

**Nationalism and Northern Ireland:  
A Rejoinder to Ian McBride on “Ethnicity and Conflict”**

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ABSTRACT: The concept of “Ethnicity” continues to enjoy some currency in the historical and social science literature. However, the cogency of the idea remains disputed. First coming to prominence in the 1980s, the term is often used to depict the character of social relations in the context of nationalist conflicts over sovereignty. The case of Northern Ireland presents a paradigmatic example. This article is a rejoinder to Ian McBride’s contention that my scepticism about the notion lacks justification. In response, I show that, in the context of so-called ethnic conflict over the state, “ethnicity” in effect means nationality. I further claim that the nation state is a successor to the dynastic state: it refers to a state that belongs to its people or nation. In clarifying the meaning of this arrangement, the article brings out the extent to which a nation is a juridical rather than empirical category. More specifically, it derives from the notion of corporate personality in law. For this reason, its retrospective integrity is a matter of fabrication, depending on the fiction of ancestral continuity. At the same time, its future-oriented cohesiveness means that it must be invested with a unifying will. I conclude that the legitimacy of a nation state rests on its democratic will, whose coherence is expressed in the action of its government.

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, Conflict, Nationalism, Democracy, Northern Ireland

I: Introduction

In an article on “Ethnicity and Conflict” in Northern Ireland, Ian McBride has drawn a distinction between three styles of argument: the polemical, the philosophical and the historical.<sup>1</sup> McBride’s aim is to specify the nature of the “Troubles” by privileging the historical over the other two. As most readers will know, the “Troubles” is a euphemistic description of the disturbances which raged in the region, roughly between 1968 and 1998. At that time, the population of the territory faced a state of civil war with the confrontation managed by a British military occupation. Given the potential scale of the contest, and the intensity of feeling invested in the outcome, generations of scholars have sought to explain the nature of what occurred. For McBride, the two main protagonists in the collision were divided in their allegiance. They were also, he thinks, opposed in their religious affiliations. It is important to make clear at the outset of my response that I accept both these assertions. Nonetheless, despite this overlap, McBride’s arguments are directed against my own research. He believes that my contribution has been polemical and philosophical without being historical enough. This combination of alleged deficiencies has led to “misrepresentations” on my part which McBride

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict: The Northern Ireland Troubles,” *Journal of British History*, First View Online, 3 August 2023, pp 1–22.

is keen to expose. My purpose in what follows is to correct misunderstandings and to justify the import of my original intervention.

McBride's article is a mixture of refutation and attack. He has in his sights two historians in the field, Simon Prince and me. In academic terms, Prince belongs to a younger generation of historians who developed an interest in the Troubles in the aftermath of the conflict when the field was still dominated by figures who were formed in the late 1960s. On the other hand, McBride, like me, is a member of an intermediary generation who came to political consciousness in the 1980s: between the Hunger Strikes (1981) and the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985). Each of these generations faced different pressures. McBride himself has written incisively about this subject.<sup>2</sup> Over a decade ago, he correctly pointed out that the pursuit of research "in the shadow of the gunman" posed serious challenges to the norms of academic conduct. Acknowledging the reality of pervasive pressure, McBride has nonetheless generally been inclined to vindicate the record of a number of historians sometimes accused of ideological bias.<sup>3</sup> This largely means historians in the generation above him – the generation that substantially shaped the debate and exercised patronage relating to positions and publications. Their influence had not diminished when Prince came on the scene, but the persuasiveness of their arguments had.

In 2018 Prince published an article in the *Journal of British Studies* titled "Against Ethnicity: Democracy, Equality and the Northern Irish Conflict."<sup>4</sup> The article offered a review of the literature on civil conflict and adopted a sceptical attitude to some of its core commitments. Above all, as his title makes clear, Prince doubted the framing of the conflict in "ethnic" terms. As I read him, his goal was to open up the field to new forms of inquiry by questioning older conceptual schemes. Partly building on my work, he was advocating a fresh look that was less dependent on modes of analysis which Irish historians had picked up from the sociological study of nationalism.<sup>5</sup> McBride now questions the benefits associated with the new departure and urges a return to earlier ideas. In the pages that follow, I uphold the spirit of

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<sup>2</sup> Ian McBride, "The Shadow of the Gunman: Irish Historians and the IRA," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46: 3 (2011), pp. 686–710.

<sup>3</sup> Ian McBride, "The Peter Hart Affair in Perspective: History, Ideology and the Irish Revolution," *The Historical Journal*, 61:1 (2018), pp. 249–71; Ian McBride, "Ireland's History Troubles," *Field Day Review*, 3 (2007), pp. 205–13.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Prince, "Against Ethnicity: Democracy, Equality and the Northern Irish Conflict," *Journal of British Studies*, 57: 4 (2018), pp. 783–811.

<sup>5</sup> Sociological theories are variously explored and canvassed in Tom Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan, 2006).

open inquiry as well as the need for historical revision. I maintain that academic criticism should not be confused with polemic. I also defend the role of philosophical analysis in attempts to advance historical understanding. Finally, I renew my sceptical challenge to the cogency of “ethnicity” as a tool for explaining the impact of nationalism in Northern Ireland.

## II: History and Philosophy

A philosophical treatment and a polemical intervention are plainly polar opposites. Despite this, McBride is intent on suggesting that I have engaged in both. Philosophy proceeds by reasoning about ideas whereas polemic seeks to advance a partisan cause. Analysis is the standard method of philosophical study. It identifies and differentiates concepts, and thereby refines their usage. Without some such undertaking, all departments of inquiry would soon become confused. Much like every other branch of research, history depends on this kind of cleaning-up operation. Historical revision involves interrogating suspect conceptions. New evidence is weighed, but old concepts are also challenged. Research cannot surrender either activity. So, whilst I agree with McBride that academic study must not be polemical, I reject the notion that history and philosophy are opposed. For example, his own dispute with me relies on philosophical analysis. Even though his concepts stem from anthropology and sociology, his aim is to sift and justify their employment. Chief amongst the tools he uses is the category of an “ethnic” group. If scholarship is to draw on this conception for its explanatory power, then I fully agree it is necessary to clarify what it means. Here, again, there is no quarrel between McBride and me. My interests are indeed philosophical and historical, but they relate to a field that is saturated with polemic.

