

# **The Problems of Antagonism: Applying Liberal Political Theory to Conflict in Northern Ireland**

## Abstract

In recent issues of the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* a debate has developed between Shane O'Neill and Glen Newey on the role of liberal political theory in resolving conflicts in Northern Ireland. This article argues that the roots of this debate lie in the differing perceptions of the role of political theory that the two protagonists employ. It suggests that O'Neill's Habermasian approach relies on an abstract understanding of political legitimacy and an excessively legalistic approach to dealing with the conflicts that permeate politics in Northern Ireland. However where Newey's critique focuses on the problems of conflicting rights as they emerge in O'Neill's theory, this article highlights the difficulties that arise from the latter's understanding of rationality when applied to the real problems of antagonism in Northern Ireland. This implies that we need to rethink our expectations of political theory when addressing enduring conflicts and that democratic processes are likely to lead to complex and contingent outcomes rather than perfectionist, 'rational' answers to the prevailing antagonisms.

## Political theory and Northern Ireland: the O'Neill-Newey debate

The recent debate in the pages of the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* between Shane O'Neill and Glen Newey on the application of liberal political theory and discourse rights to the dispute over the Drumcree marches has made an important and welcome contribution to theoretical discourses on the conflict in Northern Ireland (O'Neill 2000a, 2002; Newey 2002). Not only does it shift theoretical reflection on Northern Irish politics beyond the dominant ethno-national perspectives on the conflict but it raises fundamental questions about the role of political theory in our understanding of the practical problems and antagonisms that exist in societies such as Northern Ireland. Moreover the debate highlights the problems that can emerge when we attempt to apply abstract theoretical discourses to practical political problems. This article contends that these difficulties emanate in particular from abstract liberalism and that political theorists need to revisit concepts such as rationality and legitimacy if they are to make applicable observations on conflicts in divided societies such as Northern Ireland. The main aim of the article is to provide an alternative understanding of democratic processes to the liberal models that predominate in contemporary political debates. This might enable alternative discourses to the dominant orthodoxy to have a much more significant impact upon political debates in Northern Ireland than has hitherto been the case.

The article does not attempt to prescribe political structures or frameworks for democratic dialogue. Instead it focuses on the need to rethink the political in Northern Ireland; it attempts to move towards a new understanding of the public sphere and reverse the 'politics of closure' to enable a wider range of political discourses to

emerge in debates within and beyond Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup> In so doing it should be recognised that most interpretations of Northern Ireland have been sucked into the understanding of the problem as one of a single division (e.g. of religion, nationality, etc.) or set of divisions (i.e. a fusion of cultural, religious, political issues). This article contends that Northern Irish political debates (and theoretical reflections on them) need to move beyond constructed binary divisions and accommodate a much wider understanding of difference. Similarly Ruane and Todd argue that talk ‘of “two communities”’ seems to posit two monolithic blocs whether within Northern Ireland or on the island as a whole, denying “internal” differences and cross-cutting commonalities’ (Ruane and Todd 1996, 9). The foundation of the argument constructed here then is the need to open out the parameters of Northern Irish political debates to encourage a broader understanding of diversity than is currently the case. The intention is to break out of the straitjacket that binds key actors and political analysts and this entails a fundamental challenge to the orthodoxies of political theory in Northern Ireland. This approach recognises that whilst recent political initiatives have subscribed to liberal theories of difference and ‘parity of esteem’, in practice, by defining difference only in terms of the ‘two traditions’, diversity has actually been neglected (Rolston 1998, 270).

One attempt to move beyond traditional understandings of the antagonisms in Northern Ireland is the critical discourse theory of democracy that has been applied to some of the key conflicts in Northern Irish politics by Shane O’Neill (1997, 2000a, 2000b). O’Neill’s thesis combines the Rawlsian notion of impartiality with a critical appraisal of Habermas’s discourse theory of democracy to construct a ‘rational’ position on the sources of conflict in Northern Ireland. However a critical evaluation

of O'Neill's liberal perspective demonstrates the difficulties of using concepts such as 'impartiality' and 'rationality' in the practical politics of Northern Ireland, not the least of which is the likelihood that these theoretical concepts will often be 'recast in more familiar (unionist or nationalist) terms ...' (English 1999, 106). This helps to explain the likelihood of theoretical perspectives being interpreted on the basis that they would further one side or another of the Northern Irish political divide. In this context it is difficult in practice to cloak our theories in the clothes of neutrality or impartialism in deeply divided societies like Northern Ireland when the outcomes of political initiatives will rarely be regarded as neutral by all parties.<sup>2</sup> In the real world of Northern Ireland, as English (1999) observes, the outcomes of theories are more important than their philosophical justification. Thus the fact that theories may be justified as neutral holds little water in practice if their outcome is not perceived to be so in the complicated world of Northern Irish politics.

