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Unionisms and the Challenges of Change

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## **Unionisms and the Challenges of Change<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

This article considers unionisms as sets of ideas that inform political movements, situating them theoretically within the broader field of territorial politics, showing the dimensions on which they converge with or diverge from nationalisms, outlining a preliminary typology of unionisms and showing the limits on the capacity of each type to respond to challenge and conflict. It shows the relevance of this for study of contemporary unionist movements, outlining how the contributors to this volume analyse the responses of unionisms, in Ireland and comparatively, to contemporary challenges.

**Keywords:** territorial politics, unionism, nationalism, conflict, negotiation, state downsizing, cultural logics, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, Brexit.

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## **Unionisms and the Challenges of Change.**

### ***Introduction***

The reconfiguration of European and British political unions has created new dilemmas and options for unionisms in Northern Ireland. The interrelations between the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK), between Great Britain (GB) and Northern Ireland, between Scotland and the rest of the UK (rUK), between nationalist and unionist within Northern Ireland, and between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic have been disrupted by the process of British exit from the EU. The crisis has generated multiple useful commentaries on unionisms and unionists by themselves and by others.<sup>2</sup>

This article analyses the present crisis theoretically and comparatively, showing the conceptual tools available to unionists and their interlocutors in negotiating conflict. It explores how the political ideas that define territorial politics are given particular emphases by different forms of unionism and presents an empirically-grounded and situated analysis of the concepts, values and dilemmas that inform unionist politics. Comparative analyses of nationalism have developed typologies of nationalism, based on the interrelations of key concepts.<sup>3</sup> This article outlines a preliminary typology of unionism, based on interrelations of key concepts. This forms the basis for analysis of the opportunities and limits on negotiation given by the cultural logic of each form of unionism and it raises questions of how, when and in response to what incentives unionists themselves change from one type of understanding to another.

The first part of this article situates unionisms theoretically, showing their contrasts and convergences with other forms of territorial politics, in particular nationalisms. The second part of the article develops a typology of unionisms, showing how it is of use in analysing the form, limits and prospects of unionist responses to challenge and conflict. The third part of the article focusses on the applicability of this analysis to contemporary unionist dilemmas, in the context of Brexit and ongoing crises in the Balkans.

### ***Situating unionisms***

#### ***Concepts***

'Unions' are understood here in the broadest sense, to include states or polities with multiple (named and recognised) peoples and/or territories.<sup>4</sup> Unionisms are the movements and ideologies concerned to hold that polity together against separatisms,

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<sup>2</sup> After a decade in which unionism was hardly discussed at length, there have been multiple commentaries and discussions in the media, for example, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/james-nesbitt-interview-irish-northern-irish-protestant-and-proud-1.3947853> and in social media, for example [https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2019/07/11/lost-tribe-moderate-unionists/content.html?sig=G94f\\_9DLcNnBditi5U-nxKF7hEZqNBaNsdkvj08xCJU](https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2019/07/11/lost-tribe-moderate-unionists/content.html?sig=G94f_9DLcNnBditi5U-nxKF7hEZqNBaNsdkvj08xCJU)

<sup>3</sup> For example, contemporary typologies emphasise interrelations of ethnic commonality, cultural features, civic values, and state-belonging in different types of nationalism (variously Wimmer, 2002 ; Keating, 2001; Bonikowski, 2017 ; Brubaker, 1996 ; Pehrson, 2019), and the conventional grammars by which they are interrelated (variously Wodak, 1999 ; Hutchinson, 2005 ; Todd, 2018, 71-95 ).

<sup>4</sup> 'Unions', in this broad sense, includes those states where self-identified distinct peoples have local and/or non-territorial autonomy (Coakley, 2017 ). They many consociational polities are 'unions' as thus understood. This broad definition allows us to explore the cultural logics in common across these cases.

secessions, irredentism and other forms of boundary change.<sup>5</sup> This paper looks at unionisms, rather than unions, arguing that they constitute an ideological family with distinctive responses to challenge and conflict.

