This paper outlines a longitudinal study of struggles to control the public space of Belfast City Centre, the capital of Northern Ireland and a city divided by the competing political aspirations of British unionists and Irish nationalists. While the City Centre was once proscribed to nationalist groups, since 1993 nationalist groups have claimed equal use of this ‘sacred space’, once the spatial preserve of unionism. I examine this opening access of the City Centre in terms a shift from an ‘ethnocratic’ form of citizenship to one inflected by liberal multiculturalism, from one of ethnic exclusion to one informed by forms of power-sharing between nationalists and unionists. While many commentators have critiqued this form of conflict management for institutionalizing sectarianism and facilitating zero-sum conceptions of space, I argue that current strategies of creating a ‘shared space’ can be critically viewed as a successful form of liberal multiculturalism.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
centre of Belfast and the site of social centrality for unionists and nationalists for over a century. It is in this space, I argue, that relationships and definitions about citizenship are mediated. Indeed, while this space was once practically the preserve of unionist civic occasions, with nationalist events excluded by the state authorities, since 1993 nationalists have proclaimed their ‘right to the city’ by utilizing the City Centre space for cultural and political events.

Rather than uncritically celebrating this potentially inclusive definition of public space as the working out of progressive ‘right to the city’ struggles, in which public space is opened for dissent and competing identities (Mitchell, 2003), I explore this process in terms of ongoing anxieties about the management of ethnonational division in Belfast during the current period of post-conflict transition. That is, to what extent are policies which promote inclusive uses of public space in Belfast City Centre contributing to the formation of equal horizontal relationships between groups, thus enabling peace-building efforts? Or, alternatively, are group differentiated claims to public space by Irish nationalists and British unionists representative of the logic of institutional sectarianism, a dangerous politics of recognition and ‘benign apartheid’ as groups are placed in mutually exclusive cultural communities?

In this synopsis, the language of multiculturalism is ill-fitting for a divided society in which classical tensions between individual liberty and claims to group identity are inflected by competing ethnonational perspectives on the meaning of the good, the just and the right (Graham & Nash, 2006: p. 254). Compared to plural societies in which national sovereignty is not disputed, territory and space in ‘divided cities’ are subject to a politics of resistance and dominance. They are “‘frontier cities’, built on two or more mutually exclusive dreams’ (Morrissey & Gaffkin, 2006: p. 875), and the control of space reproduces the ongoing struggle over the legitimacy of the state.

Furthermore, initiating equal access to the City Centre, argue Morrissey and Gaffkin (2006), does little to challenge ethnonational animosity because conflict in deeply divided societies does not purely stem from unequal power relations. Since conflict flows from the close proximity of opposing groups, long standing animosities rooted in a perceived threat to identity are reinforced by high levels of violence (Lederach, 1997). The conflicting groups’ deep rooted fear and hatred of the other cannot be dealt with without being germane to the protagonists’ experiential realities which shape their perspectives and needs (Lederach, 1997: p. 24). This can be seen in the politics of ‘territoriality’, defined as the attempt to ‘control people, phenomena and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area’ (Sack, 1986: p. 19). Territoriality is underpinned by the presentation of ‘fear’ by ethnonational entrepreneurs, who aim to create purified and homogeneous spaces which legitimize a series of discursive activities and social group practices (Shirlow, 2003).

Through reviewing these arguments, by examining extensive historical archival and contemporary ethnographic data, 2 I argue it is possible to hesitantly conclude that, in specific instances, forms of liberal multicultural democratic citizenship are being slowly developed. This perspective diverges from many current pessimistic analyses, which argue that current methods to manage public space in Belfast are exacerbating ongoing processes of ‘Balkanization’ and zero-sum conflict over resources. Alternatively, I argue that current strategies to share the City Centre are contributing to peace-building by ameliorating feelings of inequality and the lack of recognition some identities have historically experienced. The central thesis advanced is that contrary to the idea that the recognition of competing ethnic claims for public space automatically creates conflict and a weak basis for democratic stability, it can instead be consistent with democratic mobilization and negotiation (Kymlicka, 2007: p. 277).

### Consociationalism and group rights

After three decades of civil conflict in Northern Ireland, which resulted in nearly 4000 deaths and over 40,000 serious injuries (Morrissey & Smyth, 2002: p. 3), a peace accord was signed in 1998 by the governments of the UK and the Irish Republic. The agreement, endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum, was subsequently called either the ‘Good Friday Agreement’ or the ‘Belfast Agreement’. Although the remit of the Agreement is extremely wide ranging, particular attention is drawn to provisions for political power-sharing between Irish nationalists and British unionists and ‘parity of esteem’ for the identities of both groups. In so doing, the Agreement is typically categorised as a form of ‘consociationalism’ (Clancy, 2007).

As a system to accommodate ethnonational diversity, consociationalism has come under sustained attack from a number of commentators (Graham & Nash, 2006; Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006; Taylor, 2008; Wilford & Wilson, 2006). These critics have formed a chorus to accuse consociationalism of failing to address the root causes of ethnonational conflict and even expediting inter-group conflict. The:

- specific features of the agreement, arising from its unreflectively consociational thrust and weak democratic moorings have unintended polarising effects and which have been readily exploited by those with a determined sectarian and/or paramilitary agenda (Wilford & Wilson, 2006: p. 32).

Consociationalism is blamed for this because it is seen to promote group differentiated rights in the public sphere. This process can be seen in two ways. First, in terms of cross-community power-sharing where the two ethnonational blocs are afforded a group veto. Second, the expression of group rights is seen in the call to ‘to reflect the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities [nationalist and unionist] and parity of esteem’ (The Government of the UK & The Government of Ireland, 1998: p. 2).

Although ‘parity of esteem’ is based on the European Union’s (EU) Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1995), it has generated intense debate about the consequences of group recognition in the public sphere. This is because ‘parity of esteem is generally assumed to imply the unquestionable existence of two separate traditions, which should be recognized and respected in equal terms’ (Nic Craith, 2002: p. 179). Critics of ‘parity of esteem’ have therefore accused it of privileging “‘natural” pre-given ethnonational group categories and promoting ‘the pursuit of group differentiated politics that is reduced to the “positional logic” of winning and losing, of promoting and maximizing communal advantage’ (Taylor, 2008).

