The Politics of Culture in Northern Ireland

Simon Thompson

In Northern Ireland, culture is one of many terrains on which political struggles are waged. The orientation of much of politics around a single axis has meant that issues which might elsewhere be regarded as ‘merely’ cultural acquire here an intense political significance. Culture is seen as one battlefield on which the broader political struggle can be fought, the interests of one’s own national community advanced, and those of the other retarded. Nor is anything in Northern Ireland ‘merely’ symbolic: in this region, symbols mark territory, reinforce identities, and perpetuate political divisions. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that both unionists and nationalists see the conflict over culture as a zero-sum game: any gain for one side must entail a loss for the other. If the institutions of the state come to bear the impress of one cultural form rather than another, or if the symbols associated with one community displace those associated with the other, then both communities will regard this as a victory for the first side and a defeat for the second.

One example which amply demonstrates these claims is the recent renaming of the region’s police service. The recommendation of the Patten Report to change the ‘Royal Ulster Constabulary’ to the ‘Northern Ireland Police Service’ came into effect in November 2001. Whilst the intention was to replace a name associated with one section of the community with a name which could be accepted by all, many unionists were bitterly opposed to the changes. In a very mild expression of these misgivings, Danny Kennedy, Ulster Unionist Party MLA, remarked: “I think a lot of people will be very sad and very sorry that the proud symbols of the RUC are changing. . . . Many unionists will not accept that the current symbols of the RUC would not be able to command cross-community support.” Alex Maskey, Sinn Féin MLA, rejected this argument: “The Patten report made clear that the new beginning to policing heralded by the Good Friday Agreement must mean a neutralisation of all symbols and emblems. There is a substantial size [sic] of the community which does not identify with certain symbols and emblems and the crown is one of them.” Thus, although one of the explicit aims of the Patten Report was “to take the politics out of policing,” its implementation has been highly politicized, and the two sides to the dispute have divided on clearly partisan lines.

A wide range of accounts of the ‘problem’ of Northern Ireland focus on this cultural dimension to the conflict. On one view, for instance, since the tragedy of Northern Ireland is caused by the presence of two clashing cultures, it follows...
that, if a stable political system is to be established in the region, it needs to be underpinned by a single homogenous culture. This is the nub of the case made by ideologysts of nationalism for uniting state and nation. A sharply contrasting view, while also accepting that a clash of cultures is the source of the problem, goes on to draw the inference that the state needs to divorce itself so far as is practicably possible from culture. Classical liberals can be associated with a view of this kind. According to a third view, the solution is to give public acknowledgement to the two major traditions to be found in the region. This view is articulated by a number of commentators influenced by the politics of recognition.

In the most recent phase of its development, this last view takes the form of the claim that there should be ‘parity of esteem’ between the unionist and nationalist communities. As Alan Finlayson comments in his analysis of the Cultural Traditions Group, “The philosophy behind cultural traditions would seem to be encapsulated in the now popular phrase, ‘Parity of Esteem’. In the Belfast Agreement of April 1998, this principle is given a crucial role to play. Article 1 states that “the power of the sovereign government . . . shall be founded on” the principle “of parity of esteem.” The Agreement seeks to ensure that, in all of its structures, institutions, policies, and practices, the government in Northern Ireland gives equal acknowledgement to the two national communities. The Northern Ireland Act set the principles of the Agreement into law in November 1998. It created a devolved consociational assembly at Stormont, linked to bodies connecting Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic (the North-South Ministerial Council) and Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK (the East-West Council). This set of state institutions gives practical expression to the principle that the two national communities should be shown equal recognition.

Today the two traditions approach, now principally in the form of parity of esteem, has achieved considerable hegemonic power in Northern Ireland. A wide range of political actors would not question what seems to them to be the common sense idea that the distinctive cultures or traditions of the two national communities should enjoy equal and public acknowledgement in any workable political settlement in this region. It is important to note that such acknowledgement is not only regarded as a rightful claim of justice; it is also anticipated that it will lead to political stability. The hope is that, if the traditions of the two national communities are publicly acknowledged, then members of these communities will feel confident that their place in Northern Ireland is assured, and that the distinctive character of their contribution to life in the region is valued. Hence, it is hoped, they will accept the legitimacy of, and participate fully in, the political system which provides this acknowledgement.

This idea of parity of esteem, which is now such an important part of the political discourse of Northern Ireland, forms the focal point of this article. By examining the ways in which advocates of this principle defend it against a range of criticisms, it will be shown that parity of esteem is based on a complex account of the relationship between politics and culture. Using the terms to be employed
here, the case for parity involves an account of politics as an activity which combines the expression, transformation, containment, and deconstruction of culture. On this account, politics aims publicly to acknowledge two cultures (expression), and to privatize all others (containment). It anticipates that the cultures which are acknowledged will be significantly altered (transformation) and partially dissolved (deconstruction) in this process of acknowledgement.

Bringing these elements together, parity of esteem is interpreted as part of a political project of cultural engineering designed to create and sustain two moderate political blocs, both of which accept the legitimacy of the political system within which they were formed. A number of important consequences follow from this account. For one thing, by showing that the state is complicit in the shaping of cultural forms, this analysis throws into question all versions of the politics of recognition which maintain that the state’s business is simply to take ready-formed cultural identities and make them manifest in the public realm. The implication is that theoretically sophisticated and normatively justifiable interventions in the realm of culture can only be made if the inevitable dialectical relationship that the state has with cultural forms is fully acknowledged.

The argument proceeds as follows. In the next section, a range of criticisms of parity of esteem is reviewed. We consider what type of relationship between politics and culture is implied by each of these critiques. The section after that returns to parity of esteem itself in order to determine the particular account of cultural politics that it embodies. In the penultimate section, we evaluate this account by comparing and contrasting it with those of its rivals. In the conclusion, the more general implications of this argument for the politics of recognition and of multiculturalism are spelled out.