Very little comparative analysis of unionisms has been undertaken, although Michael Keating has recently refocused attention from federations and regions to the concept of 'unions'.<sup>6</sup> Considerable scholarship exists, however, on particular unionisms, in the EU,<sup>7</sup> in the UK,<sup>8</sup> between Scotland and England<sup>9</sup> and (Northern) Ireland and Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> Yet unionisms, as the literature clearly shows, are part of a wider set of ideologies and political movements concerned with territorial politics, concerned *inter alia* with territoriality and polity, peoplehood and identity, democracy and self-determination, law, constitutionality and rights. Although always likely to provoke conflict and sometimes violence, the concerns of territorial politics cannot be bypassed (Keating, 2013). In the contemporary world, there are no alternatives other than to find ways better to construct and interrelate these key reference points.<sup>11</sup> Nationalisms assign one set of prioritizations and emphases to them and unionisms another.

Unionisms are thus siblings of their arch-opponents, nationalisms, and usefully analysed in comparison and contrast with them. They share the same characteristics that Hutchinson and Smith (1994,4) use to define nationalisms: unionism is *territorially defined* (although not always clearly bounded, since an open-ended expansive unionism is possible); it is focussed on a particular *polity* (often but not always a state); it involves a *historical narrative* that part-constitutes *an identifiable named unit* (the union), constructed as the home of a *people* and/or *peoples* that may not possess affective *solidarity* but at the very least are shaped into a unity by their mutual engagement, commitment and reciprocity.<sup>12</sup> Unionisms, like nationalisms, may conservatively defend achieved political institutions against challenge, or may expansively work to create such political institutions.

Within this, unionisms vary quite as widely as do nationalisms: from the defence of the EU to Algérie Française, from Scottish national consciousness within the UK to British imperialism to defence of the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina from a pre-war multi-

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<sup>5</sup> Thus VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM are 'unionist' parties in the Republic of North Macedonia, each with a prime aim of holding the state together and each recognizing – since the 2001 constitution- that it is composed of different peoples. VMRO-DPMNE is also clearly a majoritarian-state-nationalist party, prioritizing the interests of the ethnic Macedonian people. In this case, as in others, a party may be both unionist and nationalist in different respects: see below pp..

<sup>6</sup> Rokkan and Urwin (1983 ) coined the term 'union state' a concept later developed by Keating (2013; 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Nicolaidis, 2013, 2017; and others

<sup>8</sup> From early work by Rose, 1982, Bulpitt, 1983 to the range of work on the specific character of British and/or English nationalism, for example Kumar, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Kidd, 2008; Keating, 2001; 2018

<sup>10</sup> On Northern Ireland, see Miller, 1978, to Wright, 1973 and Bew et al, 1979 through Todd 1987, 1991 and Aughey, 1989, Jackson, 1989, Mulholland, 2000, and Graham Walker, 2004, to McAuley, 2010, 2016 and Tonge et al, 2014, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Territorial politics at its multiple levels provides what Hegel called the 'ethical life' through which increasingly wide and universalistic perceptions and dialogue become possible (see variously Ben Habib, 2011 ; Cooke, 2016 ; MacBride, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> To use Honohan's (2001) metaphor of citizenship, the members of a union may be as colleagues shaped by their interaction, rather than as friends or family shaped also by affect.

cultural perspective. In Northern Ireland between 1998 and 2016, about half of Irish nationalists, together with the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the loyalist paramilitaries (Coakley, 2019) preferred the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to a united Ireland. As can be seen, unionisms and unionists encompass a very wide range of ideological positions, political stances and forms of identification and argumentation. Even within one society, unionists support different types of union in different ways for different reasons and from different interests.

Unions may be imposed or chosen or, most common of all, they may evolve in their character from state- and empire-building pasts increasingly to allow constrained choice and constrained consent.<sup>13</sup> The ideologies of unionisms emerged within this checkered history and also informed it. All contemporary states and polities are composed of multiple parts and peoples, thus their self-definition as nations or unions partially constitutes their politics and direction. Much as Ian Lustick (1993) argued with respect to colonial status, whether a polity is a union or a nation is a matter of hegemony, ideology and self-understanding not simply of organization, institution and law.<sup>14</sup>

Of course some institutional configurations make unionist readings more plausible than do others, but they do not determine them. The lean but strong British state historically allowed separate institutions, cultural norms and different laws in each of its parts, and thus it is easily seen as the political expression of a 'union' of separate territories; but the United Kingdom also developed nation-state characteristics that waxed and waned at different historical periods so that it often also made sense to speak of a British nation and indeed many Scottish nationalists did so (Robbins, 1989; Kidd, 2008). British governments could emphasize rhetorically the multiple or the unified character of the polity, or more often both: from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish devolution, they faced a real choice of developing the polity so that it became a truly negotiated and agreed union of several peoples, or of asserting its unity as one state and one democracy; with Brexit it seemed that they could no longer do both (Gillespie, 2019; Coakley, 2019)

#### *Unionisms and nationalisms: dimensions of distinction*

The distinction between unionisms and nationalisms is characterized by their emphasis on key concepts, which I order here in four dimensions.

