This article examines the relationship between the discursive character of Irish republican ideology, the ‘pluralist’ and ‘two tradition’ perspective that underpins the latter. It suggests that mainstream contemporary Republican thought is the product of changing material conditions, externally generated ideological forces and an inherited spectrum of political ideas. These ideas range from the radical and universalist to the ethnically centred and particularist. The paper further argues that it is a communalist rather than a class-based and universalist agenda within republicanism that tends to be promoted by the institutions established under the Belfast Agreement. It is in the contestation of this trend that the future potential of a positive, dynamic and radical republican politics will

Irish Republicanism and the Potential Pitfalls of Pluralism

Mark McGovern

INTRODUCTION

Republicanism, Pluralism and the Peace Protest

The Belfast Agreement, signed in April 1998 and overwhelmingly validated by simultaneous referenda both North and South of the border, signalled the end of a particular phase in the long-term dispute over the constitutional arrangements by which Ireland is governed. As such it marked a critical moment in modern Irish history; although whether or not it proves to be the starting point for a lasting settlement remains to be seen. The Agreement was also a political compromise of the principles of all those involved, though perhaps some had to go further (and with less acknowledgement) than others.

As one of the main party’s involved in the talks process, Sinn Fein represented the dominant voice of modern day Irish republicanism.¹ Through much of the Process the message of the party leadership to the republican grassroots tended to be almost self-consciously upbeat. For example, in the week that saw the setting up of the power-sharing executive in December
1999 a correspondent for Sinn Fein’s newspaper An Phoblacht (AP/RN) argued that ‘it was a good time to be a republican’ (AP/RN, 2/12/99: 17). Whilst the previous five years of political machinations had been ‘confusing’, it was argued, this was so because ‘that’s winning for you’. Yet the debate within republicanism over the trajectory of the Process was often both fraught and vociferous. The President of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, himself recognised that the Agreement had been a ‘wide rubicon’ for the party to cross (AP/RN, 18/11/99: 8). For at least one republican critic the peace strategy had led the Sinn Fein leadership ‘to launch an unprecedented assault on the belief system of the republican base’ (Observer on Sunday, 4/7/99).

For the same commentator the acceptance of the principle of decommissioning was sufficient to call into question the whole reason for having conducted the war in the first place.

Certainly the party’s support for the deal involved them accepting, however reluctantly, conditions which, it could be argued, go against the very grain of the republican tradition itself. Sinn Fein suggest that the Agreement will lead to a period of ‘transition’ for an end to partition and a realisation of republican aims. This may or may not prove to be true. But, whatever progressive dynamic has been built into cross border bodies and institutions and the significant inroads made in terms of the equality agenda for northern nationalists, Sinn Fein signed up to a partitionist assembly, and acknowledged that the future re-unification of the national territory required, under the terms of the Agreement, the explicitly expressed consent of a majority of the population of the six counties (O’Leary, 1999).

There are clear and understandable reasons for Sinn Fein’s position. The social, political and indeed military circumstances within which the party was working were hardly those of their own choosing. The changing nature of Ireland’s economy, and the class re-alignments brought in its wake, impacted in a range of ways upon the attempt by Sinn Fein to move beyond the confines of its traditional base; the northern catholic working class (Shirlow, 1997). Similarly, the whole approach of the party to the business of making peace since the mid-1980s needs to be seen against the backdrop of British counter-insurgency strategies which had been designed to isolate and marginalise both the movement and the community from which it stems (McIntyre, 1995, Tomlinson, 1993). Allied to this, a sense of increasing unease with the continuation of the conflict was
undoubtedly taking shape within their own constituency ensuring that Sinn Fein, from the late-1980s onward, more and more felt the need to develop a ‘peace agenda’ (McGovern and Shirlow, 1998). The implicit recognition that republican goals were less likely to be achieved by a continuation of armed struggle than by other means led the IRA to ‘cash in their chips’ and support Sinn Fein’s emerging unarmed strategy (Rolston, 1994).

Modern Irish republicanism has itself been, in other words, through a period of profound transition. The adoption of their ‘peace strategy’ brought with it both new possibilities and new problems. The strategy was premised on the party combining with other anti-partitionist political forces in what was to become known as the ‘pan-nationalist consensus’ (Bean, 1995, Hayes, 1998; McGovern, 1997). The Dublin government, the SDLP and the pro-unification lobby in the USA were all identified as new possible sources of complimentary political leverage in the ‘battle for fresh allies’. In addition, the British government was increasingly called upon to ‘join the ranks of the persuaders’ and to recognise that its historic involvement in Ireland had created with it a ‘responsibility’ to bring about a lasting constitutional settlement; which for republicans meant rejecting its pro-unionist stance.

Inevitably the adoption of this strategy brought with it a very significant reworking of Sinn Fein’s overall political outlook. The party was basing future progress toward its goals upon its ability to influence matters through a very particular model of conflict management and resolution that it helped shape, but by no means controlled. As a consequence the party began to shift its perspectives in line with this paradigm of conflict management, and the essentially liberal bourgeois model of democracy and society upon which it is based. It is the central contention of this paper that this fundamental shift has profound implications for the politics of modern republicanism in a whole range of ways and represents the terrain upon which the future trajectory of republicanism as a political project will be fought. In particular, long-term tensions within republican ideology itself, between a left orientated, radical and universalist agenda and that of an ethnically-centred, particularist frame of thinking are being tilted in favour of the latter by a peace process predicated on a view of society best defined as both pluralist and postmodern.
Although conceptualised and explained somewhat differently, such tensions within Republicanism were alluded to by a number of contributors to the *Capital & Class* special issue on Northern Ireland published in Autumn 1999. For Colin Coulter the ‘incessant dialogue between class consciousness and ethno-national orientation’ almost invariably left the latter with ‘the last word’ (Coulter, 1999). O’Hearn *et al*., argued that what they defined as ‘conservatising’ and ‘radical’ impulses within Sinn Fein were key forces directing previous and future policy initiatives within the party (O’Hearn *et al*., 1999). In the latter case the impact of strategic and contingent concerns on intra party debates provided a central focus. Whilst in no way seeking to discount the importance of such factors this paper will rather lay emphasis upon the influence of a wider framework of external and specifically ideological forces which have shaped the form and tenor of such debates in recent years.

