Anthropology Misapplied? The Culture Concept and the Peace Process in Ireland

Andrew Finlay

ABSTRACT: This article is animated by a concern that anthropological ideas of culture, particularly the 'old' idea of culture as the way of life of a distinct people, have been misapplied in the government of Northern Ireland during the period of the peace process. Rather than accept disciplinary responsibility for this, I trace the provenance of the notions of culture and identity implicit in the Good Friday Agreement. While people trained in anthropology have been involved in implementing cultural policy, other disciplines—notably law, history and political science—have been more influential in its conception, with only occasional references to anthropology for legitimation. Paradoxically, the influence of the old anthropological concept of culture is a sign of the relative weakness of anthropological influence in government circles. Ultimately, though, anthropological circumspection in this regard might be preferable to the hasty and vainglorious claims of other academic disciplines.

KEYWORDS: culture, identity, conflict, ethno-national, rights, peace, consociation

Introduction

This article is concerned with the misapplication of what Susan Wright (1998) calls the 'old' anthropological idea of culture; ie culture as the distinct way of life of a specific people or group. This concern is not particularly novel. Wright herself worries about the use of the old idea by right-wing politicians, by management consultants and in recent UNESCO publications (see also Harris 1996; Wilson 1996; Cowan et al 2001; and Eriksen 2001). My concern might not be novel in the broader anthropological literature, but the object of my concern—the peace process in Ireland—is.[1]

This is not entirely true. I am not the first to express concern about the way notions of culture and identity have been deployed in the peace process. Concern has been expressed by other anthropologists and by other social scientists (English 1994; Finlayson 1997; Bell 1998; and Rolston 1998. Notable among the anthropologists are Hastings Donnan and Graham McFarlane (1997); but see also Nic Craith 2002; Finlay 2004; and Whitaker 2004). In a review of the relationship between anthropologists and public policy in Northern Ireland, Donnan and McFarlane (1997: 11) observe that :

> for the non-anthropologists who use and think about the term, 'culture' still has the definitional attributes which anthropologists have been calling into question since at least the 1960s. For the non-anthropologists, 'culture' seems to be thought of as a relatively discrete collection of essential or fundamental beliefs, values, assumptions and behavioural traits, passed on like a tradition from generation to generation, in an only slowly changing form.

In other words, the same definitional attributes as Wright's 'old' idea. Donnan and Mc-

Farlane worry that although local anthropologists are well aware of the 'deconstructionist, anti-essentialist' critique of the old idea developed by colleagues elsewhere, and indeed, some have, in certain contexts, critiqued the concepts themselves; nevertheless they are implicated in the reproduction of the old idea: 'when anthropologists (often the same anthropologists) are working in the policy field, much of this theoretical understanding has tended to get set aside' (Donnan and McFarlane 1997: 12).

What underlies Donnan and McFarlane's concern is an intimation of the extraordinary importance of concepts of culture in the government of Northern Ireland. What I am referring to here is not simply some generalised notion of the role of culture in governmentality as elaborated by Foucault (1991) and, subsequently, in a variety of intellectual fields, notably postcolonial theory. I am referring to specific sets of policies, specific developments in the peace process, and especially their culmination in the Agreement signed on Good Friday 1998, also known as the Good Friday Agreement (GFA).

In this regard, Donnan and McFarlane draw particular attention to 'state-sponsored Community Relations/Cultural Traditions initiatives, which see at least partial solutions to the Northern Ireland "problem" to lie in the establishment of greater mutual understanding and contact between the two major ethnic blocs' (1997: 11). They are right to draw our attention to these initiatives if only because they involved a very substantial investment of resources, but what Donnan and McFarlane could not have known when they were writing in 1997 was the significance that the ideas of culture and identity, articulated in these cultural initiatives, were to take on in the GFA.