Like the argument constructed here, Glen Newey's critique of O'Neill questions the applicability of Habermas's abstract theory to the political realities of Northern Ireland. Newey contends that Habermas provides a neo-constructivist model of procedural neutrality based on epistemic constraints that 'are held to preclude non-neutral outcomes, by ensuring that actors are denied access to information ... which might bias them' (Newey 2002, p. ?). This is a procedure which is designed to tackle the existence of conflicting conceptions of the good in society but, as Newey intimates, many conceptions of the good are predicated 'upon the *badness* of other conceptions of the good' (Newey 2002, p. ?). In the real conditions of Northern Ireland this is frequently the case. Indeed we can take it a step further by identifying that not only is Northern Ireland permeated by perceptions of badness between the

conflicting viewpoints, but also that some of the key beliefs that inspire conceptions of the good are defined by their opposition to 'the Other'. In other words, it is not just a clash of competing views of the good; the construction of those conceptions of the good is based upon the 'badness' of 'the Other'. In this sense the conceptions of the good are fundamentally based upon an oppositional relationship with the alternative views of the good. This creates particular problems in Northern Ireland because these constructions of the good may be based upon misunderstandings or misconceptions of the position of 'the Other'. Newey highlights the difficulties that this creates for neutralist liberals such as O'Neill:

While it may not be impossible in principle for neutrality to favour one outcome which conflicts with another, it places a strong burden on the neutralist to show that the mode of *justifying* this outcome is substantively neutral. The very fact that one side is favoured will make it harder to sustain the claim that the justification is neutral, when the side which loses out is liable to use this very fact contrapositively, to query the neutrality of the method by which the outcome was produced. (Newey 2002, p ?)

Newey's argument has particular resonance in the context of Northern Ireland. Although O'Neill is correct to identify the need for robust procedures for dealing with conflicts in Northern Ireland, his argument is weakened by his imposition of the conditions for those procedures *a priori*. Where the outcomes of deliberations between conflicting groups are likely to generate further contestation, the supposed neutrality of the procedures may also be a matter of dispute. Thus the robust procedures are more likely to emanate from concerted dialogue - as 'outputs from the

discussion' (Newey 2002, p. ?) - rather than from preconceived imaginations of what is neutral or 'rational'. Arguably the stuttering nature of political deliberation in Northern Ireland has developed in part from the construction of numerous pre-conditions to ascertain the legitimacy of participants in the peace process. This relates to Newey's further objection to O'Neill that not only are there competing versions of the good in Northern Ireland but there is also contestation over the right, particularly with regard to the right of certain groups to participate in the process. This is not simply reducible to ethno-national affiliations. Disputes over the right to participate in dialogue creates schisms not only between political parties in Northern Ireland but also within them. In this sense the conflict in Northern Ireland is not solely concerned with conflicting interpretations of the good, it is evidently about contestation of the right as well.<sup>3</sup> The inadequacies of procedural neutralism in dealing with these political realities is palpable insofar as the controversial issues that commentators such as O'Neill attempt to circumvent are unavoidable.

Newey's critique of O'Neill provides a strident rebuttal of the abstract basis on which the latter constructs his argument and, in particular, the discourse of rights that O'Neill employs (Newey 2002). However, in the context of Northern Ireland, the most important lesson to emerge from the O'Neill-Newey debate concerns the role of political theory and its implications for political practice. The root of this issue is how politics grapples with the existence of power and the relationship between power and political decision making. Where O'Neill asserts procedures for engagement that provide a framework for democratic encounters between competing views of the good, Newey contends that such procedures will themselves be the source of dispute. In this sense he argues that 'it is implausible to believe that these [procedures] can be

decided pre-politically, since deciding such matters is itself a political matter. Allocating powers and responsibilities is not a regrettably necessary prelude to the real business of politics: it is the regrettably necessary business of politics' (Newey 2002, p. ?). The remainder of this article evaluates this perspective in the light of the realities of politics in Northern Ireland before returning to the broader question of the role of political theory in the conclusion.

### Incommensurability, community and the problems of Northern Irish politics

The problems with O'Neill's thesis result from a simplification of the contestations that permeate politics in Northern Ireland. In the previous section the limitations associated with the 'two communities' model were mentioned in the light of the ways in which it militated against the development of a broader multiculturalism, simplified the diversity that exists within Northern Ireland, and failed to grasp the diversity that exists *within* each of the 'two communities'. Despite these failings of the 'two communities' model, community remains an absolutely central concept in the analysis of the political situation in Northern Ireland (albeit not within a simple dichotomous construction). The reasons for this are identified by Ruane and Todd (1996, 9) who, whilst recognising that communities are social constructs, see that they are regarded as primary forms of attachment in Northern Ireland. At the simplest level, people consider themselves to be members of communities in everyday life and it is regarded as an important denominator. However these communities are not divided in a straightforward way on cultural or religious lines for example. Indeed, despite the conflicts that exist in many deprived areas, it can be argued that some of the experiences of working class communities

brook the sectarian divide. Examples of such shared experiences are outlined in Hall (1994) and the Falls Think Tank (1996) where concern is expressed at the ways in which the middle class political elites of Northern Ireland have paid scant attention to the real, everyday needs and experiences of deprived communities.

