Discourses of Ethno-National Demography: Northern Ireland from the 1991 Census to the Census of 2001

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1. Political Demography and Ethnicity in Divided Societies

In ethnically-divided societies, population change and spatial distributions are typically matters of popular concern invested with special political significance. In consequence there are strong tendencies to interpret or misinterpret Census data for political ends. This politicisation of demography is particularly prevalent in situations of ethnic conflict or potential conflict, and especially where there is the threat or promise that relative numbers are converging, or where either segregation or mixing are seen to be growing. It can be observed in the Balkans for instance where it led to so-called ‘ethnic cleansing’; and it is also seen in Palestine-Israel where the Palestinian population is increasing much faster than the Jewish population; and in large parts of the USA where traditional issues of black-white segregation are now being overtaken by questions of Spanish-speaking people becoming the majority population. However, it is especially clear in Northern Ireland where both the numerical convergence and the segregation of Protestants and Catholics, proxies for British and Irish nationalists, are thought to be increasing dramatically, and where the misuse of Census statistics has been elevated to a local art form. The public discourses around the 1991 Census were particularly sensationalist, and the ‘2001 discourse’ has been even more so. There can be a fine line between discussing ethnic divisions and propagating them; between analysing the demography and exacerbating the conflict. Misinterpretations of the Census reflect and reinforce the ethnic conflict which they purport to measure and interpret.

There are thus several reasons why it is important to analyse the discourses of political demography in divided societies, to expose their limitations and distortions. The discourses both reflect the nature of the divisions between population groups, and they are an integral part of the conflict with direct bearings on attitudes and actions. They provide a window into the mind-sets and competing perspectives which underpin the conflict. They are weapons in the conflict which are shaped by the political strategies of
the protagonists, and (often in a lethal combination with lazy or opportunistic journalism) they can seriously exacerbate the conflict. Exposing their faults thus has practical urgency because bad analysis encourages bad politics, ‘justifies’ the unjustifiable, or leads to opportunistic or counter-productive policies. They demand demolition. But despite their obvious flaws, deconstructing these discourses and replacing them with more benign perspectives is far from easy.

They gain in credibility or legitimacy from the apparent precision of the Census statistics, but these statistics are often wilfully abused, and the interpretations placed on them typically extend well beyond anything that the statistics themselves can reliably sustain. Rather than being based on the Census itself or on other reliable data, the interpretations are often a fairly straightforward reflection of pre-existing prejudices or unexamined assumptions. Yet despite such inherent weaknesses, these discourses, like most ideologies with any power and plausibility, add up to a persuasive Weltanschauung. They have a complexity and an apparent coherence which makes them difficult to demolish. Their mutually protective layers are hard to penetrate, especially where political conflicts are long-standing and deep-rooted as in Northern Ireland – demolish one flawed argument and you are immediately confronted by another. While contending ethnic groups are locked in conflict and disagreement, they rather perversely have much in common, often agreeing the supposed ‘facts’ of the situation or providing ‘mirror-image’ interpretations of the same ‘reality’, thus reinforcing each other’s prejudices as they see the world through their respective ‘ethnic’ spectacles. This is picked up and encouraged by ‘third parties’ such as the dominant state power or the so-called ‘international community’ of leading states - to further their own ends and/or as they try to ‘manage’ the conflict in a supposedly ‘realistic’ way which ‘accepts the realities of the situation’. Indeed in some cases they may have initiated ‘ethnicisation’ in the first place, perhaps as a ‘divide and rule’ tactic. Thus there is a tendency to ‘ethnicise everything’. The narratives of ethnicity are perpetuated and ethnic conflict is reproduced.