The critique of consociationalism, particularly the notion of ‘parity of esteem’, links to wider contemporary global debates and anxieties concerning the promotion of group rights to engender social equality between groups. It is worthwhile rehearsing some of these debates because they provide an important context for understanding how consociationalism, group rights and the use of public space are currently debated in Northern Ireland.

---

2 The data for this article was collected during the ESRC funded ‘Imagining Belfast’ project conducted at the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University of Belfast. As a researcher on this project, I examined the history of ‘shared spaces’ in Belfast. For this, I collected a range of historical archival material and I also conducted ethnographic research at a number of public events in Belfast (Gay Pride, St. Patrick’s Day, May Day, Lord Mayor’s Carnival and various political events) from August 2006 to August 2007 (see also Nagle, 2008a, 2008b).
Multiculturalism

Radical critics and proponents of multiculturalism largely agree that the modern nation state often included forms of ethnic inequality. Where the two factions disagree is whether the virtues of undifferentiated citizenship or group targeted rights are best harnessed to achieve equity. The debate, especially within left-liberalism, is currently polarized. For many critics of multiculturalism, only the merits of universal human rights and a singular conception of citizenship can deliver social equality (Barry, 2001; Fraser, 2000; Malik, 1996). Critics of multiculturalism argue that only by treating humans as the same will fundamentally deliver equality; to treat humans as different, as belonging to discrete groups deserving differentiated rights is inherently illiberal by promoting discrimination and excusing intolerant practices. Multiculturalism, for one opponent, 'represents not a means to an equal society, but an alternative one, where equality has given way to the tolerance of difference, and indeed inequality' (Malik, 1996: p. 170).

Proponents of multiculturalism counter argue that the process of treating everybody with a universal set of rights is paradoxically in certain instances discriminatory (Kymlicka, 2007; Taylor, 1994). The project of state building, accordingly, included a strong assimilationist or exclusionary ethos. Minority ethnic groupings, proponents of multiculturalism argue, fared badly under this system. They were coerced into abandoning their cultural practices and distinct identities, which were often designated by the 'dominant culture' as backward, primitive and a threat to national cohesion. Tully (1995: p. 64) sums up this perspective by arguing that identical treatment is to be contrasted with fair treatment: 'A constitution of equal citizens who are treated identically rather than equitably'. For Tully, unitary citizenship is an 'empire of uniformity' (1995: p. 64).

Some proponents of multiculturalism argue that in order to counter the denigration or 'misrecognition' of a minority's identity, the idea of cultural equality should be promoted. Taylor (1994: p. 64) demands that 'we all recognize the equal value of different cultures; that we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their worth' [emphasis original]. Taylor further argues that the failure to recognize cultures as equal provide the basis for conflict between groups and individuals within groups. Critics of multiculturalism object to the assumption that all cultural practices and notions of the 'good life' should derive parity of esteem. Brian Barry (2001: p. 267) argues that we are bound to judge that some cultures 'are better than others: more just, more free, more enlightened, and generally better adapted to human flourishing'.

At root, critics of group rights claim the process inevitably engenders conflict between groups by fostering zero-sum 'ideas about the way in which a polity and a society should be organized', especially when 'one group seeks to impose its ideas on a territory containing other groups' (Barry, 2001: p. 24). Group rights, consequently, foment ethnic out-bidding, a struggle between different groups to prioritize their cultural differences, as well as hierarchical claims of victimhood. Instead of a political will to break 'the vicious circle of mutually reinforcing exclusivities' (Bauman, 2001: pp. 103–104), the constant bickering over the allocation of resources hinders the chance to act collectively and obscures the real sources of inequality and deprivation.

For critics of multiculturalism, group differentiated rights threaten the integrity of universal individual human rights. Multiculturalism, they argue, also entails a recognition of diversity which would lead to the complicated business of the state mediating between conflicting and incompatible conceptions of the 'good life'. These critics argue that only the cultural neutrality of the civic realm can ensure personal autonomy, equality, and common citizenship. The state then, according to critics, should treat all its citizens equally and uniformly by endowing them an identical set of legal, political and social rights (Barry, 2001).

Many advocates of multiculturalism disagree with Barry's analysis, arguing in contrary that liberalism's 'difference blind' approach neither guarantees social equality nor the amelioration of ethnic conflict. In fact:

- conflict and fragmentation arise most often not when compromises are made between ethnic groups or when formal ethnic, linguistic and/or religious rights are accorded some degree of recognition, but when these have been historically avoided, suppressed or ignored (May, 1999: pp. 20–21) [emphasis original].

Indeed, legislation by international actors, like the EU, recognizes the right of cultural association to impose its ideas on a territory – enshrining religious freedom, free speech, the rule of law, formal equality and procedural legality and a universal franchise – this neutrality best when it is assumed that there is a broad cultural homogeneity among the governed. However, rather than the liberal state managing to slough off its ethno-particularistic skin to emerge in a culturally cleansed, universalistic form, the state was typically formed by a dominant ethnos.

Ethnocracy and Belfast

Proponents of multiculturalism argue that the idea of a neutral civic sphere has often been contradicted by the dominance of one ethnonational group over the polity. This theory is borne out by the history of Northern Ireland and is particularly salient for understanding how public space has been controlled in Belfast City Centre. Northern Ireland was formed in 1921 as the result of the partition of Ireland. The two jurisdictions, the North and the South, were formed in order to recognize the national aspirations of two ethnonational groups in Ireland: Ulster unionists who demanded that the political association with the UK remain and Irish nationalists who demanded Irish independence. Partition therefore was viewed as either a transitional, interim phase by Irish nationalists until the whole of Ireland became unified or as the best possible permanent solution by Ulster unionists. Partition was facilitated to ensure that in Northern Ireland unionists had an inbuilt two-thirds majority. Unionists, consequently, were able to control the polity and culture at the expense of nationalists, who refused to recognize the political legitimacy of Northern Ireland and expressed allegiance to another sovereign state (the Irish Republic). Nationalists, consequently, had many components of citizenship denied by the dominant unionist government, who viewed this minority as a threat to the security of the state.

