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Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective

Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Accounts of civil breakdown and the emergence of political violence in modern societies are widely subject to theories of conflict that fail to represent reality. The frameworks for depicting extreme upheaval employed by both the media and politicians, and likewise within much historical and political analysis, frequently distort the object they are seeking to understand. The interpretation of conflict is determined, in short, by “languages of conflict” that are poorly designed to represent the phenomenon they hope to explain; understanding is framed by explanatory schemes without any genuine purchase on their subject of study. The result is often bafflement in the face of the violence that accompanies such conflicts, commonly reckoned to be “savage” or “senseless” and beyond all rational accounting.¹ Deforming languages of conflict are legion, but they reduce to two fundamental types: theories of primitive regression, on the one hand, and theories of cultural solidarity, on the other. Attempts to depict modern conflicts in terms of “tribalism,” “ata-vism,” “mysticism,” and the like are examples of the former explanatory model; theories of clashing “civilizations,” “cultural” collision, and “ethnic” conflict exemplify the latter mode of thought.² The history of these approaches

* I have benefited from comments on an earlier draft of this article by Paul Bew, Peter Hart, Colin Jones, Bill Kissane, Ian McBride, Quentin Skinner, and Maurice Walsh. I am also grateful to the journal’s anonymous readers for critical scrutiny. Versions of the argument presented here have been delivered as papers at the University of Oxford; the University of Cambridge; the University of Reading; the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; the University of Notre Dame Keogh Centre Seminar, Dublin; the North American Conference on British Studies; and the Seventeenth Conference of Irish Historians in Britain.

¹ For classic accounts, see Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, 1956). More recently, see Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe, and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York, 2001). For criticism of the genre, see Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria,” *Rationality and Society* 11, no. 3 (1999): 243–85.

² Examples of these diverse forms of analysis can be seen in Samuel P. Huntington,

shows that they were originally developed to apply to situations that bear no relation to contemporary conflicts, but they are nonetheless reissued for usage whenever the circumstances seem to fit.

It is a striking feature of prevalent ideas of conflict that so many owe their origin to accounts of the German “catastrophe” of 1933–45, regularly seen as having been brought about by tribal regression or ethnic solidarity or by the perversion of one of these social states under the influence of religion.³ The argument of this article is that concrete evidence is rarely produced to support such abstract schemes of analysis, which frequently predetermine the interpretation of the relevant data. This is not to say that religion is somehow irrelevant to conspicuously religious conflicts or that competing forms of solidarity play no part in civil unrest. But it is to claim that the application of these categories is usually schematic, or even inapposite, so that they lack any efficacy as forms of causal explanation. Beginning in the 1950s, both primitivist and ethnic typologies have been applied successively to civil disturbances in Europe, Africa, and Asia, becoming widespread again as interpretative frameworks after the end of the cold war.⁴ Originally developed in the academy, these approaches soon migrated into think tanks and government bureaucracies, ultimately gaining the status of commonsense assumptions in the perception of the public.

This is important because the frameworks governing the understanding of political crises are intricately related to policy responses. Before atavistic and ethnic theories, “social” interpretations abounded, with adverse consequences

The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the Modern World Order (New York, 1996); and Ian Buruma, “The Blood Lust of Identity,” *New York Review of Books*, April 11, 2002, 12–14. For criticism of the assumptions that underpin this brand of argument, see Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton, NJ, 1997); James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 75–90.

³ For classic accounts, see Talcott Parsons, “Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany” (1942), in *Talcott Parsons on National Socialism*, ed. Uta Gerhard (New York, 1993); R. G. Collingwood, “Fascism and Nazism” (1940), in *Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Boucher (Oxford, 1989). For subsequent adaptation and application on a broader canvas, see Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, 2005). For recent popular employment of related concepts, see Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and War, from the Great War to the War on Terror* (London, 2007).

⁴ See, e.g., Elie Kedourie, “Introduction,” in *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, ed. Elie Kedourie (London, 1974); Milton J. Esman, *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World* (London, 1977). For the post–cold war situation, see Daniel P. Moynihan, *Pandemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (New York, 1993); Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging* (London, 1993).

when these were applied in inappropriate circumstances. In the United States, social analyses of political discontent made their appearance throughout the 1960s in various attempts to come to terms with the phenomenon of post-colonial insurgency.⁵ Northern Ireland, toward the end of the same period, provides a northern European example of this widespread tendency. I begin here with the social interpretative model as it was applied to Ulster politics, before turning to the primitivist and ethnic approaches and discussing the basic feature the latter have in common. What the evidence reveals is that common phrases from the 1960s intended to account for political cleavages, such as “social disaffection,” “economic discontent,” and “racial discrimination,” are not terms that neatly apply to agreed facts but loaded vocabularies inflected rhetorically to serve an ideological agenda.

II. IDEOLOGY AND LEGITIMATION

In the spring of 1969, the British home secretary, James Callaghan, assumed that the “root cause” of the unrest in Northern Ireland was social in nature. Correspondingly, he remarked that the problem lay “in the growing contrast, reminiscent of the situation in this country early in the century, between the relative prosperity of a section of the people and the continuing poverty of the majority.”⁶ A Home Office memorandum from the following summer observed that most reliable opinion on the recent disturbances in Ulster regarded the basic cause of conflict to be the bitterness and frustration arising out of the levels of unemployment in Londonderry. While political differences were relevant to the form of protest, the memorandum continued, these were secondary to more fundamental social grievances that could be remedied by appropriate legislation.⁷ Of course, Home Office officials, along with the secretary of state, would ultimately change their opinion as the situation in the Province descended from unrest into mayhem, leading to calls for political as well as social reform. While the constitutional system in Northern Ireland was broadly acceptable to the Home Office in the summer of 1969, two years later, now in opposition, Callaghan was keen to impress upon the Irish minister for foreign affairs the need to overhaul the form of government in Ulster.⁸ This shift points to the significance of interpretative frameworks for guiding atti-

⁵ Social and economic interpretations abounded in the 1960s and 1970s. See Bruce M. Russett, “Inequality and Instability,” *World Politics* 16 (1964): 442–54; Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ, 1971).

⁶ United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA), CAB 128/44: Conclusions of Cabinet Meeting, April 24, 1969.

⁷ UKNA, CJ 3/5, Memorandum by the Home Office: “Northern Ireland: Political Summary for the Period 15th–22nd July 1969.”

⁸ UKNA CJ 3/5, “Representation in the Northern Ireland Parliament: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Home Department,” July 11, 1969; Republic of Ireland

tudes to the management of conflict. Poor depiction adversely affects the speed and quality of intervention.

Callaghan's social interpretation of discontent in Ulster was not a product of familiarity with the situation on the ground. It owed a debt to the perspective advanced by the prime minister of Northern Ireland in the period before the crisis fully unfolded. In an interview conducted during the aftermath of the fateful Derry civil rights march of October 5, 1968, Terence O'Neill explained to David Kemp, the chief features writer for the *Glasgow Herald*, that positive action on "housing and unemployment" represented the best means of stemming the tide of protest in Northern Ireland.⁹ Beneath this social account of the problem, there existed a nervous suspicion that the fundamental issue was to be found elsewhere. The previous year, in a letter setting out his attitude to one of his Unionist colleagues at Westminster, O'Neill acknowledged that "religious intolerance" manifested itself in Ulster "from time to time."¹⁰ When under pressure, the Northern Ireland prime minister was capable of presenting this occasional intolerance as amounting to a thoroughgoing "cleavage" and, indeed, as an ongoing stimulus to "hatred."¹¹ While O'Neill habitually described this antipathy as having a religious basis, at the same time he characterized these differences in religion as fundamentally cultural in nature.¹² But cultural prejudice, as O'Neill saw it, could not be alleviated by legislation, least of all if it was introduced under pressure from Westminster. The room for government initiative was thereby confined to social policy that, under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, was designated as the exclusive concern of the devolved administration in the North. The emphasis on social affairs thus offered a means of countering arguments in favor of British intervention in the business of the Province. In the end, the terms of analysis were influenced by underlying political principles.

The point is further illustrated by the approach adopted by O'Neill's Catholic opponents during the same period. In April 1968, the nationalist leader Eddie McAteer sought to characterize political antagonism as a consequence of a concerted program of "discrimination" against the Northern

National Archives (RINA), 2002/8/76, "Call on Dr. Hillery, Minister for External Affairs, by Mr. James Callaghan, M.P.," February 5, 1971.

⁹ A record of the interview can be found at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), CAB/9B/205/7.

¹⁰ PRONI, CAB/9B/205/4: Letter to Captain L. P. S. Orr, MP, clarifying the Northern Ireland government's attitude to enable Orr to state the position to the Conservative MP John Biggs-Davison, January 3, 1967.

¹¹ "Ulster's 'Second-Class Citizens,'" *The Times*, April 24, 1967; "Strains on Relations with Britain," *Belfast Telegraph*, April 24, 1967.

¹² "Ulster's Prime Minister Replies to His Critics," *The Times*, April 28, 1967.

minority. McAteer ascribed Unionist policy to a prejudicial attitude comparable to the racism of Enoch Powell.¹³ The argument, common at the time, that discrimination was a result of “racial” bigotry carried with it a definite implication, namely, that a race relations act ought to be imposed on the Province by Westminster. A letter sent by a member of the public in June 1967 to a Unionist representative at Westminster arguing the case for such a bill elicited the response that, in the opinion of this particular member of parliament, the UK government would be “extremely reluctant” to follow such a course, “and for very good reasons.” These reasons boiled down to the claim that legislation was ill suited to the “historic problem of religious difference.”¹⁴ But of course that depended on how this “historic problem” was understood and, therefore, on what was meant by both “racial” and “religious” discrimination. In either case, the scheme of analysis was related to the type of action to be taken. In fact, in this case, the preferred policy prescription determined the character of the explanation.¹⁵ This conclusion should prompt us to test the general observation that descriptions of conflict are informed by accompanying ideological assumptions. It may happen that political preferences shape the perception of a given problem or that ideology determines the nature of policy responses. The point here is to show that policy and ideology are interdependent and to claim that perception and description are never neutral. It is this situation that obliges us to scrutinize our modes of analysis. My argument is intended as a contribution to that undertaking.

In the long history of attempts to represent social reality, there has been nothing irremediable about distorting efforts at depiction. Misdescription is a risk implicit in the endeavor to capture complex behavior, and in the face of significant mistranslation we are free to set about interpreting anew, revising our styles of reasoning the better to pick out hitherto elusive practices.¹⁶ Throughout the argument developed here, my emphasis is on how languages of conflict have been applied to Northern Ireland in the historical and social science literature since these approaches mutually reinforce one another. Nonetheless, it seems probable that the problem examined has a far more general application: the case of Ulster illustrates pervasive misunderstanding.

