FROM BARRIERS TO BRIDGES:
THE EUROPEANISATION OF IRELAND’S BORDERS

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CIBR Working Papers in Border Studies
CIBR/WP04-1
Abstract

The meaning and significance of borders in nation-statehood and European integration are integrally linked in a process of change. Uncovering such connections in a specific and particularly notable case study, this paper examines the conceptualisation of borders in Irish official discourse in relation to the territory of Ireland and the new ‘space’ of the European Union. Through analysis of speeches/statements made by members of the Irish governmental elite since accession to the EEC, this paper explores the way in which the narratives and models of the national territory and European space integration been brought together in Irish official discourse. Its central thesis is that participation in the space of European Union has facilitated the conceptualisation of a common Irish space. Thus, borders (specifically the Irish border) are not conceived as barriers to be overcome but rather as bridges to the fulfilment of interests. In the Irish case, the definition of these interests is inseparable from residence on the territory of Ireland, north and south. Bearing in mind the ideological significance and history of official Irish nationalism, this study highlights the continued importance of traditional conceptions of national territory as well as their modification in the new European context.

Key words

Ireland, border, territory, discourse, governmental elite

Note on the Author

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INTRODUCTION

Instead of creating international incidents along the Border we should be involved in building bridges between North and South, not in the creation of more puerile and more ineffective barriers between the people of this island (Lynch 20 February 1971).1

Central to the transformation of governance in contemporary Europe has been the impact of membership of the European Union on state borders (Herb 1999:9). Redrawing the internal and external territorial borders of the European Union has been driven by economic considerations, facilitated by political adjustments and legitimated through conceptual change. As with all developments in European integration, the precise nature of this conceptual reform varies according to context. From a state level of analysis, the reconceptualisation of borders varies between member-states according to the historical construction of their state’s territory in relation to its governance (epitomised in official nationalism). This level of analysis is applied here within a discursive constructivist framework in order to assess the effects of Europeanisation on the conceptualisation of borders in the territory of Ireland. In this case study, the European context is interpreted by Irish state elites as transforming borders from ‘barriers’ into ‘bridges’. This paper outlines the image of European ‘space’ that frames this reconceptualisation of territory in Irish political discourse before tracing the new symbolic contours of Ireland’s borders. In order to do so, the conceptual importance of borders in relation to European integration and nation-statehood must first be recognised.

CONCEPTUALISING BORDERS: NATIONAL TERRITORY, EUROPEAN SPACE

An important distinction is made by Smith (1995:2-3) between two types of geographical boundaries: ‘bona fide’ (i.e. those which exist independently of human cognitive acts, such as coastlines) and ‘fiat’ (i.e. those which do not exist independently of human cognitive acts, such as property lines). The fact that state borders are rarely bona fide frontiers means that they are primarily socially constructed institutions, delineated not by seas or mountains but by political decisions across history. The territory of a state embodies the extent of its physical scope and political authority. Yet, as Anderson (1991:170-178) notes, maps are not merely the representation of the limits of state authority, they are also one of the most
powerful international signifiers (alongside the name and flag) of the state. Territorial borders thus have political and symbolic as well as physical significance. Precisely because borders are instruments, constraints and markers of statehood, the matter of what they are and represent (as opposed to how they are delineated) is constantly reworked (Anderson 1998:5). In light of this, a constructivist perspective aids detailed analysis of the changing significance of state borders. Constructivism holds that social realities exist only by agreement, by human cognitive action and interaction, and are therefore fragile and changeable (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Searle 1995). The rationale of collective actors changes according to experience, in order to adjust to a new position regarding other social actors or structures (Offe and Wiesenthal 1979). In analysing this process of social change, discursive constructivism points to the importance of discourse (language) in the interpretation of, response to, and definition of context. Official discourse, as texts produced by the governing elites to explain and legitimate policy action and principles, is central to the definition of the political and symbolic significance of state borders. As the internal and external constantly changes, so too does state practice, the worldview in which it is framed, and the language used to legitimate it—all three of which are encapsulated in official discourse. Discourse analysis considers what is being presented and how and thus highlights the logic of the conceptual/practical link and the way in which it is being reconstituted. In relation to European integration, state elites have to manage the perception of the nation-state and the European Union in the continually fluctuating light of the context in which the two interact. This research focuses on the way in which this conceptual balance is achieved in official discourse, as the national territory is reconceptualised in the European space to redefine the political and symbolic significance of state borders.

**National territory**

Geographical space has emotional and material power; in nationalism, this emotional and material power is harnessed in the delineation of ‘territory’ as the embodiment of (and point of connection between) state and nation (Penrose 2002). The territory of the state thus gives it a palpable material existence that gives it a ‘tangible’ international platform and (literally) grounds its identity in common experience (Periwal 1995:236; Bassin 2001; Murray 1997). For, according to O’Dowd and Wilson (1996:8), bounded territories ‘are not simply a matter of control or access to resources, or of networks of interaction within fixed geographical
limits, rather they denote participation in a collective consciousness. The association of common experience, practice and culture with a particular territorial space is epitomised in the notion of the national ‘homeland’ (Billig 1995:83). The narrative of the homeland supports the intrinsically spatial identities of ‘state’ and ‘nation’ with an historical and physical context: in the national territory, the ancestral and cultural origins of the nation connect with the contemporary and political activity of the state. Thus, nationalism serves to blur the division between the bona fide and the fiat types of boundaries, asserting that the borders of the state are (ideally) its ‘natural’ boundaries, marking the (pre-)historical space of the nation’s homeland. In this way, the territorial borders of a state become associated with an ‘imaginary process’ of linking present with past and an ‘active process’ of drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion. The territorial borders and the cultural, historical, economic and political boundaries of the state thus become analogous.