Ethnicisation

Many of the problems of political demography in fact stem from the ethnic definition of the contending population groups and the conceptions of ‘ethnicity’ which the various protagonists apply to themselves and others. The Northern Ireland conflict, which was traditionally framed in terms of religious ‘sects’ and ‘sectarianism’, has recently experienced ‘ethnicisation’ and this is a decidedly two-faced or mixed blessing. Discussing media reporting of ethnic violence and war, as in former Yugoslavia, Allen and Seaton note that ethnic ‘explanations’ of conflict, particularly where they depend on dangerously misleading essentialist conceptions of primordial or fundamental differences between contending groups, can be a way of cynically distancing the observer from the conflict (Allen and Seaton 1999, 2). In these taken-for-granted non-explanations, conflict is due either to the atavistic ‘human nature’ we all possess but which gets manifested only with social breakdown, or, explaining even less, conflict is due to the ‘inherent character’ of the particular ‘ethnic’ people seen essentially as ‘racially’ distinct. The message that these people are not like ‘us’ can be underlined by denunciations of ‘ancient tribal hatreds’; but the failure to engage with them is also a failure to explain what they are doing and why. For example - in a spurious contrast with 'rational' civic or state nationalism - the so-called 'ethnic nationalism' of minority or subordinate national groups is often seen as 'irrational' and hence beyond rational analysis. And that absolves 'us' from bothering with proper analysis, and makes it easy to claim that maybe
the only thing ‘they’ understand is superior force - in typical nationalist fashion, the problem is always other people's nationalism or ethnicity.

Thus ethnicisation can de-contextualise and de-politicise political conflict – providing ‘natural’ or ‘racial’ non-explanations, stripping away the real politics and history, and distancing ‘third party’ state powers to the role of blameless or well-intentioned ‘outsiders’, rather than presenting them too as part of the conflict. Even though political demography involves a politicisation of demography, it too suffers from and facilitates this type of de-politicisation. Not only is the ethnicisation defective where it is applied, but it is applied partially and typically does not extend to the groups holding state powers or at least not to those in the leading states. When did you last hear the conflicts involving the USA, Britain or France 'explained' by the 'ethnicity' of the North Americans, British or French? In other words, the politicisation of demography is both defective and partial, and some might be tempted to conclude that it would be better to simply de-politicise the study of population completely and only deal 'objectively' with 'statistical facts'. This positivistic goal, however, is both impossible and mistaken even if it were possible. The numerical facts, even when they can be established beyond doubt, have to be interpreted and they are open to different interpretations. Like it or not, population is political, and the answer lies in politicising demography 'properly', restoring the politics and history which the 'ethnicisation' tends to exclude. Likewise, while the essentialism of treating ethnicity as ‘natural’ and primordial conflates it with discredited racial 'explanations', we cannot solve the problem simply by avoiding ‘ethnic’ categories.

While overused to mean almost anything and almost nothing, the concept of ‘ethnicity’ does have a positive as well as a negative aspect; and as Allen and Seaton point out, it would be foolish to suggest that ethnicity does not influence behaviour once conflict is established:

“Once violence starts, ethnic identities become social facts, they are quickly ascribed to people whether or they want to have them, and many protagonists will not hesitate in giving highly essentialist ethnic explanations for what they are doing. The power of ethnicity comes from an acceptance by enough people that particular social divisions are natural and inevitable.” (Allen and Seaton 1999, 3)

Given the latter point, it is somewhat ironic that the concept, relatively new in English but applied to subordinate ‘ethnic minorities’ such as Afro-Americans, Italians and Irish in the USA in the 1940s, was effectively generalised and popularised by anti-essential social scientists since the 1960s. And they adopted it as a relatively ‘neutral’ term to avoid using problematic notions such as ‘race’ and ‘tribe’, while emphasising that ethnicity was socially constructed, fluid and negotiated. But then the term 'escaped' from academia and became widely used to mean something very different. For politicians and protagonists in ‘ethnic’ conflicts and for journalists reporting them – and more particularly for their audiences - the term increasingly meant natural or inherited characteristics, precisely the connotations which the anti-essential academics had sought to avoid (Allen 1999, 28-30). Effectively, the 'politically correct' term of the anti-essentialists was re-appropriated by essentialists. But the academics faced the objective problem (one seriously under-estimated, especially by aficionados of ‘post-modernism’) that while ethnicity may be negotiable in some circumstances, ethnic identities are often inherited and escaping or re-negotiating an ascribed identity can be extremely difficult in practice. Indeed for particular groups and individuals ethnicisation and ethnic conflict may operate to make it virtually impossible - retaining members and ensuring group coherence is one
reason the groups often see themselves as 'natural'. However, the main outcome is that the older connotations of 'race' and biological determinism applied to different population groups have been revived in the popular versions of ethnicity. Sometimes these connotations are explicitly encouraged by racist politicians (as in the Balkan conflicts and in anti-immigrant xenophobia in western Europe), but often they are implicit as talking about 'race' has become less acceptable in public political discourse.