The Critique of Parity of Esteem

Having sketched the context in which the idea of parity of esteem emerged, our task is now to determine what sort of relationship between culture and politics this idea implies. The taxonomy to be presented here distinguishes four principal relationships, according to whether the task of politics is regarded as the expression, transformation, containment, or deconstruction of culture. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list; other ways of relating culture and politics are conceivable. Nor, as we shall see later on, are the items on the list mutually exclusive; it is possible to combine elements of two or more of these forms of cultural politics (although these combinations will have varying degrees of logical coherence and likely practical success). Taken as a whole, this classificatory scheme nevertheless encompasses a wide range of the views to be found both in academic theory and in political practice. It will provide a template which will be used in the critical analysis of parity of esteem which is to follow.

In developing this taxonomy, the views of a range of critics of parity of esteem will be analyzed. All in all, five different groups are distinguished: northern
nationalists, cultural unionists, liberal unionists, civic unionists, and radical democrats. It must be noted, however, that these labels refer to rough ideological distinctions. They do not imply membership of specific political parties or organizations. Nor is it suggested that these groups are homogenous or mutually exclusive. It may be possible to distinguish different factions within each group, and particular political actors may have feet in more than one camp. While the distinctions between these groups will become clear in the course of the argument, brief definitions may be helpful at this point. The first group, unsurprisingly, endorses a nationalist ideology according to which all nations have a strong claim to political self-determination. The titles given to the middle three groups are taken from Norman Porter’s well-known analysis of unionism. Cultural unionists argue that Northern Ireland has a distinctly British cultural character and that the political institutions in the region should reflect this fact. Liberal unionists base their politics on a principle of equal citizenship, but they nevertheless defend the British political identity of the state in Northern Ireland. Civic unionists, the group with which Porter associates himself, hold that while both national communities should be recognized in Northern Ireland, more is due to British than to Irish culture. The last group – radical democrats – comprises those critics who, since they believe that cultures are ideological constructions, reject any form of political practice which invokes the authority of such cultures.

Expression. The first two groups of critics share a great deal in common. In spite of their immense political differences, both northern nationalists and cultural unionists reject parity of esteem for what is at root the same reason. Since both groups believe that a polity must be founded on a single unified culture, they reject parity since it would give recognition to not one but two cultural forms. Of the first group, Terry Eagleton says that nationalists clamor for “a one-to-one hook-up between state and people.” Here, for instance, is part of Gerry Adams’ Address to Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis in 1996: “The British need to remove all anti-nationalist symbols and appearances from the Six-County statelet by providing ‘parity of esteem’ in that area and by eliminating as far as possible all obvious and visible difference between there and the rest of the island of Ireland.” Here Adams’ implicit aim seems to be the creation of a unified culture across the entire island of Ireland. According to the logic of the ideology of nationalism, this would be an important point in favor of unification and hence the end of Northern Ireland as a separate political entity. The logic of the cultural unionists’ argument is just the same. Some of this group, for instance, place emphasis on the Protestant character of Northern Ireland, and contrast this with the Catholicism of the Republic. For them, parity of esteem should be rejected since it allows an equal presence to a religion which is opposed to the proper faith of this region. As Michael Hughes puts it, “Unionists regard themselves as custodians of an idealized vision of the ‘British way of life’ and British liberty, symbolized by the Crown and the Union between Britain and Northern Ireland, which they see as protecting them against destruction by an alien Catholic Irish state.”
Thus both northern nationalists and cultural unionists assume that each political order must have its own particular culture. They disagree, of course, about which culture is appropriate for Northern Ireland. If we focus specifically on their account of the relationship between politics and culture, we can see that both these two camps regard the state as the site for the expression of national culture. In fairly similar ways, both northern nationalists and cultural unionists believe that the business of the state is to make a culture manifest, and to project it onto the public stage. As Eagleton puts it, talking specifically of nationalism, politics is regarded as “representational” rather than “constitutive”; in the sphere of politics, culture is “luminously” expressed. Furthermore, since these critics tend to think of cultures as pre-existing entities, politics is conceived as a process which does not create and should not even affect the culture it transmits. It should simply act as a neutral means for the articulation of culture. For these two groups, then, the raison d’être of politics is to serve culture. As critics of this position might put it, on the expressive model, politics is collapsed into culture. As Eagleton says of nationalism, “the political . . . is either already cultural, or sheerly instrumental to it.” Finally it is important to emphasize that, although they accept an expressive model of cultural politics, neither northern nationalists or cultural unionists believe that any and all cultures should be expressed. It is, of course, an essential tenet of their views that one and only one culture should be expressed in the institutions of the state. This is the principal reason for their opposition to parity of esteem.

**Containment.** Liberal unionists are the third group of critics. Members of this group are liberals since they begin from an ideal of equal citizenship, contending that there should be identical rights for all individual citizens in the UK. They are unionists since they believe that equal citizenship for the inhabitants in Northern Ireland is best protected by the continuation of the union with Great Britain. Liberal unionists differ significantly from many mainstream liberals in their belief that the state in Northern Ireland should be strongly British in character. They nevertheless contend that this belief does not depend on any claim about the existence of a cultural entity which is either Protestant or British in character. Indeed liberal unionists are determined to separate their political credo from any cultural associations. Thus Arthur Aughey asserts that “the idea of the union is the willing community of citizens united not by creed, colour or ethnicity but by a recognition of the authority of the union.” Arlene Foster, for instance, does not accept that the flying of the Union Flag in the province symbolizes the power of one culture over another. As part of the United Kingdom, it is to be expected that the public realm in Northern Ireland will be marked by its symbols. Foster then goes on to contrast the “legal fact of British citizenship” with an “aspiration to Irish unity” which, while it is entirely legitimate, is no more than an aspiration.