**European space**

The link between territory and the interests and identity of the state is fundamental to the logic of nationalism; whilst the nature of this link may have changed, its underlying rationale remains as strong as ever, even within contemporary Europe. From a legal or geopolitical perspective, state borders within the European Union have remained for the most part remarkably unchanged since the end of the Second World War. Neither can EU membership itself be said to have dramatically altered the classic concept of statehood and its territorial basis (Müller-Graff 1998:15). For the EU is founded on a territorially based notion of material and constitutional powers, due to the fact that its conception and practice is based for the most part within the territorial jurisdiction of its member-states. Moreover, new understandings of territory in Europe continue to draw on material and constitutional powers of space, with sovereignty and governance still associated with bordered territorial jurisdictions (Penrose 2001; Herb 1999:13). Indeed, territory has in some respects become more important in the context of European integration: as cultural norms, political principles and economic practice become less differentiated, territorial location becomes a prime factor in distinguishing the particular interests and identities of states.

Nonetheless, although European integration has not redrawn the map of Europe, it has been predicated on the notion of a definable European ‘space’. Jönsson, Tägil and Törnqvist (2000:3) define ‘space’ as a ‘geographical concept’ within which the politically-laden notion
Reference to ‘European space’, therefore, includes historical, cultural, and economic dynamics that may be associated with but not defined by territorial boundaries. As will be seen in relation to the Irish context, the concept of European space is seen as one that transgresses the limitations of political state borders, forming a basis for European political cooperation, economic transactions (Rosamond 2002), communication and mobility (Richardson and Jensen 2003). As Christiansen (1996) argues, this European space not only facilitates supranational cooperation but other forms of political activity, such as regional and local governance. Whereas territoriality may be conceived as a ‘specific arrangement of space’ whose boundaries are politically defined (Albert and Brock 2001:34), the term ‘space’ is more apt in relation to the EU. For, although reference to ‘Europe’ has particular geographical associations, the EU itself cannot be said to be a territorial entity given that the most concrete delineation of its boundaries at any time is the external borders of its member-states.

Ambiguity regarding the space of Europe reflects the case that it was not until relatively recently that European integration became expressly concerned with the significance of political borders. It was the Council of Europe that first projected an alternative view of borders as bridges, through its ideal of regional cross-border cooperation. In contrast, the European Economic Community actually strengthened state borders, with the regulation of national markets enhanced by the Treaty of Rome (1957—a trend continued with the development of the Single Market in the 1980s and the corresponding role of the state within its own borders (O’Dowd 2000:7). This changed with the focus on political cooperation as a part of economic integration within the European Union, and the 1990s saw the growth of ideals of cross-border cooperation. This was accompanied by a discursive shift away from the use of borders as symbols of exclusive national power, at both a European and a national level (O’Dowd 2000:11). Overcoming internal division and enhancing internal unity is reflected in the ideal model of the EU as one in which internal borders are no barrier to cooperation in the achievement of common interests within the common space of the EU. As a consequence, the official discourse of member-states has presented the European space as a forum within which the territorially-defined interests and identity of the state can be fulfilled beyond its territorial confines. This thesis is now elaborated in relation to the case study of the Republic of Ireland, whose official conceptualisation of European space
contributed to a significant reconceptualisation of its own territory, including the retraction of its irredentist claim over Northern Ireland.

**Ireland in the space of Europe**

Irish official discourse on European space is clearly influenced by the territorial status of the island of Ireland—its location, size, and cohesion; this is demonstrated in the official presentation of the effects of Europeanisation on these territorial features of the Irish state. The nature of Irish territoriality and, thereby, the borders of the state not only relate to Ireland’s material and political status but also its position in relation to its geographical neighbours, most particularly the United Kingdom including Northern Ireland. The significance of a European model in which territorial frontiers are bridges (not barriers) to partnership and cooperation has not been overlooked in Irish official discourse. Irish nationalism has traditionally presented Northern Ireland as having common interests and identity with the Republic as a consequence of being part of the island of Ireland. Given the context of the foundation of the Irish state and the path of Irish history since independence, it is possible to contend that the six counties of Northern Ireland have been as important in the definition of the Irish state as the twenty-six counties of the Republic. Moreover, the Irish governmental elite’s conception of Northern Ireland (and the conflict) has consistently informed Irish foreign policy, specifically in relation to European integration. The development of the EU and the parallel conceptualisation of ‘European space’ have been viewed by the Irish governmental elite as highly significant for the territory of Ireland, most particularly the Irish border. Bearing this in mind, this analysis of official discourse regarding Ireland’s borders will assess the significance of Europeanisation both for the territory of the state (i.e. location, size and cohesion) and the territory of the island (i.e. partition, unification and cross-border cooperation).

**The territory of the Irish state in Europe**

**Location**

Although membership of the European Union could not change the facts of Ireland’s territorial circumstances, it was possible for Irish official discourse to ‘reimagine’ these conditions in the context of the European Union. Ireland’s geographical location on the
periphery of the European continent has been traditionally interpreted in Irish nationalist discourse as a clear indicator of its distinctiveness. Whereas this had previously led to a sense of isolationism and marginality, becoming part of the space of the European Union has allowed this dimension of Irish geography to be interpreted as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. Even aside from substantial economic growth, the plain fact of EEC membership meant that FitzGerald was able to claim in 1978 that the Irish Republic was ‘no longer an isolated political unit in a small island off the coast of another island’ (20 May 1978).\textsuperscript{9} Thus, as a ‘partner[ ] in a common enterprise’, Ireland has been able to play its part ‘in assisting and encouraging change across our shared continent’ (Ahern 1 March 2001:1; 5 February 2001:1, emphasis added).\textsuperscript{10} Another indicator of the ‘reimagining’ of Irish territory in official discourse has been the revival of President de Valera’s vision of an Ireland ‘situated at the very focus of the trade routes between Europe and America—the gateway to the West’ (1918:2) and ‘the gateway of the Atlantic…the last outpost of Europe towards the West’ (1922:11).\textsuperscript{11} More recently, members of the Irish governmental elite have presented Ireland as ‘a natural and profitable gateway to Europe’ and ‘well-placed to meet the needs of US companies seeking a European base (Cowen 6 June 2000:2; Ahern 24 November 1997:3). This model not only implies that Ireland’s geographical position no longer confines it to the economic and political periphery of Europe, it also enables Ireland to be presented in official discourse at the ‘centre’ of Europe. In addition, the European Union’s external as well as internal borders no longer confine the limits of political and economic cooperation. In the ideal model of European integration, therefore, Ireland’s (inter)national potential is realised beyond its borders without its territorial integrity being compromised.

