

## **Episteme, nation-builders, and national identity: The re-construction of Irishness\***

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**Abstract.** There are many disagreements among the three main paradigms of the nationalism literature. Yet most modernists, ethno-symbolists and constructivists agree that elites play a key role in inventing and re-inventing nations. Notwithstanding this insight, none of these schools of thought has generated a compelling answer to the question of why the inventors of a certain nation build, out of an infinite number of possibilities, a particular nationness. Analysing the case of 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish identity, this paper seeks to shed light on this question by inquiring into the process through which elites come to imagine the nation that they seek to build. I argue that epistemic understandings of the world delineate which kinds of national identity are conceivable for, and plausible to, nation-building elites.

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## Introduction

The literature on nations and nationalism may be divided into three main schools of thought: modernism, ethno-symbolism and social constructivism. While there are many disagreements among these contending approaches, there is also an important consensus. Most scholars agree that structural factors, as important as they may be, do not determine the origins and the evolution of a nation. Agency plays an important role. Most accounts emphasise the role of elites. Embedded in a material and/or ideational context, elites invent and re-invent nations.

Despite the prominence of elites in the literature, however, we know very little about what makes elites seek to invent a particular nationness. At a time when rational choice theory seeks to include ideational factors into its framework, many modernist theories continue to adhere to an instrumentalist logic of action that leaves no room for ideas. In this view, elites invent the nation the way they do in order to maximise their material interests. These interests are exogenously defined, usually as maintaining or accumulating wealth and power. Ethno-symbolists criticise this instrumentalist logic and argue that agency is constrained by a pre-existing *ethnie*. The focus of ethno-symbolism, however, is on the *ethnie* and not on agency. Although elites matter in this approach, their decision-making remains under-theorised. Constructivists emphasise that nations are socially constructed and that elites are the principal agents of this process. Yet the approach gives contradictory clues as to why nation-builders seek to shape processes of national identity formation in certain ways. Whereas some authors employ an instrumentalist framework, others emphasise ideational factors such as identity and norms.

This article does not pretend to solve the problem of agency in nation-building processes. The purpose of this study is to improve our understanding of the issue by investigating into a neglected aspect of the problem: How do elites come to imagine the nation that they seek to invent or re-invent? I argue that epistemes delineate those constructions of national identity that are conceivable for and intelligible to elites. In brief, an episteme is a set of fundamental and taken-for-granted beliefs about what constitutes the world and about how the world works. Although my account is underpinned by a constructivist ontology, it is not meant to be an argument for either one of the three approaches. Epistemes, as defined in this study, may be incorporated into different kinds of theoretical frameworks.

I develop this argument in three steps. The theoretical part critically reviews the conceptualisations of agency in the modernist, ethno-symbolist and constructivist perspectives, and introduces the episteme to the study of nations and nationalism. The empirical part probes the salience of the episteme in nation-building processes by analysing the evolution of Irish identity. Finally, I discuss the findings in the conclusion and suggest an agenda for further research.

### **Nation-builders in the literature**

Most nationalist practitioners are primordialists in the literal sense of the word. Nationalists often firmly believe that their nation existed from ‘the first’ (*primus*) ‘beginning’ (*ordiri*). To a primordialist, the nation is something natural and eternal. It has always been there in one form or another. Scholars, by contrast, shun away from primordialism understood in this way. Various reviews of the literature on nationalism

still identify a primordialist approach, and many researchers are anxious to demarcate their work from those whom they consider to be primordialist scholars. Yet, chastising a set of the literature as primordialist is possible only by either digging in the annals of the literature or by following Gellner's broad definition of primordialism. In his view, anyone dating the origins of nations prior to the advent of modernity is a primordialist (Gellner 1997: 93). This definition was part of Gellner's attempt to carve out an intellectual space for the modernist approach and distinguish it from other avenues of research on nationalism. The literal definition may be more useful than Gellner's, but, independently of how this debate is settled, there is a broad consensus in the scholarly community that nations are invented. They are not natural entities that emerged at the dawn of history.