From this perspective an understanding of the possible routes along which Irish republicanism might go in the future necessitate a consideration of how the postmodern politics of identity have impacted upon intellectual debate and the peace process in Northern Ireland through the promotion of ‘multiculturalism’ and the concept of the ‘two traditions’.

**THE ‘TWO TRADITIONS’**

1: ‘Multiculturalism’ and the Postmodern in Northern Ireland

Multiculturalism has ‘colonised discourse on Northern Ireland’ (Rolston, 1998: 253). In essence multiculturalism calls for the celebration of difference within society as various (usually ethnically constituted) identities are seen as equally valid, culturally-constituted moments of irreducible social difference. Originally the product of liberal responses to the politics of ethnic mobilisation in the US and Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, multiculturalism represents itself as the embodiment of social and political equality. Its Northern Irish variant is the model of the ‘two traditions’.

The two traditions paradigm suggests that the Northern Ireland conflict has been the product of two hostile and mutually exclusive ethnic identities, Irish Catholic Nationalism
and Ulster Protestant Unionism. This approach to Northern Ireland, as essentially a site of ‘ethnic conflict’, has increasingly come to dominate academic as well as political debates on the root causes of political violence, particularly during the 1990s. It is a dominant model of academic explanation that should also be seen in its social and political context, the product of a specialist intelligentsia operating in a very specific material context where a premium has been increasingly placed upon rejecting critical and colonial analyses (McVeigh, 1995; Miller, 1998; O’Dowd, 1996). For example, Desmond Bell has argued that the growth of critical interest in questions of identity and difference has characterised much intellectual debate in the 1980s and 1990s in Ireland as elsewhere. In turn this has helped foster a government-led ‘search for multicultural consensus’ in the North in which the ‘motif of culture as redemptive and as an instrument of reconciliation has become a key one in the pluralistic approach’ (Bell, 1993: 144).

The ‘two traditions’ perspective has undoubtedly provided the basis for implementing policy in a variety of spheres. State centred strategies of multiculturalism have been highly evident in the implementation of educational and social initiatives through such organisations as the Cultural Traditions Group, (a sub-group of the Community Relations Council since 1990), whose remit is to ‘encourage a tolerance of diversity amongst the communities in Northern Ireland’ (NICRC, in Rolston, 1998: 256). Such policy initiatives have also helped define the wider social environment in which the politics of the peace process would ultimately take shape.

Often engendered by liberal social and political perspectives, the contemporary rationale of multiculturalism also closely parallels postmodernist sociological thought. Whilst it is difficult to make generalisations of a body of ideas that is itself highly disparate, postmodernist discourse is primarily concerned with notions of ‘identity, marginality, locality, difference, otherness, diversity and desire’ (Eagleton, 1998: 326). It posits a conception of society in which universalising concepts have been discredited as ‘Eurocentric’ and ‘essentialist’ and in which cultural pluralism is the corollary of a world characterised by fragmentation. The stress in postmodernist thought is therefore placed upon the multiplicity of social identities. In itself, of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing. However, it often leads to a cultural
relativism in which all identities are stripped of their social content and treated as ‘self-validating and mutually incommensurable’ (Eagleton, 1996: 124). Indeterminacy, invariably celebrated within postmodernist discourse, leads to an inability to distinguish between those identities that might be conducive or antithetical to key democratic imperatives. The lack of a universalising element prevents a clear understanding of social relations, ultimately resulting in a ‘questioning of equality itself’ and precluding the emergence of a transformative political project (Malik, 1996: 16).

In contrast a modernist paradigm focuses upon ‘rights, justice, oppression, solidarity, universality, exploitation [and] emancipation’ (Eagleton, 1998: 326). Such notions necessitate a universalist perspective in which it is possible to conceive of shared interests and identities capable of underpinning the pursuit of human self-determination. Material social and economic conditions are such that they insinuate the need for solidarity beyond the smallness of ethnic and other identity based distinctions for the realisation of desirable (and universally grounded) principles, such as equality.

Critics of liberal multiculturalism have also emphasised its relationship to the rise of global capitalism that homogenises global culture at the same moment it insinuates a fragmentation of the social and creates a growing emphasis on the local. Indeed, multiculturalism has been described (after Fredric Jameson) as the ‘cultural logic of multinational capitalism’ (Jameson, 1991; Zizek, 1997). In addition, in its celebration of irreducible difference, postmodernism has been castigated for replicating the very categories of racist ideological thought that it is intended to supersede. It is in this sense too, that postmodern thought has been denounced as the inheritor of romanticism’s tarnished mantle (Eagleton, 1999). Postmodern pluralism presents an apparent challenge to the powerful, but is ultimately complicit in the domination of capitalism’s contemporary form.

There can be little doubt that postmodernist perspectives have come to play an increasingly central role in debates around the conflict in Northern Ireland. Indeed ‘two traditions’ multiculturalism has been openly identified by some academic analysts not only as Northern Ireland’s version of post modernist pluralism but one which offers the best strategy of conflict resolution. Thus Cathal McCall recently described the
Cultural Traditions Group as a body designed to ‘induce self reflexivity’ that provides ‘a useful postmodernist deconstructivist critique of the cultural resource’ of nationalism and unionism (McCall, 1998). Significantly, McCall identified a benignly defined ‘postmodern’ European Union, with its prospect of ‘multilevel governance’ and ‘supranational citizenship’ as the arena within which the identity differences of Northern Ireland could be sublimated and reconciled. Such an approach is typical of the ‘Postnationalist’ agenda celebrated in the Irish political world by John Hume (along with virtually all the leading voices of the south’s political establishments) and in the academic world by, for example, the philosopher and cultural theorist Richard Kearney.

