# Disjunctured narratives: rethinking reconciliation and conflict transformation

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*International Political Science Review* 2012 33: 82 originally published online 22 June 2011
DOI: 10.1177/0192512110389568

*Article*

International Political Science Review
33(1) 82–98

DOI: 10.1177/0192512110389568
ips.sagepub.com

# Disjunctured narratives: rethinking reconciliation and conflict transformation

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## Abstract

Reconciliation has been a notable part of discourses of conflict management and transitional justice in a number of conflictual situations around the world. This article examines the recent emergence of critical theories of reconciliation with particular reference to processes of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. It evaluates the ways in which conflict transformation in Northern Ireland is specific to that context and the variations in the usage of discourses of reconciliation compared with other 'post-conflict' societies. The article highlights critical theories of reconciliation which, although largely supportive of the potential of reconciliation, tend to highlight the arguments and conflicts that notions of reconciliation can generate. By examining the ways in which reconciliation is articulated in Northern Ireland through interviews with representatives of the main political parties, the article contends that narrative approaches are best suited to analysis of the issues in Northern Irish politics. The argument developed here suggests that reconciliation in Northern Ireland is part of a 'disjunctured synthesis' whereby the main political parties become locked into narratives of reconciliation based on opposition to the perceived position of the other.

## Keywords

discourse, nationalism, Northern Ireland, post-structuralism, reconciliation, unionism

## Introduction: understanding reconciliation in Northern Ireland

In early 2009 the long-awaited report of the Consultative Group on the Past (CGP) (the Eames/Bradley Report) was published, providing recommendations for ways in which Northern Ireland could deal with the legacy of the past.[1] The report sets out a range of strategies to enable the process of 'reconciliation, justice and information recovery' in order to promote 'peace and stability in Northern Ireland' (CGP, 2009: 6). These recommendations generated considerable controversy and disgruntlement in a society that is not explicitly reconciled, although undergoing a process of conflict transformation. This article examines the theoretical case for reconciliation and the reasons

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why it has proved difficult to implement conflict management initiatives based on reconciliatory ideas in the particular context of Northern Ireland.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it examines theoretical claims about the capacity of reconciliation to provide a conceptual framework that facilitates conflict transformation in divided societies. This necessitates some unpacking of the theoretical literature on reconciliation and, in particular, an attempt to differentiate between normative approaches which lean towards advocacy of reconciliation and more critical accounts which provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of the difficulties that emerge when we apply theoretical constructs like reconciliation to practical situations in divided societies. Second, this article attempts to outline some of the specificities of the impact of reconciliation narratives in Northern Ireland to demonstrate the ways in which the application of conceptual devices varies between different conflict scenarios. Implicitly, it suggests that the example of Northern Ireland may demonstrate some of the limitations of the concept when compared with other societies where ostensibly it may have had greater utility in navigating the difficult waters of conflict transformation. South Africa is an obvious comparison here and it is alluded to at several points in the first half of the article. In bringing the two threads of the arguments together, the major point to be emphasized is that evaluation of theoretical devices, like reconciliation, needs to be deeply grounded in substantive contexts and the obstacles they involve – an approach that has been somewhat lacking in normative approaches to the concept of reconciliation.

While there is a critical literature on the idea of reconciliation (Humphrey, 2000; Norval, 1998; Schaap, 2005), there is also a tendency in both academic and popular accounts to imagine reconciliation as a positive process towards the accommodation of political difference (see e.g. Lederach, 1997). Although accepting the transformative potential of reconciliation, this article argues that there are two key issues at stake in understanding its political implications: first, the need for a specific and deeply contextual understanding of the meaning of reconciliation and, second, a requirement to unpack the ideological and linguistic presuppositions that reconciliation invokes within a specific context. The article uses the example of Northern Ireland as a testing ground for these issues on the basis that it is a society that has been involved in conflict transformation processes in the last 15 to 20 years and one where notions of reconciliation have been invoked as fundamental to future political and social relations (Schulze, 2008).

What emerges is a complex picture of reconciliation discourses and narratives in Northern Ireland that demonstrates the deeply contested nature of the concept. Because reconciliation is an unsettled and elusive concept, it becomes difficult to employ it as a key strand of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. Indeed, as the interviews discussed in the second half of the article make clear, pursuing reconciliation in Northern Ireland might actually makes things worse because it has never been established as an agreed objective of the peace process. This reflects the contention that, while reconciliation might be a fruitful concept to use in the context of the management of some conflicts in the world, it is most certainly not universally beneficial and can be harmful where the implications of its application have not been thoroughly considered. Many conflictual societies such as Northern Ireland have moved through processes of conflict transformation without engaging in overt forms of reconciliation. This suggests that reconciliation should not be placed at the summit of any general hierarchical model of the most appropriate forms of conflict resolution.

Indeed, in the Northern Ireland example, conflict is not only based upon the schisms between the arguments of different social groups but also the synthesis of these conflicting perspectives in terms of political actors defining themselves in contradistinction from their opponents. Thus, this article contends that there is a ‘disjunctured synthesis’ at work in Northern Ireland that militates against reconciliation being employed as the conceptual device to facilitate conflict transformation.

## From normative to narrative theories of reconciliation

As will become clear, this article argues the case for reconciliation discourses to be grounded in particular contexts (Hermann, 2004). However, in the interests of clarity, it is worth outlining the general definitions of reconciliation that have emerged from the recent literature on the topic. At this point it needs to be recognized that many of the strongest advocates of reconciliation realize that the term is complex and that many commentators use it in extremely different ways and say widely divergent things in the name of reconciliation. Despite this, attempts to define reconciliation and highlight its normative benefits abound in the literature. For example, Thompson (2002: 50) states that 'reconciliation is achieved when the harm done by injustice to relations of respect and trust that ought to exist . . . has been repaired or compensated for by the perpetrator in such a way that this harm is no longer regarded as standing in the way of establishing or re-establishing these relations'. Indeed she goes as far as to claim that reconciliation 'is a process of mutual accommodation that presupposes the acceptance of moral conditions and objectives' (p. 52).