**Size**

Ireland’s geographical (and thereby historical) proximity to Britain also gave rise to another traditional tenet of Irish nationalism, namely its vulnerability to larger countries. This tenet was strengthened by the small size of Irish territory. Ireland’s size affected its approach to international affairs in three ways: a sense of vulnerability, an empathy with other ‘small nations’, and a weak economic capacity. Again, this territorial feature has been reinterpreted in the context of European integration. The logic of official discourse advocating full cooperation with other states has been that Ireland’s geographical size and position necessitates it.\textsuperscript{13} Participation in the Common Market was urged on the basis that Ireland was
‘a small country with little capacity, at present, to influence events abroad that affect [its] interests’ (DFA 1972a:13). However, a sense of Ireland’s physical vulnerability to larger powers has also been present in arguments against EU membership, many of which have compared the sharing of sovereignty in Europe to Ireland’s experience of colonialism. However, such a protectionist attitude was the type of worldview that the pro-European Irish governmental elite were attempting to prove as anachronistic and self-defeating. Instead, they argued that Ireland’s approach to European integration should reflect and build upon its territorial properties. Ireland’s small island status was hence conceived in official discourse as being transformed in the European context, with its isolation overcome and its distinctiveness enhanced through Europeanisation. Recent analyses of Ireland’s experience of EU membership have credited it with enabling Ireland:

…a small, insular country, insular literally and up to then, metaphorically as well to interact on a basis of equality and on a wide range of issues with our fellow-members on the continent, as well as our nearest neighbour (Ahern 15 April 1999)

Ireland’s interaction with its ‘fellow-members’ in the EU has reflected the continuation and extension of its identification with other small nations in the international realm. This has been demonstrated in recent times as the Irish government led small states in opposition to certain elements of the draft treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and in relation to the enlargement of the EU, in which Ireland’s status (including its size and history) has been emphasised as a basis for support. The presentation of EU membership as an invaluable opportunity for small states on the European periphery to ‘catch up’ relates to the reversal of Ireland’s weak economic capacity in the European context. Integration of the Irish economy into ‘one of the great economic groupings of the world’ was always presented in Irish official discourse as effectively overcoming the limitations on the Irish economy arising from the status of its territory (i.e. mainly agricultural, small size, geographically ‘hidden’ behind its neighbour) (DFA 1972a:13). An article written by Garret FitzGerald (5 January 1963, emphasis added) following Ireland’s first application to the EEC, and ten years prior to accession, draws together these elements of Ireland’s territorial status and their redemption through integration into the European space:
Economically participation in the EEC seems desirable because… *the smaller the country the more it needs international trade* because of its greater dependence on goods and services *not obtainable within its own frontiers*.18

Irish official discourse from this time onwards reflects the conception that Ireland’s territorial position gives the state a duty not only to defend what little it has—‘Our responsibilities are those of a small nation with limited resources’ (FitzGerald 14 March 1984:3)—but also to express its resulting identity on the world stage. The small size of Ireland is no longer viewed as an impediment to an active and influential role in international affairs; instead, it is presented as a positive attribute. From being ‘a small island off Europe’, Ireland now ‘punch[es] above its weight’ as a player ‘at the heart of decision-making in Brussels’ (Ahern 15 May 1999:1; Cowen 6 June 2001).

**Cohesion**

As the Irish state gained equality with the countries of Europe, the issue of internal inequality between its territorial regions became increasingly urgent. Regional development has always been pivotal to the Irish government’s support for European integration. The Department of Foreign Affairs (1972d:2) dedicated an information leaflet to this precise topic in 1972 outlining the government policy objective to ‘level out the differences in development which exist and to see to it that all areas share in the increasing prosperity’. In relation to this, the EEC’s desire, as set out in the Preamble of the Treaty of Rome, to reduce ‘the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions’ is lauded as the first step in the development of a community regional policy. The leaflet asserts that the EEC accepts Irish requests:

> …to recognise formally that there are major economic and social imbalances of a regional and structural nature in Ireland and that it is necessary that they be corrected. [Also]…to give a commitment that it will use all the means at its disposal to help us in removing these imbalances... (DFA 1972d:7)

The way in which the Department of Foreign Affairs chose to explain the meaning of ‘common market’—using the analogy of trade and movement within the Irish state, i.e. duty-free trading between Galway and Mayo—highlights the way in which the territorial model of the state is used to explain the government’s approach to European integration, in which
The Europeanisation of Ireland’s borders

Both parts of Ireland share many similar problems in relation to underdeveloped regions… In the EEC we shall be pressing for a comprehensive Community policy and action on regional development. This will help the North as much as the South because the country as a whole stands to benefit from a policy and action by the Community for the underdeveloped regions. (DFA 1972c:2-3).

This theme is continued in Irish official discourse regarding a number of other areas of Community policy, many of which are considered in the next section of this paper.

THE ISLAND OF IRELAND IN EUROPE

Partition

Turning to the possible effects of EEC membership, although it would be quite wrong to look to this as a panacea for the Irish problem, which will always remain one to be settled by Irishmen in Ireland, such influence as membership of the Community will have is likely to be uniformly directed towards easing that path to a united Ireland. (FitzGerald 1973:104, emphasis added)

Prior to the referendum on accession, the Irish governing elite was keen to persuade the Irish electorate that membership of the EEC would not ‘involve [the Irish government’s] acceptance…of the partition of Ireland’ nor would it ‘adversely affect the national policy for the reunification of this country’ (DFA 1972c:1). Points made in a leaflet on ‘North and South in the EEC’ about the likely impact of EEC membership on decreasing ‘barriers’ between North and South were, explicitly or implicitly, referring to its impact on the barrier
between Northern Ireland and the Republic, i.e. the border. This argument had a flip side too, with the threat that the border would become increasingly significant if the Republic opted not to accede to the EEC:

Britain has decided to join the EEC. If we were to stay out of the enlarged Community, then the Border would, in effect, become the land frontier between us and the EEC. This would result in the erection of many more economic and trade barriers than exist now. ...North and South would inevitably grow even further apart. (DFA 1972a:12)

