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## **The limits of identity: ethnicity, conflict, and politics**

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that, although they are often talked about in this way, identity and ethnicity do not, *sui generis*, cause people to do things. They must always be understood in political and economic contexts, in particular with respect to the pursuit of local material interests. We must take account for why perceived interests come to be so perceived, as interests. They are historical constructs, neither 'natural' nor inevitable. Also with respect to perceived interests, the material and other consequences of identification are important: who benefits, who doesn't; what is locally valued, and so on. The argument is pursued on the basis of brief case-studies of Northern Ireland and Denmark. The twentieth-century Danish case, if no other, further indicates that powerful ethnic and national identities and differences, even when combined with conflicts of perceived interests, need not, however, always lead to violence, or even to overt conflict. Perhaps the most interesting question raised by this paper is why, historically, has identity become such an important rhetorical resource? Identity and self-determination have become unassailably defensible as political values. While it is not respectable to pursue self-interest too nakedly, self-determination expressed in terms of identity is a wholly different matter. It appears to permit almost anything.

## **The limits of identity: ethnicity, conflict, and politics**

Of the various foci of collective affiliation and mobilisation which threaten either the project of greater European unity, or the fragile post-1989 settlement in central and eastern Europe, ethnicity, and its close cousin, nationalism, must be counted as perhaps the most powerful and potentially destructive. I do not need to itemise the local and regional conflicts concerned - from the Aegean, to the Balkans, to the Atlantic seaboard, to the Baltic, to the Caucasian borderlands - to make this point. So it is important that we should try to understand what is going on. There is, however, a danger that ethnicity, and identity more generally - because ethnicity is commonly, and sensibly, talked about in the same breath as identity - will be accorded an explanatory and analytical status that they do not wholly deserve. Why this should be the case is something else that we should strive to understand better.

## **Identity in the contemporary world.**

Identity is perhaps one of the most widely used words in today's world.

In both everyday discourse and in social science analyses and debates, there seems to be no end to the contexts in which it pops up, and the uses to which it is put. In common-sense, everyday speech the notion of identity is used in connection with all of the following:

- \_ *Personal individuality.* This is the world of the psychotherapies, philosophies of personal growth, and so on. With an emphasis on selfhood, self-actualisation and freedom, and authenticity, these discourses are at least as likely to be found in the pages of popular magazines as the consulting rooms of professionals.
- \_ *Life-style.* Here we are still in the same territory, albeit somewhat more widely defined, covering everything from 'subculture' to sexual preference, and encompassing the collective as well as the individual. Among the most important social arenas for the expression and construction of life-styles, one can point to

advertising and consumption (or, indeed, their rejection), and individual or collective affiliation to various 'alternatives' to the perceived cultural mainstream.

- *Social position and status.* The complex societies of the industrialised world - and at the beginning of the third Christian millennium, that should probably be taken to mean the entire globe - are neither undifferentiated nor egalitarian. They are systematically and hierarchically structured in terms of social identifications such as gender, age, class, religion, marital status, disability, culture and ethnicity, and so on. While these serve to differentiate people, individually and collectively, they also offer provide bases for the organisation of collective mobilisation and action.
- *Politics.* Apropos collective organisation, in terms of voting behaviour and other forms of political action, something has emerged known as 'identity politics'. This is pre-eminently the terrain of the new social movements - particularly single-issue movements, such as those promoting women's rights, gay rights, ethnic civil rights, and so on - but it has also filtered through into the strategies of more established political parties, not least in the attempt, typically on the left, to form so-called 'rainbow coalitions'.
- *Bureaucracy and citizenship.* Passports, identity cards, and other forms of personal registration, are an established part - albeit to differing degrees from country to country - of the everyday life of the citizens and inhabitants of all industrialised states. They are bound up with nationality, freedom of movement, citizenship rights, taxation, financial and other economic services, welfare benefits, routine population monitoring, individual surveillance, criminality, and so on. There is hardly any aspect of everyday life that is not in some sense touched by the bureaucratisation of identity.

I have itemised these separately for the purpose of presentation, but in practice, they do, of course, overlap with each other. The pursuit of 'personal individuality' is likely to involve 'life-style choices'; social status and politics have always been intimately connected; bureaucracy and citizenship are fundamentally political; and so on.