In more applied terms, Hamber and van der Merwe (1998) also focus on the normative case for reconciliation in their identification of a range of approaches and ideologies of reconciliation that emerged in South Africa as a pivotal element of conflict transformation in the 1990s.[2] These understandings of reconciliation involved, for example, non-racial ideologies, an agenda of intercommunal understanding, a religious and moral perspective, a human rights approach, and a form of community building. Depending on which of these approaches was paramount, very different meanings of reconciliation emerged with varying knock-on effects for policy and practice. What is more, Hamber and van der Merwe state that at different times the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) articulated different understandings of reconciliation to meet their objectives (see also Doxtader, 2001; Hayner, 2000; Moon, 2006). What seems clear from analysis of the South African example is that a pre-ordained political objective of 'nation-building through non-racialism' led to a situation in which the 'expression of conflict is often seen as a betrayal rather than a challenge to common ground' (Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998: 2).

Despite the recognition that reconciliation is multi-faceted, the most notable feature of this argument is the pursuit of greater agreement about the definition of reconciliation. Indeed, Hamber and van der Merwe (1998: 4) explicitly state that 'consensus on a clearer definition than what has been used over the last few years will serve to avert conflict over who is, or who is not, committed to reconciliation'. On this normative view then, conflict over the concept is inherently problematic. A counterpoint would be the case that it is precisely this attempt to narrow down a process of reconciliation (and provide a definitive account that can form the basis of consensus) that is likely to further marginalize accounts that do not correspond with the over-arching agenda. Thus, the very process of establishing consensus around a specific definition will police the boundaries of acceptable political discourse and 'what we can hear' under the auspices of reconciliation (Butler, 2004; Rancière, 2004; Schaap, 2008). Where debates abound about, for example, the distinctions between reconciliation as a social phenomenon or a matter for individual victims (Minow and Rosenblum, 2002; Rosenblum, 2002), less attention tends to be focused on the way in which the *language of reconciliation* can frame the space in which debates about conflict transformation can take place.

Six years after these reflections on as reconciliation in South Africa, Brandon Hamber was also involved in applying some of these debates around definition in the context of Northern Ireland where reconciliation was a less fully formed concept and thus had been much more loosely implemented.[3] This project contended that reconciliation is a fundamental element of peacebuilding such that the following definition emerged: 'reconciliation is the process of addressing conflictual and

fractured relationships' involving five key strands: a shared vision of an independent and fair society; acknowledging and dealing with the past; building positive relationships; significant and attitudinal change; and substantial social, economic and political change (Hamber and Kelly, 2004: 3–4). However, as will see, few of these developments have taken place substantively in Northern Ireland. While it is fair to say that the conflict has been involved in a transformative process, in the Northern Irish context at least, relative peace since 1998 has not been dependent on reconciliation in the way Hamber and Kelly define it. Indeed, the discourses of political actors in Northern Ireland might suggest that it is difficult to construct general theories of reconciliation that can be applied without *generating* political conflict. Thus, regardless of the intentions or disposition of particular political actors, the language of reconciliation tends to be regarded as politically – or more precisely, ideologically – loaded in each context. While this should not be regarded as inherently problematic, it puts the place of reconciliation as an intrinsically positive part of conflict resolution processes into some doubt.[4] This calls into question Bar-Siman-Tov's (2004: 4) claim that reconciliation is particularly applicable to zero-sum disputes – it is precisely the zero-sum game dimension of Northern Irish politics that makes reconciliation difficult to implement.[5]

This background to the Northern Ireland conflict clarifies why it is pivotal to bear in mind the *generative* dimension of political narratives and, thus, the ways in which concepts such as reconciliation potentially create more conflict than they resolve (Little, 2010; Moon, 2006). This propensity for disagreement can be regarded as particularly resilient where there are few shared narratives of the over-arching conflict and indeed where accounts of the conflict are reliant upon a disjunctured relationship with alternative readings. In other words, processes of reconciliation are less likely to contribute to conflict transformation where the established narratives rely upon the existence of an alternative reading to shore up their particular accounts and explanations of the nature of the conflict itself (Žižek, 2004). Or, to put it in even more simple terms (and in contrast to the argument of Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004), reconciliation is less likely to contribute to conflict transformation in societies where the conflict is often construed as a zero-sum game.

In these circumstances the success of reconciliation is closely tied to its linguistic expression and the extent to which it reflects or challenges existing social divisions. In Northern Ireland there is a multiplicity of views of reconciliation and each has a different political import. What is clear, however, is that there is an intersection of narratives of reconciliation and identity-based politics in Northern Ireland which means that reconciliation tends to be filtered through an ideological prism. As a result the concept of reconciliation is rarely cast in an objective light; instead it *reflects and reinforces* existing structural social divisions and contributes to the undoubtedly emotive nature of Northern Irish politics. In Northern Ireland then, reconciliation discourses are deeply bound up with conflictual identity claims based upon incommensurable interpretations of political difference. Put simply, reconciliation in Northern Ireland is regarded by many people as an ideological tool rather than an institutional process concerned with the amelioration of substantive social and political disagreements or a means by which perpetrators of violence express contrition for their wrongdoing and victims exercise forgiveness.

