A RESISTANCE TO BRITISH CULTURAL HEGEMONY: IRISH-LANGUAGE ACTIVISM IN WEST BELFAST*

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Abstract: In this article it is to be argued that not all Irish-language activism in Belfast is revolutionary, but that rather, to use Williams' terminology, it has both alternative and oppositional ideologies as major components. While both alternative and oppositional Irish-language activists have recovered the Irish language and are using it to challenge the legitimacy of British cultural hegemony in Northern Ireland, the difference lies in their ultimate goals.

The reaction of the British State to the challenge of Irish-language activists has varied depending on the form and perceived intent of Irish-language activist groups. While prior to 1980, attempts were made to exclude the Irish language and culture from Northern Ireland, since 1989 the State's approach has been a re-interpretation of the Irish language and culture into the Northern Ireland context. Mixed reaction to the British government's efforts has resulted in an impasse.

Résumé: Dans cet article, l'auteur discute le fait qu'à Belfast l'ensemble de l'activisme en langue irlandaise n'est pas uniquement révolutionnaire, mais plutôt que ses composantes principales contiennent des idéologies à la fois alternatives et d'opposition. Alors que les deux groupes d'activistes, ceux qui prônent l'alternative et ceux qui préfèrent l'opposition, ont récupéré la langue irlandaise et s'en servent pour contester la légitimité de l'hégémonie culturelle britannique en Irlande du nord, la différence dans les idéologies réside dans leurs buts ultimes.

La réaction de l'état britannique au défi posé par les activistes de langue irlandaise a été différente en fonction de la forme et de la perception des intentions des deux groupes d'activistes. Alors qu'avant 1980, il y avait eu des tentatives pour exclure la langue et la culture irlandaise en Irlande du nord, depuis 1989, l'approche de l'Etat a consisté en une réinterprétation de la langue et de la culture irlandaise dans le contexte de l'Irlande du nord. Des réactions mitigées au sujet des efforts fournis par le gouvernement britannique ont abouti à une impasse.

Introduction

The general focus of this article is an investigation of Irish-language activism in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and the British State's response to this symbolic challenge to its cultural hegemony. The analysis will address the way in which Belfast cultural groups, Sinn Féin and the British government perceive and construct Irish-language activism.[1] Concentrating on the nature and form of Irish-language activism and how it is perceived and responded to by those in power, and drawing on the work of Raymond Williams (1977, 1980), this ethnographic study will suggest ways in which the multiple meanings of resistance in areas where liberation struggles are being fought, can be delineated and analyzed. The study is based on 15 months of in-depth research conducted in the war-torn environment of Belfast between February 1990 and May 1991.

A. British Cultural Hegemony: The Struggle for Legitimacy

1. The Theoretical Framework: Raymond Williams' Model of Cultural Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

Elaborating on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Raymond Williams (1977, 1980) developed a theoretical model in which he analyzed the relationship between power and culture. Williams asserted that "in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective" (Williams 1980:38). This social process of selection, while being tied to "relations of dominance and subordination," is at the same time "meaningful" to both those in power and the powerless, because it represents "a selection from and interpretation of a people's history ... [which] touches aspects of the lived reality, or experience of the dominant and dominated alike" (Roseberry 1989:26-27). As Williams (1977:115-116; 1980:39) explains, some of the subordinate culture's meanings and practices are "reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture." Hence, cultural hegemony is powerful in that it does allow the "effective self-identification" of the dominated with what is always passed off as "the tradition," and "the significant past" (Williams 1980:39). However, Williams (1977:115-116) continues, other subordinate meanings and practices are neglected, excluded, dismissed or demeaned. It is the latter meanings and practices that are, Williams maintains, "effectively recoverable," and can be used by the subordinate group(s) to challenge the effective dominant culture. Therefore, cultural hegemony is also vulnerable because it leaves room for resistance or counter-hegemony to develop.

One of the sources of this resistance is found in what Williams calls "residual" culture. Residual culture is not, Williams argues, equivalent to "archaic" culture, even though it has "been effectively formed in the past," but instead consists of those subordinate meanings, practices and values that are "still active in the cultural process ... as an effective element of the present" (Wil-

liams 1977:122). When this residual culture is unsuccessfully incorporated or devalued by the effective dominant culture, the cultural hegemony of the dominant may be challenged. Clarke et al. (1976), Schweitzer (1991) and others argue that this challenge takes the form of "counter-hegemonic" resistance, in which the powerless group seeks to secure a permanent place for those meanings and practices that the effective, dominant culture has rejected, demeaned and/or ignored.

The reaction of those in power to these challenges to their cultural hegemony differs depending on the form and perceived intent. Applying Williams' theory of cultural hegemony, the form and intent of counterhegemonic resistance can be further distinguished as being either alternative or oppositional in nature. Williams (1980:42) describes the alternative resister, using the analogy of "someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it." He goes on to depict the oppositional resister as "someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light." Williams (1980:42) adds that "this is usually the difference between individual and small-group solutions to social crisis and those solutions which properly belong to political and ultimately revolutionary practice."