Playing on the resonance of the verb ‘unite’ in Irish nationalism, Fianna Fáil campaign advertisements in the 1972 referendum carried the slogan ‘Unite with Europe’. One of its campaign posters carried the image of Ireland outside of an EEC of which the United Kingdom and, thereby, Northern Ireland was a part, creating a graphic split within the island of Ireland (Source: Desmond 2001). The implication of this image was that Irish exclusion from the EEC would result in the Irish border being ‘permanently entrenched’ as an ‘international frontier’ between not just the Republic and Britain but the Republic and the EEC (Haughey 7 May 1972; DFA 1972a:12; DFA 1972c:4). At the heart of this discourse was the association of accession to the EEC with reunification of the island. If the Republic and Northern Ireland were both part of the EEC, then the frontier between them would be diminished:

The North is joining the EEC; that decision is made. If our people vote in the Referendum in favour of joining, then the whole of Ireland – North and South – will be inside the EEC. If not then part of Ireland will be inside the EEC and part outside. (DFA 1972c:2-4)

In this way, Irish official discourse on European integration built upon the traditional assertion that the island was not only a territorial but also a cultural and political unit, as reflected in Cosgrave’s (2 July 1973:3, emphasis added) claim:

...our aspiration towards an eventual political unity of the island of Ireland is founded on a reality – on the reality that Ireland is and has always been a single society...
The ideal correspondence between the ‘fiat’ (political) and the ‘bona fide’ (natural, i.e. island) boundaries of the Irish nation asserted in the quest for independence became a problem for official Irish nationalism in both ideological and practical terms (Mann 1995:52). The governing elite of the independent Irish state had to construct an official nationalism in the context of the partition of the island. This was a precarious operation given that the territorial frameworks of the ideal Irish nation and political Irish state essentially did not correspond (as acknowledged in the Constitution). The need to make the 26 county state ‘united [and] sovereign’ was thus balanced with, and (it may be argued) partially achieved through, the maintenance of the ideal of a united 32 county Ireland (de Valera 21 June 1925, emphasis added). The incontestable and immutable bona fide reality of the island has formed a basis of continuity in Irish nationalist discourse between past, present and future, regardless of how the events on and around this territory are interpreted. Thus, ‘the island of Ireland’ has been a foundation stone of Irish official discourse, even as members of the Irish governmental elite have sought to construct a more inclusive and moderate approach to Northern Ireland.

Unionist and Nationalists, Protestant and Catholic all share the one island, and are deeply attached to its soil. All belong and have a contribution to make to our common country. (Haughey 30 May 1983)

 Territory is important in the traditional conception of Irish nation-statehood not only in its political, symbolic or cultural designation but also in ideological, even emotive, terms. For example, in the above extract Haughey (30 May 1983) refers to a deep attachment to the ‘soil’ of the island shared by all resident on it, thus making a direct equation between the physical reality of territory that forms the literal and metaphorical ground of people’s identity and experience. Such a notion is prominent in Irish official discourse, as it was in pre-independence Irish nationalism, and sustains the belief that territory helps define what it means to be Irish and to hold an Irish worldview. For this reason, partition is also conceived as an emotive and personal issue as much as political one. This is embodied in Reynold’s description of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution reflecting ‘hopes and ideals which lie deep in the hearts of many Irish men and women North and South’, and also a speech given by Lynch to the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis of 1970:
Partition is a deep, throbbing weal across the land, heart and soul of Ireland, an imposed deformity whose indefinite perpetuation eats into the Irish consciousness like a cancer. ...it is impossible for true Irishmen, of whatever creed, to dwell on the existence of Partition without becoming emotional. (Lynch 17 January 1970)

In anthropomorphising the territory of the island of Ireland, Lynch presents the division of Ireland as a personal tragedy for every Irish citizen, equating ‘true’ Irishness with an anti-partitionist sentiment.\(^{22}\) It is a legacy of this association of Irishness with a desire for Irish unity that all leading members of the Irish governmental elite find it necessary to stress that reunification remains their ideal objective. Thus, whether it is a question of relations with Britain, economic development or participation in the EU, official Irish discourse will not portray any national state policy as making re-unification less feasible. Even when there are significant changes in government policy, this principle remains—or must be seen to remain absolute.

The consequent significance of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is reflected in the capitalisation of ‘border’ in the transcription of Lynch’s speech below:

Partition is more than just a *Border*, more than just an *artificially-made* and *artificially-maintained* barrier, more than just an *economically-disruptive* division, more than just a *culturally-divisive* influence, more than just an *historical affront*. (Lynch 17 January 1970, emphasis added)

A device particularly common in the early 1970s, the use of capitalisation in government publications indicates the reification of certain concepts in Irish official discourse. In this case, the Irish border and the island of Ireland are being given significance and status that are usually reserved for individual places or countries, thus implying that the ‘Border’ and the ‘Island’ have their own identity and (international) importance.\(^{23}\) Yet, nomenclature itself remains a significant element of official discourse and a good indicator of change in Irish official nationalism. The phrase ‘twenty-six counties’ is used in official discourse with the assumption that the audience will associate this geographical term with a political and cultural entity. It is interesting to note that the phrase is often capitalised, which (for reasons
noted above) confirms that it is more than a reference to a geographical area. Similarly, ‘the North’ is often used as a self-consciously ‘depoliticised’ term for Northern Ireland in Irish official discourse. References to ‘the South’ are only made in statements that refer also to ‘the North’, affirming the image that Northern Ireland and the Republic are both parts of a ‘whole’, i.e. the island of Ireland. Yet, the North/South description is not purely territorial and it often appears in texts that acknowledge the different cultural constitutions of the jurisdictions. The fact that FitzGerald can make reference to ‘traditional North/South tensions’ (27 September 1977:12, emphasis added), highlights the association of the geographical areas with different histories, ideologies and cultures. The development of not only divergent economies and polities but also different ‘traditions’, ‘identities’ and ‘views’ in the two parts of Ireland had, it was argued, resulted in ‘psychological barriers between North and South’ (FitzGerald 21 November 1984:4; Lynch 6 August 1971; FitzGerald 11 February 1982:1). This discourse became increasingly pronounced with the growth of the conflict in Northern Ireland, which Cosgrave saw as ‘accentuating the mental partition’ and, moreover, ‘killing here [in the Irish state] the desire for unity which has been part of our heritage’ (13 June 1974:3).