We can see that liberal unionists reject the expressive model of cultural politics, denying that politics should act as a medium for culture. Indeed, they are
convinced that citizens’ political identity must be sharply distinguished from their cultural identity. In place of this first model, then, this group of critics endorses a strongly liberal version of cultural politics. According to this version, in order for equal respect to be shown to all citizens whatever their cultural identities, the state should not be marked by any particular cultural form. Hence it is necessary to ‘privatize’ culture, banishing it from the realm of the state. We can say that liberal unionists endorse the idea of politics as a container for culture. It is a container in two senses: first, the business of the state is to provide a space in which cultures can exist and be expressed. Thus, in spite of their loyalty to the union and to the British character of Northern Ireland, liberal unionists nevertheless emphasize their commitment to cultural diversity. Robert McCartney, for instance, calls for “the parity of value of British citizenship throughout Great Britain and Northern Ireland” where this would mean “a Union which, while accepting a British political identity, fully acknowledged the diverse and different cultural heritage of the entire Northern Irish community.”\footnote{13} Second, the state is also a container in the sense of an enclosure designed to hold where necessary these cultures in check. This type of containment may be necessary to protect citizens’ freedoms when cultural practices threaten to undermine them. For instance, many unionists hold that the culture of romantic Irish nationalism is by its very nature inimical to the liberal state. Given their endorsement of this containment model of cultural politics, liberal unionists’ rejection of parity of esteem is easy to understand.

*Transformation.* The third critique is that offered by Porter in the name of what he calls civic unionism. He breaks with the assumption of the other two unionist camps that Irish culture should be denied any public recognition. He does so since he believes that, given the binational character of Northern Ireland, state institutions will have to reflect the character of both national communities. His argument is worth spelling out in a little detail. He begins from the premise that “self-government” is “a primary political good.”\footnote{14} For this to be possible, citizens must be able to identify “with the institutions and practices of their society.”\footnote{15} That is to say, citizens must see the institutions of the state as their institutions if they are to be motivated to participate in them and so achieve the good of citizen self-government. From this it follows that, in “certain circumstances,” state institutions may rightly reflect “more than one identity.” In the specific case under investigation here, Porter contends that “the circumstances currently existing in Northern Ireland justify the representation of British and Irish identities.”\footnote{16} But note that, while he accepts that there should be fair acknowledgement of both national communities in Northern Ireland, Porter denies that this entails strict parity of esteem. Instead, he defends a principle of due recognition as a necessary precondition for the effective participation of all citizens in the public life of their polity. ‘Recognition’ implies that one respects, without having positively to value, the other; furthermore, such recognition should be awarded only insofar as it is ‘due.’ To be specific, Porter contends that,
given the history of Northern Ireland, more is due to the British than to the Irish identity in this province.\textsuperscript{17}

It is clear that there is a strong element of expression involved in this account of the relationship between politics and culture. Due recognition of British and Irish cultures involves their passage from the sphere of civil society onto the public stage of the state. Alongside this explicit acceptance of expression, however, a commitment to a cultural politics of \textit{transformation} can also be detected. That is to say, Porter presumes that politics does not just transmit but also partly transforms the cultural entities that it expresses. Politics is not just a neutral medium for the expression of culture, but is also a process in which what is articulated is significantly altered in the process of articulation.\textsuperscript{18} This second aspect to Porter’s cultural politics comes into focus once we realize how he draws inspiration from the civic republican tradition of political thought. His political ideal is a polity that makes possible concerted action by all citizens in pursuit of the common good. Thus he regards the state as “the site of the institutions, practices and symbols that express the unity of the collective life of society.”\textsuperscript{19} How can such an ideal be realized in circumstances in which the two national communities have very different – if not to say antagonistic – political outlooks? For civic republicans the answer is that, in the good polity, existing cultural forms are transformed as citizens seek a common good together. Here they place great emphasis on the transformative power of political dialogue. By engaging in such dialogue, citizens are prepared to alter their initial views as they hear and response to others’ opinions. Some commentators who draw upon the civic republican tradition are very explicit on this point. Gerard Delanty, for instance, in his take on Habermas’s idea of post-national identity, argues as follows: “A post-national identity can . . . emerge in circumstances that have their origin not in existing collective identities but in the very process of over-coming them.”\textsuperscript{20} In Northern Ireland, then, “national identity, both that of republican nationalism and unionism, must be transformed rather than merely accommodated.” He concludes with the hope that “a new identity can emerge out of the very process of conflict resolution.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Deconstruction}. Radical democrats, the final group of critics to be considered here, reject parity of esteem and indeed any form of the politics of recognition. They attack the two interrelated assumptions, first, that there are two major ‘communities’ or ‘traditions’ in Northern Ireland and, second, that the role of politics should be to try to accommodate them. On the first assumption, radical democrats point out that, by focusing on unionism and nationalism, the parity approach neglects claims made in the name of all other traditions. It is sometimes observed that there are, for instance, more Chinese first language users in Northern Ireland than there are Irish speakers. Regarding the second assumption, they contend that, since cultures are only temporary stabilizations of relations of power within a particular bloc, they are not the sort of entities that can be represented. Furthermore, attempts to represent them will lead to a number of undesirable
consequences. These include harmful effects within and between the communities whose cultures are being represented, as those communities discipline their own members and draw up the battle-lines against others. They also include harmful consequences for the quality of political life. In particular they argue that this will institutionalize the division between the two national communities and so perpetuate rather than resolve the conditions of conflict. In light of these considerations, radical democrats conclude that the state should not be in the business of institutionalizing and reifying cultural identities. As Finlayson says, the task of politics should be to “demonstrate that both traditions are equally illegitimate.” This, he suggests, would be “a move from parity of esteem to parity of contempt.”

For these reasons, it is clear that radical democrats will reject the expressive model of cultural politics. Nor would the transformation model be a better alternative: the creation of a single culture would involve the oppression of internal differences, and its effect would still be to stultify political life. The containment of culture might look like one solution to which radical democrats would be drawn. But the problem here is they think that cultures are oppressive whether they are located in the realm of the state or the realm of civil society. Rejecting these three options, radical democrats regard the task of politics as the deconstruction of culture instead. That is to say, they believe that culture should be analyzed in order to expose it as an ideological formation that serves unequal relations of power. By showing that culture is the contingent product of power, radical democrats believe that they have shown that it cannot constitute a legitimate basis for political practice. Finlayson, for instance, regards culture as an aspect of social life that can become reified, so that it is treated as a thing that cannot be changed rather than a relationship that is fluid and contingent. Thus he says that “the cultural” becomes “sedimented” when “the origins of a practice in contingent social relations of power become forgotten and the practice takes the form of objective presence.” He then offers an account of politics that places it in strong opposition to culture as a practice which aims to de-reify culture: “The political is that process or moment when the contingent basis of these objectivities is exposed.” In this sense, politics is regarded as the antithesis of culture: “the political and cultural are in fact in opposition to each other . . . the political consists of the disestablishing of a phenomenon as cultural and the rendering of it as political.”

