

Northern Irish unionism: a Reconsideration of the Unionists' Claim to Political Self-determination

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Fall 2001

Introduction

The notion of a right to self-determination is one that provokes significant discussion, debate and disagreement within the fields of philosophy and politics. This notion achieved considerable prominence in the twentieth century, with the collapse of the old empires and the reawakening of nationalist sentiment. The definition of self-determination is itself often as hotly contested as the specific circumstances in which any particular group may invoke such a right. The idea of self-determination is, in general terms, based around the idea that communities, possessing certain characteristics or fulfilling certain criteria, have a right to determine their own political destinies. The usual context in which such a right is invoked occurs where a community, seeing itself as a cohesive political entity, is subsumed within a state dominated by another group. The general proposition involved in the principle of self-determination is that such communities have the right to decide collectively those matters that are the primary concern of their members.^[1]

Tension within the notion of self-determination arises over disagreement about how this right should be expressed. Should it be by means of an independent state? Should existing states ensure pluralistic institutional and social structures that allow for internal diversity? Or should such diversity be quashed in the cause of integral unity or economic demand? Such questioning raises issues of identity, of nationalism and of citizenship. All

these issues are visible in – and central to – the debate on the Ulster unionists’ right to self-determination. Calls for self-determination, variously defined, have long played a part in unionist discourse. Ulster unionism is an interesting test case for the philosophy of self-determination, especially given the religious diversity of its adherents and the internal confusion between appeals to ethnoculture and assertions of a form of ‘constitutional patriotism.’ The central question is, then, do the unionists of Northern Ireland – on either of these grounds – have a right to self-determination?

Aims and Objectives

In this paper, I will seek to define the notion of self-determination and list possible characteristics of such a right. I will also critically assess the various circumstances under which that right might be exercised. This will require an analysis of the current literature on self-determination, on nationalism and on secession. This paper will assert that self-determination can be understood *apart* from notions of self-government and secession and that the right to self-determination may have been undermined through conflation with these other ideas. Central to this paper is consideration of the Margalit-Raz model, which posits a number of characteristics that groups seeking self-determination ought to show.

Through application of this model and discussion of other self-definition theories, I will engage in an analysis of Northern Irish unionism. I will describe, in brief, the origins and defining political beliefs of unionism and will examine appeals to a right to self-determination from within the unionist community. Ultimately, I will argue that elements within Northern Irish unionism have mistakenly conflated loyalty to the institutions and symbols of the British state (a type of ‘constitutional patriotism’) with a right to self-determination. This paper will, however, accept that unionism is entitled to a self-determination *of sorts*; that unionists have a right to a voice in determining the nature of their government; and, thirdly, that these rights do not include that right to secession implicit in many theories of self-determination.

What is Self-Determination?

Competing Definitions

Yael Tamir notes that the core consensus appears to be that self-determination enshrines the idea that a people, if it wills, is entitled to independence from foreign domination and may establish a sovereign state in the territory it inhabits and where it constitutes a majority.^[2] Central to Tamir's own definition is the notion that a right of self-determination is best predicated on a cultural claim. Tamir emphasises a primary right to preserve the existence of a nation as a distinct cultural entity, differing from individuals' right to govern their lives and freely participate in politics.^[3] Both the description of the self-determination debate and Tamir's perspective are distinctly nationalistic. The emphasis is on the right of a group, conscious of its ethnocultural unity, to detach itself from 'others.' The idea of a state apparatus dedicated to the protection of a particular culture is an overt part of the nationalist project. A right of self-determination on these grounds envisages a state dominated by one particular group, but does not accord a similar right to minorities within the national state, as to do so is seen as a potential threat to national cohesion.

One can distinguish between such an idea of *national* self-determination and the general liberal notion of self-determination. 'Self-determination' Michael Gallagher argues, 'implies a degree of choice for each individual, while national self-determination holds that the nation, acting as a whole, can decide its own future.'^[4] The former definition is resonant of liberal-individualist political philosophy. Liberalism's hostility to those who would devalue the individual in the name of the collective makes it wary of the very concept of a group or 'national' right. Also, if a right to self-determination is recognised on such liberal-individualist grounds, then the principle of reiteration seems logically to follow – in justifying my own group's claim to be self-determining, I also justify the corresponding claims of others.^[5] This, then, is a central divide in the debate on self-determination. In recognising a right to self-determination, which matters more – the right of a national group to viable self-determination in a nation-state, regardless of other sub-groups' claims, or the right of every group, regardless of nationalist demand, to decide its own destiny?