Which brings me on to the use of the notion of identity in contemporary social science discourses. Here, reflecting the fact that social science necessarily draws at least some of its substantive inspiration from the everyday social world, we find the word used in connection with all of the above topics. In addition, however, the 1990s saw the emergence of an distinctive set of related theoretical emphases, which have been disproportionately influential in defining recent sociological and other debates about identity (e.g. Benhabib, 1996; Calhoun, 1995: 70-96, 193-297; Gutmann, 1994; Hall and du Gay, 1996; Lash and Friedman, 1992; Seidman, 1997). Four themes in particular have been repeatedly emphasised, across a wide range of literature:

- \_ *personal self-identity and reflexivity;*
- \_ *the variability and fluidity of identity, as against essentialism or primordialism;*
- \_ *difference as the defining criterion or principle of identification;*
- \_ *the definitive modernity (or post-modernity) of identity discourses, and of the fluidity of identity.*

While the two can never be the same, there is an interesting convergence of everyday discourses about identity, and the social science - particularly, perhaps, the sociology - dealing with the same topic. Among others, the following broad swathes of common ground should be noted:

- \_ *Identity is often reified, it is talked about as a 'thing', rather than as the emergent outcome of complex and ongoing processes of social identification;*
- \_ *Related to this is a tendency to take for granted what identity is - or, indeed, that it is - without unpacking how social processes of identification work.*
- \_ *Equally, there are taken-for-granted assumptions that identity means something in and of itself, that it is necessarily important, that people act in terms of it.*
- \_ *A clear distinction of kind is made between individual and collective identifications.*

- \_ Finally, there is *an understanding of identity as potentially more or less vulnerable* to the homogenising and centralising forces of modernity, rationalisation, mass-society, and globalisation; there is much talk of identity being 'under threat', of 'losing identity', and so on.

These are not simply matters for social theory, however. Taking the last three points together, 'identity' has become a legitimate political good *sui generis*, bound up with notions of either individual or collective authenticity - expressed as individual choice or collective membership - and something to which people, once again individually and collectively, have a more or less strongly-defined 'right', and a right to assert. In fact, the notion of identity has arguably become inseparable from weaker or stronger models of human - collective and individual - rights. As a justification for political action of whatever kind, the appeal to identity has become almost unimpeachable, a striking cocktail which blends together ineffable notions of authenticity, belonging, and destiny. This reflects two historical trends:

- \_ *the influence since the late 18th century revolutions of political philosophies of collective destiny*, different versions of which assert, for example, the primacy of democracy based in individual citizenship, or that every 'people' should have a nation-state; and
- \_ *the subsequent development of affluent individualistic psychologies and philosophies of selfhood*, which assert the importance, for example, of individual fulfilment, freedom, or self-actualisation.

In these, the collective and the individual are summed up in the same notion, *self-determination*.

To return to theory, there is also available another - and in my view rather more useful - model of social identity, rooted in symbolic interactionism and anthropology. Although this approach has perhaps been unfashionable recently, it draws on long-

standing theoretical traditions within sociology and social anthropology, side-steps some of the problems that - although I have not dwelt on them in detail - are implicit in my characterisation of the recent social science of identity, above, and seems to me to be arguably in greater accord with the observable realities of social life. This model can be summed up briefly, thus (see Jenkins 1996, for greater detail):

- \_ social identity is simply - and complexly - a *process* of identification, it is no more, and no less, than *how we know who we are and who other people are*;
- \_ processually, *the individually unique and the collectively shared have much in common*;
- \_ identification is always a matter of *relationships of similarity AND difference*;
- \_ it is also a matter of *internal definition and external definition*: this suggests that *identification can never be unilateral* (any more than self-determination can);
- \_ *identity is negotiable and changeable, but when identification matters, it really matters*; and, finally,
- \_ *identification is also a matter of its consequences*, as a process - rather than a 'thing', or an ideal classification - it is inherently practical.

In this model, human social life would simply not be possible without identification, with some way of knowing who we are, and who others are. Which further suggests that identifications of one kind or another are emphatically not modern - in fact, *cannot* be modern - nor is a concern with them. They are, rather, a routine aspect of ordinary, everyday human social life. Thus, while identity is largely taken for granted until something happens to render it problematic - a change of circumstances - that does not mean it is necessarily problematic or vulnerable by definition.