The Cultural Politics of Parity of Esteem

With this scheme for the classification of forms of cultural politics in mind, we can now return to parity of esteem itself in order to determine the nature of the
relationship between politics and culture on which it depends. It will be argued that parity of esteem incorporates elements of all four forms of cultural politics.

_Expression_. It is clear that there is a strong element of the first type of cultural politics at work in arguments for parity of esteem. The most obvious feature of this principle is that it regards politics as a medium for the expression of what it regards as the two principal cultures of Northern Ireland. In this respect, the case for parity of esteem follows the logic of nationalism and cultural unionism. It parts company with them, however, in suggesting that not one but two cultures should be reflected in the institutions of the state. To that extent, it follows civic unionism’s contention that the two most significant traditions should enjoy public acknowledgement. Moreover the defenders of parity of esteem and civic unionists converge on this conclusion for the same reason: both camps believe that recognition of the two traditions is necessary if the citizens of Northern Ireland are to be able to accept the legitimacy of the political institutions of their region. This was the thinking behind the change of philosophy by the British government from around 1985 onwards when it accepted that any future political settlement would have to incorporate an Irish dimension if it was to be acceptable to northern nationalists.

Let us look more closely at the relationship between politics and culture assumed by this facet of the argument for parity of esteem. First, it should be emphasized that, in this respect, parity of esteem treats culture as pre-political. That is to say, it assumes that acknowledgement is being given to cultures which exist prior to this acknowledgement. The presumption is that the entities to which parity of esteem should be shown are already out there, as it were, as part of the situation to which parity of esteem responds. In this case, the task of politics is to act as the means by which these pre-existing cultural entities can be projected into the realm of the state. Second, since cultures exist prior to political action, it follows that they must be treated with respect. Thus paragraph 10 of _A New Framework for Agreement_ includes the following: “any new political arrangements must be based on full respect, and protection and expression of, the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland and even-handedly afford both communities in Northern Ireland parity of esteem and treatment, including equality of opportunity and advantage.” The underlying rationale seems to be that it is necessary to allow the free expression of these cultures in order to respect the communities which identify with them.

_Containment_. Parity of esteem aims to facilitate the expression of the two traditions of Northern Ireland in the institutions of the state, but it does not extend this offer to any other traditions. In fact, its approach to those so-called ‘third traditions’ is one of containment. Thus the argument for parity of esteem also includes an element of the second form of cultural politics. Again the state is regarded as a container for culture in two senses: it is a space for expression and a restrictive
cage. On the first of these, it is important to emphasize that, by focusing on the two traditions, defenders of parity of esteem do not mean to suggest that citizens have no right to follow other traditions. They simply believe that these others have no place in the institutions of the Northern Irish state. In addition to the commitment to parity of esteem, Article 1 of the Belfast Agreement includes the following: “The two Governments . . . affirm that . . . the power of the sovereign government . . . shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens.” With regard to the second sense of containment, it must be stressed that, although all citizens will enjoy an individual right to cultural expression, only those who identify with the two traditions will additionally see their cultural identity reflected in the institutions of the state. There is no provision to allow any third tradition to have formal expression at this level. Moreover, if citizens’ cultural practices threaten others’ freedoms, then containment in this sense will become necessary.

Transformation. Alongside the themes of transmission and containment, the third form of cultural politics can also be detected in the arguments for parity of esteem. Although this theme is less explicit, the conception of politics involved in the defense of the principle of parity does in part regard politics as the transformer of culture. In order to see why this is so, consider the fact that there are versions of both traditions which defenders of parity would find unacceptable. In offering equal acknowledgement to unionism and nationalism, there is no intention to welcome forms of these traditions which are based on a complete rejection of the legitimacy of their rival. It would be impossible to show equal respect for a unionism based on virulent anti-Catholicism and a nationalism which had no place for any kind of British identity in its vision of Ireland. In this case, exponents of parity of esteem hope that both sides can be encouraged to endorse a reasonable version of their political creeds. Their incentive for doing so is that these transformed traditions will be given a secure place in the Northern Irish state.

Deconstruction. It may seem unlikely that there could be an element of the fourth type of cultural politics at work in arguments for parity of esteem. Since, as we have seen, it seeks to transmit and partly transform the two traditions, and to act as a container for all further traditions, how could the achievement of parity also lead to the deconstruction of those same traditions? How could a tradition be respected and at the same time be shown to be an ideological formation justifying unequal relations of power? In spite of this apparent paradox, it can be argued that there is at least a trace of deconstruction at work in arguments for parity of esteem. To begin with, recall that the idea of parity of esteem emerged from a current of thought that talked of the ‘two traditions’ in Northern Ireland. This way of thinking did not just propose the institutionalization of these traditions in the
state, but also recommended measures which would help their adherents better to understand and appreciate the others’ viewpoint. For example, in 1989 Education for Mutual Understanding became a compulsory theme across the school curriculum in Northern Ireland. This program aims explicitly to encourage better community relations by teaching children to appreciate cultural diversity. More recently consultation documents – such as “A Culture of Tolerance: Integrating Education” (1998) and “Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Education for Diversity” (1999) – have proposed ways in which to advance the same aim by promoting a ‘culture of tolerance’ and by increasing the number of integrated schools. The reasoning behind these and other initiatives is that members of each community, in the encounter with their neighbors, will change their attitude not only to the others’ traditions, but also to their own. In the first place, they might start to appreciate the strengths of others’ traditions. In the second place, they may develop a certain reflexive distance from their own traditions by coming to appreciate how all such traditions are invented. In this way, although the argument for parity of esteem does not try to make people regard traditions as wholly illegitimate ideological constructions, there is nevertheless an element of that argument which tries to discourage them from unthinking reliance on the authority of their traditions. This may not go as far as the most radical exponents of deconstruction would want, but it is undoubtedly a move in a deconstructive direction.