That the GFA relies heavily on specific ideas about culture and identity is most apparent in items 1(v) and 1(vi) of the 'Constitutional Issues'. Here the 'participants' to the Agreement 'endorse the commitment made by the British and Irish governments that, in a new British–Irish Agreement replacing the Anglo–Irish Agreement, they will (…)'

> (v) affirm that whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there 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, and of parity of esteem and just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations *of both communities;*

> (vi) recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland *to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose,* and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland. (The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland 1998: 2; my italics)

There is clearly a tension here: item (vi) is suggestive of the 'deconstructive anti-essentialist' trend that Donnan and McFarlane refer to; i.e. a view of communal identity as something that is not fixed, not an either/or matter. The reference to 'all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions' in item (v) is also promising in its inclusiveness, but this promise is undermined by a crucial contraction at the end of the sentence such that 'parity of esteem' is accorded to the identities of only two communities. Item 1(vi) might refer to identity as a matter of choice, but in practice the only choice that seems to matter is to be British or Irish, unionist or nationalist. Right from the outset the 'two communities' model has tended to trump other possibilities. This is most apparent in the rules of the short-lived Assembly set up under the Agreement which meant that the votes of those members or putative members who might not wish to designate themselves in communal terms—liberals, socialists, feminists—did not count in key issues. And it has

become more marked in the period since the Agreement was signed (for examples see Finlay 2004; Bryan 2005; and Whitaker 2005).

While I share Donnan's and McFarlane's concern about the way concepts of culture—especially the 'old' idea—are applied or misapplied in Northern Ireland, I am not so ready as they are—or in the larger context Susan Wright is—to accept disciplinary responsibility. Instead, I propose to trace the provenance of these concepts of culture in the Irish context. I will start by looking at the cultural initiatives to which Donnan and McFarlane refer.

Community Relations Policy, Cultural Initiatives and the Law

Looking at community relations/cultural traditions initiatives from their inception in 1989, there would appear to ample evidence to warrant Donnan's and McFarlane's anxiety about the complicity of anthropology in the (mis)application of the old idea of culture. Anthropologists have been employed, often at senior level, to administer these initiatives. While what is now called 'The Cultural Diversity Programme' has been increasingly informed by a more critical perspective on culture (Langlois 2000; Crozier 2004), the Director of the original Cultural Traditions Group (CTG) would still defend something like an old, essentialist view against those who would have urged the CTG towards a 'melting pot' ideal. A frank recognition of sectarian difference was necessary.

> It has been noticeable that in times of despair or celebration in Northern Ireland people have repaired to the places of their fundamental allegiance: all the different churches were filled to capacity after the Omagh bomb, and the flags which were waved at the time of the ceasefires were not the doves of the community relations and peace people but the traditional symbols of partisan affiliation. (Crozier 2004: 39)

Notwithstanding the high profile of anthropologists amongst the staff of the CTG, their intellectual influence is probably less than it seems. Certainly, in the key debates that preceded and followed the formation of the CTG in 1989, the most influential intellectual figures and texts tend to come from other academic disciplines, notably history and human rights law.

Let me look first at the origins of one of the key terms of the Agreement—parity of esteem. This first appears in print as 'equality of esteem' in a report of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (1990: 76) (SACHR), an official body set up under the Constitution Act of 1973 to monitor the effectiveness of antidiscrimination legislation. The notion of equality of esteem is introduced in a section of the report entitled 'Communal Rights and Communal Recognition'. This section deals with the pros and cons of 'granting some form of formal constitutional or legislative recognition of the existence of two major sections of the community in Northern Ireland' (1990: 76). The report notes that on the back of the Anglo Irish Agreement of 1985 the government had 'established a Community Relations Council whose functions include the fostering of both traditions within Northern Ireland' (1990: 89); i.e. the initiatives to which Donnan and McFarlane refer. However, SACHR argued that there were still outstanding matters to be dealt with relating to the Irish language and education.