¹³ “Grasp Ulster Nettle Soon, Heath Told,” *Belfast Telegraph*, April 23, 1968.

¹⁴ PRONI, CAB/9B/205/4: Letter to F. H. Stott, drafted for Robin Chichester-Clark by Ken Bloomfield, June 12, 1967.

¹⁵ On pretexts for behavior under conditions of conflict, see Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525–vers 1610* (Paris, 1990).

¹⁶ On the perils of “mistranslation” in social science and political theory, see Sudipta Kaviraj, “Marxism in Translation: Critical Reflections on Indian Radical Thought,” in *Political Judgement*, ed. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, 2009). On “styles of reasoning,” see Ian Hacking, “Language, Truth, and Reasoning,” in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

It follows that the prevailing languages of conflict stand in need of revision, and a start can be made by isolating what our basic “primitive” and “cultural” models have in common.¹⁷

The problem with primitive theories is that they are quietly anachronistic, ascribing bygone ways of life to contemporary social practices. The difficulty with cultural interpretation, however, is that while it focuses on group or “ethnic” affiliation, it downplays the role of politics in the formation of allegiance. Both the primitive and the cultural conceptions share the common defect of being historically insensitive to the principles of allegiance in terms of which political conflicts are defined. Both models are “primordial” in Clifford Geertz’s sense of the term: not insofar as they base themselves on the idea of perennial forms of kinship but to the extent that they understand attachments to be governed by “given” sentimental ties.¹⁸ As a result, both schemes concentrate on the passions and motives that inspire solidarity regardless of the ideological framework that gives political ties their meaning. On this understanding, political struggle can be isolated from its intellectual context: political attachments are reduced to their affective bonds and abstracted from the principles by which loyalty is rationalized. As a consequence, all forms of allegiance are characterized in terms of the affective content of loyalty alone. This article argues, however, that principles of allegiance are as decisive in determining political action as are feelings of allegiance. Behavior presupposes a stimulus to act, but at the same time it is oriented in terms of principles of action—in terms, that is, of general ideas or schemes of legitimation.¹⁹ But while the contest in Northern Ireland revolved

¹⁷ Relatively recent pleas for revisionist analysis can be found in Rogers Brubaker and David D. Laitin, “Ethnic and Nationalist Violence,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 423–52; and Stathis N. Kalyvas and Nicholas Sambanis, “Bosnia’s Civil War: Origins and Violence Dynamics,” in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, ed. Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, 2 vols. (Washington, DC, 2005).

¹⁸ See Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States” (1963), in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 259. Anthony D. Smith, who correctly denies that he is a primordialist in the former sense, is nonetheless (despite himself) a primordialist in our second sense, insofar as he subscribes to the notion that “ethnic” ties can be analytically distinguished from the form of political association in which they find expression such that ethnicity forms a building block out of which nationalism is constructed (see his *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* [Oxford, 1986], 6–18). For ambiguities in Geertz’s account, see James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity,” *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 845–77, 849 n. 8.

¹⁹ On legitimating principles as causal conditions of political behavior, see Quentin Skinner, “Moral Principles and Social Change” (1974), in *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002), and “Preface,” in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1978), 1:xi–xiii. The argument is further illustrated in

around opposing accounts of legitimacy, interpretations of the conflict have tended to reduce the opposing positions to automatic emotional responses. The implication of this view is that there was no political conflict but only a collision between primordial “gut” reactions.

The interpretation of conflict in Northern Ireland, as with many other contests over the meaning of popular sovereignty, has been a casualty of this process in which the behavior of the participants is reduced to naked passion shorn of legitimating norms. This approach ignores the significance of the ways in which behavior is rationalized: it downplays the importance of legitimating conventions in justifying what look at first like visceral responses.²⁰ Of course, to recover the norms invoked to vindicate a course of action is not to imply that they are in any real sense justified. Nor is it to gloss over the needless carnage caused by the conflict or to discount the claim that physical force was sustained by killing rage. Yet while malice explains the motives for much of the violence in Northern Ireland, it does not explain the reasons behind the Troubles as a whole.

III. PRIMITIVISM

It is an interesting fact about the history of interpreting the Ulster crisis that one of the most intellectually ambitious analysts of the problem was also among its most polemical observers. In the pages of this journal in 2004, Charles Townshend identified Conor Cruise O’Brien as having advanced one of the most challenging accounts available of the troubled relationship between religion and politics in Ireland, undermining previous orthodoxy in a way historians ought to follow.²¹ Yet O’Brien’s iconoclasm was married to a political agenda that even historians favorably disposed to the quality of his

Quentin Skinner, “Augustan Party Politics and Renaissance Constitutional Thought” (1974), in *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, *Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge, 2002). For discussion of the relationship between reasons and motives in explaining social action, see Martin Hollis, *Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action* (Cambridge, 1977), 74–86; cf. Martin Hollis, *The Cunning of Reason* (Cambridge, 1987), 182–93.

²⁰ The rationalization of action obviously does not make the behavior reasonable: for the sense of “rationality” employed here, see Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons and Causes” (1963), in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980); for discussion of the relationship between reason and emotion, see Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge, 1999), 283–331; for the contrast between “visceral” and “prudential” motives, see Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behaviour: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2007), 75–93.

²¹ Charles Townshend, “Religion, War, and Identity in Ireland,” *Journal of Modern History* 76 (December 2004): 882–902.

analysis have often been reluctant to accept.²² In any case, my aim in what follows is not to take issue with O'Brien's politics but to examine his interpretative approach to the causes of conflict. Given O'Brien's prominence, his arguments deserve attention for their own sake, but we also need to be alert to his influence on subsequent commentators. His exploration of the destructive combination of religion and nationalism has been described by two admiring historians as one of his "great achievements" in Irish letters, but it can be argued that this achievement is compromised by a number of fallacies toward which the very urgency of the issues involved made him negligent or indifferent.²³ O'Brien conspicuously endeavored to fuse his characteristic polemical and analytical purposes in his pathbreaking work of 1972, *States of Ireland*. As a consequence of this fusion, he developed the most widely disseminated primitivist account of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and as a result, many of his assumptions are to be found in much of the subsequent historiography. In this section, I analyze the ingredients that make up O'Brien's account, illustrate some of its impact on subsequent historical writing, and point to a number of predecessors who developed related arguments, albeit with a view to describing entirely different situations. This last fact forces us to question the appropriateness of such arguments to the context in which O'Brien sought to apply them.

In the epilogue to *States of Ireland*, composed in June 1972, O'Brien characterized the quarrel as "religious" in a special sense.²⁴ There is a complex and long-established association in Western culture between religion and the advent of political strife. This derives partly from the experience of the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but also from subsequent enlightenment attempts to ascribe responsibility for the mayhem of the wars of religion to attitudes based on superstition and enthusiasm.²⁵ O'Brien wanted to capitalize on this association between theological commitment and intolerance, although in the end he implicated religion in a vague and rhetorical sense only. He began by highlighting what in his view the

²² See, e.g., John A. Murphy, review of *Herod*, by Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Irish Times*, June 24, 1978, and review of *Passion and Cunning*, by Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Sunday Independent*, April 3, 1988.

²³ Richard English and Joseph Morrison Skelly, "Introduction," in *Ideas Matter: Essays in Honour of Conor Cruise O'Brien*, ed. Richard English and Joseph Morrison Skelly (Dublin, 1998), 17.

²⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972), 305.

²⁵ For enlightenment responses to the wars of religion, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Clergy and Commerce: The Conservative Enlightenment in England," in *L'eta dei lumi: Studi storici sul settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi*, ed. Raffaele Ajello et al. (Naples, 1985), 1:523–62, "Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions," *Government and Opposition* 24 (1989): 81–105, and "Enthusiasm: The Antiself of Enlightenment," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60 (1997): 7–28.

conflict was not. It was plainly not a form of “class” antagonism, he insisted, since shared political preferences united theoretically opposed classes behind programs based on principles that were unaffected by prevailing economic divisions.²⁶ Furthermore, it could not be reduced to a contest between “settler” and “native” since the colonial conditions of early modern Ireland had been utterly transformed over the course of modern history. Equally, modern colonial societies offered inappropriate comparisons: as O’Brien had already underlined in an angry letter to the *Irish Press* in the spring of 1970, hostilities in Northern Ireland were utterly different from the colonial antagonism that had beset Algeria a decade earlier.²⁷ But neither was the conflict simply “national” in character since allegiance in Northern Ireland bore the stamp of religious difference. In other words, despite his peripatetic mode of argumentation, O’Brien was contending that the conflict was over allegiance, while equating the content of allegiance with religion.²⁸

O’Brien’s account has never been systematically examined, although its elisions are immediately apparent. He admitted that the conflict was not a “theological war” but a collision between groups “defined by” religion.²⁹ Consequently, there was no struggle over the content of religious doctrine as such: each branch of the Christian religion was happily tolerated in the Province.³⁰ The dispute instead concerned the rights of sovereignty over Northern Ireland, with opposing loyalties being animated by distinct religious cultures. The religious cultures in question comprised divergent teachings and practices—they differed at once in their ecclesiology and their forms of worship—but they actually conflicted in their appeals to opposing pedigrees: the populations divided, as O’Brien saw it, in claiming rival dynasties of “ancestors.” Therefore, pedigree, rather than dogma, appeared to be the issue in contention: this was not, it seems, a contest over the control of religion but a dispute about the remit of political jurisdiction in which opposing claims were legitimized through appeals to heroic histories supported on each side by

²⁶ O’Brien had already developed the point at length in a response to James Callaghan’s bid to build up the Northern Ireland Labour Party. See Conor Cruise O’Brien, Letter to the Right Honourable James Callaghan, MP, February 5, 1971, Conor Cruise O’Brien Papers, University College Dublin (UCD) Archives, P82/222 (41–42).

²⁷ Letter to the Editor of the *Irish Press*, May 18, 1970, Conor Cruise O’Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/222 (29–31).