According to this understanding of community then, the constitution of communities are not given nor are they necessarily organic (Little 2002a). Instead communities are looser forms of attachment which are characterised by dynamism and the potential for change. Thus, to talk of community is not to be prescriptive about the ideas and likely courses of action of any given community. Rather these are the product of the changing circumstances of individuals within a community and the varying ways that such change is interpreted. Moreover within a community there is likely to be considerable disagreement and conflict regarding beliefs and courses of action particularly if communities are faced with the kinds of politics that exist within divided societies such as Northern Ireland. In this sense when we articulate the concept of community we need to be very clear that whilst communities may well have an idea of who is and isn't a member of their community - what Ruane and Todd call 'a capacity for boundary maintenance' - this does not mean that internal relations are necessarily cohesive or consensual. Such relations are dynamic in themselves and will vary according to a range of political, social, economic and cultural factors.

This perspective attempts to avoid the simplistic view of Northern Ireland that emanates from the 'two traditions' model. It recognises that divisions in Northern Ireland are not as clear cut and unequivocal as may seem to be the case to the untutored eye and that this can have fundamental ramifications for political initiatives



aimed at resolving conflicts. As suggested above, one of the most pivotal divisions within the traditions in Northern Ireland is based on social class, not least because working class communities have tended to suffer most from violence and deprivation.<sup>4</sup> At the same time the realm of formal politics in Northern Ireland has been dominated by middle class representatives who have been somewhat distanced from the communities that have experienced the brunt of political violence, antagonism and conflict. This is important because many in these deprived communities question the legitimacy of the political institutions and agreements that have been forged by the political elites (Hall 1994; Falls Think Tank 1996). In this situation political legitimacy is not static and does not merely derive from formal, legal mechanisms. Rather legitimacy is contingent and dynamic and thus will vary according to the social and political conditions at any given time. In this light O'Neill's contention that there is a rational, legitimate resolution to conflicts in Northern Ireland neglects the fact that the conditions in which conflicts emerge are subject to change. O'Neill is right to point to the need for contextualisation but he fails to recognise the shifting nature of the context. Thus, whilst on an ostensible level the conflict at Drumcree which is at the heart of O'Neill's analysis centres upon the same recurring problem, the surrounding political events (such as the murder of children in Ballymoney) impact upon the method and likelihood of resolving the situation on an annual basis. In this sense, even if there was a 'rational' settlement to the Drumcree marching controversy, it would not be unchanging as if it could be divorced from the wider, changing context of Northern Irish politics.

A realistic approach to political conflict in Northern Ireland must recognise that the nature of conflicts between the two traditions will vary according to other

cross-cutting sources of communal identity such as geographical location and social class. Here the limitations of the procedural liberalism employed by O'Neill to resolve disagreements becomes problematic. However it is interesting to note that there is considerable evidence that the 'grammar' of liberalism, that is, the language of toleration, identity and diversity, is increasingly evident within discourses that accept the hegemony of the 'two traditions' model (Rolston 1998). Rolston notes that this preoccupation in its cultural and political manifestations tends to lead to the pursuit of balance and symmetry between the two communities where none exists and ultimately this leads to cultural expression in terms of traditional milieus to the neglect of less traditional forms of expression (Rolston 1998, 271-2).<sup>5</sup> Moreover the 'grammar' of liberalism has been woefully inadequate when it has been employed in the context of real conflict situations such as Drumcree. This is precisely because of the contested nature of liberal concepts such as parity of esteem and the conflicting nature of rights claims.

This hegemony of liberal discourses is evident in the 'Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity' section of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. Here the parties commit themselves to 'the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community' (The Agreement 1998, 16). The concrete manifestation of this commitment is the affirmation of a number of basic human rights (free political thought, freedom and expression of religion and so on) as well as others that seem more specifically focused on Northern Ireland (e.g. freedom from sectarian harassment, the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means). The aspiration in the Agreement to meet these rights iterates a concern for the 'identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem' (1998,

17) and this ably demonstrates the way in which the liberal concepts of tolerance, equal opportunities, identity and parity of esteem have tended to be articulated in relation to the 'two traditions' model. Thus, beneath the shroud of diversity lies a very narrow understanding of social difference. The only specific cultural issue that is mentioned in terms of rights relates to 'the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland' (1998, 19). Laudable as this might be, it hardly reflects a serious commitment to cultural diversity - the concrete implications of this statement relate in particular to the Irish language (1998, 19-20).

