

The place of Northern Ireland in Ethnic and Racial Studies in Britain: what place? Chris Gilligan, University of the West of Scotland¹

This article raises some questions about how academics teaching and researching race and ethnicity in Britain deal with Northern Ireland. The article is not based on any systematic analysis, rather it provides a reflection which draws on my experience of teaching in politics and sociology departments in Higher Education Institutions in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and my experience as a researcher investigating peace and conflict and migration and 'race relations' in Northern Ireland. In preparing for my teaching and carrying out my research I have had the pleasure of reading a wide range of texts (including: books, monographs, book chapters, journal articles, official reports and journalistic accounts) written from within a wide range of disciplines, and on three interconnected subject areas: race and ethnicity; peace and conflict, and; nations and nationalism. (I use the term pleasure in a very broad sense here; the material I have read has varied considerably in its quality). My reading has particularly concentrated on the extensive literature on Northern Ireland.

When I say how academics in 'Britain' deal with 'Northern Ireland' I am using both of those terms in a deliberately vague way. This is because the terms have a certain fuzziness to them, a point which I argue needs to be borne in mind much more than it currently is by academics who use the terms. As well as being fuzzy, however, both 'Britain' and 'Northern Ireland' are weighty terms which are laden down with multiple assumptions. One of the reasons why I believe that academics in Great Britain should pay more attention to 'Northern Ireland' is because it helps to bring some of those assumptions out into the open. This, I argue, may help us to think differently about how we make sense of race and ethnicity and contemporary Britain.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first part I outline what seem to me to be the two main ways that Northern Ireland is dealt with in textbooks on race and ethnicity in Britain. In the second part I outline some factors which help to explain why Northern Ireland has been sidelined in ethnic and racial studies in Britain. In the third part I briefly suggest some ways in which ethnic and racial studies in Britain would benefit significantly from more extensive engagement with Northern Ireland.

The place of Northern Ireland in the textbooks

There are two main ways in which Northern Ireland is dealt with in ethnic and racial studies in Britain. It is either ignored or it is quarantined. Take the chapter on race and

¹ The ideas in this article have been formulated over a number of years of teaching the 'Sociology of "Race" and Ethnicity' at the University of Ulster and Aston University. I am indebted to former students and colleagues who helped me to more fully develop my ideas. In particular I would like to thank Gargi Bhattacharyya, Silvia Mussano, Rachel Naylor, Mairead NicCraith and Shane O'Curry. This article was presented at the C-SAP 'Race-ing Forward' conference held at the University of Northampton in February 2008. I am indebted to Prof Andrew Pilkington for inviting me to speak at the conference and for useful comments on my paper, particularly from Robert Moore and Tony Bilton.

ethnicity in Giddens' *Sociology*; one of the best selling textbooks used in A level courses in schools and colleges and in first year undergraduate studies at university. This book provides many of the next generation of social scientists with their first substantial introduction to the discipline. In the whole of the chapter in the fifth edition there is mention of Northern Ireland in the chapter 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'. In the index there are three mentions under the entry 'Northern Ireland', two are in the chapter on religion and one in the chapter on social stratification. All avoid any use of ethnicity as a category for attempting to examine Northern Ireland.

Giddens is not a specialist in ethnic and racial studies, so perhaps it is unfair to cite him. So let us look instead at *Introductory Sociology*, one of the best selling textbooks used in first year undergraduate studies (Bilton et al, 2002). In the whole of the chapter on 'Race and Ethnicity' in the fourth edition there is no mention of Northern Ireland. In the index there is no category 'Northern Ireland' or 'Ulster' or 'Belfast' but there are eight entries under 'Ireland' and 'Irish people' (four in each) and four of these are in the chapter on race and ethnicity (all refer to Irish immigrants in Great Britain). To be fair to the author of the chapter he was given the unenviable task of summarizing the topic of ethnic and racial studies in Britain in thirty pages, (and all chapters ignore Northern Ireland, so it is not something specific to ethnic and racial studies). Perhaps we would be better to look to textbooks devoted specifically to race and ethnicity in Britain. John Solomos's book *Race and racism in Britain* is one of the standard textbooks used on undergraduate courses on Ethnic and Racial Studies in Britain (2003). It is widely read by students, as indicated by the fact that it has run to three editions since it was first published in 1993. Its wide readership is in many respects fully justified. The book is accessible, wide-ranging and demonstrates an obvious command of the existing literature on race and racism in Britain. There is, however, no attempt to engage with Northern Ireland *anywhere* in the book. There is some mention of anti-Irish racism and this is mainly about nineteenth century anti-immigrant prejudice. In case this might be thought to be something specific to Solomos let us take Peter Ratcliffe's *Race' Difference and the Inclusive society* as another example (2004). This could be said to be an improvement in the sense that in a book of 208 pages it has one citation on Northern Ireland, in the chapter on residential segregation.