²⁸ O’Brien, *States of Ireland*, 305–8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

³⁰ This point was made by Hugh Trevor-Roper, “Why Ulster Fights,” *Réalités* (December 1969), 48. For an angry response to Trevor-Roper’s article, see Owen Dudley Edwards, *Sins of Our Fathers: Roots of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1970), 329.

a “cult” of heredity. “Descent” was claimed on one side from the deliverer, William of Orange, and on the other from the martyred republican dead.³¹

It needs to be clarified that the kind of pedigree in question is based not literally on the biological notion of heredity but on the idea of historical inheritance. At the same time, it is generally recognized that politicized conceptions of historical inheritance distort the actual dynamics of past political struggle by superimposing spurious narratives or ancestral “traditions.”³² Nonetheless, in invoking the fact of a collision between divergent histories, O’Brien was keen to make two points at once. The first point is that the rights of political jurisdiction in Northern Ireland were legitimized in terms of genealogy, and the second is that such precedence is held in “religious” awe. Both claims seem problematic, but in any case they take us a great distance from the kinds of conflict associated with the Reformation wars of religion. As O’Brien himself concedes, the constituencies in Northern Ireland were at loggerheads not over religion but over political loyalties justified by opposing “sacral” genealogies.³³ But even this claim would strike many as contentious. While there is no doubting that the distinct national traditions on the island of Ireland invoked opposing precedents to gain historical support for allegiance, the idea that political legitimacy was purely a function of genealogy cannot be sustained by the available facts.³⁴ Moreover, while it is true that deference to ancestors can often border on veneration, it is surely implausible to reduce such reverence to the literal status of a religious cult. O’Brien strained to produce an analysis that could account for the problem that absorbed him, so he settled for underdeveloped arguments that would serve his polemical purpose.

O’Brien’s rhetoric may have been more effective than his logic, but the problem is that his arguments continue to make an appearance in accounts of the Troubles in both the media and the academic literature. Beginning around 1970, his project was designed to delegitimize republican violence by associating it with primitivism and superstition. My aim here is not to challenge

³¹ O’Brien, *States of Ireland*, 308.

³² On the distinction between tradition and history, see Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983). For discussion of the deployment of ancestral narratives as instruments of ideological struggle in the Irish case, see Ian McBride, “Introduction: Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland,” in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge, 2001).

³³ The argument is implicit in O’Brien, *States of Ireland*, 309, but is more fully developed in Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Godland: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

³⁴ For a study of the uses and abuses of history in framing political responses and legitimizing behavior, see Ian McBride, *The Siege of Derry in Ulster Protestant Mythology* (Dublin, 1997).

O'Brien's objective but to subject his explanatory model to revisionist criticism. This is a fairly delicate operation since O'Brien had definite insights into the ideological subtleties guiding republican doctrine on the island of Ireland, despite the difficulties that surround his general account of political motivation. It is therefore important to recover his grasp of Irish national ideology before trying to expose his understanding of nationalist affiliation. By the spring of 1970, O'Brien had come to see the exploits of both Paisleyism and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) as threatening to plunge community relations in Ulster into escalating conflict.³⁵ However, even earlier in the year, he had been keen to convict Irish republicanism more generally of creating conditions in which violence could prosper. Despite their avowed ambition to foster cooperation across the confessional divide, even the more benign forms of republican doctrine appeared to O'Brien to contribute to the advent of sectarian collusion.

The proletarian nationalism of the Official IRA was a case in point: its politics were still governed by the ideal of Irish "unity," thus casting Northern Unionism as a blockage on the road to a republic.³⁶ Back in the 1960s, O'Brien had expressed his suspicion of apparently inevitable national units, openly advocating the "Balkanization" of the Nigerian Federation in preference to counterproductive assertions about the legitimacy of "unity."³⁷ In the secessionist southeastern Nigerian state of Biafra at the time, as among Northern Irish Protestants subsequently, appeals to national unity under the banner of "sovereign legitimacy" were seen as a cover for the threat of coercion by a seemingly hostile neighboring jurisdiction.³⁸ In the case of Ireland in the 1970s, it was the governing Fianna Fáil Party's commitment to "inevitable" unity that seemed to O'Brien to pose a more immediate problem than the views of the comparatively marginal Official Sinn Féin. In imagining the British government as the sole guardian of partition, Fianna Fáil relegated Unionism to a reflex ideology that could be confronted successfully if its British patron quit the scene. O'Brien's singular contribution to understanding the Northern crisis lay in recognizing that the word "confronted" covered two distinct possibilities, neither of which was politically attractive. Either it

³⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, Record of a Trip to Northern Ireland, ca. November 1969–ca. July 1970, Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/221 (1–6).

³⁶ O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, 317–25. See further Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: A Political History of the IRA* (London, 1997), 121–22; Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party* (Dublin, 2009), 132–33.

³⁷ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Tribe, Nation, State," New York University Archives (NYUA), Papers of the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, Conor Cruise O'Brien Files, box 7, folder 8.

³⁸ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A People Condemned," NYUA, Papers of the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, Conor Cruise O'Brien Files, box 7, folder 6.

meant that Unionism could be easily faced down, thus underestimating the intensity of Protestant opposition, or it implied that Unionists could be militarily outmaneuvered, raising the specter of a gruesome civil war.³⁹ But if O'Brien acutely identified a blindness at the center of republican thinking, he mythologized the nature of the attachment to these ideas.

Indeed, he arguably distorted the character of nationalist allegiance in general. One reason for this distortion derives from O'Brien's "Free State" nationalism: his commitment to the integrity and stability of the South. In his valedictory lecture as Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at New York University, delivered on April 23, 1969, he closed with a series of remarks on the potency of national sentiment as understood by Niccoló Machiavelli. Sentiment of the kind, O'Brien contended, tapped into a "fury" based on what appeared to be "the most powerful forces in human nature." These forces had to be either channeled or released; they could not simply be ignored.⁴⁰ With the onset of the Troubles, O'Brien's fury was channeled into a defense of the South at the expense of insurgent republicanism in the North. He denigrated the nationalism to which he was opposed in the interest of the one he felt impelled to support, drawing a veil over his own ideological commitments while demonizing the substance of his antagonists' ideals.

O'Brien could never quite credit the idea that ideology shaped behavior, and so he substituted emotivism in the place of doctrinal commitment. He seemed to think that, while the head ruminated, it was the heart that finally decided. What moved the heart, from O'Brien's perspective, was the immediacy of "tribalism" or kinship. A lecture schedule that has survived from his period as Schweitzer Chair indicates that he took the thought of Edmund Burke to have ultimately been driven by "tribal" loyalty to his ancestral past.⁴¹ A letter from O'Brien to James Callaghan in 1971 likewise glosses sectarian

³⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Memorandum for Consideration of Parliamentary Labour Party on Middle and Long Term Prospects in Relation to the Situation in the Six Counties of Northern Ireland and to the Eventual Unity of Ireland," 1969–70, Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/220 (1–10). For the Irish government's position on partition at this time, see Thomas Hennessey, *Northern Ireland: The Origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2005), 337–76.

⁴⁰ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "What Exhortation?" NYUA, Papers of the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, Conor Cruise O'Brien Files, box 9, folder 3. For an attempt to resolve these forces into the twin impulses of lust and rage, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, "'Art Is Man's Nature': Burke, Yeats and the Conservative Imagination," NYUA, Papers of the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, Conor Cruise O'Brien Files, box 7, folder 8.

⁴¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Literature and Society," Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/137 (1–3). O'Brien derived the idea from Ali al 'Amin Mazrui, "Edmund Burke and Reflections on the Revolution in the Congo," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 2 (January 1963): 121–33. For O'Brien's notes and comments on this article, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Burke," NYUA, Papers of

attachment as a form of tribalism, even though he was perfectly aware of the inappropriateness of the category.⁴² But, as time went on, such terminology served the purpose of equating political extremes with the alleged irrationalism of primitive societies. It soon appeared that a damning association of this kind was more effective than analytical precision.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that neither primitivism nor irrationalism properly characterize the Troubles, unless these terms are used in an extended metaphorical sense. Yet, in O'Brien's hands, such connotations offered a means of disassociating the Southern establishment from the revolutionary turmoil in the North. Between 1969 and 1970, O'Brien had struggled to differentiate the project of reforming what he took to be a discriminatory regime in Northern Ireland—the “Sectarian Caste System,” as he described it in a letter to Bernadette Devlin in January 1970—from attempts to secure its revolutionary disestablishment.⁴³ Part of the problem was that reform, in a sense, meant disestablishment. This was already the clear implication of a comment piece speculating about British intervention in Northern Ireland written by O'Brien before he left New York for Dublin in the summer of 1969: in the context of such an eventuality, O'Brien wrote, it was difficult to

the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, Conor Cruise O'Brien Files, box 5, folder 8.

⁴² Letter to the Right Honourable James Callaghan, MP, February 5, 1971, Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/222 (41–42). O'Brien had commented on the inappropriateness of the term “tribalism” as a means of depicting Ibo nationalism in Nigeria in the 1960s: see Conor Cruise O'Brien, “Biafra Revisited,” *New York Review of Books*, May 22, 1969, repr. in Donald Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien*, vol. 2, *Anthology* (Montreal, 1994), 167.

⁴³ Letter to Bernadette Devlin, January 12, 1970, Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/222 (15). For O'Brien's early views on violence and civil disobedience as means of achieving legitimate political change, see his contribution to the debate held on December 15, 1967, with Hannah Arendt, Noam Chomsky, and Robert Lowell, “The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act,” recorded in Alexander Klein, ed., *Dissent, Power, and Confrontation* (New York, 1971), 95–133. For his appreciation of ambivalence among intellectuals about revolution, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, “Introduction,” in *Power and Consciousness: The Schweitzer Lectures*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien and William Vanech (New York, 1969), 4. For comment on O'Brien's views in the late 1960s, see Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York, 1972), 176. For O'Brien's subsequent revision of his earlier views, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, “Introduction: The Legitimation of Violence,” in *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence* (London, 1977), 9. For O'Brien's view that the Northern Ireland regime lacked “normal democratic rights” but was unlikely to be reformed short of violence, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, “Civil Rights: The Crossroads,” *The Listener*, October 24, 1968; for his view of the Stormont government as based on a system of “sectarian rule,” see Conor Cruise O'Brien, “Holy War,” *New York Review of Books*, November 6, 1969, 9–16, repr. in Akenson, *Conor: Biography*, 2:187.

see how the “shabby edifice” of Ulster politics could be reconstructed in the old mold.⁴⁴ After his return to Ireland, as part of an Irish Labour Party delegation that included Frank Cluskey, Michael O’Leary, Noel Browne, and Justin Keating, he met with members of the British Labour Party in the days after the violence of August 1969 in Armagh, Derry, and Belfast in order to call not just for the disbandment of the B Specials in Northern Ireland but also for the “abolition” of the Stormont regime itself.⁴⁵ Abolition was seen as an extreme measure but not imagined as a violent act. Accordingly, as the situation on the streets steadily deteriorated, O’Brien set about revising his view of the role of violence in bringing about radical change as he had originally formulated it in response to the civil disturbances in the United States just a year earlier. At that time, he wrote of the riots in the American ghettos: “I do not subscribe either to the view of those who hold that the problems of the cities can be solved altogether without violence, or of those who hold that they will be solved through a violent revolution.”⁴⁶ In the Irish case, by 1969, O’Brien wanted violence firmly off the agenda, but he needed to show how this resolution would affect the construction of a new regime in Northern Ireland.