2. British Cultural Hegemony and Irish-Language Resistance: A Definition of Terms

Theory, Giddens (1984:ix) writes, not only aims to "illuminate, interpret and explain substantive features of human conduct" while "establishing and validating generalizations," but, more importantly for this study, it sensitizes those "conceptual schemes that order and inform processes of inquiry into social life." With this in mind, a theoretical framework will now be proposed, based primarily on Williams' model of cultural hegemony. This framework will be used in the ensuing analysis in an attempt to decipher the contradictory constructions of language activism made by the British State, versus those of the citizens of West Belfast involved in promoting and reviving the Irish language.

The "effective dominant culture" in Northern Ireland is essentially English-speaking and British. The British State, in keeping with the Gramscian definition of state, is that apparatus which, through force plus consent, implements an effective dominant culture in Northern Ireland. The term, "British government," its local arm being the Northern Ireland Office, refers to the actual people and offices that carry out the task of the State. The subordinate culture (in this study, culture as it is embodied in the Irish language) is not just oppressed but possesses neither autonomy nor its own hegemonic position within Northern Ireland. The Irish language, in this study, will be taken to be part of a "residual" not archaic culture, in that despite its 2000-year heritage, its place in the Irish-language activist community in West Belfast is not as a fossil revived from the past but as "an effective element of the present" (Williams 1977:122).

Resistance in the Irish-language activist community, it will be argued in the first section of this article, is—using Williams' concepts—both oppositional and alternative. The resistance of political Irish-language activists is embodied in a declaration by one of the leaders of the 1916 Rebellion, Pádraig Pearse: "Ireland, not free merely but Irish as well, not Irish merely but free as well." The members of Sinn Féin, Republican prisoners and others adhere to this philosophy which is oppositional in that it directly challenges British cultural hegemony. On the other hand, the resistance of cultural Irish-language activists (in the sense that Williams defines it) is mainly alternative. As one Irish-language activist I interviewed stated:

> There are many people within the movement for the restoration and the revival of the Irish language who would not necessarily have any political goals other than the revival of the Irish language. And people who would be happy, for example, to revive the Irish language within a British Commonwealth context or within an independent Northern Ireland context or whatever.

The reaction of the British State to these forms of counter-hegemonic resistance to British cultural hegemony in Northern Ireland has been varied. In the case of oppositional resistance, the State has continued in its cultural suppression of the language and its refusal of the demands of political activists, except in those instances in which the international legal apparatus has forced them to make concessions. (For example, some demands for cultural rights within Northern Irish prisons have been granted in response to legal challenges made by Republican prisoners.) The State's response to alternative resistance during the 1980s reflects what Lears (1985:574) refers to when he describes the permeability of the membrane that separates dominant and subordinate cultures. The State's position on recognizing the Irish language as a part of at least one of the "two traditions" in Northern Ireland, and its decision to make some funding available to the Irish language, appears to be a significant change from its historical position of open hostility and "planned neglect" (see Andrews 1991), in the pre-1980 period. However, I will argue in section D of this article that, rather than actually recognizing the Irish language as reflecting Irish culture, the British State is attempting to re-interpret the Irish language in the Northern Ireland context, thereby incorporating it in forms "which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture" (Williams 1980:39).

B. Sinn Féin and the Irish-Language Movement: The Irish Language as Part of the Republican Ethos

Current revolutionary ideology of the Irish Republican Movement considers the restoration of the Irish language as an integral part of the struggle for self-determination. This ideology draws its authenticity and legitimacy (see Fish-

man 1989:269-367) from the legacy of the United Irishmen (1798), Thomas Davis (1840), Pádraig Pearse (1916) and other revolutionary heroes who proclaimed that economic and political freedom could only be achieved in a culturally and linguistically distinct Ireland. Therefore, as in the past, Sinn Féin today believes that cultural liberation is inseparable from political and economic freedom. Ó Muilleoir (1986:20-21, 23), a Sinn Féin councillor at Belfast City Hall and head of the Belfast division of Sinn Féin's Cultural Department, articulates the linkage between present Republican cultural thinking and that of their forefathers:

> Republicans have always realised that to be free, the Irish people must have a culture of their own, as distinct from that of the oppressor. Pearse said "chan amháin saor ach Gaelach chomh maith, chan amháin Gaelach ach saor chomh maith," i.e., not free merely but Irish as well, not Irish merely but free as well. Mellows [the leader of the Galway Volunteers in 1916] spoke of the fight to maintain our Irishness as the intellectual part of the Irish revolution when he said: "The revolution going on in Ireland, has a threefold aspect, it is intellectual, it is political, it is economic. Of the intellectual aspect it is sufficient to say that Ireland to be free, must be Irish, must be free from the domination of alien thought as from alien armies."
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> Sinn Féin accepts both the above statements and understands the necessity for urgent action to redress the neglect of culture and defeat cultural oppression. We realise we are oppressed not only economically and physically but that the oppressor also exercises a cultural and social control over our people. It is only natural then that resistance to the oppressor must take place on all these fronts.
>
> We must replace the ideology of the oppressor with a republican ideology rooted in our own history and experiences. . . .
>
> Imperialism has been described as a situation where, "The centre of gravity of a nation, i.e., its crucial decision making, is no longer in that nation but in some other." It is clear that while the cultural domination of Ireland continues, our "centre of gravity" will not be in our own country.
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> It is essential therefore that our struggle against economic and political oppression is united with cultural resistance.

