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WHAT EUROPE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND? EUROPEAN APPROACHES AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION*

1. Introduction

It is widely believed that Britain's and Ireland's membership in the European Union and European integration itself have had a positive impact (albeit an indirect one) on the transformation of the Northern Ireland conflict. Without the improvement of British-Irish relationships following the accession of both countries to the EC in 1973, the peace process in Northern Ireland would hardly have been possible. The EU has also had a place – if a peripheral one – in the other dimensions of the Northern Ireland problem, for example in the framework of cross-border cooperation programmes like INTERREG, or the ad hoc Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Furthermore it has provided a model for pooling sovereignty, which is reflected in the architecture and procedures of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (O'Donnell: 1999, 70-73).

The EU itself does not seem for its part to perform too badly in terms of general popularity, either. According to recent surveys, in Northern Ireland attitudes towards the EU are relatively favourable and are becoming more positive over time. Support for it has increased among the voters of all political parties, with the exception of the DUP¹, and three quarters of the respondents – including a substantial majority of all political groupings – favour the status quo or an increase in EU powers (O'Connor and McGowan:

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¹ Democratic Unionist Party. Led by the Rev. Ian Paisley, it has been since 2003 the most voted party in Northern Ireland and in the unionist community.

2003)². Remarkably, in the last few years Sinn Féin has modified its previous wholesale hostility towards the EU and moved to a pragmatic consideration of the opportunities it offers to the Irish nation. Apparently it is only the DUP that is holding fast to an uncompromising anti-EU stance.

Increasing support for “Europe”³ and acceptance of a European political space may well be an aspect of the changing nature of ethnonational identities, in the sense of their becoming less cohesive and consistent, less dichotomous and tradition-oriented, more complex and multifarious, and more receptive to cross-fertilizations (Coakley: 2002). Possibly, this is an intimation of a post-modern culture influencing collective identifications, and to which European integration has also contributed all over the continent (McCall: 1999, 193-206). On the other hand, what are we to make of the quagmire in which the peace process, especially in its political dimension, seems to have bogged down into? Back in 1998 the Good Friday Agreement was greeted as the culmination of a development involving the whole of Europe, and having at its heart the transformation of the very concept of nation. “The new question is ‘Can people at the end of the twentieth century live without knowing that they belong, once and for all, to a well-defined nation?’” Fintan O’Toole asked. “The peace deal is based on the belief that the answer is yes”, he continued, as “nations exist in the mind”. Thus Northern Ireland “has become a new kind of political space. Its people are in an extraordinary position – free to be anything they can agree to become. They have escaped from nations” (O’Toole: 1998, 54 and 56).

Nowadays it is difficult to deny that this new kind of political space has not thrived, and that, if Northern Ireland then led the way, Europe has not followed, notwithstanding the widening and deepening process of integration which has lately been renewed. The rise of ethno-populist or markedly euro-sceptic forces Europe-wide testifies to a resistance to social and cultural transformations, especially as regards new concepts of citizenship. The present divisions within the EU concerning war, transatlantic relations, possible future enlargements, the federalist or intergovern-

² The surveys referred to are the 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Time Survey and the 1993 *Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey*, as well as Eurobarometer surveys.

³ I write “Europe” in inverted commas when I mean Europe specifically as a polity or as a social, political and economic project.

mental features of “Europe”, touch the very rationale of the European project. The rhetorical justification of war as a means to impose democracy, human rights and disarmament, fight terrorism, and even prevent attacks, which the Blair government in particular has made its own, disavows in practice the methods and principles on which the Northern Ireland peace process has been built. These factors have *discursively* re-launched the national state as the almost exclusive political actor, and reduced alternative political spaces. In such circumstances the Northern Ireland peace process, based as it is on consensus and inclusion, power-sharing and sovereignty-pooling, dialogue and external mediation, “constructive ambiguity” and accommodation of zero-sum national aspirations, as well as on the premise of a deep transformation of the national state itself, can hardly be enhanced as it would need in order to move to a stage of mutual trust and reconciliation. The two communities in Northern Ireland are rather encouraged to hold their ground, try to gain more, and go on pursuing their own mutually exclusive national goals by other means, at the expense of the “middle ground” or the “people in between”.

European integration has rarely been considered in relation to nationalism and ethnonational conflict. Consequently, most accounts of European integration read inevitably like success stories with minor setbacks now and then, while European contributions to conflict resolution appear in isolation from the wider context of integration, and quite detached from the developments within it. In this paper I consider some moments of the nexus peace/national question/European integration in relation to Northern Ireland, mostly from a historical perspective. What follows is divided up into three sections. In the first I argue that distinctive historical experiences have positioned the British Isles and continental Europe (especially the six countries involved as first in the ECSC and the EEC) differently in the matters of borders, sovereignty, integration and conflict resolution. All these factors were already evident when the approach to European integration was essentially functionalist. By way of example I will draw a brief comparison between South Tyrol and Northern Ireland. In the second section I consider how attempts at the political integration of Europe were predicated on transnational approaches, as can be seen most notably in the Haagerup Report on the situation in Northern Ireland, issued by the Political Affairs Committee of the European Parliament in 1984, and in the development of trans-state regionalism. Finally, I list some factors that have lately re-launched the structures and the ideology of the national state, and the challenges

they raise both to European integration and the peace process in Northern Ireland in the present times.

2. The legacy of World War Two: Border matters and European integration

During World War II the sense of a crisis of the national state became widespread. Not only had nationalism, in its fascist and nazi variety, plunged Europe and the world for the second time into a carnage. The experience of exile and antifascist struggle, the impotence of national states to resist the onslaught of occupation by themselves, the fracture between collaborationists and Resistance fighters (both claiming to act in the name of the nation) in all occupied countries, the only hope for deliverance coming from the outside, the transnational nature of the antifascist movement, the transnational experience of the horrors of concentration camps, all this also questioned the structures and the rationale of the national state itself. In particular, it was the principle of absolute national sovereignty which came first under critical review, as it was seen to lead to authoritarianism in domestic affairs, and to war between states.