**Unification**

The perception that ‘the two parts of Ireland [had] drifted apart insensibly’ had significant consequences for the ideal of reunification (FitzGerald and Harte 1979:4). The Irish government was in the paradoxical position of wanting to disassociate the Irish state from the conflict in (and confine it to) the province of Northern Ireland whilst taking every opportunity to emphasise its right to involvement in any resolution. The language used by the Irish governmental elite on this subject was directed at countering both the fears of people of Northern Ireland and the indifference of the people of the Republic regarding reunification. As a result, whilst acknowledging the differences between ‘North’ and ‘South’ (i.e. unionist and nationalist) FitzGerald (20 May 1978:18) contested ‘the attempt to suggest that North and South are ‘foreign’ to each other’ and called for ‘bridge-building’ to ‘bring closer together the two parts of this island’. More specifically, he identified at the core of ‘this radical re-statement of the nationalist position’ a new consideration of the role of territory in Irish nationalist ideology:
…the reunion sought by the people of the Republic [is] a reunion of peoples and not a re-conquest of territory. (FitzGerald 22 February 1980:1)

This approach was consistently advocated by John Hume as leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party in Northern Ireland, whose definition of an ‘agreed Ireland’ centred on removing ‘the real border in Ireland, which is not a line on a map but in the hearts and minds of people’ (Hume 1993, 2001). The crucial role played by Hume in the peace process in Northern Ireland, specifically in developing relations between political parties on the island of Ireland and between British and Irish governments, is embodied in the application of concepts and phrases associated with Hume in official discourse of the two states, for example in the 1993 Major-Reynolds ‘Joint Declaration on Peace’ (Article 5):

The Taoiseach [Reynolds] hopes that over time a meeting of hearts and minds will develop, which will bring all the people of Ireland together.24

Recognition of the importance of reconciliation between traditions and communities led to acknowledgement that peaceful reunification of the territory could only occur with agreement of a majority in Northern Ireland. This principle was fundamental to the major agreements between the governments on the path towards the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, in which the political parties also agreed to the principle of majority consent in Northern Ireland:

We have no interest in creating by force a united but unstable Ireland. We have no ambitions to take over the territory of Northern Ireland, but ignoring its people. Unless and until we can persuade a majority of the people of Northern Ireland to join with us, there will not be a united Ireland. (Reynolds 1993)

This is not to say that territory became less important in Irish nationalism. Indeed, increasing official recognition of the diversity of identities, ideologies, traditions, etc. on the island of Ireland was accompanied by an emphasis on the importance of the territory of Ireland as a basis of common history, experience and interests. Recognition of the existence of ‘different kinds of Irish people’ not only emphasised diversity, it also stressed a conception of ‘Irishness’ based on territorial residence and not cultural, religious and political affinity (FitzGerald 16 June 1978:4). These notions are encapsulated in an address given by Lynch in
1970, which emphasises the territory of Ireland as the basis of Irishness and the natural unity of Ireland:

We are all Irish in our different kinds of ways…. Danes, Normans, English, Scots, followed into Ireland our earlier migration and became part of our soil, of our blood and bone, of the green fields we cultivate… (Lynch 11 July 1970:22-23, emphasis added)

The implication in the above narrative is that ‘territory’ forms a unity between the people in Ireland not only through their physical residence on the island but also their (and their ancestors’) cultivation of the land itself. These images are also present in a speech given by Lynch, addressed to the population of Northern Ireland:

We share this country not merely because we live on the same island; we share it also because of common history; because of qualities which complement each other where they are not the same; because our blood has been intermingled as much as it has been uselessly shed; because we have, all of us, formed and cultivated the land of Ireland and none of us can be removed from what we made. (Lynch 20 February 1971)

The notions of ‘common history’, different but complementary ‘qualities’, ‘blood’ and ‘land’ are intertwined to present a picture of a people who are fundamentally linked to each other. Territory, therefore, remained fundamental to the Irish official discourse that supported and facilitated the peace process, with the term ‘common space’ substituted for the phrase ‘united Ireland’:

A new beginning to relationships on this island must involve the creation of a common space in which our different cultures can be experienced, shared and enjoyed by all people of the island, free from the political overtones which in the past have alienated different groups and communities from elements of our common heritage. (Ahern 14 May 1998:1, emphasis added).

Ahern implies that political ideologies lie at the heart of the conflict in (Northern) Ireland, and if these were to be taken out of the equation, residence in the ‘common space’ would mean common interests, action and identity in a rediscovery of a ‘common heritage’. This
idea of conceiving of culture as apolitical is actually a highly political statement to make, particularly given that the implied assumption is that unionism ‘free from…political overtones’ would be merely another Irish cultural tradition. Nevertheless, official Irish nationalism was itself somewhat ‘depoliticised’ with regards to Northern Ireland as a concession to the normalisation of the North/South relationship, as epitomised in the amendments made to Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of Ireland following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Articles 2 and 3, in which the Irish state’s irredentist claim over the territory of Northern Ireland resided, were of immense symbolic significance for Irish nationalism:

Our Constitution…enshrines in Articles 2 & 3 the clear assertion of the belief that this island should be one political unit—a belief stretching far back into history and re-asserted time and time again by the vast majority of our people North and South. (Haughey 11 October 1981)

Ultimately, the amendments to Articles 2 and 3 were made in the context of a growing awareness among the Irish governmental elite that they were not only a defining point for Irish nationalists but also a sticking point for unionists and, therefore, a barrier to north-south cooperation. Unionists objected to Article 2’s description of Ireland’s ‘national territory’ as the ‘whole island’ and viewed as a threat the explicit expectation of reunification and the assertion of the ‘right’ of the Irish government to jurisdiction over the ‘whole’ of the territory in Article 3. Following the 19th Amendment of the Constitution, as noted by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, David Andrews (30 April 1998:1), Article 2 has moved ‘the centre of gravity from land to people’:

It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation.