What implications do these conditions have for the ways in which we conceptualize reconciliation? As we have seen, in the literature on reconciliation there tends to be a strong emphasis on reconciliation as a normative project: one inspired by the pursuit of truth and forgiveness to reach the objective of peaceful co-existence and the renewal of a society (Bar- Siman-Tov, 2004; Crocker, 2004; Hamber and Kelly, 2004). This transformative process is imagined as one where the wrongdoing of the past is recognized in the name of finding a new *modus vivendi* which can bring together former enemies in the establishment of a mode of social engagement which recognizes the

errors of the past in its understanding of future development. However, among more critical theories of reconciliation, there appears to be more scope for sufficiently nuanced accounts which take account of some of the difficulties of applying abstract concepts to complex political situations. These critical theories include agonistic approaches (Little, 2010; Muldoon, 2003; Schaap, 2008) and rhetorical constructions of reconciliation (Doxtader, 2003; Little, 2011), but the approach I would like to focus on here is a narrative perspective on reconciliation which allows much more scope for the continuation of contestatory discourses than is the case with agonistic or rhetorical approaches (Humphrey, 2000; Moon, 2006). Where agonistic theory embraces reconciliation for its transformative capacity in changing antagonistic relations to agonistic ones, and rhetorical approaches focus on the opening of spaces which allow for political dialogue between opposed parties, narrative approaches to reconciliation concentrate much less on the transformative potential of discourse. Instead, narrative is viewed as a 'basic cultural means of perceptions, emotions and meanings. Narrative comes out of experience as well as shapes experience and what is generated as a narrative is as much a product of forgetting as remembering' (Humphrey, 2000: 10). This view of narrative is much less normative than the other theories considered here insofar as it recognizes that reconciliation narratives can be just as divisive and misleading as they are transformative, unifying and illuminating.

The highlighting of reconciliation as part of a process of story telling about contentious events is an approach which is alive to the ways in which the issues which give rise to the call for reconciliation are generative of new political conflicts. Thus, as Moon (2006) contends, talking about reconciliation needs to involve narratives which are not reconciled, which are not forgiving, which do not apologize, which call for punishment. In short, narratives of reconciliation will generate critiques of reconciliatory processes and greater or lesser degrees of non-reconciliation. The generative function of reconciliation narratives is not just about producing accord but may well open up and create new forms of disagreement as traumatic events are narrated (Humphrey, 2000). Thus, we cannot assume that narratives of reconciliation will perform the transformative role imagined in agonistic accounts or even open up rhetorical spaces to enable thinking about the future. If they are loaded with these agonistic or rhetorical assumptions, then the narrative power of accounts of events loses a key critical component in the pursuit of some element of closure: 'the past and present bear the mark of future narrative closure, of reconciliation. Reconciliation is thus a transformative fiction that confers a moral unity upon the related events' (Moon, 2006: 272). Ultimately, the concept of reconciliation can constrain narrative by policing and foreclosing acceptable and sensible discourse (Rancière, 2004) thereby producing blockages because the dominant, normative approach cannot reflect the multitude of interpretations of reconciliation while still driving towards an agenda of compromise. In short, if reconciliation's aim is to bring together perpetrators and victims of the past in one way or another, then it relies on a certain disposition amongst interlocutors which is based upon preformed conciliatory mentalities.

While all critical theories of reconciliation recognize the inevitability of social and political conflict, there are nuanced differences between them. Where agonism seeks to establish a broader (but more disputatious) space in which acceptably contested engagement can take place, narrative approaches are more attuned to the existence of openly conflictual accounts within the political paradigm. One way of transcending this difference is the rhetorical approach which addresses the need for conceptual discursive mechanisms which can bring conflictual parties together. However, it is not clear that there is a single conceptual device which can fulfil this need – the experience of reconciliation processes in different societies suggests that such concepts translate into political practice in multiple ways in different conflictual settings and not always for the positive. Therefore

theories of reconciliation need to be grounded in a particular social context to comprehend the ways in which particular languages and narratives emerge in relation to the social context in which they are articulated. This approach is likely to pay greater attention to the miscommunications that often appear in politics and the significance of the politics of language. Moon's narrative approach suggests a framework through which the language of reconciliation can be deconstructed and the various meanings that underpin different discursive constructions can be identified (Moon, 2006). It is an approach which accepts the view that there is no consensus on the meaning of reconciliation and sees the conflict around the meaning of such concepts as symptomatic of the ambiguity of political language. This suggests an unsteady foundation for political ideas (including reconciliation) because 'subjects do not independently produce, but are constituted by, discourse, and they in turn reproduce the particular assumptions of the discourse within which they are constituted, thus ensuring its hegemony and continuity and also, crucially, the invisibility of its reproduction' (Moon, 2006: 261). The next section locates these claims in the context of Northern Ireland.

## Narratives of reconciliation in Northern Ireland

While abstract discussion of reconciliation provides useful theoretical insight, it is by applying conceptual discussion to specific grounded examples that the ramifications of abstract models become apparent. In this section processes of reconciliation in Northern Ireland are discussed to shed further light on the normative and critical literature on reconciliation. This is apposite given the publication of the Consultative Group on the Past report in early 2009. This report reflects the contention that 'any individual or group identity – that is, a sense of sameness over time and space – is sustained by remembering and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity' (Norval, 1998: 254). In the example of Northern Ireland then, remembering is a pivotal part of the conflict transformation process and, as we shall see, the narratives on reconciliation that emerge are deeply imprinted with conflictual identities and the political ideologies which emanate from them.