Grounds for Implementation of a Self-Determination Right

The traditional approach to establishing grounds for recognition of a group's right to self-determination involves a three-step process. In asserting a right to political self-determination, minorities 'have a primary right only not to be treated unjustly, a secondary right only to compensation for violation of this primary right, and finally a tertiary right to reorganise politically if their primary and secondary rights are violated.'^[6] These criteria are based on the notion that individual human rights should be the main concern of communities and posits that only when these rights are violated should communities seek secession. This breaks the nationalist link between individual well-being and independence. Many self-determination theorists emphasise that where a group's rights and culture are respected and protected by the state – even if a different ethnocultural group dominates the state – no automatic right to self-government may be accorded. Self-determination is not a universal right of secession, but rather a right to have one's rights and culture recognised by the parent state.^[7]

This last factor is particularly important in the case of Ulster's unionists. The unusual feature of the dominant unionist claim to self-determination is that it sees its self-determination right as best fulfilled in *continued* membership of the British State. The unionist community in Northern Ireland is predominantly Protestant. However, unionists are almost equally divided between Presbyterians on the one hand and Anglicans (Church of Ireland) and Methodists on the other. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), currently led by Nobel laureate David Trimble, is the larger of the unionist parties, traditionally attracting middle-class Anglicans and those who favour a more 'mainstream' unionism and a British identity. In recent decades, though, parties that take more radical or separatist stances have flourished in Northern Ireland. So-called 'loyalists' tend towards 'fundamentalist Protestantism, conditional unionism, and an Ulster identity.'^[8] This overwhelmingly Presbyterian and working-class constituency is represented by the Democratic Unionist Party of the charismatic Ian Paisley and, increasingly, by smaller, secular loyalist parties such as the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party, which speak for various paramilitary factions.

The UUP does not assert its claim to self-determination against the parent state, Great Britain, but rather asserts its right to continued membership of that state. That

membership is traced back to the plantations of Ulster in the seventeenth century, when predominantly Scottish farmers were forcibly settled on farms in northeastern Ireland. The Act of Union between Britain and Ireland in 1800 created a United Kingdom, with a central parliament at Westminster. After the partition of Ireland in 1922, the northeastern six counties of Ulster remained in the Union and, for the next fifty years, enjoyed a form of devolved self-governance. The combination of a large Protestant population and a majoritarian electoral system turned Northern Ireland into the personal fiefdom of Ulster's unionists. In the 1970s, with the growth of the Catholic population, of the civil rights movement and of sectarian violence, government powers were retracted by Westminster and direct rule under a Secretary of State introduced. Since then, several experimental forms of self-government have been attempted in Northern Ireland, most recently a power-sharing executive set up under the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

If a unionist claim to self-determination is asserted *against* something it is probably against the Irish Republic's claim to sovereignty over Ulster. This claim expressed itself in Articles 2 and 3 of the Republic's 1937 Constitution, which were only deleted following a referendum on the Belfast Agreement. The unionist example proves, to an extent, that – in contradiction of nationalist notions – self-determination can be distinguished from self-government and, particularly, from secession, since unionists require neither secession nor self-government from the Republic. Ulster's unionists are not a repressed minority within the Republic of Ireland. Since most unionists do not make a claim to an independent state, the liberal issue of reiteration appears somewhat askance. If a unionist right to self-determination (defined as having a state that enshrines one's values and protects one's identity) is recognised, however, then the reiteration principle equally recognises Northern nationalists' right to reject the British state. The calls for a more nationalistic style of self-determination come from the 'conditional unionists' within the DUP and some smaller loyalist groups. Such is the quandary at the heart of the Northern question.

The Qualifying Conditions for a Right to Self-Determination

The Margalit-Raz Approach

Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz have offered a set of six relevant characteristics to help identify groups that 'qualify' for a right to self-determination.^[9] The first requirement they posit is that the group concerned has a common character and culture that encompass many varied aspects of life. Serious candidates for self-determination will possess pervasive cultures and identities determined, at least in part, by their culture. Tamir identifies the cultural aspect of the right to self-determination as its most important constitutive element. Members of national minorities, Tamir argues, are entitled to national rights (which include a right to self-determination) because they have an interest in preserving their unique cultural essence.^[10] The rights of a group, according to this interpretation, should not refer to issues like size and viability, but rather to the extent to which the public space reflects the group's culture. If it does not or does, but unsatisfactorily, then a right to self-determination may be invoked.