This goes some way towards addressing the problem that Article 3 of the 1937 Constitution originally faced, namely accommodating the difference between the ‘national territory’ and the actual territorial jurisdiction of the Irish state. The anticipation of reunification (‘until then’) remains in the amended Article 3, yet the ‘threat’ is removed through the inclusion of two conditions: a) it would occur through ‘peaceful means’ and, b) with majority consent in Northern Ireland. The second part of Article 3 marks a new departure for the 1937
Constitution (although it was present in the 1922 Constitution) in its facilitation of institutions that function on an all-island basis, as established by the Good Friday Agreement.  

Official Irish discourse on the amendment of Articles 2 and 3 exemplify the attempts of the Irish governmental elite to give the impression of continuity and the enhancement—not compromise—of what are deemed to be fundamental nationalist principles. The key principle of reunification remains, with the new Articles 2 and 3 presented as affirming that the Irish nation ‘is not territorially disembodied’ and ‘is and always will be a 32-county nation’ (Ahern 21 April 1998:2, 26 April 1998:3). Indeed, ‘the bonds that unite the Irish nation, North and South’ are, according to Ahern (26 April 1998:4), made stronger, in that:

> The nation is defined in terms of people, but people related to a specific territory, the island of Ireland. ...As a consequence of that, we no longer say, or appear to say, that the territory is ours, not theirs, but rather that it is shared by all of us. (21 April 1998:2)

Thus, Ahern is presenting the amended Articles 2 and 3 as representing principle of official nationalism that Cosgrave or FitzGerald, Lynch or Haughey could have recognised and approved of thirty years previously: unity through peaceful means.

This ideal is also behind Lynch’s proposal that improvement in the relationship between Britain and Ireland as a result of joint EEC membership would be central to the reunification of Ireland:

> I consider that the only solution is an Ireland united by agreement, in independence; an Ireland in a friendly relationship with Britain; an Ireland a member with Britain of the enlarged European Communities. (Lynch, July 1972:1)

The fact that Britain and Ireland would move ‘into closer political and economic association’ in the EEC represented a move away from previous assumptions that the path to reunification lay in clearer distinction between Britain and Ireland (ITGWU 1972:19). Instead, Irish governmental elite members began to claim that closer association between Britain and the Republic could help overcome differences between north and south. This assertion was at the
heart of negotiations that led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, the 1995 Framework Documents and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement itself (Arthur 1999:73-78), and is reflected in comments made by John Bruton (1996), a key player in these negotiations:

This problem [of conflict] is not a problem that can be solved solely within the perspective of Northern Ireland itself alone. It’s a problem that has wider dimensions. It has an all-Irish dimension. It also has a dimension in terms of relationships between Britain and Ireland.

By placing Northern Ireland ‘in between’ Britain and Ireland, it becomes the concern not only of these two states but also of ‘Europe’ itself:

Both Northern Ireland and Ireland are part of Europe, and any problem that occurs in Northern Ireland or Ireland—or as we say, Ireland and Britain—is a European problem in that sense. (Bruton 1996)

As the following extract from the Joint Declaration of the British and Irish Governments (December 1993) shows, common membership of the EU actually brought the two states together and highlighted the options for a cross-border approach to Northern Ireland:

…the development of Europe will, of itself, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of the island of Ireland, and to Ireland and the United Kingdom as partners in the European Union. (Art. 3)

It is for this reason that structures for the resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland need to recognise ‘the special links that exist between the peoples of Britain and Ireland…while taking account of newly forged links with the rest of Europe’ (Joint Declaration 1993:Art.8).

**Integration**

Participation together in the EEC will certainly encourage the people of this island to concentrate on what they have in common rather than on what divides them. (DFA 1972b:3)

The suggestion in official discourse that the island of Ireland is a ‘common space’ is directly related to the concept of a ‘European space’ in which territory constitutes an area for
common interests and cooperation is not delimited by state borders. This point is clearly expressed in a statement made by Lynch (28 May 1971):

Ireland and Britain are now very close to entry into the European Economic Community. North and South will find many of its problems and opportunities common to both. *Ireland itself will be one common market* of 4.5 million people and will, in turn, be part of the much larger common market of ten States.

The image of the island of Ireland as a ‘common market’ in the Common Market draws direct parallels between the practice and ideals of European integration and Irish official nationalism. The arguments set out regarding the impact of EEC membership on the creation of a common space in the island of Ireland therefore link directly to the assumptions about the territory of Ireland outlined above. First, the EU was presented as lessening the differences and divisions because the EU is predicated on the notion that common interests are more important than territorial boundaries, EU membership highlights the *common interests* of north and south. Secondly, membership of the EU thus *lessens differences* and divisions between Northern Ireland and the Republic whilst (in some cases) heightening those between the island of Ireland and Britain. Thirdly, as a result of the *cross-border cooperation* and structures arising from the two previous factors plus the impact of EU membership, reunification of Ireland is made more feasible. Each of these three arguments will be considered in turn, beginning with the notion that the common interests of the two parts of Ireland have ‘re-emerged under the conditions of EEC membership’ (FitzGerald 16 June 1978:4).

*Common interests*

Underpinning the identification of common interests between north and south is the assumption that economic interests are themselves integrally related to conditions within a particular territorial unit. This theme in Irish official discourse seeks to highlight the rationale or the logic, as opposed to the ideal or ideology, of a united Ireland. Nevertheless, the Irish governmental elite has been acutely aware of the political implications of common interests in the context of EU membership. It was envisaged that common interests between
the Republic and Northern Ireland in the European context in the particular areas of the
Common Agricultural Policy and regional aid would form the basis for common action:

*Within a vast European Community the two parts of Ireland, sharing common
interests* in relation to such matters as agriculture and regional policy, *must
tend to draw together*—and the fact that on some of these major issues the
North and the Republic will have a common interest, divergent from that of
highly developed Britain, cannot be without significance in these conditions
(FitzGerald 1973:103, emphasis added).

