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Culture and the Irish border: Spaces for conflict transformation

Cathal McCall

Abstract

The Irish border (between Northern Ireland – the 'North' and the Republic of Ireland – the 'South') has been described as a 'natural' cultural divide between the island's two dominant indigenous ethno-national communities. However, an examination of key resources of ethno-national group culture – religion, sport and language – provides evidence to challenge this representation. Moreover, in the post-1994 period of conflict transformation, evidence is also presented to support the proposition that the Irish border region has developed into a cultural space in which Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist ethno-national communities can explore cultural differences and commonalities through cross-border, cross-community contact and communication in small group encounters. This space underpins the reconfiguration of the border from barrier to political bridge between North and South. European Union (EU) Peace programmes for Ireland, beginning in 1995, provided the support for a cross-border approach to escaping the cage of ethno-national conflict in Northern Ireland. However, post-2004 EU enlargement signalled the beginning of the end for EU Peace funding, and severe economic recession has undermined the expectation of British–Irish intergovernmental intervention to support cross-border partnerships and their work. Therefore, the outlook for the sustainability of this cross-border cultural space is gloomy, with potentially deleterious consequences for the continued reconfiguration of the border from barrier to bridge.

Keywords

Introduction

Traditionally, the primary function of borders has been to divide, and an understanding of these divisions is coloured by the analytical lens employed. In his overviews of Border Studies, David Newman (2006a, b) adroitly navigates through the different academic approaches to borders. For geographers, borders have been conceptualized as lines of

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separation that divide economic, political and social spaces and are driven by a bordering process entailing both demarcation and management functions. Political scientists have concentrated on the power relations involved in that demarcation and management (including border reconfiguration). Sociologists and social anthropologists have tended to focus on binary distinctions when studying borders: that is, distinctions between 'self' and 'other', 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'there', 'inside' and 'outside' and 'include' and 'exclude' (Newman, 2006a: 143–7; 2006b: 176).

The partition of Ireland and the creation of the Irish border in 1921 served to highlight the power of the British state and its client Ulster unionist ethno-nationalist group in relation to the Irish nationalist group in Ireland. The binary distinctions between 'self' and 'other', 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'there', 'inside' and 'outside' and 'include' and 'exclude' were used to justify partition politically and were territorially endorsed by the new border. Cultural reasoning for that divide was also offered, most notably by the Dutch geographer Marcus Heslinga in his influential book *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide* (1979, second edition). For Heslinga, religious difference constituted the border as a 'spiritual divide' (1979: 78) or 'religious frontier' (p. 204). Religious difference underpinned 'two nations' on the island of Ireland – the Catholic Irish nation in the South and Protestant British 'Ulstermen' in Northern Ireland (1979: 62).

Dennis Kennedy's (1988) examination of unionist newspaper commentary and opinions cited in Northern Ireland government documents on the Irish Free State paints a vivid picture of a border divide from partition to 1949 that was buttressed by antagonism and hostility. However, Michael Kennedy (2000) qualified this account by detailing a significant degree of 'quiet' cross-border cooperation, conducted by senior civil servants, during this period. Between 1959 and 1965, cross-border cooperation became more public, symbolized by the *rapprochement* between Irish Taoiseach Seán Lemass and Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill.[1]

While there is a common perception of borders as barriers for the imposition of order through control of belonging, communication and movement, borders may also be reconfigured to constitute bridges and points of contact with the other side (Newman, 2006a: 143). The conceptualization of a border as a bridge involves a significant degree of cross-border contact, communication and cooperation across public, private and Third (voluntary and community) sectors. The outcomes of this contact, communication and cooperation include institutional and policy development, economic initiatives with mutually beneficial outcomes and community development across the border.

The Northern Ireland conflict (1969–94) ended the public North/South cooperation of the earlier period and helped to reinforce the border as a barrier. However, more than a decade after the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement, which politically addressed relationships between binary distinctions – unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland, North and South, and Britain and Ireland – through the provision of a raft of institutions and reforms, the Irish border may now be understood in terms of a political bridge between North and South. Importantly, an associated Irish border region[2] cultural space developed after the Irish nationalist/republican and Ulster unionist/loyalist ceasefires in 1994 and the tangible beginning of the Irish peace process. Through cross-border cooperation initiatives in this space, the island's two indigenous ethno-national groups were provided with opportunities for contact and communication to the ends of

exploring cultural commonality and diversity, building cross-border, cross-community relationships and cementing the peace process.

The European Union (EU) has been an important influence on reconfiguring the border economically and politically, not least through support for North/South institutions provided by the 1998 Agreement. It has also been integral to the development of an Irish border region cultural space through its provision of funding for cross-border, cross-community partnerships under the auspices of EU Structural Funds and community initiatives, principally the EU Peace programmes for Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland (1995–2013). This 'grassroots' cross-border cooperation, most closely associated with the Third (voluntary and community) sector, is an important element in sustaining and developing border reconfiguration and conflict transformation[3] especially when the 'elite-level' political process is in a period of stalemate.[4]

At the outset, this article challenges the representation of the Irish border as a 'natural' cultural divide. It does this by examining resources of ethno-national group culture and the hypothesis that the border accurately reflected ethno-national cultural difference on the island of Ireland. Thereafter, it proposes that European integration, the Irish Peace Process and EU programmes have led to a reconfiguration of the border from a political barrier to bridge and to the production of a cross-border cultural space that is conducive to contact and communication between unionists and nationalists to a conflict transformation end. In particular, it examines the role of the EU Peace programmes in creating opportunities for cross-cultural contact and communication in an Irish border region space which has served to underpin border reconfiguration and conflict transformation in the political realm. It does this by considering two key cultural resources of ethno-national group identity – *sport* and *language* – and the way in which the EU Peace programme projects have engaged with these resources leading to the consolidation of the Irish border region cultural space. The article uses semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted with a range of politicians and community activists, to support the proposition.[5] It also addresses the issue of the sustainability of this cultural space in the contexts of post-2004 EU enlargement and deep economic recession in Britain and Ireland commencing in 2008.