Kearney has been a key exponent of recent European postmodern philosophical trends and played a critical role in their introduction into Irish intellectual debates. He has also been a keen advocate of a ‘Europe of regions’, a reconstituted European Union as the structural formation within which localism and cosmopolitanism could be positively intertwined. Similarly Kearney has suggested that the resolution of the North’s problematic relationships would be best tackled within a new ‘dissensus’, a conception of pluralism framed by a ‘postmodern hermeneutic of indeterminate judgement’ that would therefore recognise ‘certain differends (conflicts of incompatible but equally valid interests) which cannot be resolved’. Significantly (and somewhat ironically) Kearney has also sought to combine this indeterminate postmodernist perspective with what he suggests is the ‘authentic legacy of republicanism’, a liberal interpretation of the universal principles of the enlightenment (Kearney, 1997).

This viewpoint exemplifies the aspirations of large sections of Ireland’s intelligentsia and bourgeoisie, north and south of the border, whose interests are increasingly closely linked with the island’s integration into the European Union and the global capitalist economy. Kearney’s culturalism is the high browed face of the Celtic tiger. Couched in the language of ‘postmodern resistance’ and liberal egalitarianism, the celebration of the structural mechanisms of transnational capital as supposedly empowering and progressive is a manifestation of Terry Eagleton’s critique of postmodernism as ‘politically oppositional but economically complicit’ (Eagleton, 1996: 124). In similar vein the cultural relativism of this outlook, as an
intellectual underpinning of ‘two traditions’ pluralism, wedded to the conception of such principles as justice within an ‘indeterminate’ framework, ensure that, whilst it can voice demands for identity recognition, it offers no meaningful critique of the material context of competing identity claims. In the ‘battle of ideas’ for the meaning of modern republicanism Kearney and others are essentially arguing that its ‘post-nationalist’ mode should be one in which questions of power, oppression, and other such troublesome modernist concepts are subsumed in a morass of cultural ambivalence masquerading as equality. The best future for Northern Ireland is therefore one in which pluralism is enshrined within governmental structures, and civil society is shaped by the cultural expression of ‘varieties of Irishness’ (Kearney, 1997: 89-91). Such thinking shadows the logic of the peace process and the Belfast agreement.

2: Consociationalism, Pluralism and the Peace Process

In the wake of the Belfast Agreement disagreements have been primarily focused upon those measures dealing with issues that arose as a consequence of the conflict, including the release of paramilitary prisoners, the decommissioning of weapons and reform of policing. These, whilst of great importance (particularly to those communities most directly affected throughout the last three decades) are not, however, the cornerstone of the political settlement itself. This is rooted in the new structures of government the Agreement is designed to implement.

The Belfast Agreement has been described as a consociational settlement with a ‘bi-national’ dimension (O’Leary, 1999). The model of consociational democracy was developed as a means of governing what were defined as segmented societies through four inter-related elements (Lipjhart, 1977). First, the creation of a power-sharing coalition. Second, establishing segmented autonomy. Third, instituting the ‘principle of proportionality’ and fourth, that a ‘concurring majority principle’ should guide decision-making processes (McGarry and O’Leary, 1993). Consociationalism is premised upon the idea that conflict resolution can be achieved by the management of differences that are seen, at best, as transitional
and must, in any case, be recognised and given institutional form within a framework of pluralist governance. Supporters of such a strategy of conflict management argue that this is designed to avoid the ‘compulsory integration of peoples’ and that critics who suggest that such arrangements institutionalise sectarianism are either utopian, myopic, partisan or a combination of all three (O’Leary, 1999).

Certainly the Belfast Agreement would seem to accord with consociational criteria. It allowed for the establishment of a devolved assembly and government for Northern Ireland in which the principles of power-sharing and proportionality are intrinsic elements both in terms of representation and executive decision-making. The concept of ‘parity of esteem’ is also supposed to be applied in a range of ways to ensure an element of ‘equality in cultural life’ and a bolstering of minority rights. The ‘bi-national’ (or what is sometimes erroneously considered to be the ‘post-national’) dimension of the Agreement is seen to be reflected in the greater degree of co-operation and co-ordination it allows for between Belfast and Dublin, alongside a re-negotiation of the British-Irish relationship. The logic of economic and political co-operation evident in the processes of greater European integration have undoubtedly informed these developments and such changes parallel the implementation of transnational structural change in line with global economic developments.

Taken together, these elements would clearly indicate that consociationalism lies at the heart of the Agreement. Consociationalism, it has been argued, is framed by a modernist liberal consciousness. However, the distinction between liberal conceptions of ethnic differentiation and postmodern thinking on ethnic pluralism has become increasingly blurred. Certainly in the Northern Ireland context the consociational dimensions of the Belfast agreement are viewed as the means to secure identities and thereby make them potentially permeable in the longer term, to foster the possibility of ‘mutually enriching traditions’ by denying the prospect of ‘forced assimilation’. The ability for such a strategy to deliver its desired ends might, however, be questioned. The principles of ‘power-sharing’ and ‘parity of esteem’ are premised on the idea that parties are communal representatives. When elected to the assembly parties are required to declare themselves as being representative of one or other of the ‘two communities’, though, it should
be noted, it is also possible for parties to declare themselves for neither. Given the nature of the system, however, and the ‘zero-sum’ context of Northern Ireland politics that it seeks to operate through rather than deconstruct, it could be argued that it will encourage parties to maximise their political clout by adopting an overtly communalist perspective to the process of political negotiation and horse-trading that this model of government encourages.

The Agreement was the logical outcome of a talks process that, throughout, placed the differentiation of ethnically defined communities at the centre of the political arena, on the grounds that this was realpolitik recognition of the status quo. In an essentially managerial approach, communal political elites were encouraged to arrive at a rapprochement that did not so much dismantle such divisions as re-negotiate their meaning. Indeed, the peace process strategy was one that placed great emphasis upon the politics of identity and the realm of culture and language as the context within which the apparently irreconcilable could be rendered non-conflictual. Such culturalism reflects an anti-materialist mindset that is also a hallmark of postmodern politics. In other words the logic of the ‘two traditions’ lay at the heart of the peace process, framed the Belfast Agreement and operated in tandem with a wider social environment that had in turn been conditioned by the promotion of ethnic pluralism both through the implementation of specific social policies and the general tenor of intellectual debates. Consociationalism and postmodern pluralism thus emerged as ‘mutually supportive’ processes (Wilford, 1992: 45).

