The Politics of Recognition in Northern Ireland: Co-Constructing a Theory of Civic Loyalism

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Introduction

This paper is an outline of my doctoral thesis, which is a piece of action research, undertaken in collaboration with Loyalist communities, specifically, the Progressive Unionist Party, which seeks to first diagnose the mis- or non-recognition of Loyalism, and then co-develop a progressive theory of 'civic Loyalism', which addresses and aims to positively transform these recognition relations, using Fraser's "transformative recognition" theory (2008: 34-37).

What I am going to do today is briefly explain my theoretical framework, and suggest some reasons why recognition theory might be a useful way of examining Loyalism's place in post-Agreement Northern Ireland. I will explain the concept of 'civic Loyalism', which refers specifically to a Progressive Unionist, urban, social democratic identity, which is the theory I am working towards.

Finally, I raise the issue of the complexity of managing competing recognition claims, with the group in question, Loyalists, unable to receive respect and esteem from all 'other' groups. Fulfilling the expectations of one group will frustrate those of another, and so a critical component of recognition theoretical work is to provide Loyalists with the opportunities to map their recognition relations and decide who they require esteem from.

My conclusions will argue that in order for Loyalism, and indeed any marginalised group, to transform, and participate in civic and political life, the realm of recognition and respect is critical to this transformation. The onus, therefore, is both on Loyalism, to undertake the internal work necessary to present in more 'civic' ways, but also on broader society, to be receptive to, and respectful of, Loyalists as rational, political agents.

Defining Loyalism

Loyalism is defined, within this paper, as working-class Unionism, which is marked by an opposition to the aims of political Republicanism, understood as working class nationalism, and a troubled relationship with middle-class Unionism. More specifically, civic Loyalism is understood as a non-paramilitary, primarily working-class identity, with adherents supporting the continuing Union with Great Britain. The group which my research focuses on are the Progressive Unionist Party, whose ideology and historical efforts to support power-sharing meet Porter's criteria for "civic Unionism". Given the distinctions which I outlined between Loyalism and Unionism, notably, the class difference, I have re-conceptualised the PUP as "civic Loyalists".

I do, however acknowledge, that there is no 'essential Loyalism', and that this 'section' of Loyalism, is subject to the same fluctuations in identity as all social groupings, changing over time, and shifting in response to its interactions with others'. Reed's recently-published work provided a landmark investigation into the 'identity work' of Loyalism, and he concluded that Loyalism must be understood as "multiple, non-essential, interactional and ever-changing" (2015: 31). Whilst for some, who may be "fighting to stay the same" (BBC Radio 4), such an analysis might be unsettling, it is a profoundly positive declaration for Loyalists who feel subject to the condemnations and stereotyping of others, which encloses them in normative prisons, from which they are unable to escape.

There are conceptual linkages between my theory of civic Loyalism and Norman Porter's "civic unionism", which is grounded in a respect for justice, individual rights and democratic dialogue, and bolstered by a confident and magnanimous recognition of the Britishness and Irishness present in Northern Ireland (1998: xviii). This thesis moves beyond Porter's theory to develop a social democratic, class-based analysis of Loyalism. In addition, whilst Porter's political-philosophical project was purely theoretical, this theory will be applied, in order to make the most effective use of the knowledge produced. The data and knowledge generated throughout my thesis is disseminated to the PUP (following the appropriate anonymization) and shared with organisations such as Alternatives and A.C.T. (Action for Community Transformation) so that it can be operationalised, reflected upon, and responded to, in real-time. I have sought throughout not just to study Loyalism, but to make whatever contribution I can to the Loyalist political journey. This was a personal and also an ethical decision, which is underpinned by a belief that researchers should produce knowledge which is of benefit to communities around them.

Why Recognition Theory?

The use of political theory to examine the empirical evidence on Northern Ireland's politics is unfortunately, an under-utilised approach. Whilst Northern Ireland is acknowledged as one of the most heavily researched regions on the planet (Whyte 1990), only a small subset of the research has used theoretical or conceptual frameworks to assess the wealth of historical material which has been accumulated. For Loyalism in particular, the research is often security-centric, viewing Loyalism as a 'problem' to be 'managed', with little attention paid to the political thought generated within Loyalism (Silke 1998, 2000, Mitchell and Templar 2013). Recent work has sought to address this deficit, with important research conducted by Novosel, Mulvenna, Shirlow, Edwards, Bloomer, and more besides, making coherent arguments for Loyalist contributions to peace and stability, and indeed a distinctive, class-based brand of politics which are markedly different from how we understand traditional Unionism.