In practical terms, O’Brien sought to defend a radical program of reform against a scheme of revolutionary overhaul. Yet, as this description implies, it is extremely hard to draw a line between these overlapping options. In fact, the Troubles resulted from a failure all around to distinguish between reform and revolution. Elements inside the Northern Ireland government throughout the late 1960s interpreted reform as a concession to the enemies of the constitution. Yet, as Terence O’Neill conceded in a secret memorandum drafted at the start of 1969, “in resisting this molehill of reform we are allowing a mountain to fall on us.”⁴⁷ However, a molehill in terms of principle could translate into a major political standoff leading to civil breakdown. This ambivalence was captured by O’Brien himself in November 1970, when he presented the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association as being responsible at once for securing legitimate reforms and for opening the way to violence in the Province. “Neither part of the balance sheet should be left out of the count,”

⁴⁴ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Where Orange Is White,” NYUA, Papers of the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, Conor Cruise O’Brien Files, box 7, folder 10.

⁴⁵ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Report of Party Delegation to Six Counties and British Labour Party—16/19 August 1969 (Strictly Confidential),” August 26, 1969, Conor Cruise O’Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/219 (1–9).

⁴⁶ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Racial Conflict—Peaceful Resolution?” May 9, 1968, Conor Cruise O’Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P92/145 (1–10).

⁴⁷ PRONI, CAB/9B/205/6: “The Political Situation: Memorandum by the Prime Minister,” January 14, 1969. The memorandum was put before the Northern Ireland Cabinet on January 15, 1969.

O'Brien commented.⁴⁸ But as reform and the opposition to reform alike careered toward militant confrontation, O'Brien sought to distance the democratic constitutionalism of the South from the revolutionary nationalism that threatened to captivate the Northern minority and attract support from sympathetic opinion in the Republic. Back in 1967, O'Brien had been happy to endorse the mission of early twentieth-century Sinn Féin, associating its program of self-determination with the agenda of American "Black Power."⁴⁹ But now agitational politics looked disturbingly perilous and had to be distinguished from peaceable reform.

This project of differentiation would ideally entail distinguishing the principles underpinning democratic constitutionalism from those of popular democratic legitimation. However, since the ideals of the latter are customarily taken to justify the practice of the former, a strict border between the two is not easy to maintain.⁵⁰ The complexity of the situation required that the democratic fundamentalism adopted by revolutionary nationalism in modern Ireland be meticulously scrutinized—that both the political method and the ultimate objective of revolutionary nationalism be anatomized. Political violence was the method selected by militant nationalism, and O'Brien took this to be legitimized by a cult of sacrificial martyrdom.⁵¹ However, the objective was that of securing the sovereignty of the Irish people, which was defended in terms of the democratic legitimacy of the popular will. A decisive refutation of the assumptions contained in this conception would prove arduous, so O'Brien opted to debunk it by purely rhetorical means. He equated allegiance to the form of sovereignty he opposed with retrograde solidarity and unreasoning superstition.⁵² Accordingly, republicanism was associated with a mix

⁴⁸ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Address to the New Ulster Movement," November 9, 1970, Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/252 (5).

⁴⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Order, Justice and Revolution," Address delivered on April 21, 1967, to a Symposium on Revolution at Central Washington State College, Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/141 (1–20).

⁵⁰ On this, see Richard Bourke, *Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas* (London, 2003), 2–12. On the collision between modern democratic constitutionalism and its underlying political idealism generally, see John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London, 2005), 171; Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge, 2001), 111; Richard Tuck, "Democracy and Terrorism," in Bourke and Geuss, *Political Judgement*, 315.

⁵¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "American Aid to Freedom-Fighters?" (1976), in *Herod*, 46.

⁵² Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Shades of Republicans" (1975), in *Herod*, 131, *Neighbours: The Ewart-Biggs Memorial Lectures, 1978–1979* (London, 1980), 61, *Religion and Politics* (Coleraine, 1984), 10, and "Bobby Sands: Mutations of Nationalism," in *Passion and Cunning: Essays on Nationalism, Terrorism, and Revolution* (New York, 1988), 202.

of tribalism, mysticism, and emotivism, thus identifying insurrectionary nationalism with textbook accounts of German fascism.⁵³

In attempting to develop a more penetrating analysis of Irish nationalism between the 1970s and the middle of the 1990s, O'Brien strove to underwrite this strategy of insinuation with an element of intellectual rigor.⁵⁴ But he never succeeded in remedying his confused association of affective allegiance with religious sentiment. To be truly affecting, O'Brien seems to have thought, ties of attachment must be at once primordial and sacralized. He further assumed that these characteristics of political affiliation are irrational insofar as they are based on emotional or "visceral" attachments. As a result of this emotive quality, he concluded, the sense of allegiance is prone to unaccountable intensification and derangement, disposing it to militant assertiveness and conflict. But while O'Brien took these exaggerated feelings of political allegiance to be a potent force among the living, he also assumed that they are transmitted down the generations by a process of mystical transfusion. Thus, as he put it in 1994, the "atavistic national-religious forces" that cast a spell over the actions of Patrick Pearse in turn "move" the insurrectionary fundamentalism of Provisional republicanism in the absence of any positive awareness on their recipients' part of the process of magical inspiration: allegedly, the Provisionals were unconsciously stirred by outside forces in the form of ghosts from the republican past, even if their tangible influence is nowhere to be found.⁵⁵ Thus, bizarrely, with O'Brien's analysis, we get a mystified account of a presumed process of mystification.

Many of O'Brien's arguments were deliberately propagandistic and cannot be expected to withstand the closest scrutiny. But the fact is that they gained a hearing within historical debate and continue to be influential among historians of the Troubles. My suggestion here is not that historians have embraced every aspect of O'Brien's paradigm but that elements of his analysis have been adopted by the profession, sometimes in the form of verbatim deployment of his terminology and at other times as unwitting reproduction of his ideas. Thus, repeatedly throughout his history of nationalism in Ireland, Richard English takes the "intertwining" of politics and religion to explain the

⁵³ The association with National Socialism is explicit in O'Brien, *Religion and Politics*, 6.

⁵⁴ For a brief account of the intellectual trajectory of Conor Cruise O'Brien, see Richard Bourke, "Plague Man: The Crusader in Conor Cruise O'Brien," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 13, 2009, 13–14. For a narrative of O'Brien's life, see Donald Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien*, vol. 1, *Narrative* (Montreal, 1994). For an analysis of key themes in O'Brien's intellectual development, see Diarmuid Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien: Violent Notions* (Dublin, 2009).

⁵⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin, 1994), 159; cf. Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Global Letter," in *Herod*, 19.

fanaticism of revolutionary republicanism after 1916.⁵⁶ In this idiom, Marianne Elliott has recently identified the “roots” of national antagonism with the history of religion on the island of Ireland.⁵⁷ Even O’Brien’s critics employ his diagnostic phraseology, with the result that the Northern Ireland conflict has been described by one such critic as “a variety of tribal religious war.”⁵⁸ This proposition can be found among the most prominent Irish historians, such that the paradigmatic instance of Irish insurrectionary zeal in 1916 is depicted as “atavistic,”⁵⁹ the Provisionals as driven by “implacable tribal hatreds,”⁶⁰ and the resurgence of the Troubles after 1968 as unleashing “ancient antagonism over national and religious identities.”⁶¹ References are habitually made to the “atavism of the street-fighting in Derry and Belfast” in 1969, as though such descriptions in any real sense explain the behavior.⁶² In the same genre, the cause of republicanism is characterized as “sacred,” the insurrectionary impulse roundly denominated “primitive.”⁶³

In strict anthropological terms, it is true that tribalism is often understood to be organized around lineage: legitimation depends on ancestral pedigree, and tribal membership is defined in terms of lineal kinship.⁶⁴ It is also true that modern political societies base aspects of their legitimacy on historical precedent and so are lineal in this highly metaphorical sense.⁶⁵ It is, moreover,

⁵⁶ See Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2006), 274, 277, 294–96, 359, although English does not connect this with resurgent republicanism after 1969.

⁵⁷ Marianne Elliott, *When God Took Sides: Religion and Identity in Ireland* (Oxford, 2009), 3.

⁵⁸ J. J. Lee, *Ireland: Politics and Society, 1912–1985* (Cambridge, 1990), xiii.

⁵⁹ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600–1972* (London, 1988), 493.

⁶⁰ Roy Foster, “‘Colliding Cultures’: Leland Lyons and the Reinterpretation of Irish History,” in *The Irish Story, Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (London, 2001), 54.

⁶¹ R. F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, 1970–2000* (London, 2007), 106.

⁶² Charles Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1983), 393. For a journalistic reprise of the terminology, see Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London, 2002), 80.

⁶³ Charles Townshend, *Ireland: The Twentieth Century* (London, 1998), 208.

⁶⁴ See Marshall D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (London, 1968); Elman R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1971). For a skeptical inquiry into the category altogether, see Morton H. Fried, *The Notion of Tribe* (London, 1975).

⁶⁵ For the persistence of such legitimating strategies into the age of modern state formation, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, rev. ed. (1957; repr., Cambridge, 1987). For conspicuous resort to such strategies after the French Revolution, see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford, CA, 2001), 182–85.

right that national allegiance involves imaginative affiliation with “fellow” citizens and can to that extent be thought of on the analogy of kinship. But it seems obvious that modern state forms are not grounded on lineal descent and that citizenship is radically different from clanship.⁶⁶ There exist both British and German historiographical traditions extending back into the nineteenth century in which political allegiance is cast in terms of kinship relations, but that strategy was adopted as a means of consolidating patriotism and ought not be confused with neutral description.⁶⁷ The principles of tribalism are diametrically opposed to civil politics, and the idea, traceable to Victorian comparative ethnographers, that populations struggling over sovereignty somehow revert to tribal politics is hard to credit.⁶⁸ Standard eighteenth-century jurisprudence contrasted tribal with civil organization, identifying the former with societies of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists and the latter with the establishment of political societies.⁶⁹ The advent of violence in democratizing states gives us no reason to revise the basic distinction.⁷⁰

The idea that religion provides the core solvent of social life derives most obviously from Durkheim, but in O’Brien’s reworking, the thesis lost whatever historical subtlety it had.⁷¹ Modern societies, for Durkheim, were highly individualistic orders in which interaction was based on a complex division of labor, whereas the solidarity characteristic of primitive societies was sustained by far more cohesive sacred ties.⁷² O’Brien’s strategy was to project the traits ordinarily ascribed to simple, “tribal” societies onto modern commercial civilization, particularly where its politics degenerated into violence in either

⁶⁶ On this, see the classic account in Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society* (1877), ed. Leslie A. White (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 13–14.