If the nation is invented and re-invented, the questions arise as to why and how nations are built and evolve the way they do. The grand debates in the nationalism literature address these questions. Over the last decades, three major approaches have emerged: modernism, ethno-symbolism, and social constructivism. Modernism holds that the nation emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century due to processes of socio-economic and technological change. How exactly these processes influenced the creation of nations is contested among modernists. The two early protagonists of this perspective, Kedouri and Gellner, for example, disagree about the role of ideas and the extent to which modernisation determined the advent of nations. Kedouri argues that social change, including ideational factors such as the breakdown of religious beliefs and the emergence of new philosophies, made the invention of nations possible, albeit not inevitable (Kedourie 1960). Gellner (1964; 1983; 1997), by contrast, rejects Kedourie's contingency

with regard to the origins of nations and is less concerned with ideas than with processes of economic change. Gellner makes the functionalist argument that the nation was an inevitable by-product of industrialisation. Modernity gave rise to the nation because modern society required the nation in order to function.

Ethno-symbolism is linked to modernism. Its principal proponent, Anthony Smith (1998: 145), considers his theoretical framework ‘an internal critique and expansion of modernism.’ While not discarding the forces of modernity, Smith argues that nations are not freely invented. Nation-building is constrained by the *ethnie*. Most nations have an ethnic core that constitutes the ‘cultural and social basis of the nation.’ The *ethnie* provides the ‘unifying elements (in terms of land, language, law and customs) of the modern nation’ (Smith 2004: 197). Smith’s focus is not on explaining the origins and the evolution of an *ethnie*, but he defines the concept clearly. It is an ideational category consisting of shared myths, memories and symbols that supplies a ‘sense of continuity, shared memory and collective destiny’ (Smith 1991: 29).

Social constructivism comprises an important part of the latest wave of the nationalism literature. Three postulates underpin this quite heterogeneous school of thought: First, there is not one type of nationness<sup>1</sup>, but a considerable variety. Consequently, constructivists – in contrast to modernists and ethno-symbolists – tend to be sceptical about grand theorising. Second, nationness is a socially constructed discourse. Language, in this view, does not merely mirror the world, but it constructs social reality. National identity is an aspect of this reality. Third, national identity varies across time and across different segments of the population. There is no one monolithic discourse. Critical scholars emphasise in particular this third aspect. Authors such as Nira

Yuval-Davis (1997) and Patrick Hanafin (2001) unmask the exclusionary nature of nationalist discourses. Other constructivists attempt to understand the evolution of nationness outside of the epistemological premises of post-structuralism and critical theory (Billig 1995; Brubaker 1996; Calhoun 1997; Hastings 1997; Hall 1998).

This very brief overview of the literature highlights a number of fundamental disagreements about what a nation is, what its origins are, how it evolves, and how nations are to be studied. Despite all these differences, however, there is a remarkably far-reaching consensus across the three approaches that elites are indispensable for the invention of a nation. Elites, embedded in particular contexts, build nations. All three perspectives, albeit to different degrees, emphasise the role of elites.

Most modernists embrace an instrumental conceptualisation of agency. Kedourie, for instance, argues that elites invent nations in order to further their own selfish interests or the interests of the state they serve (Kedourie 1960: 99). This instrumentalist view still dominates the most recent works that can be loosely categorised under modernism. Liah Greenfeld (1992) contends that those elites who are personally affected by the structural contradictions that modernity creates invent nations in order to overcome the adverse effects of modernisation. Many other authors share this instrumentalist view (Hechter 2000; Piper 2002; Máiz 2003; Schöpflin 2003; Hroch 2004).

Smith's ethno-symbolism is to a large extent motivated by what the author regards as excessive voluntarism. Smith rejects the notion that elites invent the nation freely. He argues that nations are not built '*ex nihilo*', but that the invention is constrained by the *ethnie*. This constraint, along with socio-economic constraints, leaves room for the agency of elites to build the nation (Smith 1995: 3). The question of why exactly elites

invent a nation or a particular nationness, however, is not systematically addressed by ethno-symbolists.

Finally, elites are of paramount importance in constructivist studies on the evolution of national identity. Calhoun's conception of agency resembles the instrumentalist view. Elites want power. Therefore, they construct the nation in a certain way (Calhoun 1997). Hall (1998: 260-261) makes a similar argument, but adds the role of knowledge to his account. He contends that trans-national theories about nationness help elites to reason about national identities. Brubaker (1996: 23-76) does not deal with the role of elites in depth, but alludes to the fact that elites may be nationalists after all. They do not stand apart from nationalist ideas, but are embedded in them. Consuelo Cruz (2000) emphasises that elites and mass share the same imaginable possibilities for the construction of a nation. She conceptualises these possibilities as rhetorical frames that emerge at critical junctures of history.