There remains, however, a lack of theoretical analyses on Loyalism, and this is what I would like to address in my thesis, and in this paper. There are swathes of empirical and historical research on the Northern Ireland conflict, with academics, citizens and policymakers perplexed by the persistence of 'identity politics', which inhibits a transition to a healthier, left-right political spectrum. To remedy this, we must now begin to theoretically assess these tensions, diagnosing them, prior to our attempts to transforming them.

Recognition theories, given their focus on the construction and maintenance of identity, provide fresh methods of examining the competing identity claims, and divergent political projects, of the multiple groups who inhabit the territory of Northern Ireland. This thesis builds upon the pioneering work of Porter (1998) and Reed (2011b, 2012), who used theories of recognition to unpack the politics and identities of Unionists and Loyalists.

What does it mean to 'recognise'?

In short, recognition theorists argue that our sense of self, our identity, is partially formed by the moral feedback which we receive from society. We are dialogic beings, and we form our social, political and cultural sense of ourselves, in interaction with others. We do not internally generate all of our self-esteem, or pride. We rely on our peers, our critics, and the media to negotiate our ideas around whether or not the groups which we belong to are 'good' or 'bad', 'constructive' or 'destructive', and indeed, welcome, in the societies we inhabit.

There are inter-disciplinary variations between how recognition, or esteem, is understood. Some scholars view recognition as more than a matter of justice (Fraser 2003, Honneth 1995), or the securing of cultural rights (Taylor 1994), and read the receipt of esteem as a necessary pre-requisite for sound mental health (see Maslow 1943: 381-382, Deci and Ryan 2000). The affirmation of our identities, or our societal contributions, is critical to our sense of self, and without it, pathologies can develop (Deci and Ryan 2002: 5).

However, the existence of need does not posit a *right* to recognition, but instead, highlights that, as inter-subjective beings, frustrated quests for esteem can cause real and lasting harm. Specific patterns of cultural value, which, in a neoliberal, post-imperial society such as Northern Ireland, may unfairly hamper some groups from receiving the respect which they feel they are owed. The issue, upon examination, may of course be that the group are behaving in morally unacceptable ways, and this, as a useful feedback loop, can discourage such behaviours.

But it may also be the case, as in neoliberalised worlds, that what we view as a valuable contribution is unfairly narrow, and inhibits those groups, who, like working-class Loyalists, are not profitable, and are therefore deemed unworthy of respect. We must therefore examine the opportunities which Loyalists have to secure esteem, or respect, in the current political landscape, and assess whether these frustrated efforts are in fact unjust, or simply unfortunate.

In sum, there are a broad swathe of disciplinary approaches which view respect and esteem as vital to human flourishing, and indeed, the very foundations of a just society. This paper, and the broader thesis, follows Fraser in understanding socio-economic redistribution, and cultural recognition as being bound together, and argues that a re-calibration of both the economic system, and the cultural value horizon, would lead to better outcomes for Loyalism, and other marginalised groupings. In using these established theoretical approaches, and combining these with the organic knowledge of local Loyalist groups (see Cassidy 2008), the results should be useful in terms of new, scholarly knowledge, and relevant, transformative insights for the groups being studied.

Misrecognised, and at what cost?

Thus, the impetus for undertaking such research is to apply co-produced knowledge to the compelling social problem of marginalising a particular group and, in doing so, effect positive change. There are particular justifications for involving both Loyalists and their recognition partners in this project. Whilst Taylor's politics of recognition famously argues that mis-recognition can harm the 'mis-recognised' group (1994: 25), this thesis extends Taylor's argument, and suggests that society as a whole will be harmed by the ritual denigration of any social grouping. Taylor states that:

> "A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (1994: 25).

If we allow the ritual denigration of Loyalists, with the justification that it "helps to encourage them to behave better", a claim invoked by a notorious parody site, formed to mock Loyalists in the wake of the flags protests, what defence remains for the next group who becomes the folk-devil of contemporary Northern Ireland? Further, when Loyalists seek to participate politically, or offer progressive solutions to pressing political problems, they are not given the same opportunities as others may be. There is therefore a moral, social and political argument for addressing the ritual mis-recognition of Loyalists, who's right to participate should be defended, and whose opportunity to cultural expression should be welcomed.