An Evaluation of Parity of Esteem

Given this analysis of the relationship between politics and culture implied by the argument for parity of esteem, it is now time to offer a critical evaluation of this idea. We follow the same order of argument as that deployed so far, focusing in turn on expression, transformation, containment, and deconstruction.

Expression. With respect to the first element of the relationship between politics and culture, we have seen that parity of esteem proposes to transmit two cultures in Northern Ireland into the sphere of the state. In this it opposes the claims of nationalism and cultural unionism that public expression should be given to only one culture. Does the bicultural or monocultural position make more sense? Monoculturalists have to claim that, whilst the task of politics is to facilitate the expression of culture, only one culture should be thus expressed. But in order to make this claim, they need to find a way of ignoring the obvious presence of the other national community in Northern Ireland. To do so, they have to invoke an additional argument in support of their case. Both, for instance, suggest that the one culture that should be publicly expressed is that of the group indigenous to the territory. Both groups can make the same claim since they focus on different territories. For nationalists, it is the Celts who are native to Ireland. For cultural unionists, the Cruthin, a group indigenous to the northern eastern part of the island, are the ancestors of today’s Ulster Protestants. This and similar argu-
ments for restricting what cultures are expressed significantly complicate the monoculturalists’ argument by introducing reasons which are not intrinsic to the logic of expression itself. In contrast to this, the biculturalist case for parity of esteem is much more straightforward since it takes full account of the fact that Northern Ireland is profoundly binational. Defenders of the principle of parity need not invoke convoluted reasons for ignoring either the unionist or nationalist presence in Northern Ireland. The argument is simply that there are two national communities in the region, and that both should enjoy public acknowledgement in the state.

If the case for parity of esteem relied solely on the claim that it follows the logic of expression more faithfully than do either northern nationalism or cultural unionism, then it would be vulnerable to the criticism that it lacks a rationale for restricting its attention to these two traditions. That is to say, if biculturalism makes more sense than monoculturalism, then why not go as far as multiculturalism? Although there are clearly other cultural groups such as the Chinese community and the traveling community in Northern Ireland, parity of esteem does not offer them official recognition. Is the supplementary argument that it invokes to restrict such recognition any more justified than those employed by monoculturalists? One argument that could be invoked is pragmatic in character. This simply says that it is the consent of these two national communities that is required in order to underpin the legitimacy of the political system and so guarantee civil peace. But there is also a principled counterpart to this argument. Here the claim is that, since it is these two cultures that have had a predominant influence on the history of Northern Ireland and that continue to have the most profound role in shaping the character of its public life today, it is appropriate that their influence is recognized in just the way promised by parity of esteem.

So far it has been suggested that the case for parity rightly claims that acknowledgement should be given to the two national communities of Northern Ireland. But some critics might suggest that this argument still sticks too close to the ideology of nationalism, and that in this case it is vulnerable to the criticisms made of that ideology. Eagleton, for instance, contends that such nationalism is guilty of “organicist mysticism.” It is based on wildly romantic ideas about the spiritual unity of a people and their need for freedom. These ideas, he asserts, are wholly erroneous and cannot be used to justify any sort of political claims to self-determination. Eagleton’s critique would also apply to proposals to recognize the binational character of Northern Ireland since, as its name suggests, binationalism simply reproduces in a duplicated form the logic of nationalism. Thus he argues that the bid to create a system of joint sovereignty “subscribes in a rather more devious way to the romantic nationalist fallacy of an internal relation between culture and politics.” Behind both this proposal and the case for parity is the idea that, since there are two cultures present in the region, it follows that two states must be involved in their governance. Only in this way can the “one-to-one hook-up between state and people” be preserved.
Are the defenders of parity of esteem guilty as charged? Is their case for the institutionalization of culture in the state based on the same romantic fantasies that bedevil the ideology of nationalism? To be specific: is the case for parity of esteem based on claims about the essential unities of the northern nationalist and the Ulster unionist peoples? Does it assume that their cultures are organic wholes, the origins of which have been lost in the mists of time? And does it believe that the cultural self-realization of these peoples can only occur if they achieve political self-determination? In fact the argument for parity of esteem need not make any of these assumptions or claims. It need offer no opinion on the nature of the people of Northern Ireland or the character of their cultures. Nor need it claim that political self-determination is needed for cultural self-realization. Rather the best argument for parity is based on the claim, also found in the civic republican position, that citizens’ sense of ownership of the institutions of their state is profoundly important to the political health of that state, and that this sense is best promoted by giving citizens the ability to shape the institutions of the state. Perhaps it could nevertheless be argued that the case for parity does nothing to disabuse people of their belief in, for example, the “essential unity of the Irish people” or the unique value of Ulster Protestant culture. In fact, as we shall see when discussing transformation and deconstruction, other elements of parity of esteem’s cultural politics do challenge romantic ideas of this kind. If it is plausible to attribute these further elements to the argument for parity, then it would not be guilty of this charge of romantic mystification.

**Containment.** So far as the second element of parity of esteem’s cultural politics is concerned, it has been shown that it intends to contain all of the so-called third traditions to be found in Northern Ireland. In this regard, the case for parity of esteem differs significantly from the argument for containment made by liberal unionists. In contrast to parity’s proposal to give expression to two cultures and contain all others, liberal unionists advocate the containment of all cultures whilst nevertheless contending that the state can have a ‘political’ identity. In order to evaluate the relative merits of these positions, it will be useful to examine each of liberal unionism’s claims in turn.