The religious divide

Marcus Heslinga (1979: 78) argued that religion is fundamental to a sense of cultural difference between Ulster Protestant and Irish Catholic communities on the island of Ireland. However, he also identified some shared cultural commonalities including: an abiding interest in history and mythology; a dedication to parading and wild rhetoric; and a conservative morality promulgated by Presbyterian preachers and Catholic priests alike (Heslinga, 1979: 81). With perhaps some justification, he could also have included: A commitment to heavy drinking, demonstrated during 'a session', or teetotalism; a devotion to martyrs, be they reformers (Protestant) or revolutionaries (Irish nationalist); a fondness for flying flags with political, religious or sporting import; and 'the craic'.[6] Nevertheless, Heslinga maintained that religious difference between North and South legitimized the border in cultural terms. Nowadays, no serious scholar would attempt to

defend this thesis though it still finds some currency in the Ulster Protestant unionist communal imagination.

If Heslinga's narrow religious conception of culture is accepted, then it is fairly straightforward to demonstrate that his argument is built on flimsy demographic foundations. The Irish border is patently not accurately representative of a cultural divide in religious or ethnic community terms because, before partition, a substantial segment of the population of what would become Northern Ireland was Irish Catholic, with Ulster Protestants concentrated in the northeast of the new entity. Partition and time did not wither the Irish Catholic population in the North. The 2001 census found that, while 53% of the population of Northern Ireland belonged to the Ulster Protestant community, 44% belonged to the Irish Catholic community. Moreover, the Irish Catholic community was in the distinct majority in the west of Northern Ireland and in local authority areas right along the Irish border. In ethno-religious terms, Northern Ireland itself is riddled with 'cultural divides' that run through its cities, towns and counties.

The 2001 UK General Election resulted in Irish nationalist/republican Sinn Féin candidates capturing the two remaining unionist seats west of the river Bann,[7] heightening the river's significance as a symbolic border – arguably a much more accurate 'cultural divide', in ethno-religious terms, than the Irish border. This increased political definition ascribed to the 'Bann border' post-2001, in turn, may have led to an intensification in the symbolic significance of borders between the 'Irish Catholic nationalist west' and 'Ulster Protestant unionist east' of many towns and cities in Northern Ireland, including Armagh, Portadown, Omagh, Enniskillen, Dungannon, Magherafelt, Derry and Belfast.

Borders within Northern Ireland are particularly explicit in the urban working-class and under-class areas of Belfast, as demonstrated by the abundance of 'peace walls'[8] and by the 2001 Holy Cross Primary School dispute. 'Holy Cross' involved a potent brew of territorial insecurity and sectarianism which inspired Protestant loyalists to protest at the route taken by pupils and parents to a Catholic primary school in a so-called 'loyalist area'.

Many inner-city border battles are also fought in cyberspace. Ó'Dochartaigh (2007) has described how new information and communications technology features, like a website guestbook, and tools, such as digital cameras, have been used in interface areas of Belfast for the purpose of feeding insecurity through taunts of incursion and the photographing of individuals 'on the other side', thus reinforcing inner-city ethno-national territorial boundaries.

The cultural divide

While religion and ethnicity are prominent cultural resources of national identity, culture does not end there. Williams (1976: 87) maintained that 'culture' was one of the most complex words in the English language. Eagleton (2000: 32) has argued that the denotation of 'culture' is 'both too broad and too narrow to be greatly useful'. Lane and Ersson (2002: 30) initially concurred with this view, pointing out that 'recent cultural theory continues to speak of culture as values and beliefs, social relations and ways of life – in other words, "culture" denotes almost everything'. However, in an effort to grasp the culture of a society, they singled out 'ethnicity, religion, historical legacy and

value orientations' as important 'bases', while not dismissing the possible validity of other bases (Lane and Ersson, 2002: 38). Kottak (2000: 61) is more interested in the way in which these 'bases' or 'phenomena' are shaped, changed and used:

> Cultural traditions take … phenomena … and channel them in particular directions. Everyone is cultured, not just people with elite educations. Cultures are integrated and patterned through their dominant economic forces, social patterns, key symbols, and core values.

Similarly, Avruch (1998: 20) concludes that, 'culture is to some extent always situational, flexible and responsive to the exigencies of the worlds that individuals confront'.

By virtue of this shifting threshold, 'culture' itself produces a space in which fertile discussions can inform questions of national identity, belonging and a distinctive way of life. The cultural content of nationalism on which these discussions are based includes the resources of religion, ethnicity, historical legacy, sport and language, though others, like food, customs and rituals, are often important too. As Edensor (2002: 7) argues persuasively, the nation is not just imagined through the printed page (as Benedict Anderson (1983) suggests),[9] it is also imagined through:

> … for instance, music hall and theatre, popular music,[10] festivals, architecture, fashion, spaces of congregation, and in a plenitude of embodied habits and performances, not to mention more parallel cultural forms such as television, film, radio and information technology.

Culture may therefore be regarded as a multidimensional site of daily struggle and ongoing contestation wherein the meanings of multiple resources of identity and belonging are continually negotiated through communication (Goody, 1992). In effect, culture is underpinned by communication; it is shaped by arguments and debates (Delanty, 2008). And, of course, in a national arena, intrinsic to those arguments and debates are cultural entrepreneurs, political actors, political ideologies, as well as the state or states with a vested interest.