The idea of a new Europe – construed as a federation or as “United States of Europe” – spread with amazing simultaneity in various non-communist Resistance groups, particularly in France, Holland, Germany, Italy and Poland, most often independently of each other and even unbeknownst to each other. A flowering of federalist manifestoes and declarations attempted to direct post-war future towards a European federation⁴. One of these, the 1941 Italian Ventotene Manifesto, stated among other things:

The uselessness, even harmfulness, of organizations like the League of Nations has been demonstrated: they claimed to guarantee international law without a military force capable of imposing its decisions and respecting the absolute sovereignty of the member States. The principle of non intervention turned out to be absurd [...]. The multiple problems which poison international life on the continent have proved to be insoluble: tracing boundaries through areas inhabited by mixed populations, defence of alien minorities, seaports for landlocked countries, the

⁴ On all this see Lippens: 1968; Graglia: 1996; Malandrino: 1998, 109-115; Niess: 2001; Preda: 2004, 512-516.

Balkan Question, the Irish problem, and so on. All matters which would find easy solutions in the European Federation, just as corresponding problems, suffered by small States which became part of a vaster national unity, lost their harshness as they were turned into problems of relationships between various provinces⁵.

To be sure, to contemporary ears the *Ventotene Manifesto* might now sound blissfully unaware of the tensions and the coercion historically involved in incorporating “small states” into “a vaster national unity”, or in reducing them into “provinces”. What is significant, however, is that in this period the whole system of relationships within the polity was being rethought. This is also testified by another strand of European federalism which was concerned with sub-state relationships: in a time when sub-state nationalist movements, as in the Flanders or in Brittany, were deeply discredited by their associations with collaborationism, other federalists turned their attention to the oppressive centralism of the national state, and advocated internal federalization, political, cultural and administrative autonomy, and specific measures to meet the needs of ethnic, national or linguistic minorities⁶. In other words, all federalists sought in their own way to change the frame of reference of social and political life. Living in what they construed to be a revolutionary situation, they hoped the European Federation would be achieved simultaneously with the establishment of democracy, the rule of law and pluralism, as a sign of a clean break with the nationalistic, militaristic and authoritarian past.

We cannot say now whether a European Federation built on the revolutionary repudiation of nationalism would have resolved or allayed ethnonational conflicts. As it was, such a prospect had been ruled out by the American and Russian superpowers already by 1944 (Dedman: 1996, 22-24); postwar European integration took place in the context of the Cold War and was deeply conditioned (as well as initiated) by its logic and interests. Its scope was at first quite limited (to the sphere of human rights and cultural

⁵ I am quoting from the English version *The Ventotene Manifesto: Towards a free and united Europe - a draft manifesto*, in <http://www.federalunion.org.uk/archives/ventotene.shtml>.

⁶ Malandrino: 2004, pp. 111-113. This variety of federalism developed particularly in the alpine regions between France and Italy. See the text of the 1943 *Carta di Chivasso*, http://www.nostereis.org/Identita_e_mondialismo/carta_chivasso_ita.htm.

matters in the case of the Council of Europe, and to the economic sphere in the case of the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community), its method intergovernmental and functionalist, its approach elitist and top-down. Centred on the “misunderstanding” of economic integration, the functionalist framework that was established with ECSC and the EEC could be claimed by the champions of both federalism and intergovernmentalism (Baer-Kaupert: 1998, 73). Where Europe was actually going, only time could tell.

It is in fact a debated question among scholars who the actors were, and what the actual rationale and motivations were behind the first steps in European integration. A “received” narrative emphasizing the agency of movements and enlightened personalities, as well as the intention to vanquish nationalism by curbing the absolute sovereignty of the nation-states, was challenged in the recent past by the influential work of Alan Milward (1992). In the latter view European integration, far from undermining the nation state or bringing about a new type of supranational polity, was “created” by the national states themselves for their own purposes, and has in turn reinforced them. This position has not gone unopposed either. While it is by and large acknowledged that the primary actors in European integration were the reconstructed national states, nonetheless the ideas, visions and projects behind individuals and movements do have significance as “mental maps” (Murray and Rich: 1996, 1), influencing in some measure how “Europe” is imagined, experienced and devised in various contexts. Hence the relevance of this debate to questions of conflict resolution: as ethnonational conflicts touch the nub of nationality principle (i.e. issues of sovereignty, citizenship, identity, territorial integrity, coexistence, community relations, etc.) in a very concrete, daily-life way, the strategies for their transformation can be considered a critical test of the nature, motivations and direction of European integration.

After World War II some state borders in Europe staid in place and others changed again – this time however with little or no pretence of serving self-determination, but only according to a balance of coercion set by the superpowers. And borders were meant to be unchangeable. National claims were to give way to loyalty to the military/economic/ideological block one’s country belonged to; national interests were to be articulated in accordance to those of the respective superpowers. The discredit of nationalism, compounded by more stringent standards in anti-dis-

crimination laws and by the spread, in the Western world, of modernization theory, implied that the national states more or less ceased to *actively* pursue the reflection of their own presumed ethno-cultural make-up in their polities (though the perception of minority rights as distinct from human rights and outside the province of “internal matters” has been developed only in recent years, especially after 1989). At any rate, in continental Europe traditional national narratives and self-conceptions had been badly disrupted by the events of the war. National actors wishing to reconstruct continuity, righteousness or self-confidence in their collective narratives could do so only at the price of oblivion, silences and omissions. In the six countries that formed the ECSC in 1951 and the EEC in 1957, the functionalist discourse of European integration may well have provided a new framework within which to heal the traumas of the war. The focus was on economic benefits and technical linkages among policy areas, which was supposed to create practical solidarity, re-position conflicting interests, and lead to integration spill-over and mutual interdependencies. Its success story is of course provided by Franco-German reconciliation and partnership (Stetter, Albert and Diez: 2004, 3-4).