The theoretical contradictions of a postmodern pluralism that is supposed to deconstruct ethnic differentiation but which essentially rarefies and reproduces such categories have therefore been replicated in the practice of the peace process and the Belfast Agreement. It is in this sense that the Agreement has been criticised for ultimately institutionalising sectarianism, ensuring that in the formal political sphere at least, the possibility of developing a politics that supersedes such ‘ethnic’ divisiveness is made less, not more likely (McCann, 1993; McGovern, 1997). The intensification of sectarian tension that has paralleled the peace process throughout, and which has been most clearly evident in the confrontations and civil unrest that have surrounded contentious Orange parades in general,
and that of Drumcree in particular in recent summers, might therefore be viewed as a consequence, rather than a contradiction, of the process.

The politics of the peace process were therefore designed to reconceive sectarian division as ethnic difference. This helped shape one of the abiding characteristics of the talks process, the dual voices of interpretation that emerged from British and Irish government officials that greeted each and every new development. Such appeals were invariably made through the logic, signs and symbols of pre-existing political perspectives to what were always regarded as two distinct constituencies. In similar vein, the process therefore sought to re-constitute those political perspectives by adapting their internal character in a very particular way. To understand how this has impacted upon the politics of Sinn Fein, and why it did so by amplifying the very aspects of republicanism that might be considered most antithetical to a politics of transformation, it is necessary to examine how modern Irish republicanism has become what it is today.

MODERN IRISH REPUBLICANISM

1: The State and Sectarianism, Experience and Consciousness

The support afforded to Irish republicanism throughout the decades of conflict in Northern Ireland has given rise to a wide range of perspectives on the roots and nature of its appeal. Antagonistic explanations have placed an emphasis upon everything from the pathological to the theological. In the latter vein, for example, Richard Kearney explained the rationale of ‘militant republican’ activists as having less to do with social and economic issues than ‘an exigency of sacrifice to a mythological Ireland’. Similarly, Sean Moran described republicanism as a ‘theology with its own morality’ that was so deeply embedded in the traditions of western Christianity that it could not surrender ‘the notion of the holy and the true’ (Kearney, 1988: 211; Moran, 1991: 9-23). Such views, again reflecting the vogue of much postmodernist sociological thought, are based upon a view of the social in which the constitution of consciousness is disassociated from any conception of an external material reality. It might also be noted that they have often paralleled,
whether wilfully or not, the state’s prosecution of a counter-insurgency strategy that was designed to contain, criminalise and depoliticise armed opposition to itself.

Conversely, other analyses have been flawed by looking at republicanism solely in its own terms and by reference to its own logic and internal dynamic (Kelley, 1988; O’Brien, 1993). As both Anthony McIntyre and Mark Ryan have pointed out, modern Irish republicanism cannot be understood unless put into the context of wider, external and often hostile forces. For McIntyre, it is British state strategies adopted from the early 1970s onward that, to all intents and purposes, defined the parameters within which ‘politically violent anti-partitionism’ became the dominant expression of modern Irish republicanism (McIntyre, 1995: 98). Mark Ryan has analysed the emergence of the peace process, and what he has called the ‘twilight of republicanism’ as primarily a product of changing global geo-political and economic realities. He points to the emergence of a post-cold war new world order as a primary and overarching influence that has ensured ‘nationalist movements are everywhere in retreat together with oppositional forces in the West’ (Ryan, 1994: 162). Such macro-level forces have undoubtedly helped shape the lived reality and experience of those who have been active in (or given their backing to) modern republicanism. In addition, however, that lived experience was the outcome of a particular interaction of material circumstance, consciousness and ideology that owed a great deal to the influence of both class and sectarian division lived at a more localised level.

There can be little doubt that the support base of both the IRA and Sinn Fein over the past thirty years has been principally found within the northern catholic working class. As a result, explaining the nature of republicanism necessitates a clear understanding of the relationship between class and sectarianism as dominant social cleavages within the North. In what remains one of the most thoughtful analyses of this issue Liam O’Dowd argued that sectarian division must be understood as a ‘material reality’ and that class relations in Northern Ireland are ‘sectarian class relations’, the product of a specific history of colonialism, capital accumulation and class struggle (O’Dowd, 1980: 25). Similarly, Frank Burton suggested that Irish republicanism emerged as the dynamic mobilisation of a ‘catholic social consciousness’ within nationalist working
class areas of the north in the 1970s (Burton, 1978). A fusion of the politics of ‘civil rights’ and ‘national liberation’, republicanism offered an historically rooted ideological resource through which sectarianised social relations, alienation from the state and the experience of conflict itself could be comprehended and shaped into an active response.

Revisionist and postmodernist perspectives tend to emphasise the over-riding importance of an historically derived mentalite, the irreducible influence of identity, or a deviant social psychology as the prime movers of republican activism. However, most accounts from those who either became involved in (or have given support to) Irish republicanism throughout the last three decades invariably evidence the importance of experience for their political engagement. Of course, there were those (such as Gerry Adams) who were always likely to become republicans having been born into the relatively small group of families with a specific history of involvement in the movement. Far more typical, however, is a story of politicisation born through experiencing a material historical process, itself shaped by class and sectarian relations, in which confrontation with the forces of the state was often direct, immediate and deeply shocking. It is in this context, for example, that Bloody Sunday was so politically significant. In other words, the politics of modern Irish republicanism were defined by the very particular circumstances facing working class catholics living in a state that had enmeshed sectarianised social relations into its structures and policies, and that was willing and able to employ its coercive capacity to maintain the same.