Polemic has surrounded the response of historians to the Troubles since, from the start, the majority self-consciously pitted themselves against revolutionary republicanism. A number of these went on to challenge underlying assumptions which had percolated more widely into popular attitudes.<sup>6</sup> The leading, and by far the ablest, opponent of militant republicanism in Ireland was the diplomat and writer Conor Cruise O’Brien.<sup>7</sup> His criticisms targeted widespread

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<sup>6</sup> John A. Murphy, “Further Reflections on Irish Nationalism,” *The Crane Bag*, 2: 1/2 (1978), pp. 156–63; Hugh F. Kearney, “Visions and Revisions: Views of Irish History,” *The Irish Review*, 27 (Summer 2001), pp. 113–20. For discussion see John M. Regan, “Southern Irish Nationalism as a Historical Problem,” *The Historical Journal*, 50: 1 (March 2007), pp. 197–223.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion, see Richard Bourke, “Plague Man: The Crusader in Conor Cruise O’Brien,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 March 2009, pp. 13–14; Diarmuid Whelan, *Conor Cruise O’Brien: Violent Notions* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009); Margaret O’Callaghan, “Conor Cruise O’Brien and the Northern Ireland Conflict: Formulating a Revisionist Position,” *Irish Political Studies*, 33: 2 (2018), pp. 221–31; Stephen Kelly, “‘I Was Altogether Out of Tune with my Colleagues’: Conor Cruise O’Brien and Northern Ireland, 1969–77,” *Irish Historical Studies*, 45: 167 (2021), pp. 101–21.

nationalist ideas as well as the specific doctrines of the Provisional IRA. His most defiant provocation lay in the challenge he mounted against residual irredentism within influential sections of opinion in the Irish state. As his credit among the electorate fell, his reputation among historians rose. There is no disputing the potency of O'Brien's original offensive, particularly as formulated in his 1972 classic, *States of Ireland*.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, his depiction of his opponents became ever more parodic, and these caricatures steadily spread among an admiring group of historians, most prominently in the work of Donald Akenson, Richard English and Roy Foster.<sup>9</sup>

In this way, historiography became infused with partisanship. Nonetheless, the dispute between McBride and myself is not party-political. We are both happy to question spurious assumptions associated with Irish nationalism, above all the more specious tenets entertained by republican insurgents. Our disagreement concerns the implications of this shared scepticism. McBride is motivated to vindicate an Ulster Protestant identity. In the past, he has rightly defended its integrity along with its complex character.<sup>10</sup> Armed with this commitment, his aim is to secure community rights by appeal to the notion of ethnicity. As he sees the matter, traditional Irish nationalism disregarded the claims of Protestants by seeking to subsume them under a single ethnic umbrella.<sup>11</sup> This led him to advocate for an Ulster-British ethnicity. From my perspective, he is right about the presumptuousness of Irish nationalist pretensions. However, he supports his cause by resort to incoherent principles. This can be illustrated by the fact that Northern Protestants might retain their freestanding "identity" under any liberal regime, for example as a constituency within a united Ireland. This, however, would not secure them the arrangements that they seek. The case of Northern Catholics can be used to demonstrate the point. Even after partition most still saw themselves as Irish.<sup>12</sup> Then, under the Good Friday Agreement, they acquired the right of naturalisation.<sup>13</sup> Noting this development, various commentators believe that the conflict was solved by a new conception

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<sup>8</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London: Hutchinson, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Donald Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 2 vols.; Richard English and Joseph Morrison Skelly eds., *Ideas Matter: Essays in Honour of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1998); R. F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, 1970–2000* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Ian McBride, "Ulster and the British Problem" in Richard English and Graham Walker eds., *Unionism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> McBride, "Ethnicity and Conflict," p. 13, on "the standard nationalist view that Ulster unionism was a superficial product of elite manipulation."

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rose, *The United Kingdom as a Multinational State* (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde Occasional Papers, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> This is the "birthright" protection clause contained in the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement. See *An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland*, Cm 3883 (10 April 1998), "Constitutional Issues," 1 (VI).

of identity.<sup>14</sup> According to this view, erstwhile antagonists resolved to cohabit as distinct ethnicities. Citizens in Northern Ireland could declare as “Irish,” “British” or “both,” just as some Australians might regard themselves as Irish yet lack electoral rights in Ireland. This shows that cultural affiliation, and even naturalisation, do not in themselves confer full political rights of citizenship.

It can be seen from this that what is often championed as a “flexible” interpretation of ethnicity was not responsible for solving the Northern Ireland conflict. For a start, the contest has been muted but not extinguished. The struggle over sovereignty is patently ongoing, with both sides seeking to finalise the issue of statehood rather than revise the contours of their identity. As a matter of fact, identity is confined to the following role: the protagonists “identify” with rival jurisdictions. As will become clear, even this shared allegiance does not give rise to ethnic unity. In the meantime, I accept with McBride the validity of the opposing identifications. However, we disagree on how the legitimacy of each is to be secured. McBride supposes that national rights are an objective matter of ethnic identity, vindicated by appeal to ancestral membership. He seems to think that ethnic cohesion just naturally emerges. He also believes that group integrity is transmitted down the generations – a “nation through the centuries,” in effect.<sup>15</sup> In opposition to this, I contend that nationality is a claim rather than a fact. Even its establishment under international law depends on recognition rather than self-evidence.<sup>16</sup> After the demise of dynastic regimes in early modern Europe, national claims were justified by appeal to prevailing political norms. In broad terms, since the nineteenth century, the relevant norms have tended to be democratic in character.<sup>17</sup> However, the problem has been that democratic ideals are open to contestation, as is apparent in many established democracies today.

McBride overlooks these more complicated considerations by narrowing his sights and reducing his ambition. He begins by insisting that a more nuanced treatment will miss the force of the ethnic story. He thinks that scholars fail to appreciate the potency of his preferred outlook

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Fintan O’Toole, “Brexit’s Irish Question,” *New York Review of Books*, 28 September 2017. For a more balanced and substantial treatment, see John Tonge, “From Sunningdale to the Good Friday Agreement: Creating Devolved Government in Northern Ireland,” *Contemporary British History*, 14: 3 (Autumn 2000), pp. 39–60.

<sup>15</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 1n2. The phrase in quotation marks comes from a chapter title in Frank Gallagher, *The Indivisible Island: The Story of the Partition of Ireland* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1957), cited in McBride, “Ireland’s History Troubles,” p. 210.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Kelsen, “Recognition in International Law,” *American Journal of International Law*, 35: 4 (October 1941), pp. 605–17; Hersch Lauterpacht, *Recognition in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947).

<sup>17</sup> Alfred Cobban, *The Nation State and National Self-Determination* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970).

because they expect the idea of ethnicity to have explanatory power whereas it only pretends to stand as a “description” of the situation.<sup>18</sup> In this vein, McBride proposes that the Troubles should just be *characterised* as ethnic. This, he insists, is different from giving a “causal” account.<sup>19</sup> However, it is clear that both activities are intimately related. To describe a cultural phenomenon is certainly a distinct activity but it often forms part of the aim to provide a causal take on its place in society. This applies to the standard social categories we encounter – such as class, race, gender, the family and the economy. Likewise, in the context of the current argument, it is obvious that to describe a conflict as ethnic is by any common-sense reckoning to point to ethnicity as a cause. Ultimately, McBride in effect admits that he believes this himself: he claims that Syria is divided *because* of ethnic strife.<sup>20</sup> In general, we do not simply want to know what various entities *are*; we also want to understand how they function or what they *do*. This latter ambition is typical of historical explanations which tend to focus on why things happen rather than simply on what they are like.<sup>21</sup>

In pursuing his nominally descriptive agenda, McBride is inclined to query my reference to “proper” historical study. However, I suggest that there are indeed standards which underpin the discipline. Some of these are of course disputed, but still others are widely accepted. Two, in particular, stand out. First, most historians reject teleological explanations, even if they commonly fall foul of their own injunctions. Second, historians tend to question the resort to disembodied abstractions to account for individual events. The most famous case of such a resort is supplied by the popular image of Hegel’s *Geist*.<sup>22</sup> When Hegel says that “Spirit” has determined a given shape of the world, the historian will naturally ask what this means. That is, to make sense of causal claims we tend to look for causal relations. This usually involves a search for the particulars that make up abstract collectivities like “nation,” “class” or “community.” We strive to resolve abstract generalities into their aggregate parts. It is only on that basis that we can discover their causal efficacy. McBride suspects the veracity of “mechanistic” explanations.<sup>23</sup> But a “mechanism” is merely a causal account without a covering law.<sup>24</sup> Mechanisms are the basic units of historical accounting.