The political dimension from polity to people: Peoplehood is central to nationalism, and self-determination and democracy its core norm; thus state-hood is always subject to democratic consent.<sup>15</sup> Nationalisms often prioritize popular agency and will over achieved institutions: even state boundaries are seen as institutions which crystallize

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<sup>13</sup> For a thorough account, see Keating, 2013. With specific reference to Britain, France and Spain, see Ruane, Todd and Mandeville, 2003. Some of the problems of imposed unions are discussed by Bieber, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Lustick's insight was that historically embedded complex states are meaning-laden and open to different readings. Thus even the relatively centralized French republic can be seen as a military-administrative complex imposing itself on a conglomerate of disparate territories and peoples under a unifying political myth (as radicals like Lafont (1967) have argued), and should this ever become a widespread perception the nation dissolves and even the political union loses its legitimacy.

<sup>15</sup> National democracy is not necessarily ethno-national majoritarianism: it may involve the making at once of democratic consent and of a (national) demos out of diverse sub-groups (Miller, 1995)

power relations rather than defining the limits of justice and democracy (see O’Leary et al, 2003 ; McGarry and O’Leary, 2013) . Unionisms, in contrast, focus on the values associated with the unity of the polity: these may be economic benefits and/or moral traditions (‘liberty’) and/or institutional values, or legal norms or constitutionality. They may sometimes involve appeal to peoplehood and democracy (Bourke, 2003) but this is often recessive, understood rather than emphasized, and often the weight of achieved institutions is emphasized over agency (Aughey, 1989).

Indeed there is much room for creative conceptual mixing: civic republicanism constitutes a people contemporaneously with a polity, and may differentially emphasize one or the other.<sup>16</sup> Actually-existing unions work best when they constitute a people, albeit a thin one, as well as a polity: the United Kingdom was better able to navigate disagreements when the Scots (for the most part) saw themselves as British as well as Scottish (Kidd, 2008).

Since it is a matter of prioritization and emphasis, the same collective movement and the same state may simultaneously be informed by unionist *and* nationalist ideas, with the emphasis varying with speaker and situation. So, for example, there has long been a tendency within Ulster unionism (both UUP and DUP) to focus on peoplehood (Ulster Protestantism and Britishness) *as well as* statehood . Indeed David Trimble, the paradigmatic Ulster unionist constitutionalist, regularly spoke of his ‘folk’.

The peoplehood dimension, from singular to composite and relational identity. If nationalisms tend to present their peoplehood as simple and unitary, despite its always contested and often-composite character (Hutchinson, 2005), unionisms pride themselves on their compositeness: unionists are British *and* Scottish, Spanish *and* Basque, European *and* French *and* Corsican. Unionist movements are happily hybrid: for example unionism in Northern Ireland is at once Ulster Protestant, British, and sometimes as well Irish and Northern Irish (Todd, 1987; Todd 2018 pp 71-78). And composite peoplehood is more than a package of diverse groups, it is always also relational. Being European means relating as Irish or as French to the other 27 nations, and being Spanish means relating to the others in Spain as Basque. The same could be said of functioning consociational unions, in the Republic of North Macedonia or Northern Ireland. As Nicolaidis (2013, 356) puts it with the respect to the European Union, it is a matter of reciprocal responsibility, ‘internalizing [the] externalities’ of the other. Where unionisms constitute a people, it is a people by marriage not by blood and like modern marriages it does not require giving up one’s distinct identity of origin.

Importantly, this distinction between forms of people-hood cross-cuts the ethnic-civic distinction. Unionisms are sometimes, incorrectly, seen as non-ethnic and non-national, while nationalisms are seen as essentially ethnic (Aughey, 1989). On the contrary, as Murphy and Evershed emphasise (2019), some unionisms focus on descent as the key attribute determining membership in one part of the union (the Protestant ‘folk’), or even as the attribute defining commonality across the parts (the British ‘family’). Some nationalisms (like some unionisms) focus instead on the founding constitutional moment of choice as central to peoplehood. And some see ‘ethnic’ descent as one among a number

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<sup>16</sup> See variously Miller, 1995 ; Honohan, 2002. Indeed on some analyses the nation-state itself constitutes a singular people out of (and alongside) multiple peoples who retain some distinction (Wimmer, 2002) :

of factors relevant to conferring membership, but neither necessary nor sufficient to do so (Todd, 2018, 82-3 ).

