EUROPEANISATION AND HYPHE-NATION: RENEGOTIATING THE IDENTITY BOUNDARIES OF EUROPE’S WESTERN ISLES

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ABSTRACT

EUROPEANISATION AND HYPHE-NATION: RENEGOTIATING THE IDENTITY BOUNDARIES OF EUROPE'S WESTERN ISLES

This paper explores the feasibility and plausibility of the emergence of an Irish-British form of identification. We examine the possibility of such a hyphenated identity category in the context of those who consider themselves to be Irish whilst residing under the jurisdiction of the British state. The key developments in official recognition of new forms of identification in the Western Isles that may point to the emergence of an Irish-British identity are the inclusion of an “Irish” category in the 2001 British censuses and the recognition of a dual Irish and British identity as part of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. We examine these developments and assess the degree to which they support the notion of hyphenated identities. Our assessment draws a comparison between the meaning of identification in the European context and that of the United States of America and concludes that the continued dominance of territorially-defined national identities in Europe precludes the development of a hyphenated Irish-British identification along the lines of those prevalent in the USA.

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Katy Hayward is a doctoral research scholar in the Department of Politics, UCD. She is currently completing her thesis on Irish nationalism and European integration.

Kevin Howard is a doctoral research fellow at the Institute for British-Irish Studies, UCD. His current research interest is in the Irish in Britain, with particular reference to the inclusion of an Irish ethnic option in the 2001 census of Great Britain.
The new Britain being constructed today offers many positive possibilities for the development of an Irish-British identity and culture which could act in much the same way as the Irish-American experience (NESC, 1991: 215).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the possibility of hyphenated forms of national identification emerging in the context of the “Western Isles of Europe” (Ahern, 1998). The concept of hyphenated identities in this context is relatively under-researched despite, as seen in the above quotation, developments in official elite conceptions of inter- and intra-island identities and relations. In the 10 years since the publication of the NESC Report, the political landscape of the Western Isles has been transformed in such a way that could be even more conducive to the emergence of an Irish-British identity. The NESC Report sees such a development as following a similar pattern to that of “Irish-American” identification. From an examination of the two main “identitive spaces” in which such an identity would apply, i.e. among the so-called “Irish in Britain” and among people in Northern Ireland, we contend that the United States is an inappropriate model for conceptualising an Irish-British hyphenated identity. Central to our assessment is the recognition that the official definition of “identity” is integral to any development of new forms of identification. Ultimately, we contend, the continued dominance of the structures and concepts of the nation-state as a territorially defined entity in the European context mitigates against the growth and recognition of a hyphenated national identity, such as “Irish-British”, in the foreseeable future.

**HYPHENATED IDENTITIES: MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE**

*Identification and self-definition*

It is important to distinguish between “identification” and “self-definition” as two dimensions of identity. “Identification” refers to legal nationality (i.e. citizenship) whilst “self-definition” refers to self-ascription in ethnocultural terms. Clearly, the first is more concrete, more readily definable, than the second. The crucial point about identification is its objectivity: nationals are definable according to law. Achieving the cognitive “fit” between identification and self-definition, between legal nationality and the ethnocultural identity, is the logic of nationalism. The territorial boundaries of the state and the ethnocultural boundaries of the nation are (according to the ideal type) coterminous, as encapsulated in the term “nation-state”. In the context of the European Union, this assumption is, some contend, under pressure from both above and below, thus problematising traditional assumptions about the relationship between self-definition (ethnicity) and identification (nationality) (Kearney, 1997). Hyphenated identities may be seen as accommodating this dynamic, by linking self-definition with identification.
US Hyphe-nation

In the United States, historically seen as the paradigmatic “country of immigration”, the accommodation of diverse ethnic origins and US national citizenship is evident in the ubiquity of hyphenated identities. There are of course intense and vigorous debates in the US about just what a hyphenated identity means. We take a position broadly similar to that of Michael Walzer in his recent work *What it means to be an American* (1996). To be Irish-American or African-American is not somehow un-American; to be an American *is* to be a hyphenated-American. As Walzer puts it, Irish-Americans are not somehow culturally Irish and politically American, they are both culturally and politically Irish-Americans. “Irish-American”, “Italian-American”, “African-American” and “Hispanic-American” are indigenous identities in the sense that they mark internal boundaries between *Americans* (see fig. 1). In the USA, hyphenated identities denote being both *in* and *of* America. However, in the context of the Western Isles, the concept of hyphenated identities is more problematic. Our argument is that being identified in hyphenated terms can suggest being *in* but *not of* Britain—a conceptualisation more in line with the European model of multilevel identities.