### **Agency and the (re-)invention of national identity**

Despite the prominence of elites across different schools of thought on nationalism, their motivations are under-theorised. We know that elites are of critical importance for nation-building, but we are lacking a convincing theory as to what makes elites attempt to invent a particular nationness. We do not know what makes the kind of nation that they seek to build imaginable for and intelligible to them.

Modernist theories do not provide a compelling answer to this question. This is not only due to the fact that modernists tend to focus on the advent of nations and nationalism as a historical force and not on the evolution of particular national identities. More

profoundly, the modernist approach lacks a convincing theory of agency. Outside of the nationalism literature, there are various interesting debates about how to amend rational choice theory in order to accommodate the constructivist turn in social theory and to include ideas in decision-making situations. Most modernists, however, continue to ignore attempts to refine the instrumentalist logic of action.

The outside debates deals, for example, with preferences and likelihood estimates. Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane (1993) maintain that there is a complementarity between instrumentalism and the study of ideas. Agents seek to attain their preferences with the least cost possible. Their preferences are shaped by ideational factors. Bates et al. (1998) argue that actors who have to choose in situations of uncertainty rely on ideas in order to calculate the likelihood with which a strategy effectuates an outcome. Even this amended rational choice framework, the authors contend convincingly, may be insufficient to model decision-making in situations of profound change.

Modernists, however, continue to disregard ideas in the decision-making process of nation-building elites. Preferences and information continue to be assumed. Costs and benefits are presumed to be predominantly material. It is puzzling that instrumentalist theories on nationalism have not taken part in the attempts to include ideational forces in rational choice frameworks. After all, the nationalism literature puts ideas – nations, nationalism, nationhood, etc. – at the centre of its investigation. Furthermore, the cautioning of Bates et al. that rational choice has difficulties modelling decision-making situations in circumstances of profound change is of high relevance for modernist theories, because they postulate that exactly such a profound change – socio-economic and technological – caused the advent of nations and nationalism.



Ethno-symbolism also has difficulties in specifying what makes elites invent a particular nationness. Smith (1995; 1998) is correct in criticising instrumentalism for assuming that nations, provided certain socio-economic variables are present, can be moulded at the will of nation-builders. His emphasis on the *ethnie* alone, however, does not solve the problem. It merely adds a further constraining factor that limits the range of possibilities for elites to build a nation.<sup>2</sup> Why they actually build a particular nation is unclear from Smith's account. Yet he gives several interesting hints. One of them relates to something that may be provisionally labelled a world view. Smith contends that the idea of nationalism is based on a 'vision' according to which 'mankind is "really" and "naturally" divided into distinct communities of history and culture, called nations. Each nation is distinct and unique. Furthermore, each nation has its peculiar contribution to make to the whole, the family of nations' (Smith 1979: 2).

The question of why elites seek to build a particular nationness is especially important for constructivist scholarship. If – as posited by constructivists – national identity is constructed and re-constructed by elites, if it evolves over time, if it may significantly change over time, then the question of why elites attempt to construct a particular national identity becomes even more crucial than for other approaches. It is a prerequisite for understanding not only the origins of a national identity, but also its reproduction and transformation.

The key challenge for a constructivist answer to the question of why elites build certain national identities and not others consists in finding a balance between two implausible poles: on the one hand, constructivist accounts that assume an entirely voluntarist, cost-benefit calculating elite (as opposed to the mass that is enmeshed in

nationalist ideas) are as problematic as the instrumentalism suggested by modernists. On the other hand, arguments that postulate that nationalist ideas determine the actions by elites are also implausible. Social actors always have some measure of agency. Several constructivist scholars have proposed an ideational force that makes it possible to navigate through the voluntarist Skylla and the holist Charybdis. Similarly to Smith's 'vision', this force may be classified as a world view. Shmuel Eisenstadt (1999) argues that 'schemes' and 'codes' make people imagine certain kinds of nationness and not others. As alluded to above, Hall (1998: 260-261) contends that nation-builders construct the nation based on a set of knowledge that transcends the boundaries of nations and states. Cruz (2000) maintains that nation-builders construct the nation within a rhetorical frame that makes the construction of a particular nationness imaginable. The next section conceptualises as episteme what I have so far loosely referred to as world view.