Sport

Sport in Ireland and elsewhere has come to be regarded as an increasingly prominent cultural resource for national identity. MacClancy (1996: 7) contends that:

> [Sports] may be used to … define more sharply the already established boundaries of moral and political communities; to assist in the creating of new social identities; to give physical expression to certain social values and to act as a means of reflecting on those values; to serve as potentially contested space by opposing groups.

Sport as national performance, for which training begins at school and is witnessed regularly throughout most adult lives whether in stadia or on television and radio, rivals religion as a cultural resource for national identity in the contemporary secular age.

Eric Hobsbawm (1992) first recognized the importance of sport for national identity when he interpreted the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a defining moment for 'competitive

national self-assertion'. This site of sporting contest had profound implications for culture and identity in Germany and Europe generally at this crucial moment in world history. For Hobsbawm, national communities are imagined and re-imagined through the prism of mythology and particular cultural artefacts. Sport is a contemporary cultural artefact (or 'resource' or 'basis' or 'phenomenon') that, in the national context, through repeated contests with 'others' in cathedrals of sporting contest, with national flags waving and national anthems blaring, has proved able to tap into the emotional appeal of religion. According to Hobsbawm (1992: 143): 'The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself.' Basque nationalist supporters of Athletic Club de Bilbao recognize instantly this imagined reality when their team takes to the pitch to do battle with Real Madrid (MacClancy, 2007: 54–7).

One of the most insightful analyses of the role of sport in inventing the modern Irish nation is offered by R. V. Comerford (2003) in *Ireland*, a volume in the *Inventing the Nation* book series. It is no accident that Comerford devotes a chapter of his book to the subject of sport, such is its importance to the nation-building project. By codifying games involving, for example, balls and sticks that had been played without rules on roads and in fields, and organizing them on a national basis, the nation could appropriate individual and team glory and even defeat for its own ends (Comerford, 2003: 213). In 1880s Ireland, a period of political and ideological upheaval, the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the identification by its leading cultural entrepreneurs of some sports as 'foreign', that is, 'British', served a nation-building purpose through the identification of internal 'otherness' and, by extension, internal British 'others' (Comerford, 2003: 220).[11]

The GAA, principally through its invented codified field sports of hurling, camogie and Gaelic football,[12] has become the most visible representation of sport as a cultural resource for a 32-county island-wide Irish national identity (Cronin, 1999). The GAA has had a central role in defining the modern nationalist identity and has provided a cultural route through partition for Irish Catholic nationalists in Northern Ireland. One prominent GAA spokesperson asserted that:

> Partitionism, the border, is not something the GAA centres on. The GAA focuses as a 32-county [All-Ireland] body. It's saying that there is a 32-county identity through culture. The border is a mark on a map. The border that divides people just doesn't apply within the GAA.[13]

All-Ireland final days in 'GAA Headquarters' Croke Park are the climax of the GAA year and celebratory social occasions in which the GAA acts as a national binding force (Comerford, 2003: 224–5). Gaelic football finals, in which Northern teams have featured prominently in recent decades, are particularly prominent displays of this 32-county national identity, though occasional complaints from Southern TV pundits about the 'northern style of play' when, for example, Tyrone (from the North) beat Kerry (from the South), may suggest a degree of Irish nationalist cultural estrangement along the north–south axis.

Although some other team sports in Ireland did split following partition and duly established separate associations North and South – notably Association Football

(soccer) – others, like rugby, continued to transcend the border and attract players and supporters from North and South, and, unlike the GAA, from both the Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant communities. The All-Ireland, cross-community embrace of rugby necessitated the sidelining of the Irish national anthem Amhrán na bhFiann ('The Soldier's Song') for the Irish rugby team's away matches. Unfortunately, the replacement 'inclusive' anthem is an uninspiring pedestrian dirge entitled 'Ireland's Call', which, as one acerbic commentator argued, puts the national team at an immediate disadvantage when it is played alongside *La Marseillaise* (McNally, 2007).

Marcus Heslinga (1979) had no understanding of the cultural significance of sport for national identity. He simply dismissed the popularity of Gaelic games throughout Ireland as merely an 'outlet for their mania for sport and gambling – a mania which the Irish share with the English and other inhabitants of the British Isles' (1979: 92–3). In fact, the GAA is also a significant social actor on the island given the reach of its extensive club structure into local communities and its ability to identify and address areas of social need. For example, 2009 saw the launch in Croke Park of a project to tackle the social isolation experienced by older men living alone and vulnerable to depression, illness or self-harm as a result. Working in partnership with other interested organizations – the Irish Farmers' Association, Senior Help Line, Third Age Foundation, An Garda Síochána, Macra na Feirme and Muintir na Tire – the GAA has sought to utilize its network of clubs to host social events for such men and provide transportation.[14] GAA clubs abroad also serve as a first port of call for many newly arrived émigrés searching for accommodation, work and a social network.[15]

Language

Heslinga (1979) also considered another cultural resource – language. He was quick to point out the obvious: namely, that although the 1937 Bunreacht na hÉireann (Irish Constitution) claimed that 'The Irish language as the native language is the first official language', the English language is the *de facto* first language by dint of the fact that it is spoken by virtually everyone on the island – though dialects and accents may suggest otherwise to outsiders – whereas the Irish language is spoken by relatively few for the purpose of everyday communication (Heslinga, 1979: 81).

Despite the introduction of compulsory Irish language learning at primary school level in the new Irish Free State, and the Irish language entrance requirement to the civil service, any revival was undermined by the suspect quality of the effort and, crucially, the social and geographical mobility afforded to individuals by the English language (Kelly, 2002). After 1921, the identification of the Irish language with radical Irish nationalism meant that the language was greeted with suspicion by the new unionist government in Northern Ireland. There it could be offered as an optional subject in schools wishing to do so, but it was banished from all aspects of public life, including the key cultural forum, BBC Northern Ireland television (Comerford, 2003: 149).