A further problem with this part of the Agreement lies in the way in which it treats the divisions and conflicts that have emerged in Northern Ireland. These conflicts are to be settled using legal instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the establishment of bodies such as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (with a similar institution in the Republic of Ireland) and an Equality Commission. This legalistic approach to social difference underestimates the importance of the symbols and trappings of the 'two traditions' in the Northern Ireland conflict and the ways in which many of the basic cultural practices of one group are regarded as fundamentally problematic by the other section of Northern Irish society. The aspiration that 'symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division' is worthy but underplays the significance of such emblems and the opposition that they generate. The point is that, whilst legalistic strategies may be the only means of solving deep seated conflicts, *it*

*is unlikely that such legal intervention will necessarily be seen as fair or rational by the participants on the ground.* Many of the conflicts in Northern Ireland are seen as zero-sum games and communal identities are at least partially founded on not being 'the Other'. In this light the outcomes of legal decision-making are unlikely to be seen as neutral nor will those outcomes necessarily be passively accepted by conflicting protagonists. In short, they are likely to inspire further conflicts.

Perhaps a more effective strategy in approaching Northern Irish politics is to make a clearer statement of what all the participants realise anyway, namely, that the values, symbols and traditions in Northern Ireland are frequently incommensurable and many of them are irreconcilable. Of course such an approach does not tell us how politics and society should be organised but it is worth bearing in mind when evaluating the Belfast Agreement because what the latter appears to offer is an aspirational statement of a pluralistic liberalism combined with a practical recipe for the expansion of legal mechanisms to deal with the many disputes that will emerge. It therefore doesn't really establish many motives for the 'two traditions' to accommodate one another. Moreover it also says relatively little about economic issues which make a fundamental contribution to the unrest in Northern Ireland. Thus, even if the courts were capable of dealing adequately with the issues of culture and identity in the province, the document doesn't engage clearly enough with socio-economic inequalities and the ways that they cross-cut with the 'two traditions' in the North. This absence is important because '[s]ocio-cultural and ideological difference alone would not have produced the oppositional communities or intense communal conflict. Difference became conflictual and lasting because it was the basis of access to resources and power' (Ruane and Todd 1996, 12). From this perspective the model

for resolving conflict in the Belfast Agreement is unlikely to be sufficient to deal with the depth of divisions in Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup> If that is the case, though, the question still remains as to how conflict should be envisaged by political theorists and what methods can be employed to resolve or manage it.

### Rationality and conflict: the problems with liberal theory in Northern Ireland

O'Neill believes that a combination of the liberal ideas of Rawls and Habermas can provide a normative foundation on which to work out rational, impartial solutions to conflicts in Northern Ireland. He uses the annual conflict at Drumcree as a microcosm of the divisions in the province and as a signifier of the difficulties of finding satisfactory outcomes to them. In so doing O'Neill suggests that conflicts over contentious marches can be resolved through rational debate and therefore that those conflicts are not irreconcilable. Clearly then, he rejects the widely held view that the values of the 'two traditions' in Northern Ireland are incommensurable and that each particular conflict is a zero-sum game whereby each side perceives any advantage gained by the other side as disadvantage for their own cause (Bruce 1994; Kirkpatrick 1996). Other commentators such as Ruane and Todd argue to the contrary and note that the very structural configuration of Northern Ireland 'underpins a situation in which the fundamental interests of one community can be secured only at the expense of the fundamental interests of the other. The two communities in Northern Ireland are caught in a structural bind' (Ruane and Todd 1991, 34). O'Neill has a case in arguing that not all conflicts in Northern Ireland are zero-sum games and that democratic engagement between the conflicting sides on certain issues may generate some kind of agreement. However it is also the case that

the social structure of Northern Ireland does entwine the ‘two traditions’ in a conflictual relationship and frequently this is most evident when the two sides are forced to engage with one another (Ruane and Todd 1991, 40).<sup>7</sup>