### **Episteme and national identity**

In Wilhelm Dilthey's attempt to uncover how human beings attach meaning to their lives, the concept of *Weltanschauung*, literally translated world view, is of key importance. Dilthey argued convincingly that a world view is both enriching and impoverishing. On the one hand, it enables us to make sense of the world. On the other hand, it confines the sense that we make of the world to the boundaries of the *Weltanschauung* (Dilthey 1924; 1981). There are many ways to conceptualise a world view. Yet these two features – the enriching and the impoverishing aspect – are always at the core of its meaning.

Foucault coined a particularly rich conceptualisation of a world view, i.e. the episteme. The episteme is an ideational force that makes us interpret the world in a

certain way, often without an active interpretation process. Given the episteme, a particular interpretation of the world seems so evident to us that we do not even reflect upon it. Other interpretations are beyond the limits of our imagination. In Foucault's words, the episteme is the 'positive unconscious' (Foucault 1970: xi) of knowledge, that delimits the 'conditions for possibility' (1970: 23) of a discursive formation. Foucault develops the concept of episteme to theorise on the evolution of the human sciences. Similarly to Kuhn's paradigm, Foucault's episteme is the lens through which the scientist looks at the world.

The following definition of episteme modifies its original formulation by Foucault in order to make it amenable to the empirical study of national identity: An episteme is a background capacity that consists of a shared set of interrelated and fundamental causal, constitutive and evaluative beliefs on the basis of which social actors construct the world. This definition is comprised of four key components: First, an episteme is a background capacity. Usually, we do not articulate or even consciously think about an episteme. It is something we take for granted. Second, an episteme is shared. Individuals may share it with a group of scientific experts, a nation, maybe even humankind, but they never hold it alone. Third, an episteme consists of causal, constitutive and normative beliefs. These beliefs about cause-effect relationships, constitutive elements of aspects of social reality, and evaluative criteria are a type of knowledge. This makes the episteme similar to what Hall (1998) refers to as 'theories'. Fourth, an episteme does not consist of any beliefs, but only those beliefs that give social actors fundamental clues as to what constitutes the world, how it works and how it ought to work.<sup>3</sup>

The meaning of national identity may also be circumscribed by four characteristics: First, national identity is identification. It is an ongoing, never-ending process. Second, national identity is a non-essentialist category. It is a historically and socially contingent construct. Third, national identity is relational. Part of what gives meaning to a nation is the relationship between itself (Self) and other nations (Other). Fourth, national identities are constructed through telling stories about Self and the relationship between Self and Other. Identity is a narrative category. It is constructed through communicative acts that, by connecting events of past, present as well as desires and expectations about the future, tell stories about Self and Other. These narratives are not objectively true or false, but they are intersubjectively plausible or implausible.

How is the episteme linked to national identity? The episteme delineates which identity narrative is plausible and which one is not. As Foucault's human sciences are, at a particular moment in time, circumscribed by an episteme, epistemes circumscribe the construction of national identity. An episteme makes certain identity formations conceivable for and intelligible to nation-builders. Whether a conception of national identity is inside or outside the nation-builders' pool of imaginable and plausible ideas, depends on the episteme through which the inventors and re-inventors of nationness look at the world.

The remainder of this article probes the hypothesised role of epistemes in processes of national identity formation by analysing the profound change of Irish national identity. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-builders constructed an exclusive identity. Its hallmark was the sharp demarcation from Britain and Unionism. By the 1990s, Irish identity had changed

fundamentally. Nation-builders re-invented Irishness. The sharp demarcation was replaced by an inclusive identity.

The analysis focuses on dominant elite discourses on Irishness, more precisely on why and how elites from the Irish Free State and the Republic of Ireland (not the North) came to re-invent Irishness.<sup>4</sup> The terms ‘Nationalist’, and ‘Unionist’ are used as they appear in Irish discourse. Nationalists (in North and South) aspire to a united Ireland, whereas the Unionists of Northern Ireland seek to preserve the sovereignty of the United Kingdom over Northern Ireland.