Yet, efforts by Comhaltas Uladh/Ulster Association to promote the language through, for example, support for the Donegal Gaeltacht[16] and its summer schools, to which hordes of teenagers are dispatched during the school holidays, helps to maintain the language, at least at the level of cultural consciousness. It is a consciousness that is shared

island-wide and beyond, even if competence in the language may not stretch far beyond *an cúpla focal* (a few words). Research has also found that the language continues to attract some Protestant unionists who may be motivated by the desire to reclaim it as an aspect of Presbyterian heritage after its appropriation by Sinn Féin as the language of 'republican struggle' (McCoy, 1997; Pritchard, 2004).

From the early 1980s, the UK government made funding available for Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland resulting in the creation of a number of *bunscoileanna* (Irish language primary schools) and *meánscoileanna* (Irish language secondary schools) in Belfast and beyond (Mac Póilin, 1999: 114; O'Reilly, 1999: 22–3). This new approach was linked to the UK government's 'parity of esteem to cultural traditions' agenda in Northern Ireland, itself closely associated with the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, some unionist politicians interpreted this development as anything but parity. The response was to resurrect an 18th century Ulster-Scots dialect of the English language, principally to compete with the Irish language for government funding (McCall, 2002). It eventually translated into an institutional accommodation embodied in the North/South Language Body, composed of *Foras na Gaeilge* representing the Irish language and *Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch* representing Ulster-Scots, which was established by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement for the promotion of Irish and Ulster-Scots on an all-island basis.

Cultural difference in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland is often asserted in terms of the Irish language versus the Ulster-Scots dialect. As such, these markers of identity provide a platform for the extension of conflict by cultural means. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) resistance to an Irish Language Act for Northern Ireland is but one pillar of this conflict that has the potential to destabilize the post-1998 power-sharing dispensation between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland. However, where the Irish language can be used as a potential totem of tourism regeneration, then objections are more muted. Belfast City Council promotes the Gaeltacht Quarter (Irish-speaking Quarter) of Belfast, alongside the Queen's, Titanic and Cathedral Quarters, in an effort to attract 'cultural' (presumably as distinct from 'war' or 'dark') tourists.[17]

Reconfiguring the border as a bridge

After partition, the border between the two parts of Ireland came to represent a primary marker of political separation and cultural differentiation for Ulster Protestant unionists. It also became a symbolic security barrier from the threatening Irish nationalist 'other' and was imagined even as a frontier of civilization with barbarism at the gate (Ruane and Todd, 1996). When the Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill entered into the public *rapprochement* with the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Seán Lemass in the 1960s, he was lavished with opprobrium by the fundamentalist Protestant preacher turned politician the Reverend Ian Paisley: '[H]e is a bridge builder he tells us. A traitor and a bridge are very much alike for they both go over to the other side' (Mulholland, 2000: 84). How remarkable then that Paisley himself, as Northern Ireland First Minister, went over to the other side four decades later to heartily greet the then Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern with the words:

> Some say hedges make the best neighbours, but that is not the case. I don't believe we should plant a hedge between our two countries … I am proud to be an Ulsterman but I am also proud of my Irish roots … Today, we can confidently state that we are making progress to ensure that our two countries can develop and grow side by side in a spirit of generous co-operation. Old barriers and threats have been, and are being, removed daily. Business opportunities are flourishing and genuine respect for and understanding of each other's differences, and for that matter, similarities, is now developing.[18]

The factors that brought about this ideological transition and the reconfiguration of the border include: the development of a British/Irish intergovernmental relationship after both states joined the European Economic Community in 1973; the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement which gave the Irish government an advisory role in the public affairs of Northern Ireland; the impact of European integration on member states' borders; a politically repositioning and numerically strengthening Irish nationalist/republican community in Northern Ireland; violent stalemate involving republican and loyalist paramilitaries and the British Army, and the subsequent paramilitary ceasefires of 1994; and the changing international context after the collapse of communism and the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States of America which sounded the death knell for revolutionary liberation struggle as a viable political ethos[19] (McCall, 2001). These factors provided the impetus for unionist/loyalist and nationalist/republican political elites to challenge their traditional opposing ideologies based on securing and destroying the border respectively, and subscribe to an infrastructural compromise that included a North/South cross-border institutional dimension contained in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leaders signed up to the 1998 Agreement. Important preconditions for them included the rescinding of Articles 2 and 3 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Irish Constitution) which laid claim to the whole territory of the island, and nationalist/republican acceptance that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK could not be changed without the consent of the majority in the region. After the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, Ian Paisley's hitherto implacably anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) emerged as the dominant unionist party in Northern Ireland and followed the UUP's lead in accepting inclusive governance with nationalist and republican parties – the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin – in Northern Ireland and the reconfiguration of the border as a bridge symbolized by functioning North/South institutions. After the event, Arlene Foster, a DUP minister in the new Northern Ireland Executive, commented on cross-border cooperation:

> Sometimes if you give it [North/South cooperation] a grand name and give it a grand structure then people rightly feel threatened on some occasions. But if communities are working together [cross-border] in a very low-level way and getting on and making relationships for their own communities then it works. I'm not ruling out having relationships – as one would expect in normal times – between two neighbouring countries, if there is an issue that has to be dealt with by Belfast and Dublin.[20]

However, this preferred DUP approach is reminiscent of the 'quiet' cross-border cooperation of the 1925–59 period identified by Kennedy (2000), with an emphasis on

such cooperation occurring within the Third (voluntary and community) sector rather than on institution-building and public cross-border cooperation involving political elites.