⁶⁷ The imperial patriotism of J. R. Seeley provides an obvious example: see his *Life and Times of Stein; or, Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic Age*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1878), 1:19. The tendency is likewise conspicuous among the various members of the German Historical School of Jurisprudence. See, e.g., Karl Gustav Adolf Knies, *Die politische Ökonomie vom Standpunkte der geschichtlichen Methode* (Braunschweig, 1853).

⁶⁸ On the doctrine of reversion or “survivals,” see E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London, 1871), 2:410.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Adam Smith, “Report of 1762–3,” in *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis, 1982), 200–215.

⁷⁰ The terms of the distinction continue to be disputed, however. For discussion, see Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (London, 1969); Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York, 1974); James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, 2009).

⁷¹ O’Brien’s debt to Durkheim is touched on in Ernest Gellner, “The Sacred and the National” (1989), in *Encounters with Nationalism* (1994; repr., Oxford, 1997).

⁷² Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893; repr., New York, 1984), chap. 2.

its populist or authoritarian forms. The diffusion of classic arguments against National Socialist primitivism publicized by R. G. Collingwood and Karl Popper had already popularized this brand of anachronistic projection.⁷³ The attempt to explain German totalitarianism in the simple terms of retrogression to social and religious primitivism now looks highly implausible, but in the 1940s and 1950s it enjoyed a certain vogue. O'Brien shared with Popper and Collingwood the idea that spiritual malaise or the "strains" of modern existence prompted a search for forms of compensation.⁷⁴ In the absence of redress, individuals and groups would seek comfort in primitive communalism and accompanying modes of mystical affirmation.⁷⁵

Both Collingwood and Popper had been heavily influenced in their arguments by the pioneering analysis of the Hungarian émigré philosopher Aurel Kolnai. For Kolnai, German fascism stemmed from a failure to advance from ethnic primordialism to politics proper—from *ethnos* to *polis*, from tribalism to statehood. It was a reversion, as he put it, to "Modern Tribal Nationalism."⁷⁶ Kolnai's thesis was indebted to the anthropology of the 1920s, which had built upon the ethnographic assumptions of the late nineteenth century.⁷⁷ But whatever insights this work could provide into the abiding features of human nature, it hardly captured the political character of modern systems of despotism, which, for all their brutality, cannot literally be called "savage." O'Brien's resuscitation of these tropes and his application of them to populist militancy in Ireland forced him to stretch credulity still further, obliging us to question their usage in contemporary historiography. Below, I will consider how we can avoid these anachronisms, but first we need to expose the second fallacy that dominates research into the explanation of conflict in Northern Ireland.

IV. CULTURAL CONFLICT

Conor Cruise O'Brien had an important influence on both the popular and the academic understanding of the Troubles, but he did not exhaust the possibilities of interpretation. Since the 1980s, most attempts to explain the advent of conflict in Northern Ireland have in fact been indebted to the Anglophone

⁷³ See R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan; or, Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism*, ed. David Boucher (1942; repr., Oxford, 1992), 257–60; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (London, 1966), 1:176, 188.

⁷⁴ Donat O'Donnell [Conor Cruise O'Brien], *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (New York, 1952), 57; cf. Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*, 1:176.

⁷⁵ On the impulse to fill the imaginative and emotional void caused by spiritual and cultural bankruptcy, see O'Brien, *Religion and Politics*, 6–7.

⁷⁶ Aurel Kolnai, *The War against the West* (London, 1938), 395.

⁷⁷ For his reliance on Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, see *ibid.*, 31.

literature on nationalism, which is based on the idea of national “cultures.” This section examines the organizing principles that inform this writing, explores its various intellectual debts, and traces the history of its insights and assumptions.

The Anglophone literature on nationalism stems from three main sources. Accounts of German expansionism, accompanied by the homogenization of the domestic population in the 1930s, represent one source; assorted reflections on the experience of political dissolution in Central and Eastern Europe during the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Romanov, and Ottoman empires constitute another. Popper, Kolnai, and Collingwood addressed the first phenomenon; Elie Kedourie, Hans Kohn, John Plamenatz, Hugh Seton-Watson, and Ernest Gellner focused principally on the second;⁷⁸ and Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson variously blended the two.⁷⁹ But both these strains of thought have been complicated by a third that appeared in American comparative politics after the Second World War: the postwar debate on nation building developed perspectives on popular allegiance with a view to understanding comparative political development. Karl Deutsch and Stein Rokkan helped to establish the field; Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba, Bingham Powell, and Lucien Pye pursued its comparative implications; and Walker Connor became an early critic of their assumptions. But each of them constructed their hypotheses out of existing insights drawn from sociology and anthropology.⁸⁰ Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, and later Clifford Geertz provided the essential building blocks.⁸¹ In the previous section, I listed the main philosophical

⁷⁸ Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London, 1960); Hans Kohn, *The Age of Nationalism: The First Era of Global History* (Westport, CT, 1962); John Plamenatz, “Two Types of Nationalism,” in *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (London, 1976); Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (London, 1977); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983).

⁷⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (1983; repr., London, 1991).

⁸⁰ Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge, MA, 1953); Stein Rokkan, “Dimensions of State Formation and Nation-Building: A Possible Paradigm for Research on Variations within Europe,” in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton, NJ, 1975); Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ, 1963); Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston, 1966); Lucien W. Pye and Sidney Verba, eds., *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton, NJ, 1965); Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, NJ, 1994).

⁸¹ Talcott Parsons, “Democracy and Social Structure,” and “Max Weber and the Contemporary Political Crisis” (1942), in Gerhardt, *Talcott Parsons on National Socialism*; Edward Shils, “Personal, Primordial, Sacred and Civil Ties,” *British Journal of Sociology* 8 (1957): 130–45; Clifford Geertz, “Integrative Revolution,” and

writings on National Socialism that exercised a major influence on subsequent theories of conflict. The remaining historical and political science literature on the problem of nationalism is enormous, yet, for all its richness in terms of insight and innovation, it is for the most part based on the idea of cultural allegiance. Its attendant understanding of conflict is derived from the notion of cultural collision, but this conception needs to be treated with considerable caution. This section aims to uncover its limitations.

In a sharply focused essay published in 1995, John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary set about controverting what they took to be the dominant intellectual “fallacies” that guided “liberal” theories of conflict.⁸² At the root of these fallacies lay a basic misconception, they contended: since, it was argued, liberalism is primarily preoccupied with the protection of individual rights, it is incapable of adequately recognizing emergent national communities. The kind of national communities that McGarry and O’Leary had in mind were “ethnic” communities—or “ethno-national” identities, as they preferred to describe them. An ethnic community is commonly understood as a cultural community, that is, a mutually committed group that shares a culture or a set of attitudes. Those shared attitudes may amount to no more than the communal sentiment itself, the vague yet powerful sense of “belonging” to one another.⁸³ As McGarry and O’Leary see it, such sentiment becomes truly “national” at the point at which it demands political expression through the constitutional organs of the state.⁸⁴ National sentiment allegedly requires equality of respect, and it is assumed that the failure to meet this requirement incites disaffection and leads to conflict: the “denial of institutional recognition and equality” to national sentiment is held to destabilize multicultural democracies.⁸⁵

McGarry and O’Leary deny that they are primordialists in the sense of crediting the notion of “immutable” allegiance: allegiance can be durable yet

“After the Revolution: The Fate of Nationalism in the New States” (1971), in *Interpretation of Cultures*.

⁸² John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, “Five Fallacies: Northern Ireland and the Liabilities of Liberalism” (1995), in *The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements* (Oxford, 2004).

⁸³ In their commitment to this idea, McGarry and O’Leary depend on Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, 1985), 56–57.

⁸⁴ John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London, 1993), 3, and *Explaining Conflict in Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford, 1995), 355.

⁸⁵ McGarry and O’Leary, “Five Fallacies,” 188; cf. John McGarry, “‘Democracy’ in Northern Ireland: Experiments in Self-Rule from the Protestant Ascendancy to the Good Friday Agreement” (2002), in McGarry and O’Leary, *Northern Ireland Conflict*, 347.

neither perennial nor permanent, they correctly argue.⁸⁶ However, primordial ties were first theorized as neither original nor perpetual but as fundamental, or binding ipso facto—that is, “by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself,” in Geertz’s words.⁸⁷ Geertz’s thesis was explicitly indebted to arguments first formulated by the sociologist Edward Shils, who had drawn in turn on the work of Ferdinand Tönnies.⁸⁸ Each of them share a common set of assumptions: first, that feelings of the kind are sufficient to sustain coherent behavior independent of their political organization and, second, that they are more basic than normative conventions. In other words, such ties are seen as “natural,” in the sense of arising spontaneously, and as capable of inspiring communal action.⁸⁹ At the same time, these sentiments are assumed to be charged with a raw immediacy that floats free of legitimating ideologies. I began this article by arguing that there are no political sentiments that escape ideological determination in this way—that motives are always shaped by normative principles. Political conflict unleashes inordinate self-righteousness, but part of its energy derives from the sense that a principle has been violated. Fury in such circumstances is never just blind fury: we need to uncover the historical values that guide and inform the passion.

Political allegiance, then, is governed by the terms of allegiance: it is not an automatic feeling of community. Moreover, while sentiments of attachment are only expressible in terms of principles of allegiance, principles of allegiance are continually renegotiated in the process of political struggle.⁹⁰ Political sentiment, in other words, is not only tailored to ideology; it is also modified under pressure from the political process. The ideological component of allegiance is commonly acknowledged but then soon forgotten. Ben-

⁸⁶ John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, “Introduction,” in *Northern Ireland Conflict*, 32.

⁸⁷ Geertz, “Integrative Revolution,” 259.

⁸⁸ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887; repr., Leipzig, 1912). For Shils’s discussion of Tönnies, see Shils, “Personal, Primordial, Sacred and Civil Ties,” 113.

⁸⁹ For criticism of the idea, see Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, rev. ed. (1965; repr., Cambridge, MA, 2001), esp. his skeptical reflections on the theories of group action developed by Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York, 1939); Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff and Reinhard Bendix (Glencoe, IL, 1950); David B. Truman, *The Government Process* (New York, 1958); Sidney Verba, *Small Groups and Political Behaviour* (Princeton, NJ, 1961); and George C. Homans, *The Human Group* (New York, 1950).