In this way, Northern Ireland was an 'ethnocracy'. Yiftachel and Ghanem (2004: p. 649) define an ethnocracy 'as a regime facilitating the expansion, ethnicization and control of contested territory and state by a dominant ethnic nation'. An ethnocracy is a type of regime which is neither democratic nor authoritarian. It fails on the count of authoritarianism because it possesses partial democratic features, most notably political competition, some free media and some civil rights. It fails to be democratic because these features fail to be universal or comprehensive, especially in regard to the state's minority ethnonational groups who are discriminated against. The structure of an ethnocracy is designed to expedite ethnic stratification and discrimination, with ethnicity rather than citizenship featuring as the main basis for resource and power. Furthermore, the dominant ethnonational group appropriates the state apparatus and shapes the political system, public institutions, geography, economy and culture, so as to expand and deepen its control over state and territory (2004: p. 650). Consequently, the
notion of the ‘demos’ – a community of equal resident-citizens – ‘does not feature high in the country’s policies, agenda, imagination, symbols or resource distribution, and is therefore not nurtured’ (2004: p. 650). In terms of space and territory, ethnocracies seek to fuse national identity with the boundaries of the state. By making national identity indivisible with a specified territory the ethnocracy strives to render abstract its political power. The process of ethnizing territory includes the utilization of structural segregation to facilitate the expansion of the majority group and the construction of minorities as a ‘threat’ to the project of ‘purifying’ ethnic spaces. Anderson (2007) further views the development of ethnonationally ‘divided’ cites and societies as wrought within the context of the imperial project, ‘at the edges and towards the end of empires’. Accordingly, the imperial project sought to ‘create political entities out of pre-existing ethnic difference’ and these ‘politiciized ethnicities tended to later become the basis for competing nationalisms’ [emphasis original].

Belfast, the capital city, was central to the process of imperial ethnization because it became a place in which unionism and the British state controlled the economy and the polity, whilst simultaneously coming under threat from Catholic inward migration. While in the early nineteenth century Belfast was Ireland’s second city, the exponential growth of the city’s industrial sector – particularly in shipbuilding, engineering, linen and ropewalks – sucked in hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom were Catholics. While the Catholic population of Belfast in 1800 numbered just 3 percent, by 1900 the figure stood at 34 percent (McIntosh, 2006: p. 10) and between 1871 and 1901 the population of Belfast doubled from 175,000 to 350,000 (McIntosh, 2006: p. 31). The arrival of thousands of Catholic and Protestant migrant workers into the city within a short period ignited sectarian conflict resulting in patterns of residential segregation which persist into the twenty first century.

To reflect the city’s growing economic and political importance, unionist civic leaders instigated the construction of a grand City Hall. Opened in 1906, the City Hall, a huge Edwardian edifice, demarcated the political and civic heart of the City Centre. The City Hall and the long streets which surround it immediately became ‘the stage for the political and social dramas of Belfast’ (McIntosh, 2006: p. 4). Mostly, the City Hall and the City Centre were the focus for civic unionism. After the First World War a War Cenotaph and a Garden of Remembrance were constructed in the City Hall grounds, which became the sacred sites of memory used to remember the sacrifice of Protestant unionists in the service of the Union. Within the grounds of the City Hall are also sited a number of statues and symbols to remind the city of its great unionist heroes and its industrial identity. For instance, a statue of Queen Victoria ‘guards’ the entrance to the City Hall and on the façade of the pediment above the entrance is a ‘classical’ relief which celebrates the city’s mercantile heritage. The City Hall and the City Centre were thus immediately marked ‘in a high-profile and partisan way as a symbol of unionist power and Protestant culture’ (McIntosh, 2006: p. 73). For Irish nationalists, on the other hand, the unionist delineation of the City Hall and the City Centre signified nationalist exclusion from political and cultural power in the city. Nationalists quickly viewed the City Hall ‘as the sacred temple of...Orangeism’ (Irish News, September 30, 1912); ‘Orangeism’ being a popular sobriquet for unionism.3

In the context of ethnocratic imperialism, Belfast City Centre represented a specific site of ‘social centrality’. Henri Lefebvre noted that every society creates sites of social centrality in which authority is inscribed: ‘the consolidation needs centres; it needs to fix them, to monumentalize them (socially) and specialize them (mentally)’ (1976: p. 86). Processes of centralization aspired to be total under contemporary capitalism and imperialism, and in so doing attempts to expel ‘all peripheral elements with a violence that is inherent in space itself’ (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 332). Lefebvre argued that cities increasingly possessed centres of power and peripheries of exclusion. This process of centres and banlieues, argued Lefebvre, was largely part of the progressive extension of capitalist and statist production of space to concentrate the decision making centre while creating dependent colonies on the margins. Lefebvre wrote: ‘around the centres there are nothing but subjugated, exploited and dependent spaces: new colonial space’ (1978: p. 85; cf. Shields, 1999: p. 182). Although Lefebvre was providing a teleological sketch of the capitalist city, in a ‘divided city’ the collision between ethnicity and capital is particularly intense and provides a division between the powerful centre and the excluded peripheries. Such places are shaped by a ‘conspicuous ethnic logic of capital, which tends to stratify groups through uneven processes of capital mobility’ (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004: p. 650). In order to disproportionately distribute resources to one faction at the expense of the other, rigid forms of socioeconomic stratification are maintained, despite countervailing legal and market forces.

### Exploiting the cracks: civil rights

Yiftachel and Ghanem (2004) argue that a crucial characteristic of ethnocracies is how groups attempt to exploit the “cracks” emanating from the state’s self-representation as democratic. A particular place to illuminate this form of conflict, in which marginalized minorities use partial openings to challenge the regime, is public space, especially Belfast City Centre.

An important way in which territory in Northern Ireland was ethnicated could be seen in unionism’s capacity to regulate and reproduce public space. This was apparent in the Flags and Emblem (Display) Act (NI) of 1954 which forbade the public display of so-called ‘provocative emblems’ in Northern Ireland. This Act had the de facto intention of proscribing the use of nationalist symbols in public space without needing to formally specify them (Purdie, 1990: p. 30). An interrelated arena that nationalists became excluded from was key public spaces, such as Belfast City Centre, which became largely preserved for unionist civic events. In this way, access to public space surrounding the City Hall for cultural and political displays was the spatial analogy of citizenship. Nationalist events were effectively banned because they either clashed with ‘traditional’ unionist civic events, which took precedence, or if, as often happened, the security forces judged the events as security threats.