Cultural resistance in Republican ideology is based on the belief that to be a sovereign people the Irish must first regain control of their own destiny. The Irish language is seen as an essential element in restoring to the demoralized Nationalist population a sense of this control, and as a step toward re-establishing their self-esteem and self-worth as a people. The belief that the success of the liberation struggle lies in building a stable, self-reliant people is put into practice by encouraging members of the Nationalist community to speak out and demand their civil and human rights. A Sinn Féin spokesperson explained:

> From our point of view, we don't administer to the community. We don't simply provide a service to the community. We don't simply look after the needs of the community. That would be totally counter-productive. We see our role as being a vehicle through which community grievances can be heard. For ex-

ample, if there is a problem with an individual housing estate, that has to be
taken up with the Housing Authority, it's not Sinn Féin's role to go on behalf of
the residents to raise that issue. It is Sinn Féin's role to go with the residents to
raise the issue . . . if you like it is almost psychological, like training someone to
be involved in athletics. If they can look after and stand up for their own rights
on any given issue, they will stand up for themselves on every given issue. . . .

    We are not the voice of the people, we are a voice with the people. And that's
the only way Sinn Féin can go forward.

By assuming a supportive role in the community, Sinn Féin has encouraged
the Nationalist people to fight for their rights, to challenge the authorities di-
rectly. It is this philosophy that lies at the root of how Sinn Féin perceives its
role in the current Irish-language revival.

The significant role the Irish language played during the prison protest pe-
riod, which was begun in 1976 as a resistance to the British State's attempt to
criminalize the struggle of the Republican movement (and culminated in the
1981 hunger strike, which resulted in 10 deaths by starvation), did not go un-
noticed by Sinn Féin. As Andrews (1991:100) commented:

The fact that Irish had helped to sustain republican prisoners through their worst
experiences during the years of protest, including hunger strikes, had brought
SF [Sinn Féin] to the realisation that the language could be equally meaningful
outside the prisons as a distinctive expression of cultural identity and as a form
of cultural resistance.

After the hunger strike ended, rather than public support diminishing for the
Republican struggle, a significant portion of the Catholic electorate began
casting their votes for Sinn Féin candidates in local assembly and Westminster
elections (see O'Malley 1990:211-213). What had, prior to the hunger strikes,
primarily been an armed struggle, was now a struggle that had been given a
strong political voice.

Even before the end of the hunger strike, Sinn Féin was developing a new
political platform that would better reflect its elevated political status. Since
the platform was to include a dynamic cultural program, the Sinn Féin Cul-
tural Department was established in 1982.

Sinn Féin's Cultural Department has devoted much of its energy to the task
of Gaelicizing the Republican Movement's own membership and to cam-
paigning for the cultural and language rights of Republican prisoners. Addi-
tionally, the Sinn Féin Cultural Department had, by the mid-1980s, involved
itself in setting up almost 30 Irish classes (20 in Belfast alone). Many of these
classes were taught by Irish teachers who, while not entirely in agreement with
Sinn Féin's policy, were "broadly sympathetic" toward Sinn Féin's position
on culture (Ó hAdhmaill 1985:7). Sinn Féin's President, Gerry Adams, called
on Republicans of the 1980s to increase their involvement in the Irish lan-
guage, even if this involvement only entailed the incorporation of a few simple

Irish words and phrases into daily speech: "This [involvement] may take such small forms as deciding never again to say 'cheerio' and always say 'slán,' or it may mean a total involvement in supporting the demands of the language struggle and the demands of the people of the Gaeltachtaí by working actively alongside them" (Adams 1986:147). Moreover, Adams called on Republicans to concentrate on demanding that Irish programming be included in public broadcasting—both radio and television—and he called on all elected Sinn Féin representatives to use their

> ... elected positions in both the 26 and 6 counties to promote Irish culture in such areas as the erection of street signs in Irish, grant aid for feiseanna [festivals], bilingual council stationery and signs, the use of Irish at formal council occasions, and an emphasis on Irish music and dances at council-sponsored social events. (Adams 1986:147)

Individual Irish-speaking Sinn Féin members are encouraged to pursue their cultural interests by joining and working with Irish-language groups and associations, groups which in Williams' definition would be called alternative, but Sinn Féin as an organization shies away from taking a direct, controlling leadership role in any of these groups. By distancing itself from community action groups in general, including alternative Irish-language activist groups, Sinn Féin assumes a supportive role, encouraging the Nationalist population, either individually or in groups, to speak up for themselves and make their demands for civil, human and cultural rights, to which they are legitimately entitled, heard by the State. Sinn Féin's stance of supporting and encouraging individual activists and single issue community groups to act on their own behalf, has become a powerful weapon against the State. This approach has proved to be far more effective than assuming the leadership of a group directly, which is what the State accuses Sinn Féin of doing.