### **The anthropological approach to ethnicity**

The general model of social identity outlined immediately above draws, among other sources, on the anthropological literature dealing with ethnicity. For the purposes of

this discussion, ethnicity is taken to include national identity, and a range of other communal or local identifications. It is a subject which social anthropology, perhaps more than any other discipline, has made its own. Drawing its ultimate inspiration perhaps from Max Weber, the anthropological approach to ethnicity is based on the seminal contribution of Fredrik Barth and his collaborators, in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth, 1969), and subsequent contributions made by writers such as Cohen (1985), Eriksen (1993), Geertz (1973: 255-310), and Jenkins (1997). There is a basic, consensual anthropological model of ethnicity, comprising four basic propositions:

- \_ allowing for the remarks above, about the necessary relation of similarity and difference in all processes of social identification, *ethnicity is, in the first instance, about collective identification based in perceived cultural differentiation;*
- \_ *ethnicity is concerned with culture* (shared meanings) but it is rooted in - and the product of - *social interaction*, especially across *boundaries*;
- \_ *ethnicity is neither fixed nor static*, any more than the culture of which it is an aspect, or the situations in which boundaries are produced and reproduced, are fixed and static.
- \_ *ethnicity is both collective and individual*, externalised in *institutions* and *patterns of social interaction* and internalised in *personal self-identification*.

That this is a broadly consensual model within the discipline, to which most anthropologists could subscribe in its outline form, does not mean that there are no controversial issues, themes that are ripe for development, or substantial criticisms of the model. There are (see Jenkins 1997, for further detail). For example, the approach's axiomatic focus on 'group-ness' and group boundaries has tended to reify ethnic groups and make their boundaries appear as 'harder' than they necessarily are. This underplays change, and the ongoing emergence of collective forms out of interaction; social groups are no more 'things' than identities are.

The anthropological approach also privileges and emphasises processes of collective self-identification, underplaying any understanding of identity as an emergent outcome of the interplay between (internal) self-identification and (external) identification by others. The bias towards self-determination in this approach can also encourage voluntarism, with its insufficient attention to power and compulsion, and overlook the intimate and necessary relationship between group identification and social categorisation.

An important question that has not been sufficiently addressed by anthropologists is, why are ethnic affiliations so locally variable in their strength and salience? If we are to understand why ethnicity means more in one place than another, why some identifications matter more than others to their bearers, and why the 'same' identification can mean different things to different people, we must pay attention to the individual and collective consequences of ethnic identity in different contexts. This is, if you like, matter of ethnicity's real-world materiality. There is a similar need to pay greater attention to processes such as socialisation, if we are to understand adequately why, when ethnicity means something to individuals, it can *really* mean something.

With respect to whether ethnicity is utterly flexible and malleable - and if not, why not - the meaning and cultural content of ethnicity are probably at least as important as the interactional construction of boundaries which has, to date, been the main pre-occupation of anthropologists. What is the relationship between boundary maintenance and the local cultural content or meaning of ethnic identification? Some 'cultural stuff' - to use Barth's well-known expression - is likely to be more consequential, and more constraining, than others. I have in mind embodiment, language, collective history, and religion, as a preliminary list.

Finally, what about the relations between ethnicity and the identifications - such as locality, community, region, nation, and 'race' - which are clearly variations on the basic ethnic theme of collective identification stressing perceived cultural differentiation. And, a related question, what about the ideological expressions of ethnic identifications: ethnic chauvinism, sectarianism, nationalism, and racism, in

particular? Where do these fit into the anthropological approach? Anthropology has tended to neglect these issues.

Of all these criticisms and developmental possibilities, the most pressing seem to me to be the intimately related issues of the variability of the strength of ethnic affiliations, and the limits to the malleability and negotiability of ethnic identification. In the social world of humans, ethnicity is *not* infinitely variable or negotiable. That much seems clear. Furthermore, ethnicity doesn't have the same salience in people's lives everywhere. But what are the social processes that make ethnicity matter, *when* it matters? There are at least four possibilities:

- \_ earliest *primary socialisation* may be extremely consequential, in establishing ethnic (or similar) identities as primary identifications, in terms of which most or all individual experience is mediated;
- \_ the cumulative weight and force of *the categorisations of Others* may serve to systematically limit the possibilities for flexibility;
- \_ the *meaning and content* of ethnic identification, and the *history* - meaning here, of course, history as it is collectively perceived and imagined - within which it is located, will also render ethnic identification more or less malleable;
- \_ the *materiality and consequences* of ethnicity - the costs and benefits attaching to any particular identification in any particular context - must also be taken into account.