European multilevel identities

The conceptualisation of multilevel identities and representation in the context of the European Union is pivotal to an understanding of hyphenated identities within its member-states. To be more precise, the notion of multilevel identities developed alongside a map of representative institutions within the EU’s jurisdiction as a
means of addressing the changing relationship between citizens and political institutions in a world of both increasing individualism and supranational policy-making.¹ Our model of multilevel identities in Europe serves to illustrate our assertion that, in contrast to the US model, forms of identification and self-definition do not overlap with each other, but rather they are layered within the national identity (see fig. 2).

Hence, there are many “core identities” within the “regional identity”; there are many regional identities within the “national identity”; and many national identities within the “European identity”. We suggest, in accordance with Milward (1992) and, indeed, Bertie Ahern (2001), that because the nation-state is the “basic building block of Europe, the core political reality”, national identity remains of central importance in the European context. Indeed, the representation of minority and non-state nationalist groupings (sometimes identified as regions) at the EU level (in an official capacity or not) signifies the continued importance of territorially-defined communal identities in Europe. The prevailing logic of the European model of iden-

¹ By 1992 there were 322 “European Economic Interest Groupings” established by cross-border associations between substate authorities (Goodman, 1997: 188). The number of regional representative offices has grown from 2 in 1985 to 50 in 1994 (Laffan, 1996: 91). A trans-national focus for regional communities and a powerful lobby of opinion in favour of adding political regionalism to the original drafts of the TEU at Maastricht were provided by the Association of European Border Regions, the Assembly of European Regions, RETI and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (Taylor, 1995: 77).
tity is that there is always one dominant national identity within any territorial area and that this national identity should be reflected in the institutions that govern the people within that area. The continued dominance of the notion that national identities are territorially exclusive significantly delimits the possible scope for hyphenated identities. Consequently, hyphenated identities in Europe are most common in terms of linking a national identity with that of a “visible” minority, a regional or a linguistic identity group.

NEW IDENTIFICATIONS IN THE WESTERN ISLES

Hyphenated Britishness

Multilevel, even hyphenated, identities are not new in Britain, although they have become more salient in recent times (Baumann, 1999). Issues of identity have been forced onto the political agenda from two distinct directions: post-war non-white immigration and indigenous “regionalism”. This was most recently encapsulated in the 2001 censuses of Great Britain. The state now recognises the hyphenated identities of non-white British nationals, making it possible to identify and be identified as, for example, “Black-British” or “Asian-Scottish”. Stuart Hall (1992) has famously argued that the descendants of the post-war non-white immigration, people who identify as Black-British, have shown that there is more than one way to be British. According to the discourse of multiculturalism, British society is made up of people from a myriad of origins. However, in Great Britain, hyphenated designations such as Black-British or Asian-Scottish have meanings signifying both inclusion and exclusion. The negative public reaction to the publication of The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (Parekh, 2000) showed that terms such as “Black-British” are also used precisely because of the deeply embedded notion that to be of Britain, to be “authentically” British, is to be white. In this sense hyphenated identities in Britain are for those who in some sense are non-indigenous, who remain positioned as “outsiders”.

Identifying the Irish-British

The British born descendants of Irish migrants are ambiguously positioned in the discourse of multiculturalism in Great Britain. On the one hand, being white, “the Irish” are indigenous, easily assimilable. On the other hand research shows that Irish migrants and their descendants experience relative disadvantage comparable with that of non-white ethnic groups. The Irish have been characterised as “inside/outsiders”. This is reflected in the fact that there is no agreed term to describe the British born descendants of Irish immigrants. In a speech at the University of North London in 1999, Bertie Ahern referred to such people as the “Irish in Britain”, “Irish people in Britain”, “Irish people in this country” and “the Irish community in Britain”, but never as “the Irish-British”. Ahern’s speech is of interest precisely because it dealt explicitly with the importance of nomenclature:

The way in which countries and states and peoples are named can often throw an interesting light on the unfolding of history and the evolution of relationships and identities... the agreement I signed is the British Irish Agreement, not the Anglo-Irish
Agreement... The change in nomenclature consolidates an evolution that has been under way since 1985. It reflects a number of elements. Firstly, the evolution of consciousness among Irish nationalists, who, in the main, no longer see England and its rule as the sole issue in relation to Northern Ireland. Secondly a better understanding of the Britishness of Unionists... not captured by the adjective Anglo. Thirdly a lively appreciation within the United Kingdom of the strong movements towards devolution and towards political expression of the separate consciousness of the Scots and the Welsh... Reflecting on the position of the Irish in Britain as the interface between the two states, they too, have had to grapple with issues of naming and of how to identify themselves, especially beyond the first generation of immigrants... All of this questioning about self-identification of the Irish here, all of the agreed adjustments as to how states are named, all of these reflect the rapid pace of change in relations between the two main islands in the North Atlantic archipelago. That in turn, reflects, to a considerable extent the rapid pace of change in independent Ireland (Ahern, 1999).

In all sorts of ways British born descendants of Irish migrants have had to negotiate a self-definition while standing at the interface of two antagonistic nationalist ideologies. In some cases this has led individuals to adopt virulently anti-British politics (as exemplified by Sean Mac Stiofáin, the former IRA Chief of Staff); at the other extreme, some have adopted fiercely pro-British politics (such as the BNP’s Oldham council candidate Mick Treacy). Between these extremes, the millions of British nationals of Irish descent have gone unrecorded and under-researched as an ethnic minority, generally assumed to have passed from one culture to another.

From politicised silence to embracing the diaspora

Although the Irish state has long-acknowledged the Irish diaspora community in the United States of America, the recognition of people and communities with an Irish identity in Britain has traditionally been more problematic. Mass Irish migration to Great Britain in the twentieth century to some degree symbolised failure to achieve the potential of independent Irish statehood. The resulting politicised silence of the Irish state regarding the passage of millions of people to Great Britain served to support the assumption that the children of these immigrants rapidly assimilate at no cost to their material or psychological well-being. A change in the approach of the Irish state to the Irish diaspora occurred in the mid-1980s, as the magnitude of a new wave of emigration necessitated a political response. The increased awareness amongst the political elite of the Irish diaspora was personified in Mary Robinson’s presidency. Under Robinson’s tenure the whole notion of the Irish diaspora was raised to public consciousness in a way not seen since the foundation of the state. On 2 February 1995, in a speech to both houses of the Oireachtas, \textit{Cherishing the Irish Diaspora}, President Robinson argued for a reconceptualisation of Irish identity, claiming that “Irishness is not simply territorial”, for it is shared by “an array of people outside Ireland for whom this island is a place of origin” (Robinson, 1995).

Reconceptualising Ireland

As a result of the Good Friday Agreement, the definition of the Irish nation as given in articles 2 and 3 of the constitution of Ireland was altered. Article 2 of the 1937 constitution read as follows:
The national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and the territorial seas.

Article 2 of the constitution, following the 19th Amendment of the constitution is now thus:

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. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.

Both versions of the article assert that membership of the Irish nation is not limited to those who are citizens of the Irish state; moreover, in relation to this, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic is not perceived as delimiting the bounds of the Irish nation. The crucial difference between them is that the amended article implies that the residents of Northern Ireland have a choice as to whether to define themselves as Irish. It is interesting to note that conditions of membership of the Irish nation are birth on the island of Ireland or eligibility for citizenship of the Irish state. Moreover, the constitution in a sense legitimises the “Irishness” of the diaspora, defined as “people of Irish ancestry” beyond the territory of Ireland. Thus, the new form of article 2 may be seen as having a slightly different conception of the relationship between territory and identity than previously existed, namely one in which national identity is tied to but not confined to the territory of the island of Ireland. The recognition of the Irish diaspora in the revised article 2 encapsulates an official acknowledgement of an Irish identity beyond the jurisdiction of the Irish state and the territory of the island as articulated by Mary Robinson.

Irish and British in Northern Ireland

…the commitment made by the British and Irish Governments that…they will…recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland (Agreement, 1998: 2:1.vi).