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<sup>18</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>21</sup> For the best account of the role of “description” in social science, see W. G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983–1997), 3 vols., I, chaps. 7–13.

<sup>22</sup> Though see the corrective interpretation in Terry Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 17n97.

<sup>24</sup> For the role of general laws in history, see Carl Gustav Hempel “The Function of General Laws in History,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 39: 2 (January 1942), pp. 35–48. For an overarching criticism of the assumption,

For instance, if it is claimed that “capitalism” has determined the rise of “democracy,” then the historian will separate out the elements of the economic formation and trace their role in causing the emergence of the political entity. Recognising the pervasiveness of this intellectual operation, J.H. Hexter saw the historian’s craft as including the practice of “splitting.” As is well known, he contrasted this exercise with the activity of “lumping.”<sup>25</sup> When faced with a presumptively indeterminate agent like *Geist*, we try to split it up into its component parts the better to uncover an explanatory mechanism. If the specified parts are found to lack any causal relevance, then the historical explanation in effect fails. Implicitly operating with this kind of reasoning, McBride suggests that my reliance on democracy in explaining the Troubles is overblown. Far more important, he claims, is the role of ethnicity in the conflict. In order to evaluate these rival claims, we need to take a closer look at what is contained in these respective concepts.

### III: Democracy

McBride complains that I approach my material *as* an intellectual historian.<sup>26</sup> From what has been said by me so far, this depiction will most likely seem right. It is, nonetheless, a simplification. My first work on the Troubles took the form of narrative history. Its focus was for the most part on political events. Its source base comprised an array of public records along with media reporting, activist journalism, pamphlet literature and interviews.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding this conventional cache of materials, I also approached the subject with a view to challenging standard assumptions.<sup>28</sup> That involved critically assessing existing explanatory models. This certainly gave my work a philosophical dimension that was perhaps uncommon in the historiography. In questioning received academic idioms, I concentrated on the ideas used by the historic actors themselves. Insofar as they accept the legitimacy of these procedures, every historian is to some extent an “intellectual” historian. When I originally set about researching Northern Ireland, a familiar trope about the Troubles was that it involved

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see Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behaviour: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> J.H. Hexter, “The Burden of Proof,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 October 1975, pp. 2–4.

<sup>26</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Bourke, *Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas* (2003) (London: Pimlico, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Howe, “Complex Thoughts in Troubled Times,” *Independent*, 12 September 2003; Steven King, “Agreement and Disagreement,” *The Irish Times*, 3 January 2004; Arthur Aughey, “The Democratic Troubles,” *Prospect Magazine*, 20 February 2004; Paul Arthur, “Ireland: Ideas of War and Thoughts of Peace,” *Political Quarterly*, 75:4 (October 2004), pp. 429–31; Iain Fergusson, “Peace in Ireland,” *Open Democracy*, 3 October 2005; Bill Kissane, “Power Sharing as a Form of Democracy,” *The Review of Politics*, 68 (2006), pp. 663–74; James Stafford, “Trajectories of Union,” *Renewal*, 20:2–3 (2012) pp. 134–38.

some kind of reversion to primitive patterns of behaviour. For this reason, solidarity among the protagonists was regularly described as “tribal.” In the same idiom, reactions were often depicted as purely “visceral.” Equally, the quarrels on all sides were presented as “atavistic.”<sup>29</sup> Given these attributed characteristics, in political speech, the media and academic literature alike, the parties in Northern Ireland were advised to modernise themselves. It was said that they needed to embrace the value of democracy.

In *Peace in Ireland*, I argued that this injunction was naïve and problematic. It was pretty much like preaching toleration to the intolerant without explaining why toleration had broken down. It was all very well to urge certain values on the population, but the fact was that they were already divided over the meaning of those values. Democracy was an obvious case in point. This value is not a simple but a complex norm. It is compounded of a number of constitutive elements, each with its own specific history. Particularly important components are its theory of the state, its approach to representation, its conception of government, and its vision of constitutional design. My argument was that republicans and unionists were divided in how they sought to combine these factors. This led to conflict over how a system of responsible government could be reconciled with possible configurations of the state.

Notwithstanding this exercise in elucidation, leading historians still recycled the familiar line. A good example is Roy Foster’s 2007 book, *Luck and the Irish*, published with a chapter on the Northern Ireland crisis headed “Big, Mad Children: The South and the North.” The title itself was a lofty provocation, *de haut en bas*. Here, once again, a trove of O’Brienite expressions substituted historico-philosophical analysis. Without pause for reflection, the situation in Northern Ireland was described in terms of “ancient antagonism over national and religious identities.”<sup>30</sup> But how was the struggle “ancient,” and how did these “identities” function? In line with these assumptions, the Provisionals were condemned for their “atavistic nationalism.” In general, the “ethnic antagonisms of the North’s divided society” were foregrounded.<sup>31</sup> But the validity of such descriptions was taken for granted. Foster offered suggestive and evocative statements, but they lacked conceptual rigour and explanatory power. For a start, the terms of discussion enjoyed a political and journalistic provenance. They were designed to apportion blame rather than account for behaviour.

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<sup>29</sup> For a range of illustrations see Richard Bourke, “*Antigone* and After: ‘Ethnic’ Conflict in Historical Perspective,” *Field Day Review*, 2 (2006), pp. 170–96; Richard Bourke, “Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles,” *Journal of Modern History*, 83: 3 (2011), pp. 544–78.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, *Luck and the Irish*, p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 111.



In rejecting this charged vocabulary, my objective was to focus on the self-understanding of the main parties concerned. This meant taking seriously their language and their worldviews. The aim was to give each rival perspective its due without seeking to justify any of them. In the brutally combative atmosphere of the time, it was considered bad form to ascribe ideas to paramilitaries. But most today would acknowledge that terrorists have thoughts, whatever we think of the content of their creeds.<sup>32</sup> Equally, back then, to highlight the contentiousness of democratic doctrines was regarded as outrageous, while lately the divisive character of democracy is widely observed.<sup>33</sup> Until quite recently, McBride himself was open to an exacting approach. For example, in 2011 he generously wrote that *Peace in Ireland* offered the “best account of Provisional politics” available.<sup>34</sup> Later he maintained that this same work provided “the most sophisticated analysis of republican and unionist ideological positions, both of which appeal to ‘democracy’ for legitimacy.”<sup>35</sup> In citing these views, my goal is not to advertise McBride’s earlier approval, but simply to show that his assessments are inconsistent. Having once been open to revising older battle-line assumptions, he now wants to deny a significant role for democracy on the grounds that Northern Ireland “deviates” from Western norms despite being “institutionally” similar.<sup>36</sup> Democracy, he concludes, cannot account for the deviation. Only “ethnic” divisions can.