There were obvious limits to this discourse in terms of conflict resolution. The most evident was that it ultimately rested on “negative” motivations, such as a “balance of coercion” or the understanding that pursuing a “nationalistic” course of action would bring clear material or political disadvantages. On the one hand this is what made it “work” in the case of the six ECSC/EEC countries and what allowed it to be successfully “imposed” on the new Eastern European EU members. It is on the other hand revealing that while the 1993 Copenhagen criteria for the accession of new member countries to the EU explicitly include the protection of minorities, the EC/EU itself never had an internal policy towards minorities or minority rights, thus causing critics to speak of a “double standard”⁷ (apart from some initiatives undertaken by the EU and indirectly affecting minorities, as illustrated in de Witte (2002), the most committed EU acknowledgment of minority rights so far is to be found in the 2004 Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, where in Part I, Title I, Article I-2 “the rights of persons belonging to minorities” are grounded in “the Union’s values”). As the minority question shows, primacy of national gov-

⁷ On this matter see de Witte (2002).

ernments, reticence and caution characterized the overall approach to ethnonational conflict resolution, and has by and large continued to do so even though European integration has greatly expanded and deepened since the mid-1980s. Moreover, the sweeping condemnation of nationalism – especially sub-state nationalism – did not encourage a clear-headed perception of the causes and dynamics of ethnonational conflicts, let alone lay the groundwork for dialogue and mediation. Nor did this approach have specific answers to the problems of communities living side by side in conflictual circumstances, its stress being on inter-state conflict. The countries internally afflicted by ethnonational conflict had to work out solutions to questions of coexistence by themselves.

Yet this approach did have positive developments as well. The fact that borders, which could not be changed fostered the consciousness of the arbitrariness and injustice of *all* borders, which is in itself a way to promote peace, as efforts to “right” a “wrong” border would inevitably lead to strife and further injustice. Accommodation of ethnonational minorities remains the only viable solution, albeit not an easy one to accept or pursue for all the parties concerned, and liable to be met with overt or covert resistance. In this context, however, *ethnos* and *demos* cannot neatly coincide any longer, a space is thus produced which is highly contested, the site of clashing, totalising ethnic identities, but where plural identities, alternative outlooks and narratives, and cross-community encounters can develop and question binary contrapositions. Moreover, European integration itself has also meant learning a methodology of negotiation, cooperation and compromise which may well tend “to blunt the sharper separatist feelings. (...) [T]he capacity to generate sophisticated compromises on complex matters, which West European politicians and officials have learned through their participation in the EU decision-making process, is fundamentally at odds with the radical and uncompromising attitudes traditionally displayed in ethnic conflicts within nation-states” (de Witte: 2002, 155).

The conflict in South Tyrol is significant in this respect. The post-war “balance of coercion” set definite limits to the conflicting aspirations of the parties: South Tyrol would not be annexed to Austria or become independent; Italy could not continue its assimilationist policies, and *had* to grant special autonomy to the region and cultural rights to its German- and Ladin-speakers. Nevertheless, it took the 46 years between the 1946 Gruber-De Gasperi Agreement and the formal conclusion of the conflict in 1992 be-

fore this set solution also became “agreed”. Since 1972, the year when the new Autonomy Statute came into force, the conflict has become “civilized and institutionalized” (Kager: 1998), although it took 20 years to implement all its measures. These include the establishment of a consociational democracy at a regional scale (Markusse: 1999); equal status of the languages and cultures (as from 1976 a certified command of both Italian and German is required as a precondition for employment in the public sector); a system of ethnic proportion (quotas according to the census proportions) in public employment and the allocation of social welfare and services; territorial autonomy both at regional level (where the majority of the overall population is Italian) and at provincial level (in the South Tyrol province the majority is German) – i.e. *double autonomy*. Cross-border relations have also played a role in decreasing the alienation felt by the German-speakers: the European common market has enabled unhindered economic links with Germany, thus connecting an area quite peripheral in the Italian economy with Europe’s economic heartland; some specific arrangements with Austria were also needed (from border trade of agricultural products to the possibility for German-speakers to have their Innsbruck academic degrees legally recognized or to get in Innsbruck specialised medical treatment unavailable in South Tyrol, with the Italian National Health Service covering the costs) (Markusse: 1999). At present, Austria’s accession to the EU in 1995, the common belonging to the Schengen area, the ample territorial autonomy enjoyed by South Tyrol, the establishment of a “European Region” made up of the Austrian *Land* Tyrol and the Italian provinces of South Tyrol and Trentino, as well as the common currency, have effectively reduced the border to an administrative boundary (Woelk: 2001, 105) and taken care of the territorial issue.

In this post-conflict stage however there are also problems, which (as in the post-Agreement Northern Ireland) concern community relations in the first place. Even in its sharpest moments the conflict in South Tyrol was obviously much less violent than in Northern Ireland, and the population at large was, apart from few exceptions, not hit by acts of overt violence. Still, people in South Tyrol continue to lead their own life in parallel communities and institutions, with little trust, contact or integration between the different groups. Ethnic identity is in fact institutionalised in a more pervasive way than in Northern Ireland: failure to declare one’s language group at the time of the census means forfeiture of the right to stand for public office, be employed in schools or in the