Liberal unionists contend that equal respect can be shown for individual citizens only if all cultures are contained by a state which is itself unmarked by any cultural form. This argument must assume that politics and culture can be clearly distinguished in theory, that they can be separated in practice, and that the former can be used to contain the latter. The problem with this is that it is impossible to provide a full account of the nature of the state without referring to culture. Every state will inevitably embody or at least be associated with a particular set of beliefs, values and practices. As the Parekh Report on *The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain* recently argued, “a state cannot be culturally or morally neutral.” From this it follows that it is impossible for the state to serve purely as a container for culture, since the container is itself contaminated by that which it seeks to contain.
In short, the political is always already cultural. Furthermore, the particular set of beliefs, values and practices associated with the state will stand in very different relationships to the cultures of the various communities to be found within that state. For some communities there will be a close correspondence between their values and those of the state. For others there will be some overlap of values. And yet other communities will find that their values stand in some degree of opposition to those embedded in the institutions of the state. As a consequence, a state which claims to act as the neutral container for all cultures will in fact achieve quite the reverse. It will ensure that some communities do better than others simply because there is a coincidence between their values and those embedded in the state. In this case, parity of esteem gets the better of the argument: it is better explicitly to give a formal role to one or more particular communities in shaping the institutions of the state.32

Liberal unionists’ second claim is that, although all cultures should be privatized, it is nevertheless possible for the state to have a British identity. They believe that this is not a contradictory position since the state’s identity can be political rather than cultural in character. Does this claim fare any better than the first? It should be immediately observed that, if the critique of the first claim works, then this will also knock out the second claim. That is to say, if it accepted that the state necessarily embodies particular cultural values, then it is impossible for it to have a purely political identity. Even if we could make sense of the distinction between political and cultural symbols, it would do no good since, in addition to its association with a set of purely political symbols, the state would also be inextricably linked to a specific set of cultural values. Hence it could not act simply as a container for culture. But if we put the critique of the first claim aside, there are other independent reasons for thinking that symbols can never be purely political in the way that liberal unionists hope. To understand this point, recall the argument considered earlier on, which contends that it is vital for all citizens to have a sense of ownership of the institutions of their state. From this perspective, whilst the intention behind the use of British symbols may be simply to register the fact of British sovereignty, the problem is that this is still experienced as the granting of exclusive public recognition to one national community. Northern nationalists do not feel that the institutions of the state are their own, bedecked as they are with Crowns and Union Flags. Hence the hollowness of the unionist politician’s hope (mentioned at the start of this article) that the symbols of the RUC could come to command the support of both communities. For as long as this is the case, the good of citizen self-government will not be achieved since one national community in Northern Ireland will not be motivated to participate in the political life of the state.

Transformation. Alongside expression and containment, there is also an element of transformation involved in the cultural politics endorsed by supporters of parity of esteem. That is to say, the case for parity suggests – albeit sotto voce – that the
cultures given recognition are to some extent altered by that recognition. This element of transformation means that the argument for parity of esteem opposes the recommendation that the state should act simply as a neutral medium for the transmission of culture. At the same time, this aspect of the argument for parity closely parallels civic unionism’s defense of due recognition. In both cases, it is hoped that the unionist and nationalist traditions will be moulded into politically acceptable forms as their adherents participate in the political system which offers them parity of esteem. In order to assess this aspect of parity of esteem’s cultural politics, it will be useful to distinguish two different questions. First, is it ever acceptable deliberately to attempt to transform culture? Second, is it possible coherently to combine elements of both expression and transformation?

The first question is relatively straightforward to answer. To believe that cultures exist before politics, so that the task of politics can be conceived simply as one of facilitating the expression of those cultures, is to commit the romantic fallacy discussed earlier. Since politics always necessarily shapes culture, expression without some degree of transformation is not an option. Eagleton gets it just about right: “Politics, to be sure, has to make something of given facts. . . . Even so, it is politics which, to some extent, produces culture, even if political institutions also have to mould themselves to culture’s requirements.”33 It seems plausible to suggest that, in what is necessarily a relationship of mutual determination, politics has a somewhat more influential role to play than culture. Politics ‘produces’ culture, although it must adapt itself to what it finds. In this case, it is impossible for culture to be unchanged by its encounter with politics. At the same time, it must be admitted that different degrees of transformation are possible. While accepting that some alteration in a culture will always occur in the process of expression, we can nevertheless make a choice either to try to minimize the degree of alteration that occurs, and thus be as respectful to that culture as possible, or to choose deliberately to transform that culture in furtherance of our political ends. This issue is addressed to some extent in what follows.

The second question poses a greater problem for parity of esteem. There is at the very least a tension, if not an outright contradiction, between those aspects of the argument for parity that rely on an element of expression and those that rely on the idea of transformation. On the one hand, the case for parity holds that already existing national communities deserve formal recognition by the state. Thus the argument embodies an element of expression. But on the other hand, it is also hoped that the achievement of parity will create the conditions in which a unified political identity can be forged. In this respect, the argument for parity embraces a transformative model of cultural politics. Clearly there is a tension between these two elements of cultural politics. If the traditions of two national communities are given formal expression in the sphere of the state, then it has been argued that this institutionalizes and so perpetuates the conditions of conflict. But if the aim is for existing political cultures to be changed so that a ‘post-national identity’ can be created, then this requires a transformation of
existing cultural identities. So is it best to show existing identities respect by
faithfully recognizing them or to transform those identities in order to forge a
single new political identity? It would appear that the achievement of the first
goal will work against the second, while the achievement of the second will
undermine the first. Successful expression makes transformation less likely, and
successful transformation must mean that faithful expression has not been
achieved.