C. Alternative Irish-Language Activism in Belfast

Clearly, the history of British State policy toward the Irish language prior to 1980 was one of suspicion, if not open hostility. Eradication of the language seems to have been a constant theme underlying this policy, dating back to the days of the *Statutes of Kilkenny*, 1367. As a local journalist wrote:

> It is hard to recall an age when the Irish language was not an issue. The right to speak it; the right to use it as a medium of education for children; the right to have the Irish form of a name on State documentation. It would seem that the language has always ... been linked in the public perception to a measure of disrespect for establishment politics. (Macauley 1990:11)

When the Northern Ireland State was formed in 1922, the dominance of British culture, which the Unionist-controlled Parliament wished to establish, was not secure. The Irish Free State was embroiled in a civil war over the issue

of partition, and, although the pro-treaty forces eventually won out, the Union-
ist population in the North did not trust the South to stay out of its affairs. Thus
the new Northern Ireland State was in no mood to permit any religious, politi-
cal or cultural concessions to its minority Catholic population, deemed by the
State to be potentially subversive (see Andrews 1991; Rowthorn and Wayne
1988:26). This distrust is reflected in a series of Education Acts and amend-
ments made by the new Northern Ireland government, beginning in 1923,
which eliminated most of the gains that had been made by the Gaelic League[2]
prior to partition, and reduced the status of Irish in the schools to an optional,
foreign-language subject.

Within the alternative Irish-language activist community in this pre-1980
period, open resistance to government policy toward the Irish language was at
a low ebb. One local Irish-language activist described the dispirited attitude of
these times by saying that "up until 1981-82 the Irish language revivalist
organizations had made no demands on the State. They shrugged their shoul-
ders and accepted that the State would not support what they were doing."

Despite the lack of serious public challenge to the government's hegemony
over the Irish-language revivalist community, there were some significant ac-
tions by alternative Irish-language activists prior to 1980. A number of Irish-
language groups in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the most prominent being
Comhaltas Uladh[3] and the Cluain Ard[4] did set up Irish classes within the
"safety of Nationalist areas," to compensate for the dearth of Irish-language
instruction in the educational system. These groups also sponsored many
Irish-language activities and events. In the 1960s a group of young people
who frequented the Cluain Ard, and who were just settling down after mar-
riage, decided to create an Irish-speaking community on Shaws Road in West
Belfast. This dream of a Gaeltacht[5] in West Belfast came to fruition in 1971
with the building of Northern Ireland's first Irish-medium primary school.

As the 1970s progressed, the Irish-language activist community became
bolder and began to make demands on the State to support the Shaws Road
Irish-medium primary school. However, until the early 1980s, these demands
were not backed up by a large-scale campaign, did not unduly challenge the
cultural hegemony of the State and were thus ignored. While these activities
by alternative Irish-language activists in the pre-1980 period did perpetuate
the Irish language and culture, their membership was not large, and the groups
made no organized demands on the State to support their endeavours. Thus,
the British State was content to coexist with language activists who presented
neither a burden to its coffers nor a challenge to its cultural hegemony in
Northern Ireland.

During the years 1976 to 1981, the prison protests and the corresponding
intensification of violence brought a new wave of disruption to the lives of the
citizens of West Belfast. Geertz (1973a:104) writes that, in the face of chaos,

individuals, as well as groups, require a cultural system more than ever. They require a system of symbols to provide them with, "not only . . . [the] ability to comprehend the world, but also, [in] comprehending it . . . [to give] a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it" (Geertz 1973a:104). During this period, for many residents of West Belfast, the Irish language had become the symbol, the "vehicle for a conception," through which they could, "render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful" (Geertz 1973b:208n, 220).[6]

During the blanket and dirty protests and the ensuing hunger strikes Republican prisoners endured Draconian conditions, yet they nonetheless taught themselves to become fluent Irish speakers. Television images, newspaper articles and personal stories of these events effected a permanent change in the form taken by Irish-Language activism in Belfast.[7] Whereas prior to 1980, alternative Irish-language activists had made no demands on the State, instead choosing to satisfy their cultural needs within the safe confines of the Nationalist community, after 1980, the State was faced with both a resurgence of oppositional Irish-language activism, in the prisons and from the politically victorious Sinn Féin, as well as much more vocal and organized alternative Irish-language activism which now demanded not only that the State recognize Irish-language rights but that it support and fund the Irish language.

The campaigns for Irish-language rights of the early 1980s employed some of the types of political protest developed by Sinn Féin, those of lobbying and agitation, but they also drew on the well-established Welsh model of civil disobedience (see Khleif 1979, 1985). As these alternative Irish-language activists in the post-1980 period left the confines of the Nationalist areas they began to confront British cultural hegemony in Northern Ireland directly, demanding that Irish-language rights be recognized by the State. Initial campaigns focussed on attempting to de-stigmatize the language and as such were aimed at areas in which cultural discrimination was most blatant, specifically, the 1949 law that prohibited the erection of Irish-language street signs and the media.