Yet even this rebuttal is erratic. At times McBride claims that democracy is relevant – just not as relevant as other factors. He ascribes to me the view that it was a “causal condition” of behaviour.<sup>37</sup> This, I agree, is exactly my view: not that it was a trigger, but that it was a precondition of strife. Even when confronted with this qualification, popular historians want the conflagration to have been about powerfully moving emotions. They are of course right that masses of population are motivated by strong feelings. But affect without content is necessarily blind. The meaning of an emotion is determined by its cognitive content.<sup>38</sup> It follows that the passions are shaped by their ruling ideas. Correspondingly, political sentiments are formed by the doctrines of the age. For this reason, it should come as no surprise that the

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<sup>32</sup> See Martyn Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West: A History of Enmity and Engagement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London: Profile, 2018); Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> McBride, “Shadow of the Gunman,” p. 701n56.

<sup>35</sup> Ian McBride, “Dealing with the Past: Historians and the Northern Ireland Conflict” (2017), p. 5n11. Available online at: [https://www.academia.edu/34292402/McBride\\_Dealing\\_with\\_the\\_Past\\_2017\\_pdf](https://www.academia.edu/34292402/McBride_Dealing_with_the_Past_2017_pdf). Accessed 14 August 2023.

<sup>36</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> This was the view of both Aristotle and Kant, but it has more recently been elaborated in Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

adversaries in Northern Ireland justified their beliefs by reference to competing aspects of democracy. They had opposing views of what made up a democratic state. This outcome is hardly incomprehensible. After all, notwithstanding McBride's view that Northern Ireland was somehow "institutionally" typical, it was in fact a single party regime. It was governed from 1920 until 1972 under a system of majority rule, but one in which the governing party never lost elections. This was defended by unionists as perfectly democratic and opposed by so-called nationalists as an affront to accountability.<sup>39</sup> McBride contends that this consideration is relatively insignificant. I believe, on the contrary, that it is pivotal.

It was of course well known that "majoritarianism" posed a problem.<sup>40</sup> Building on this consensus, my ambition was to connect it to a fuller conception of democracy. This meant relating the electoral system to ideas of sovereignty, representation and statehood. McBride oscillates between treating my points as obvious and dismissing them as idiosyncratic. My hope, in any case, was to arrive at deeper insight. This, I believed, would reveal why the problem had seemed intractable. In support of my hypothesis, I would emphasise that, when a settlement came, the protagonists had not changed what McBride calls their "ethnic sentiments," but they did change their views of democratic legitimacy and popular representation. Finally, I was keen to illuminate the vulnerabilities of democracy. For me, far from being a casual rhetorical counter it is a complex system of government. While its components can fit together, they can also come apart.

#### IV: Ethnicity

For reasons that are perfectly understandable, it matters deeply to McBride to regard the Troubles as the product of an ethnic cleavage. As already noted, this is to some extent because he considers himself a member of one such ethnic group: the Protestants of Ulster.<sup>41</sup> But while his commitment to the ethnic thesis is partly based on personal loyalty, it is also informed by the theoretical literature. In fact, it is arguable that the theory helped to shape the attitude. Important for him in this context is the work of Anthony D. Smith.<sup>42</sup> Smith's career was consumed by an attempt to refine the typology of ethnicity. In assorted works he proposed that

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<sup>39</sup> I say "so-called" because Catholics in Northern Ireland (usually dubbed nationalists) are no more nationalist than Protestants (most of whom are unionists).

<sup>40</sup> Arend Lijphart, "The Framework Document on Northern Ireland and the Theory of Power-Sharing," *Government and Opposition*, 31: 3 (July 1996), pp. 267–74.

<sup>41</sup> Ian McBride and Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, "Round Table: Decolonising Irish History? Possibilities, Challenges, Practices," *Irish Historical Studies*, 45: 168 (2021), pp. 303–32, at 314.

<sup>42</sup> McBride, "Ulster and the British Problem," p. 15; Ian McBride, *The Siege of Derry in Ulster Protestant Mythology* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), p. 79; Ian McBride, "Ethnicity and Conflict," pp. 4n19, 8–9.

ethnic groups formed inter-generational identities.<sup>43</sup> On that basis, one could explain the persistence over time of specified peoples: the ancient Egyptians, the Boeotians, the Assyrians, the Arabs and the Jews. According to Smith, what formed these populations into cohesive groups was their “myths of common ancestry.”<sup>44</sup> The same, he thought, applied to modern nationalities. McBride started his scholarly career by subscribing to Smith’s ideas and is now resistant to reconsidering their profitability. His most recent defence involves an attempt to supplement his original conviction with assorted academic insights gathered from the political and social science literatures. But despite this expanded intellectual horizon, from which Irish history only stands to benefit, the basic conceptual architecture remains the same, informed by Smith’s ideas about ethnic solidarity. Standing on this ground, McBride charges me with refusing to grant Smith’s concepts any “analytical utility.”<sup>45</sup> Now, although these are not my words, it is true that I doubt the value of such an elastic concept, whose applicability spans the gamut of world history. Given its capacious malleability, I am inclined to question its ability to reveal the dynamics of modern conflicts.

In his attempt to justify its usage, McBride reveals numerous problems. For one, he believes his core idea “escapes precise definition.”<sup>46</sup> Equally, he declines to distinguish its meaning from other relevant concepts: “The differences between ‘ethnic’, ‘communal’, and ‘national’ do not matter for the purposes of this article.”<sup>47</sup> However, if it makes no difference to McBride whether a given group is depicted in communal, national or ethnic terms, then he could substitute the notion of ethnicity cost free with either of the other equally applicable terms. On his own principles, instead of referring to an “ethnic community,” as he does, he could, as he concedes, replace the phrase with the word “community.”<sup>48</sup> I would argue that specifying one’s categories represents a gain. One frequently finds the term “ethnic” used as a suffix in the literature – “ethno-national,” “ethno-religious” – without much light being thrown on what the qualification is supposed to reveal. Although the word appears as a mantra, it brings no supplementary insight. Given the resulting opacity, one might usefully put a version of the question McBride put to me back to him: since ethnic groups have existed in every society known to man, why is it that they only lead to conflict under special conditions? The simple fact of ethnicity, it seems, cannot explain the appearance of conflict. McBride’s default position

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<sup>43</sup> Smith published roughly thirteen monographs on the subject.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1n2.

<sup>48</sup> For the reference to “ethnic community,” see *ibid.*, p. 17.

is that while it cannot exactly account for, it can at least characterise, the conflict. I take this as a concession that it cannot actually explain. It pretends to describe without having to analyse.

But my reticence about ethnicity runs deeper still. McBride applies the term to various periods of Irish history, for instance during the struggles of the 1790s.<sup>49</sup> One problem with this approach is that the word lacked stable currency across this succession of epochs. Although McBride provides some early twentieth-century references, it needs to be remembered that even as late as the 1960s the expression was still fairly infrequent. It was in the 1980s that its usage really took off.<sup>50</sup> The term “ethnic” derives from *ethnos*, the Greek word for “a race of people.”<sup>51</sup> In the New Testament it referred to denominations other than Jews and Christians, and so in early modern Europe it was employed as a term for paganism.<sup>52</sup> Its modern sense emerged with the rise of ethnology in the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Anthropological theories were applied to assorted tribes and races, usually understood as pre-state social structures. Ever since, ethnic and racial theories have tended to overlap.<sup>54</sup> The overlap can be confusing, since some racial theories are bio-genetic whilst others are concerned with acculturation.<sup>55</sup> Anthony Smith rejected the resort to race as an alternative to ethnicity because the former had been taken up by unsavoury Social Darwinians.<sup>56</sup> Yet the term “race” might well refer to any descent group, however delimited – just as Smith’s ethnicity could.<sup>57</sup> In that case, the words become pretty much interchangeable. This conclusion helps highlight the fact that ethnicity, like race, is prone to confusion and therefore tends to obscure rather than illuminate social phenomena. Since the 1970s, its most common meaning has referred to group identities in pluralist states.<sup>58</sup> Its significance was then extended to cover rival populations in conflict.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Isle of Slaves* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2009), p. 414.