The prohibition of nationalist groups from Belfast City Centre came under assault during the late 1960s. A considerable impetus for this was the post-war human rights revolution, especially the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which precipitated various global struggles to contest enduring ethnic hierarchies (Kymlicka, 2007; Taylor, 1994). For some minorities historically subject to assimilatory policies, where they were stripped of their own language, culture and self-governing institutions, their struggle was for group specific rights (Kymlicka, 2007: p. 91).

Within the Human Rights revolution, Northern Ireland witnessed a major civil rights movement (CRM) during the late 1960s. A plural based and ostensibly reformist social movement, the CRM campaigned for equal rights under British law for those discriminated against in Northern Ireland, especially Irish Catholic nationalists. Indeed, the formation of the CRM, rather than emphasizing

---

3 Although newspaper reports are used in this paper, it is important to note that newspapers express divided political loyalties in Northern Ireland.
differentiated group rights, defined its aims in terms of Universal Human Rights by demanding ‘the basic rights of all citizens’ and protection for ‘the rights of the individual’ (see Purdie, 1990: p. 133). Although the CRM aimed to address discrimination in the sphere of housing, employment and the electoral franchise, access to public space also figured prominently. The CRM underlined the importance of equal access to public space by calling for ‘guarantees for speech, assembly and association’ (1990: p. 133). Gaining access to public spaces typically excluded to nationalists quickly became a core component of the CRM and many of its activities included the occupation of public spaces, which represented a ‘symbolic invasion of ancient territory and the assertion of an illegitimate right to “walk”’ (Foster, 1988: p. 58).

From the late 1960s onwards Belfast City Centre became a crucible for testing claims to civil rights. On numerous occasions civil rights groups proclaimed their right to the City Centre. Although many Protestants were prominent members of the CRM, the unionist government viewed the movement as little more than a nationalist/ Marxist conspiracy aimed at overthrowing the state (see Purdie, 1990). State imposed restrictions on the CRM’s ability to access public space were outlined in the Public Order Act (1951), which required parade organizers to provide forty eight hours notice to the security forces of their intent to march. Parades viewed as threatening to public order could be peremptorily banned or rerouted and the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, an almost wholly Protestant force, was crucial in maintaining unionist control of space. The first attempt by the CRM to enter the City Centre in October 1968 was banned by the authorities who claimed that it would cause violence. A week later, two thousand civil rights marchers managed to bypass the restrictions by holding a protest outside the front of the City Hall (Purdie, 1990: pp. 205–207). This was their last success in gaining access to the City Hall as further CRM marches were halted by the security forces, which designated them ‘illegal’. The restriction of access to the City Centre to the CRM undoubtedly fuelled grievances that inequalities remained endemic to the unionist ethnocracy.

In order to further maintain control over the challenges to Northern Ireland’s public spaces, the unionist government made crucial amendments to the Public Order Act, including banning many protest tactics used by the CRM, specifically illegalizing ‘counter demonstrations, the occupations of public buildings and sit-downs in the streets’ (Irish News, March 13, 1969). By illegalizing the CRM’s core modus operandi, street politics, the demand for civil rights increasingly became focused on the right to public space in Northern Ireland (Purdie, 1990: pp. 222–223). In response, the unionist government decided to put a ‘prohibition on all…processions and outdoor meetings which includes any street, road or highway and any place to which, for the first time being, the public have or have been permitted to have access’. In other words, groups demanding the right of access to specific public spaces for the first time would be outlawed; on the other hand, events perceived to be traditionally related to specific places would not be affected. This effectively meant that unionist events which were traditionally routed through Belfast City Centre would not be subject to the proscriptions of the Public Order Act. This can be read to mean that group specific rights, those of unionists, became protected in law while those of nationalists were curtailed.

The City Centre during the ‘troubles’

The CRM’s objective of achieving the democratization of the state (Purdie, 1990: p. 2) had a more disastrous implication when it unwittingly led to the stabilization of a violent thirty-year conflict. A hitherto dormant Irish Republican Army (IRA) was renewed in 1969; proclaiming to defend nationalists against sectarian attacks, militant Irish nationalists launched an armed offensive claiming that only through the overthrow of the state could civil rights be achieved. Malignant unionists, proclaiming to be defenders of the Union, reciprocated with a barely concealed sectarian murder campaign against Catholics. Although at first the British army was sent onto the streets as a peacekeeping force, it quickly became viewed as a partisan pro-unionist force by nationalists. A lasting legacy of violence intensified territorial boundaries with sizeable population movements leading to residential segregation in single religion enclaves. It is estimated that by February 1973 over 60,000 people in Belfast, 10 percent of the city’s population, were forced to move; in the period 1968–2001 over 1700 people were killed in Belfast (Bew & Gillespie, 1999: p. 18). Another consequence was the collapse of the unionist controlled Parliament as all political powers were transferred to the UK government at Westminster.

The control of public space in Northern Ireland, invested in the Public Order Act, was placed under the jurisdiction of the Northern Ireland Minister of State, appointed by the Westminster government. Disputes over access over public space in Belfast continued with violent intensity as nationalists challenged their exclusion from the City Centre as a matter of civil rights. Nationalist organizations habitually tried to force their way into the City Centre for political demonstrations, and in response state security forces repulsed the marchers. Violent clashes between nationalist marchers demanding access to the City Centre and the security forces became a common occurrence.

On numerous occasions, in 1973 for instance, nationalist organization ‘People’s Democracy’ demanded authorization from the security forces to march into the City Centre. Invoking the Public Order Act, the Minister of State, in consultation with security forces, would prohibit the march from ‘within a radius of half-a-mile from the City Hall, Belfast’ (Irish News, February 10, 1973). Marchers, often departing from nationalist districts in west Belfast, would be stopped short by the security forces who had sealed off the whole City Centre. The confrontation would frequently spiral into a riot with the security forces firing plastic bullets into the crowd of thousands. For nationalist organizations, their continued exclusion from the City Centre became the spatial confirmation of their unequal status in Northern Ireland. On this issue, nationalist organization ‘People’s Democracy’ wrote in 1973: ‘one thing goes on forever – the ban on…any anti-unionist organization marching to the City Hall in Belfast’ (Irish News, February 10, 1973). A nationalist leader asked whether ‘it will ever be possible for an anti-unionist organization to hold a march or parade outside the Catholic ghettos of our cities and towns?’ (Irish News, January 1, 1973).