Within this context republicanism has therefore been the vehicle through which a large section of the northern catholic working class have articulated their anger, hopes and fears over a considerable period of time. Clearly, as those circumstances changed so too did the nature of that experience and that response. What is also true, however, is that republicanism itself, as an ideological paradigm, has offered a range of avenues and possibilities for both action and thought which have, in turn, been profoundly influenced by wider developments, both material and ideological. As the world within which modern republicanism took shape was defined by the interaction of class and ethnic tensions and contradictions, so these were refracted through the discursive elements of republicanism itself.
2: The Universal and the Particular

Irish Republicanism is the inheritor of a complex and diverse range of intellectual and ideological antecedents, many of which are often not merely competing but contradictory. Throughout a history shaped by the dynamic of social and economic development within Irish society, and the various social forces that development has unleashed, republicanism has also been deeply affected by wider international currents of intellectual thought just as Ireland itself has been anything but isolated from the influence of global economic and political circumstances. Such intellectual influences, if often only received in relatively inchoate form, have been similarly disparate. Whether in terms of Tom Paine’s ‘Rights of Man’ and Rousseau’s early romanticism, Herder’s ethnic nationalism or the call of international socialism, Catholic traditionalism, the maxims of Mao or the logic of third world national liberation, the intellectual history of Irish republicanism has been marked by the tense meeting of such externally generated influences. Such intellectual trends cannot, of course, be divorced from the realities of class positions and interests that have struggled both within and against Irish Republicanism. Indeed, diverse conceptions of what republicanism is have been the means by which class antagonisms have been articulated through it. However, these ideas have helped frame the form republicanism has taken, and what it has said, in any given place and time.

What has been left is an historical residue of ideas, symbols and signs through which the contemporary world can be viewed, understood and articulated. This does not, however, imply a single perspective. Republicanism is discursive in that it offers an internally differentiated series of ideological possibilities. It contains within it a range of exemplary models, memories, stories and rational political arguments that can be interpreted and re-interpreted through time. The ‘republican tradition’ may therefore be conceived as a discursively constituted, culturally and politically specific collective resource by which power is contested at the level of the idea.

Certain broad categories within that tradition have been identified by a number of analysts and while it may be a necessary but insufficient categorisation, Irish republicanism can be seen as containing within it both ‘ethnic’ and civic’
strands (O’Leary, 1996). In the former the emphasis upon cultural belonging is very much to the fore; the particularity of Ireland and its people identified as the key constitutive element underpinning the Irish republican and (the often linked but significantly distinct) nationalist case. The influence of romanticism in the post-enlightenment era clearly had a profound impact in this regard. The more ethnocentric versions of Irish nationalism and republicanism that have surfaced throughout modern Irish history have been the result.

The civic dimension, on the other hand, places emphasis upon universal principles, the non-ethnic-specific calls for justice, equality and human empowerment that are the celebrated legacy of the Enlightenment, radicalised and otherwise. When such universalised political goals are applied to the Irish case, it has been argued within such versions of republicanism, they legitimate and indeed necessitate calls for an end to British involvement in Ireland and the creation of an independent Republic. For human beings on the island of Ireland to be free, so the argument goes, thus must Ireland be. Indeed, it has been recently suggested, such a ‘civic’ and transformative perspective offers the basis for a specifically ‘non-nationalist’ case for a United Ireland (Eagleton, 1999).

These (often contradictory) perspectives have cohabited more or less uncomfortably, within republicanism throughout much of its history. That history is one that cannot be divorced from the context of colonialism, post-colonialism and the changing nature of contemporary capitalism. The balance of the universal and the particular, of the ethnic and the civic elements within the rhetoric of republicanism has often reflected those changing realities. This has ensured that the history of republicanism has in many ways been characterised by discontinuity. The rhetoric and political projects of Irish republicans can often seem to have little enough in common from one historical period to the next, though certain broad continuities of thought and principle are also evident; that of national self-determination being the most obvious.

The historical discontinuity within republicanism has not only reflected changing social and political circumstances but also the contest of conflicting class interests through which those circumstances are forged. The discursive character of republicanism has meant that various interests at any historical moment, and from one historical period to the next, have
struggled for hegemony by laying claim to the republican tradition. Indeed, by providing a series of historicised signs and symbols through which discontinuity could be presented as the perpetuation of unchanging political truths, such hegemony has also been grounded in the very idea of ‘tradition’ itself. It is in this sense that republicanism might be considered a highly historically-minded ideological force. ‘New’ politics, or the possibility of transformation, are almost invariably presented as the realisation of ‘traditional’ goals.

Within modern republicanism, therefore the key ideological struggles have been fought on the terrain of the ‘particular’ and the ‘universal’. The political projects of republicans have been conceived in the balance of ethnic and civic elements that have in turn reflected, more or less coherently, the changing realities within which republicans have operated and the class and other interests such projects have sought to serve. Critically, however, this process has not occurred in a vacuum but in the context of external influences, both material and ideological. These have impacted directly upon the balance of the ‘ethnic’ and ‘civic’ elements most obviously brought to the fore within republican discourse. State strategies of conflict management, the integration of Ireland into a transnational global capitalist economy, and the parallel arrival of postmodernist conceptions of the social world have all helped shape the context within which the ‘universal’ and the ‘particular’ are being constituted in contemporary republicanism.

3: Class, Ethnicity and Community

The fraught relationship of the ‘universal’ and the ‘particular’ within modern republicanism have been most evident in the expression of class, ethnicity and community as key mobilising concepts. Such a relationship, that has proved so problematic within the history of Irish republicanism, is illustrative of the wider tension between socialism and nationalism in the politics of national liberation movements. It has also been predicated on the emergence of modern republicanism as a community-based political movement, severed from a wider social base by the sectarianised social relations that have defined society in Northern Ireland.
The interaction of class, ethnicity and community as conceptual elements within the rhetoric of Irish republicanism has been noted by numerous analysts throughout the last three decades. In the 1970s Frank Burton wrote of the ‘remarkable’ nature of an ideology which could ‘express its revolutionary claims one week in a thinly veiled religious and mystical form and the next in a style and reasoning much closer to Lenin and Mao than to Aquinas’ (Burton, 1978: 75). Indeed, Burton argued that ‘doctrinal looseness’ was a key means by which the Provisionals were able to balance the conflicts and tensions existing within the community.