The reconfiguration of the border from a barrier to a bridge began with the physical removal of border customs posts after the introduction of the European Single Market on 31 December 1992. It was supported by cross-border, cross-community cooperation initiatives mostly funded by the EU's Interreg[21] and Peace programmes, as well as advances in the Irish Peace Process and institutionalized North/South cooperation. The Good Friday Agreement's provision of cross-border institutions was a key infrastructural element. These institutions included North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), six North/South Implementation Bodies, as well as Tourism Ireland Ltd, a semi-official body established to promote the island as a tourist destination. After the Agreement, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), one of the North/South Implementation Bodies attached to the NSMC, was given responsibility for the management of the Peace programmes as well as Interreg IIIA and its successor (Laffan and Payne, 2004).

In the context of the EU Peace programmes' cross-border priority, Third (voluntary and community) sector organizations, operating as Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs), were central to the implementation of a number of measures. The IFBs – Border Action,[22] Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI) and Cooperation Ireland – also assumed an important lobbying role in the context of cross-border, cross-community cooperation and were welcomed by local community and grassroots project organizers as important elements in the governance and peace and reconciliation aspects of the programme.

According to Mark Durkan, SDLP, then Leader:

> Possibly the most important thing the European Union has done has been the creation of discrete cross-border funds and deliberately building in cross-border measures into wider programmes of the Structural Funds like the Peace Programme. [Government] departments, voluntary and community bodies, and private businesses all have budget lines to bid to in order to fund cross-border initiatives, produce pilots which have proved the worth of cross-border activity and that in turn has led to more mainstream cross-border activity.[23]

Arlene Foster (DUP) also recognized the significance of EU involvement in terms of infrastructural development and community support:

> I think the European Union has played a role most specifically in the physical context of the border because when I was growing up along the border the roads to the south of the border were probably the worst on the island of Ireland and now they are probably some of the best roads that we have and that's down to the impact of the European Union. And obviously the European Union has had an impact through the special [Peace] programmes of a cross-border nature that they run and the interaction that goes on there.[24]

The Irish border region and conflict transformation

Principally through its structural funds and community initiatives, the EU has proved to be a factory of cross-border zones of contact, communication and cooperation. Newman

has criticized this production as 'something artificial and superimposed' (2006b: 180–1). No doubt such criticism is warranted when people on either side of a border shun contact, communication and cooperation across it. However, where there is an interest and a willingness to engage in a cross-border zone, especially to a conflict transformation end, then it may be classed as something real and voluntary.

The Irish border region may be understood as a cultural space that provides opportunities for escaping the cage of ethno-national conflict in Northern Ireland, thus underpinning and advancing conflict transformation (O'Dowd and McCall, 2008). This space resonates with the idea of borders being reconfigured as networks that increasingly enable flows of communication and mobility, as well as that of the EU as the 'paradigm of the network state' (Rumford, 2006: 55). The borders as networks thesis is qualified by the post-11 September 2001 emphasis on border security and illegal immigration (Vaughan-Williams, 2009). However, it has not been significantly undermined in the context of the EU's internal state borders.

With the diminishing political and violent threats from Irish nationalism and republicanism in the 1990s, the Irish border offered a less contentious transnational space in which unionist and nationalist cultural differences and commonalities could be explored through local 'grassroots' community contact and dialogue. Such communication is crucial because language may not just inform, it may also affect the emotions (Britton, 2000: 277), something integral to a conflict transformation enterprise.

Through its Peace programmes, the EU has endeavoured to support political élite level efforts dedicated to accommodating political and cultural differences and transcending ingrained territorialism by creating frameworks of communication and cooperation that traverse the border at the local 'grassroots' community level. Essentially, these broader frameworks of contact, communication and cooperation have been made manifest in cross-border, cross-community partnerships funded by the Peace programmes. Pat Colgan, the Chief Executive of the SEUPB, has estimated that 130,813 individuals participated in Peace II sponsored cross-border activities alone.[25]

Many cross-border, cross-community projects have involved discussion on Irish histories with the aim of increasing mutual understanding. For example, one project initiated fruitful discussions on the meaning of 1916 for unionists/loyalists (the Battle of the Somme during World War I) and for nationalists/republicans (the Easter Rising). Cross-border projects for young people have included the Cultural Pathways project which brought together young people from Protestant East Belfast and 'Southern' Catholic Ballybofey to play music and sport, as well as talk about issues that interest them and visit each other's districts.[26] Other projects with a cross-border, cross-community sports focus have included the Dunfield project, which is a joint initiative of Linfield Football Club and Dundalk Football Club involving 1000 young people, mostly school pupils. The project has organized cross-border, cross-community soccer matches, 'blitz networking' days, 'conflict resolution classes' and a 'cultural diversity awareness group'.[27]

Projects have also involved storytelling in English, Irish and Ulster-Scots in an effort to promote in school pupils an appreciation of cultural diversity through languages. Regarded as an integral element in a conflict transformation endeavour (Salmon, 2007), storytelling has been employed in projects beyond the confines of schools – from carnivals to art in public spaces to film-making to the life stories of ex-prisoners – in an

effort to challenge strict binary distinctions between 'self' and 'other', 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'there', 'inside' and 'outside' and 'include' and 'exclude' (McCall and O'Dowd, 2008).

Challenging stereotypes, discussing history and recognizing diversity and commonality among indigenous ethno-national groups have been important conflict transformation outputs of the Irish border region cultural space. The emphasis of projects in this space has been on the search for commonality, the acceptance of difference and the promotion of diversity rather than on attempting to narrow political and cultural differences. Respect for difference is a prerequisite. As Anton Blok (2001: ix) has observed:

> [I]t is hard for people to survive physically and socially when they are not in some way 'respected'. Violence underwrites reputation – either directly … or indirectly, when the state holds effective monopoly over the means of violence and can thus protect its citizens.

Therefore, without respect, violence becomes the default position in the quest to assert cultural reputation.