Under these conditions the task of conflict resolution is difficult. O’Neill rightly challenges the discourse of rights in Northern Ireland as it is usually articulated and makes the point that claiming a right is not the same as justifying it. In the light of this it is interesting to note that the Belfast Agreement abounds with statements about the rights of the two communities but says very little about how to deal with conflicts between those rights. To justify his use of the discourse of rights, O’Neill subscribes to a Habermasian rational-legal definition whereby ‘legally enforceable rights are justified on the basis of inclusive and reasoned agreements among all those affected by their exercise’ (2000a, 30). Whilst this may be relatively uncontroversial in the context of established liberal democracies (although Newey would contend that it is highly debatable), it is more problematic when applied to Northern Ireland. In the latter such inclusive and reasoned agreements do not really exist. Although the Belfast Agreement includes a strong statement of human rights, there is no agreement on what to do when rights conflict and, of course, this is so often the case in Northern Ireland. Moreover substantial sections of the populace of Northern Ireland have consistently opposed the Agreement and, even with the mandate from the referendum, the process has largely been driven by political elites rather than ordinary people in the province. When rights have conflicted on the ground, there has often been reluctance on the part of the participants to even engage with one another (as in the Drumcree dispute), let alone reach ‘inclusive’ or ‘reasoned’ accords. Whether O’Neill likes it or not, rights *are* often claimed rather

than justified in Northern Ireland and there is little evidence that such rights are thought of as ‘responses to problems that citizens encounter in their everyday lives and ... justified when citizens with a diversity of perspectives can achieve agreement based on collective insight’ (O’Neill 2000a, 32). If anything, most rights discourses are based upon anything but this kind of engagement in Northern Ireland.

The problem that emerges in O’Neill’s Habermasian discourse theory in the context of Northern Ireland is the difficulty of applying such a liberal democratic model in that setting. Northern Ireland is beset by a politics of closure, a lack of engagement rather than the kind of vibrant, vigilant public sphere that O’Neill advocates. Similarly the elite, hierarchical nature of formal politics in the province has militated against the ‘inclusive dialogical process’ that underpins his theory. Whilst it is a worthy objective to aspire to and practically facilitate greater democratic engagement in Northern Ireland, at the moment that remains something of a pipe-dream. Likewise O’Neill’s assertion that groups must ‘be willing to revise their goals, aims and aspirations if these turn out to conflict with the peaceful co-existence of each group under conditions of equal citizenship’ (O’Neill 2000a) is a laudable aim of traditional liberal theory, but it runs the risk of merely wishing away decades of conflict and disagreement in the context of Northern Ireland. It asks the political participants to give up the very reasons why they have been in such a murderous conflict in the first place. Unfortunately the magic wand of liberalism cannot eradicate the deep-seated, heartfelt beliefs and sources of ethnic, religious and national identity in Northern Ireland (Bruce 1994). O’Neill’s (2000a, 33) blunt statement that, where there is irreconcilable disagreement between groups, the judiciary must step in to protect rights may be realistic in orthodox liberal democratic theory but, in the context

of Northern Ireland, where the make-up of the judiciary may be violently contested and where rights are unlikely to be agreed upon, this does not mean that conflicts will be effectively or harmoniously settled through legal mechanisms.<sup>8</sup> O'Neill (2000a, 39) is correct to argue that ultimately no-one could agree to the 'unrestricted exercise of rights' in Northern Ireland but the kind of discursive mechanisms that he advocates to decide where such claims of rights are appropriate and where they are not simply do not exist in many of the conflicts in the province.

In many respects the problem with O'Neill's argument is not in the goals that he aspires to (although radical democratic commentators such as Mouffe would quibble with the notion of achieving some kind of consensus) but rather the impracticality of his approach. Even those who profess some attraction to the idea of rational impartiality note that 'the expectations of even such a contextualized impartialism as that favoured by O'Neill are a little high for practical political analysis' (English 1999, 106). O'Neill goes so far as to make the assertion that he thinks he has made it 'clear that we are not facing a tragic conflict of incommensurable claims ...' (O'Neill 2000a, 40) when such a scenario has not been disproved and his only means of negating the idea of incommensurability has been his construction of an 'imagined dialogue' between two individuals representing the two sides of the Drumcree dispute.<sup>9</sup> Even if the participants in disputes in Northern Ireland were not embroiled in an incommensurable conflict, they may *perceive* that they are and this undermines the likelihood that they will readily agree to the procedural devices that O'Neill advocates nor adopt an open approach to those whom they must engage in political deliberation. Again one can see why the liberal scenario that O'Neill envisages is attractive, namely, 'that the only public expressions of



culture that can be tolerated are those that do not undermine the equal respect on which these arrangements must be built' (O'Neill 2000a, 40), but it neglects the fact that in many disputes in Northern Ireland any claim made by one side is perceived as an attack on respect for their traditions by the other (Bruce 1994). Whilst we should aspire to reach agreements, the liberal theoretical model clears the hurdles to such an accommodation with far too much ease to provide a workable model for the resolution of conflict in Northern Ireland.