"While explicit statements about racial determinism are controversial, the suggestion that ethnicity determines behaviour is more acceptable, even if in practice this can often mean the same thing.... there has been a conflation of ethnicity with the old meaning of race as social differentiation with a biological basis, and many ethnic explanations of conflict are in fact inherently racist." (Allen 1999, 31)

However, while we need to be aware that racism cloaked in 'ethnicity' may be political demography's sometimes hidden content, we cannot simply reject ethnic identities. Whether racialised or not, in conflict situations, as Allen puts it:

"ethnic identities become objective social phenomena. At least for a period, it becomes impossible for people to 'unwrite what has been written'.....[and] it is not helpful to...dismiss all statements by protagonists about ethnicity as mere 'false consciousness'. Arguing that ethnicity is socially constructed is no consolation to a woman who has watched her family being beaten to death.....[instead we need to understand] why so many people...find highly ethnicised explanations....so convincing." (Allen 1999, 29, 33)

And this brings us back to the point that 'over-ethnicised' discourses of demography are complex and difficult to dislodge. Hence the need for detailed and sensitive deconstruction, though that said, countering these discourses at the level of ideas can only go so far. They will only be decisively demolished if the priority given to ethnic categories is replaced in material practice by other categories, most notably by trans-ethnic and trans-national categories of social class which have been the main conceptual victims of 'ethnicisation'.

2. Demography and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland provides a particularly revealing case of political demography because the ethno-national conflict is deeply embedded, demographic issues are long-standing and intensifying, and the abuse of Census data is an art form as already suggested. Since the 19th century ethno-national division in Ireland has generally been expressed in the sectarian religious terms of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant', assumed to stand for 'Irish nationalist' and 'British unionist', and sectarian head-counting has been a built-in feature of politics in Northern Ireland since, and because of the way in which, it was established in 1920. A majority of Irish Protestants had opposed Irish 'Home Rule' from the 1880s, and increasingly on an Ulster-wide basis from the 1900s, but Northern Ireland was delimited as six rather than all nine Ulster counties in order to give it a 'safe' two-to-one majority of Protestants over Catholics. This had entailed some 300,000 Protestants in the rest of Ireland being excluded from the settlement - sacrificing or 'throwing them out.
of the lifeboat' as they saw it - to secure the dominance of the roughly 900,000 Protestants within a six-county Northern Ireland. Instead of their resulting '66%: 33%' majority, the nine-county Ulster would have given a Protestant majority of only about 56% in 1920, with the 44% Catholic minority much closer to parity and seen as endangering the political union with Britain.

Subsequently, the two-to-one majority was maintained because the generally higher birth-rate among Catholics was off-set by their relatively higher emigration rates, themselves a function of various economic, social and political forms of sectarian discrimination practiced mainly by members of the dominant Protestant group or by institutions controlled by them. Having started sectarian head-counting - whether of overall numbers in Northern Ireland or its various sub-units, birth rates, death-rates, or migration rates - neither side could not stop counting, or in some cases trying to influence, relative numbers; and so political demography and popular interest in the Census also became a built-in feature of Northern Irish politics. But with changes in demographic factors leading to a reduction of the Protestant majority from the 1960s, it was increasingly seen as approaching or going below the 56% mark which had been deemed 'unsafe' in 1920. This helps explain the intensification of demographic politics in recent decades. However, in suggesting a dramatic Catholic increase and imminent majority, along with growing sectarian 'apartheid' after two decades of armed conflict, the 1991 Census discourse was unusually misleading. And in some respects the 2001 discourse has been even more sensationalist.