The defenders of parity of esteem can at least avoid blatant contradiction here
by not making a commitment to facilitating the completely faithful transmission
of cultures. If they acknowledge that a degree of transformation is bound to occur
in the process of expression, then they are not committed to two completely
conflicting goals. In this case, the problem is one of managing the tensions
between these two elements of a cultural politics. Looking at the argument for
parity of esteem, it seems that this is achieved in part by distinguishing between
short-term and long-term goals. In the short term, parity of esteem draws atten-
tion to the distinction between the two national communities as it transmits them
into the state sphere. But it does so in the hope that, in the longer term, it will be
possible to reduce the salience of this distinction as the traditions of the two
communities are transformed. The unionists and nationalists are offered parity of
esteem now, in the hope that in the future the need for parity will decrease as the
two communities forge a shared political identity together. Finally it must be
emphasized that all of this is supposed to happen voluntarily. As the rival national
communities find themselves in the same political institutions, they will learn to
cooperate together. In the course of this cooperation, the political credos of these
communities will change as they search for a common good together. From this
perspective, it could be argued that these two elements of cultural politics can be
coherently combined since expression is necessary in the here and now in order
to make transformation possible in the future.

Deconstruction. It has been suggested, finally, that there is a trace element of
deconstruction present in the cultural politics of parity of esteem. There is at least
a hint of the argument that, if traditions are publicly acknowledged, then it will be
possible to weaken people’s attachment to those traditions. In this respect, the
case for parity of esteem resembles the radical democrats’ argument that, since
traditions are social constructions, they should not be regarded as infallible guides
to political action. According to Finlayson, this aspect of the argument for parity
of esteem suggests that people’s attitudes to their traditions will change if those
traditions are recognized. In his critical reconstruction of the ideology of the
Cultural Traditions Group, he suggests that their “hope is that, if given the oppor-
tunity, if ‘given’ a voice, people will feel able to relax, confident in their own
cultural tradition, free from threat so that they may explore and engage with
others.”\(^34\) In the course of such exploration and engagement, as people come to
appreciate the socially constructed and contingent character of traditions, they
will be less inclined to rely on them as absolutely valid and unquestionable sources of guidance to political action.

What should be made of this final element of the cultural politics of parity of esteem? In particular, is deconstruction compatible with the other aspects of the argument for parity of esteem? While expression would enable the two traditions in Northern Ireland to shape the state, transformation would seek to forge a single new political identity. But despite these differences, both hold that politics is necessarily related to culture. To be specific, both believe that it is appropriate for respect to be shown to some sort of cultural entity or entities. Deconstruction, in stark contrast, tries to delegitimize all cultural forms by exposing them as hegemonic constructions tangled up with relations of unequal power. The problem is that these two different attitudes to culture seem irreconcilable. As Finlayson asks of the Cultural Traditions Group, one of the organizations which promulgates the two traditions approach, “How can it say ‘your cultural tradition is a contingent formation that can and should be changed, it has no essential validity,’ at the same time as saying ‘feel good about yourself, we respect your culture fully’?”

In responding to this problem, it is important to distinguish between a weaker and a stronger version of the deconstructive claim. The weaker version claims that the point of deconstruction is to convince people that they cannot be sure that they are completely right, to enable them to see the merits of the others’ positions, and thus to give them good reason to work with those others toward a principled compromise. By contrast, according to the stronger version, the aim of deconstruction is to show that cultures are entirely fabulous creations that provide legitimation for relations of unequal power, and consequently to demonstrate that any reliance on such cultures is profoundly mistaken. In the case of the stronger version of the deconstructive claim, there seems to be no way to eliminate the tension between expression and transformation, on the one hand, and deconstruction on the other. It would be paradoxical to offer a culture public acknowledgement only to try to prove its illegitimacy. This would be to show respect to a culture in order then to disrespect it. So far as the weaker version of the claim is concerned, however, it does seem possible to endorse this claim and at the same time to retain a commitment to some version of expression and transformation. In this case, while the argument for parity offers formal recognition to the two traditions (expression), it hopes that reasonable versions of these traditions will emerge (transformation), and it encourages members of the two national communities to put at least a little reflective distance between themselves and their traditions (deconstruction). This type of deconstruction may not satisfy the most
die-hard radical democrats, but at least it makes sense to endorse it as part of the argument for parity of esteem.

Conclusions and Implications

The first aim of this article was to draw out the complexities of the account of cultural politics which underlies parity of esteem. The second aim was to offer a qualified defense of this account, and hence a qualified defense of the principle of parity as well. With regard to the first aim, it has been argued that parity of esteem intends to facilitate the public expression of the unionist and nationalist traditions in Northern Ireland, whilst it contains all other cultures in the sphere of civil society. Regarding these two traditions, it hopes that, by being allowed to manifest themselves in institutions of the state, they will be transformed and partly deconstructed. The rationale for combining these various elements of cultural politics becomes clear once the purpose of parity of esteem is fully appreciated. It must be understood as an important of a political project that seeks to shape each of the two traditions into forms which are acceptable to the other. In this way, it is hoped, both traditions will be able to give their support to the political system that permits them such public expression.

What does this tell us specifically about the account of the relationship between politics and culture underlying the case for parity of esteem? The most obvious element of this account is that of expression: if it is nothing else, parity is a principle that allows the traditions of the two national communities to be expressed in the institutions of the state. If attention were paid to this element alone, the impression would be given that parity endorses a naïve account of culture as an entity that exists in a pristine state before politics comes along. However, once the other elements of parity of esteem’s cultural politics are taken into account, things appear in a rather different light. By understanding how the argument for parity involves an expectation that the cultures being expressed will be transformed and partly deconstructed in the process of expression, we see that a dialectical relationship between the culture and politics is imagined. On the one hand, politics is necessary for culture to be made manifest; there can be no expression of culture without the intermediation of politics. On the other hand, politics must deal with the cultural material that it finds; it cannot simply shape culture at will.

Thus this analysis of parity of esteem shows how culture is fundamentally shaped by politics. Parity cannot be seen simply as a principle designed to give due acknowledgement to already existing cultural identities. Rather it guides a political practice that concentrates upon and actively shapes particular identities in the service of the project in which it plays a significant role. Given that this form of cultural politics is by no means unique to the Northern Irish situation, more general lessons can also be learned. One important implication is that all versions of the politics of recognition which suggest that politics simply reveals
pre-existing cultures are based on unjustified romantic assumptions about the character of culture. Cultures are not simply out there, as it were, waiting to be discovered by politics; no neat separation of the cultural and political is possible. But this demonstration of how cultural identities are entwined with political power does not lead to the opposite conclusion that politics is the all-powerful creator, and culture the creation. Nor therefore does it lead to radical democrats' conclusion that these cultural identities are arbitrary and illegitimate hegemonic constructions. It shows rather that it is necessary to reformulate the politics of recognition in order to take this unavoidable dialectic between the cultural and the political into account.