The involvement of Protestant unionist groups in cross-border activities funded under Peace I (1995–9) was underwhelming. However, the optimism generated by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement helped to boost unionist involvement under Peace II (2000–6). Indeed, some Protestant unionist groups stated a preference for cross-border projects rather than cross-community projects within Northern Ireland. It would appear that the underlying reason for this is that nationalist groups south of the border represent the less threatening Irish nationalist 'other' because they have existed outside the territorial cage of the Northern Ireland conflict. Nevertheless, some also stated that cross-border activity is a necessary first step that they envisage will lead eventually to cross-community discussion in Northern Ireland (O'Dowd and McCall, 2008).

Taking the first physical step across the border has been challenging but ultimately rewarding for Protestant unionist cross-border project participants. One project provider commented:

> The first time I went across [the border] was in 1998. This last couple of years there has been a lot travel back and forward. I brought a young school group up from Ballyshannon for a concert one night. They were apprehensive about even coming up here and Ballyshannon's not that far away. They'd never been over the border before but they enjoyed it, it broke down a barrier.[28]

Another pointed out the practical difficulties for cross-border interaction after the beginning of the conflict in 1969:

> The border roads were all blown up so cross-border social activity around here would have been practically non-existent. There was a generation that never went across the border – not because they didn't want to go across, because they couldn't.[29]

Ongoing fringe republican violence and the dismantling of security fortifications along the border serve as continuing sources of threat and insecurity for border Ulster Protestants (Rural Community Network, 2003). An inability to attract Peace funding has

also provided a source of alienation and mistrust for some Ulster Protestant community groups. According to the leader of a border Protestant victims group:

> As far as funding goes, we are just bottom of the pile. They have this notion that unless you are prepared to say that 'everybody is getting on well' and you are reaching out the hand of friendship then you are not entitled to funding. We would differ with that. We believe that you have to be truthful, up-front and straight. Instead of sitting down and having a cup of tea and a biscuit and pretending everything's OK we believe that you have to be truthful with the people and hopefully that's when you will start to get to get to the core of the problem.[30]

Nevertheless, this vocal community activist remained open to the idea that cross-border communication could benefit conflict transformation:

> I believe that people should be talking from North and South. I believe that it is important that we do talk so that people learn about each other, especially in the border areas. We have people who live in the border areas who have never put their foot on the southern side of the border – that's hard to believe – but they have lived all their lives and would never put their foot into the southern side of the border.[31]

Yet, mistrust also surfaced as to the ends of this communication when he commented:

> I couldn't give 'a stuff' about cross-border activity, you know, within reason. If it's people coming from the southern side to make political decisions here then I would differ there but as far as 'people working together' goes … I don't have a problem with that.[32]

The initiation of cross-border contact, especially after a long conflict which generates emotions of mistrust, fear and alienation, can exacerbate feelings of animosity towards 'the other' (Newman, 2006a: 151–2). Lord Laird, a high-profile advocate of Ulster-Scots, articulated feelings of mistrust when he complained of lack of cooperation from the Irish government in promoting the work of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch through the North/South Languages body. According to Laird, this was a case of ethno-national bias rather than the difficulty faced by Irish civil servants in adapting to a transnational ethos. Laird's conclusion was that 'you cannot trust people in Dublin'. He maintained that the inclusion of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch with Foras na Gaeilge in the North/South Languages body was tokenism to disguise a united Ireland intent.[33] Laird's irritation with Southern state officials may have been exacerbated by different organizational cultures of the civil services, North and South. They may also have been spiked by what Freud and later Blok referred to as a 'narcissime des petites différences' (1929: 39) and a 'narcissism of minor differences' (1998). Such irritation raises the possibility that increased cross-border communication and contact, facilitated by a border cultural space, may actually intensify the narcissism of minor cultural differences, particularly among ethno-national groups and individuals seeking to maintain the differentiation and oppositional elements of their subject positions.

Marcus Heslinga (1979: 75) maintained that both communities in Northern Ireland – unionist and nationalist – harboured a 'sense of difference from Southerners'. While

Northern nationalists are likely to deny the existence of cultural difference from their Southern co-nationals they may concede that a degree of estrangement has developed since partition. Southerners may more readily concede estrangement because the post-1969 British/Irish conflict was largely caged within Northern Ireland with differing life experiences resulting between North and South (Caňás Bottos and Rougier, 2006: 634). However, this has not translated into differentiation and 'othering' in a 26-county 'Free State' nationalism: 'North and South – it's all the same, we're all the same' was a comment that reflected general opinion among Southern border region respondents in a study by Todd, Muldoon, Trew, Caňás Bottos, Rougier and McLaughlin (2006: 372–3). Cross-border communication and cooperation helps to diffuse the territorial issue for nationalist/republican groups because it begins to address degrees of estrangement along the North–South axis caused by partition and conflict.

After peace?

Peace I (1995–9) was allocated EU funding totalling €500 million. Between 2000 and 2004, Peace II received €531 million from the EU.[34] Peace II was extended until 2006 with an additional €160 million in funding.[35] Finally, Peace III (2007–13) is worth €333 million for the period.[36] In total, therefore, the Peace programmes will have drawn €1524 million from EU structural funds and community initiatives over almost two decades.

