LGBT rights in Northern Ireland: a war by other means

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Despite lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights being at the centre of policy agendas, the way those rights are being viewed in post-conflict societies remains under-researched. In starting to address this gap, Bernadette C. Hayes and John Nagle look at the case of Northern Ireland. They find that nationalist parties support those rights as part of their broader agenda on equality, while unionists view them as a means deployed by nationalists to attack unionist identity. They write that understanding these conflicting views is not only crucial in designing power-sharing institutions, but in considering how other minority groups might end up being left behind.

Disputes over Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights now occupy a central place on national and international agendas. Yet, noticeably absent is an analysis of LGBT rights in societies undergoing transition from ethnonational conflict to peace. This omission must be considered surprising given competing claims as to the link between ethnonationalism and the rights of LGBT people.
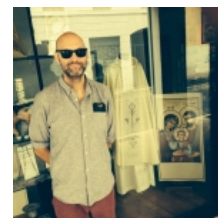
On the one hand, it has long been argued that nationalism is inherently homophobic. According to this perspective, because ethnonational boundaries coincide with sexual ones, prescriptions about appropriate sexual couplings and the control of sexuality is central to ethnonational projects. In fact, feminist scholarship has long pointed to the intimate link between heteronormativity and these ethnosexual intersections, particularly in terms of controlling the sexual practices of women. On the other hand, more recent scholarship calls into question this assumption. Pointing to a rise in 'homonationalism', or the increasing number of ethnic minority groups that actively seek to co-opt the language of LGBT rights as a means to distinguish their own political platform as more liberal compared to that of their rivals, such research cautions us against seeing ethnonationalism as inevitably homophobic.

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Previous evidence from Northern Ireland – a deeply divided society characterised by a long-standing ethnonational conflict – is somewhat mixed in relation to this issue. Since the signing of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, records show increasing levels of homophobic attacks in the region, especially violence against gay men and research has found a strengthening of homophobic attitudes in recent years. In fact, according to some commentators, homophobia has now replaced sectarianism as the major expression of societal hate.

At the level of elite politics, although LGBT rights have been side-lined in the power-sharing parliament, there is evidence of distinct differences between Irish nationalists and unionists in relation to this issue. Sinn Féin, the dominant Irish nationalist party, supports LGBT rights by conflating it with their demand for nationalists to be given greater minority rights. Sinn Féin states: '[nationalists] are only too well aware of what it means to be treated as second-class citizens. Our politics are the results of decades of resistance to marginalisation and discrimination'. By contrast, The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) – the main unionist party – has adopted a deeply negative stance on LGBT rights, including using the 'communal veto' to quash same-sex marriage legislation on three occasions since 2013.

Our research on public opinion in relation to same-sex issues suggests that these differences by ethnonational identity are also mirrored within the public at large. Irrespective of whether same-sex marriage or the teaching of gay and lesbian rights in schools are considered, it is those who are congruent in their ethnonational identity – define themselves as either British-Unionist or Irish-Nationalist – who stand out as the most negative in their views (see Table).

For example, whereas just under half of all respondents (46 per cent) who conformed to such a dual-identity label perceived same-sex marriages as invalid, the equivalent proportion among those who did not was markedly lower at just under a third (31 per cent). These findings are repeated when attitudes towards the teaching of gay and lesbian rights in school are considered. Again, it is those who are willing to endorse an ethnonationalist label who emerged

as the most negative in their views: while 51 per cent of all respondents who conformed to such a dual-identity label rejected such an initiative, the equivalent proportion among those who did not was thirteen percentage points lower at 38 per cent.

Congruency in Identity and Attitudes Towards Gay Rights (%)

	Protestant		Catholic		Total	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Same-sex marriages:						
Not valid	61.1	41.5	29.9	22.2	46.0	31.1
Valid	38.9	58.5	70.1	77.8	54.0	68.9
(N)	(185)	(248)	(174)	(270)	(361)	(511)
Teach Gay Rights in Schools:						
No	65.6	49.2	36.3	28.3	51.2	37.9
Yes	34.4	50.8	63.7	71.7	48.8	62.1
(N)	(189)	(248)	(182)	(276)	(371)	(517)

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2012.

These patterns are replicated when members of the two main religious communities – Protestants and Catholics – are considered separately. This is not to discount, however, marked religious differences in relation to this issue. Irrespective of whether same-sex marriage or the teaching of gay and lesbian rights in schools, Protestants are around twice as likely to adopt a negative stance in relation to both these issues than Catholics, and this relationship holds irrespective of identity preferences. What may explain this difference in finding, or the much greater lack of support for gay rights within the Protestant community? Additional analysis suggests that it is actually antipathy towards the equality rights of gay and lesbian people which is the primary factor in accounting for Protestant views.

LGBT rights have become entangled with the struggle for ethnonational rights in post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Irish nationalist parties have supported LGBT rights because they see it as compatible with the advancement of the equality agenda and the demand for minority rights. Unionist parties resist LGBT rights as they view them as a Trojan horse deployed by nationalists to attack unionist identity. A view, it should be noted, that is also currently shared by the Protestant community. Thus, in post-Agreement Northern Ireland the difference in support for LGBT rights between the two main communities – Unionist and Nationalist – has now become 'a war by other means.'

The nationalist/unionist conflict over LGBT rights has important policy consequences. Power-sharing is one of the principal tools for ending ethnonational conflict as it incentivises belligerents into exchanging violence for democracy by being awarded constitutional safeguards for group rights. Yet, while power-sharing may accommodate the main ethnonational groups, it can simultaneously have unforeseen negative consequences for groups outside of the cleavage, such as migrants, feminists and sexual minorities. It is these consequences that policymakers and researchers must address when designing power-sharing institutions.

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You can read more about the above research here. A reading list has also been kindly provided by the authors and is available here.

About the Authors

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