public administration, or to benefit from public housing. Positions that are vacant for lack of qualified applicants from one ethnic group can be given to members of the other ethnic groups only temporarily and for non-renewable periods. Thus the children of mixed parentage, bilingual people, people of other ethnic groups and whoever wishes to escape the ethnic cage are particularly penalized. Since during the fascist regime Italian immigration was encouraged in order to “Italianize” South Tyrol, German-speakers have been particularly wary of assimilation through contact. In the pre-1972 negotiations they insisted on the preservation of the ethnic character of the *territory* as well (i. e. not just of the German-speaking population as the Italian government was prepared to concede, which they considered insufficient to prevent assimilation) (Wolff: 2003, 131-132). Under the present arrangements the *Südtiroler Volkspartei* (SVP), the party which collects the great majority of the German votes, has tried to prevent cultural contamination or/ the blurring of communal boundaries, and has opposed measures designed to bring the two communities together, such as the early teaching in German to Italian children, bilingual schools, or an “inter-ethnic” approach to history. The Italian-speakers, who do not enjoy the same communal cohesion as the German and Ladin groups, have found themselves after 1972 on the losing side for being often monolingual or for working disproportionately in the public sector which used to be their precincts. They are thus markedly dissatisfied with the way the “Autonomy” has been implemented, and express their insecurity and frustration by emigrating or increasing the share of votes for the nationalist Right (formerly neo-fascist MSI, now post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale).

However, another line of development – mostly provided by the *territorial* dimension (Woelk: 2001, 116) – has to a certain extent mitigated and counteracted the communal segregation which those very measures designed to resolve the conflict would have left untouched. The relatively homogeneous distribution of the ethnic groups on the territory made the system of “double autonomy” a viable strategy for conflict resolution (Schnecker: 2002, 343-351), especially in that the double autonomy allows an alternating change of perspective between majority and minority positions (Woelk: 2001, 116.). Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s there arose a lively grassroots movement, mainly around the late Alexander Langer (who was MEP for the Greens from 1989 to the year of his death in 1995), opposing the ethnic proportion, communal segregation, the ethnonational way, and advocat-

ing coexistence, cultural pluralism and European integration (Langer, 1996). This movement has always been the expression of a minority, but it has been keeping a high profile. And some changes have been brought about. Since 1991 the census has included the option “other” for the benefit of bilingual people and other EU citizens (although a second option must still be indicated in order to enjoy one’s civil rights to the full). The language examination was reformed in 1999, so as to increase the number of passes (till then 15%) (Wolff: 2003, 144); a recent ruling of the EU Court of Justice has countenanced the use of other language certificates to prove the command of the language, so as to avoid discrimination of applicants coming from other regions of Italy or other EU countries. The principle of the ethnic proportion is being applied with more flexibility. The 2001 Reformed Autonomy Statute has increased the autonomy of the two provinces, and increased and formalized the participation of the Ladin-speakers in the political process, thus moving “beyond the traditional Italian-German dichotomy” (Wolff: 2003, 148). More relaxed relationships have been detected, especially among people of the younger generation; intermarriages are increasing (Kager: 1998)⁸. Interethnic organizations now include the Green Party, the confederal trade-unions, some cultural associations and some left-wing social movements. This process may still have setbacks as well, as is testified by the result of a referendum held in Bolzano in late 2002 on the re-naming of the square around the fascist victory memorial: “Peace Square” (Friedensplatz/Piazza della Pace), as the municipality had decided to rename it, or “Victory Square” (Siegesplatz/Piazza della Vittoria), the old name which Alleanza Nazionale wanted to restore? 30,900 voters of the predominantly Italian-speaking town voted the old name back, against 19,000 nays. Which shows how tensions may in fact be mounting surreptitiously under the surface of one of the most celebrated models for conflict resolution⁹, and how a highly controversial symbol can mobilize communal feelings of frustration by its very abrasive and potentially disruptive significance, despite being quite irrelevant

⁸ Stefan Wolff interestingly writes: “In contrast to Northern Ireland (...), where carefully selected memories have been preserved over centuries and shape mutual community perceptions until the present day, the memory of the fascist period is barely present as a significant feature of identity among the younger generation of South Tyrolese, and is one factor that has contributed to a greater openness toward Italian culture” (Wolff: 2003, 132).

⁹ See the comments reported in Paris (2002).

to the present times (or perhaps because its very irrelevance can all the better convey anger and protest).

The British Isles as a whole had altogether different experiences during the war and the post-war period. During World War II Éire had been neutral; Britain had been sorely tried by the war, but had not known occupation, deportations, the division between collaborationism and Resistance, denationalisation. Far from being disrupted, received national narratives and concepts of national sovereignty were if anything reinforced. In the post-war stages towards European integration, however, Irish leaders looked to “Europe” as a way to shake off the trammels of an imbalanced, historically charged, now stifling, binary relationship with Britain, and the young Republic of Ireland was among the founding members of the Council of Europe in 1949. Attitudes could vary, from that of two ministers in the Costello government, Seán McBride and James Dillon, who “openly supported the federalist cause in Europe” (Ottoneo: 2004, 235), to the more “Eurosceptic” one of Éamon de Valera, then at the opposition¹⁰. In the following years, though, internal considerations, starting from the state of the Irish economy, remarkably conditioned Ireland’s interests in the European project. The question of Partition and Northern Ireland loomed large in the minds of the Irish delegates to the Council of Europe and in their speeches as well, much to boredom or bafflement of the delegates from other countries, who on their part were preoccupied with Russia, the Saarland or Trieste, or were grateful to Churchill for “launching” European integration (Hederman: 1983, 28-36). But the Irish delegates hoped “to sway their continental audience to put some pressure on Britain to change a situation which they considered to be unjust and a source of potential trouble between Ireland and Britain in the future” (Hederman: 1983, 32). Unlike in continental Europe, the decision over a disputed border appeared to rest, illegitimately or not, with Britain only, as it always had.