There is also a peace-building case to be made for undertaking this work. The mis-recognition of Loyalism is brought into sharp relief by American academic, Tony Novosel, who, in discussion with a friend on his research into Loyalist political thought, was met with the rebuff, "*Do* they think?" (2013: 4). A post-Agreement Northern Ireland which is comfortable with dismissing the claims of Loyalists, or indeed, dissident Republicans, will not forge "positive peace", which is characterised by pluralism, cooperation, justice and dynamism, amongst other criteria (Galtung 1967: 14). It is therefore in the interests of policymakers, academics and members of civic society, to engage with the claims of Loyalists, and, in broadening their inter-subjective value horizon (Honneth 1995), reject the notion that to be critical of the Belfast Agreement means one wishes to return to conflict. The 'others', with whom Loyalists share a society, are not obliged to grant Loyalists esteem recognition, that is, to positively view their identity and contributions, but ought to, at the very least, recognise them as members of the moral community, and listen to their arguments.

Recognising Loyalism- do Loyalists want respect? If so, from whom?

Within my thesis, the politics of recognition is used as a diagnostic tool, to assess some of the barriers to Loyalist participation in civic and political life. For a variety reasons, Loyalists are not recognised by their fellow citizens, neither as equal citizens in Northern Ireland, nor as rational agents, whose contributions to the body civic, nor whose political projects are worthy of consideration and respect. Loyalists are keenly aware of how their fellow citizens regard them, and have, for the most part, adopted the 'Millwall' position, claiming that, "No one likes us, we

don't care". Despite this rejectionist discourse, Loyalists, as social beings, do of course care about how others view them, and desire, and even need, respect and esteem, in order to confidently participate in civic and political life.

The particular identity attributes which constitute Loyalism, such as belonging to a flute band, a commitment to social democracy, or respect for Ulster's participation in the two world wars, are important to Loyalists. Each of these 'pieces of identity' contribute to the psychological wellbeing, and group esteem of Loyalists.

When these identity components are derided, delegitimised or dismissed, by other citizens, group-members can experience shame, hurt or resentment (Shirlow 2014, provides an example of this). As I will show, some theorists believe this can cause "real harm" to the recipient (Taylor 1995).

We can see frequent, contemporary examples of Loyalist expectations, and often demands, for recognition. "Respect our culture" was the rallying-call of the flags protests. Loyalist flute bands, in their names: the "Pride of Ardoyne", "Pride of Laganvalley", and their actions: inter-band competitions, often held in band halls, or at neutral venues also represent quests for recognition and esteem. Richard Reed's 2011 paper, '*Rebels Without Applause: History, Resistance and Recognition in the Ulster Defence Association'*, noted the competing esteem claims between the Ulster Defence Association and Ulster Volunteer Force, with each wanting to be viewed as militarily more sophisticated, historically more legitimate, and curiously, better-dressed than the other, with no regard for how the traditional enemy of Irish Republicanism viewed them. The intra-Loyalist desire for respect destabilises the idea that Loyalism is a single, homogenous and fixed entity (Reed 2015: 32), and that it is only opposed to Irish Republicanism.

However, as I will outline, respect is not owed to us, it is not an inevitable consequence of our existence in the social world, and we cannot insist upon all types of respect, which, by its very nature, must be granted voluntarily. If you are compelled to respect me, it becomes meaningless. The Loyalist need for respect and recognition therefore, must be managed in different ways. Loyalists must decide for themselves whose respect they desire, and re-orient their behaviours and rhetoric in ways which fulfil these needs. They must also accept that others will not always view them in ways which they would like, and that this is a logical consequence of some of their choices.

Managing competing claims- losses and gains for Loyalists

Of course, not all recognition claims can, or will, be satisfied (Galeotti 2007: 50). Often, those whose approval we seek will have unrealistic expectations of us, and it is more prudent to accept that we cannot reasonably fulfil these. Similarly, what might win us recognition from one group, might earn us disapproval from another. In terms of Loyalism, there are two immediate examples which illustrate these tensions, and which represent the daily choices which Loyalists must make in who they work with, what they work towards, and how they frame this.