So far as the second aim of the article is concerned, it has been suggested that robust reasons can be offered in support of parity of esteem. These reasons offered here often as not invoke the civic republican arguments which have been associated in this article primarily with Norman Porter. Civic republicanism is a form of political thought that holds participatory self-government to be the most important political good. There are echoes of civic republicanism at a number of points in the argument. It is at work in the argument that it is important to facilitate the public expression of the two national traditions of Northern Ireland. It can also be seen in the suggestion that, in the longer term, it may be possible for these two traditions to be transmuted into a single post-national identity. It can also be detected, finally, in the proposition that a weak form of deconstruction may be an effective means of generating the motivation necessary for the two communities to come to a principled compromise. In each case, the underlying rationale is the same: certain elements of parity of esteem can be justified since they may lead the national communities to develop a sense of ownership of the institutions of their state. And this is necessary if that state is to be home to a body of citizens capable of governing themselves through active participation in political life. As Porter says, the state is – or at least should be – “the site of the institutions, practices and symbols that express the unity of the collective life of society,” and thus an institution which “articulates a common good with which citizens can identify.”

In defending this position, this paper has set itself against a number of rival positions taken up in contemporary debates about the politics of multiculturalism. First, it opposes all arguments that recommend the development of a single civic culture, whether this recommendation is based on a conservative argument for assimilation to a single tradition, a nationalist argument for loyalty to a single nation, or a republican argument for submission to the general will. Second, it rejects the classical liberal argument that the state should be a neutral body that serves as a container for all cultures, arguing that this is impossible (since the state can never be culturally neutral) and unwise (since two cultures can and should have access to the institutions of the state). Third, it offers principled reasons for opposing proposals from more radical forms of the politics of difference to infinitely pluralize the state so that a vast array of cultural entities can make their
imprint on those institutions. Against all of these positions, it has been argued that, in certain circumstances, some cultures should enjoy a different status to others within a multicultural state. In the specific case of Northern Ireland, two national communities should enjoy privileged access to the institutions of the state in order to shape those institutions after their own image.

In the introduction, the renaming of the police service was offered as an example of the highly fraught character of the politics of culture in Northern Ireland. In addition to the new name, the emblems on the uniforms of the Police Service of Northern Ireland have also changed. The new badge incorporates the scales of justice, harp, torch, laurel leaf, shamrock, and crown “to symbolise the province’s diverse communities.” It should now be apparent why the logic of the argument presented in this paper would fully support these various changes to the PSNI. It would do so for the civic republican reasons that have been given: such a renaming is necessary if both national communities are to feel that it is their police service. Of course there is no guarantee that these changes made in the name of parity of esteem will solve the problems of Northern Ireland. Indeed the signs are present are very mixed. On the one hand, the deal encapsulated in the Belfast Agreement has just about held together through a series of potentially fatal crises. In the case of the PSNI, it did manage to recruit as many Catholics as Protestants in its first intake. But on the other hand, this success has been threatened by forces opposed to the peace settlement. In June 2002 an attempt was made to murder a young Catholic who had just joined the PSNI. A dissident republican group was seen as the most likely culprit. As Declan O’Loan, a local SDLP councillor, said: “The attack was carried out because the young lad was a Catholic, recently graduated police officer.” It is impossible to say with any degree of confidence whether the peace process will finally succeed or not. In this paper, it has only been possible to hold out the hope that, by facilitating the expression of the cultures of the two national communities in the institutions of the state, both sides will become increasingly convinced that, as co-owners of that state, they have more to gain by continuing to play their part in its common life than by abandoning it for a very uncertain future.

NOTES

3. Note that the phrase ‘ideologists of nationalism’ is used here to distinguish adherents to the general creed of nationalism from those found specifically in Northern Ireland. In this paper, members of the latter group are often referred to as ‘northern nationalists’ to avoid confusion.
4. For more details on the genealogy and present range of usage of this principle, see S. Thompson, “Parity of Esteem and the Politics of Recognition,” Contemporary Political Theory 1 (2002).


9. Eagleton, “Nationalism and the Case of Ireland,” 47.

10. Ibid., 50.


15. Ibid., 186.

16. Ibid., 195.

17. Ibid., 189.

18. In the strongest version of this argument, politics actually constitutes culture.


21. Ibid., 30.


24. N. Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-socialist’ Age,” 212 (1995): 83. Eagleton, “Nationalism and the Case of Ireland,” 47–48, argues that this form of cultural politics is in fact a transmitter of cultural identities just like nationalism. The only difference is that, in this case, it transmits identities which it regards as “hybrid” and “dislocated.”


Other supplementary arguments may include those based on claims about the intrinsic worth of a culture, the unity of a people, the historical continuity of a community, and so on.

28. Eagleton, “Nationalism and the Case of Ireland,” 47.

29. Ibid., 55.

30. Ibid., 54.


32. Coming from a somewhat different angle, D. Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), emphasises the need for a liberal polity to provide the conditions in which the form and content of a single national culture can be determined in an ongoing and open public debate amongst all citizens.

33. Eagleton, “Nationalism and the Case of Ireland,” 47.


35. Ibid.


37. *The Guardian*, 6 April 2002. In addition to these symbolic measures, the new police service has also made sure that new recruits are drawn in equal numbers from the Catholic and Protestant communities. Of course, the distinction between these religiously-defined communities is not
exactly the same as that between nationalists and unionists. For a brief summary of the relationships between these different aspects of identity, see B. Hayes and I. McAllister, “Ethnonationalism, Public Opinion and the Good Friday Agreement,” in Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, eds., *After the Good Friday Agreement: Analysing Political Change in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999), 37–40.