The Northern Irish case is also revealing because the conflict is sometimes virulent despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that the two groups are closely intermingled geographically and socially are not very dissimilar. Sectarianism and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries is something which has to be worked at, rather than 'coming naturally'; and their reproduction has to adapt as circumstances change. The conflict has also changed over the decades – even if 'to stay the same' has often been the motivation – and currently it is open to further change both in malign and benign directions.

In previous research, we focused on the 1991 discourses, not as representing the realities of demography, but as representing realities of sectarian thinking about the demography of Protestants and Catholics - 'sectarian readings of sectarianism' (Anderson and Shuttleworth 1994). These discourses systematically exaggerated the importance of religious categories and distorted the image of Northern Ireland and the self-images its two main religious groupings, painting a bad situation as much worse than it already was. The abuse of population statistics - whether in unwarranted extrapolations of past trends or flawed measures of 'increasing' segregation - was therefore a major concern. The discourses were gaining currency in the media and also in academic and policy circles, risking further damage to inter-group relations, reinforcing or 'justifying' sectarian attitudes, and encouraging the promotion of sectarian 'solutions' to the ethno-national conflict (Anderson and Shuttleworth 1998).

We have therefore returned to these issues, to assess the public discourses around the 2001 Census and how they compare with those of the early 1990s. What are the changes and the continuities over a decade which saw major paramilitary cease-fires and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 which was expected to herald conflict resolution? We carried out a detailed review and evaluation of the media coverage of demographic topics at a range of scales from Northern Ireland as a whole to local levels.
We focused both on the expectations of the 2001 Census and the responses when the results were made public.

Some themes had become less prominent, and there are grounds for limited optimism in the emergence of some new perspectives or revisions to the earlier ones. However, the overall conclusion was that while much has changed politically, much has stayed the same. Many of the sectarian themes have continued, sometimes regardless of the facts; and some have been reinforced and are now simply accepted as conventional wisdom. For example, perceptions of increasing segregation have intensified among protagonists on all sides of the conflict. Prior to publication of the 2001 results, the hopes and fears of Northern Ireland getting a 'Catholic majority' also intensified; while the rhetoric and reality of alleged 'ethnic cleansing' took on new meanings and significance. Some themes sank to relative insignificance, and others, such as long-distance migration into Northern Ireland, the general (un)reliability of census measurement, and the continued emigration of Protestant school-leavers to universities in Britain, emerged or gained in prominence. Yet despite such changes, the basic story remained consistent over time.

3. The Structure of Sectarian Population Narratives

We have seen it is important to understand how ethnicised and sectarian discourses ‘work’, how and why they appeal (as well as appal), and why they can be difficult to counter and dislodge. Basic consistency over time is clearly one strength, and so too is consistency between the various themes so that taken together they seem to make sense. The 1991 discourse suggested, and the 2001 discourse confirmed, that it is useful to see the themes as coalescing to constitute two related 'master narratives'. The primary one is of 'Catholic growth/Protestant decline', seen as having implications for the very existence of Northern Ireland as a political entity. The second narrative is of 'increasing Protestant/Catholic segregation and polarisation', with implications for the quality of social and political life within Northern Ireland and ultimately for its functional viability.