The PUP recently participated in a 'Save the NHS', anti-TTIP protest. They were pictured

alongside the Workers Party, and several Trade Unions. The political left extended respect towards Loyalists for doing this. Loyalists, to the left, behaved in a morally appealing and politically acceptable way, by defending the NHS, a socialist institution which underpins ideals of civic Britishness. Yet for the right flank of Loyalism, any collaboration with 'the left', perceived to be inextricably linked to Republicanism, is a betrayal of the Loyalist cause, and should be rejected, whether or not the outcome, as it would be in this case, would benefit the Loyalist working class.

In a second case of competing recognition relations, Mitchell and Templar explore the antagonistic demands made on Loyalist paramilitaries in a post-conflict setting. These men, they argue, persuaded their rank-and-file members to subscribe to ceasefires, and to accept peace. In doing this, they won the (fleeting) recognition of the British state, as at least useful, if not worthy agents, who needed the 'men with guns' to consolidate the peace agreement. However, as the article highlights, in renouncing their role as 'community vigilantes', Loyalist paramilitaries left themselves open to sustained criticism from the communities who they had, in one form or another, 'defended'. This paradox, where their legitimacy came from their use of armed violence, and was used to call ceasefires, which then de-legitimised them in the eyes of their communities, reveals the complexities and complications of managing recognition relations (Mitchell and Templar 2012: 413-417).

Recognition and Redistribution- Transforming both?

Recognition need not solely deal with matters of cultural respect and identity politics. Fraser's dualist theory of justice adopts a transformative approach to recognition *and* redistribution, and argues that merely advancing affirmative strategies will not destabilise the existing, unjust orders. For example, in the economic sphere, progressive taxation will affirm the rights of the poor to a decent share of societally-generated wealthy. Concurrently, programmes which seek to affirm the cultural worth of particular groups will provide them with a 'share' of the social esteem. Yet these practices leave unequal power relations untouched. Fraser rejects these reformist approaches and suggests that true transformation, which would lead to socio-economic and cultural justice, requires systemic change. What would this look like in a Loyalist/Northern Irish context?

Firstly, given the recent launch of the Loyalist Communities Council, a collaboration between the UVF, UDA and RHC, new attention has been paid to initiatives which claim to address disenfranchisement and deprivation. Just a few hours after Jonathan Powell made his statement, in the Park Avenue Hotel in East Belfast, with leaders from the three organisations present in support, discussions began across social media about Loyalists "looking for money to go away". This is a reasonably cynical stance, given that peacebuilding in Northern Ireland has been funded to a total of £1.3 billion in the past twenty years. Some 'gatekeepers' have become wealthy, and retained a degree of power over their communities, whilst those most in need have remained socially marginalized.

I argue that whilst material resources are necessary for groups to progress, and indeed, to 'level the playing field' which is an inevitable result of capitalist economics, Fraser's vision of a

socialist economic setting, combined with a "deep restructuring of relations of recognition" (2008: 32) would provide a lasting change in the social and cultural landscapes, which currently reward only profitable, de-politicized groups.

Future work, or funding projects, ought to have two strands. The first, should address the structural causes of material deprivation, and, rather than provide short terms of funding, allow groups to investigate alternative economic systems which provide long-term social justice. Secondly, in terms of recognition, future projects should reject surface-level interventions which allow groups to positively present their identities, but instead work to reveal the non-essential nature of identities, and the institutionalized patterns of cultural value (Fraser 2003) which see some marginalized, and others welcomed.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude by summarising the possibilities and limitations of this type of research. Firstly, recognition is not inevitable, nor is it guaranteed as part of this project. The immediate aims of the thesis are to equip Loyalists with a coherent account of their political identity, and a co-produced recognition landscape, in order that they can better manage their recognition relations. Allowing Loyalists to identify their potential recognition partners, and, reflecting upon their own political objectives, marry these up in order to feel less subject to the moral whims of others, and indeed, less marginalised and powerless to shape their own reputations. These critical skills can be used in interactions with Unionists, Republicans, the British state, media outlets, and statutory bodies.

Those are the immediate goals of the doctoral project. However, overall, the political-activist aims are to reveal the unequal power structures which result in inequalities of wealth *and* esteem in Northern Ireland, and, through the 'strategic alliances' which Novosel has discussed in the past, working with other movements of the left, build a broad movement which sees Loyalism acting in its own class interests, and no longer being constrained by Northern Ireland's ethno-national landscape.