Jim Smyth pointed to the evident problems in Sinn Fein’s espousal of socialism in the 1980s when ‘class’ as a collective political subject stood in a fractious and (more often than not) subservient relationship to that of the ‘people’; the key conception of the nation as ‘imagined community’. In similar vein the tendency for Sinn Fein to celebrate a supposedly distinct Irish variant of socialism was seen as an inevitably flawed attempt to reconcile what are, in the last resort, incompatible political subjects (Smyth, 1991). This was similarly identified in the 1990s by Eamonn McCann, who has noted the tendency for the party to ethnicise the ever diminishing socialist content of its politics, as the party sought to distance itself from any hint of ‘some exotic sinful class of socialism’ (McCann, 1998:167).

For some this reflects an irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of republicanism that means its commitment to class politics will invariably be subverted by its nationalism. Henry Patterson contends that left-orientated ‘social republicanism’ is an illusion. Modern republicanism, he suggests, is essentially a ‘communal nationalism of grievance’ and that both its internal characteristics, and the environment within which it operates, ensure that it offers no meaningful avenues for a transformative political project (Patterson, 1997). Unquestionably Patterson’s analysis is at one and the same time both illuminating and caustic, pointing to the problematic of reconciling the universal and the particular in a form of republicanism largely confined to a communal support base. However, the rejection of a colonial dimension in his historical analysis, combined with an assumption of the positive reformist potential of the British state in Northern Ireland, tends also to define Patterson’s overtly negative
definition of all anti-partitionist politics. As a result the precise nature of the context within which a politics of communal grievance has emerged, and the possibility of social progress through a combination of class and nation, are ultimately denied.

What is clear, however, is that modern republicanism has in large part become a politics of community. In itself the very idea of community has been seen as a critical concept within the shared political culture of northern nationalists (Todd, 1991). This in turn reflected the long-term importance of ‘community’ as a lived experience for the alienated minority within the northern state. Such alienation fostered the development of a distinct communally based network of institutional and social structures through which the idea of ‘community’ was lived. In terms of its ideology, its structural form and political practice Sinn Fein has attempted to harness this phenomenon to its own political project. The battle for hegemony within catholic working class areas of the North, waged in the main by Sinn Fein with the Catholic Church from the late 1970s onward, was fought on this terrain. Modern Sinn Fein essentially emerged in the 1980s as a party that in large part forged its constituency through grassroots community activism. In turn, the ‘imagined community’ of the nation in many ways emerged as a symbolic representation of this lived ‘resistance community’. In such a way, the politics of nation and of community were symbolically and ideologically fused with one another.

The recognition of its limited appeal beyond the ‘resistance community’ was in large part responsible for the rethink that defined the emerging ‘peace politics’ of Sinn Fein from the late 1980s onward. The single greatest factor limiting the party’s ability to break out of its ghetto support was the very IRA violence that was part and parcel of the republican movements overall long war strategy. However, as the party moved toward the search for ‘inclusive dialogue’ the environment within which it would do so was being set by a social view that would in many ways encourage, rather than deconstruct, a communalist outlook, albeit one that sought to replace ‘division’ by ‘difference’. It is in this context that the politics of ‘multiculturalism’, as they have been implemented in the peace process, has impacted upon the shape of modern republicanism.
THE PEACE PROCESS, REPUBLICANISM, PLURALISM AND PROTESTANTS

It is important to stress that Sinn Fein has not, of course, assumed wholesale the spurious logic of postmodern pluralism. Nor, by any stretch of the imagination, could the party be said to support an overtly ‘postnationalist’ perspective. The party continues to argue its position through the language of rights, equality, liberty, oppression and national self-determination. Sinn Fein remains committed, for example, to the long-term goal of creating a ‘national democracy’, though their conception of what constitutes the expression of national self-determination has undoubtedly been affected by the implementation of an all Ireland plebiscite on the Belfast Agreement. In addition modern republicanism, even in terms of Sinn Fein alone, cannot be considered a monolithic political and ideological animal. Indeed, the debates that have taken place within the republican movement (particularly between an often impatient grassroots and the leadership) evidence the extent to which many are fully aware of the implications of some recent developments for the very nature of republicanism itself.

It would be untrue to say, however, that the dominant politics practised and at times espoused by the party have not been shaped by the wider material and intellectual developments that have helped engender both the specific nature of the peace process and that of the Belfast Agreement that has been its consequence. To do so would be to consider ideological debates within Irish republicanism peculiarly immune (if not hermetically sealed) from external influences. Given that the ‘two traditions’ model has been at the core of approaches to that conflict resolution strategy and as a major player in the peace process Sinn Fein has, by definition, had to reconstitute itself in relation to that agenda.

As has been argued, the peace process has sought to end a conflict defined as ethnic by institutionalising communally based politics. This has been rooted both in the model of consociationalism and the conception of ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism that has come to dominate discourse on Northern Ireland, and the overarching logic of contemporary multinational capitalism that such ideas manifest. The interaction of these processes with modern republicanism has, in turn, been dependent upon the changing material
circumstances of the ‘republican constituency’, the discursive character of republicanism as an ideological form and the political practice of Sinn Fein as a ‘party of community’.

The sectarian nature of the northern state (and the role Britain played supporting it) defined a republican politics in which the desire for equal and collective access to economic and social opportunities, along with opposition to state strategies of militarisation, marginalisation and exclusion were articulated through the signs, symbols and discourses of the ‘republican tradition’. For decades this underwrote the armed opposition to the state manifest in the political and paramilitary activism of Sinn Fein and the IRA. However, circumstances changed. State strategies have been increasingly designed to draw a significant section of the catholic community into a new social and political consensus (particularly the burgeoning upwardly mobile new catholic middle class) and to re-negotiate the British-Irish state relationship given the wider context of continental and global economic conditions (McGovern & Shirlow, 1997). The consociationalist and pluralist agenda of multiculturalism and the peace process were the result.