⁹⁰ This point is well made in Rogers Brubaker, “National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe” (1995), in *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, 1996).

edict Anderson, for example, explained that imagined communities in the age of nationalism were conceptualized as “limited,” “sovereign,” and “equal”: imagination, by implication, was shaped by concepts like sovereignty, whose history can be recovered and examined.⁹¹ Despite this, it is customary to appropriate the idea of an imagined community to the naked sentiment of national allegiance. Accordingly, Hobsbawm refers to “the emotion of being an ‘imagined community,’” even though he recognizes that such attachments have been historically shaped by the process of democratization.⁹² Gellner goes further: modern political allegiance is a “flame” that has sprung up “spontaneously” across the globe, driven circumstantially but impervious to ideology.⁹³ Finally, for Walker Connor, challenging the nation-building ambitions at one time implicit in much of the American literature on comparative political development, national kinship is a species of prepolitical “emotional magnetism.”⁹⁴ In each case, we are left with the notion of a shapeless community held together by a process of sentimental fusion.

The idea of a cultural community of this kind, united by a common allegiance governed by emotional attraction, has pervaded analysis of Northern Ireland since the 1960s.⁹⁵ Cultural communities at the outset of the Troubles were usually depicted as distinct “traditions.”⁹⁶ Since then, allegiance to a tradition has customarily been conflated with the concept of identity, political conflict being glossed as a “clash of identities.” In 1990, this gloss was described as a major interpretative model that had guided the conclusions of the New Ireland Forum and formed the approach of the former Irish prime minister Garret FitzGerald to the Troubles.⁹⁷ But it has also channeled academic research. Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd have presented conflict in Ireland as the cumulative product of overlapping and mutually reinforcing forms of identification—ethnic, religious, colonial, ideological, and national.⁹⁸ This approach comes close to rehabilitating elements discarded from Conor Cruise O’Brien’s framework of analysis—polarities based on

⁹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6–7.

⁹² Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 177, 110, 44.

⁹³ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 125–26.

⁹⁴ Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, 108.

⁹⁵ An early example is M. W. Heslinga, *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide: A Contribution to the Study of Regionalism in the British Isles* (Assen, 1962).

⁹⁶ RINA, 2001/6/549, Interdepartmental Unit on the North of Ireland: “Remarks by Dr. Patrick J. Hillery, Minister for External Affairs, at First Meeting of Interdepartmental Unit on the North,” June 18, 1970; RINA, 2001/6/517, Oifig an Aire Gnóthaí Eachtrach: “Memorandum for the Information of the Government: Policy in Relation to Northern Ireland,” September 7, 1970.

⁹⁷ John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1990), 98. Whyte cites Garret FitzGerald, *Irish Identities* (London, 1982), 5–6, to illustrate his point.

⁹⁸ Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict: Power, Conflict, and Emancipation* (1996; repr., Cambridge, 2000), 290–91.

class antagonism and the opposition between settler and native—before adding the ingredients in O'Brien's favored mix: religion and nationalism. However, for Ruane and Todd, O'Brien failed to see the extent to which national differences were determined by preexisting group allegiances.⁹⁹

In offering this corrective to O'Brien, Ruane and Todd inadvertently replace conventional national teleology with an archeology of conflict in which antagonistic communities preserve their group integrity as they seamlessly progress through history, transmitting their hostility down the generations. On this construction, rival cultural identifications are founded on enduring communities of fate: antithetical group allegiances persist through time without reference to legitimizing principles of loyalty or to the forms of politics that those principles are supposed to justify.¹⁰⁰ In lived historical reality, however, loyalty is evoked in terms of specific norms of allegiance—imperial, monarchical, or democratic allegiance, for instance—while those norms are mobilized by political movements or represented by regimes.¹⁰¹ Democracies, for example, appeal to democratic principles, and allegiance is a function of alignment between the two. In the absence of specific content of this kind, allegiance is reduced to abstract “ethnic” affiliation—to disembodied cultural affinities.¹⁰² As a result, “cultures” are mysteriously imbued with an agency of their own, despite their having been separated from political organization and rendered devoid of definite ideological import.

The attempt to reduce political conflict to cultural antagonism found its classic expression in Irish historiography in F. S. L. Lyons's Ford Lectures delivered in 1978 and published the following year as *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland*. In this study, Lyons sought to trace the “volcanic” eruption of violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the legacy of assorted cultural collisions that grew in intensity during the aftermath of the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16, 22, 24, 28–29, 290–91.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 29: “Later conflicts of identity and allegiance were the effect of . . . communal division, not its cause”; cf. Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, “The Roots of Intense Ethnic Conflict May Not Themselves Be Ethnic: Categories, Communities and Path Dependence,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 45, no. 2 (2004): 209–32, on the enduring social sentiments that underwrite prepolitical “ethnic” solidarity. Compare also Jennifer Todd, “Trajectories of Identity Change: New Perspectives on Ethnicity, Nationality and Identity in Ireland,” *Field Day Review*, 2007, 83–93. These assumptions are pervasive among the standard treatments of the history of Irish nationalism. See, typically, D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (1982; repr., New York, 1995), 393–94.

¹⁰¹ For discussion of the means of mobilization—such as coercion, persuasion, and collaboration—under conditions of civil crisis, see Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, 2006). See also Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts* (Chicago, 1970).

¹⁰² As, e.g., in Peter Hart, *The I. R. A. at War, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 2003), 243.

fall of Parnell at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰³ But the argument was based on a plain inversion of historical causation. According to Lyons, diverse cultures or “ways of life” lay at the root of political contestation after 1891: “political differences,” he wrote, were merely the “outward and visible sign” of a deeper cultural divergence.¹⁰⁴ However, the opposite case is surely more plausible: conflicts over beliefs and practices emerge in the context of a contest over their political control and expression. Diverse affiliations have always been with us, but they have conflicted where there has been a shifting balance of power. It is unimaginable that opinion in Ireland would have been polarized among discrete factions in the absence of a contest over political sovereignty in the United Kingdom: 1886 is a clear precondition for the turmoil of the early decades of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, because the idea of “cultural nationalism” cast such a spell over the understanding of political conflict in the last century, analysis continually reverts to the paradigmatic notion that “culture” is a vehicle for political animosity.

The idea has its origins in assorted attempts to distinguish Central from Western European and Anglophone nationalisms.¹⁰⁵ But ironically, these efforts themselves derive from the distorted legacy of German histories of national unification published before the Great War. The pivotal text here is Friedrich Meinecke’s *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, which first appeared in 1907. The experience of German defeat in 1918 led Meinecke to revise his views significantly over the course of his remaining academic career, but his original goal had been to justify the subordination of cosmopolitan idealism to the project of German unification. Cosmopolitan idealism, here, meant cultural norms acting independently of political power. Unification was seen as the achievement of an alliance between an ethically charged national culture and the coercive capacity of Prussian power.¹⁰⁶ Meinecke’s thesis was therefore based on a distinction between the national community and executive power—between “cultural” and “political” nationalism, as he put it. Bismarckian strategy allegedly amounted to a combination of the two leading to the formation of a national state.¹⁰⁷ Meinecke’s core contention was

¹⁰³ For analysis and criticism, see Roy Foster, “Varieties of Irishness: Cultures and Anarchy in Ireland,” in *Paddy and Mr. Punch* (London, 1993). Foster’s challenge was to Lyons’s alleged determinism, but the idea of cultural conflict is preserved intact: see Foster, “Colliding Cultures.”

¹⁰⁴ F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890–1939* (Oxford, 1979), 177.

¹⁰⁵ Plamenatz, “Two Types of Nationalism,” exemplifies the genre, but there is a large derivative literature: see, e.g., Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

¹⁰⁶ Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat*, rev. ed., ed. Hans Herzfeld (1907; repr., Munich, 1962), 24. The work is translated into English as *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, trans. Robert B. Kimber (Princeton, NJ, 1970).

¹⁰⁷ Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum*, 10: “Kulturnationen” and “Staatsnationen.”

that this combination did not entail the subjection of policy to the demands of power politics since the state had been happily civilized by culture on account of the beneficent alliance between German idealism and Prussian might.¹⁰⁸

In Meinecke's understanding, German *Kultur* had acted as a humanizing agent since the Classical age of Goethe and Kant. From Wilhelm von Humboldt to J. G. Fichte and the early Romantics and beyond, the ethical ideal of personal autonomy was harnessed to a form of individualism that promoted a culture of self-realization.¹⁰⁹ But when this cultural, or prepolitical, project was aligned with German nationalism by Ranke, and then co-opted by Bismarck's pragmatic genius, it could be counted on to act as a civilizing influence on the exercise of power: in this way, the "national idea" could be expected to restrain crude "nationalism."¹¹⁰ According to Meinecke, this restraining effect resulted from the fact that the German national idea was less utilitarian than French democracy, whose roots could be found in the doctrines of modern natural law culminating in the ideas of 1789. Modern nationalism since the French Revolution was nothing other than democracy, which had emerged under the banner of popular sovereignty.¹¹¹ While German society had been slower to adopt the democratic project, for Meinecke its cultural ideals supplied the means of humanizing the popular will. In the absence of this curb on democratic zeal, national politics was disposed to aggressive expansionism. Meinecke's idea that modern nationalism is a product of democratic ideology has been lost on subsequent historiographical inquiry, which has instead confused his cultural idealism with irredentism and ethnic solidarity. This confusion underlies the idea that nationalism can be explained in terms of cultural identification and that the resulting cultural nationalism causes conflict. In fact—civil conflicts are caused by clashes between politically organized sets of opinions. In the Irish case, we need to know the content of these opinions if we are to stand a chance of unraveling the nature of their collision. With this end in view, I turn now to the relationship between democracy and modern conflict.

V. DEMOCRACY

In December 1970, the Irish prime minister, Jack Lynch, contributed an article on republicanism to the *Irish Independent*. There, he reminded his readership

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 244–77.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

¹¹⁰ For Meinecke's mature view of Ranke, see Friedrich Meinecke, "Ranke und Burckhardt," in *Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin: Vorträge und Schriften* (Berlin, 1948), bk. 27. The distinction between nationality and nationalism is brought out in Friedrich Meinecke, "Nationalismus und Nationale Idee," in *Die Deutsche Erhebung von 1914* (Stuttgart, 1914).

¹¹¹ Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum*, 12, 29.

that the Irish republic was a “democracy” where the “ultimate sovereign power” rested with the people. He contended that the concept of popular power was originally formulated in the eighteenth century, inspired by the American and French revolutions.¹¹² “The people” in Ireland comprehended the national community from which Unionism kept itself apart. In consequence, the Northern polity could claim no representative status, as Lynch informed his party conference the following year.¹¹³ Thus, the Southern conception of democracy presumed itself entitled to disestablish the Northern understanding of the same thing. This outcome had been elucidated in the autumn of 1970 in a policy document prepared for the Irish government by the Department of External Affairs. There, it was argued that Northern Protestants had a right to some form of corporate “personality,” but in the end it lacked proper democratic “validity.” As a result, Unionists should accept their “true position” in Ireland as members of a corporate Irish *demos*.¹¹⁴ What this involved was acceptance of a permanent minority status under a majority that would in practice control the democratic agenda. So, while Southern democracy offered protection to the Protestant “personality,” its procedures would ensure its dissolution.