Originally, in the liberal tradition, human rights accrue to individuals. So in broaching the possibility of granting legal or constitutional recognition of 'two sections of the community', SACHR are inevitably confronted with the question of the relationship of group rights to individual rights. Anthropologists have played an historic role in the development of notions of group rights. Indeed the response of the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 remains one of the most powerful statements of group rights. Consistent with the liberal tradition, the Universal Declaration defined rights

as belonging to individuals. Against this, the AAA's Executive Board (1947: 541) argued that:

> The individual realises his personality through his culture, hence a respect for individual differences (…). There can be no individual freedom, that is, when the group with which the individual identifies is not free. There can be no full development of the individual personality as long as the individual is told, by men who have the power to enforce their commands, that the way of life of his group is inferior to that of those who wield the power.

Given the historic role played by anthropologists, one might reasonably have expected some reference to anthropology or anthropologists in the SACHR document. But there is none. SACHR simply notes that 'human rights lawyers' take opposing views on this issue, and side-steps the debate by arguing that it 'does not think it appropriate [for them] to express a view on theoretical and philosophical issues of this kind' (1990: 77). Rather than discuss the theoretical and philosophical issues, SACHR discusses various international conventions and treaties and explores well rehearsed examples; notably that of schools for 'communal minorities'. In this context the report references the infamous U.S. precedent (Plessey v Ferguson 1896), and allows that there are problems with the provision of 'separate but equal' schools for children from such communities; but argues that such provision is 'an acceptable way of pursuing the objective of full equality of treatment and esteem' so long as the facilities are genuinely equal, and with 'two provisos' (SACHR 1990: 79). The main proviso is that 'there should be no imposed segregation and no unreasonable curtailment of the rights of those who wish to live and work in or work towards an integrated or homogenous society' (1990: 79–80).

SACHR may have side-stepped the theoretical, philosophical and anthropological issues in 1990, but these would return to haunt the Northern Ireland Commission for Human Rights

(NICHR) set up under the terms of the GFA. The main role of the NICHR was to develop a 'Bill of Rights' for Northern Ireland and a joint charter for the island as a whole. Commissioners were divided between those who thought that the Bill of Rights should stick with 'the international norm in attaching rights to individuals', which implies a 'recognition of those who choose "not to be treated as a member of what might be perceived to be their national, ethnic, religious or linguistic community"' and commissioners who thought it should more strongly reflect the principle of parity of esteem, which 'would involve deleting the right-of-exit clause' (Wilson 2003: 11). Interestingly, one human rights lawyer supported the latter position by invoking something like the old anthropological argument: communal and individual rights are not incompatible because as 'Any good liberal should know (…) communal life is as central a part of personal autonomy as anything else. Much contemporary liberal thinking recognises the value of communal and cultural life to the individual' (Harvey 2003: 9).

Keeping in mind our theme of the misapplication of the old idea of culture, we should note here that while Harvey might be guilty of misapplying an idea that anthropologists have done more than anyone else to develop, the real issue is not the misapplication but the non-application of anthropology. Had SACHR attended to the 'theoretical and philosophical issues' and glanced at some of the anthropological literature, it would have noticed that anthropologists had reservations from the outset. The people involved in drafting the AAA statement about the dependence of the individual personality on communal culture, Melville Herskovitz for example, had in mind 'the small communities in colonized regions, such as Africa and the Caribbean' that they had studied. The general applicability of the statement was questioned by Julian Steward, among others (Merry 2003: 57). Nevertheless, the connection between individual personality and communal culture that the AAA statement

makes, has been generalised such that it has been (mis)applied to, and/or used by, many other kinds of communities and groups. This is something that subsequent generations of anthropologists have been questioning (Wright 1998, Cowan et al 2001; and Eriksen 2001).

Community Relations Policy, Cultural Initiatives and the Historians

Turning now to the community relations initiatives themselves, particularly the CTG, which, as the SACHR report notes, were already in operation in 1990, we will find both direct and indirect anthropological input. The founding Director of the CTG, herself trained in anthropology, might not see it quite that way. She argues that, perforce, the CTG got on with its job in advance of discussion in academic literature about ways of promoting attitudinal change, which is, she says, the aim of most such initiatives. She describes the approach adopted by the CTG as being 'instinctive (…) at the start' (Crozier 2004: 37). This rings true, but bearing in mind that the community-relations strategy grew out of the Anglo Irish Agreement of 1985 we can see that the strategy was informed by a lively intellectual debate on cultural pluralism and identity dating from the 1970s in Ireland.