Another way in which Northern Ireland is approached is to quarantine it, to separate it out and treat it as a special case. As exceptional, a place apart, a strange region of the United Kingdom characterized by ethnic, or ethno-national, conflict. This is the dominant approach in the British Politics literature. Politics, as a discipline which deals with government and power, finds it is more difficult to avoid any mention of Northern Ireland. Many academic texts manage to ignore the region completely, but it is difficult to produce introductory textbooks which claim to provide an overview of British politics without mentioning this part of the United Kingdom. In *Politics UK*, for example, we find a chapter devoted to Northern Ireland, entries for 'Northern Ireland' and 'Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association' in the index and nine-subentries. Outside the chapter on Northern Ireland the region is mentioned in six out of thirty-one chapters, and in most

cases these are fleeting mentions (Jones et al, 2007). There are a number of textbooks, aimed at a range of different readers, which focus on Northern Ireland (see e.g.: McGarry & O’Leary, 1996; Tonge, 2001; Whyte, 1990). These books seem to only be aware of the sub-branch of the extensive literature in racial and ethnic studies which is devoted to ethno-national conflict.

The literature which largely ignores Northern Ireland focuses on immigrant minorities, and a range of issues which are relevant to their experience, in Great Britain. The literature which engages with Northern Ireland suffers from the opposite problem; it ignores or only has a superficial engagement with the literature on immigrant minorities. One book which provides a partial exception to the characterisation I have given here is David Mason’s *Race and Ethnicity in Modern Britain*. Mason mentions several different ways in which Northern Ireland is relevant to ethnic and racial studies in Britain. He notes the relevance of the history of a colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland which ‘manifests itself not only in the violence which has characterized Northern Ireland since 1969 but also in the persistence of anti-Irish stereotyping as an explanation for conflict’ (2000: 21). He also notes the history of ‘systematic discrimination against the large Catholic minority... [which] led to the emergence of a Civil Rights Movement seeking democratic reforms’ as part of a half page potted history of Northern Ireland which concludes with the comment that the conflict which has raged in the province since 1969 ‘has had direct effects on British state policy in a range of areas from immigration controls to policing’ (ibid: 22). He acknowledges the existence of Northern Ireland, and draws the reader’s attention to some of the difficulty of dealing with it within the study of the experience of immigrant minorities in Britain. This insight, however, is not followed through in the rest of the text where Northern Ireland fails to merit any more mentions. This partial exception in some respects confirms my basic characterization. In effect Mason deals with Northern Ireland by quarantining it within a text box, which then allows him to proceed with the substance of the book which ignores Northern Ireland.

Up to this point I have focused on studies of racialised and/or ethnicised communities *in* Britain (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). There are, however, also British based academics that study and teach race and ethnicity: in a range of other national settings; in comparative context, and/or; theory in the field of race and ethnicity. When we look at British *based* ethnic and racial studies we can see that the way that Northern Ireland is dealt with is part of a more fundamental bifurcation – between studies of immigrant minorities and studies of ethnic conflict – within the field of ethnic and racial studies.

Monserat Guibernau and John Rex’s *The Ethnicity Reader* is an unusual teaching text in that it attempts to cover a range of different ethnic formations by including extracts on: situations of ethnonational conflict (Scotland, Catalonia, Northern Ireland); discrimination against indigenous/first peoples, and; immigrant minorities. We might expect that, given the more all encompassing range of texts drawn on, the extract on Northern Ireland would provide a case study in which the three different forms of ethnic

formation could be studied side-by-side. This, however, is not the case. The extract they have used is an historical introduction to the conflict, and attempts to develop a peace process, in Northern Ireland (Cox, 1997). It can be firmly located in the ethnonational conflict literature. This missed opportunity is not necessarily a failure on the part of Guibernau and Rex. Some of the articles which have raised provocative questions on how to characterise Northern Ireland either date from the early 1970s or appeared in print after the *Reader* was published (see Moore, 1972, for a good example of the former; on more recent work see contributions by Clayton, McVeigh or Rolston, all in: Miller, 1998). It seems more likely, however, that the chosen extract was informed by Rex's distinction between 'the first project of ethnicity' – ethnonational nation-building – and 'the second project of ethnicity' – (first, second, third... generation) migrants' attempt to sustain a sense of ethnic identity when living in an established nation-state other than that of the country of 'origin' (Rex, 1997). Rex's distinction reproduces the bifurcation in the field.