Before going on to discuss the specific research that has been employed in the development of this article, it is worth making some brief observations on the extent to which the application of the theoretical arguments to the case of Northern Ireland has broader comparative ramifications. In general, the approach employed here is heavily context driven in recognition of the difficulties of developing general theories of transitional justice or conflict transformation. Insofar as all conflict scenarios are grounded in highly particular political, cultural and social circumstances, then, it is dangerous to generalize too much from specific contexts in terms of identifying pathways to conflict transformation in other disputes (Daly and Sarkin, 2007). That said, it is clear that the discourse of reconciliation has been a familiar dimension of many transitional justice processes from South Africa to Australia and in many places in between. While the South African example was widely regarded as an exemplar in the middle of the 1990s, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has received much more critical scrutiny in the last few years (Hayner, 2000). In Australia on the other hand, reconciliation has remained a powerful discourse in the ongoing pursuit of recognition of historical and contemporary wrongdoing against indigenous people, though not least because the process has been far from thoroughgoing (Schaap, 2009).

Although different conflict scenarios manifest in multiple ways, it is possible to identify trends in which the main critical theoretical approaches can be exemplified in a variety of different post-conflict situations around the world. In Northern Ireland it is possible to construe those engaged in mainstream political dialogue as part of an agonistic interaction between legitimate adversaries (Little, 2009). This agonistic engagement has emerged from the political developments of the

1990s without a strong rhetorical foundation in notions of reconciliation. Moreover, as we shall see, the parameters of acceptable discourse in the 'post-conflict' environment in Northern Ireland are constrained. As such, the boundaries of what can be said are policed and remain the subject of considerable political conflict. This compares with a number of post-conflict situations around the world which, despite their differing particularities, reflect the tendency of transitional justice processes to focus on accommodating narrowly defined reconciliatory perspectives and to marginalize perspectives which might be seen to be grounded in older conflictual narratives. This is particularly the case in situations such as East Timor where the post-conflict scenario is one in which many people feel deprived of human rights and where victims of the conflict continue to argue for better recognition of their loss (Leach, 2008). In the Argentinian case, the pursuit of truth was thought to be potentially compromised by any kind of more substantive demand for reconciliation (Skaar, 2005). In other situations such as Rwanda which were not so much based on conflict *settlement*, the post-conflict administration is so embroiled with one side of the conflict that the idea of 'reconciliation' seems almost anachronistic (Cameron, 2006; Reyntjens and Vandeginste, 2005). Each of these post-conflict scenarios is highly particular but it is interesting to note that in many of these cases theories of transitional justice appear somewhat lacking in terms of their failure to recognize the continuation of sources of conflict in the 'post-conflict' environment (Gready, 2003).

This article is based on an ongoing programme of research that began in late 2006 based on a series of semi-formal interviews and informal discussions with representatives of political parties and organizations within civil society focused on processes of reconciliation and remembrance in Northern Ireland. Here I focus on the initial phase of that research, which concentrated on the narratives constructed within some of the different political parties as a means of understanding, supporting or criticizing notions of reconciliation. Following the argument outlined earlier, it is at least partially through the process of understanding narratives and their sub-texts that the extent of conciliation and the potential obstacles to reconciliation become clear. Thus, although in the broader research project a range of different texts are evaluated to make sense of reconciliation discourses, this article is more focused on the narrative constructions that underpin those discourses. Clearly these narratives vary considerably in Northern Ireland (and even within each political party) so the participants in this research should not be regarded as giving a definitive view of the perspective of their parties.[6] Nonetheless, the participants were the individuals who were nominated by their parties to engage in the interviews when approached by the author and should therefore be deemed to be relatively authoritative commentators. Indeed, they ranged from party leaders to senior party officials to party spokespeople on the issue of reconciliation. The methodological stance adopted in analysing these interviews is a form of critical interpretivism whereby, if we understand politics as the arena in which

> we see expressed the irreducible and contested plurality of public life, the ineradicable contestation of differing world-views, then it is clear that what is distinct in politics is not the presence of beliefs but the presence of beliefs in contradiction with each other, not decisions about courses of action but of dispute over decisions and courses of action. It then follows that ideational and interpretive analyses have tended to examine the wrong object, which ought not to be ideas but arguments. (Finlayson, 2007: 552)

Thus, the rest of the article sheds critical light on the theories of reconciliation examined so far by addressing them in relation to the arguments about reconciliation articulated by Northern Irish political parties. Importantly, it does so by unveiling the narrative underpinnings of these arguments because these foundational points are often just as revealing as the arguments themselves taken at face value. From this methodological standpoint, it is not surprising that notions such as reconciliation can generate polarized responses in conflictual societies such as Northern Ireland.

Indeed, it would be reasonable to expect that societies with deep divisions which help to structure social and political discourses would see those structural schisms reflected in the discussion of contentious notions such as reconciliation. There is then a multiplicity of perspectives on the idea of reconciliation which reflects the social and ideological diversity in Northern Ireland. But it is also worth reflecting on the diversity of the articulations of reconciliation and the animosity that the idea generates from those who feel the reconciliation agenda might fuel political unrest rather than resolve it. What is notable, then, is not so much the variety of arguments about reconciliation in Northern Ireland but rather the *disjunctured nature* of these narratives. It is this disjuncture that suggests that reconciliation processes are likely to generate as much conflict as they resolve in the Northern Irish context.