Concessions gained[8] in early 1980 campaigns by Irish-language activists paled in comparison with those attained by similar groups in Wales. Yet, for Irish-language activists the gains represented significant progress over the days when the Irish language had been totally ignored by the British State. Thus, the Irish-language movement had been infused with new hope. Alternative Irish-language activists began to devise ways that would channel the momentum of the Irish revival occurring in Belfast into the building of a permanent Irish-language infrastructure, the element they felt had been lacking in all previous language revivals, and one which had doomed them to failure. This infrastructure was to be founded on two key elements: the establishment of a

daily Irish-language newspaper;[9] and the development of an Irish-language education system.[10] The cultivation of a stable infrastructure would, alternative Irish-language activists reasoned, help ensure that future generations of Northern Irish Nationalists would live in a bilingual society. As one Irish-language activist put it:

> We have our own agenda [and that is] getting the infrastructure of the Irish language in place first, then we'll be controversial. Minority languages everywhere require government money. The thing is to get the money and work around the rules to survive. Not only does government money give you an amount of legitimacy but it gives you a certain security that you are going to be able to continue with the work in the future. It starts people thinking about institutions and infrastructure rather than just learning the language. The next big thing is to get an Irish-medium secondary school. Then it will continue on its own momentum. When they come out of secondary school they will have spent most of their formative years in the Irish language and they will be ready to start their own family. [When this happens] the whole focus of the Irish language movement will have to change. There is no use in investing all that time, energy and money into teaching and educating them through Irish if they are going to take the first plane to America or Australia or England or Dublin. You have to keep them here. So you have to create the overall environment that will keep them here. Not just jobs, but everything, houses, jobs, media, everything.

D. The State's Response to Alternative Irish-Language Activism

A State has two choices, according to Williams' model, when the "effective dominant culture" is challenged by "meanings and practices" that have been "recovered" and made "an effective element of the present" by the subordinate culture. One of these choices is to "neglect or exclude" the subordinate culture, and the second is to find some way to incorporate it into the effective dominant culture so as to neutralize its hegemonic challenge. For most of the existence of Northern Ireland, the British State chose to neglect or exclude the Irish language. However, in the mid-1980s, the British State adopted a new strategy toward Irish language and culture. In this new approach, the subordinate Irish culture and language was to receive some State funding. By the late 1980s this strategy had expanded to include a policy of incorporation in which the Irish language and culture would not be considered part of the "Southern tradition," hence foreign and subversive, but as part of one of the cultural traditions of Northern Ireland. Having thus recognized that there were "two traditions" in Northern Ireland, the British State attempted to devise ways that would make the barrier that separates these two cultures "permeable" enough so that they would be able to exist together peacefully.

Whenever the State elects to make available resources necessary for the subordinate culture to propagate its own meanings and practices, motives are suspect, often legitimately so.[11] After the hunger strike the British State chose

to make money available for the promotion and development of the Irish language. At first, the government was very leery about funding anything to do with the Irish language. As one Irish-language activist, who headed an Irish-language group seeking government funding, told me, "It was as if you had an Irish dictionary in one hand and an AK-47 in the other."

In an attempt to overcome the alienation and suspicion between the State and the Irish-language activist community, and to begin the process of incorporating the Irish language into the dominant culture, a Trust was established in September 1989 (becoming operational in February 1990). The purpose of the Trust was to channel government funds into Irish-language projects that were considered to be "safe." Hence, the ULTACH Trust was born, its name being an acronym for "Ulster Language, Traditions and Cultural Heritage" (the name also means "Ulster" in the Irish language).

As its title suggests, ULTACH Trust was established to promote the contribution that "the Irish language makes to Northern Ireland's cultural heritage," by providing funds for "Irish language projects which enhance awareness and appreciation of the language, in the context of promoting greater mutual understanding across the whole [Northern Ireland] community" (NIO spokesperson, quoted in McAdam 1990:6). Hence, the British State's recognition of the Irish language as part of "Northern Ireland's cultural heritage" appears to be a significant departure from its previous view of the language as being foreign and subversive.

The education system was also to become a target of the government's new strategy. In the 1990 *Education Reform Order*, two courses were designed for inclusion in all Northern Ireland schools with the aim of "improving understanding and tolerance between the communities in Northern Ireland" (NIO 1991). These two courses, "Cultural Heritage" and "Education for Mutual Understanding," are thus described by the Northern Ireland Office (1991):

> Two of the compulsory cross-curriculum themes, regarded as essential and to be studied by pupils in the full range from 4-16, are Cultural Heritage, and Education for Mutual Understanding. The former is designed to enable pupils to understand and evaluate both the common experience of their cultural heritage and its distinctive aspects. . . . Education for Mutual Understanding is meant to teach them self-respect and to understand the other person's point of view; to appreciate how people depend on one another within society; to know about and understand what is shared, as well as what is different in their cultural traditions, and to appreciate the benefits of resolving conflict by non-violent means.

The apparent purpose of these new courses was twofold. In an attempt to neutralize the challenge being made by alternative Irish-language activists to British cultural hegemony, the courses were designed to aid in the "process of incorporation" of the subordinate Irish culture into the Northern Ireland context. In addition, they were intended to act as a resolution mechanism, encour-

aging an attitude change as a way of ending what the British State perceived as a war between "two religious communities" (see Crozier 1989, 1990; Smyth 1989).

1. Irish Language in the Northern Ireland Context: A Hegemonic Nightmare

While the alternative Irish-language activist community was becoming more united in its campaign for official recognition of the Irish language, British cultural hegemony in Northern Ireland was experiencing severe fragmentation. This was expressed in the internal differences which developed within the Protestant majority over the incorporation of the subordinate Irish culture and language into Northern Ireland's dominant culture.

In a sociological survey conducted in 1968 among Northern Ireland's Protestants, it was found that 20 percent thought of themselves as Irish; 39 percent considered themselves British; and 32 percent deemed themselves "Ulsterites" (Fitzgerald 1988:198). While the last 25 years of war have perhaps changed the percentages, these three distinct identities can be discerned in the Belfast Protestant community of today.