Allied to this is the second point of the Margalit-Raz model, which asserts that people growing up among members of the group in question will acquire the group culture. The group thus comes to share a culture and a history, since it is through history that cultures develop and are transmitted. A cultural argument for the right to self-determination is sometimes applied to Ulster's unionists. The unionist tradition has incorporated and exalted a number of cultural features that may be pointed to as core elements of a unionist 'character.' The Protestant faith is, obviously, of deep importance, as are the traditional liberties seen as inherent in British citizenship. In recent years, some attempts to emphasise unionism's cultural distinctiveness have focussed on the potential of an Ulster-Scots language to provide evidence of unionism's cultural uniqueness. Many unionists see continued rule under the apparatus of the United Kingdom as the best means by which its 'culture' can be protected and therefore unionist 'self-determination' expresses itself in a desire to uphold that union. Others, however, see this 'culture' as the grounds upon which a claim to a right of self-determination, defined as secession, might be made.

The third and fourth characteristics listed by Margalit-Raz concern the connected ideas of recognition and identification. Group membership is, in part, a matter of recognition. 'Typically, one belongs to such a group' they argue, 'if, among other

conditions, one is recognised by other members of the group as belonging to it.'^[11] Membership thus becomes a matter of being recognised as part of a particular group by others generally and by other group members particularly. The fourth, connected point suggests that self-identification is vital in asserting a right to self-determination. Group membership, according to the Margalit-Raz model, is one of the primary clues for people in interpreting the conduct of others. This point is developed by David Miller who claims that one's group provides the background against which individual choices about how to live can be made.^[12] In this sense, one's recognition as a group member and one's self-identification in that context is vitally constitutive of self. If the structures that enable and protect this identification process are destroyed or do not exist, then the individual is left in a painful vacuum.

The logic of self-determination, then, is that it prevents the creation of such a vacuum and provides the means through which individuals can find such recognition and self-identification. Unionism has a developed sense of its group 'self,' a sense constructed from within. Similar recognition is not, however, so forthcoming from those *outside* the unionist community, especially in Northern nationalism, in the Irish Republic and in certain sections of the British Establishment. This crisis of recognition and identification has led, in part, to the 'siege mentality.' This lack of recognition has, Arthur Aughey argues, been compounded by Ulster's ambiguous political position within the union. 'The expressive formality of the constitutional people' he argues, 'depends upon conditions of political security. Of course, Unionism has rarely, if ever has such political security [and it] has always felt under siege.'^[13] If unionism does not successfully claim recognition, is it in a position to claim a right of self-definition?

Membership, according to Margalit and Raz's fifth characteristic, is a matter of belonging, not achievement. One does not have to prove oneself or excel at anything to belong and be fully integrated as a group member. This theory of non-voluntary group membership posits that one cannot *choose* to belong, but rather that belongs because of who one *is*. The theory is one that, if Margalit-Raz is accepted as the threshold for consideration of a self-determination right, cannot allow for unionist self-determination. A central fact of Ulster unionism is that unionism is *not* a group into which one is born, since

it is primarily a political philosophy which, at least theoretically, is arrived at by a process of rational decision-making. The logic of unionism allows for the possibility that those who do not identify with a Protestant or 'Orange' culture might still believe that their best political and socio-economic interests lie in continued membership of the union.

This last possibility is inherent in Aughey's assertion that unionism may be seen as a form of 'constitutional patriotism,' a rational adherence to an all-protecting constitution, that predates the theorising of Jürgen Habermas and Attracta Ingram.^[14] Aughey claims that it is not Britishness as a spiritual substance or cultural tradition that defines unionism, but rather the acknowledgement of the authority of the constitutional nexus of 'Crown-in-Parliament.'^[15] An appeal to constitutional patriotism is incompatible with an appeal to the right of self-determination on ethnocultural grounds – and this is vital to any critique of unionist demands in this area. The final characteristic of the Margalit-Raz model posits that, because the groups concerned are 'anonymous,' they develop conventional means of identification that help to quickly identify 'them' and 'us.' Unionism has certainly bedecked itself with symbolism but, this paper argues, these means of identification are not necessarily based on a right to self-definition, but rather illustrate the notions of loyalty that characterise unionism's brand of constitutional patriotism.