In turn, the logic of the peace process drew upon the more communally-orientated elements of Sinn Fein’s ideology and political practice as the means to successfully integrate the party with the political mainstream. After the signing of the Anglo Irish Agreement in 1985 (which enshrined consociationalism and ethnic pluralism as the bases for a state strategy of conflict management) Sinn Fein began to re-negotiate its own perspective in order to seize the political initiative. However, its avenues for doing so and for finding a way out of the conflict that had had such a devastating effect upon the community from which republicans came were circumscribed by this wider context. The identification of ethnic difference as the mechanism of conflict resolution conditioned the environment within which Sinn Fein’s own ‘unarmed strategy’ was developed. The reworking of Sinn Fein’s vision of republicanism was, likewise, discursively reconstituted within these material conditions of possibility. Again, it is important to stress that such shifts have not gone uncontested. Indeed, it could also be argued that, although the policy positions of the party have in the main remained wedded to radical perspectives, these have not always proved commensurate within the statements and positions adopted by the key leadership players.
However, what emerged was a new balance of the universal and the particular in which the universal subject of class became less and less apparent and the particularity of communal identities, constituted within a culturalist and pluralist framework, were brought to the fore. This process can be seen, for example, in two inter-related but distinct spheres; the relegation of socialism in Sinn Fein’s contemporary political appeal and the culturalist ground upon which the search for a rapprochement with protestants is now being made.

In the 1980s Sinn Fein was at some pains to manifest its socialist credentials. However, engagement with the peace process has undoubtedly involved a rightward shift in the public pronouncements of the party on a range of social and economic issues. The ‘battle for fresh allies’ in the creation of the pannationalist consensus brought with it a new emphasis upon political respectability and a republican version of Blairite ‘new realism’. Much of the class-based revolutionary rhetoric of the earlier period began to disappear and instead Sinn Fein repositioned itself as a social democratic voice of the centre left. Thus, in an address to the World Economic Forum in 1996 Mitchel McLaughlin (then Sinn Fein party chairperson) combined a demand for ‘economic justice for all’, and in particular an end to sectarian discrimination, with a call to the ‘local and international’ business community to play a ‘fundamental role… in securing the peace process’ (Sinn Fein, 1996). The key objectives of Sinn Fein’s current economic policy reflect this perspective. The party’s expressed desire is to provide ‘sustainable and dignified livelihoods for all citizens… to develop economic resources, human and material, to their fullest, and to create an economic base which reflects the social and cultural values of all the Irish people’. This may be considered a critique of the prevailing logic of multinational capital, but if so, it is of a somewhat muted variety (Sinn Fein, 1995).

Similarly, while the rhetoric of the radical republican tradition continues to be occasionally invoked, its revolutionary goals have been replaced with those of social reformism. This has led to some rather peculiar juxtapositions. At the 1999 Ard Fheis, for example, Gerry Adams conjured up James Connolly’s call in 1915 for the ‘reconquest of Ireland [to ensure the] social as well as the political independence from
servitude of every woman, man and child in Ireland’, to support the party’s call for local government reform. Adams also criticised the ‘hard heart of the Celtic tiger’ for failing (a la the 1916 Easter Proclamation) to ‘cherish all the children of the nation equally’ but offered little in the way of an alternative vision to the multinational dominated inward investment strategy that is the essence of the ‘Celtic tiger’ economy (AP/RN, May 1999).

That said, *An Phoblacht* recently declared that ‘the core theme of Irish republicanism’ historically has always been ‘a commitment to the creation of the economic and social conditions where the Irish people are truly free’ and so, consequently, the goal of the movement today remains that of a ‘socialist republic in the twenty first century’ (AP/RN, 25/11/99: 6). In line with this the official policy of Sinn Fein continued to denounce the national wage agreements, corporate tax incentives and property development initiatives that have been the mainstay of the low wage, multinational capital-led ‘Celtic tiger’ strategy of the southern regime in recent years (AP/RN, 25/11/99: 10-11). There is clearly ground here for potential intra-party diversity and debate. In many ways the contradictions evidenced in such debates may reflect a potentially problematic conundrum for Sinn Fein as an all Ireland party with two quite different roles in the two jurisdictions. In the north the party is set to become a permanent fixture (as long as such a thing exists) in an executive that has a shared remit for, amongst other things, economic development and investment strategies. At the same time, and for the foreseeable future, Sinn Fein is likely to base its electoral strategies in the south upon its potential appeal as a voice of radical opposition. Indeed, the space for such electoral expansion has been identified as critical to the future development of the party (O’Hearn et al., 1999: 21).

What has been striking, however, is the dilution of class as a universal and transformative political subject in the dominant statements of the party. At the same time there has been an evident emphasis upon the particularity of community-centred issues, such as a just call for an end to discrimination and ethnicity (i.e. the ‘cultural values of all Irish people’). This diminution of a class content to Sinn Fein’s politics also has direct implications for its increasing adoption of a pluralist perspective as the basis for its strategic approach toward the protestant community (McGovern, 1999).
Since the late 1980s Sinn Fein has been making increasing efforts to redefine its grasp on the position and politics of Ulster protestants. In some senses this has represented a desire to re-define the civic traditions of republicanism. However, this has been done in a very particular way. The attempt to ‘sensitise republicans’ to the position of protestants has included a series of elements. An appeal to a specifically anti-sectarian history of Irish republicanism, and of protestant involvement in that history, became increasingly prominent within republican rhetoric. At the same time the party began to take protestant fears of republicanism more seriously than before, tacitly acknowledging the alienating impact of republican violence as part of the logic of moving toward an unarmed strategy (McLaughlin, 1992a). Even more significantly the public pronouncements of the Sinn Fein leadership began to re-define pro-unionists within a ‘crisis of identity’ model, seeing them less as a supremacist community than one ‘wracked with fear and self-doubt’ (McLaughlin, 1992b).