Post-2004 EU enlargement incorporated a swathe of post-communist Central East European states with serious structural problems and a combined average GDP per capita that was approximately one-third of the existing EU member state average. With most of the applicant states qualifying for Objective One funding from a limited EU Structural Funds budget, the case for continued levels of EU structural funding for Ireland was untenable. That was made clear when the Peace III programme (2007–13) was allocated an amount that was less than half the value of its predecessor and it was announced that this would be the final programme.[37]

Unlike its predecessors, Peace III does not have a dedicated cross-border cooperation priority commanding a set percentage of the funding. Instead, the programme has two main priorities – 'reconciling communities' and 'contributing to a shared society' – though cross-border cooperation is a 'cross-cutting theme'. As such, the Operational Programme maintains that cross-border cooperation has been 'mainstreamed' under Peace III.[38]

Despite the lack of a dedicated priority, cross-border projects continued to be funded under Peace III with sports, language and story-telling among their key areas and activities. For example, under the 'shared society' priority, Peace III has provided €7.8m for a cross-border sports complex in the 'Clones Erne East' region involving sporting organizations and local authorities from both sides of the (Monaghan/Fermanagh) border and from both communities.[39] A 'reconciling communities' cross-community project called 'Yes We Can' has developed sporting and cultural links between camogie and field hockey players in Northern Ireland. The cross-border element has involved project members attending All-Ireland camogie finals at Croke Park.[40] The stories of those on both sides of the border who have been directly affected by the conflict form the

substance of another 'reconciling communities' project called 'Whatever You Say, Say Something', which is provided by the Healing Through Remembering group. The project's conversation workshops have been led by trained facilitators and are emblematic of a 'bottom-up' approach to conflict transformation.[41] Peace III has also funded literal bridge-building in the form of a €14.5m foot and cycle 'Peace Bridge' across the River Foyle linking both parts of Derry city and the Donegal hinterland.[42] By July 2009, 75 cross-border projects had received Peace III funding.[43]

During the years of sustained economic growth in Britain and Ireland that traversed the new millennium, it was not inconceivable to expect the British–Irish intergovernmental partnership to assume responsibility for sustaining the multitude of local community 'peace and reconciliation' initiatives in the event of EU funds being directed elsewhere. That expectation was given some foundation by the Irish government's National Development Plan for 2007–13 which detailed support for infrastructural programmes in Northern Ireland. Dermot Ahern, then Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs (subsequently Minister for Justice), envisaged a more 'hands on' approach by the Irish and British governments when he commented: 'If international attention begins to wane then the two governments will be critical in making sure that they step in to make sure that the cross-border, cross-community activities continue right across the spectrum.'[44] However, with the global economic crisis beginning in 2008, and the Irish banking crisis culminating in the intervention of the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund to rescue the Irish economy in November 2010, it became increasingly apparent that the expectation of British–Irish intergovernmental support for sustaining cross-border initiatives was founded in an entirely different economic context.

The political context for cross-border cooperation may also be shifting. The post-Paisley leadership of the DUP has engaged in rhetorical recidivism regarding the border with the NSMC, a particular object of scorn. In his New Year message for 2009, DUP Leader and Northern Ireland First Minister Peter Robinson asked 'is it [the NSMC] really the most effective use of our time and resources?' while lauding the fact that differing currency and tax rates on either side of the border had benefited businesses north of the border.[45] A month later, DUP chairman Lord Morrow went one step further in calling for the suspension of the NSMC:

> Economically there would be a good reason why this North–South stuff shouldn't continue. At least suspend it for a while until we get the country up and going again economically and demonstrate to the people at large that this waste will not continue.[46]

These remarks were made in the run-up to the 2009 election to the European Parliament. With the hard-line (ex-DUP) Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Jim Allister competing with the DUP in that election, it may be hypothesized that these combined remarks represented an exercise in rhetorical border recidivism to the end of recapturing the seat from new hard-line unionist competition. After recapturing the seat with a greatly reduced percentage of the vote, the DUP nominated Nelson McCausland (a leading advocate for Ulster-Scots) as Northern Ireland Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure. On appointment, McCausland engaged promptly in rhetorical cultural recidivism by publicly stating his opposition to the Catholic Church, the GAA and the Irish language.[47]

Conclusion

By examining key cultural resources of national identity, this article refutes the thesis that the Irish border is a 'natural' cultural divide. After the partition of the island, unionist politicians and cultural entrepreneurs began buttressing the new political divide by creating a narrative of north/south cultural difference. Marcus Heslinga's book, *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide* (1979), was called 'the most comprehensive presentation of a pro-unionist point of view' (Whyte, 1990: 146) and spoke directly to this project. However, in the context of an Irish national identity, these cultural resources and their component parts extend across the Irish border and, in some instances, across the ethno-national divide.

After the republican and loyalist ceasefires of 1994, the EU initiated its Peace programmes for Ireland. The cross-border measures of these programmes were innovative policy instruments, some of which were directed at developing an Irish border region culture space wherein cross-border, cross-community contact and communication on issues relating to conflict and culture has taken many forms. Sports and language projects have featured prominently because they are significant cultural resources of ethno-national identity that provide opportunities for cross-border, cross-community contact.

The evidence presented suggests that an Irish border region cultural space for small group encounters and interaction helps to address the political culture of threat and insecurity, downgrade communal antagonism towards 'the significant other' and leads to the articulation of cultural difference and commonality in a constructive way. Such an articulation is embedded in an approach that challenges the reified and homogeneous conceptions of culture articulated by Marcus Heslinga and associated with nationalist and unionist communal imaginations, conceptions forged in a long history of political and violent conflict. Consequently, this space, which is closely associated with the Third (voluntary and community) sector and involves local community groups, has helped underpin the political reconfiguration of the border from barrier to bridge and conflict transformation in Ireland.

For many involved in cross-border, cross-community encounters, the Irish border region cultural space has become synonymous with culture as a figurative site of communication and contestation wherein meanings are continually negotiated through communication rather than challenged by violence. However, sustaining and developing these physical and figurative spaces depends on favourable economic circumstances, as well as a political commitment on both sides of the border and among unionist and nationalist political elites. Economic recession and rhetorical border and cultural recidivism limit room for future development and may result in a contraction of the Irish border region cultural space with unpredictable results, not least across Northern Ireland's innumerable internal ethno-national borders.