The aspect of the Good Friday Agreement that upholds the possibility to be “Irish, British or both” in Northern Ireland is arguably related to the logic of the European Union that affirms rather than undermines national identities, as discussed above. For a start, there is no mention of a “Northern Irish” identity; moreover, the political institutions established under the terms of the Agreement could be seen as facilitating rather than ameliorating the mutual exclusivity of British and Irish. For the Assembly, cross-border bodies and intergovernmental conferences affirm the notion that Northern Ireland is a territory of conflicting national identities and there remains no official space for a resident of Northern Ireland to identify as both Irish and British. Hence, despite 30 years of British and Irish membership of the European Union and the legal provision in the 1998 Agreement to dual nationality, a polarisation between “Irish” and “British” identities continues in Northern Ireland.

Fig.3. Self-ascribed identities of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.
Source: European Values Survey, 1999
This polarisation is evidenced by the European Values Survey of 1999, in which 8% of Catholics identify as British and a mere 3% of Protestants identify as Irish. Amongst Catholics, 64% identified as Irish, 14% as Northern Irish and 14% according to some other definition. Amongst Protestants, 76% identified as British, 9% as Northern Irish and 12% according to some other definition. Thus, within the two primary ethno-denominational groups there is a degree of diversity, but the Catholic rejection of a British identity and the Protestant rejection of an Irish identity remain almost total. Within the “Other” category we find that 8.6% of all those polled identified as “sometimes British, sometimes Irish”. It appears, therefore, that for the vast majority of Northern Ireland’s population Irish and British remain mutually exclusive categories of ascription (Hayes and McAllister, 1999; see also fig. 3). This, however, is not confined to the contested territory of Northern Ireland.
**Administrative barriers**

Hyphenated identities in Great Britain remain associated with non-white ethnic minorities. We saw above how the 2001 censuses of Great Britain both reflect and reinforce public consciousness of particular ethnic designations. In addition to legitimising hyphenated identities for non-whites, the 2001 censuses were also innovative in that the “white” category was deconstructed to include an Irish sub-category (see fig. 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source/ Identification</th>
<th>Devolved Government/ Autonomous Dependencies</th>
<th>British-Irish Council</th>
<th>Census of England &amp; Wales</th>
<th>Census of Scotland</th>
<th>Census of Northern Ireland</th>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Northern Irish</td>
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<td>Other British</td>
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<td>Irish Traveller</td>
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<td>Any other white background</td>
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*Fig. 4. Possibilities for identification in the United Kingdom*
The instructions for the ethnic group question on the census ask respondents to tick “the appropriate box to indicate your cultural background”. In the census of England and Wales, the ethnic options in the white category were “British”, “Irish” and “any other”; in the census of Scotland (as approved by the devolved Scottish Parliament), the options were “Scottish”, “other British”, “Irish” and “any other”. Comparative evidence from other jurisdictions shows clearly that ethnic activists view inclusion on state mechanisms of ethnic monitoring (such as the census) as a crucial means of raising public consciousness of ethnic identities. Yet, in effect, the most recent census format in Britain reinforces the either/or conceptualisation of Irish and British (or indeed Irish and Scottish) “cultural backgrounds”. Thus, the census formats may be seen as a barrier to “the development of an Irish-British identity and culture” (NESC, 1991: 215).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine the possibility of hyphenated forms of national identification in the “Western Isles”. Yet, as it stands, the census, as the primary source of public knowledge on the ethnic complexity of the population of Great Britain, maintains that Irish and British identities are mutually exclusive. Moreover, beyond the possibility of holding dual citizenship (i.e. dual nationality) of Britain and Ireland, as yet there is little scope for identifying as Irish-British. This, we contend, is essentially related to the “spatial” dimension of ethnicity in the Western Isles. Hyphenated identities as they apparently exist in the Western Isles currently depend on “ethnic” identity being de-territorialised and de-politicised in official definitions. The hyphenation of national identities is, however, highly problematic given the continued significance of political and territorial dimensions of national identities in Europe. The territory of Ireland remains central to the definition of the Irish nation, as seen in the revised article 2 of the Irish constitution, which reiterates that the parameters of the Irish nation remain territorially bounded. “British” identity is also territorially based. The “Irish-British” hyphenated identity is, therefore, for the foreseeable future, neither feasible nor plausible.

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Managing Editor
IBIS Working Papers
Department of Politics
University College Dublin
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