O'Neill's faith in dialogue as a means of resolving conflicts such as Drumcree assumes the creation of conditions in which his discursive model could take place. Unfortunately more often than not these conditions do not apply in Northern Ireland. It is all very well to posit the conditions of a procedural impartiality and a method of democratic engagement but the translation of this model into the real world of Northern Irish politics is deeply problematic.<sup>10</sup> Again it is not the liberal aspirations of O'Neill's argument that are objectionable but the means of their practical enactment. In this vein Aughey contends that 'the rationalism of [O'Neill's] discourse ethics abstracts Northern Ireland from its historical, constitutional and normative situation' and that it is therefore unpersuasive 'because it has lost touch with the requirements of liberal democratic politics' (Aughey 1999, 131, 132). In short, O'Neill has provided a welcome and necessary theoretical engagement with the Northern Ireland conflict but the result is a prescription of how we should be rather than a plausible depiction of who we are and where we should go from there.

Rethinking the role of political theory in understanding Northern Ireland

There are many attractions in the idea of deliberation as a means of settling conflicts and, in the context of Northern Ireland, the more disputes that can be settled by agreement between affected participants the better. However theories of discursive or deliberative democracy tend to assume certain agreed principles or procedures that simply do not prevail in Northern Ireland. The danger that is evident in many analyses of the Northern Ireland problem is to posit an ideal-type solution that over-simplifies the complexities of the conflict. It seems unfashionable (albeit reasonably sensible) to view the problem as one that cannot be 'solved'. Perhaps then we need to strive for a more limited approach to changing the politics of Northern Ireland. Such an approach is hinted at by Ruane and Todd (1996, 15) who argue for a process of emancipation which 'seeks to dismantle a system which constitutes two communities in mutually antagonistic and destructive relationships'. They regard this as a starting point whereby we move beyond the politics of the 'two traditions' and 'address the struggles of women and other groups for full inclusion, participation and social justice' (Ruane and Todd 1996, 15; Little 2002b).<sup>11</sup>

The approach of Ruane and Todd recognises some of the complexities of the Northern Ireland conflict and the multiplicity of issues upon which antagonism can develop. At the same time there is a suspicion that their analysis wants to 'normalise' the political situation. Thus, whilst they argue that they should not be aiming for a 'compromise political settlement', they do believe that this is consonant with 'a common endeavour to dismantle the root causes of conflict' (Ruane and Todd 1996, 15). Here they run the risk of neglecting the deep-seated nature of the conflict and the legitimate hopes and aspirations of the different communities in Northern Ireland.

This sentiment is expressed by Bruce in his critique of liberalism. Of loyalists, he states that there are ‘perfectly sensible reasons for group identification and conflict; ethnicity is not an early morning fog that will evaporate under the bright light of rising understanding’ (Bruce 1994, 135). Such a perception of the normality and legitimacy of conflict applies equally to republican or nationalist communities and, indeed, other types of community in Northern Ireland (e.g. we should expect feminists or some groups of women to be in conflict with prevailing opinions in Northern Ireland on abortion, marriage, divorce and so on). This is part of the democratic condition. Any argument for Northern Ireland as a liberal democracy must recognise a wide variety of different communities and associations with often conflicting rationalities and views of the world. Where some problems can be resolved through dialogue and agreement, other conflicts are likely to be incommensurable. Thus rather than positing political strategies that will lead to some kind of resolution of the Northern Ireland problem, we must recognise that a ‘normalised’ democratic politics will contain considerable conflict and many views that cannot be reconciled with one another.

Where Ruane and Todd (1996, 324) argue that the move towards a political settlement in Northern Ireland is undermined by the pursuit of power, a radical democratic approach suggests that such struggles for power are a natural and legitimate feature of democratic politics (Mouffe 2000; Connolly 1995; Rose 1999; Little 2002a, 2002c). Ruane and Todd ultimately argue that their emancipatory approach must override the politics of power whereas, in reality, power is likely to be unavoidable. The implications of this inspire Newey to advocate a Schmittian approach to conflicts in Northern Ireland: ‘[a] political authority will be required to

put a solution into effect, if necessary by force ... [I]t is required in the face of the disagreement which characterises political conflict'. Newey's point is based upon the recognition that, even if we did think that conflicting protagonists *should* agree with the 'rational' outcomes of a particular procedural principle, the brute fact is that often they don't. In this scenario 'there will not even be a solution in the abstract' (Newey 2002, p. ?). The radical democratic application of Schmittian ideas suggests that the unavoidable condition of democracy involves the idea of contingent, imperfect settlements rather than rational agreements (Little 2002c). Ultimately the institutions of the state will often have to intervene in incommensurable conflicts and, given the disputed status of the state in Northern Ireland, this, in itself, is likely to inspire further contestation. Clearly then, this supposes that a rational, harmonious solution to conflicts in Northern Ireland will not emerge merely by getting the participants to think and act in a reasonable way. Against the prevailing liberalism, we need to understand that there are a number of rationalities at work in Northern Ireland which don't necessarily trump each other on the basis of legitimacy. Whilst on democratic grounds we should support the expansion of dialogue between conflicting groups and communities, this does not suppose that, if more political engagement took place, there would be an agreement or settlement of differences.