There is one undergraduate textbook on race and ethnicity, that I am aware of, which engages more fully with Northern Ireland; Richard Jenkins's *Rethinking Ethnicity* (1997/2008). This exception is perhaps telling. The book is more theoretical than the others mentioned so far. Perhaps even more tellingly it is written by an anthropologist who grew up in Northern Ireland, but who now lives and works in England, and who describe Northern Ireland as the place 'where I feel most "at home"' (2008: 1).

Jenkin's book is the only one that I have not used with undergraduate students (my excuse is that I have taught on race and ethnicity with year one and two students, but not final year ones). When I have used the other textbooks in teaching students in Northern Ireland I have found that they reinforce the impression, which students already have, that Northern Ireland is different. They even suggest to students that, depending on prior political conviction, this region of the UK is not really like the rest of the UK, or it is not really British, but Irish. The textbooks on race and racism in Britain reinforce a sense that 'racism is not really a problem here because there are no black people here' (McVeigh, 1998). The texts on ethnic conflict suggest that Northern Ireland is different and the reference points for comparison are not between Belfast and Birmingham or Brighton, but Belfast and Durban or Sarajevo or Jerusalem. I left Northern Ireland to take up a post at Aston University (Birmingham) in August 2007. In the few years before I left students were beginning to think of racism as an issue in Northern Ireland. Partly this was based on experience of inward migration and partly on hyperbolic media coverage which dubbed Belfast the 'race hate capital of Europe'. The textbooks on race and racism, however, seemed to provide inadequate coverage as they were based on an assumption of discrimination against colonial people of colour, and their descendents. The vast majority of the immigration in Northern Ireland, however, was from Poland.

Teaching on the topic of race and ethnicity at Aston University has been in many respects a very different experience. Aston has a large non-white student body and it is located in the centre of Birmingham, a city with a numerically significant non-white population. Most of the students at Aston were familiar with the issue of race and racism. (Many of

the 'White British' students, however, seemed to be very anxious not to say the 'wrong thing' about race, a factor which presented a significant barrier to discussion about a range of topical issues). Some of the students at Aston were very interested in the topic of 'mixed race', in seven years of teaching in Northern Ireland this topic rarely engaged any students. At Aston the students were very curious, but not very knowledgeable, about Northern Ireland (their curiosity may have partly been because they knew I grew up there and because I often used examples from the region to illustrate points). The students at Aston, however, also found some difficulty in relating the experience of Polish migrants to the material covered in the textbooks.

Why has there not been more interest in Northern Ireland?

The material in the previous section indicated that there has only been a superficial engagement with Northern Ireland in the literature on ethnic and racial studies. In this section I argue that the two main ways that the region has been dealt with, by ignoring or quarantining it, are not accidental but the result of British state strategies of containment. British academics, I argue, colluded in the ideological containment of the challenge to the state posed by Irish Republicanism. The development of a peace process and the incorporation of Irish Republicans in the governing of Northern Ireland make this factor redundant, but the ideological campaign has bequeathed an intellectual legacy which continues to limit the place of Northern Ireland in ethnic and racial studies.

Amongst analysts of violent conflict in Northern Ireland it has become commonplace to repeat John Whyte's claim that: 'in proportion to size, Northern Ireland is the most heavily researched area on earth' (1990: viii). This claim is contradicted by M. L. R. Smith's contention that the conflict in the regions is, 'one of the most under-studied conflicts in the world' (1999: 79). Smith is scathing in his criticism of academics in the discipline of international relations (IR), claiming that:

The barrier to scholarly interpretation [of Northern Ireland] is purely a mental hurdle that has grown up in the minds of academics, fortified by three decades of established methods of thinking about conflict... British international relations and strategy experts ignored the conflict throughout the years of the Cold War. They were content to view it as an impenetrable problem... This in itself indicates that international relations lacks the impulse for scholarly inquisitiveness (1999: 96).