<sup>50</sup> The evidence from assorted online Ngram searches is conclusive.

<sup>51</sup> *Greek-English Lexicon* eds. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. “ἔθνος.”

<sup>52</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. “Ethnic.”

<sup>53</sup> Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>54</sup> As per the journal, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, founded in 1978.

<sup>55</sup> For a detailed historical investigation, see Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>57</sup> As, for example, in Pierre L. van den Berghe, *Race and Ethnicity* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

<sup>58</sup> Influential here have been studies like Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); Michael Walzer et al., *The Politics of Ethnicity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1990).

<sup>59</sup> For example, in Milton J. Esman ed., *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977); Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985).

Corresponding to this range of reference, its meaning in McBride is difficult to determine. On the one hand it is used to delimit populations across great tracts of time, but on the other it simply means “an aspect of a relationship” which is then characterised as “fluid, over-lapping, and sometimes arbitrary.”<sup>60</sup> This doesn’t inspire confidence that the idea is sharply focused. For McBride it is an enduring vehicle for group cohesion yet also a “situational” coalition.<sup>61</sup> To bring more precision to his discussion, McBride turns to the work of the Scottish sociologist Steve Bruce, who in turn (we are told) relies “on Max Weber’s classic account.”<sup>62</sup> Yet Weber was reluctant to use the word in a modern context, concentrating his discussion first on pre-civil kinship units and then on the role of tribes (*Phylae, Curiae*) in ancient city states. In the case of the nation-state, he loses faith in its applicability. In modern regimes with societies based around a complex division of labour, he decided that the notion of ethnicity is best “abandoned”: “it is unsuitable for a really rigorous analysis.” Once we try to define our terms exactly, Weber concluded, the concept effectively “dissolves.”<sup>63</sup>

#### V: The People

When it comes to conflict over the constitution of modern states, there are even stronger reasons for avoiding such indeterminate concepts. In Northern Ireland, much like other societies beset by secessionist pressures, the contest was not a battle over the cultural attributes of the population but over the state and system of government which was to control the citizens’ lives. For that reason, I have found the language of statecraft more conducive in anatomising the nature of the conflict. Its terms derive from early modern theories of state formation. These were not concerned with either tribes or races, but with forming a *people*. The resort to “people” (*populus*) emphasised the consent-based nature of allegiance as opposed to the idea that it was a natural necessity like kinship relations.<sup>64</sup> So, one could in principle withhold one’s consent from the government of a polity whereas one had to accept the fact of lineal descent.<sup>65</sup> Viewed from this vantage point, a tribe or race was seen as a natural attribute of a group. A state, by comparison, was a voluntary association. Allegiance was based on choice rather than lineage.

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<sup>60</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 5, quoting Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 1993), and then McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 4

<sup>61</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978), 2 vols., I, p. 395.

<sup>64</sup> This is the role of the concept of a “populus,” “people” or “people” in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, Samuel Pufendorf, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

<sup>65</sup> For David W. Miller in *Queen’s Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in Historical Perspective* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978) the principle is fundamental to Ulster loyalist political thought.

I suggest the same applies to modern states today, including Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom. All kinds of "nationalists" – whether on the republican or the unionist side – might insist that they belong self-evidently to some ethnic or racial group. My question is what such beliefs can hope to explain.

Although in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries appeals to race were widespread, non-biologically based yet still racially defined communities are nonetheless hard to demarcate. For obvious reasons, the idea of biological races has proved even less appealing, not least because of the dogged research of Franz Boas and his students.<sup>66</sup> In the end, I suspect McBride would accept these points. If the occupants of the island of Ireland formed a distinct band in 1916, then why did Irish Protestants wish to separate from this cohort? McBride proposes that it is because they formed their own distinctive group. They were held together, he believes, by ties of co-belonging shaped by feelings of "common descent." Yet soon this natural unit fractured. By 1920, Northern Protestant autonomy was secured by self-determining separation from the larger Protestant population on the island as a whole. Politics divided apparent homogeneity. Erstwhile ethnic fraternities split into rival parties.

Despite McBride's professions to the contrary, I accept the potent sense of fellow feeling among Northern Protestants. It was certainly stronger in the period 1968–1998 than the ties uniting Southern nationalists in 1922–1923, when civil war divided a single "ethnicity" into two. So much for the transhistorical cohesiveness engendered by a belief in shared ancestry. Facts like this should encourage us to probe the basis and limitations of Protestant unity, just as they should for Northern or Southern Catholics. Importantly, McBride's picture of ethnic uniformity downplays crucial divisions which at other times he is happy to recognise.<sup>67</sup> He may wish to describe the most prominent cleavage in Northern Ireland in ethnic terms. However, I contend that all the divisions are political in nature. Interestingly, at one point McBride cites John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary making the same point, even though he is anxious to paint us as being at loggerheads.<sup>68</sup> In the end, as I see it, the opposing groups are elective rather than ontological in character, and so I avoid the resort to ethnic categorisation. This is not to deny the felt intensity of affiliation, or the fact that some believe it is a source of unity. But it is to deny its efficacy as a freestanding "bonding" agent, as well as its capacity to guarantee group integrity across generations.

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<sup>66</sup> Franz Boas, *Race, Language and Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1940).

<sup>67</sup> For instance, loyalist versus liberal unionist constituencies as adumbrated in McBride, "Ulster and the British Problem," p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> McBride, "Ethnicity and Conflict," p. 8.

We should be careful not to get tangled in a terminological dispute. There is no rule that should prevent McBride making use of the word ethnicity. He is free to represent either the “people” or “peoples” of Northern Ireland, or every one of their various sub-constituencies, as ethnic groups. Among unionists, for instance, in principle he is at liberty identify “ethno-devolutionists” and “ethno-integrationists.” The problem is not the word but the concept. What does the name pick out? We could all decide to settle on a new and agreed meaning. But in the absence of effective powers of linguistic legislation it is standard to resort to criticising prevailing usage when it is flawed. Accordingly, I have found it wise to shift debate from ideas of tribalism. Naturally this is not to dispute the role of policing, housing, inequality, unemployment, interfaces, flags and emblems in fomenting discontent in Northern Ireland. As McBride notes, the significance of these issues has been ably demonstrated by Niall Ó Dochartaigh and others.<sup>69</sup> But it is to argue that particular contests are framed by the larger issue.