Despite the different wave-lengths, in this respect, from the continental partners, on the Irish side “Europe” came to be seen as the framework in which progressive integration in agreed matters would lead to the eventual unification of the island by goodwill only, without force or coercion. This view, derived from the then

¹⁰ For an example see the extract of a 1955 speech in the Dáil quoted in Hederman (1983, 49).

widespread (neo)functionalist assumptions, and based on a deep misunderstanding of the actual Unionist position, was taken up especially by the modernizers who succeeded de Valera in 1959. Unionist modernizers in Northern Ireland, too, adopted a different version of the same view, maintaining that as Ireland was economically dependent on the UK, growing economic integration would, besides diminishing sectarianism and antagonism, lead rather to a united British-Isles framework than to Irish unity (an argument Republicans accepted, thus opposing European integration) (Dixon: 1994, 168-169). However, the national implications of the Irish pro-Europe stance were not lost on Unionists at large, who became increasingly¹¹ hardened against a (mainly Catholic) institution advertising vaguely defined political ends and trespassing on state sovereignty – especially now that Northern Ireland itself was being challenged by civil-rights and Nationalist agitation and brought to the bar of international public opinion, as it was drifting into brutal ethnonational conflict. Pro-European Unionists were the liberal “moderates”; hardline Unionists were hostile to “Europe”. By the time of British and Irish accession to the EC in 1973, when the conflict was at its most violent stage, the majority of Unionists were firmly nested in the anti-Europe camp.

Granted the specific conditions and developments of the conflicts in South Tyrol and Northern Ireland, a tentative comparison can still be drawn. The practical impossibility to reverse the internationally guaranteed post-war settlement had a mitigating influence in the first case. The parties were “compelled” to negotiation and agreement. As the contested border eventually lost significance, the territory has become the site where civic integration is striven for, counteracting the existing communal segregation. In Northern Ireland the *border* has been at the heart of the conflict, and no “solution” aiming to have the slightest chance to succeed has ever been able to ignore or “transcend” it. The repeated stalemates which have bedevilled the post-Agreement stage up to now show that the conflict goes on, especially around issues of symbolic relevance which can establish a symbolic victory or defeat. As Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd put it, “if the Good Friday Agreement resolved the issue of sovereignty at the formal-legal level, it did not do so at the political-substantive level, nor has it removed it from the terrain of active political struggle” (Ruane and

¹¹ Consider the ever-dwindling number of Unionist supporters of Britain’s accession to the EEC at each parliamentary voting in Dixon (1994).

Todd: 2001, 936). Although wider and wider sections of the unionist and nationalist community now frame their respective national aspirations in terms of “civic nationalism”, neither side has succeeded in convincing the other to settle with one’s national framework (McGarry: 2001). Consequently the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic may now have shrunk into insignificance according to the Good Friday Agreement, but it has been symbolically replicated throughout the territory of the province, particularly in its towns. In this context, if civil-society, cross-community or conflict-resolution organizations have been instrumental in bringing about the conditions which made the Good Friday Agreement possible, they appear to be in no position on their own to lead the way out of the present stalemate, also because of the variety of their nature and objectives (Cochrane: 2001).

Another element of difference has been the ideological resources of conflicting nationalisms. In South Tyrol the guilt of both nationalisms before and during World War II, the defeat of fascisms, and the establishment of democracy signified a break in collective narratives and identities, which facilitated the eventual rise of interethnic movements (especially in the 1968 and post-1968 generation, and to the left of the political spectrum) highly critical of both “traditions”. Albeit destined to be a minority for the foreseeable future (vested interests do favour and reproduce communal polarization), by advocating cultural pluralism and individual rights such movements have contested ethnonational communalism, including those aspects provided for by the final settlement, and pointed to alternative paradigms of coexistence. In Ireland, on the other hand, the colonial roots of the Irish Question, its very length, its all-pervasive influence in as good as every aspect of life, and the deeper intercommunal enmity made it impossible to circumscribe “nationalism” to a determinate moment in history, to a determinate frame of mind, or to determinate social and political conditions. Either conflicting nationalism could appeal to one’s own tradition of (struggle for) freedom and democracy; each could accuse the other of being reactionary and illiberal or undemocratic. Since the outbreak of the conflict in the closing 1960s the necessity to stand by one’s community, and the lack of significant fractures in one’s national narrative have strengthened the ideological resources of both unionism and Irish nationalism, and impaired the ability of cross-community organizations to formulate a feasible alternative. Thus the assumption that economic integration would resolve ethnonational conflict has been

proved a fallacy, but the experiences of the war and post-war period did have a decisive impact on such conflicts which should not be undervalued.

3. Crossing the borders: political processes and Europe of the Regions

If the split in Northern Irish opinion on European integration did not at first have particular repercussions, matters became more complex at the latest with the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979, as it had become clear that the neo-functional-ist way was hardly going to have any positive significance for the Northern Ireland conflict (Guelke: 1988, 153-158).

From the perspective of European integration, the first direct election of the European Parliament represented a watershed between the crises and the relative lull of the previous years and the reform plans and changes of the following decades (from the developments of the European Monetary System to the Single European Act, the Maastricht Treaty and beyond). It also had great symbolic significance in itself, as it had been the result of a grass-roots campaign aiming to re-launch the *political* process in Europe from the bottom up (Preda: 2004, 531). So the Parliament that convened in Strasbourg on 17 July 1979 was very conscious of its democratic legitimisation and was determined to make the most of it. Its very limited powers made it a forum where matters of principle could be “safely” debated (Baer-Kaupert: 1998, 74), thus giving it moral authoritativeness and the role of the conscience of Europe. This Parliament also meant to take the lead in the attempts to reform the European Community, as it did on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli, one of its members who had been a co-writer of the *Ventotene Manifesto* during his imprisonment by the fascist regime and had afterwards served on the Commission. On 14 February 1984 the plenary assembly of the EP adopted the Spinelli-inspired Draft Treaty Establishing the European Union (237 votes to 31 with 43 abstentions), which aimed to transfer some of the legislative power to the European Parliament, strengthen the powers of the Commission, and transform the Council of Ministers into a second Chamber, along the lines of the US Senate or the German *Bundesrat*. The Draft Treaty was eventually rejected by the European Council, which preferred other more cautious measures leading eventually to the Single European Act (adopted in December 1985).