There is still a portion of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland which proclaims itself to be Irish and, as do alternative Irish-language activists, views both the Irish language and culture as part of its Irish heritage. For example, when a Belfast Presbyterian was asked why Protestants would consider learning the Irish language, he replied:

> I think there are two strands. The first strand would say that it is simply a love of language. There wouldn't be any particular sense of identity coming through. The other one [strand] that seems to be more authentic, is that Protestants who wanted to learn the Irish language were making a statement that in fact they were not Unionist. That would be a much stronger irony in the sense that it is a double bind that the government sponsored ULTACH Trust will find itself in. That those Protestants who are looking to learn the Irish language and take it on board will have become nationalist in some sense, at least there will be some emerging sense of nationalism. That seems to me the most authentic reason.

When I spoke with a Protestant student taking the six-week intensive course offered by Glór na nGael at Ulster People's College, his reasons for learning Irish confirmed that he was part of the second "strand" mentioned above. While he had been born and raised in Shankill, a strongly Loyalist area of West Belfast, the student no longer considered himself British. He told me that he, like many he knew who had been Unionists at one time, no longer supported the party, and blamed the Unionist inflexibility for causing the Troubles. He said that if the Unionists had been willing to enter into some form of power-sharing agreement, the armed struggle would not have occurred. He continued, explaining that he now felt that his identity was Irish and that eventually, "a long way in the future," he did believe that there would be "some

sort of unification of Ireland." His rejection of Unionism had led him to pursue a degree in Irish studies at Queen's University. Irish, he told me was "part of the other tradition," and as such was not offered in the State schools, nor was it included in the courses he studied at Queen's to get his degree. The program he had taken had concentrated on economics and politics, rather than language and culture. He had decided to take the intensive course in Irish at Ulster People's College, offered by the West Belfast Irish-language group, Glór na nGael, because he felt that that language was part of his culture. Like many alternative Irish-language activists, these Protestants, who identify themselves as Irish, expressed cautious, albeit positive support for the British State's new initiatives.

Counter to this wary support is an outright rejection of any attempt to recognize the Irish language and culture as a tradition of Northern Ireland. This view is held by Protestants of the group who consider themselves as British, and members of this group continue to regard Irish culture as foreign and subversive. One of the more explicit vocalizations of this view occurred in 1987, when a newly elected Sinn Féin councillor attempted to challenge a ban on use of the Irish language, which was in effect at Belfast City Council meetings. Sammy Wilson, an outspoken Democratic Unionist[12] councillor, immediately called for a vote. With echoes of Wilson's comment, "There'll be no leprechaun language here," the vote was carried 20 to 13, not only to continue the Council's unilingual policy, but to bar the challenging councillor from the rest of the meeting (Andersonstown News 1987:15). This incident is representative of the strong negative feelings held by some members of the Protestant community toward the "threat" of Irish. Pritchard (1990:32) has described how similar negative emotions have resulted in threats of violence toward teachers attempting to introduce tolerance toward a cultural tradition other than the British via the two prescribed courses: "Cultural Heritage" and "Education for Mutual Understanding."

Among Protestant members of the Unionist persuasion, the rejection of the Irish language is not universal. In fact some Unionists, while considering themselves politically British, do identify culturally with Ulster. The work of Adamson (1986, 1987) has enabled these people to accept Ulster Irish (a different dialect of Irish than Munster Irish or Galway Irish), as part of their Ulster-Scot identity.

Ian Adamson (1986, 1987), an Irish speaker, a Belfast doctor, an Ulster Unionist[13] councillor on Belfast City Council and a Trustee of the ULTACH Trust, argues that a people closely related to the Scottish Picts, known as the Cruthin, formed a pre-Gaelic population in an area of northeast Ulster approximating that of present-day Northern Ireland. According to Adamson's theory, the Cruthin were driven by the Gaels east to what is now England and north to Scotland, finally settling in the Scottish lowlands, about the seventh century

A.D. Adamson argues that the settlers who were "planted" in Ulster in the 17th century by Elizabeth I, most of whom were lowland Scots, were descendants of the same Cruthin driven out of Ulster a thousand years before by the Gaels. Therefore, the planters were actually the aboriginal or indigenous population of Ulster, returning to reclaim their ancestral home.

The appeal of Adamson's argument for Ulster Protestants, Buckley (1989: 194) claims, is as follows:

> In short, the Cruthin argument addresses directly the rhetorical challenge of Irish nationalist history. It makes the claim that Ulster Protestants, and particularly those who emigrated from Scotland, have at least as much right to live in Ireland as do Irish Catholics. Second, it takes from the nationalist heritage many of its most treasured traits by arguing their Cruthinic rather than Gaelic origins. And finally, the historical linchpin of Irish nationalism, the Plantation of Ireland, is transformed from a conquest by an oppressive people into a reconquest by a people who had formerly been forcefully expelled.

Unlike the majority of Protestants (the 39% from the 1968 survey who consider themselves British), those who accept Adamson's reinterpretation of Ulster history would also accept the incorporation of the Irish language and culture, providing it were presented as being a phenomenon unique to Ulster. This interpretation would not be acceptable to most alternative Irish-language activists, nor to the group of Unionists who take a strong stance in preventing anything Irish from tainting the British identity in Northern Ireland.

