

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MÁIRÉAD NIC CRAITH, *Plural Identities, Singular Narratives: The Case of Northern Ireland*. New York: Berghahn. 2002, x + 232 p. Index. \$79.95 cloth, \$27.50 paper.

Northern Ireland's regional elections in November 2003 were a political setback for the few moderate, cross-community political parties. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition lost both of its seats and The Alliance Party barely held onto its seats, while hard line political parties gained momentum and support. In light of this electoral outcome, and the fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont remains suspended, Máiréad Nic Craith's hopeful view of what can be achieved by highlighting the complexity of identities in Northern Ireland in the post-Good Friday Agreement period is more important than ever.

Nic Craith's central aim in *Plural Identities, Singular Narratives: The Case of Northern Ireland* is to explore the politics of cultural traditions in Northern Ireland because, she argues, the greatest clashes are emerging here. Using a range of sources, from academic articles to Loyalist newspapers and magazines, she analyzes various "webs of significance," including history, religion, mythology, sport and language. She documents their origin in a singular cultural narrative, and examines their subsequent reconstruction, over time, into the 'two traditions', Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Loyalist, that shape the social, political and cultural landscape of the North of Ireland. The establishment of these two traditions downplays commonalities in order to legitimize existing inequalities, overlooks diversity within traditions and marginalizes minority traditions. Nic Craith's argument that the Good Friday Agreement, as a framework document, endorses and reinforces this two traditions approach is consistent with the views of other scholars and with critics of the Agreement.

The strength of this book is its optimism about Northern Ireland's future. Nic Craith both assesses various ways to confront the two traditions model and the politics of cultural traditions, and proposes an alternative model. She finds the parity of esteem, or a 'separate but equal' strategy, that is embedded in the Good Friday Agreement unworkable for the way that it highlights tradition-based identities, and reifies group identities, group membership and, ultimately, exclusion. This strategy has already been soundly rejected, as demonstrated in regional elections, by those who interpret parity as granting special rights to minority populations. Strategies that build common identities outside of the prevailing traditions, such as

Northern Irish, European and regional identities are found to be similarly unworkable. Northern Irish and European identities have emerged only recently and are unlikely to be widely adopted. Regional identities underestimate commonalities among regions. A plausible alternative offered by Nic Craith is philosopher Nancy Fraser's "status model of recognition," based on the recognition of individual group members as full partners or peers in the larger context of social relationships with parity of participation. The major drawback with this proposal, she concedes, is that this model will be difficult to implement because it challenges existing power relations between the two traditions.

There are some limitations in her analysis. Her recommendation for a critical multicultural practice that could displace focus from the two dominant cultural traditions, promote plural identities and address the exclusion of minority cultural traditions in Northern Ireland, seems overly optimistic. Some minority traditions are so small, such as the two hundred and thirty Jewish community members, that even well intended multicultural practices are unlikely to ensure equivalent participation. Some minority groups ignored in Nic Craith's analysis, such as gay and lesbian communities in Northern Ireland, are also unlikely to gain equivalent participation through the promotion of multicultural practices. It is an oversight that plural identities, central to Nic Craith's analysis, are presented as gender neutral identities.

This book will be useful to students and scholars who are already familiar with the region and the history of the formation of Northern Ireland. The brief three and half pages that summarize this history will be insufficient for those who are not. Those who already understand something about the structure of inequalities in Northern Ireland will find her analysis of how cultural traits are used to maintain these inequalities, enlightening. However, those who are unfamiliar with structural inequalities in Northern Ireland will not find them sufficiently discussed.

Making her case for plural identities, Nic Craith envisions identities that are complex. For better or for worse, this seems to be what already exists in light of the current political uncertainties in Northern Ireland.

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