It was in this Parliament that the first discussions of Northern Ireland took place at EC level, from the hunger strikes to the plastic bullets. It was this Parliament that in March 1984, much to the displeasure of the British Prime Minister, debated the Report on the situation in Northern Ireland prepared by the Danish MEP Niels Haagerup, and passed a resolution on its findings by 124 votes to three with 63 abstentions. In the context of the early 1980s, Northern Ireland appeared to be the trouble spot in the Europe that was coming into being, and the European Parliament felt it had the right and the duty to appraise the state of affairs in Northern Ireland and to put forward suggestions. They were however ignored by the Council and the Commission, as they were considered too politically sensitive (these EU institutions became involved in Northern Ireland only ten years later, at the invitation of the British and Irish governments, when the ceasefires had made direct European attention less controversial) (Salmon: 2002, 353). Though “Europe” could not aspire to play any consequential part in the transformation of the conflict, it is nonetheless significant that both the British-Irish process and major integrationist reforms of the EC were initiated in the mid-1980s – their fruits would eventually ripen in the following decade. Considering the new ideas which had come from the New Ireland Forum in 1983-1984, one can see a new approach emerging, whose pillars are the production of transnational/transterritorial space and a realignment of identity permitting a plurality of non mutually exclusive identifications and, in particular, identification with “transterritorial *space*, as well as territorial *place*” (McCall: 2001, 13, emphasis in the text). The Haagerup Report¹² can be considered one of the earliest documents of such approach in relation to Northern Ireland, all the more “candid” as it was produced by a body with still very limited powers and therefore less conditioned by official politics.

In this report and in the resolution, the conflict is recognized as one “of conflicting national identities”¹³, explicitly taking leave from an established tradition which, especially in continental Europe, explained the “Troubles” in terms of religion or of class (*Re-*

¹² N. J. Haagerup (1984), (henceforward *Report*). On the *Report* see Hayward (2004).

¹³ *Report*, 7, M; “Resolution on the Situation in Northern Ireland”, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, No C 117 (30.4.1984), pp. 53-55 (henceforward *Resolution*), p. 54, N.

port, 27 and 51). Significantly, neither identity or aspiration is regarded as somehow more “legitimate” than the other, or as carrying the seeds of resolution in itself (the description of Northern Ireland as a “constitutional oddity” actually refers to the peculiar autonomy in the Stormont regime and to the conditions of direct rule, rather than to the fact itself of its belonging to the UK; see *Report*, 37-41). Whereas “nobody should question the right of nationalists to demand and to hope for Irish unity”, on the other hand “a British withdrawal would not still the violence [...] but rather increase it to civil war proportions” (*Report*, 70-71). Thus “there is no definite solution to the problems of Northern Ireland which could expect to satisfy everybody [...] or the large majority of the two communities” (*Report*, 69). Instead, “progress can and should be made within the present constitutional framework without prejudice to the possible future changes *under different conditions than those prevailing today*” (*Report*, 73, emphasis in the text). This prospect of a long-term change in the constitutional status of the province as the result of a *process* does represent a departure from the principle of the unchangeableness of borders, but in this way it sets the framework for the production of transnational space, easing “the pressures for constitutional changes” (*Report*, 74). The Report suggests “the establishment of joint British-Irish responsibilities in a number of specified fields, politically, legally and otherwise” (*Report*, 73); the Resolution urges “the closest possible cooperation between the United Kingdom and the Irish Governments” (*Resolution*, 54, L) and “the creation of new arrangements which have the agreement of both sections of the population and of the United Kingdom and Irish Governments”, and which “would make it possible for the Community to intervene more productively [...] for the restoration and development of social and economic life” (*Resolution*, 54, M).

The two governments are called on the “to use their influence with the two communities in Northern Ireland to bring about a political system with an equitable sharing of government responsibilities, which would accommodate the identities of the two traditions” (*Resolution*, 55, 14), and “to set up [...] a joint Anglo-Irish parliamentary body with representatives of the two Parliaments and of any elected body truly representative of Northern Ireland, and [the EP] offers to have members of the European Parliament take part in such a body” (*Resolution*, 55, 15). The basic assumption of this approach is similar to the one underlying the Good Friday Agreement: as the claims of neither side are acknowledged to be more “deserving” than the other, the “two traditions” need to be

recognized and accommodated, with the hope that in an “agreed” and peaceful context both “traditions” would open to each other, become blurred and be transformed. Long-term change in the constitutional status of the province is provided for, but more as a way to defuse the constitutional question itself and to create an “agreed” context than as the “righting” of a “wrong” border.

Such an approach as the one exemplified by the Haagerup Report was bound to raise controversy between the parties of the Northern Ireland conflict. The constitutional nationalists (especially in the person of John Hume) have become strenuous supporters of the European project and tried to involve “Europe” as much as possible into Northern Ireland. Unionists have opposed all European interventions, which they suspected of being in the Nationalists’ interests, and have aligned themselves in the main with the Eurosceptics in the defence of the prerogatives of the sovereign states. Even those liberal Unionists who are identified as “pro-Europeans” generally support the framework of the “real-existing” EU without envisioning any different European arrangements and with no time for post-nationalist suggestions. A common complaint, on the other hand, concerns the “exception” to the rule of the unchangeableness of borders made by European institutions in relation to Northern Ireland (Alcock: 2001, 172).