The Post-Colonialist Approach

Before I progress to my substantive argument, I would like to first consider the international perspective. The United Nations Organisation (UN) has attempted to lay down ground-rules for the exercise of the right to national self-determination and secession. The principle of self-determination implicit in UN practice is that only states and former colonies have a moral right of self-determination. So while the UN proclaims a broad right of self-determination, implying a right to secession, it restricts this right, quite arbitrarily, to people trying to free themselves from colonial rule.^[16] This principle is clearly inconsistent with the liberal democratic philosophies of the state and self-determination outlined earlier. UN policy accepts the reality of colonial borders, despite the fact that these borders were arbitrarily drawn, by the colonial powers, regardless of

territory, ethnic composition or even the principle of consent.

The result of this general principle, therefore, has been a philosophically confused intervention policy, exemplified by the UN's attempted crushing of Katangan secession in the 1960s, whilst simultaneously supporting the Congo's liberation from Belgian rule.^[17] The UN declarations on the right to self-determination, especially that of 1960, were intended to give independence to colonial states as monolithic units. They were not intended to recognise the rights of groups, however strong the claims to self-determination of those groups, *within* the former colonial states. The result has been that colonies are usually given independence with the old colonial borders intact. Despite substantial argument that Ireland was not, at least after 1800, a colony of Great Britain, the relevance of this principle to the Irish situation has been referred to by Michael Gallagher. If the 1960 position had pertained at the time of the Irish Revolution (which it, of course, it did not), he argues, then Ireland, as a British colony, should accordingly have been given independence as a single entity and no one portion of it should have been retained by the colonial power. International precedent, then, would not give a self-determination right to unionists.

Focussing on Northern Irish Unionism

Ulster Unionism and Appeals to Self-Determination

Arthur Aughey, in his recent dissection of Ulster unionism, lists a number of current, though contrasting definitions of unionism. These range from Miller's notion of unionism as a covenanting traditional of conditional loyalty, through MacDonald's insistence on a colonial mentality approach, to Lee's depiction of unionism as a 'Herrenvolkean democracy.'^[18] This list encapsulates the problems involved in defining Ulster unionism and points to the difficulties inherent in assessing unionist claims to self-determination. Unionism, in its current politicised form, emerged in the late nineteenth century, when a distinct Ulster party semi-detached itself from the conservative Tory Party. As its leader, Edward Carson gave the party a strong, individual identity in the

early twentieth century. Its defining moment came with the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, when devolved government was granted to the six northeastern Irish counties. The Unionist philosophical tradition, however, predates this politicisation.

Most commentators point to those English and Scottish settlers who came to Ulster from the seventeenth century onwards as the progenitors of modern unionism. With them came Protestantism, that feature perhaps most equated with unionism. Unionism, though, rarely professes itself to be an ethnocultural phenomenon, despite its links to history and religion. Unionism typically asserts itself as a type of political loyalty. The relevant concept in Unionism, Aughey argues, is not the 'nation' of Protestant Scots or English, but rather the 'citizen.'^[19] According to this interpretation, unionism is a democratic citizenship ideal, embracing different nations, religions and colours as equal citizens under the authority of the British state. This seems to place unionism outside of traditional appeals to self-determination on cultural grounds. The question is, then, whether the unionist appeal for self-determination can be based on cultural grounds (as in the first and second of the Margalit-Raz characteristics) or whether its definition as a citizenship principle means that its self-determination takes the limited form of an appeal to the state to protect its culture features.

Self-Determination as Identity based on Loyalty

Most unionist claims to self-determination do not express themselves as claims to independence on the grounds of ethnocultural peculiarity. Some attempts have been made to give unionism a more distinctive cultural edge, but unionism is, at core, a form of political identification which, at least theoretically, transcends cultural appeals. There are some grounds for recognition of unionists as a distinct 'people,' given their historical tradition, their general cultural cohesiveness and their fifty year experience of self-government but, importantly, most unionists do not see themselves as a separate people. Assessing unionist claims to self-determination on such a ground is, then, ineffectual. Independence on these grounds is, in any case, a virtual impossibility in Northern Ireland, given the ethnic cleavage within the North and the contentious issue of whether the

'indigenous people' of the territory should have rights superior to those of 'settlers.'^[20]

Despite Miller's enthusiasm for national independence rights, he accepts that the internal situation in Northern Ireland makes recognition of such a right impossible –

The Protestant majority in Northern Ireland had and still has a good case for separation from a Catholic-dominated Irish Republic, whereas the Catholic minority in the North can reasonably claim that their identity has not been respected in the Protestant State. Until there is movement on one side or the other, neither solution – separation or union – can be preferred on nationality alone.^[21]