This statement exemplifies the notion that common interests relate to territory and, therefore,
that not only are the interests of Northern Ireland and the Republic similar, they differ from
those of Britain. In this vein, FitzGerald (16 June 1978:4) asserted that the similarity of the
interests of north and south in Ireland, based on shared territory, and their distinction would
‘prove a significant factor in the evolution of the political situation between North and
South’.

*Lessening difference*

Since the establishment of the Irish state, the governmental elite had sought to create ‘the
kind of society in the Republic with which the Northern majority would wish to be closely
linked with a view to our common benefit’ (Cosgrave 26 June 1974:8). Cosgrave, as with
other Irish leaders, saw this ideal society as being achievable only through economic
development, as he claimed, ‘[p]rosperity can bring us a unity of hearts and of purpose’ (26
June 1974:9). Many government speeches on the subject of drawing North and South closer
together were, therefore, premised on the need to first ‘increase the material wealth’ of the
island (2 July 1973:9). The belief that a (more) united Ireland would arise from greater
prosperity was integrally connected to a conception of the impact of Ireland’s integration into
the European space on the space of the island. In this light, official discourse proffered the
relative insignificance of the territorial border, given that ‘the real dividing line in Ireland so
far as economic prosperity is concerned has always been an East-West and not a North-South
one’ (Lynch July 1972:1). Overall, the island of Ireland was able to be conceived as a
European unit, in which ‘Irish people must diminish the differences between us… must
concert our actions and promote our common interests’ (Lynch 28 May 1971) and, in
addition, ‘development policies of the EEC [would] be helpful to each part of what is largely a single region’ (Lynch July 1972:1). The ‘reality’ of territorial unity and resulting common economic needs would thereby become realised through the diminution of the border itself:

Continental entrepreneurs will not be concerned with political borders or outmoded political attitudes in this country. And the Governments of the Common Market countries will not be interested either. (Lynch 28 May 1971)

**Cross-border cooperation**

The level of cross-border cooperation envisaged from accession was particularly ambitious given ‘the taboo that surrounded North-South relations’ prior to the 1960s and the impact of the ‘Troubles’ from the late 1960s onwards (Kennedy 2000:367). The vulnerability of such cooperation to localised events and sensitivities served only to enhance the Irish governmental elite’s expectations of the effect of EEC membership in this area. For this reason, Irish official discourse determinedly set forth the case for the benefits and timeliness of north-south cooperation at an official political as well as economic level:

This kind of cross-border co-operation, which has been given a further boost by E.E.C. membership, would be considerably facilitated, however, by a political association between North and South. (FitzGerald and Harte 1979:8)

This theme has continued and developed throughout the past thirty years; however, it is possible to identify a move towards a less state-centred vision of cross-border relations. The three strands of the Good Friday Agreement, in which cross-border cooperation is ‘multilevel’ and covers a wide range of areas, embody this development. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 envisages an ideal situation in which territorial borders would not inhibit cooperation or negotiation, either within Ireland or between Britain and Ireland. In a speech to the European Parliament on the Agreement, the then-Minister for Foreign Affairs acknowledged the role of EU structures as a guide ‘in the negotiations of arrangements for cooperation and joint action within Ireland, North and South’ (Andrews 29 April 1998).

The symbolic (if not political) significance of cross-border cooperation in a common European space is frequently referred to in Irish official discourse, as the following quotation from Andrews’ successor illustrates:
Politically and economically, the intrinsic value of North/South co-operation is obvious… North/South co-operation can benefit everybody and need not threaten anybody. This was also a result of that underlying trend…towards working together without reference to the border or to political affiliation. (Cowen 28 April 2000:3, emphasis added)

This serves to give the impression that internal territorial borders are de facto no longer significant. As Cunningham (1997) contests in a critique of the political language of John Hume, the logic of this is directed towards the principle of reunification. This may be identified in earlier statements of the Irish governmental elite predicting that a united Ireland would be facilitated and supported through EU membership. However, simplified anti-partitionism in Irish official discourse has been effectively abandoned as the peace process has centred on the principle of majority consent in Northern Ireland for change in its constitutional status. If closer links with Northern Ireland remain an ideal of official nationalism, participation in the common European space provides the Irish political elite with alternative means, models and end-goals for such cross-border relations.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered some of the ways in which the territory of Ireland has been defined by official Irish nationalism in the twentieth century, particularly since accession to the EU. It has highlighted the centrality of the principle of reunification in official discourse and its continuity to the present day. The reason for this continuity, and the fact that reunification is the ideal which no Irish government can be seen to discard, is essentially because of the significance of ‘territory’ in Irish nationalism. The framework, model and narrative of the EU have been presented as generally affirming the ideals of unification (with cross-border cooperation, lessening difference, etc.). Nonetheless, whilst Irish unity remains an implicit core ideal of Irish official nationalism, changes in the conceptualisation of territory and borders in the context of European integration have altered the very meaning of a ‘united Ireland’ itself.
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Acknowledgements

Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the ‘European Unification’ panel at the International Political Science Association annual conference in Durban, July 2003, and the ‘Bridges and Borders’ conference at Wilfred Laurier University, Ontario, October 2003. The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the useful advice of anonymous referees and funding from IPSA and the Viessmann Research Centre on Modern Europe for the opportunity to develop this paper.

Notes

1 Jack Lynch: Government Minister 1957-66; Leader of Fianna Fáil 1966-79; Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) 1966-73, 1977-79. During his time as Taoiseach, the ‘Troubles’ began in Northern Ireland, direct rule from Westminster was introduced for the province (1972), Ireland acceded to the EEC (1973), Ireland joined the EMS (1979), and Ireland held the Presidency of the European Council (1979).

2 This is related to Fairclough’s (2001:21) definition of discourse as bringing together text, interaction and context.

3 Although this research concentrates on the discourse of members of the Irish governmental elite, it is of central importance to note that the concepts analysed here are not exclusive to the Irish state but may also be propagated by, for example, the European Commission and moderate nationalist politicians in Northern Ireland (most notably John Hume). This highlights the importance of the shared conceptual as well as political space of the EU.

4 This ‘collective consciousness’ is forged over time, as individuals are socialised and experiences shared (particularly in relation to those outside the state) within this common delimited space (Herb 1999:17; Van Amersfoort 1995:173).