The identity dimension, from culturally thin and politically defined identity to culturally thick and informally embedded identity . If unionisms are built on political unity rather than cultural affinity, nationalisms tend to present themselves as rooted in culturally rich and interlocking historical practices, social relations and a wide range of formal and informal institutions and networks. Thus nationalist identity narratives are typically historically deep and complexly elaborated while unionists tend to focus on political and material benefits of state belonging. However this is merely a tendency. State centred nationalisms sometimes tend towards the culturally thinner end of the spectrum, while unionist narratives may evoke thick and historically deep cultural resonances, for example in the case of the United Kingdom around the political reference points of parliament, liberties, constitutionality and monarchy.<sup>17</sup>

The change dimension, from flexibility to brittleness. Positioning on the first three dimensions affects the capacity to cope with political change and conflict. The history of internal contest over the meanings and origins of the nation provides multiple cross-cutting repertoires and values to contemporary nationalisms, and this gives them considerable flexibility in changing political direction while retaining their claims to historical continuity. Unionisms, whose central reference point is political union, are more conscious of the dangers of fission and often less flexible in face of challenge and change. Again there are exceptions, and states that at one point prove flexible in negotiating change, at another prove brittle. For example, the UK's complex and contested state tradition allows movement seamlessly back and forth from more to less centrism as high politics demands.<sup>18</sup> Thus its territorial flexibility in the 1990s and 2000s has been replaced by power and brittleness in the 2010s, with the seeming expectation at the centre that once the crisis of Brexit is over, the 'four nations' can return to their flexi-devolutionary settlement.<sup>19</sup>

I have presented unionisms of different types and regions as united in their family resemblances one to another, overlapping with the family of nationalisms, and differing from them most sharply at the extremes. Pure unionisms are focussed on polity: to the extent that a concept of one people exists at all, it is seen as composite and culturally thin, political rather than ethnic, at the limit with the constituent parts of the union bound together for reciprocal benefit rather than from loyalty or identity. Pure nationalisms are defined primarily by peoplehood rather than polity, they are culturally thick and singular with a strong descent emphasis and at the limit are both state-less and trans-state. In between, the distinction is one of emphasis.

### ***Types and logics of unionism***

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<sup>17</sup> This as much the 'invention of tradition' as is any national myth of origin. For a critique of this myth along the lines of contemporary critiques of nationalist myth, see Nairn, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Bulpitt (1983) gives a classic analysis of this mindset – as he calls it these habits of state-craft - from an Anglo-centric perspective. McCrudden (2015) shows the 19<sup>th</sup> century constitutional spectrum as expressed by Bryce and by Dicey.

<sup>19</sup> Keating (2001, 2018) analyses the contemporary movement from flexibilism to brittleness. On the possible futures see Gillespie (2019).

In what follows, I develop a typology of unionisms based on the prioritisations and interrelations of concepts and values. I go on to show how the logic of each type of unionism predisposes it to liberal, flexible or authoritarian responses to challenge. Finally I turn to the different possible relations between unionism and nationalism, arguing that either or both can be backward, narrow and/or authoritarian depending on type, circumstance and relationality.

### *Types*

An initial typology of unionisms can be based on the relative emphasis on key concepts:

**institutions and laws:** divided in turn into existing or expansive

**identity and peoplehood:** divided in turn into whether singularity or plurality is emphasized in culture and in forms of democracy.

**projects and values:** divided in turn into interests or ideals (which in turn could be further divided along lines of degree of egalitarianism, democracy and negotiability)

Counting different combinations and permutations, this gives hundreds of ideal types, which could be further multiplied by additional distinctions and different ways of cutting the conceptual cake. Of these, I discuss seven empirical types, common in the British Isles and wider European arena.

Conservative unionism prioritizes institutions and laws over peoplehood and identity and sees values as embedded in those institutions rather than used to reform them. It focusses on the fact of the polity's existence and stability, and holds that lasting values – including a respect for the difference of territorially and perhaps religiously defined peoples - are embedded in the institutions, laws and traditions of the state. These are seen as primary in creating and harmonizing public expectations and order, itself in the interest of all. Burkean conservatism is the British variant of this, and constitutional fundamentalism the American.