This debate is led not by anthropologists but by revisionist historians such as F. S. L. Lyons (1979) and revisionist politicians such as Garret FitzGerald (1976), who as Taoiseach was the Irish signatory to the Anglo Irish Agreement. In the Irish context, revisionism refers to those who sought to replace the monocultural vision of Irish identity projected in traditional nationalist historiography with a more pluralist vision. Lyons argued that there was not one, singular Irish identity, but two or three or more discrete cultural identities. In developing his argument, Lyons strains to define culture in a broader way than was conventional in Irish historiography at the time. He starts with Mathew Arnold's definition of culture as that which 'makes the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere', and which serves 'to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light'.

> When Arnold was composing his essay in the late 1860s, the social sciences were still in their infancy. There were not *social anthropologists or social psychologists* to compel him to explain himself more intelligibly (…). To get closer to Irish realities we shall have to interpret culture in a much broader sense, yet without committing ourselves irrevocably to the devotees of any specific school (…). At this stage (…) it will be enough to apply it to the different groups in Ireland which either have or have had a distinct and relatively autonomous existence and whose members have shared a recognizably common way of life. (Lyons 1979: 3; my italics)

Thus, although Lyons refuses to commit himself to any 'specific school' of anthropology, he does invoke the old idea of culture. Using this idea, Lyons develops a famously bleak analysis in which Ireland's political troubles are merely the outward sign of the neverending clash of underlying cultural differences.

Lyons (1979) provided the starting point for the keynote speech at the founding conference of the CTG. The keynote speaker was Roy Foster (1989), the leading member of the new generation of revisionist historians. His task was to transmute Lyons's pessimism into optimism. Foster agreed with Lyons that the source of Ireland's political problems was a clash of cultural identities, but he also had to show how culture was the realm that could yet redeem. Amongst some of the discussants, the Arnoldian vision of culture as a place where reconciliation could occur is amalgamated with a view of Ulster or Northern Ireland as a distinct region with its own culture and personality, shared by people from both communities. Such regionalism is most associated with the geographer Estyn Evans and the poet John Hewitt, but it is perhaps significant that at the inaugural lecture of the CTG Foster legitimates it with reference to Rosemary Harris's celebrated ethnography of rural Ulster.

I return to Harris in a moment, but let me end this brief look at the origins of cultural pluralism and policy by mentioning that the conflation of different concepts of culture contributes to a confusion such that it was imagined that if Catholics and Protestants were encouraged to look into their own traditions and communal identities they would gain in self-respect and self-esteem such that they would have the confidence to engage with the other community and to learn about its traditions, and out of this encounter there would not only develop mutual respect but each community would discover that they shared values rooted in a common regional culture.

Based on these shaky theoretical foundations, it is hardly surprising that the policies have rarely had the intended result. Encouraged to dwell on their respective cultural identities, activists in each community have not, for the most part, discovered commonality, rather they have tended to manufacture and objectify difference and to dig in behind it. After the GFA, such reification is not checked or mitigated even by a tenuous notion of a common culture—all there is is the constitutional right to hold simultaneously both a British and Irish passport.

Consociational Theory

Lawyers and historians are not the only academics to have drawn on anthropological theories and concepts; so have political scientists. Indeed, if we were to take at face value the claims made by some political scientists regarding their influence on the peace process, they may yet be the most significant proponents of anthropological ideas about culture.