At the same time as nationalists were demanding the right to the City Centre, militant groups, like the IRA, promoted a more destructive approach. The IRA constantly targeted the City Centre in order to cripple the commercial, financial and political centre of Belfast. On one occasion in 1972, subsequently called ‘Bloody Friday’, the IRA detonated 26 bombs across the city, 11 in the City Centre in the space of one hour which killed nine and injured 130 people. In response to the bombing campaign the security forces erected a ‘ring of steel’ around the City Centre with armed checkpoints. The advent of the security cordon placed around Belfast City Centre made it difficult to enter the City Centre without passing through armed security checkpoints.

‘The third arm’

The 1980s witnessed contrasting and contested approaches to the concept of shared access to Belfast City Centre. To begin with, the British state sought to commercially regenerate the City Centre. This approach was implicitly bound up with British counter-insurgency
strategy (Bean, 2008: p. 24). A key strategic thinker, British politician Richard Needham (1999: p. 1), summed up this approach as the ‘the third arm of the British government’s strategy to resolve the Northern Ireland conflict…the economic and social war against violence’. The plan ‘was to isolate the terrorists by proving it was they…in Belfast who were the villains, delaying progress and strangling investment’ (Needham, 1999: p. 167). Under the rubric of ‘Making Belfast Work’, the state built private housing in the City Centre in an attempt to lure ‘yuppies’ (1999: p. 167); they constructed a huge new shopping complex and commercially redeveloped Belfast’s riverfront, Laganside, in a model borrowed from London’s Docklands and Boston’s waterfront. Of correlative interest to this strategy was the construction of ‘safe areas where both communities could mix and match’ (1999: p. 168). Through engendering the City Centre as a ‘shared space’ the state hoped to:

build a shared sense of civic pride, security and enjoyment among people whose attitudes, shaped by separated experience, may well be mutually antagonistic…radiating a sense of citizenship outward to a divided population (Hadayaw, 2001: p. 40).

The desire for ‘shared space’, however, was problematic. Its remit rarely went beyond the desire to create shared ‘cathedrals of consumption’. Such attempts to ‘normalize’ Belfast have thus been accused of subverting the ‘injustices of segregation and socio-spatial exclusion’ which lie outside of the City Centre (Shirlow, 2006: p. 101). Furthermore, this state led vision of ‘sharing’ did little to assuage nationalist concerns that the City Centre was prohibitive of nationalist political and cultural events.

Running parallel to these counter-insurgency maneuvers was the struggle of nationalists mobilizing for inclusion within the local state (Bean, 2008). Instead of viewing the City Hall purely in terms of an ‘impenetrable bulwark of a “Protestant state for a Protestant people”’ (Hayden, 1999: pp. vii–viii), nationalists, especially Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, began advocating participatory input into formal politics at the citywide level. Rather than purely seeing the state as beyond reform, it could be made more amenable through the politics of accommodation and inclusion. From the 1980s onwards Sinn Féin began to increasingly frame issues regarding inequalities as necessitating an engagement with formal electoral politics. This process was augmented by Sinn Féin becoming a major electoral force in Belfast. In the space of twelve years from 1985, Sinn Féin had almost doubled its number of electoral seats in the city council to transform itself from one of the smallest parties to the largest one in the city and in 2001 Belfast elected its first Sinn Féin mayor at the City Hall. Eschewing the rhetoric of exclusion, Sinn Féin increasingly articulated the politics of pluralism and diversity, speaking of ‘a shared city of equals’ and of seeking to physically reconstruct the city.4

Of continuing importance to creating ‘a shared city of equals’ was the demand for equal access to the City Centre. In July 1993, a group of nationalists applied for permission from the security forces to hold what they called a ‘Nationalist Rights Day’, including a march into the City Centre and a political rally outside the City Hall. The security forces granted permission for the parade when it was made clear that no rival organization, religious or political, had filed for authorization for a rival demonstration at the same time.5 Speaking prior to the parade Alex Maskey, a leading member of Sinn Féin, stated that they would seek to show that one of the main injustices experienced by nationalists in Belfast ‘was not being allowed into our own City Centre unhindered. We’re now taking that step’ (Irish News, August 7, 1993). On Sunday August 8th 1993 parades from nationalist areas across Belfast converged on Belfast City Hall. The march attracted up to 10,000 nationalists, many of whom held placards stating ‘Our City Also’. Speaking at the conclusion of the rally outside the City Hall, Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin told the crowd, ‘you have the right to your city, the right to your city hall’ (Irish News, August 9, 1993).

Shared space or ‘benign apartheid’?

Since 1993 Belfast City Centre has become a space in which nationalists and unionists are made to feel that they have equal access for cultural and political performances. Belfast City Council, responsible for the management of public space in the City Centre, encourage the premise that public space is a palpimpsest upon which any number of identities are constituted. Towards this end, Belfast City Council encourages:

- a tolerant and fair society, where people are respected and their differences are celebrated…it is very important that we remove any physical barriers, and break down social, political, cultural, religious and economic barriers (Belfast City Council, 2005: p. 18).

This promotion of ‘inclusivity’, ‘good relations’ and ‘sharing’ links well with broader societal objectives, which can be read in the espousal of a ‘Shared Future’, a legislative document which aims to establish:

- A normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equality, respect for diversity and recognition of our interdependence (Community Relations Unit, 2005: p. 7).

While such sentiments are eminently worthy, a number of anxious commentators (Graham & Nash, 2006; Morrissey & Gaffikin, 2006; Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006) have questioned to what extent this project of managing diversity is instead based upon the logic of ‘separate but equal’, the confirmation of institutional sectarianism. To be sure, much of this critique addresses the intensification of residual segregation that has occurred during the post-conflict phase. Pertinently, public spaces, like Belfast City Centre, are also subject to critical analysis. It is in both residential areas and civic public spaces, theorists note, that despite talk of diversity and pluralism by policy makers, strategies for managing space are ‘conceived in terms, not of a radical departure from segregation but…“benign apartheid”’ (Graham & Nash, 2006: p. 273).