Downplaying the bigger picture, McBride’s expressions pull us back towards the tribalist conception. He proposes that loyalty in Northern Ireland is “given.” By this he means it is not “chosen.”<sup>70</sup> This comes close to presenting allegiance as following automatically from the fact of group participation. It is a denial, in effect, of both “consent” and “self-determination.” It also departs from the letter of the Good Friday Agreement, under whose provisions citizens are entitled to select their allegiance however “they may... choose.”<sup>71</sup> Ethnicity, for McBride, follows from “birth and upbringing.”<sup>72</sup> Revealingly, he describes the social bodies he hopes to analyse as supported by “kinship” networks.<sup>73</sup> This is the language of natural affinity – of clans, bloodlines and stocks. Membership, McBride claims, “is inherited from one’s parents.” The resulting groups are denominated “communities of descent.”<sup>74</sup> However, even “descent” in McBride is an ambiguous attribution. As above, it can refer to lineage. But he also takes the phrase to mean historical descent.

As McBride knows, the most powerful invocation of historical descent as a means of conferring communal integrity derives from Edmund Burke. Recognising this, McBride has written that “Bourke is no Burkean.”<sup>75</sup> This is of course true. I am a scholar, not an advocate,

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<sup>69</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 18, drawing on Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997).

<sup>70</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> *Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland* (1998), “Constitutional Issues,” 1 (VI).

<sup>72</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ian McBride, “Bourke on Burke,” *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 32 (2017), pp. 160–64, at p. 160.

of Burke's thought. But I do not underestimate his arguments in support of dynastic succession. These were famously articulated in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by reference to "an inheritance from our forefathers."<sup>76</sup> Burke showed how national communities authorise themselves by appeal to tradition, *as if* their integrity stretched back into an immemorial past: "we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood".<sup>77</sup> But the point is it was an "image" not a literal bloodline. The myth of pedigree, Burke was claiming, sustained the idea of the state. It conferred the illusion of permanence on a political body which was in fact "composed of transitory parts."<sup>78</sup>

It is true that an impression of shared inheritance will be operative among native and immigrant populations – from refugees and economic migrants to colonists and post-imperial settlers. Modern societies are full of communities who define themselves in terms of their past. However, the idea of tradition does not result in transgenerational unity – or, in McBride's phrase, in "intergenerational groups distinguished from one another by recognizable cultural attributes."<sup>79</sup> Instead, as with republican and unionist traditions in Ireland, it leads to the invention of new folkloric beliefs. The historical profession in Ireland since 1938 has been devoted to correcting these persistent mythologies.<sup>80</sup> McBride applauds this scepticism when it is deployed against republican dogma. He is less willing to see it applied to Northern Protestants.

## VI: Nationality

McBride writes as if I dispute the reality of nationality. However, on the contrary, I acknowledge its existence but also seek to explain it. McBride thinks it is resolvable into the concept of ethnicity. This, he believes, can account for its "intergenerational" continuity. But while he asserts this truth, he also doubts it, as when he declares that ethnic identities can be unstable and circumstantial.<sup>81</sup> How can such a shape-shifting commodity give rise to an enduring identity? My answer is that nationality functions as a kind of corporate personality.<sup>82</sup> It provides a semblance of persistence through the ages. Although in each generation the

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<sup>76</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.C.D. Clark (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 181. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>79</sup> McBride, "Ethnicity and Conflict," p. 1n2.

<sup>80</sup> Ciaran Brady ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994).

<sup>81</sup> McBride, "Ethnicity and Conflict," p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> On the uses to which this notion was put in the twentieth century, see David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).



population changes, nonetheless they are represented as a united and abiding people. Normally this idea legitimises the state. However, problems with corporate nationality emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One kind of difficulty was induced by programmes of national unification, most obviously in the cases of Italy and Germany. Another was the dilemma caused by national secession, exemplified by the break-up of the British and Austro-Hungarian empires.<sup>83</sup>

These processes gave rise to the language of nationalism. That language built on earlier vocabularies concerned with state formation. When Grotius, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau thought about the civil origins of peoples, they did so with a view to defending a vision of relations between government and the governed. While they reflected on the democratic foundations of the state, they largely did so in the context of stably existing polities. The partition of Poland first raised the question of the rights of peoples to control their borders.<sup>84</sup> The debate intensified with the French Revolution, in whose shadow the first controversies about secession and annexation arose. Already in 1791, the French National Assembly sought to vindicate the rights of peoples on the basis of affirming the popular will by the use of plebiscites.<sup>85</sup> This moment was succeeded by a series of Revolutionary conquests, culminating in the attempted Napoleonic takeover of the continent, stirring national consciousness in Tyrol, Spain and Prussia. When revolutionary attitudes were later resuscitated around 1848, thinkers had to concern themselves with the democratic formation of nations opting out of larger empires just as they had earlier had to debate the nature of democratic regimes inside existing states.

A sequence of well-known thinkers strove to resolve the problem of how to decide which people was entitled to form a state. When Mazzini turned to the issue in the context of the Risorgimento, he conflated the concept of “people” with that of “nation,” and in turn associated nationalism with republican government.<sup>86</sup> Practical difficulties nevertheless persisted regarding attempts to sort out the definition of nationality. For Renan, towards the end of the century, it was a mistake to contend that national disputes could be settled by appeal

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<sup>83</sup> On secession and balkanisation, see Richard Bourke, “Nationalism, Balkanization and Democracy” in *Schleifspuren: Lesarten des 18. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Anke Fischer-Kattner et al. (Munich: Dreesbach Verlag, 2011), pp. 77–89.

<sup>84</sup> The emphasis on Poland as inaugurating the dispute appears in John Dahlberg-Acton, “Nationality” (1862) in *Essays in the History of Liberty*, ed. J. Rufus Fears (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics), 3 vols., I, p. 413.

<sup>85</sup> The strategy was first applied to Avignon and Venaissin, and then the following year to Savoy and Nice. See Cobban, *The Nation State*, p. 41.

<sup>86</sup> Giuseppe Mazzini, “On the Superiority of Representative Government” (1832) in *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Writings on Democracy, Nation Building and International Relations*, ed. Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 48.

to ethnographic criteria presuming to discriminate among ethnicities or “races.” It was in that context that he declared the nation to be “an everyday plebiscite.”<sup>87</sup> In his highly influential *Theory of the State*, Bluntschli had traced the concern with nationality to the 1840s: only since then “has the natural right of Peoples to express themselves in the State been appealed to as a practical principle.”<sup>88</sup> While this development threatened geopolitical instability, there was no easy fix because, although increasing numbers of nations now demanded independence, no method existed for reliably ascertaining the cultural identity of peoples: “We cannot therefore allow more than a relative claim to the principle of nationality.”<sup>89</sup>

Bluntschli’s reticence was an implicit criticism of the expectation associated with figures like Mill to the effect that the bounds of governments might be made to coincide with those of nationality. However, in Mill’s case, this was in part based on the notion that national sentiments were malleable. He drew evidence for this assumption from the history of the relationship between Britain and Ireland where, apart from the sole remaining obstacle of an established Protestant church, the two “races” were supposed to be drawing ever closer together such that over time it could be predicted that they would blend and become one. In Mill’s mind, before long the Irish would meld into the “completing counterpart” to British nationality.<sup>90</sup> However, the following year, Acton cast a more quizzical look over the prospects for statecraft in the era of nationalism.<sup>91</sup> He began with the idea that the proliferation of nations was an effect of the rise of democratic ideology: “The theory of nationality is involved in the democratic theory of the sovereignty of the general will.”<sup>92</sup> It was Mazzini above all others, he thought, who had inspired the wave of nationalist awakenings. But the movement traded on a misconception: namely, the idea that a people in the shape of a nation could form a natural unity. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, crystallising in the middle of the nineteenth century, some came to believe that a “national” population might constitute an automatic “unity” separate from the state.<sup>93</sup> However, for Acton, this was little more than an ethnological delusion, a damaging “fiction,” based on the notion that a race could form a unit of action independent of government.<sup>94</sup> A secessionist project might appeal to the idea of a pre-existing

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<sup>87</sup> Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” (1882) in *What is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*, ed. M.F.N. Giglioli (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 247, 261–62.