The danger in this position, as O'Neill (2002) argues, is that it can be regarded as offering little more than a rationalisation of the status quo. However, nothing could be further from the truth. It is an argument for greater political engagement and the need to challenge inequalities of power and their impact on Northern Irish society. However we need to recognise that a change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland or the empowerment of devolved institutions or reforms in the security forces

will not do away with conflict. These are certainly conflicts and battles to be won and lost but, even if they are resolved, there will be a raft of new conflicts to take their place. Such is the nature of democracy and this applies just as much to Northern Ireland as anywhere else. The main problem with O'Neill's thesis is the assumption that there is a singular rational solution to problems such as Drumcree and a failure to recognise that the dynamism of political development ensures that the context of the conflict will change from year to year. In this sense there is not a 'rational' solution to Drumcree that can be imposed on the protagonists; it is for the protagonists in the conflict to agree upon a legitimate set of procedures to which they all concur. However, given the history of this particular conflict, we should not be surprised if they do not do so and that no perfectionist solution emerges. Thus the experience of Drumcree is that the likely outcome of the conflict will be unsatisfactory and imperfect. Whilst we should encourage the disputing parties to engage in democratic dialogue, this does not mean that it will take place. Unfortunately for O'Neill it is not possible to parachute in the requisite levels of civic friendship to facilitate an inclusive agreement.

The main aspiration of radical democratic theories is that engagement in political conflict might lead to agonistic rather than antagonistic relations (Mouffe 2000, chapters 4 and 5; such an approach is also hinted at by Newey 2002). In her concept of 'agonistic pluralism' Mouffe argues for a situation in which, instead of trying to reach a rational consensus, we should attempt to establish a different kind of political sphere in which conflicts take place. According to this position 'the aim of democratic politics is to construct the "them" in such a way that it is no longer an enemy to be destroyed but as an "adversary", that is, somebody whose ideas we

combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question' (Mouffe 2000, 101-2). In radical democratic theory political engagement in the public sphere will not bring about agreement or consensus but it may serve to legitimise the differing stances of those with whom we engage. Clearly such a scenario does not prevail in Northern Ireland at the moment and nor is it likely to in the near future. Nonetheless the attempt to rethink the way in which we engage with those with whom we disagree appears to be a more realistic strategy for change in Northern Ireland than imposing a singular rationality or suggesting that we can find consensual agreement with our opponents. As Aughey points out , 'antagonistic forces will never disappear in political life. These antagonistic forces, however, can be accommodated by creative political thinking' (Aughey 1999, 132). Radical democracy does not provide us with clear cut solutions to the Northern Ireland problem or firm pathways for a peaceful future. However, in reminding us of the complex and messy realities of democratic politics, it might serve as a more useful strategy for Northern Irish politics than the imposition of an imaginary consensus. Put simply, political theorists need to think about how we manage and contain conflict rather than dreaming up impractical forms of resolving it.

### Conclusion

Essentially the debate between O'Neill and Newey is constructed around differing expectations of the role of political theory in interpreting conflicts in Northern Ireland such as the Drumcree marches. O'Neill's response to Newey accuses the latter of conservatism and suggests that political theorists need to 'address basic questions of institutional design and democratic procedure in a plausible way'

(O'Neill 2002, p. ?). Moreover O'Neill contends that there are dangerous political implications in Newey's argument because it discourages communities from critical self-reflection, devalues the attempts of groups that are prepared to enter into dialogue, and provides succour for people who want to remain entrenched in closed worldviews. These would be very serious flaws in Newey's argument if they existed but, unfortunately for O'Neill, they do not. Nowhere in Newey's argument is dialogue criticised nor does he indicate support for the politics of closure. However he does recognise that closure exists and that it provides a major obstacle to the kind of inclusive agreements that O'Neill advocates. For Newey, the pursuit of political deliberation and accommodation is not undesirable; it is just unlikely to take place in the perfectionist sense that O'Neill promotes. It is worth reiterating that it is not the liberal values of O'Neill's theory that are problematic but his perfectionist account of democratic decision making and the prescribed outcomes of his procedural liberalism.

Where O'Neill and Newey agree is in the recognition that the role of political theory is to make realistic or plausible contributions to our understanding of practical political problems. It is not conservative to point out the problems of liberal perfectionism as Newey has done. Rather it makes us aware of the fundamental nature of the problems that we encounter in trying to surmount the kind of conflicts that blight Northern Ireland and the obstacles to radical solutions. In this sense it is on his own criterion of plausibility that O'Neill's thesis falls in his imagination of inclusive agreements founded on abstract discourse rights. To conclude, O'Neill may or may not be correct to argue that in analysing conflicts in Northern Ireland 'optimism is a political responsibility' (O'Neill 2002, p. ?), but an even more important point to remember is the contested nature of legitimacy, rights and rationality in Northern

Ireland. In short, O'Neill lets his optimism blind him to the implausibility of his argument

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<sup>1</sup> The 'politics of closure' refers to the domination of Northern Irish politics by the 'two traditions' and the problems that emanate from viewing the conflict solely through the lens of ethno-national explanations. For an analysis of how this closure has impacted on feminist politics in Northern Ireland, see Little (2002b).