Paradoxically there is much truth in both the claim that the conflict is heavily researched and that it is under-studied. The reason why both claims can be true is that the vast majority of studies of Northern Ireland treat it as 'a place apart', an exceptional space. Northern Ireland could be heavily researched and under-studied because those who researched it treated the conflict largely in isolation from the wider international and UK society within which it was located. Academics, with a few notable exceptions, arrived at the study of Northern Ireland with their preconceived categories and filled in the blanks

in their study with empirical data on Northern Ireland. Smith notes, for example, that ‘terrorism studies’, which has extensively engaged with Northern Ireland, ‘has often been based on a faulty, or skewed, method of analysis that focuses on the means and techniques of sub-state violence. The result has often been a blinkered concentration on identifying counter-measures against a phenomenon which, in any accurate sense, has never been proved to exist’ (1999: 83). Those analyses which quarantine Northern Ireland are, Smith notes, blunted in the critical insights they can bring not only to an understanding of Northern Ireland, but also to an understanding of small-scale violent conflict more generally.

John Whyte, in his magisterial review of the literature on Northern Ireland, noted that historically the analyses fell into one of two main camps: the traditional Unionist and the traditional Nationalist interpretations of the problem. After the outbreak of the troubles, however, an ‘internal-conflict’ interpretation became the dominant paradigm (Whyte, 1990). In a similar vein McGarry and O’Leary make a distinction between exogenous factors (such as the constitutional claim of the Republic of Ireland over the territory of Northern Ireland) and endogenous factors (such as Catholic/Protestant inter-group rivalry), and they point out that the majority of the literature on the Northern Ireland conflict emphasizes endogenous factors (1996). The treatment of conflict in Northern Ireland as a matter which could best be understood in its own terms was the outcome of a sustained political and ideological campaign by the British state. The various strands of this campaign included: the convention of bipartisanship at Westminster which guaranteed a consensus view amongst the political parties; the policy of Ulsterisation which placed the locally recruited police force in the frontline of security in the region; the promotion of an official view of the conflict in the mass media, and; the support of ‘those Irish nationalists who have sought to uphold the legitimacy of British rule in Northern Ireland’ (Gilligan, 2007: 608). The ‘extreme politicization of events in Northern Ireland’ made it dangerous waters for academics to swim in and it ‘was a war too close to the bone for British and Irish society. Those who became involved in the study of violence in Northern Ireland were participating in a dirty little war in their own backyard’ (Smith 1999: 88, 93). Treating Northern Ireland as exceptional was integral to presenting Britain as normal. In failing to challenge the ‘exceptionalism’ of Northern Ireland scholars colluded in the British states’s strategy of containment. It is for this reason that Paddy Hillyard has characterized the response of British academics to the conflict in Northern Ireland as ‘the silence of the lambs’ (1995).

It is difficult to tell to what extent academics who have researched the experience of immigrant minorities in Britain ignored Northern Ireland because of a desire not to get their hands dirty in the ‘little war in their own backyard’. Some were certainly aware of the conflict and some of its connections to wider British politics. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) helped to deepen and extend the research on race and ethnicity in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. The work of CCCS, and of Paul Gilroy in particular, demonstrates an awareness of the literature on Northern Ireland. In *Policing the Crisis*, for example, the authors recognize that the conflict in Northern

Ireland provides an important component of the crisis of the British state (Hall, et al, 1978). The authors also recognize that state actors in the policing and security services draw on lessons from Northern Ireland in dealing with urban ‘race’ riots in England. Despite this, however, they do not appear to see that there are lessons which they could draw on, if they bothered to scrutinize the conflict Northern Ireland more closely. The violent challenge to the legitimacy of British state rule in Northern Ireland was not linked to the political struggles of other ‘colonial’ peoples within Britain. In his later work Gilroy moves even further away from making any connections with Northern Ireland. This is most striking in relation to Gilroy’s *There ain’t no Black in the Union Jack* (1987). In the book he does not acknowledge that Irish Republicans are trying to deconstruct Britain, not simply in a symbolic sense by removing the cross of Saint Patrick from the Union flag, but territorially and constitutionally by removing the last remnant of Ireland from what is now the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Gilroy and others in CCCS are keenly aware of the way in which the nation and the nation-state act as resources to mark out those who do not ‘belong’. For this reason it is all the more remarkable that they did not afford more importance to Northern Ireland in their analysis. In a sense CCCS critiqued the British state from within an English nationalist framework.