Funding

Notes

1. These successive periods of cross-border cooperation produced: the Erne hydroelectric scheme; the Foyle Fisheries Commission; the joint operation of the Dublin to Belfast railway line through the Great Northern Railway Board; increased levels of North/South trade; electricity interconnection; and agreement covering joint tourism promotion, social welfare payments and extradition for ordinary crimes (Kennedy, 2000: 5).

2. The Irish border region comprises local authority areas – North and South – that are contiguous to the border. In 1993, O'Dowd estimated that the Irish border region had a population of approximately 800,000 people (1993: 97).

3. According to Reimann, 'conflict transformation refers to outcome, process and structure oriented long-term peacebuilding efforts, which aim to truly overcome revealed forms of direct cultural and structural violence' (2004: 10). Conflict transformation is used here to capture a peace-building effort wherein political violence has largely abated, competing ethno-nationalist elites have entered into an agreement on governance and, crucially, local 'grassroots' communities have been engaged in an on-going peace-building effort (Lederach, 1995: 26).

4. As when, for example, the main institutions of the Good Friday Agreement were suspended between 2002 and 2007 because of disagreement between competing ethno-national political elites.

5. This article builds on previous research conducted on the Irish border region and cross-border cooperation (see, for example, McCall, 2001, 2002; McCall and O'Dowd, 2008; O'Dowd and McCall, 2008). It presents new primary evidence in the form of documentary analysis and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with political elites and local community representatives. This methodology avoids an excessively top-down approach and is appropriate for the study of conflict transformation given the crucial role played by local community groups.

6. 'Craic' is a gaelicization of the Hiberno-English word 'crack' meaning news or gossip. While 'craic' can also mean 'crack' it has come to denote a good time usually lubricated by music and alcohol. Equally, 'the session' is often gaelicized to 'seisiún'.

7. The Bann runs roughly down through the middle of Northern Ireland from north to south.

8. Approximately 40 'peace walls' divide Catholic and Protestant working-class neighbourhoods. For details see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8121228.stm (accessed 10 January 2010). Their purpose is generally understood to be to prevent outbreaks of inter-communal violence. However, the 'peace walls' also prevent inter-communal communication and interaction and thus, paradoxically, militate against the resolution of senses of insecurity and perceptions of threat.

9. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

10. A canon of popular Irish rebel songs dating from the 19th century and including *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, *Down by the Glenside (The Bold Fenian Men)*, *A Nation Once Again*, *Kevin Barry*, *The Patriot Game* and *The Men Behind the Wire* has added to the emotional appeal of Irish nationalism at home and among the Irish Diaspora especially.

11. The 'foreign' sports that GAA founding fathers Archbishop Thomas Croke and Michael Cusack had in mind included cricket which, in codified form, was a well-established sport in the south and east of Ireland before the founding of the GAA in 1884 (Comerford, 2003: 214).

12. While there is evidence of uncodified hurling matches in 18th-century Ireland (Comerford, 2003: 215), the Gaelic football code was invented in the 1880s and resembles an amalgam of Association Football, rugby and Australian Rules Football (critics may also include basketball and brawling) to produce something unique.

13. Interview, 16 May 2006.
14. *Irish Times*, 27 February 2009.
15. *Irish Times*, 21 March 2009.
16. Irish-speaking area.
17. Available at: http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/news/news.asp?id=515 (accessed 15 January 2010).
18. From the speech by Ian Paisley on meeting Taoiseach Bertie Ahern in Dublin on 4 April 2007. Available at: http://borderireland.info (accessed 10 February 2010).
19. Under apartheid, the African National Congress (ANC) became the figurehead of revolutionary liberation struggle which, from a leftist perspective, bestowed this political ethos with a degree of legitimacy. Consequently, Sinn Féin made common cause with the ANC seeing the ANC's struggle and the 'Irish republican struggle' as one of liberation from oppression.
20. Interview, 20 May 2007.
21. The EU-wide Interreg programme supports cross-border economic cooperation, though conflict transformation may be a by-product of this cooperation.
22. Now called 'Pobal'.
23. Interview, 23 May 2007.
24. Interview, 20 May 2007.
25. In *The European Union and Cross-border Co-operation in Ireland* at http://www.crossborder.ie/events/Lessons_Colgan.ppt#463,11 (accessed 13 January 2009).
26. Available at: http://borderireland.info/discuss/?p=132 (accessed 13 January 2009).
27. Available at: http://www.cooperationireland.org/files/NewsLink-summer2007.pdf (accessed 13 January 2009).
28. Interview, 10 September 2003.
29. Interview, 30 May 2007.
30. Interview, 27 May 2006.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. At the 2005 Institute of British–Irish Studies (UCD) conference, *The North/South Bodies, Five Years On*.
34. Available at: ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/about_us/office_in_northern_ireland/funding/peaceii.pdf (accessed 10 March 2009).
35. Available at: http://www.seupb.org/documents/PEACE%20II%20Extension/peaceextend-summ.pdf (accessed 10 March 2009).
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40. *Irish Times*, 4 October 2010.
41. Available at: http://healingthroughremembering.info/images/uploads/HTR_annual_report_2010.pdf (accessed 20 November 2010).
42. *Irish Times*, 4 October 2010.
43. Available at: http://www.seupb.eu/Libraries/PEACE_III_Reports_Pubs/Implementation_Analysis_of_PEACE_III_and_INTERREG_IVA_Programmes.sflb.ashx (accessed 20 November 2010).

44. Interview, 22 May 2007.
45. *Irish Times*, 2 January 2009.
46. *Irish Times*, 10 February 2009.
47. *Irish Times*, 9 July 2009.

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