In order to explore more closely the extent to which Belfast City Centre can alternatively be seen as a successful form of sharing between nationalists, unionists and other groups, it is important to analyze some of the contemporary uses of the space. To begin with, it is possible to discern two parallel methods which underpin shared space in Belfast City Centre. First, the notion of a shared space is evoked in public spectacles wherein the identities of the two groups are accommodated. The assumption here is that in many cases nationalists and unionists share similar cultural forms and it follows that an important task of peace-building is to

---

4 The restructuring of the city also saw unionists disproportionately move out of the Belfast City Council to the wider Belfast Metropolitan area. This has created a historically unprecedented situation whereby Belfast City is evenly balanced between nationalists and unionists.

5 Notably, the authorization for the parade in 1993 came at crucial juncture of a nascent peace process, and less than a year before the instigation of ceasefires and the beginning of public talks on power-sharing.

6 Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement so-called ‘peace walls’ (security walls which separate nationalist and unionist districts) have proliferated and they’re being built ever higher. There are now nearly forty peace walls in Belfast alone, stretching 13 miles across Belfast (Irish News, 2 September 2006).
encourage the idea that the two groups have more binds of commonality than forms of difference. I call this strategy ‘common ground’. The second form of shared space refers to the process in which nationalists and unionists should also be endowed with separate but equal access to the City Centre. The underlying assumption here is that nationalists and unionists also maintain different and even mutually exclusive cultural and political identities and it is correct that they should be endowed equal recognition. I call this strategy ‘equal recognition’.

Common ground

Of the two approaches the ‘common ground’ thesis appears particularly appealing because it seeks to foster cross-community dialogue concerning issues of shared identity. At its most attractive the approach offers a radical opportunity to forge alliances across the ethnonational cleavage and to deconstruct the very basis of cultural separateness which can underpin ethnonational conflict. This perspective could fruitfully link with Fraser’s (2000) distinction between ‘affirmative’ and ‘transformative’ politics. Fraser (2000) argues that struggles undertaken to gain ‘affirmation’ for cultural difference in the multicultural paradigm serve not to ‘promote respectful interaction within increasingly multicultural contexts, but to drastically simplify and rehearse group identities’. A ‘transformative’ politics, alternatively, is one which engenders ‘dedifferentiation’ by attempting to abolish ‘economic arrangements that underpin group specificity’ (Fraser, 2000: p. 108).

An example of a cross-community social movement in Belfast who purposely seek to use the space of Belfast City Centre to try and deconstruct the ethnonational cleavage is the annual socialist and Trade Union ‘May Day’ parade. The May Day parade actively fosters diversity by embracing as wide a constituency as possible. By promoting cosmopolitanism embedded in the idea of the International Workers’ Movement, organizers hope to challenge the competitive and divisive nationalisms which contribute to the sedimentation of violence and segregation in the city. A May Day organizer summed up their conception of the parade:

I would see it as challenging the two community idea. I think that what we have strived to do is to create a safe space for people of all religions and none to come together to mark their relationship as working people rather than as Catholics, as Protestants, as atheists, whatever. We have said: ‘it’s a non-sectarian, non-denominational march’ (Claire Moore, interview with author, 25 June 2007).

The Belfast ‘Gay Pride’ event, although it is not rooted in class politics, also provides a focus on networks and relationships across the ethnonational cleavage. Beginning in 1991, with just over fifty participants, ‘Pride’ now regularly attracts over seven thousand. With themes like ‘Unity Through Diversity’ (1998), ‘One Community, Many Faces’ (2001), ‘Let’s Respect Diversity’ (2003), a ‘Pride’ organizer explained that rather than limiting such sentiments to religious expressions of separatist difference, ‘an event like this is particularly relevant in a city like Belfast. This parade transcends all barriers, we have all religious persuasions coming together’ (Irish News, 6 August 2005).

Another strand to the ‘common ground’ strategy is more problematic. This strand does not involve an attempt to deconstruct nationalist and unionist identities, but instead strives to accommodate them equally in a shared ritual. Belfast City Council has announced its intention to promote events which provide ‘opportunities for input from both the major communities...within the city’ (Belfast City Council, 2005). Underlying this premise is that despite their political differences nationalists and unionists are actually largely bound by a common cultural domain and out of joint encounters, ‘each community would discover that they shared values rooted in a common regional culture’ (Finlay, 2006: p. 6). The problematic aspect of this approach to the ‘common ground’ can be seen in regards to St. Patrick’s Day Celebrations in the City Centre.

During the 1970s St. Patrick’s Day Parades in Belfast were mostly a nationalist affair, restricted to nationalist districts and part of an ongoing political strategy to promote Irish heritage and pride. Irish nationalists also requested that the parade should be afforded greater civic recognition by being granted the ‘right to Belfast City’. At the same time unionists were increasingly promoting the idea that St. Patrick, the saint and the celebration, was a symbol that unionists should be encouraged to identify with and in 1985 the unionist Orange Order, an exclusively Protestant institution, inaugurated St. Patrick’s Day parades (Cronin & Adair, 2002: p. 191).

Despite unionist growing recognition for St. Patrick’s Day, nationalists called for a parade to take place in the City Centre and the first one occurred in 1998. Despite the nationalist organizers barraging political symbols and speeches from the event, unionists noted the strong presence of Irish nationalism and argued that the parade appeared exclusive and unaccommodating. For unionists the celebrations appeared little more than a display of nationalist ‘triumphalism’. Nelson McCausland, a politician, typified the unionist view by noting in a council meeting that the celebrations had not been inclusive and expressed particular concern at the flying of certain flags and the political element of some floats. The flag that had reportedly caused unionists most concern was the Irish tricolour, the flag of the Republic of Ireland. Even though the Irish tricolour was not used in an official form during celebrations, the sight of many in the crowd, and some in the parade flying the tricolour was evidence for unionists that the space and celebration were not neutral and inclusive.