Imperial unionism prioritizes the expansive institutions of the union and – in its rhetoric at least – its plural peoples. It focusses on the benefits of the expansive union for the interests of all multiple peoples within it, while understanding those peoples – and their interests and identities - within a hierarchically weighted caste-like order (Osterhammel, 1997). If mutual interest is (sometimes) emphasized, inclusion is strictly limited and values and project-direction are determined by the dominant elite.

Ethnic/particularist unionism prioritizes peoplehood, understood as a singular minority people, whose existence, interests and values are symbiotic with the existing institutions and laws of the union. Sometimes it takes that minority as emblematic of the union itself, of its finest traditional values and projects, and even of its institutional vulnerability. This position has been common among some brands of Ulster loyalists (see variously Miller, 1978 ; Jordan,2013 ], and more generally among frontier minorities.

Dominant majority unionism prioritizes peoplehood (understood as majoritarian and singular) as it is expressed in the institutions, laws and practices of the union state. It focusses on statehood as democratically legitimated, and sees state institutions as resonating with the values and interest of the majority. Its unionist credentials come from



its acknowledgement of different peoples/territories in the union, although this is rhetorical rather than effective at points of democratic choice. When it sees the majority as an ethno-national one (it may instead be understood as religious, or as defined by civic values) it is indistinguishable from majoritarian ethno-nationalism.

Constructive unionism prioritizes peoplehood (understood as multiple) and the equal accommodation of their interests, which can and should override the existing institutions and laws. It legitimates the union and its institutions in terms of the reciprocal and egalitarian benefit of its peoples. Thus it prefers consociational rather than majoritarian democracy, and it values negotiated reform over tradition (see McGarry, O'Leary and Simeon, 2013). Such unionisms accommodate difference rather than attempt to create greater overarching unity. This is the intergovernmentalist understanding of EU unionism.

Project unionism prioritizes the construction of a shared project and values by the plurality of peoples. It assumes a plurality of peoples and territories, which attain a unity through interaction towards the shared project, which also gives values in terms of which its institutions are to be reformed. Examples include the creation of a multi-cultural Canada in which '...the political task of multiculturalism, in part, is to provide opportunities for differences to be visibly manifested in spaces that mark them as manifestations of civic friendship, engagement, contribution, and allegiance.' (Bloemraad et al, 2019), and, on some interpretations, the EU itself (Nicolaidis, 2017). The values differ from one project and age to another, but this form of unionism works so that each of its parts benefits reciprocally from its relations to the others, and both parts and whole change in the process of deliberatively working out a shared project. It is a form of polity-building consistent with the recognition (rather than submergence or integration) of the parts. In EU terms, it is what Nicolaidis (2013) calls 'demoicracy'.

True unionism prioritizes the union itself and its existing institutions over interest, tradition, identity and value. The union becomes an end in itself, over which no argument is contemplated. Dependent on the existing union for their very being, these unionists are prone to ontological insecurity in situations of challenge and change.

Typically unionist politics, parties and movements are composites of several types of unionism, which are expressed by different subgroups and differentially combined in different situations. Thus the unionist alliance is itself potentially fissile even before the union itself is.

In the European Union, constructive unionism – maximising benefits for all parts – and project unionism – constructing a shared project that goes beyond economics and security – predominate in discourse and by-and-large in practice. There have been some attempts to emphasise the (Christian) values and identity of the dominant majority, and an increasing conservative emphasis on the role of the Union in maintaining stability. In practice, however, considerable particularist jockeying for position and policy by the member states coexists with an attempt to create a shared project. In its federalist form, this leads to a decrease of the powers, identities and interests of the members – a sort of state-centred integration in which the numerical majority dominate – rather than a reciprocal recognition of each member (Nicolaidis, 2013 ).

In the United Kingdom, conservative Burkean unionism and constructive unionism coexisted historically within a strong imperial project. Imperialism provided the wealth and opportunities which gave plausibility to the belief that the union benefitted each part of the Kingdom. Sometimes a wider constructive unionism was proposed: thus the 19<sup>th</sup> century project of a 'Greater Britain' (Bell 2007) envisioned a reciprocally beneficial union among the countries of the white empire, and was open at once to imperial, majoritarian-racist and project-oriented interpretations. Dominant majority (English nationalist) unionism was weakly emphasized - as Kumar (2003) has argued, the English had an underdeveloped nationalism as is functional for empires<sup>20</sup> - but majoritarianism was prevalent from the democratization and played the same function. Most recently, in the debates on Brexit, a constructive unionist *discourse* has coexisted with a majoritarian nationalist *practice* of asserting majority decisions on dissenting Scottish and Northern Irish regions (see Keating 2018).