<sup>88</sup> Johann Kaspar Bluntschli, *The Theory of the State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), p. 99.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>90</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 317.

<sup>91</sup> Mill was one of his targets, as is made plain in Acton, “Nationality,” p. 422.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 424.

nation, but it could only succeed by subjecting its people to the discipline of legal and executive control.

In the Austro-Hungarian case, a bid for secession was standardly justified by appeal to self-determination. The same principle was widely invoked in support of Ireland's challenge to British sovereignty.<sup>95</sup> The demand for self-government was a petition for democracy. But how could a new democracy be vindicated? Clearly not by appeal to the existing authority of the state since that was precisely what secession was intended to undermine. In a situation of this kind, the partisans of self-government had recourse to the idea of a corporate people – a *persona ficta*, or “imagined community,” as Benedict Anderson phrased it.<sup>96</sup> A mythical community of the kind could be imagined as extending through the ages, as when Patrick Pearse proposed that Irish nationality had been “fixed and determined” since the twelfth century.<sup>97</sup> Given this transgenerational incarnation, Pearse believed that no act of will could cancel Irish nationality. Now, one may wish to question, as a matter of principle, the political soundness of Pearse's claim. Accordingly, the assertion that a people just *is* a people because it takes itself to have consistently been one might be rejected as dogma. That is to say, we might want to insist that democracy is a matter of choice and not inheritance. But, having made this point, it is important to clarify that my original intentions were analytical rather than jurisprudential. My aim was not so much to question the rights of enduring nationality as the factual plausibility of ethnic continuity uniting disparate individuals into a people across time. Nonetheless, against Pearse, I am also happy to endorse the normative claim that it should be possible to “unfix” nationality by popular choice. In other words, democracy is a matter of consent, not destiny.

McBride notes that Eamon de Valera, following Pearse, disputed this claim. So too does McBride himself. For him, a nation is a community that “qualifies” for self-government in virtue of the fact of nationality.<sup>98</sup> I have already indicated that I contest this assertion. As I see it, self-government is a function of democratic right – or, if you prefer, nationality can only be authorised on the basis of democratic legitimacy. From this perspective, the language of ethnicity obscures the stakes between these alternatives. More importantly, for the purposes of

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<sup>95</sup> Richard Bourke, “Introduction” to *The Political Thought of the Irish Revolution*, eds. Richard Bourke and Niamh Gallagher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

<sup>96</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>97</sup> Patrick Pearse, “Ghosts” (1915), in *Collected Works of Pádraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin, Cork and Belfast, 1924), p. 230.

<sup>98</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 3.

the disagreement under review, it fails to account for the relevant historical details. McBride resorts to ethnicity to account for the persistence of conflict in Ireland. Sometimes he presents the same struggle as continuing since the seventeenth century.<sup>99</sup> At other times, less grandly, he sees a stable pattern since the nineteenth century, erupting in violence in “1843, 1857, 1864, 1872, and 1886.”<sup>100</sup> Or, when pushed, he sees a single dynamic deriving from the 1880s.<sup>101</sup> But where McBride sees a lasting contest, I see a changing historical landscape. Across that expanse, on my analysis, ethnicity is not a fact but a fiction. Beneath the myth lies the reality of shifting allegiances.

## VII: Misrepresentation

McBride has suggested that I misrepresented the work of others to advance my arguments. He makes three principal allegations, and I shall respond to each in turn. First, he claims that I misread (in fact “caricatured”) the work of the Irish sociologists Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, because I ascribe to them the view that Irish identities are “seamless” across history. As a matter of fact, McBride contends, these authors are clear that “the feedback mechanisms sustaining ethnic communities *‘are not seamless’*.”<sup>102</sup> And yet an ethnic community is not a “feedback mechanism,” so McBride’s criticism misses its target. The subject of the statement he quotes is a mechanism and not a community. Confusing subject and object in the sentence, McBride mistakes Ruane and Todd’s meaning. Misreading his own citation, his argument falls short.

Second, McBride alleges that I am prone to bouts of spurious “genealogizing.” For example, he argues that I pointed to a dependence on the part of the political scientists John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary on the work of Clifford Geertz and Edward Shils. However, in fact I made no such assertion. On the contrary, I wrote in the context of a discussion of their work that “primordial ties were first theorized as neither original nor perpetual but as fundamental, or binding *ipso facto*.”<sup>103</sup> The theorists I cited were indeed Geertz and Shils. I dealt with these figures because of their centrality to their respective fields. McBride finds any reference to them unnecessarily “recherché.” But this is undermined by their indisputable significance. In any case, there is surely no problem with my approach: in criticising a theory,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 16.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 11–12.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 5. McBride’s emphasis.

<sup>103</sup> Bourke, “Languages of Conflict,” p. 565.

exposing the weaknesses apparent in the best available version is valid practice. It is, in fact, a standard gesture of scholarly charity.

Having insisted on the ethnic character of the crisis, McBride proceeds to cite McGarry and O’Leary on the political nature of the dispute. As far as I can see, this means that on this matter we are agreed. However, as McBride underlines, on the topic of “primordialism” we appear to differ. Even so, there is room for confusion here because the term itself has two meanings. It can either imply that a phenomenon has “persisted from the beginning” or that it is somehow “primary” or “fundamental.” Primordial for Geertz carried the latter sense. Ethnic sentiments for him were primal and so pre-reflective. They pointed to pre-rational forms of human attachment. According to McBride, no one else in the literature subscribes to this conception. But he is mistaken. Walker Connor, whom McBride discusses, thinks about nationalism in these terms. It is the element of emotivism which brings about solidarity.<sup>104</sup> Also relevant in this context, we find that Connor relies on the work of Shils and Geertz.<sup>105</sup> In addition, Connor is a notable source for McGarry and O’Leary.<sup>106</sup> Given these facts, it was premature of McBride to assume I had misrepresented the field. When levelling allegations of misrepresentation, it is important not in turn to misrepresent.

Finally, McBride maintains that I suggested that the Irish historian F.S.L. Lyons used the work of John Plamenatz and Friedrich Meinecke, both of whom produced well-known accounts of nationalism. But, again, I made no such claim. Instead, I wrote that the notion of “cultural” nationalism on which Lyons relied “had its origins” in earlier thinkers, which is simply true. It does not imply that Lyons directly used these figures as sources. Not only were these writers not sources in Lyons’s work, but he most likely never read, or possibly heard of, them. This highlights a general problem following from the fact that much of the literature on Ireland is conceptually derivative. If you check the footnotes of earlier generations of Irish historians, you might find references to recent contributions to sociology, but rarely evidence of familiarity with the relevant array intellectual resources. There are citations from popular specialists like Anthony D. Smith, but there is little independent scrutiny of ideas. In any case, on reading Smith’s books, one soon discovers that he himself refers to Meinecke and describes his central thesis as “valid and relevant.”<sup>107</sup> Meinecke is not so irrelevant after all.