### **Colonial episteme and exclusive Irishness**

Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s writings are based on a cluster of background knowledge about what nations are and what they ought to do: nations are ancient, nations are ethnically homogeneous, nations have clearly defined boundaries demarcating Us from Them, and the uniqueness of each nation necessitates a unique polity tailored to the nation’s needs (Fichte 1978). These four beliefs underpinned the construction of national identity in much of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and frequently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well. They constituted the episteme based upon which nation-builders constructed national identities.

Ireland is no exception in this regard. The four key beliefs are ubiquitous in the speeches and writings of the most influential builder of the Irish nation, Eamon de Valera. He led Ireland’s struggle for independence from the 1920s onwards and was, with some short interruptions, *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) from 1932 to 1959. The episteme is also the lens through which two other influential inventors of Irishness, William Butler Yeats and Douglas Hyde, made nationness intelligible to themselves. Yeats has been one

of the most celebrated poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Writing and translating fictional literature and later becoming the first president of the Republic of Ireland, Hyde bridged the gap between the poetic and the political realm.

The four beliefs constituted the cornerstones of Irishness as seen by the nation-builders. First, it was an unquestioned orthodoxy for the inventors of the Irish nation that the Irish were an ancient nation. For Yeats (1990: 310), the Irish nation originated in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, where it started a 2000 year long cycle. In Hyde's view, there was already an Irish nation in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Hyde 1986: 156). De Valera (1980d: 235) maintained that the Irish nation 'has been a nation from the dawn of history', and that this made it even more ancient – and thus more of a nation – than other nations in Europe (de Valera, 1980b: 38).

Second, Ireland's ethnic homogeneity was axiomatic for the inventors of the Irish nation. In de Valera's words the Irish constituted 'a race that has never ceased to strive' (de Valera 1980a: 35). Hyde fully agreed with this and advocated that this homogeneity ought to be defended and augmented. In his view, there was a 'peculiarly Hibernian physiognomy'<sup>5</sup> (Hyde 1986: 159) and Ireland was a distinctly Celtic country:

In one word, we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because in spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this island is and will ever remain Celtic to the core, far more Celtic than most people imagine (...). On racial lines, then, we shall best develop, following the bent of our own natures; and, in order to do this, we must create a strong feeling against West-Britonism, for it – if we give it the least chance, or show it the smallest quarter – will overwhelm us like a flood (Hyde 1986: 169).

Third, the nation-builders took it as a given that nations have clearly defined borders that demarcate Self from Other. The Irish nation was seen as demarcated by the sea. Everybody on the island belonged to the Irish nation. In de Valera view, God had drawn the borders of the Irish nation, and nobody ought to interfere with Providence (Bowman 1982: 302).

Fourth, de Valera, Hyde and Yeats strongly believed that the Irish nation was unique and that this required a unique form of polity. This is the essence of Yeats' political writings, the *raison d'être* of de Valera's political career, and the impetus for Hyde's struggle to revive the Gaelic language. Given the centuries of British colonisation and suppression, being unique was defined by being different from Britain. Maintaining uniqueness was equated with fighting off British colonial rule and preventing the re-colonisation of Ireland by Britain or another major power. Due to this fourth element, this episteme may be labelled a colonial episteme.

The four axioms confined the imaginative space of the re-inventors of the Irish nation to an ancient and homogenous nation that was radically different from Britain. Intellectual and political elites found their 'true' Ireland in the myths of the past, and in the rural and Gaelic-speaking west of Ireland. The Aran Islands, in particular, became a national shrine. Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* served as a window into the glorious and authentic Celtic past (Moore 1823). Yeats was fascinated by ancient Celtic saga and mythology. Writings such as *The Celtic Twilight* (1902) helped the Irish nation to define itself. A key aspect of this self-definition was the rejection of modernity, the desire to return to the mythical Gaelic roots of the Irish nation, and the celebration of the simple, rural life (Garratt 1989: 38). Other important nation-building authors, also shunning

modernity and orientating themselves back to the simple, uncorrupted country life of a mythical Gaelic past include Hyde (1910) and James O'Grady (1919a; 1919b; 1919c, 1923).

Hyde was among those who strongly advocated for the Gaelic language to replace English. In 1892, he gave a lecture, entitled 'On the necessity for De-Anglicising the Irish People.' Only in this way, he argued, could the Irish avert mimicking Britain's materialist way of life (Cahalan 1993: 127). Frank Gallagher's influential *The Indivisible Island* (1957) delivered the identity narrative of the Gaelic Irish nation through the millennia. Just how appealing this attempt of turning an imagined Gaelic past into present reality was to political leaders shows de Valera's vision of a future Ireland (de Valera 1980c: 94):

Let us turn aside for a moment to that ideal Ireland that we would have. That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live.