Unionism is quite different in Northern Ireland. In the Irish and later Northern Irish cases all types of unionism existed, usually concurrently, among different groups and in different measure depending on audience and situation. Particularist unionism around the interests and identities of the Ulster Protestant people (Miller, 1978 , Todd, 1987, McAuley, 2016 ) varied in its precise definition from primarily settler, ethnic through to primarily religious themes, and sometimes Ulster Protestants portrayed themselves at the heart of the British nation (see variously Wright, 1973 ; Jordan, 2013 ; Ganiel, 2008 ). This coexisted with an emphasis amongst the upper middle classes of the benefits and 'glory of being Britons', a form of unionism that over time changed from having a predominantly imperial to having a predominantly majoritarian nationalist resonance (Bew, 2009 ; Todd 1987, 1991). A form of constructive unionism was put forward in face of the challenge of Home Rule in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later with the modernization of the 1960s (Boyce et al, 2001 ; Gailey, 2001; Mulholland, 2000) . Less frequently a conservative unionism that resonated with conservative thinking in Great Britain itself was articulated (Aughey, 1987). In unionist political discourse, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, constructive themes were often intertwined with majoritarian British ones and occasionally with ideas of a shared project within the wider 'free world' which could create a unified Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom (see Mulholland, 2013 ). In practice, the more general constructive values and projects were only sometimes voiced in unionist party decisions and almost never won (Walker, 2004 ). When challenge occurred, 'true unionism', the need to keep the unionist alliance at all costs in order to keep the union, almost always won over constructive or project oriented politics and even the liberals succumbed (Gailey, 1995). A constructive unionism was also attempted by small groups - the New Ulster Movement (NUM), the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, and the British and Irish Communist Organisation (BICO).<sup>21</sup> Latterly with the Good Friday Agreement a project-based unionism became more common, even amongst some who supported nationalist parties, whereby the reconfigured union would be the locus of a shared project for Northern Ireland.

Over the last half century, most of these strands coexisted in the main unionist parties - the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) - with ethnic

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<sup>20</sup> Similarly the Russians (Csgero 2013) were under-stated nationalists in the USSR, and the Ottomans hardly nationalist at all (Braude, 2013)

<sup>21</sup> On NUM see Whyte, 1990, 150; on BICO, see Whyte, 1990, 182-5,

particularist and majoritarian nationalist strands vying for dominance together with a few moderating constructive and conservative voices (McAuley, 2010 ; Tonge et al, 2014, Hennessey et al, 2019). For the recent period, studies of the DUP (Tonge et al, 2014) show relatively little difference between the policies and perspectives of the two unionist parties, although the prevalence of the religious theme amongst DUP politicians underpins a very particularistic strand of unionism, which sometimes contradicts other imperatives: Ganiel (2008, 114-120) argues that after the Good Friday Agreement sections of traditionalist evangelicals (and DUP supporters) came to accept power-sharing and even an Irish dimension on the grounds that at least they would be able to defend moral imperatives – to ‘save Ulster from sodomy’. The past decade has illustrated the continuing swaying between an ethnic (and sometimes religious) particularism and a more constructive unionism in the DUP, with the particularism usually winning out.

In other cases, the range of unionisms was different. In Republic of North Macedonia, for example, a Macedonian nationality disputed by almost all its neighbours was confirmed by Macedonian state-hood such that any challenge to the unity or ethos of the state seemed to undermine the very existence of the nation (Danforth, 1993 ). Within this, there were different forms of ethnic Macedonian nationalism, more or less open to a plurality of peoples within the state and more or less able to offer more benefits to the ethnic Albanian population than were, for a period, available in the neighbour states. As Koinova (2013) argues, the developing conflict (2001) and the imposed consociational polity only haltingly developed into a constructive ‘unionism’ intent on incorporating ethnic Albanians into the state in a manner that would recognise their identity and benefit to their interests. After 2008 an overtly majoritarian nationalist ethos was restored by VMRO-DPMNE; only after major political corruption and unrest (2016-7) did a constructive form of unionism reemerge with some ethnic Albanian support although also with very strong majoritarian nationalist and conservative ‘unionist’ resistance.