In addition, with respect to the cultural content or meaning of ethnic identification, and against much anthropological conventional wisdom - which insists that it is relationships at and across the ethnic boundary that matter - the internal relations and politics of an ethnic collectivity are critically important to our understanding here. The internal project of the construction of a sense of shared similarity is no less significant than the construction of a sense of difference from external Others. The two are, of

course, closely connected. And both are, definitively, constructions: they are utterly imagined.

If ethnicity is imagined, however, it is anything but imaginary. It is 'real', in that people orient their lives and actions in terms of it, and it has very definite consequences. What is more, ethnicity may be emotionally authentic, or tactically and strategically manipulable, or, indeed, both simultaneously; for these are not necessarily contradictory. Everything depends on constraints and opportunities, contexts and situations, cultures and histories.

This all suggests that ethnic identifications do not mean anything in themselves. They are not 'things' *sui generis*. This further suggests that ethnic identifications do not necessarily generate conflict either. As social processes ethnic identifications only exist in - and can only be understood in - their properly complex social settings, interwoven with many other social processes, factors, and histories, from which they derive their meaning, form and trajectory. Thus to say, for example, that situations 'X' or 'Y' are situations of ethnic conflict is, at best, to describe rather than to explain them (and the same is true if one talks about 'identity politics', for example: as an expression it explains nothing).

### **Ethnicity in the contemporary world: two brief cases**

In order to illustrate some of the theoretical points that I have been making so far, some empirical substance is called for at this point. The two brief case studies which follow are drawn from my own research (see Jenkins 1997: 90-163; 2000) and are necessarily condensed.

#### *Northern Irish Protestants*

For my purposes here, the first three hundred or more years of the 'Northern Irish problem' can be crudely summarised. Faced with the continued refusal of the Gaelic Catholic northern province of Ireland to accept English rule, the government in London attempted to solve the problem, in the late 16th and 17th centuries, by forcibly dispossessing the native Irish of their land and 'planting' in their stead loyal English

and Scottish protestants. 'Ethnic cleansing' and population replacement (although only to a point: many of the Catholics, needed as labour, stayed on in relative or absolute poverty). The Plantation created two mutually hostile ethnicities in Ulster, Protestant and Catholic, the former economically and politically dominating the latter.

If the Plantation created ethnic division, hierarchy, and conflict in the north, these inequalities were further consolidated as industry, first textiles and then engineering, developed rapidly during the nineteenth century. The north-east of Ireland - in close touch with British finance, and dependent on Imperial markets - became the industrial and commercial centre of the island. Protestants benefited disproportionately from this relative prosperity.

The partition of Ireland in 1921, following political violence throughout the island, institutionalised these differences as part of the structure of the Northern Irish state, run by the local Protestant elite in reasonably comfortable alliance with the Protestant working class, who had the best of what jobs in what had been transformed overnight, from the most prosperous province of Ireland, to the poorest corner of the United Kingdom. The situation lasted until the late 1960s, when violent unofficial and official Protestant reaction to a Civil Rights Movement agitating on behalf of the Catholic population led, very quickly, to a resurgence of political violence, the introduction of British troops, and, in 1972, the suspension of the local, Protestant-controlled parliament and the imposition of direct rule from London.

Since then various routes to a settlement have been attempted. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement clarified the situation, not least with respect to the Republic's recognition as a significant participant, and its *de facto* recognition of the present constitutional legitimacy of the northern state. This 'peace process' has gained added impetus since the 1998 Good Friday agreement, paramilitary cease-fires, the establishment of a local Legislative Assembly, and the various negotiations which are at present still continuing. The outcome remains depressingly open.