The most widely held understanding of the Northern Ireland conflict is that it is dominated by an ethno-national schism between two amalgamations of religious, cultural and national identity. This understanding gives rise to a certain mode of political analysis and the primacy of a consociational understanding of conflict transformation (Taylor, 2009). However, when examining the idea of reconciliation, it is not only possible to identify arguments that reflect their location within the ethno-national political divide, but also considerable differences *within* the main categories that are established according to the idea of Northern Ireland as divided between two ethno-national groupings (Finlayson, 2001; Little, 2004). In its simplest terms, reconciliation tends to be viewed by unionists/loyalists as part of a nationalist/republican agenda that threatens the fragile peace accord of the 1990s whereas nationalists/republicans tend to argue in favour of reconciliation but only on the grounds that it is substantive and involves the recognition of wrongdoing across the political spectrum (including by government agencies) rather than merely focusing on the actions of paramilitary organizations. When analysed in more detail however, the variations within these ethno-national categorizations are more marked than a simple 'deeply divided society' account would have us believe. What is most notable in analysing reconciliation narratives in Northern Ireland is that the onus on the victim to become reconciled to their situation is a divisive issue when there is no agreement on the status of victimhood. While these issues were controversial in the South African context (Humphrey, 2000), they are much more divisive in Northern Ireland, where the rights and wrongs of the conflict continue to be the subject of political debate. At its starkest, some of the people who died in the conflict are not universally understood to be victims.

## *Unionist perspectives*

The main unionist parties are critical of notions of reconciliation but in differing ways that reflect the ideological division within unionism in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the governing party in Northern Ireland from its inception until 1972, was relatively comfortable with direct rule from Westminster after 1972 but acquiesced in the peace process of the 1990s with its promise of a return of devolved power to Northern Ireland. Officially the UUP supported the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and its leader, David Trimble, became First Minister when the power-sharing executive or grand coalition was eventually formed (Wilford, 2001).[7] The other main party in the unionist bloc, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), opposed the Good Friday Agreement and, following the euphoria which followed the signing of the Agreement and the new future which it promised, reaped the benefits of rejecting what soon became seen as a problematic political accord. Through the early years of the new century the DUP thrived and became the largest unionist party. Following further negotiation of the stalemate in the Northern Ireland peace process at St. Andrews in 2006, the DUP eventually entered into government with their republican opponents,

Sinn Fein (SF), in May 2007. In this context the UUP is wary of going further down the path of accommodating the demands of nationalists because their electorate appears to be drifting towards their main competitors.

After the Good Friday Agreement the UUP suffered to some extent from its preparedness to enter into negotiations with republicans and to make the leap into the unknown of forming a grand governing coalition with nationalists. Not surprisingly then, notions of reconciliation which are deemed to be areas where republicans have made the running are treated with some caution among the UUP. This is consistent with the Burkean conservative dimension of Ulster Unionist politics whereby the party regards itself as having traditionally adopted a rather pragmatic and piecemeal approach to issues in Northern Irish politics and has been sceptical of attempts to frame a big political idea such as reconciliation as the driving force of change (Interview 1). The nervousness that the UUP feels about notions of reconciliation is accompanied by a feeling of contentment about peace itself insofar as their primary objective in the peace process was to bring about the end of armed conflict. That said, however, some notion of reconciliation is at work in UUP thinking although it tends to be couched in the more familiar unionist language of remembrance especially for those who lost their lives fighting for Britain in the 20th century (especially the First World War) and more recently civilians and members of the security forces who were killed during the 'Troubles' (Fay et al., 1999). This notion of remembrance focuses on either those who are understood to be fighting for the forces of legitimacy and democracy on the one hand or those deemed to be innocent victims of the strife in Northern Ireland. While these victims of conflict both within Northern Ireland and beyond undoubtedly need to be remembered and recognized in any notion of reconciliation, there is a marked reluctance from the UUP to engage with the idea of reconciliation in Northern Ireland that accepts any blame or responsibility for wrongdoing in the formation of Northern Ireland or the more recent 'Troubles' (Interview 1). Remembrance is a comfortable and traditional discourse for the UUP to inhabit and there is little evidence of a willingness to move beyond those traditional parameters which reinforce the role of unionists in the protection of the British state whether within Northern Ireland or in broader conflicts.

This feeds into a broader unionist concern that nationalist driven processes of reconciliation would seek to recognize and remember all victims of the 'Troubles' in such a way as to create moral equivalence between them. This is dangerous for the UUP because it provides participants in the 'Troubles' with an authentic status as victims: 'unionism just can't go there; once you legitimize everyone, you feel you are being dragged into legitimizing something you just can't legitimize' (Interview 1). For Ulster Unionists then, a position where IRA volunteers who died are regarded as morally equivalent to civilians or policemen or part-time soldiers is not tenable. The problem here is that a reading of victimhood based on moral equivalence during the 'Troubles' erodes the identity and self-understanding of unionism. Where some notion of moral equivalence clearly informs republican arguments, there is a completely different narrative in the unionist reading of the history of Northern Ireland.

While the UUP clearly struggles to accept the kinds of implications that reconciliation might have for Northern Irish politics, it does see itself as the more progressive wing of unionism in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the UUP differentiates itself from the DUP, which it perceives to be more sectarian, and contends that at least the UUP recognizes that there needs to be some form of reconciliation even if that is undefined (Interview 1). On this account, there may well be aspects of a variety of political processes that contain elements of reconciliation such as the way in which deliberating and legislating with people over shared problems in everyday politics brings a form of reconciliation in itself. This, then, is not about grappling with the major issues of the past

but establishing a *modus vivendi* that enables collaboration in tackling contemporary issues and problems. For the UUP this is more important than a sanitized understanding of reconciliation which masquerades as conciliation while avoiding tackling divisive issues head on. The UUP suggests that working together on contemporary political issues helps to create spaces where the wrongdoing of the past may eventually be tackled, but Northern Ireland is clearly not at such a juncture now.