In the context of ‘divided societies’ the ‘common ground’ approach to public space is therefore fraught with difficulty. One reason for this is that even if groups in ‘divided societies’ have an affiliation to shared cultural symbols, this does not automatically correlate to ‘a source of social cohesion’ (Harrison, 2002: p. 211). Instead, ‘shared cultural symbolism can give rise to competition over its ownership or use, and this competition can play an important role in defining ethnic boundaries’ (2002: p. 211). For Harrison (2002: p. 229), these ‘relationships of conflictual resemblance’ occur because groups that wish to be distinguished by creating boundaries between each other are in fact bound together in a common symbolic domain and such similarity can create mimetic antagonism.

The ‘common ground’ approach is also problematical because it is at this juncture where competing group differentiated cultural demands most visibly clash and lead to conflict. Critics have argued that:

In Northern Ireland, the attempt to deal with substate patterns of ethno-sectarian antagonism though principles of parity of cultural respect and esteem has inadvertently created a legitimating vocabulary of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural rights’ for antagonistic expressions of separatist difference (Graham & Nash, 2006: p. 258).

In other words, group rights encourage conflict by allowing incompatible claims to clash in the public arena. This is an argument purveyed by Brian Barry, arch-nemesis of group rights. Barry (2001: pp. 325–326) claims that multiculturalism heads of the ‘nightmare of unified political action by the economically disadvantaged’ by emphasizing the ‘particularity of each group’s problems’. To avoid conflict, critics of group rights argue that the alternative task is to ensure that all perspectives should be represented in the public arena. However, in reaching policy decisions, ‘citizens should set aside their personal commitments and
affiliations and try to assess competing proposals in terms of shared justice and common interest’ (Miller, 1999: p. 106).

The search for the ‘common ground’, in public events like St. Patrick’s Day in Belfast City Centre, should not necessarily be viewed as incompatible with forms of ‘deliberative democracy’. In this, democratic institutions are legitimate insofar as they engender debate between groups and that those ‘discussions have a direct bearing on decisions made and the polices which emanate from them’ (Little, 2004: p. 89). Deliberative democracy also entails a commitment to the respect of plural values and aims within the polity. Despite the recognition that conflict has surrounded St. Patrick’s Day regarding the parity of nationalist and unionist identities, there has also been a commitment to debate and dialogue on the substantive issues to ensure the event is fully representative of all interested groups in the city. An example of this is how the organizers, the City Council, have consulted with a wide range of groups in the city to consider their views as well as introducing cross-community symbols. Although the celebration remains a mostly nationalist one, recent research has shown that unionists are increasingly participating in the event and viewing it positively (Institute of Irish Studies, 2006: p. 5). This research has also shown that ‘nationalists demonstrated a willingness to curb the number of political symbols at the event’ (Institute of Irish Studies, 2006: p. 5). Such ‘staged spaces’ designed to foster participative interaction can contribute to building positive relationships and bridges between different social, economic and ethnonational groups. They do not, however, create the sort of lasting behavioural shift that is generally needed to make a qualitative difference to separate communities (Reun德man and Lownsbrough, 2007: p. 28). In the context of contested cities, ‘systematic discursive encounters between adversaries that promote mutual understanding and cultural crossing can help to replace the antagonistic politics of sectarian enmity and grievance with a new politics’ (Morrissey & Gaffikin, 2006: p. 886) [emphasis original]. This politics seeks to optimize the ‘compromises of civic association, while avoiding the contrived conviviality of a dishonest harmony’ (Morrissey & Gaffikin, 2006: p. 886).

Equal recognition

A second strategy for Belfast City Centre is ‘equal recognition’. The ‘equal recognition’ strategy is based on the premise that recognition of cultural identities may in fact dilute the antagonistic dimensions of group identity by forcing various groups to show respect for diversity by tacitly accepting the right of each other to use public space, even if only sequentially. This strategy largely refers to nationalist and unionist political and cultural events which are exclusive to their own constituency. Although this is ostensibly a fair arrangement, it is not without difficulty.

A fundamental quandary with the ‘equal recognition’ formulation is the extent to which it becomes the focus for zero-sum conflicts over space and identity, wherein the claim for space by one group is perceived as a loss by the other group. For some Irish nationalists, gaining access to the City Centre has been a victory, an act of abandoning a past characterized by unionist hegemony. Commenting on a nationalist event in the City Centre in 1998, a nationalist newspaper stated: ‘the tens of thousands who turned Belfast City Centre black with green…were…winning the Belfast of…second-class citizenship’ (Ó Muilleoir, 1998). If nationalists have welcomed their ‘right to the city’ as indicative of ‘a city of equals’, unionists have viewed it as representative of the post-conflict dispensation which now acts to discriminate against them. For example, in the aftermath of nationalists being granted access to the City Centre for the first time in 1993, militant unionists invoked a commemorative occasion to reclaim the space around the City Hall and to make visible the perceived shifting balance of political power by protesting at ‘continuing social deprivation’ in unionist areas (Belfast Newsletter, August 22, 1993).

Nationalists and unionists’ different visions of sharing Belfast City Centre are indicative of a wider picture in which ‘power-sharing’ is viewed by the two groups. While unionism once evoked an image of a confident democratic majority secure in their political identity within the Union, a discernible counter-trend has recently been identified. Unionists are now more likely to portray their own experience as that of ‘defeat…self-pity and a predestination of victimhood’ (Finlay, 2001: p. 3). Unionist confidence has been eroded in the aftermath of 1998 Peace Agreement. The Peace Agreement has been framed by many unionist politicians as ushering in legislation that discriminates against unionists by favouring nationalists. Informed by a liberal pluralist framework, the Agreement has sought to redress a number of imbalances and grievances identified by nationalists. Labeled the ‘equality agenda’ by nationalists, unionists have alternatively identified it as an anti-unionist agenda and unionist support for the Agreement is consistently weak (Shirloc & Murtagh, 2006).