In fact matters are more complex than that. A traditional Irish nationalist approach, like Neil Blaney’s, cut as little ice with the European Parliament as Paisley’s and Taylor’s Unionism¹⁴. Hume was able to attune the language of his “neo-nationalism” to the “post-nationalist” language of Europeanism, stressing pluralism, interdependence, inclusion, consent, human rights, transterritorialism and common European space (McCall: 2001, 14), anticipating the developments of other sub-state nationalist movements (Keating: 2001 and 2004), and discursively according the goal of an Ireland unified by peaceful means with the larger one of the removal of frontiers and divisions in Europe (Guelke: 1992). What instead mars the Unionists’ case – the appeal to unchangeableness of borders as elsewhere in Europe – is their refusal to “dilute” the ethnocultural character of their state to accommodate their internal minority. Thus their defence of the border, coupled with that of traditional state sovereignty and of undiluted Britishness, is seen by most Europeans as part of the problem, not of the solu-

¹⁴ Blaney eventually voted against the Resolution attached to the Haagerup Report, along with Paisley and Taylor (Guelke: 1988, 160).

tion. All the more so as their argument involves an area which is seen as *already* integrated in an extraordinary and exemplary way: *the British Isles* themselves. The Haagerup Report states that despite their “bitter political quarrels”, the peoples of the two islands and of the two parts of Ireland “are mixed up together in a way that is *unique* in relations between independent sovereign states”, and mentions the civil and political rights granted to the citizens of one state residing in the other, the lack of control on immigration, the many important institutions organized on an all-Ireland basis, from the churches to the trade unions and sports (*Report*, 60, my emphasis). In an ever-integrating Europe such a “peculiar relationship” may well appear as just what all the Continent should tend to. In this context, a future removal of the Border is generally accepted, as it would not be considered as potentially destabilizing as elsewhere. So, it is paradoxically the very legacy of the Union that weakens the Unionist stance.

Unionists’ alienation from the European project must by no means be “essentialized”. There is much already which might make Unionism more attuned to post-national and Europeanist discourses, starting from the multi-national dimension in the post-devolution UK itself. What is positive in the “peculiar relationships” between Britain and Ireland could also be seen as a possible way for Europe to follow. In principle, a less tense relationship with “Europe” might encourage the development of that “civic unionism” that has all too often been missed in Northern Ireland (Porter: 1996, 169-213), and enhance the manifold strands in Ulster Protestant Unionist identity (McCall: 2003, 32) (the ties with Scotland, for example), which are at present as good as elided by the adamant vindication of the prerogatives of the sovereign state (Picard: 1992). As is often the case in ethnonational conflicts, however, zero-sum dynamics hinder the encounter on common ground: adopting Europeanism like the Nationalists would mean pleading guilty, admitting defeat, and it would be all the more difficult since the British political tradition, as is known, is itself resistant to limitations of absolute sovereignty.

However, the relationships between Irish nationalism and Europeanism are not on their part devoid of tensions either. So far the Irish have by and large warmly supported the European project, from which they have derived obvious economic and political benefits. It is sometimes wondered whether Irish “Europhilia” will continue unabated, considering that the latest European enlargement will probably imply a reduction in the “share” of benefits for Ireland. As far as wider political dimensions are concerned,

Joseph Ruane has identified four contemporary national projects, each with its own response to “Europe”: traditional nationalism, liberal nationalism, revisionism, and the so-called de-colonization ideology (Ruane: 1994a and 1994b). Post-nationalist attitudes are represented by the federalism of Chris O’Malley and the post-modern regionalism of Richard Kearney. According to Ruane the national ideology that is most supportive of the European project is liberal nationalism, whereas all the others have stances ranging from prolematic to hostile. It is thus fair to say that in Irish cultural and political debate “Europe” is a highly contested concept, and attitudes may well be likewise unstable.

In the light of this, it can easily be surmised that the growth of Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland, and above all its overtaking the SDLP as the most voted party in the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland, may raise a challenge to the pro-European attitude of liberal nationalism or the Hume stamp of “neo-nationalism”. Although Sinn Féin has somewhat modified its view of the EU, still its political project (which is perceived by increasing sections of the Irish population to be assertive, innovative, and more sensitive to community issues) formulates a national narrative in which the European project as such hardly plays any part. Whether this will eventually give rise to tensions between Irish nationalism and “Europe”, compounded by the rise of the anti-European DUP in the unionist community, remains to be seen.

What can instead be noticed now is the fading of the idea of a post-national “Europe of the Regions”, which had been propounded mainly by John Hume and Richard Kearney. This concept gained currency in the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, when the Maastricht Treaty was beginning to give Europe the character of a “post-national” polity, with considerable transfer of sovereignty from the national states to the European level, and with visible implications for the individual citizens, from the Economic and Monetary Union to the European citizenship integrating the national one. At the same time federalisation processes were accelerating in Belgium, Spain and elsewhere, and transfrontalier cooperation was being re-launched by the Single Market Programme (O’Dowd: 2002, 118-119). In this context a regional lobby especially centred on the “strong” regions (the German *Länder* in the first place) managed to have the principle of subsidiarity asserted in the Maastricht Treaty and have a third (sub-state) level provided for in the Political Union, with the establishment of a Committee of the Regions to represent it in EU decision-making. Part of the reasons for the success of the regional lobby lay in the inclination

to grant a level next to the citizens, lest there arose widespread negative reactions to the Maastricht Treaty in public opinion (Jeffery: 2002).

The idea of a “Europe of the Regions” was eagerly seized upon as the framework in which to transcend traditional concepts of nationalism, national state and state sovereignty, to work out new social, political and cultural interactions, and thus transform age-old national conflicts like that in Northern Ireland. This surely testifies to the deep-felt *need* for alternative arrangements and the increasing exhaustion of the national state as the sole site of collective culture and citizenship rights. On the other hand, the notion of “Europe of the Regions” was not without ambivalences. It was also taken up by rightwing ethno-populist movements in continental Europe with an exclusionary intent (Salzborn and Schiedel: 2003). In practice “Europe of the Regions” has not had remarkable repercussions anyway. The “third-level” movement has failed to make its mark in the run-up to the Treaties of Amsterdam and Nice, and has since then lost momentum; the Committee of the Regions only has an advisory role, and has been made less effective by the inclusion of the communes as well, and by the objective differences between the regions themselves in terms of interests, goals, economic resources, self-governing powers, and relationships with the respective states (Jeffery: 2002, 7). Cross-border cooperation has been intensified, sustaining the transfrontier regions “as sites of interaction and exchange” and potentially favouring the development of participatory democracy (O’Dowd: 2002, 123), but the triangular relations between the regions, their states and European institutions have been changed only to a limited extent.