In general then, unionists demonstrate an open and explicit suspicion of the idea of reconciliation as an appropriate rhetorical device to drive conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. The DUP (particularly in the shape of its figurehead and erstwhile leader Ian Paisley) has been explicit about their fears concerning the peace process in general and, more particularly, the Good Friday Agreement and its outcomes. Not surprisingly then, the idea of reconciliation rings alarm bells with members of the DUP who tend to regard reconciliation as a nationalist agenda designed to blame unionists or the British for the 'Troubles'. Like the UUP, the DUP has no truck with a process that might lead to the view that all of the losses during the 'Troubles' were morally equivalent. The obverse of this argument is, of course, that republicans were to blame for 30 years of unrest and political violence. Rather than dwelling on the overtly rejectionist utterances of the DUP however, what becomes clear in analysis of its perspective is that reconciliation is not rejected out of hand but set within a more ambitious context that regards reconciliation as an outcome of the process rather than an ingredient within it. This stance contains a strongly normative understanding of reconciliation focused on eventual peace and harmony rather than more immediate modes of conflict management (Interview 6).

The temporal dimension of reconciliation was particularly important to the representative of the DUP because he perceived the discourse of reconciliation that was part of the 1990s peace process to have been precipitate. Thus, the fact that discourses of reconciliation began long before political violence had ended reflected the view that the reconciliation agenda was perceived to be driven by paramilitary organizations that were still operational at that time (Interview 6). This has generated considerable suspicion of the idea within unionism generally and the DUP in particular such that some unionists believe that they had not fully comprehended the concept of reconciliation during the 1990s and were more embroiled in fears of nationalist advancement. This politics of fear has been a central element in unionist responses to the rise of Sinn Fein in particular and has periodically left unionist parties on the back foot when various initiatives were taking place (Aughey, 2005; Bew, 2000).

Like the UUP, the DUP tends to be sceptical of the construction of a shared narrative of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. This is not to say that such narratives are necessarily precluded but that they could only emerge over a long period of time of peaceful co-existence. Indeed, in arguing that there is a 'spectrum of victimhood' (Interview 6), it is explicitly recognized that not only is reconciliation a distant prospect, but that even official processes of remembrance should be restricted to 'innocent victims', civilians and members of the security forces who died through no fault of their own. There was little recognition in the interview with the DUP representative that decisions about who fits into these categories are rather subjective and that the inclusion of some of those deemed 'innocent' by the DUP was unlikely to be reciprocated on the other side of the ethno-national divide. This reflects one of the central problems of reconciliation narratives in Northern Ireland, namely, that the two ethno-national blocs are, at least partially, defined in terms of not being the other (despite their internal complexity). Reconciliation processes which seek to challenge these narrative constructions of ethno-national identities are, then, likely to face strong opposition.

While opposed to nationalist driven processes of reconciliation, unionists are keen to point out that reconciliatory changes may be under way even if they are not distinctively labelled as part of a reconciliation process. For the DUP, the decision to enter government with SF was deeply symbolic and represented a seismic shift in the party's attitude towards republicans. Thus, while recognizing that this process did not amount to reconciliation or the forging of a shared narrative, the DUP representative did regard it as an important process of building trust which might provide a basis for more definitive reconciliation activities in the future. At its simplest, the DUP believes that not enough time has elapsed since the 'Troubles' for people to be in position to reconcile. Perhaps, for the time being, an objective of 'disagreeing in a more mannerly fashion' (Interview 6) might be the best that can be achieved. Thus, for the DUP, there needs to be more explicit recognition of the lack of foundations for a reconciliation process and the fact that different people would want to see different things emerge out of such a process.

## *Nationalist perspectives*

Nationalist actors have been the primary advocates of reconciliation and are likely to couch their struggle in the light of other conflicts such as South Africa in arguing for more thorough processes of reconciliation than have occurred in Northern Ireland thus far. Where unionists have been able to construct remembrance narratives as a way of establishing a separation between deaths and victims who should legitimately be remembered and those who were in one way or another viewed as illegitimate participants in the 'Troubles', some nationalists want to establish the moral equivalence of all victims. Moderate nationalists tend to view reconciliation as a means of establishing a common foundation recognizing that everyone suffered and that Northern Irish society needs to move on from its historical disagreements – a view that accords strongly with the orthodox normative models of reconciliation outlined at the outset of this article. More radical nationalists want to see a more stringent interpretation of reconciliation that not only reflects the culpability of the British state in some of the events that took place during the 'Troubles', but also, and more specifically, identifies collusion between the British state and loyalist paramilitaries.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is the most significant moderate nationalist party in Northern Ireland. Its founders were active in the Northern Ireland civil rights movement in the 1960s and it has been deeply involved in most of the peace initiatives during the 'Troubles' such as the Sunningdale Agreement (1973) and the power-sharing executive in 1974. Not surprisingly then, the SDLP was a pivotal actor in the 1990s peace process and was a firm supporter of the Good Friday Agreement (Farren, 2000) advocating notions of reconciliation involving parties on all sides and the two governments recognizing their culpability for the political scenario in Northern Ireland that gave rise to 30 years of violence and bloodshed.

To some extent, the SDLP likes to see itself as an honest broker between the competing interests in Northern Ireland. It tends to highlight the wrongdoings of others but also its willingness to act in good faith to condemn violence to history, which accords strongly with normative understandings of the benefits of reconciliation. The party therefore fervently supports reconciliatory processes: 'The SDLP's vision is a reconciled people living in a united, just and prosperous new Ireland . . . The SDLP wants to build an Ireland where conflict, violence and sectarianism become footnotes to our past; where reconciliation, equality and inclusion are chapter headings in the new story we will write together' (www.sdlp.ie/about_vision.php).