Reasons to include Northern Ireland in our research and teaching

There are lots of reasons why it would be a good idea to more extensively engage with Northern Ireland in ethnic and racial studies in Britain. The fact that policy regarding race and ethnicity has been developed and promoted by the same state in different contexts provides case studies for interesting comparative study of ‘race relations’ policies and of ways in which the British state specifically manages social problems (for example, in the late 1960s a Community Relations Commission was introduced in Great Britain to help manage ‘race’ relations, in a parallel process a Community Relations Commission was established in Northern Ireland to help manage ‘community’ relations between Catholics and Protestants). The fact that the nature of contemporary migration to Britain differs from the past, (e.g. new source countries, wide range of migrant statuses, new kinds of migrant flows), means that the study of race and ethnicity faces new challenges (Vertovec, 2007). In this context many of our assumptions need to be reexamined. Including Northern Ireland in this reassessment should enrich our thinking. I could go on and outline other reasons why Northern Ireland should be taken more seriously, but instead I am going to focus on one; the contemporary relevance of ‘jihadist terrorism’ and ‘Islamaphobia’.

There is a nexus of issues regarding ‘jihadist terrorism’ and ‘Islamaphobia’ which have already risen, and been examined, in relation to Northern Ireland. Researchers working on these issues would benefit from gaining more familiarity with the literature on Northern Ireland and with trying to think through the parallels and differences. Take the question of religion, politics and conflict. The literature on these two topics in Great Britain is largely historical, the literature from Northern Ireland is living and becoming

increasingly sophisticated. The literature has covered the theme of religious fundamentalism and its relationship to sustaining conflict (Bruce, 1986). It includes a range of extensive debates about whether religion is a marker of ethnicity or an explanatory factor for ethnic conflict (McGarry & O'Leary, 1996: 171-213). These discussions have become increasingly nuanced and sophisticated (see especially the work of Claire Mitchell, e.g.: 2005). Researchers have examined a range of ways in which the criminal justice system has been used to erode civil liberties in the name of defeating terrorism. Hillyard, for example, has examined the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act to criminalize Irish people living in Great Britain (Hillyard, 1993), a range of authors have examined the use of hearsay evidence to gain convictions, detention without trial, special category status for prisoners, use of deportation and exclusion orders to control the borders, and the use of extradition to extend the reach of the criminal justice system abroad (see e.g.: Jennings, 1988). In Britain concerns about community relations which preceded the 9-11 and 7-7 attacks became grafted onto the issue of terrorism in a range of government policy initiatives (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2005; PET, 2005). Prominent amongst the themes raised in this context has been the need for debate on British values and British national identity. Shane Brighton notes that in these discussions the British Government is keen to promote British values, as these relate to the 'integration' of ethnic minorities in general, and Muslims in particular. The same Government, however, is keen to separate the issue of 'integration' from the question of how British values relate to foreign policy in general, and to the intervention in Iraq in particular (Brighton, 2007). Northern Ireland provides an historical precedent for this attempt to identify a particular community as a 'problem' while denying the British state's responsibility for the 'problem'. This evasion only serves to confuse the nature of the problems further, rather than clarify the issues at stake (Gilligan, forthcoming).

Conclusion

Northern Ireland has been contained in British government policy and in ethnic and racial studies in Britain. This is an odd state of affairs for the social sciences. In sociology, for example, it is standard practice when introducing students to the discipline to inform them that when sociologists talk about 'society' they often mean a particular nation-state (e.g. when Talcott Parsons was talking about 'society' he was really talking about society in the United States of America). This is usually pointed to as a major weakness, an assumption which needs to be challenged. Judged by our own standards, however, many British sociologists do not even attain this level of weakness because we exclude part of British 'society' from the study of British society. Northern Ireland is like the appendix of British society. It is part of the body politic, but no-one seems quite sure of the function that it performs. It is ignored as an insignificant oddity, until it goes seriously wrong, and then the standard response is to separate it from the rest of the body politic. This is a serious oversight. If we were to test drive a car we would choose difficult terrain to drive over, in order to test the limits of the car. In developing and testing our theories of society we should do likewise. In this regard Northern Ireland should be the part of the UK which is *most* intensely studied by academics. It is by studying abnormality that the

mechanisms of normal function are most clearly revealed. In analyses of society and examination of abnormality also helps to reveal the ways in which normality is a construction. In Northern Ireland many of the contradictions inherent within UK society are most apparent and most intensely manifested. Treating Northern Ireland as exceptional conveniently obscures these contradictions and presents the UK as a normal place. The devolution of power to Northern Ireland could help to further promote the tendency to ignore the region as an aberration. The purpose of this article has been to make a case for not treating the region as an anomaly, but as a case study which will help to illuminate, challenge and enrich ethnic and racial studies in Britain.

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