Ulster Protestants have spent the time since the imposed closure of the Stormont parliament in 1972 in a gathering state of insecurity and uncertainty. They have some very good reasons to feel like this:

- \_ The state that once embodied their local privilege and control, and their protection against a united Ireland, was taken away from them.
- \_ Economic depression has affected their life styles, although Protestant relative advantage stubbornly persists.
- \_ Many of the acts of violence committed in the name of the 'Protestants of Ulster' have not been easy for them to own, or own up to.
- \_ Their historical alliance with Britain is increasingly seen to be fragile - if not actually abandoned by its senior partner - and a gulf has opened up that is wider than the Irish Sea (although it was, perhaps, always there, and has simply become more obvious).
- \_ Internationally, there is an uncomfortable awareness that the rest of the world sees them - categorises them - as the villains in the piece (a conclusion that is, historically, if in no other sense, hard to resist).

A people who have been long used to keeping Catholics in their place are now having to face up to the reality of being put in theirs. What is more, the unification of Ireland, from being something which was believed to be resistible, has become irresistible, a future about which the appropriate question to ask is *when*, rather than *if*.

Protestants often present their predicament in terms of the preservation or survival of an identity - British, Protestant, democratic - threatened by an alien, Papist, authoritarian, and backward culture and state. Apart from 'identity' itself, other key words here have become 'culture', 'tradition' and 'heritage'. For Protestants, talking about themselves in these terms achieves several important things. In no order of significance, these are:

- \_ First, the obscuring of the material self-interest that might be involved. The blunt defence of accumulated advantage has always been a hard corner to fight, unsupported by morality.
- \_ Second, the opening up of a possible legitimization of the Protestant case in terms of the international ideology of self-determination and identity, discussed earlier in the paper. The oppressor becomes, if only potentially, and even if only in their own eyes, the oppressed.
- \_ Finally, and from the point of view of the governments involved too, a 'cultural' resolution to the problem, in terms of mutual respect, community relations, and so on, appears on the horizon. One of the non-governmental, although state-subsidised and certainly state-blessed, organisations at work on the edges of the peace process is, for example, the Cultural Diversity Programme (formally the Cultural Traditions Group) of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council. Local and national politics, rooted in histories of domination, become transformed into something much easier to talk about.

This does not, however, mean that Protestants talk about the conflict in terms of culture and identity solely and self-consciously in order to achieve the outcomes listed above. I do not believe that for one minute, if only because there *are* two 'identities' in Northern Ireland, and, in at least one important and authentic respect - religion - they *do* differ culturally. What is more, although the 'troubles' could not be said to be 'about' religion, a history and contemporary experience of religious difference contributes in no uncertain terms to the conflict and its continuation (Jenkins 1997: 107-123).

The centrality of identity to discourses about the current problem - although not, it must be acknowledged, to the exclusion of its other roots - is enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, where the same form of words appears in the Multi-Party and Inter-Governmental Agreements, both of which guarantee: 'parity of esteem and ... just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities' (see Ruane and Todd 1999: 199). Academic analyses often have a similar theme, with

titles like 'Conflicting Cultures in Northern Ireland' (Darby 1997) and 'Negotiating Identities' (Buckley and Kenney 1995). Here, as a further example, is a recent sociological account of the current Protestant emphasis upon 'traditional' marching routes: 'The right to march is thus understood in terms of the same two antinomies that have governed Protestant identity since plantation, for marching is an expression of Britishness (against Irishness) and Protestantism (against Catholicism)' (Brewer and Higgins 1998: 125). These comments should not be read as harsh criticism, however: I have no doubt that my own work can be read as contributing to the same emphasis.

### *Denmark and the European Union*

Lying - geographically and culturally - somewhere between Scandinavia and Germany, Denmark has, as a consequence of Nordic wars, the diplomatic mistake of siding with Napoleon (culminating in national bankruptcy in 1813), and conflicts with Prussia, contracted dramatically since the 17th century. From a northern empire encompassing Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Greenland, and German dukedoms, it has shrunk to become the small state that we know today. An absolutist monarchy until 1849, subsequent modernisation and reform proceeded on the basis of an essentially rural popular movement based on principles of co-operation, self-help and education, and the gradual (and sometimes conflictual) development of social democracy.