This diversity of reaction toward the Irish language by the ruling Protestant majority in Northern Ireland thus reveals that they, like the "Piedmont bourgeoisie" (Gramsci 1971), do not form a homogeneous dominant group, and the attempt by the British State to use the schools and other institutions as "forces of incorporation" has seriously ruptured their fragile unity. As a result of strong oppositional and alternative Irish-language resistance, the British government is in a position in which it can not exclude the Irish language and culture in Northern Ireland. In addition, internal differences of the dominant groups will not allow the neutralization of this Irish-language resistance by a process of incorporation. Hence, what has developed is an impasse, serving to repress any move to alter conditions interpreted by the majority of Northern Ireland citizens as culturally stifling.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have argued that not all Irish-language activism is motivated by revolutionary ideology. To use Williams' terminology, both alternative and oppositional ideologies are major components of the Irish-language struggle and, as he points out, the demarcation between alternative and oppositional resistance is hazy. This haziness is also evident in the methods used by the opposing groups to achieve their aims, but I have argued that

the two forms of resistance do differ in their adherents' visions of a future for Northern Ireland. Alternative Irish-language activists are seeking a permanent space for the Irish language and culture in Northern Ireland regardless of its future political status. Oppositional Irish-language activists, have incorporated the Irish language into the revolutionary struggle for a "free and Irish," 32-county Republic of Ireland. While the ideology of these two forms of Irish-language activism differs, it could be argued that the strategy alternative Irish-language activists utilize to reach their goals is potentially beneficial to oppositional Irish-language activists. Theoretically, an ethnic minority group that is self-aware of its uniqueness and aware that it is culturally and linguistically different from the effective dominant culture can be defined as a nation group (Connor 1978). Through efforts to unify and mobilize the people of West Belfast to challenge the effective dominant culture that is suppressing "our language" and "our culture" in favour of "their language" and "their culture," alternative Irish-language activists are creating a nation group. This nation group, in which Sinn Féin claims membership, is challenging the legitimacy of a common enemy, the British State, demanding it give recognition and support to the rights of Irish speakers. Therefore, alternative Irish-language activists, inasmuch as they are mobilizing an ethnic group that is necessary to achieve their own goal of creating a permanent Irish-language infrastructure, are also creating a nation group which can be a pool of both latent and actual support for the goals of Sinn Féin. In addition, the cross-cultural efforts of alternative Irish-language activists are of potential benefit to Sinn Féin because they may serve to re-spark Protestant nationalism, thus making Irish-speaking Protestants more receptive to a united Ireland.

It was also argued that, since Sinn Féin's only involvement with single-issue groups, whose demands are refused by the State, constitutes an outsider's support and encouragement, then by all appearances the State discriminates against these minority groups by denying them the civil and human rights to which they are democratically entitled. Because Sinn Féin does not assume an active role in these groups, the government's accusations of "Sinn Féin front" or "paramilitary link" are difficult if not impossible to substantiate, despite being directed toward the portion of the minority population the State wishes to win over. Therefore, Sinn Féin's "passive" method of oppositional activism not only encourages the development of a more ethnically aware Nationalist population that can be mobilized in support of its overall objective, it also exposes the vulnerability and weakens the stance of the effective dominant culture.

In response to these two forms of resistance, the British State first tried to exclude or dismiss the Irish language as inferior, dead and having no place in 20th-century Europe or modern British culture. Finding that it could not ostracize the Irish language from Northern Ireland, the State then attempted to as-

sert the legitimacy of its effective dominant culture by using a different approach. By the providing of funding to what it deemed "safe" Irish-language groups, and by the re-interpretation of the Irish language into a Northern Ireland context, the State hoped to maintain control of—and to placate—increasingly vocal members of the alternative Irish-language community. The State's conditional funding and its recognition of Irish as a traditional language of Northern Ireland, which were seen as a positive move by many alternative Irish-language activists, caused a division within the ranks of the dominant Unionist/Loyalist population. Thus, opposition from sufficiently powerful sources placed the success of the State's new venture in serious peril. The exercise of hegemonic control over a group united by common culture and language is therefore fraught with constant challenges. The situation I have described in Northern Ireland illustrates the potential vulnerability of British cultural hegemony when challenged by alternative and oppositional forms of Irish-language resistance, and emphasizes the importance to the State of the constant review and adjustment of methods of control in order to ensure the continuation of cultural hegemony.

Notes

  1. The Actors: both the dominant and the subordinate groups in Northern Ireland are neither politically nor religiously homogeneous. The Northern Ireland population of approximately 1.5 million (60% Protestant and 40% Catholic) is broadly labelled as either Unionist/Loyalist or Nationalist/Republican.

     Unionists identify themselves culturally and politically as British. They are mostly monarchists and wish Northern Ireland to remain as part of the United Kingdom. Religiously, Unionists are predominantly, but not exclusively, Protestant.

     Loyalists represent an extreme Unionist view, and believe that there should be no Irish influence, cultural or political, in Northern Ireland. A portion of the Loyalist population is actively involved in one of two major Loyalist paramilitary groups, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), or the Ulster Defense Association (UDA).