<sup>2</sup> This reflects a general problem for liberal theories of state neutrality and begs questions of the utility of the concept of neutrality in political practice. For a discussion of consequential and justificatory theories of neutrality - that is, neutrality of effect and justification respectively - see Little (2002a, chapter 2). These problems are all the more acute in societies such as Northern Ireland where the legitimacy of the state and its institutions is questioned by at least one of the major protagonists in the conflict.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, I am alluding in particular to the divisions within unionism on the legitimacy of Sinn Fein's participation in the peace process and government. However, at the time of writing (January 2002), disputes over the right are also evident in examples such as the disagreement between Sinn Fein and the SDLP over the rectitude of participating in the board overseeing the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing (January 2002) recurring patterns of violence continue to erupt in North Belfast. Not only has North Belfast been the location of considerable violence in the last thirty years, but it also contains numerous areas that are blighted by poverty and social deprivation.

<sup>5</sup> As an example Rolston points to the focus in unionist identity on the battles of the Boyne and the Somme to the exclusion of their ancestors' struggles with emigration and famine for example.

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst I am critical of the model of conflict that emerges in the Belfast Agreement, I do not reject the document *per se* nor do I challenge its legitimacy. The reality of Northern Ireland suggests that it is highly unlikely that any kind of agreement would provide a mutually acceptable settlement to which everyone would agree. The endorsement of the Agreement was as much predicated upon the pragmatic desire to end violence as it was upon deep support for some of its provisions (especially the prisoner release scheme that Newey refers to). Newey does not question the legitimacy of the Belfast Agreement as O'Neill (2002) implies; instead he challenges the ability of such agreements to meet the high, abstract philosophical objectives that O'Neill sees in their construction.

<sup>7</sup> The conflictual nature of the engagement in Northern Ireland is enshrined in the Belfast Agreement. A key safeguard in the arrangements for the Northern Ireland Assembly is that major decisions harness cross-community support. To ascertain whether there is parallel consent or a weighted majority, at the first meeting of the Assembly members 'must register a designation of identity - nationalist, unionist or other - for the purpose of measuring cross-community support ...' (The Agreement 1998, 6). Clearly it can be argued that this mechanism is vital because it prevents the operation of a simple majoritarianism, but simultaneously it entrenches traditional political divisions. See also Wilford (2001).

<sup>8</sup> O'Neill's (2000a) analysis of the Drumcree conflict ultimately suggests that the 'rational' solution would be to prevent the Orange Order marching down the Garvaghy Road. I am sceptical that is *the* rational position as it would appear that in Northern Ireland there are different conflicting rationalities which are basically incommensurable and therefore cannot be solved by 'rational impartiality'. The conflict in Northern Ireland is not purely a clash of rights that can be settled through Habermasian methods, it is *inter alia* also a clash of values and cultures. Nonetheless one can oppose the stance of the Orange Order in the Drumcree conflict (as does O'Neill 2000a, 36-8) on the simple democratic basis that they have not engaged in democratic dialogue with the Garvaghy Road residents' representatives. This doesn't give us a solution to the problem of course nor does it guarantee a particular outcome, but then neither does an imagined 'rational impartiality'.

<sup>9</sup> It is no mistake that this dialogue is hypothetical in O'Neill's article because it hasn't taken place (at least not in the conditions that O'Neill imagines and advocates) on the ground in Portadown. Further reservations about this 'imagined dialogue' are articulated in greater depth by Newey (2002).

<sup>10</sup> I think that O'Neill is aware of this difficulty when he puts forward his own version of Rawls's 'original position' by suggesting that loyalists might reach the accommodation he advocates if 'they were to find themselves in the same situation as that of the residents of the Garvaghy Road' (O'Neill 2000a, 41). See Bruce (1994) for an alternative theory of how loyalists might interpret this kind of situation.

<sup>11</sup> In O'Neill (2002, p. ?) the case for civic engagement is put forward in terms that suggest that a feminist approach to the problems in Northern Ireland might lead to 'a more cooperative, consensual approach'. This blithely skates over the role of women in the Northern Ireland conflict and the existence in the feminist theoretical literature of opposition to this kind of essentialism. For a critique of the 'strategic essentialism' of some feminist approaches in Northern Ireland, see Little (2002b). See also Roulston and Davies (2000).





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