Denmark was not among the pioneer members of the European Community. After the Second World War, and some international awkwardness about its government's stance towards occupation by Germany, its closest economic links were across the North Sea to the UK, with the other Nordic countries, and south to Germany. Politically, the Nordic arena, the home of social democracy, was the focus for much of this period. This was the period when the 'Scandinavian model' of the welfare state, as it has been called, was developed. Contemporary Danish discourses of national or ethnic identity - of *danskhed*, or Danish-ness - are rooted in:

- \_ a historical (although it might be more accurate to say 'mythical') charter which stresses the unbroken occupation of the same soil by the Danes for millennia, and the continuity of a 1,000-year old royal house;
- \_ nineteenth-century romantic notions of the *folk*;
- \_ a view of society as internally culturally homogeneous and relatively socially equal; and
- \_ membership of, and a natural cultural - in this context the conjunction of these two opposites makes perfect sense - affinity with, a wider Scandinavian or Nordic area.

Denmark joined the European Economic Community in 1972 - not coincidentally, at the same time as the United Kingdom - and since then has gained a reputation for conscientious conformity with European policies and regulations, on the one hand, and a degree of popular scepticism - bordering on strong hostility - to continued European membership, on the other.

Constitutionally, any alterations to the conditions of Danish participation in the European project must be approved by referenda. Thus, during the 1990s there were three keenly-contested referenda: 1992 (the Maastricht Treaty), 1993 (the Edinburgh Treaty), and 1998 (the Amsterdam Treaty). The overall vote in 1992, rejecting the recommendations of the government and of most Danish politicians, was narrowly against Danish participation in the proposed Union. The following year, concessions negotiated at Edinburgh, plus a continued strong governmental steer, produced a similarly marginal vote, this time in favour of the Union. This was replicated, with a larger majority in favour, in 1998. However, to judge from 1999's European parliamentary elections, the anti-EU 'June Movement' (a reference to the month in which the 1992 referendum was held) continues to attract significant support.

In the arguments against Danish membership of a European Union advanced by politicians, interest groups, journalists, and newspaper readers' letters, fears about Danish identity are invoked again and again. As well as 'identity', other key notions

here include 'Danish-ness' (*danskhed*), 'culture' and language, and 'popular-ness' (*folkelighed*, it is nearly impossible to translate properly) as a key if poorly-specified characteristic of Danish society. In the social science literature, too, Danish scepticism and opposition to gathering European unity have also been widely interpreted - inside and outside Denmark - as having something to do with 'Danish identity'. Looking at the 1992 vote, Danes were afraid of losing 'national identity, cultural significance, solidarity' (Sørensen and Væver 1992: 14). Looking at a range of commentaries (e.g. Jørgensen 1993; Østergård 1992; Sauerberg 1992; Thomas 1995), the outline can be discerned of a body of conventional wisdom concerning Danish Euro-scepticism, as follows:

- \_ Danes have a clear, homogenous, and apparently unproblematic, model of Danish identity.
- \_ This consensual identity, and the perception of a threat to it, is what makes so many Danes sceptical about the European Union.
- \_ Danish scepticism focuses on issues to do with self-determination.
- \_ Self-determination in the Danish context means the preservation of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, and/or the defence of the Nordic welfare state model of participatory social democracy.

'Danish identity' is thus widely believed - inside and outside Denmark - to explain why a majority of the Danish electorate voted 'no' vote in the 1992 referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, and the continuing hostility to the EU of many Danes.

### **What can these cases tell us about ethnicity (or identity more generally)?**

I have no doubt that the material I have presented could be drawn upon to make a number of points. Here, however, I am simply going to concentrate on three. The first, and most important, is that *ethnicity, or identity, doesn't always explain what people do (not even when they insist that it does)*. Put in this way, the argument might seem

to necessitate going down explanatory roads that end in the epistemological morass of 'false knowledge', or somesuch. Fortunately this is not the case.

Take Denmark, for example. From my research into the 1992 referendum campaign in mid-Jutland, an area that has voted 'yes' in all the European referenda since the early 1970s, it is clear that although there is no necessary or exact agreement about the fine detail of what 'Danishness' is, there is a shared set of concerns which come up again and again in local public debates about the European question during the 1990s. These are:

- \_ fear of unchecked immigration;
- \_ attachment to 'Nordic' society and culture;
- \_ questions about 'who shall decide' within Denmark?;
- \_ populist *ressentiment* against cultural and political elites, inside and outside Denmark; and
- \_ distrust of, and hostility, towards Germany.