The concept of ‘shared space’ for some unionist groups has therefore been reframed as one of loss. In the context of Derry City Centre, another important public space which was once the preserve of unionists, Cohen (2007) has elaborated the process through which unionism has ‘lost its control of the contested space’ and in response tries to reclaim it through annual commemorative parades which perpetuate the pretense of the ‘self-described role of a victor’. This process wherein the sharing of public space is portrayed as either ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ also continues to characterize debates concerning Belfast City Centre. The use of the City Centre by one group can be seen by the other as an example of particular groups being favoured, thus contradicting the intent of Rawlsian liberalism that the ‘state should be neutral between competing cultural claims’. An example of this was in August 2007 when a nationalist parade took place in the City Centre. Unionist politicians accused the parade of containing ‘depictions of IRA terrorists and participants carrying guns’, and were consequently in contradiction of the notion of ‘shared space’. Moreover, a unionist politician argued that the presence of a ‘threatening’ nationalist parade in the City Centre was an example of unfair treatment, since official procedures make sure unionist parades ‘that enters any shared space in Belfast…is marked “contentious”’.

Interestingly, this unionist discourse regarding unfair terms of access to the City Centre parallels earlier nationalist grievances. Despite the ‘equal recognition’ strategy to Belfast City Centre causing some degree of zero-sum conflict, could the strategy be conducive to the precepts of liberal multiculturalism? The idea of group differentiated rights to public space, however, is countered by Sennett (2005: p. 2), who argues that what is constituted is in fact ‘civility based on indifference… A social compromise which works against shared citizenship’. In response, there has been a call for the need in multiethnic societies to foster a sense of common belonging that is not based on ethnic or cultural roots, but rather on a shared commitment to the political community. This emphasis can be seen in a report commissioned to provide strategies to deal with ‘ethnic’ division in Britain. The authors of the report state that a ‘vision of living together’, by forging ‘common belonging to a citizenship that can embrace diversity but still engender solidarity is crucial to twenty first century Britain’ (Beunderman & Lownsbrough, 2007: p. 4). This emphasis on a ‘differentiated universalism’ depends on ‘boundaries remaining present, but

requires that they must be flexible, and, importantly, open to change’ (McGhee, 2005: p. 163).

The applicability of forging a common civic British (or Irish) community in Northern Ireland, where the ‘state is itself the subject of apparently irreconcilable political differences’ (Graham & Nash, 2006: p. 255), seems implausible. The aim of encouraging flexible or complex meta-loyalties above and beyond competing micro-loyalties in ethnonationally divided societies must, consequently, involve an alternative to the ‘glue’ of national identity. The ‘equal recognition’ strategy offers the opportunity for diverse identities to be granted equality and as a corollary it further helps build social stability and reduces ethnonational conflict.

Notably, conflict over the control of City Centre has lessened during recent years. This has been assisted by how the City Centre has lost some of its salience for nationalists, simply because it is no longer a site of exclusion and nationalist convictions in the City Centre have waned. At first, after the de facto prohibition of nationalists was lifted, nationalist groups tended to enter the City Centre at every opportunity, thus eliciting a counter demand by unionist groups. There was also an accompanying tendency to mark the City Centre as nationalistic, which included attempts to ‘maladapt’ unionist symbols, like draping the Irish flag over the statue of Queen Victoria which stands at the entrance of the City Hall. In more recent years, nationalist groups who gained access to the City Centre have realized that if they are to rightly demand recognition for their cultural identities then they are required to show equal respect for the precepts of diversity. The leaders of ethnonational minorities may appeal to the values of liberal multiculturalism to challenge their historic exclusion, but ‘those very ideals also impose the duty on them to be just, tolerant, and inclusive’ (Kymlicka, 2007: p. 93). As an extension of the human rights revolution, liberal multiculturalism can therefore have a constraining function. As Kymlicka (2007: p. 92) argues, liberal multiculturalism forces groups to advance their claims in a very specific language: human rights, civil rights liberalism, and democratic constitutionalism, with their guarantees of gender equality, religious freedom, racial non-discrimination, gay rights and due process. This precept applies for all groups using public space in Northern Ireland and is elaborated in legislation which calls for groups to:

behave with due regard for the rights, traditions and feelings of others in the vicinity: refrain from using words or behaviour which could reasonably be perceived as being intentionally sectarian, provocative, threatening, abusive, insulting or lewd (Parades Commission, 2005: p. 8).

Conclusion

In recent years the idea of multiculturalism as a system to accommodate ethnocultural diversity has come under sustained attack from a number of quarters. The ‘politics of difference’:

is a formula for manufacturing conflict, because it rewards the groups that can most effectively mobilize to make claims on the polity, or at any rate it rewards ethnic cultural political entrepreneurs who can exploit its potential for their own ends by mobilizing a constituency around a set of sectional demands (Barry, 2001: p. 21).

Similarly, the promotion of group rights and power-sharing that has emerged in the context of the Belfast Peace Agreement has been critiqued for merely seeing respect for distinct identities as primary questions of justice at the expense of a politics of economic redistribution and equality (Fraser, 2000). For Shirlow and Murtagh (2006), conflict in Belfast has largely shifted from violence to ‘identity politics’, resulting in ‘a stale and repetitive pattern of ethnically-divided competition over resources’. The politics of territorality, as groups demand their right to control public spaces for cultural performances, is a key battleground of the current political dispensation. While there is much pessimism about the accommodation of ‘ethnic’ politics, I have explored the vexed schemes to promote ‘a shared space’ in Belfast City Centre and in so doing augment peace-building efforts in a ‘divided city’. After decades in which nationalist events were prohibited from accessing the City Centre, the paper has noted two heuristic categories which have been tried in recent years to engender a shared space: ‘common ground’ and ‘equal recognition’. While the paper has noted that neither of the approaches has terminally ended conflict, crucially they do provide an opportunity for respective groups to participate in peaceful dialogue regarding the meaning and validity of their cultural and political identities as well as space to transform identities, if so desired. This is assisted by mutually agreed legislation and monitoring structures which provide a basis for the usage of public space to be informed by the values of liberal multiculturalism: individual human rights, tolerance for the claims of others, and democratic responsibility. The construction of shared space, as a truly public realm, accordingly, involves not only the constitution of more cosmopolitan politics in which pluralities, hybridities and multiple identities of a complex diverse world offer an alternative to the ‘fundamentalisms of fixed identity’ (Gaffikin, McEldowney, Raffery, & Sterrett, 2008). A shared space is also one wherein the particularistic politics of ‘recognition’ can be negotiated peaceably.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the insightful comments made by three referees and the patient editor on earlier drafts of this paper.

References


140 J. Nagle / Political Geography 28 (2009) 132–141