In *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland*, F. S. L. Lyons argued that the contemporary “Ulster question” was a “tale of two minorities”—the Northern Catholic minority and the minority of Protestants on the island of Ireland. But he failed to appreciate fully the implications of his own statement.¹¹⁵ The problems of modern Ireland and contemporary Northern Ireland cannot be explained with reference to the simple fact of minority “cultures.” Minorities only carry significance in relation to prevailing majorities, and majorities only pose a threat where they control the agenda of politics, which only arises under conditions of democracy. Still earlier, in 1971, Conor Cruise O’Brien argued in the same vein that the conflict in Northern Ireland was in part a consequence of “the solid determination of the Northern Protestants to refuse minority status for themselves, but to hold the maximum territory in which their majority status and dominance would be secure.”¹¹⁶ O’Brien’s argument is of course correct, but minimally so. What is missing is an appreciation of

¹¹² RINA, 2001/6/519: “Article by the Taoiseach, Mr. J. Lynch, for the Series on ‘Definitions of Irish Republicanism’ to be Published by the *Irish Independent*,” December 1970.

¹¹³ RINA, 2002/8/76: extract from presidential address to Árd Fheis by Lynch, RDS, 1971.

¹¹⁴ RINA, 2001/6/517, Oifig an Aire Gnóthaí Eachtrach: “Memorandum for the Information of the Government: Policy in Relation to Northern Ireland,” September 7, 1970.

¹¹⁵ Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy*, 144.

¹¹⁶ Conor Cruise O’Brien, Letter to the Right Honourable James Callaghan, MP, February 5, 1971, Conor Cruise O’Brien Papers, UCD Archives, P82/222 (41).

the ideological context from which minority and majority “status” receive their political meaning. A defense of the laws governing the franchise in Northern Ireland, issued by the Ulster Unionist Council in the autumn of 1968 in response to allegations made by the Society of Labour Lawyers in London to the effect that electoral arrangements in the Province were “anomalous,” captures Unionism’s organizing principle: it was asserted that Great Britain, by comparison with Northern Ireland, “does not have a land frontier with a State, many of whose citizens would wish . . . to exercise the franchise here solely for the purpose of opposing the majority of our people and seeking to overthrow the constitutional position.”¹¹⁷ The significance of these remarks depends on their wider context, and that context is provided by modern democratic ideology as it has emerged since the final decade of the eighteenth century.

Democratic ideas in the United Kingdom had been framed by the response to electoral reform during the aftermath of the Revolutionary Wars. Both Irish nationalism and the Ulster crisis are inconceivable in the absence of the franchise reforms of 1832, 1867, and 1884, and the reforms themselves must be seen in the context of post-Revolutionary democratic thought and popular mobilization.¹¹⁸ In 1886, writing against both the general principle and the specific form of Home Rule being proposed at the time for Ireland, A. V. Dicey recognized that the arguments in favor of Gladstonian devolution were being conducted in the name of “democratic convictions” and mobilized under the influence of “democratic sentiments.”¹¹⁹ But when he came in 1913 to defend the principle of Britain’s long-standing incorporating Union, he did so in the language of democratic legitimacy. “I am an old, an unconverted, and an impenitent Benthamite,” he wrote.¹²⁰ On the basis of the utility principle, which advocated the idea of the sovereignty of the “greater number,” the will of some 3 million Irish nationalists should not be permitted to prevail over the wishes of 40 million British citizens.¹²¹ Dicey further recognized that the utilitarian principle of majority rule was incapable of deciding the justice of secession since it always begged the question of which majority ought to

¹¹⁷ PRONI, CAB/9B/205/6.

¹¹⁸ For the later end of this period, see Eugenio F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007); cf. Margaret O’Callaghan, “Genealogies of Partition: History, History-Writing, and the ‘Troubles’ in Ireland,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 9, no. 4 (December 2006): 619–34, esp. 629.

¹¹⁹ A. V. Dicey, *England’s Case against Home Rule* (London, 1886), 43.

¹²⁰ A. V. Dicey, *A Fool’s Paradise, Being a Constitutionalist’s Criticism on the Home Rule Bill of 1912* (London, 1913), viii. On Dicey’s quirky relationship to utilitarianism, see Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 2009), 389–90.

¹²¹ Dicey, *Fool’s Paradise*, ix.

count.¹²² Nonetheless, like Lecky, Sumner Maine, and Fitzjames Stephens, Dicey had come to recognize that democracy had acquired a normative status in the language of modern British politics.¹²³ Moreover, he chose to fight the Unionist cause by appealing to its legitimating principles.

Two years earlier, in a series of articles written for the *Quarterly Review* in response to the third reform bill and collected in *Popular Government* in 1885, Sumner Maine had traced modern democratic ideas to two distinct sources—to natural law argument culminating in the writings of Rousseau and Sieyès and to philosophical radicalism as propounded by Jeremy Bentham.¹²⁴ Modern commentators have largely followed Maine's example, ascribing democratic theory to both these points of origin.¹²⁵ But while Bentham could be invoked by Dicey in defense of the continuance of a full legislative Union, the utility principle would in due course be put in the service of Ulster devolution, and ultimately it would be used to defend the majoritarian foundations of the Stormont regime.¹²⁶ It is, of course, questionable whether the democratic principle of majority decision making can be employed as an appropriate criterion of democratic citizenship, but the fact is that it was invoked in this way. Its problematic status merely points to a deeper difficulty: modern democratic doctrines are not instruments of consensus but means of bitter political division. The cold war was only the most conspicuous example of this polarizing possibility.¹²⁷ Although the ideology of democratic rights succeeded in dominating the terrain of modern political argument, the diverse content and implications of its principles have given rise to violently antagonistic understandings.

The partisan character of the term “majority” in Northern Ireland is made evident by frequent references in the public speech of Unionism to the wider political community as the “vast” or “overwhelming” majority.¹²⁸ But what

¹²² Dicey, *England's Case against Home Rule*, 69. On Bentham's own complex relationship to the principle of majority decision making, see J. H. Burns, “Majorities: An Exploration,” *History of Political Thought* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 66–85.

¹²³ Bourke, *Peace in Ireland*, 252–72.

¹²⁴ Henry Sumner Maine, *Popular Government*, ed. George W. Carey (1885; repr., Indianapolis, 1976), 167–72.

¹²⁵ The classic studies to reproduce the same genealogy are Moisei Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties*, trans. Frederick Clarke, 2 vols. (London, 1902), 2:607–741; and Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942; repr., London, 1992), 250–68.

¹²⁶ Ronald McNeill, *Ulster's Stand for Union* (London, 1922), 15.

¹²⁷ On this, see the polarizing account of J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy: Political Theory and Practice during the French Revolution and Beyond* (Harmondsworth, 1952).

¹²⁸ PRONI, CAB/9B/312/1: see, e.g., the conciliatory statement by Brian Faulkner on September 17, 1969, announcing the government program of action to tackle suspicions of gerrymandering and discrimination, which appealed to the “vast majority

was really assumed to count was a strictly Unionist majority. A statement by Terence O'Neill in the winter of 1967 elaborating his understanding of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland illustrates the standard elision between the populace and the "greater number": "Northern Ireland . . . remains in being because the majority of its people . . . continue to wish to be part of the United Kingdom." He then unpacked what this majority stood for—it stood for the population as a whole: "I repeat: Northern Ireland was born, and Northern Ireland exists because of the will of her own people."¹²⁹ These pronouncements blend the majority decision procedure associated with the selection of democratic governments into the principle of democratic political legitimacy whereby the population as a whole is understood to authorize the form of its representation. Exactly this conflation is apparent in a defense of Northern Ireland's "status" issued by the Ulster Unionist Council in the autumn of 1968: "By the democratic process the authority of the Unionist Government of Northern Ireland stems to-day, as it has done continuously since 1921, from the majority will as given expression through the ballot box."¹³⁰ It is not just the tenure of the government that is supposed to depend on a majority; the fundamental "authority" of the regime is presumed to be based on a majority will. It is this same principle that was invoked at a cabinet meeting during the same period by the minister of home affairs in the Northern Ireland government, William Craig, in order to vindicate the sovereignty of Stormont against Westminster, whose intervention into the affairs of Northern Ireland was assumed to undermine "the democratically-determined will of a majority."¹³¹

The majoritarian defense of democracy was asserted throughout the early stages of the Troubles to shore up the position of the Stormont regime. On Sunday, August 17, 1969, responding to the occurrence of disturbances across the Province during the preceding days, the Northern Ireland prime minister, James Chichester-Clark, described the recent civil rights protests as "a deliberate campaign to discredit and subvert this Government, whose basis, I would remind you, is a parliamentary majority elected on 'one man, one vote,' just as at Westminster."¹³² A government pamphlet issued the following month

of people, on every side"; cf. the broadcast by the prime minister, James Chichester Clark, on August 13, 1969, depicting that moderation exhibited "the overwhelming majority of our people."

¹²⁹ PRONI, CAB/9B/201/13: Statement by the Prime Minister, February 1, 1967.

¹³⁰ PRONI, CAB/9B/205/6: Response of Ulster Unionist Council to the Interim Report by Labour Lawyers on Discrimination in Northern Ireland.

¹³¹ PRONI, CAB/9B/205/7: Conclusions (Secret) of a Meeting of the Cabinet, November 20, 1968.