This ‘crisis of identity’ theme was evident in a variety of ways. Occasionally Sinn Fein adopted the language and symbolism identified with a specifically ‘Protestant’ political culture in order to articulate its message. Similarly Ulster protestant distrust of Britain was recognised as a distinctive strain within protestant political culture and seen as the basis for engaging meaningful with it in the future. Above all a desire to construct political rapprochement through cultural empathy meant that republicans were called upon to approach a protestant sense of identity within its own terms, to ‘address the political perceptions held by unionism… and to engage with them on the basis of what they say about themselves and not on what we say they are’ (Gibney, 1996). This essentially multi-culturalist perspective is closely allied to a republican variant of ethnic pluralism that has similarly come to the fore in recent years. Whilst denying that there are ‘two traditions’ in Ireland Gerry Adams was also able to argue that there were in fact ‘scores, maybe hundreds [of traditions] all making up a diverse and rich culture [that] in total represent the sum of our diversity’ (Adams, 1995: 317). Such a conception of diversity is not, of course, in itself an unwelcome development and certainly represents a more conscious attempt than that previously undertaken by Sinn Fein through much of the last thirty years to break out of the confines of communalism.
However, it has increasingly done so on the basis of a culturalist perspective that in many ways echoes that conception of pluralism (evidenced in the peace process itself) which, through constituting and recognising identities as self validating, suggests that they will become more porous and, ultimately, less important. In other words, the recognition of cultural difference and distinctiveness is the first step toward superseding those identities. Culture therefore emerges as the only sphere within which the politics of anti-sectarian unity can be sited and forged.

Such culturalism, increasingly evidenced in the politics of Sinn Fein is the product of the various factors, both external and internal to the republican tradition, which have been outlined above. It is, in particular, tied directly to the marginalisation of a transcendent political subject, such as class, in the contemporary politics of the party. The ability to found a politics of transformation upon universal principles and shared material conditions, the means in other words of mobilising beyond the divisiveness of however many cultural ‘traditions’ one would care to identify, is ultimately diminished rather than increased by such an approach. It is in this sense that the party’s politics has been most profoundly influenced by the dominant conceptions of ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism in contemporary Irish society that are, in turn, the local face of the ‘logic of multinational capitalism’. Ironically, it has also been a natural corollary to Sinn Fein’s position as a ‘party of community’.

CONCLUSION

Relegating the Particular, Re-invigorating the Universal

Modern republicanism as a mobilised political ideology was forged in the interaction of two things. First, the concrete material circumstances that have shaped the lived experiences of northern working class catholics. Sectarianised social relations, the changing localised impact of global capitalism and the various British state strategies of conflict management adopted over three decades have all been dominant influences in this regard. Second, the historical residue of signs, symbols, ideas and arguments that constituted a shared social conscious-
ness within that constituency and provided a means to make meaning of such forces, experiences and actions.

The consequence of this interaction was the emergence of Sinn Fein in the 1980s and 1990s as the most prominent force in modern Irish republicanism. Largely emerging as a party of community, Sinn Fein’s politics, shaped by strands within its own discursive political tradition, the interests of an overwhelmingly working class support base and an ongoing and direct confrontation with the state, were also capable of giving expression to radical egalitarian left-orientated demands. The tense relationship of the particular and the universal was always evident in its political outlook.

However, the environment within which Sinn Fein operated began to alter from the mid-1980s onward. Transnational political institutions, designed to facilitate the multinational economy, became increasingly important for political relations in Ireland and between it and Britain. The class structure of Irish society (North and South) was shifting and breaking down traditional political alignments. The basis of the British State’s strategy of conflict management shifted from containment by exclusion to that of co-option. The influence of consociationalist and multiculturalist perspectives in intellectual debate and upon the implementation of policy became increasingly hegemonic. The twin forces of capitalist global integration and social fragmentation that are celebrated in postmodernist discourse as cosmopolitanism and ethnic pluralism were therefore replicated in the creation of the Irish peace process and had direct consequences on the political trajectory of contemporary republican politics. Sinn Fein developed an unarmed strategy rooted in a pan-nationalist consensus and a re-negotiation of its perspective on the role of the British, both of which insinuated a diminution of its socialist agenda. It also embarked upon a cultural pluralist rapprochement with Ulster protestants.

Within this context Sinn Fein’s contemporary republicanism, as a discursive fusion of the universal and the particular, has increasingly withdrawn from a class-based politics and replaced it instead by a fusion of social democratic ‘new realism’ and pluralist ‘identity politics’. In addition, this new ideological configuration has in many ways only reinforced the community-orientation of both the party’s political practice and sometime ethos. To engage with a distinct ‘Protestant’
community from the social and political base of a distinct ‘Catholic’ community is both the model promoted by the Belfast Agreement and the dominant perspective within a particularist brand of republicanism. The strategy of developing anti-sectarianism on the basis of cultural pluralism is one that therefore goes hand in hand with the overall approach adopted to the business of conflict resolution within a multiculturalist paradigm, the ‘community’-orientation of Sinn Fein and, ultimately, the logic of contemporary capitalism.

Again, it is important to emphasise that such developments have by no means been uncontested within the party. The ability to challenge the drift of party policy toward such an outcome has, however, been severely hampered by the (in some senses) confining and pervasive need to maintain solidarity in pursuit of the strategic imperative of the ‘prize of peace’. Too often oppositional voices were easily marginalised as supposedly offering nothing other than a return to a war that no one really wanted. If, in the wake of the Belfast Agreement being fully implemented, space for alternative and radical grassroots perspectives is easier to find then it is at least conceivable that the balance of the universal and the particular in the ideology of contemporary republicanism can be reforged. To do so though, it will have to operate in relation to political structures that are more likely to foster an emphasis on the latter rather than the former.

It is at least questionable, therefore, whether the strategic approach that has dominated to date is ultimately capable of moving toward the democratic imperatives that are implicit in the project of the radicalised enlightenment to which many republicans would lay claim. It might therefore be argued that, rather than reifying its ethnic and communal particularity in the context of a ‘postmodern’ framework, republicanism must re-emphasise its modernist and universalist traditions (in spite rather than because of the pressure that the peace process has engendered). This is critical if modern republicanism is to aspire to an empowering and transformative dynamic. To pursue a truly pluralist agenda Sinn Fein should be seeking to relegate the role of communal culturalism and re-invigorate a commitment to class politics.
1. Throughout this article the terms Sinn Fein and Irish Republicanism refer to Provisional Sinn Fein. Provisional Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA were created in 1970 after a split in the Republican movement from what became known as the Official IRA. The Provisionals have, since the early 1970s, been the most prominent political and paramilitary expression of modern Irish republicanism. Whilst there continue to be disparate strands of Republicanism Provisional Sinn Fein is far and away the most prominent voice of the tradition today.

References