One of the strongest and most persistent academic claims to having influenced the peace process has come from advocates of consociational theory, notably John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary. Their claim is not without substance. As an adviser to the British Labour Party, O'Leary worked with Mo Mowlam, who as Sec-

retary of State for Northern Ireland, 1997–1999, oversaw the negotiations leading to the signing of the GFA. Pressing his claim for the influence of consociational theory, O'Leary points out that Mowlam was once a Politics lecturer with a 'consociational heritage' (O'Leary 2004: 262).[2]

Having pressed their claim hard, McGarry and O'Leary have become rather defensive in the light of the vicissitudes of the Agreement, especially the deepening of communal divisions in Belfast and elsewhere. They are especially keen to tackle any suggestion that the GFA is based on an essentialist or primordialist concept of culture and identity. They do this in two ways. First, by claiming that it is 'wrong to suggest that consociationalists are necessarily primordialists: there is a major difference between thinking that identities are durable and maintaining they are immutably primordial' (McGarry and O'Leary 2004: 32). Secondly, by arguing that while 'many' 'consociational agreements' are 'corporate' in the sense that they 'privileged particular identities over others', and while the GFA has some corporate elements, it is 'generally (…) liberal rather than corporate' (2004: 34). These arguments do not ring true to me: it is precisely because individual identity is conceived as being dependent on an inherited, primordial, communal culture that liberals are able to reconcile themselves to arrangements such as consociational democracy that institutionalise communal rights. Rather than taking what McGarry and O'Leary say at face value, it is worth looking more closely at the development of consociational theory to see what assumptions it makes about culture and community, and, particularly, how much these owe to anthropology.

Consociational theory is, as McGarry and O'Leary say, 'one of the most influential theories in comparative political science' (2004: 1). It provided the intellectual basis for peace agreements not just in Northern Ireland, but in Bosnia Herzegovina (Dayton Accords) and South Africa (interim constitution 1993–1996). It was first ap-

plied to Northern Ireland by the Dutch political scientist, Arend Lijphart. Indeed Lijphart is the political scientist who has done most to develop consociational theory, and the case of Northern Ireland was crucial to this development.

Lijphart starts from the idea, derived from John Stuart Mill, that democratic stability is impossible where there is insufficient fellow-feeling among a people. Lijphart draws on the work of the social anthropologist M. G. Smith to suggest that plural societies 'can be either democratic but unstable or relatively stable but not fully democratic'. He then claims

> to have found a third alternative: a culturally divided democracy which is stabilized by an agreement among the leaders of the different subcultures to join in the government of the country. This entails some form of grand coalition rule and an agreement on an equitable (usually proportional) distribution of appointments, appropriations, etc. (Lijphart 1975: 99)

The successful consociational democracies 'found' by Lijphart in the 1970s included Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Malaysia and Lebanon.

As Lijphart concedes, he was not the first to notice consociational political systems. After 'reviewing ethnographic materials on precolonial African societies for evidence of pluralism', the anthropologist M. G. Smith 'arrived at an "unanticipated result,": the discovery of a type of plural society which he labelled "consociation," that is, an association of "separately constituted corporate collectivities as equal and internally autonomous partners in a common society"' (Lijphart 1977: 167–168). M. G. Smith does not refer to these 'corporate collectivities' as primordial, but, following Clifford Geertz, Lijphart does. Communal attachments provide the basis for 'non-Western' (Lijphart 1977: 16) politics and 'such communal attachments are what Clifford Geertz calls "primordial loyalties", which may be based on language, religion, custom, region, race, or assumed blood ties' (Lijphart 1975: 17). These are foremost among the 'precolonial traditions that can serve as a

firm foundation for consociational democracy' (Lijphart 1977: 166) in 'non-Western' societies, but not only in such societies.