While the commitment of the SDLP to reconciliation is clear, there is little in this statement and other party documents to suggest that the party recognizes that all actors had a role – either witting

or unwitting – in the nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The failure to recognize that this is the case leads to a perception of the SDLP as somewhat sanctimonious in the way in which it deals with these issues in relation to other parties especially those that were open combatants. A participant in the reconciliation organization, *Healing Through Remembering*, recounts a member of the SDLP referring to their party as 'the only party with nothing to hide' (Interview 5). While the SDLP may not have had the same kind of direct role in the conflict as some other parties and organizations, that is not to say that it should not play a strong role in reconciliation processes as an actor that needs to reconcile with others. The conflict in Northern Ireland was not just about obvious acts of physical violence but also operated on the level of the symbolic with a wide range of cultural articulations and manifestations of sectarianism, mistrust and animosity. This broader understanding of the conflict was something that the SDLP was as bound up with as any other political actor and undermines its claims to be acting as an honest broker in reconciliation debates.

Not surprisingly, Provisional Sinn Fein provides a more radical and demanding understanding of reconciliation than the more conciliatory agenda of the SDLP. In some respects, we might guess that is because they do not have a lot to lose given the common perception in Northern Ireland that the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) – part of the military wing of republicanism – was at least partially, if not fundamentally, to blame for the 'Troubles'. Moreover, on a general level, republicans are willing to accept their role in the conflict although, as became clear during the Bloody Sunday inquiry, that did not necessarily extend to explaining specific instances of operational activities.[8] Specifically, for Sinn Fein, reconciliation processes should place a greater onus on the British government to accept its responsibility for Northern Ireland (from its inception through the 1920 Government of Ireland Act) and highlight the wrongdoings of the state in a manner akin to the usual allocation of blame to republicans.

In analysing Sinn Fein narratives some new issues emerge that do not appear in the arguments of the other parties. Thus, for example, they seek to place reconciliation in a 'broader, deeper' context whereby it could only be understood as national reconciliation in the 32 counties of Ireland rather than within Northern Ireland alone (Interview 5). Moreover, rather than merely criticizing reconciliation on the basis of its origins in the ethno-national division of Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein challenges the concept on the basis that it was interpreted as a 'woolly, middle class concept' whereby important political processes were reduced to the idea of shaking hands and moving on (Interview 5). While Sinn Fein is aware that many unionists saw reconciliation as a 'republican Trojan horse', their representative was concerned with outreach to unionists as a means of breaking down the walls that impeded trust and mutual understanding. Thus, even within republicanism, there was awareness that the term 'reconciliation' was potentially divisive and possibly harmful to processes that might otherwise be seen as reconciliatory.

In further investigation of Sinn Fein's reconciliation narratives, it becomes clear that there is one over-arching item that dominates their agenda: the issue of collusion during the 'Troubles' between elements of the British state and loyalist paramilitaries. The representative of Sinn Fein argued that during the 'Troubles' the British state 'sponsored, controlled, directed, armed, trained and used unionist paramilitaries to reinforce the conflict' (Interview 5). Thus, for Sinn Fein, the British government, which has accepted no culpability for the events of the 'Troubles', was implicated – whether directly or indirectly – in the activities of loyalist paramilitaries who had killed 1100 people most of whom were innocent Catholic civilians.

Nonetheless, in analysing Sinn Fein's approach to the issue of reconciliation, it is possible to identify not only a critical stance towards reconciliation debates as they have emerged in Northern Ireland (perhaps the only thing that all parties agree on), but also a willingness to accept alternative

readings of the 'Troubles'. Republicans, then, profess not to want to construct a 'hierarchy of victimhood' where some victims are seen as more authentic and legitimate than others. Indeed, the spokesperson for Sinn Fein reflected that all the pressure groups on victimhood in Northern Ireland were legitimate, even those that were fervently anti-republican such as Families Acting for Innocent Relatives, which *did* construct a hierarchy of victimhood (Interview 5). Thus, in explaining the lessons of the peace process in respect to reconciliation, the representative of Sinn Fein explained that while 'it is a long, difficult, torturous road with lots of obstacles, pitfalls and near collapses' (Interview 5), the clear lesson was that political actors needed to talk to their enemies regardless of how difficult that process was. This argument promotes a view of the polity as constituted by (mutually understood and equally recognized) conflicting discourses on the one hand, and the importance of articulating competing discourses without regarding them as transcendent on the other.

### *Summary*

As is the case with unionism, the analysis of nationalist narratives on reconciliation suggests that the division in Northern Irish politics is not just along ethno-national lines (although that certainly exists), but also between the main representatives in each of the ethno-national categories. This is not surprising but it makes the situation more complex than a simple schism between Protestant, British, unionists on one side and Catholic, Irish, nationalists on the other. In general, analysis of the prevailing narratives suggests that reconciliation is a contested idea in Northern Irish politics and that the various parties do not have fixed, unchanging perspectives on it. Instead, their positions develop according to calculations of strategic advantage and in reaction to the complex, dynamic political situation. Within the major ethno-national blocs, there are areas of dissonance as well as agreement as parties articulate ideological perspectives whilst simultaneously seeking to differentiate themselves from their intra-communal opponents. Thus, there is often as much disagreement among and within parties within communal blocs as there is between them.

This situation suggests that the idea of reconciliation is an ideological tool in Northern Ireland and, following Freeden (2005), that there is a high degree of ambiguity and indeterminacy that emanates from parties seeking to position themselves in relation to changing political circumstances while still maintaining aspects of their traditional thinking. The disjunctured nature of reconciliation narratives is clear although the disjuncture alone would not preclude the development of more consensual approaches in the future. However, what does act against that possibility is the absence of shared narratives and the tendency of the parties to construct positions on the ideological foundation of profound disagreement with each other. In other words, shared discourses of reconciliation are unlikely to emerge where the narratives of the past are fundamentally at odds with one another and built upon a zero-sum game mentality. In this scenario discourses of reconciliation may lead to more rather than less conflict.