#### *The logic of unionist responses to challenge and change*

Unions downsize with difficulty, after unionist ideological and often military resistance (Lustick, 1993). Functional down-sizing in the sense of granting increasing competences to autonomous regions, and symbolic down-sizing, in the sense of lessening claims on the symbolic ownership or legitimacy of the state is also often resisted: the Macedonian ‘name question’ is a prime example. Sometimes resistance to functional downsizing is so strong as to put the very union in question, as centrist resistance to greater Catalan autonomy showed (Wilson and Keating, 2009). The contributors to this volume show ways in which unionists in the UK and in Northern Ireland have become so insistent on refusing autonomy and differentiation to the parts of the union that they are putting the union at risk. Coakley asks why the DUP has embraced a hard – even a no-deal – Brexit at the cost not just of likely economic disaster but of potential loss of the union itself. Nor does the DUP’s stance allow the UUP to become more constructive in its unionism: despite initial opposition to Brexit, the UUP quickly turned to support it.

Is there a tendency to hardline resistance to compromise within unionism, and if so why? The answer may appear simple. When unionists have the power of the state at their disposal, they may see no strategic reason to risk adding to the resources of potentially secessionist nationalists by conceding to demands for more autonomy (Roeder, 2007 ). Keating (2013) however has argued that in cases where nationalisms are already strong, such concessions more often weaken secessionism than strengthen it. Everyday

nationalists can be incentivized to be pragmatic, and typically prefer incremental increase in autonomy, symbolism, and self-determination to the risks of conflict.<sup>22</sup> Unions, and those who benefit from them, may reasonably anticipate greater security in a looser negotiated union, than in a centrally controlled one. Why then do they often back-track from this stance? To answer the question we have to turn to cultural logics of unionism, not simply the interests involved.

Since unions are made from a multiplicity of territories and peoples, they are vulnerable to fission. Even more, the unionist alliance that upholds the union – made from a multiplicity of territorial and ideological perspectives and from groups with different interests and identities – is itself fissile. Unionisms are very conscious of this vulnerability. Nationalist movements survive successive defeats and adapt to changed circumstances: they can afford to be pragmatic. But if a union breaks up this is likely to be definitive; in a Northern Irish unionist phrase ‘unionism only has to lose once’.

Particularist and majoritarian unionisms are conceptually under-resourced to negotiate these challenges. They typically respond by resistance and accept reform to a more equal and looser union only when the power balance changes. Conservative and even imperial unionisms can be more flexible, finding repertoires of constrained change in the past, and - although typically unwilling to concede points of principle or to disturb existing interests and status hierarchies - sometimes shared projects can be constructed: imperial Britain is an example. Constructive unionism is on principle open to negotiate the distribution of benefits and recognition, willing where necessary to loosen the union in order to strengthen it. And project-oriented unionism can flexibly negotiate relations within and among its parts in light of shared values and projects, which are themselves further developed in this negotiation. From this project perspective, unions can be a moving balance of their parts, held together by shared and evolving ideals and institutions. Such an approach would allow what Gillespie (2019) calls a ‘renovated’ union in the UK, which will allow a smooth restoration of devolution in Scotland and Wales, and consociational government with North South linkages in Northern Ireland.

But without a shared project, this is a difficult balance to maintain, and the dilemma lies on each side of flexibilism. If constructive unionisms focus pragmatically on the mutual interests and reciprocal benefits of the parts of the union, they are easily open to pressure by the more powerful members; the union becomes one of interest and convenience and is likely to fission with the changing interests and resources of its members. Unionists of the conservative, ethnic, majoritarian and even project varieties sense this and oppose such bargaining because of the danger it poses. But refusal to reform in light of member interests produces an increasingly brittle union sustained solely by authoritarian centrist power. Caught between indulgence and authoritarianism, it is hard to maintain a flexible negotiating stance. Thus unionisms, in the UK, in Spain, and in Northern Ireland, tend to flip-flop from flexibilism to rigidity and back.

The difficult choices lead to splits within the unionist alliance, increasing a sense of unionist vulnerability and an openness to ‘true unionism’ which refuses all change. After 1998 in Northern Ireland, as reform occurred and widened support for the union

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<sup>22</sup> This has certainly been true of Irish nationalism. See Ruane and Todd, 1999. More generally, see Keating 2001.