¹³² PRONI, CAB/9B/312/1: Speech by the Prime Minister, Stormont Castle,

complained in the same spirit that it was “not often realized that the Northern Ireland government has all along been supported by overwhelming majorities of votes at successive elections.”¹³³ One month later still, a loyalist newspaper insisted that “in a democracy the will of the majority establishes the government.”¹³⁴ Here it is evident how readily the principle of majority decision could be converted into a norm of political legitimacy. Indeed, this slippage is apparent throughout the literature published in defense of the Ulster Workers’ Council Strike in May 1974. One statement by the council made the position perfectly clear: “The Ulster Workers’ Council are determined that the Government shall not ignore the will of the majority of the people as to the form of Government.”¹³⁵ But if the form of government could be determined on a majoritarian basis, it followed that the polity was at the disposal of the greater number rather than the community as a whole. It was this interpretation of democratic entitlement that emerged in the course of David Trimble’s defense of “majority rights” in his closing speech to the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention in 1976: “the institutions of government and the basic nature of the state,” he argued, should reflect majority views and aspirations.¹³⁶

The principle of majoritarian democracy was further capable of justifying militant insurrection. Accordingly, a year after the Ulster Workers’ Council Strike, the Ulster Volunteer Force could still appeal to the right of the majority to rebel in terms of the binding authority of Protestants’ “democratic wishes.”¹³⁷ During the strike itself, members of the executive committee of the Workers’ Council considered their authority as a provisional government to be based on the rights inherent in “normal democratic procedures”: where these procedures were violated, initiative should be ceded to the de facto custodians of the popular will.¹³⁸ This idea of “provisional” democracy has deep roots in Irish political argument and has most commonly been articulated within the republican tradition. The entitlements of provisional democracy were most notoriously claimed by the Provisional IRA, which appealed from existing political arrangements to the rights of an abiding democratic persona under-

August 17, 1969. The statement is reprinted in app. 5 of *Violence and Civil Disturbances in Northern Ireland in 1969: Report of Tribunal of Inquiry*, 20 vols. (HMSO, 1972), Cmd. 599, 2:37–38.

¹³³ Ulster Unionist Party, *Ulster: The Facts* (Belfast, 1969), 11.

¹³⁴ “British Justice Demands Law and Order,” *People’s Press*, October 1, 1969.

¹³⁵ The Ulster Workers’ Council, Press Statement, May 15, 1974, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

¹³⁶ Speech by David Trimble, reported in *Vanguard Bulletin*, no. 2, March 1976.

¹³⁷ *Combat: The Voice of the Ulster Volunteer Force* 2, no. 5 (1975).

¹³⁸ Report of Meeting of H. Patterson, R. Pagels, and H. Murray with Stanley Orme, May 1974, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

lying the history of the modern Irish nation. Here, we enter the quicksands of democratic theory: while it is easy to abhor the results of militant republican ideology, it is less easy to dispose of its underlying assumptions.

Irish republicanism, and above all Provisional republicanism, has long traded on the confusions and elisions that have dogged the history of democratic thought. An article for *An Phoblacht* that appeared in the autumn of 1971 railed against the injustice of partition by way of reference to the legitimacy of the popular will as expressed in the General Election of 1918.¹³⁹ The previous winter, *Republican News* justified recourse to violent insurrection against the Northern Ireland polity on the grounds that it was “a state formed undemocratically against the wishes of the majority of the Irish people.”¹⁴⁰ The following summer, in *Republican News*, it was again claimed that the Northern majority was a minority preference submerged in the “national” population.¹⁴¹ The leading Provisional activist, David O’Connell, made clear in 1974 how the resistance of this national minority legitimized the resort to sectarian war on the island of Ireland.¹⁴² Gerry Adams, a year later, spelled out how the same objective would be secured by “a complete fusing of military and political strategy”—by blending armed propaganda with militant politicization.¹⁴³ In each case, political action was licensed by appeal to a popular will that could override existing electorates in both jurisdictions, North and South.

What permits this appeal is the intrinsic difficulty of deciding how the popular will can best be ascertained. Of course, the problem of determining the will of the people is particularly acute under conditions in which the populace is fundamentally divided. In practice, this means resolving the grounds on which one people should prevail over another in determining the composition of the state. This cannot be done by polling an electorate since we need to decide which electorate is to count. Appeals to the Irish electorate of 1918, for example, are an attempt to privilege one people over another—to lend democratic authority to a pan-Irish community, as against an Ulster or a British nation. Where a supposedly authoritative electorate is identified as existing beyond the frontiers of an established jurisdiction, its will cannot be discovered through a state-specific plebiscite since the relevant population exists *de jure* but not *de facto*. In standard populist revolutionary parlance, this population-by-right can legitimately be represented by its pro-

¹³⁹ “Plain Speaking,” *An Phoblacht*, October 1971.

¹⁴⁰ *Republican News*, January–February 1971.

¹⁴¹ *Republican News*, June 1971.

¹⁴² David O’Connell in interview with Mary Holland for ITN’s “Weekend World,” repr. in *Republican News*, November 30, 1974.

¹⁴³ Brownie [Gerry Adams], “The Republic: A Reality,” *Republican News*, October 29, 1975.

visional trustees. A leaflet issued by the Provisionals in the summer of 1972 gave expression to this perspective: "We are the Provisionals, Provisional until . . . the Irish people can decide who is to become their final representative."¹⁴⁴

The violence of the Provisionals was based on the theory of provisional democracy. Provisional democracy derives its authority from the elusive and allegedly democratic status of the sovereign bearer of the popular will. Divisive attempts to represent the people's will have occasioned innumerable political conflicts since 1789. But while the idea of democratic legitimacy has proved endlessly controversial, it has nonetheless survived by promising to judge between rival types of regime. That promise has often culminated in conflict. While democracy has persisted as a dominant means of justification, populations have divided on the content of its normative appeal. Norms incite self-righteousness, and self-righteousness is bloody minded. Historians and political analysts need to appreciate the decisive role that legitimating ideologies play in determining social action and, by implication, in driving political conflict. Proper attention to the practical significance of principles of action will help to save us from resorting to anachronistic explanations and from dependence on metaphysical notions like "national cultures" and "ethnic groups."

VI. CONCLUSION

J. G. A. Pocock made the important observation that the political discourse of a period cannot be reduced to a single idiom; politics, institutions, movements, and individuals all justify their behavior in assorted forms of speech.¹⁴⁵ The history of modern Ireland bears out this insight. The principles of legitimation invoked in the service of political action have been drawn from diverse ideological registers.¹⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the idea of democracy has played a decisive role, presiding over successive contests as a dominant presence. If we are to stand any chance of properly understanding the conflict in Northern Ireland, we need to begin by standing back and critically assessing our inherited frameworks of interpretation and then proceed to explore the overriding norms in terms of which rival political programs have been justified.

¹⁴⁴ UKNA, FCO 87/3: Leaflet issued by "Óglaigh na hÉireann B Coy 2BN," Ballymurphy, June 26, 1972.

¹⁴⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, "The Concept of a Language and the *Metier d'Historien*: Some Considerations on Practice" (1987), in *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge, 2009).

¹⁴⁶ This point is implicit throughout Oliver MacDonagh's pioneering *Ireland: The Union and Its Aftermath* (London, 1977), although the general approach predates the methods of more recent intellectual history.

The recent Troubles are appropriately seen in the context of a longer twentieth-century struggle, while the revolutionary decade of 1912–23 is best examined in the light of the impact of democracy on the stability of the Union.¹⁴⁷ The history of Ireland since the sixteenth century has been the story not of a single contest but of a series of distinguishable conflicts. Its most recent phase, since the Act of Union, has involved a struggle over the legacy of democracy: a conflict of interpretation over what democracy has meant and how it ought to be applied in practice.

In this sense, the Easter “Proclamation” of 1916 did not represent a complete rupture; rather, it was a new interpretation of an established idiom. “We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible,” the Proclamation declares. It is on the basis of this claim of a fundamental right that the document proclaims “the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State.”¹⁴⁸ F. S. L. Lyons, who remains one of the most outstanding postwar Irish historians, took this document to be “essentially historical in conception,” but this interpretation is surely mistaken.¹⁴⁹ Without a doubt, a range of idioms populate the founding document of the republic, but its central claim turns less on specific “historical” statements than on an assertion of historic right: the democratic right of the Irish people to form a state. This assertion depended on the juridical fiction of a historically continuous democratic persona, but what it justified was the principle of popular sovereignty. Pending the realization of this popular right, the Proclamation asserts, Irish democracy can be provisionally represented by its militant guardians.¹⁵⁰

Conflict in modern Ireland is the child of democratic ideas formulated during the period of the French Revolution out of the materials of enlightenment thought.¹⁵¹ This is to claim not that disembodied concepts mysteriously caused the collision but that positions have been justified in terms of a shared norm of democracy whose application has been subject to radically opposing interpretations. A properly historical appreciation of this diversity of understandings obliges us to recover the significance of the various components of modern democracy—suffrage, parties, representation, equality, and popular

¹⁴⁷ For this periodization, see Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity, 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007). For the role of wider revolutionary and democratic ideas and processes after 1886, see Peter Hart, “A New Revolutionary History,” in *The I. R. A. at War*; Bill Kissane, *The Politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford, 2005); Matthew Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882–1916* (Woodbridge, 2006).

¹⁴⁸ “Poblacht Na h-Eireann: The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland” (Dublin, 1916), par. 3.

¹⁴⁹ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, 2nd ed. (London, 1973), 370.

¹⁵⁰ “Poblacht Na h-Eireann,” par. 5.

¹⁵¹ See Richard Bourke, “Enlightenment, Revolution, and Democracy,” *Constellations* 15, no. 1 (March 2008): 10–32.

sovereignty—and to examine how these elements have been combined in practice. This will help us to deepen our understanding of political conflict by showing how legitimating norms operate under conditions of a shifting balance of power. We need to understand the relevant schemes of legitimation in relation to the forms of power they seek to justify or condemn. The ideal of cultural pluralism exhorted in so much modern and contemporary historiography occludes the hard fact that plurality can only prosper under favorable political conditions.¹⁵² The Irish government, for example, professed a commitment to “inclusivity” from the earliest days of the Troubles.¹⁵³ But the question remained of who was to control the terms of that inclusion. This raised the controversial topics of electoral politics and democratic legitimacy, reviving in turn the problem of the relationship between them and threatening the disputants with the prospect of civil war.

In both the early and the later decades of the twentieth century, conflict in the Balkans revolved around democratic legitimacy, yet this was packaged as a case of either “primitive” or “cultural” collision. There is a democratic dimension to disaffection in contemporary Iraq, but civil unrest is usually ascribed to “ethnic” rage. These particular examples point to a general trend: in the face of violent upheaval, attempts at explanation tend to become abstract and even mystified. In this vein, many widely publicized conflicts in the twenty-first century are accounted for in terms of religious hatred, although the meaning of religious hostility is rarely explained concretely. Modern conflicts involve the mobilization of principles and the organization of ideological preferences. Despite this, insufficient attention is paid to the history of ideas in understanding the process of polarization. Recovering “ideas” in this context means tracing forms of legitimation. By focusing on the case of Northern Ireland, the purpose of this article has been to illustrate the benefits that can be derived from an examination of legitimating principles in achieving a better understanding of sectarian animosity.

¹⁵² The ideal is exemplified by Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2006).

¹⁵³ RINA, 2002/8/76: Extract from Presidential Address to Árd Fheis by Lynch, RDS, 1971.