In terms of identity as it is generally understood, this translates into what might defensibly be called an emergent 'basic model' of Danish-ness, and Danish identity, which emphasises the following:

- \_ relationships with the rest of the Nordic world or Scandinavia which stress *similarity* and co-operation;
- \_ a relationship of *differentiation*, hostility and conflict with Germany;
- \_ relationships of relative equality and *folkelig* participation within Denmark (*similarity*);
- \_ the positive valuation of ethnic-cultural homogeneity (*similarity*); and
- \_ the positive valuation of self-determination (*differentiation* from Others).

So far, so good. The problem at this point, however, is that this model is every bit as visible and as clearly-articulated among the 'yes' voters as among the 'no' voters. It may be expressed in different terms - i.e. 'Reject the EU if you do not want to be swamped by alien immigrants from the south', versus 'We need full membership of the EU in order to control immigration effectively' - but in their rhetoric both sides deploy the same set of themes.

They have to, precisely *because* there is some sort of consensual model. It constitutes the terrain over which the battles have to be fought. However, that there is no obvious alternative to this consensual model of Danish identity shouldn't be taken to mean that everyone participates in it. All Danes certainly do not necessarily appear to subscribe to, or identify with, this model of Danish identity, or indeed with any well-articulated model of Danish identity. But lots of them do, and on both sides of the argument.

So, what does explain the voting? First, *perceived material interests* must be taken into account. Jutland, the agricultural heartland of Denmark and the region with the closest links to British and German markets, has always voted 'yes'. Anything else would, as one of my informants explained to me, be foolish. It would cost too much. However, the islands and metropolitan Copenhagen - the latter with a huge welfare-state public sector which was thought to be under pressure from EU homogenisation, a history of left-of-centre labour movement politics, and, at that time, the only significant immigrant community in Denmark - voted 'no' in 1992. Different consequences in different places produce different outcomes.

Second, *party political considerations* are also important, particularly at the margins of left and right. In 1992 this was also true with respect to the internal politics of the Social Democrats: one result of a very bitter leadership contest, just before the referendum, appears to have been a degree of departure from the party line on the part of supporters of the losing candidate. Most of the Social Democrat dissidents were, however, back on board, responding to party discipline and voting for the EU, by 1993.

Material self-interest and party politics were, however, typically discussed and justified as a defence of the model of Danish identity that I have outlined here. Identity here is a rhetorical political resource, which allowed strange bedfellows - particularly from extreme left and right - to snuggle up to each other without any apparent sense of incongruity. Thus the consensual umbrella of 'Danishness' - a symbolically constructed community, if ever I saw one (Cohen 1985) - shelters underneath it a range of constituencies, all of whom can, and indeed must, appropriate it to their own ends.

What about Northern Irish Protestants? The water here is muddied by the fact that there is only a weak sense in one can recognise a consensual or shared Northern Irish Protestant identity. Although, the Protestant-Catholic difference is the major fault line of identification, overshadowing everything else, the Protestant population is fractured by class, by the historically recent Unionist-Loyalist distinction, by denomination and sect, and by the urban-rural divide. The overarching identity of 'Protestant' is in some respects a weak one, as is the equally vulnerable attachment to being 'British'. Protestant supporters of the moderate, avowedly non-sectarian, Alliance Party, for example, are no less Protestant than the politically militant, Bible-believing supporters of Ian Paisley.

What are not weak, however, are the persistent, if relative, economic advantages which, for historical reasons, attached to being a Protestant, and the continued social and economic benefits, from the point of view of most citizens, of membership of the United Kingdom (something which is consistently recognised by a significant proportion of Catholics as well). In this sense, 'Protestant identity' is massively consequential. Furthermore, historically, the very identity itself - 'Ulster Protestant' - was at least in part forged during the pursuit of agricultural, mercantile and industrial advantage during the Plantations, and subsequently in the Industrial Revolution. It makes no sense outside of that economic history. Thus, at the very least, defence of Protestant identity necessarily involves a significant pursuit of *perceived interests*, and *self-interest*.

None of which is to say that the meaning and content of either Danish or Ulster Protestant identity are irrelevant, or that they lack power and authenticity in the experience of Danes or Ulster Protestants. I am simply arguing that they do not exist, or exercise their influence, *sui generis*. Identities do not compel those who can successfully claim them to specific courses of action. In order to understand those courses of action, we must always look at the political and economic contexts, and ask what the consequences are, and for whom (and we must remember that those are not determinate either).