> The subcultures of the European consociational democracies, which are religious and ideological in nature and on which, in two of the countries, linguistic divisions are superimposed, may also be regarded as primordial groups—if one is willing to view ideology as a kind of religion. All of these societies, Western and non-Western, will be referred to here as plural societies. (Lijphart 1977: 16)

For Lijphart, Northern Ireland was 'the most unambiguous instance of a plural society (…) in the Western world' (1977: 134). It was also a place where a consociational solution had been tried and failed[3] and as such it was a good place to understand the limits of consociational theory and policy. To support his view of Northern Ireland as a case of extreme cultural pluralism, Lijphart did not invoke the Irish revisionists. Lyons's and FitzGerald's key texts had not yet been published in 1975 and the theory that Ireland's problems were the product of underlying cultural divisions was not yet hegemonic. Rather he invoked the authority of the first ethnographer of the Troubles, Rosemary Harris (1986[1972]). Harris's boss at the time was, in fact, M. G. Smith, and she was hesitant about defining Northern Ireland as an example of cultural pluralism, in fact she regarded Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland as being culturally very similar. She did not minimise the depth of division, far from it, but she insisted on understanding it at the level of intergroup relations not by invoking primordialism.

There is no question that the person who did most to develop consociational theory, Arend Lijphart, regarded Northern Ireland as a place split between two primordial groups—defined by differing religious, national and colonial allegiances—and that he regarded this division as being conducive to consociation. If the consociational solution agreed in 1974 failed, it was not because Northern Irish society was too divided. Lijphart (1975: 101) regarded sharp cultural divisions as a good thing:

> Rival subcultures may coexist peacefully if there is little contact between them (…) such distinct cleavage [would] promote internal political cohesion within each subculture and consequently the latitude that leaders have to strike a political bargain with the leaders of rival subcultures. Such leeway is vital in consociational politics.

In the words of the famous Robert Frost's poem, Mending Wall, much quoted in Northern Ireland these days, often without the irony, 'good fences make good neighbours'.

One cannot accuse McGarry and O'Leary of being segregationists; indeed, even they regard the extent to which the GFA privileges two communal identities as being excessive. One might even concede to them that it is indeed 'wrong to suggest that consociationalists are necessarily primordialists' (McGarry and O'Leary 2004: 32), but when consociationalism disavows its primordialist or essentialist assumptions about culture, community and identity it loses intellectual coherence and risks its appeal for liberals and democrats.

Conclusion

The GFA reveals traces of both the old anthropological notion of culture and of 'deconstructive, anti-essentialist' critiques of that notion (Donnan and McFarlane 1997), though the influence of the former is arguably more potent than the latter (Finlay 2004). Rather than assume that this is the result of anthropological influence, I have sought to trace the provenance of these notions of culture in a series of debates that informed the peace process. My conclusion is that while anthropologists have been influential in implementing the cultural policies that flowed from a previous Anglo-Irish agreement, other disciplines, notably law, history and political science, have been more influential in developing the conceptual underpinnings of those policies. In this context, Susan Wright's concern about nonanthropologists using anthro-pology to legitimise their interventions is warranted. Moreover, in invoking the old anthropological idea of culture while remaining oblivious to its critique, historians and political scientists have misapplied anthropology.

My conclusion is paradoxical in the sense that it implies that the salience of the old anthropological idea of culture is a sign of the weakness of anthropological influence on the peace process. If anthropologists had been more influential, the deconstructive antiessentialist critique would have been more systematically elaborated. In this context it is worth noting that, amongst all the academic claims to have influenced the peace process, those who have claimed credit for insinuating an antiessentialist view of culture and identity are not anthropologists, but literary critics wielding postcolonial theory (Kiberd 2000: 628). Ultimately, though, when the stakes are so high, anthropological circumspection is preferable to the vainglorious and hasty claims of other academic disciplines.

Andrew Finlay lectures in Sociology at Trinity College Dublin. His email is arfinlay@tcd.ie.

Notes

1. Some of the research on which this article is based was conducted with support from the IIIS at Trinity College Dublin through the 'Global Networks' Project. In this context I am particularly grateful to Mick Byrne for his assistance.
2. It is true that in her doctoral dissertation at the University of Iowa, Mowlam explored the role of the referendum in the Swiss political system. Nevertheless, an anthropologist might be tempted to counter McGarry and O'Leary by claiming Mowlam as one of their own: she studied Anthropology as an undergraduate at Durham.
3. The supposed consociational nature of the Sunningdale Agreement has been questioned (Farrington 2006).

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