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<sup>104</sup> Walker Connor, “Beyond Reason: The Nature of the Ethnonational Bond” in *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>105</sup> Walker Connor, “A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group” in *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>106</sup> John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 179, 187.

<sup>107</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, p. 8.

So ingrained is the deference among older Irish historians to the limited stock of authorities whom they have been taught to cite, that any objection to their assumptions is taken as a kind of impertinence. At one point, McBride lumps Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Walker Connor together as a way of upbraiding my attempts to question orthodoxy. He writes: “These scholars are among the most influential writers in the humanities and social sciences.”<sup>108</sup> It is not clear if this pronouncement is intended as a refutation. If so, it hardly works. Each of these scholars overtly disagreed with one another. It is obviously perfectly reasonable for me to contest what look like questionable claims in turn. Unlike the legal profession, academic history does not rely on binding authorities: its final court of appeal is argumentative coherence.

By McBride’s own reckoning, students of nationalism need to do better. This applies, above all else, to the case of Irish scholars. As McBride accepts, most commentators in the area “plucked concepts from neighboring fields without serious deliberation.”<sup>109</sup> Such a careless approach is hardly a model for emulation. As McBride describes it, analysts “lifted” ideas from different divisions of the humanities “without scrutinizing them.” Frank Wright is singled out by McBride as an incisive thinker about the Troubles, yet he also underlines his haphazard approach to conceptual rigour. “Theoretically,” we are told, Wright’s main thesis “drew upon an eclectic mixture of the French anthropologist René Girard, the political theorist Hannah Arendt, and Gellner’s work on nationalism, although his interest in Algeria also led him to the classic works on European colonialism by Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon.”<sup>110</sup> This is a startling list, but its members are at cross-purposes, so it cannot add up to a coherent perspective. Historians are not best guided by resort to pick-and-mix.

### VIII: Continuity and Discontinuity

I began this argument by agreeing with McBride, and I would like to close on a similar note. McBride is an able scholar with exceptional skills as a historian. I am happy to learn from his attempts to probe the character of the Northern Ireland situation. We both acknowledge that, in a general sense, the divisions on display in Ulster are a product of sectarianism. The question is how we characterise the rival sectarian groupings. McBride is right that the conflict was caused by divergent political allegiances, while also involving opposing religious affiliations. The combination is a product of a complex historical development with a number of

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<sup>108</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 8.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

distinguishable processes. These include expropriation, colonial settlement, religious persecution, dynastic struggle, the famine, land reform, demands for home rule, confessional revival and democratisation. McBride claims that various factors “overlapped and tended to reinforce one another.” This is also the main import of Ruane and Todd’s analysis as well as Wright’s account. As McBride writes, “Wright located the source of the Troubles in the failure of British statebuilding initiatives to defuse the settler-native antagonism created by the Ulster plantation.”<sup>111</sup> So, the reason for the problem is colonialism after all. Attracted by recent writing on settler societies by Duncan Bell, McBride reverts here to a pre-revisionist framework of analysis, widely invoked in the 1970s but generally rejected by scholars, most influentially by John Whyte.<sup>112</sup> Notwithstanding this turn, “Ethnic” divisions in McBride are traced to their “colonial” source.<sup>113</sup> This is to account for the recent rupture in terms of events that happened hundreds of years ago. Such an approach might be plausible if the word *source* meant either “origin” or “first cause.” But it is surely false if it is intended in the sense of “proximate cause.”

McBride’s interest is in “patterns” of conflict which have been “reproduced over time.”<sup>114</sup> It pays to dwell on the term *reproduced*. The suggestion is that the same dynamic keeps repeating itself. Concretely, this means that the antipathies caused by successive waves of plantation carried out in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries retained their integrity three hundred years later. However, nobody today is seeking largescale compensation for the colonial depredations of a bygone era. This is partly because the land reforms of the late-nineteenth century overhauled the impact of earlier seizures of estates. The complaints of one era are not the grievances of another. The people have changed, conditions have changed, and aspirations have changed. So too have the ideological assumptions which structure these aspirations. Given these hard historical facts, appeal to an enduring battle begins to look farfetched. Equally, it is unhelpful to construct a semblance of continuity by resort to the fiction of time-travelling ethnicities which perpetuate archaic forms of allegiance.

There is a tendency among some practitioners to think of history as process of simple accretion, with attitudes and events enjoying a cumulative impact without the original ingredients being transformed along the way. When viewed as merely additive, history looks

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 15–16. The view is likewise expressed in Kevin Whelan, “The Revisionist Debate in Ireland,” *Boundary 2*, 31: 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 179–205, p. 188.

<sup>112</sup> John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 177–78.

<sup>113</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 4, making use of Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>114</sup> McBride, “Ethnicity and Conflict,” p. 1.

like a mathematical sum instead of a process of ongoing revision and modification. For a nuanced picture, one does not simply add colonisation and penal legislation to mass starvation to get Fenianism. It is true that rival political loyalties substantially correspond to religious denominations in Northern Ireland today. Nonetheless, it is important not to regard the current impasse as a reprise of a Reformation conflict. For this reason, it makes no sense to think of earlier crises as still being monolithically “reproduced.” The current clash is taking place after an all but universal acceptance of the principle of toleration as a means of managing church-state relations. Moreover, it postdates the dismantling of the popery laws and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. These events recast the loyalties of the populations affected. We cannot pretend that their attachments are “the same” across the ages. Nonetheless, religion did continue to play a role in the conflict through the twentieth century. One reason for this is the extraordinary role played by the Catholic Church in Southern Ireland.

Despite the technical separation of church and state in independent Ireland, the authority of bishops undermined any liberal pretensions on the part of society and government.<sup>115</sup> This meant that Southern nationalists, depending on their proclivities, might think of their country as either essentially or accidentally Catholic, whereas Northern Protestants were bound to regard the neighbouring country as necessarily priest-ridden. For this reason, on the island as a whole, religious attitudes continued to affect political allegiances. This, however, is not an unbroken inheritance from the past. On the contrary, it is a dynamic created in the twentieth century by a process of secession. This involved carving out a Catholic democracy from a reforming yet unaccountable empire. It is an optical illusion to see Catholicism in democratic Ireland as supporting forms of allegiance which overlap with those of Jacobitism. In the end, McBride and I agree that political allegiance and religious affiliations are central. We disagree about the significance of the transformation of each. My interest is in how fictions of ethnic continuity mask ruptures in the character of popular allegiance. In the immediate aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, this amounted to a sketch for a new research agenda, freed from the controversies of the 1980s. Having reviewed McBride’s appeal to earlier paradigms, I am optimistic that a forward-looking programme still has promise.

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<sup>115</sup> Emmet Larkin, “Church, State and Nation in Modern Ireland,” *American Historical Review*, 80: 5 (December 1975), pp. 1244–76; J.H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923–1979* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).



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