Unionist self-determination is something different. It may be, as Aughey has posited, a form of 'constitutional patriotism.' The central ideas of unionism are not cultural particularism or political separatism, but rather loyalty and citizenship. Aughey asserts that this is a mature form of political recognition, one that subscribes to the idea that the modern British State has developed an autonomous principle of unity located in the very structures of the state.^[22] For Aughey, this is a 'mature' stance, since it theoretically transcends the divisive appeal to arbitrary notions of 'nation' or 'race' inherent in many nationalisms. Such loyalty will stand for as long as unionists see themselves reflected in the state structures and governing principles. Political reorganisation will only be contemplated when the nature of the state is threatened. Claims to independence, particularly by the DUP and more nationalistic elements within the UUP, as the expression of a unionist self-determination right have been strongest in reaction to events like the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Framework document, in which the British state appeared to abdicate some of its responsibilities towards the unionists and allowed for a change in the nature of British rule in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion: Fitting Unionism into the Discourse on Self-Determination

The conclusion of this paper is, then, that unionists *do* have a right to self-determination, but a right that cannot be conflated with self-government or independence. The important principle is that a unionist claim to the right of self-

determination is not asserted *against* an oppressive and alien parent state. Therefore recognition of a right on social justice or retribution grounds is of no relevance. Unionists actively identify with the parent British state. Similarly, a unionist right to self-determination cannot be recognised on cultural grounds, since few unionists themselves emphasise their cultural distinctiveness from Britain. One can argue, however, that unionists' cultural difference from the majority in the Irish Republic does provide grounds for assertion of a right not to be incorporated into *that* state's 'alien' culture. Unionist cultural identification is with the British state, so self-determination in this context means continued membership of that state.

Unionists fit some of the Margalit-Raz self-determination model, having both a strong sense of identity (albeit one not necessarily shaped by cultural factors) and a tradition of recognition within the British state. Unionism is not, however, something into which one is *born* – rather, it is something into which one *buys*, at least theoretically. *National* self-determination is, therefore, not really applicable to unionists, since their version of self-definition is about voluntary recognition and loyalty to a particular state. Unionists do not fit the post-colonial model either, as such a precedent would deny them self-determination altogether. Thus shorn of ethnocultural elements and ideas of 'natural community,' unionist self-determination is probably best understood as pre-Habermasian constitutional patriotism. Unionists *have* a right to self-determination, in the constitutional patriotic sense that all groups have a right to self-expression and a right to expect that their state will protect and, in some way, reflect their core values and culture. Unionism is not nationalism, but rather a political self-identification that has gathered nationalistic ethnocultural decorations over four hundred years of turbulent history.

Epilogue

The current impasse in the Northern Irish peace process, resulting from disagreements over the implementation of the Belfast Agreement, raises difficult questions about the future direction of unionism. The moderate Ulster Unionist Party has, under David Trimble, found itself grievously weakened by its decision to compromise

many long-standing tenets of unionist philosophy in order to find a peaceful accommodation with nationalism. There is a growing sense within unionism that neither continued membership of the Union with Great Britain nor union with the Republic will secure the existing rights and cultures of Ulster's Protestants. This unease has led to a marked increase in support for the hard-line Democratic Unionist Party at recent local and general elections, and reflects a similar hardening in the nationalist community, wherein support has seeped from the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party to Sinn Fein, which has strong links with republican paramilitaries. The divide in Northern Irish politics has shifted somewhat, with politicians now defined as 'Pro-' or 'Anti-Agreement' – a dichotomy that cuts across traditional political labels.

While a political solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland is still out of sight, the vacuum opened by the cessation of military hostilities has reopened the debate on unionist self-determination. If unionism is, as Aughey asserts, a mature form of constitutional patriotism then unionists should be able to give allegiance to *any* political structure that guarantees to protect their existing rights and identity. It appears, however, that many unionists do not agree; increasingly, unionist rhetoric declares that Ulster has been 'sold out' by the British government and that both the British and Irish governments, through the Belfast Agreement, are engaged in a process of 'unification by stealth.' With the removal of traditionally unionist symbols such as the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the presence of Sinn Fein politicians in the power-sharing Executive, a siege mentality seems to have returned to Ulster's unionist community. If this trend continues, it will take every last scrap of moderate unionist reserve to maintain its 'constitutional patriotic' identity within the new political framework. If the moderates fail then self-determination by Ulster's unionists may, regardless of the philosophical constraints detailed here, develop into a separatist political ideology.

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