## Conclusion

There is very little agreement in Northern Ireland concerning the precise nature of reconciliation and what it entails politically. This is directly related to the absence of consensus around the conflict and its causes. What seems clear is the way in which reconciliation is used as an ideological tool by different actors to shore up their perspective. This makes it difficult to view reconciliation as a positive process in Northern Irish politics, as the critical reaction to the Eames/Bradley Report has indicated.[9] Instead, the concept is used across the political spectrum as a way of framing and

reinforcing the established political parameters. Reconciliation is used to buttress identity claims and forms of self-understanding and the definition of others. What becomes clear in the analysis of Northern Irish party political narratives on reconciliation is the way in which opposing forces come together to reify the existing political order. Or, more philosophically, we see evidence of the Deleuzean concept of 'disjunctive synthesis', that is, 'the co-dependence of radically exclusive positions' (Žižek, 2004: 49).

This article highlights the way in which representatives of political parties and their respective ideologies in Northern Ireland invoke rather fixed and definitive understandings of reconciliation. In practice though, the understandings of the past they advocate are always being articulated anew, renegotiated and reconstructed. For Norval, this points to the impossibility of reconciliation whereby 'it does not simply call forth a *plural* past, that is, a past consisting of many, but completed, elements. Rather, the continuous reworking and reelaboration of the past [points] towards a fundamental impossibility: the impossibility of completion as such' (1998: 260–1). In turn this highlights the need for reconciliation debates to be understood in a deeply contextual fashion. Where it is not impossible that universal ideas on reconciliation can be constructed, the practice of reconciliation demands local and particular analysis: 'Trauma is readily objectified and victims homogenized when in reality suffering is context-dependent and ongoing' (Humphrey, 2000: 23).

What this suggests in Northern Ireland and potentially elsewhere is that reconciliation is not the light at the end of the tunnel of ethno-national division as the dominant normative models might suggest. Instead, reconciliation discourses are embroiled in the framing of Northern Irish politics such that they not only emanate from established senses of identity but also reinforce them. Thus, reconciliation is part and parcel of the ideological armoury that characterizes political interaction in Northern Ireland. While the idea of reconciliation might be able to contribute to conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, it is misguided to view reconciliation as a panacea to problems of political conflict and competing identities. In the context of Northern Ireland the terminology of reconciliation is very heavily loaded and its reputation as a Trojan horse for nationalist claims against wrongdoing perpetrated by unionists and the British state cannot be ignored. This calls into question the dominant normative approaches to reconciliation discussed here because the elevation of reconciliation as the founding principle of transitional politics comes with a problematic heritage in Northern Ireland. On the contrary, though, a narrative approach facilitates both conciliatory and conflictual discourses about reconciliation and provides a much more useful theoretical understanding of the 'disjunctured synthesis' that characterizes contemporary Northern Irish society.

## Notes

1. While the 1998 peace accord had hinted at the need to address victimhood, the Agreement was more focused on the accommodation of political elites and the establishment of political institutions than on processes of reconciliation.
2. The argument in this paper focuses on the literature in political theory but there are other approaches to the topic, such as those derived from political psychology (e.g. Gibson and Gouws, 2003).
3. Brandon Hamber would later become the Chairperson of *Healing through Remembering*, which is the primary peace and reconciliation organization in Northern Ireland. Other recent relevant contributions to these debates in the Northern Ireland context include O'Neill (2007) and Lundy and McGovern (2007).
4. Jennifer Lind (2008) makes clear the way in which various conflicts in international politics have been managed without either overt attempts at reconciliation or any acceptance of wrongdoing in the past. Domestically, one could also argue that societies such as Spain have managed to contain conflict without explicit efforts to seek reconciliation between different parties after the demise of the Franco regime. For further discussion of contrition and reconciliation, see Nobles (2008) and Olick (2007).

5. The 1998 Belfast Agreement was more notable for articulating the idea of 'parity of esteem' rather than reconciliation as the mobilizing objective. It is worth noting that the term 'parity of esteem' also became embroiled in multiple interpretations thereby increasing new forms of political conflict and upheaval.
6. The research for this article included interviews with representatives of political parties in Northern Ireland selected by the parties themselves in response to a request from the author (including parties not directly referred to here). This paper focuses on the positions of the main parties but the considerations on reconciliation are even more diverse when smaller parties are factored in and other pressure groups, social movements and civil society actors are involved. This broader dimension will be the focus of my future research in this field.
7. While the leadership of the UUP supported the Agreement, there was considerable dissent within the party and its supporters (Aughey, 2001) and this uneasiness persists throughout unionist politics today.
8. This refers to the controversy surrounding senior Sinn Fein figure, Martin McGuinness, and his unwillingness to fully divest his role in the IRA in Derry on 30 January 1972 when the British Army shot dead 13 unarmed protesters. For full details see www.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org.uk
9. See, for example, the discussion forum on the website established for the publication of the Eames/Bradley Report: www.cpni.org/

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## Interviews

Interview 1 (Representative of the Ulster Unionist Party), 5 December 2006.
Interview 2 (Representative of the Social Democratic and Labour Party), 6 December 2006.
Interview 3 (Representative of the Progressive Unionist Party), 8 December 2006.
Interview 4 (Representative of the Alliance Party), 8 December 2006.
Interview 5 (Representative of Sinn Fein), 11 December 2006.
Interview 6 (Representative of the Democratic Unionist Party), 11 December 2006.

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