5 Smith (1991:21) identifies a specific homeland as one of the six main identifying features of an ethnic community. However, the complex, diverse and changeable elements involved in the definition of any nation-state makes it necessary to consider the ‘homeland’ as an evolving concept rather than an historical ‘given’. To do otherwise is to risk reifying the concept.
This is an extension of Schlesinger’s (1992:16) description of national identity as involving an ‘imaginary process of creating traditions and of activating collective memories’ and, secondly, an ‘active process’ of ‘inclusion and exclusion’.

Moreover, the end of the Second World War brought with it a strengthening of national territorial boundaries, as states improved and expanded their infrastructure within their borders (O’Dowd 2000:3-5).

It is important to note that this conception of the European Union does not ‘compete’ with that of the nation-state, given that it does not presume that the EU has a ‘territory’ or ‘homeland’ at all, let alone one that supersedes that of the nation-state


This latter quotation is taken from ‘Address to the Free Nations of the World’ presented by the Irish delegates to the Peace Conference in 1919, an extract of which is quoted in de Valera (1922:11-13).

Brian Cowen: Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2000-present.

‘In the real world, all countries, especially small ones, operate within very considerable constraints. Nobody can pull the curtains and tell the world to go away.’ (Ahern 29 March 2001:2, emphasis added)

For example, a trade union leaflet issued prior to the referendum on accession asserted: ‘A surrender of sovereignty… would mean we would be powerless to prevent the rich folk of Europe from buying as much Irish land and property as they wished; it would mean the surrender of our territorial waters to highly capitalised fishing concerns in Britain and Europe.’ (ITGWU 1972:20-21, emphasis added)
15 ‘We opted for membership because we saw clearly that protectionism did not protect and that openness, economically as well as politically, was the way to prosperity for our people…We recognised that we had a part to play in securing a strong and prosperous Europe…’ (Ahern 8 January 2001:3)

16 This outlook was reflected, for example, in the positive response of so many in Ireland to the Allied call in the First World War to defend the rights of ‘poor little’ Belgium. Seventy years later, this underlying principle was maintained: ‘As a small nation we must voice our concern and join with the other small nations of the world in asserting humanitarian principles…’ (Haughey 2 November 1985)

17 ‘Ireland is seen [by applicant states] as a small state, with an historical experience not totally different from their own, which, having started from a long way back, has made the best possible use of the support and opportunities given to it to catch up with the European mainstream.’ (Ahern 5 February 2001)

18 These points are reiterated nine years later in a Department of Foreign Affairs information leaflet prior to the referendum on EEC membership: ‘We are a small country with little capacity, at present, to influence events abroad that affect our interests. As a trading country we are deeply affected by economic and trading developments in Britain and other European countries and in the world generally.’ (DFA 1972a: 13)


20 Liam Cosgrave: Government Minister 1954-1957; Leader of Fine Gael 1965-1977; Taoiseach 1973-1977. During his time as Taoiseach, the Sunningdale Declaration and Assembly was briefly established in NI (1973-1974), the NI Constitutional Convention was held (1975-1976), and Ireland held its first Presidency of the European Council (1975).

21 Joint Declaration on Peace, Art. 6, December 1993. (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dsd151293.htm)

22 This notion was present in early Irish official nationalism, as governmental elites struggled to explain the refusal of unionists to join with the Irish state. Hence, de Valera’s (17 April 1926) assertion that ‘every Irishman’ has a ‘native undying desire’ for unification.
23 Although common for the first fifty years of Irish official discourse, this device of capitalisation for emphasis has been used less frequently since the late 1970s, perhaps in line with growing importance of non-written media.


25 See also comments by Cowen (27 May 2000:19): ‘As an Irish nationalist, it remains my hope that one day there will be a united Ireland. But what we have learned over the past thirty years, is that this united Ireland must be agreed and consensual, both in its achievement and in its administration.’

26 Article 2 (original): ‘The national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and the territorial seas.’

27 Article 3 (original): ‘Pending the re-integration of the national territory, and without prejudice to the right of the Parliament and Government established by this Constitution to exercise jurisdiction over the whole of that territory, the laws enacted by that Parliament shall have the like area and extent of the application as the laws of Saorstat Éireann and the like extra-territorial effect.’

28 Article 3i (amended, emphasis added): ‘It is the firm will of the Irish nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions, recognising that a united Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island. Until then, the laws enacted by the Parliament established by this Constitution shall have the like area and extent of application as the laws enacted by the Parliament that existed immediately before the coming into operation of this Constitution.’

29 Article 3ii (amended): ‘Institutions with executive powers and functions that are shared between those jurisdictions may be established by their respective responsible authorities for stated purposes and may exercise powers and functions in respect of all or any part of the island.’

31 This notion is present in Hume’s (March 1995) argument that, ‘in today’s Europe, Britain and Ireland are together with France, with Spain, with Germany. Therefore, that has changed the nature of our problem. The problem is no longer the British presence. The problem today is the divided people.’

32 See also, Lynch’s expressed aim: ‘to win the consent of the majority of the people in the Six Counties to means by which North and South can come together in a re-united and sovereign Ireland’ (20 September 1969).

33 Hume’s (March 1995, emphasis added) argument reflects this logic: ‘For the first time in our history not to be seeking victory by one side over another, but to build institutions which respect the diversity of our people but following the European example, allow us to work our common ground together, which is economics.’

34 The Department of Foreign Affairs claimed that this would happen within the EEC, as the administrations of the Republic and Northern Ireland would have to ‘work together for the benefit of the whole country’ (DFA 1972c:3).

35 The following quotation from John Hume (1996:46-47) is the type of statement that shows the similarity between anti-partitionism and European neofunctionalism in an Irish context: ‘The EU commits all its members to an ‘ever-closer union’ among the peoples of Europe. That includes an ever-closer union between the people of Ireland, North and South, and between Ireland and Britain. Borders are gone all over Europe, including in fact the Irish border.’

36 See FitzGerald (1973:104, above) and: ‘There would almost certainly be a willingness in the European Community to contribute to investment in economic infrastructure… in the economic development of a united Ireland.’ (Haughey 30 May 1983)