     Nationalists and Republicans identify themselves as culturally and politically Irish, and envision an eventual reunification of Ireland as a necessary element in the solution to the present conflict. The basic difference between them is over the means by which unification should be achieved. These groups are predominantly but not exclusively Catholic.

     The Republican Movement consists of a political base, Sinn Féin, with its military component, the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

     Irish-language speakers and activists make up a growing part, but still a minority, of both the Republican and Nationalist population in Belfast. It is estimated, from the 1991 census, that there were 30 000 people (10%), of Belfast's 300 000 population who knew some Irish—which is up from 7900 (2.3%), in the 1911 census (the date of the previous census in which questions about the Irish language in Northern Ireland were asked).
  2. The Gaelic League or Conradh na Gaeilge was formed in 1893. Its goals were to restore Irish as the vernacular in Ireland and to create an Irish literature. By 1922, the Gaelic League had

had a few hard-won successes but they fell far short of its objectives. For further information on the Gaelic League, see Ó Feará íl, 1975.

3. Comhaltus Uladh: The Ulster Gaelic League.

4. The Cumann Chluain Ard is an Irish-speaking social club, established in 1936 in West Belfast.

5. Gaeltacht: an Irish-speaking district.

6. Ó hAdhmaill (1990:239) found that 40 percent of the 234 Irish learners surveyed in 1985 had first decided to learn the language sometime between 1982 and 1984. When provided with a list of possible reasons for their decision to learn the language, 86 percent selected "to strengthen my Irish identity" (Ó hAdhmaill 1990:239).

7. A researcher from the University of Ulster undertook a survey in 1985 aimed at measuring the extent of the Gaelic revival in West Belfast in the 1980s, and the reasons for the apparent intensified interest in the Irish language there. He concluded that: "Not only has there been an increase in interest in Irish during the 1980s in West Belfast, but much of the reason for the increase appears to be due to political conditions. Although people obviously vary in their reasons for learning Irish, a large portion of the growth in interest appears to stem from the H-block protest and ultimately the hunger strikes of 1981" (Ó hAdhmaill 1985:38).

On March 1, 1976, a so-called "Normalization Policy" was implemented by the British government in Northern Ireland. As part of this policy, any person charged with a "scheduled offence" (that is an offence relating to the political situation) would, in the future, be classified as an ordinary criminal. This in effect rescinded the special category status and all the privileges and rights, including cultural rights, afforded prisoners charged with similar offences prior to March 1, 1976. In reaction to this policy change, the prisoners refused to wear the prison uniform, thus rejecting this perceived "badge of criminalization." This marked the beginning of the blanket protest (see Coogan 1980) which progressed to the "dirty protest," when prisoners, prevented from slopping out their waste buckets, decorated cell walls with the sordid contents. These actions culminated in 1981 with a hunger strike, which resulted in ten men actually starving themselves to death (see Adams 1986; O'Malley 1990).

8. Hard-won successes of the various campaigns in the early 1980s include: Belfast Community Radio (BCR), operational in 1990, having, as part of its mandate, agreed to broadcast a one-hour bilingual program weekdays between 10:30 and 11:30 p.m. The BBC is still producing fewer than four hours of Irish-language programming on Radio Ulster each week. The phenomenon of the Irish street sign has been an ubiquitous part of city life since 1982. Another campaign by Irish-language activists has resulted in many of the shops, businesses, doctors' and solicitors' offices, as well as community centres, especially in West Belfast, erecting Irish-language signs (see Andersonstown News 1991:9).

9. In 1984, with the the help of some government funding, a decision was made to initiate daily publication of the newspaper, *Preas an Phobail* (established in 1981), and the first daily paper of its kind in any Celtic country was born. This paper was renamed *Lá*, which is Irish for "day," and launched on August 13, 1984. The publication was to become a "cultural movement" in itself, giving "birth to the north's only Irish bookshop, An Ceathrú Póilí, to Belfast's most successful Irish drama company, Aisteoirí Aon Dráma and to a (hibernating) radio station, Raidió Feirste" (Ó Muirí 1991:9).

10. The Bunscoil, Northern Ireland's first Irish-medium primary school, was established in 1971 As of 1991, there were in Belfast alone, nine Irish-medium play groups, a second Irish-medium primary school (est. 1987) and an Irish-medium secondary school (est. 1991). The only school receiving funding in 1991 was the Bunscoil, which had first received it in 1984. Total enrolment in all of these Belfast Irish-medium schools in 1991 was close to 1000 students.

11. This was discovered by the independent Irish-language group, Glór na nGael (West Belfast Committee) in 1990, when, after receiving government funding for five years, it had all money withdrawn and was accused of "improving the standing and furthering the aims of a

paramilitary organisation, whether directly or indirectly" (House of Commons, Written Answers, 1985). After an 18-month battle to clear its name, funding was restored to Glór na nGael, however not before the perceived intent of the government's action was received: if the members of the Irish-language community did not isolate and marginalize Sinn Féin, and stop publicly embarrassing the government over its Irish-language policy, they would find themselves without any sources of financial assistance.
12. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was established in 1971 by the Reverend Ian Paisley, the founder of the Free Presbyterian Church, and by the then-MP and former UUP member, Desmond Boal.
13. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) is the largest political party, and the one that provided government in the North from the formation of the Northern Ireland State in 1922 until direct rule in 1972.

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