In this context, cross-border cooperation in Northern Ireland has similarly been a mixed success. On the one hand it has had little impact on the direct relationships between the two parts of Ireland. Indeed, it is argued, it has clashed with the reality of weak local government both sides of the Border, national antagonism and different agendas so that, according to Thomas Wilson, “the EU funding has reinforced the predominance of national identities in everyday life in the Irish borderlands, and elsewhere in Northern Ireland for that matter” (Wilson: 2000, 154). On the other hand, as Elizabeth Meehan argues, it has attracted local interests, and activated networking, voluntary activism and bottom-up cooperation, and has been accompanied by “a shift in some post-Direct Rule unionist ideas about sub-state cross-border cooperation: opposition to it at all; that it should be spontaneous, market-led or

otherwise voluntary, and, now, that it can be tolerated even with administration in joint, local hands” (Meehan: 2000, 205-206). Positive changes have certainly been effected, though the terms of the conflict have hardly been altered.

4. The return of the national state?

I spoke at the beginning of a “re-launching” (at least at discursive level) of the ideology and structures of the national state, which does not arguably foster the most adequate external context for the peace process in Northern Ireland to thrive. In the last part of this article I would like to go into this claim.

Social and political processes are complex and many-sided, and do not point to one-way directions only. Especially in matters like nationalism and European integration, which are entwined in each other and pervade all aspects of the European way of life, tensions, fractures and contradictions are to be regarded as integral parts of the picture. In this sense, the end of the Cold War implied a change in the outlooks and relationships that had determined the Northern Ireland conflict till then, and started new dynamics which made the peace process possible (Cox: 2000). European integration was gathering a new momentum with the Maastricht Treaty, further perspectives of political union were opening up, and cross-border networking was intensifying. At the same time, however, Eastern Europe was experiencing a resurgence of ethnic and nationalist mobilization, which was meant, too, to undo the Cold War state of things (or, in several, cases to survive their fall), sometimes trying to revert to an idealized form of the *status quo ante*. Western European states have not been immune, either, to the temptation of raising their national profile on the European or world stage, now that the constraint of the Cold War seemed to have fallen. This has reduced the attention for new concepts of international relations and conflict resolution, even as scholarship was increasingly occupying itself with such issues.

In the last two decades European integration has been spurred primarily by the need to face the challenge of economic globalization, and issues of citizenship have lagged considerably behind in comparison. At any rate, borders have certainly become more fluid within the EU, but they have been strengthened on the outside. The status “EU” or “non-EU” has become decisive for the enjoyment of basic rights for residents in EU countries. At the same time, borders have risen even within European countries, espe-

cially dividing nationals from foreign migrants (O'Dowd: 2003). Defences of a supposed *Leitkultur*, or leading culture, discursively reproduce the traditional ideology of the national state and contribute to a general lack of awareness for the issues that are so sensitive in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Moreover, the political levels above and below the national state have not been able to acquire political significance so as to involve the citizenry as a whole. The national states – represented in the EU by the Council – still manage most of the power and consensus; the other levels are more likely to come under the category of bureaucracy. Transnational involvement of citizens takes place mostly in social movements, hardly yet in institutions. Notably, in the Northern Irish context, the least meaningful institution of the Good Friday Agreement up to now has been the Council of the Isles, which was meant to enlarge the cross-border dimension to include the nations of post-devolution United Kingdom, as well as both parts of Ireland, but which has so far proved ineffective to change established perspective on the Northern Ireland problem.

Besides such “trends” on the background, some events appear all the more telling in this respect. One was the NATO bombing campaign over Kosovo in 1999, before the first year of the new Agreement had expired. It was widely supported by public opinion throughout Europe, especially in the West. It was presented as the only way to do something in the face of severe violations of human rights, outgrowing a sterile pacifism; the first “post-national” war waged to defend basic universal rights everywhere, even trespassing on state sovereignty. World War II was again re-evoked, and made into a myth of a “liberation war” which not only overthrows tyrants, but supposedly purges peoples of baleful nationalism. What has been subsequently pointed out, however, is the failure of the Western powers in negotiations, the fall into the trap of escalation, the failure afterwards to work out a normatively valid right of intervention, and the failure to “normalize” a conflict-torn community¹⁵. NATO was taking the opposite direction that had been taken in relation to Northern Ireland, resorting to military force and shifting issues like negotiation, conflict resolution and community building in the background. Despite the rhetoric lavished on the occasion, such a view of international rela-

¹⁵ See Scotto and Arielli (1999); Calließ (2001); Mappes-Niediek (2004).

tions did not in fact lead to greater European integration. The divisions in Europe over the 2003 war on Iraq are another case in point. All the governments supporting it have also been hindering further integration and clearly working for an intergovernmental Europe. In this circumstance, too, important lessons from Northern Ireland were forgotten (Hauswedell: 2003) – in particular, the claim to wage war to effect disarmament was in blatant contradiction with the approach pursued in Northern Ireland, and implicitly vindicates the assertion of anti-Agreement Unionists that the peace process is a sell-out and an appeasement to terrorism. A further departure from the attitude inaugurated by the Blair government, i.e. a national state unafraid to uncover and own up to the “dirty” actions committed in the name of the state during an ethnonational conflict (exemplified in the establishment in 1998 of the Saville Inquiry on “Bloody Sunday”) can be seen in the government’s decision to introduce special legislation for the inquiry about the Finucane case for reasons of “national security” (Cowan: 2004). All this seems to confirm that the peace process in Northern Ireland remains now a mostly forgotten exception in the international context. That it should also remain in a standstill, it is not surprising.

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