The two narratives are overlapping and support each other. While they are propagated both by nationalists and by unionists (albeit in different ways), the first one definitely favours the ‘Catholic’ or Irish nationalist side of the political contest, and the second one arguably does so too, inasmuch as it suggests that the unionists' solution of Northern Ireland may become functionally unviable even if there is not an overall ‘Catholic majority’. This raises questions about the wisdom of unionist strategy and ideology, but the general point that concerns us here is the mutually reinforcing character of the sectarian arguments, and this applies also to the various constituent themes within each master narrative. Furthermore, while the constituent themes may change or change in their relative political importance over time, the two master narratives have a continuity which gives coherence to sectarianism - if their basic premises are accepted, and the abuse of statistics ignored. The result is an overall demographic mythology of Northern Ireland which is persuasive and pervasive as we shall see. It is widely shared on all sides despite major disagreements, and difficult to counter effectively despite its sometimes outrageously flawed arguments.

'Catholic growth/Protestant decline'
Each of the two basic stories has multiple manifestations, each is endlessly repeated in different forms. Their structure and power can be seen most clearly in the narrative of 'Catholic growth, Protestant decline'. At its most persuasively simple and abstract, this is a story of relative numbers in the formal political spaces of electoral geography, a 'numbers game' of increase and decrease where majorities have or may become minorities, and vice versa. But it is also manifested in more complex arguments involving alleged sectarian causes and effects of demographic change, and political intentionality consciously to affect population trends, with more emphasis on the social spaces underpinning the political conflict. 'Increase/decrease' becomes 'expansion/contraction or retreat' in the communal ownership and control of particular pieces of territory following as a consequence of relative population change. Then in a further twist, there are allegations of enforcing changes in population distributions and territoriality by 'ethnic cleansing'. This has increased since the early 1990s, both as a reality in some areas but more especially as a sensationalist rhetoric with little basis in fact. But taken overall, these various manifestations add up to a powerful story of change or impending change in the domination/subordination of political power.

The simple 'numbers game' of increase and decrease echoes the sectarian head-counting of Northern Ireland's origins. So it is not surprising that it is pervasive, bearing directly on the issue of Northern Ireland's continued existence, as the population totals (of all ages) are translated too directly into imputed democratic majorities in elections and referendums. It is generally assumed with little or no qualification that all Catholics are nationalists, all Protestants unionists, that all of them will actually come out to vote, and that a nationalist majority will vote Northern Ireland out of existence - an heroic set of assumptions which are either highly improbable or at best reflect relatives tendencies, not the absolutes of sectarian discourse. This narrative of population-electoral competition is however to some extent qualified by the growing perception that there are really two separate electorates and that the main electoral competition is now intra-group - between the two main unionist parties and between the two main nationalist ones. This relates directly to the second master narrative of 'increasing Protestant/Catholic segregation and polarisation' and it suggests that all four main parties assume there is little 'tactical voting' and few votes to be gained from across the sectarian divide, thus further deepening the division. But if there is assumed to be little chance of non-sectarian electoral politics, then population change does become the only way of achieving significant political change. And so the basic sectarian 'numbers game' remains the dominant discourse, and it is played by protagonists, politicians and commentators at all scales of electoral representation, from Northern Ireland as a whole, to its twenty-six District Councils, Parliamentary and local Assembly constituencies, even down to wards and electoral districts. It tells mostly the same sort of story at each scale to reinforce the general message that majorities have been or may in the future be won and lost through population change.

From this it is a relatively small step to the idea that population change is or can be engineered for political purposes by the opposing group, by one's own group, and/or by the state. Demography is of course shaped by all sorts of processes, such as residential suburbanisation, de-industrialisation, changes in the economies of scale in agriculture, changes in retail trade, in the provision of public services, and so forth, but it is a prominent feature of sectarian population discourse that these 'ordinary' processes are generally absent from Northern Ireland. In reality they are very influential, and they can have important differential effects on Catholic and Protestant groups because of their pre-existing socio-economic differences, as distinct from being the intended outcomes of
actual conflict between the two groups. However, as we saw with the 1991 discourse (Anderson and Shuttleworth 1994) 'sectarian readings of sectarianism' typically impute political intentionality to population change, seen as due to enforced migration (and forgetting 'natural increase/decrease' in situ), whether or not intentionality actually exists. This is seen at its starkest in discourses of so-called 'ethnic cleansing' which allege that population change has been enforced by 'the other side' through intimidation and violence forcing people to migrate out of particular areas, or indeed to leave Northern Ireland altogether. These discourses have changed and in some respects become more prevalent since 1991. While allegations of the ethnic cleansing of 'border Protestants' have declined with the IRA cease-fire and the ending of armed attacks on vulnerable security forces in border areas, there has been increased violence and intimidation of minority Catholic households in some mainly Protestant areas in east Ulster. At the same time there has been quite widespread abuse of the term for political effect as a generalised 'explanation' of the decline in Protestant numbers.