(Coakley, 2019), the unionist alliance of conservatives, ethnics, majoritarians, constructives and project-oriented came under increasing strain, with fall-offs from pragmatists and privatisers, business and professionals focussed on making the most of the new post-agreement opportunities, and project-oriented unionists wanting a shared society.<sup>23</sup> For those unionists with fewer opportunities, who increasingly defined their being in terms of the unity of the state, this threatened collapse of their very *raison d'être* (see for example McAuley, 2016). This is the definition of ontological insecurity (Abulof, 2015; Rumelili, 2015) and it leads to unionism becoming imbued with a narrow moralism that is almost immune to negotiation. This tendency towards 'true unionism' whenever some of their one-time allies begin to fall off from the alliance provides one answer to why unionists in contemporary Northern Ireland are acting against the interests of the union.

Of course the limits of unionist resources to negotiate can be overstated. Flexible repertoires are present in the unionist tradition and have been well documented in numerous studies. And at the everyday level, there is significantly greater flexibility again as recent studies of deliberation and discourse in Northern Ireland show. In one mini-deliberative process, Garry et al (2018) show that everyday unionists were quite ready to reflect on contentious issues and weigh up the merits of different proposals for Brexit dispassionately. A parallel conclusion was found in an interview study by Dornschneider and Todd (2019) who show how local unionists in one town West of the Bann systematically lowered the emotional salience of contentious issues, including a united Ireland, and were willing to discuss them detachedly.

#### *Unionisms and nationalisms: relationality*

Unionism, like nationalism, is a perspective on power, territory, peoplehood and value and the identities involved are multiple, varied and more open to adaptation and change than often assumed. The opposition between unionism and nationalism is itself contingent on the form of state and of politics, as Kidd (2008) has so clearly shown in the Scottish context. So too is the degree of pragmatism, on the one hand, or brittleness and diehard determination, on the other, shown by each party. When project unionisms are dominant they make separatist nationalisms unnecessary since the separate peoples can attain autonomy and the benefits sought from independence within the changing union (Keating, 2001). Opposition, it is said, comes from narrow nationalisms which are particularist and back-ward.<sup>24</sup> This rhetoric is familiar in European critiques of populism, and – in the past – in British critiques of Irish nationalism. But not all unionisms are flexible project unionisms. Many unionisms are majoritarian, or conservative, or developed from the perspective of particular interests and identities. 'Nationalist' opposition to them is often project- and value-oriented. It is necessary to move away from a stigmatisation of all nationalisms – or unionisms – as backward and authoritarian, and equally from a praise of them as progressive. Their political character is situational.

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<sup>23</sup> Various see Garry, 2016 ; Hayward and McManus, 2019 ; McGrattan and Meehan, 2013 ; Ruane and Todd, 2017 ; Todd 2005; 2018.

<sup>24</sup> The characterisation of all nationalisms as such is of course misleading. See variously Keating, 2001 ; McGarry and O'Leary, 2004 .

The task of analysis is to show the types and trajectories of unionisms (and nationalisms) in particular cases and the common patterns between cases. This in turn helps show analytically how it may be possible to incentivize movement from one type of unionism to another, what sorts of deliberation and reasoning is important and how flexibilist unionism can best be sustained.<sup>25</sup> Rather than ‘a plague on both your houses’ the tasks are to be clear on the parameters of dialogue and to see peoplehood and identity as evolving not unchanging (Todd, 2018); to highlight analytically the project-orientations implicit in some political and much everyday reflection around issues of territory, power and peoplehood; and to present the possible institutional and constitutional models on which dialogue is possible. In the Irish case, as a possible future union of Irelands comes onto the political agenda, it is necessary above all to move away from the rigidity of a Southern state-centred unionism, as much as from a particularistic or true Ulster unionism to discuss the possible forms of democracy and self-determination at each level of multi-layered polity.

***Unionisms in the contemporary world: dilemmas and opportunities.***

Are unions inherently unstable? I have argued that there is a tendency for unionists to move to a sort of fixation on the existing institutional union that is likely to generate opposition and the prospect of total defeat. Unionisms and their unions will survive – one may hypothesise – only if they are informed by projects sufficiently wide and resilient to allow change, adaptation and ongoing reconfiguration. In a democratic age, those projects must be dialogic, if the continued commitment of each of the parts of the union is to be assured.

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<sup>25</sup> Other articles in the volume submitted to Irish Political Studies will discuss these issues and we hope will be published no later than 2020.

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