The second point is that *the notion of self-determination should always be treated, analytically and politically, with a great deal of suspicion*. For many Ulster Protestants, certainly for militant Loyalists and many Unionists, self-determination actually means - or has meant for a long time, there are now signs that this is shifting, as a recognition of their new situation finally sinks in - determination of the Other. Roughly translated this means 'keeping Catholics in their place'. As I have argued elsewhere (1997: 106), this is one of the central significances, physically, spatially, and symbolically, of the 'marching season'. What is more, as the power of Protestants to keep Catholics in their place wanes, undermined by intervention from London and elsewhere, this becomes an even more significant residual activity.

The Danish case in this respect is less clear cut, but even here, among the concessions negotiated at Edinburgh in 1993 was a specifically Danish exclusion, preventing EU citizens who were not resident in Denmark from purchasing property there. Although it could not say so, this was explicitly aimed at Germans, designed to prevent them from buying holiday homes along the Danish west coast. Thus the price of Danish inclusion in the European Union was an - admittedly very minor, some might say trivial (but absolutely not trivial to many Danes) - exclusion of other EU citizens, specifically Germans, from their full rights under the Treaty of Union. Their place was to stay south of the border, and that is where they were to be kept. We are back to consequences again.

The final point is that *ethnic differences, even when combined with clear-cut differences of interests, do not necessarily lead to conflict*. I want to challenge the understandable tendency in public discourses to associate ethnic difference with conflict and violence. Clearly not too much can be made of Northern Ireland in this respect (although the question, 'Why has the violence not been worse?', is interesting, and too rarely asked). In this respect, Danish national/ethnic identity is, however, relevant. Although, like all identities, it is imagined, it is absolutely not imaginary: it is very strongly felt by many Danes. It is symbolised and embodied in a complex of flag, monarchy and state which is robust, resonant and far-reaching in Danish life. It encompasses notions of Danish-ness, notions which embody further considerations of good citizenship, co-operation, consensus, and so on.

These considerations mean that eventual membership of the European Union has been accepted by its opponents, and opposition to the EU continues to be strictly constitutional. Thus the meaning and content of identity *does* emerge here as an important background contribution to behaviour. There has been no major violence - which is not to say *no* violence, there were street disturbances in Copenhagen in 1993 - and no paramilitary formations intervening in politics. German tourists are not a target for attack or protest (apart from anything else, that would be against very many local economic interests). Nor has continued immigration - mainly refugees accepted under international treaty obligations - so far provoked the level of right-wing violence or resistance that has emerged elsewhere in Europe; that would, among other things, as Queen Margrethe has emphasised several times, be very *un-Danish*. So while perceived interests do play a part here, the meaning, content and strength of local identity is significant (in this case in inhibiting conflict).

## **Conclusions**

Perhaps the most important conclusion is that *identity and ethnicity do not in themselves make people do things*. They must always be understood in their complex, local and other, political and economic contexts. Apropos context, in

attempting to understand situations involving ethnicity *we must look at the pursuit of local material interests*. In doing this, we must also take into account the history of *why perceived interests come to be so perceived, as interests*. They are historical constructs, neither 'natural' nor inevitable (although they will often be talked about as if they were).

Next, and with respect to perceived interests, *the material and other consequences of identification need to be addressed*. Who benefits, who doesn't. What is locally valued as a benefit, and so on. In other words, in the service of which strategies are rhetorics of identification being mobilised. This does not, of course, mean that collectivities never act against their perceived interests, whether in their own eyes or in the eyes of others. Intended consequences may have unintended consequences. And, speaking of consequences, the point also has to be emphasised that the twentieth-century Danish case, if no other, indicates that *strongly held ethnic and national identities differences, even if combined with conflicting perceived interests, need not always lead to violence, or even overt conflict*. It may seem an obvious point, but it is worth making nonetheless.

Finally, although this is not strictly a conclusion, and to return to one of this discussion's starting points, perhaps the most interesting question is *why, historically, has identity become such an important rhetorical resource in politics and conflicts?* Identity and self-determination have become unassailably defensible as political goods. While it is not respectable to pursue self-interest too nakedly, self-determination expressed in terms of identity is a wholly different matter. It sometimes seems that it permits almost anything. There is an intriguing story to be told about this, even if not, for reasons of space, here.

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