Thus the narrative of 'Catholic growth/Protestant decline' goes well beyond relative numbers in electoral units to involve the material and symbolic control of particular territories defined in terms of social space. Here control is a wider socio-economic matter of community and culture rather than formal electoral balance, and population 'increase/decrease' can translate into issues of jobs or housing. For instance, conflict at some local 'interfaces' between Protestant and Catholic areas is sometimes explained or justified in terms of population decline and potential housing surplus in the former, and growth and housing shortages in the latter, and hence the threat or promise of a transfer of territory. Although socio-economic in orientation, the discourse is typically militaristic, employing such word as 'advance' and 'retreat' and on occasion the loaded term liebensraum.

'Increasing Protestant/Catholic segregation and polarisation'

The greater emphasis on the social spaces underpinning politics continues in the second narrative which is a story about the growing apart or 'growing apartheid' of Protestants and Catholics. If the 'shock' of a 'Catholic majority' fuels the first narrative, this one posits Northern Ireland becoming 'two separate societies', and again these discourses of allegedly increasing segregation are re-told at different spatial scales. There have been fears/hopes of 'cantonisation' and notions of separate 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' areas at the level of local government units; and related questions about the practical viability of what is said to be increasingly 'separate development' within the comparatively small shared space of Northern Ireland. In the most extreme case, and this relates to the ethnic cleansing discourse, there is the unionist 'doomsday scenario' of re-partition to carve out a new 'safe Protestant majority' area in east Ulster. Less dramatically, at more local, neighbourhood levels, there are implications of the two groups living completely separate lives, no longer communicating, or wanting or being able to understand one another.

At all scales, this narrative gains its power from conflating spatial segregation and social and political polarisation (of which there is also 'independent evidence' such as the idea of 'two separate electorates'). The spatial segregation of population is seen as a metaphor, a cause and an effect of the aspatial polarisation of politics. And all are seen as counter-intuitive in the context of the 1998 GFA which had been expected to deliver peace and mutual understanding - convergence rather than divergence. They can also
be tied in with criticisms of the Agreement's consociational character which is criticised for 'managing' rather than resolving the conflict and in practice further institutionalising and reinforcing the very sectarian divisions on which the conflict rests.

However, while there are serious issues here, the notion of 'growing apartheid' is a gross exaggeration. As in the case of an imminent 'Catholic majority', its statistical foundations in the Census (or anywhere else) are decidedly shaky. The projections of a 'Catholic majority' were based on the erroneous assumption that the relatively high Catholic birth rate would stay the same whereas it has fallen substantially in recent years. And the 'growing apartheid' narrative was initially established by comparing flawed data across the Censuses of 1971, 81, and 91, without taking proper account of the flaws in each year, and more especially without adjusting for the fact that the areal units of measurement were changed substantially between 1971 and 1991. While there is evidence of some increase in segregation, there is also evidence of increased mixing in some residential areas (though that is sometimes interpreted as 'invasion'). Furthermore, the data supporting the segregation story applied only to place of residence. Where people worked, who they mixed with at work, where they travelled for leisure and other activities, and who they met in their daily lives, were completely ignored in this simplistic tale of supposed 'apartheid'.

References


Allen T. 1999 ‘Perceiving contemporary wars’, in Allen and Seaton, ibid., pp. 11-42