Roman Catholicism completed the vision of Irishness. The 1937 Constitution, of which de Valera was the main author, made this very clear. Catholic social doctrine underpinned the Constitution, and it reserved a 'special role' for the Catholic Church. This Catholic identity trait was, contrary to the identity's other constitutive



elements, contested among the nation-builders discussed in this paper so far. To the Protestant Nationalists Hyde and Yeats, the Celtic revival was a way of constructing Irishness independent of confessional differences. Disillusioned with the direction into which Irishness evolved, Yeats withdrew from his role as nation-builder in the 1930s.

The dominant Celtic and Catholic representation of Irishness postulated an authentic Self that was exclusive in two ways: First, early 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-builders sought sharp demarcation from other nations, in particular Britain. Intermingling with other nations was seen as a threat to the authentic Self. Consequently, the Republic of Ireland refused to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). When Churchill offered de Valera the unification of the Republic with Northern Ireland in exchange for Ireland joining the allies in 1940, de Valera declined. To him, neutrality was synonymous with the freedom to re-build the Irish authentic Self. The ‘freedom to develop and to keep the kernel of the Irish nation’ was something that de Valera (quoted in Fanning 1990: 9-10) would not sacrifice; not even for a united Ireland.

Second, the dream of the authentic Self did not leave room for those who did not share this vision. Among these were the Unionists of the North. They were seen as ‘Irishmen gone astray’ due to their contact with the coloniser. In the words of Thomas O’Higgins (1948), Unionists would either have to be ‘cured of the mental aberration that instigates them to look outside their own country for leadership,’ or, as de Valera postulated at times, leave the island (Bowman 1982: 300). Under no circumstances, however, would the Irish nation accommodate Unionist aspirations.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, early 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-builders constructed an exclusive national identity. They came to imagine an ancient, Gaelic, rural and Catholic nation that was fundamentally different from its coloniser, Unionism, and other nations. This construct of Irishness was demarcated by the colonial episteme. This episteme did not determine the evolution of a Gaelic and Catholic identity but it predisposed the nation-builders to be revivalist and to seek sharp demarcation from its coloniser and Unionism. After all, it was taken for granted that nations are eternal, homogenous, sharply different from one another, and that they require their own polities tailored to their particular identity traits. The demarcation could have been configured differently if nation-builders such as Hyde and Yeats had gained more influence. The demarcation from Unionism, for example, would have been less pronounced because confessional differences would not have been part of this demarcation. Yet the Us versus Them, the Gaelic authentic Self versus the 'Britainised' Unionists, would still have constituted Irishness.

### **Clashing epistemes and contested Irishness**

Prior to the early 1960s, alternatives to the colonial episteme existed but were largely marginalised. There were two counter-paradigms, both of which had come from outside of Ireland. The first counter-paradigm was revisionism. As early as in the 1930s, a group of historians began to make sense of the Irish nation not through the colonial episteme, but through a scientific epistemology. Robert D. Edwards, Theodor W. Moody, David B. Quinn and Desmond Williams were educated outside of the Irish Free State, most of them at the Institute of Historical Research in England. There they had been socialised into a theory of knowledge according to which history would have to be told in a value-free way. It ought to consist of objective facts, and not myths. This necessitated that the

researcher stands apart from the object of study. A nationalist was seen as a bad historian *qua* his or her values. These values would inevitably distort the true history to be told. Delineated by these epistemological premises, revisionists rejected the commonplace that Irish history was nothing but the struggle of an ancient Gaelic nation against an external enemy. For revisionists, this was merely a myth. They traced the origins of the Irish nation to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and focused on the differences among Irish people as well as elements of co-operation and confrontation between different Irish communities (Boyce 1996). The influence of revisionism grew steadily from the 1930s onwards.

The Idea of Europe constituted the second, even more influential challenge. While in office as External Minister, Seán MacBride taught the *Dáil* (lower chamber of Parliament) the episteme that he had learnt in numerous meetings at the Council of Europe in the late 1940s. He spoke about the evolution of the Idea of Europe over the centuries and argued that integration, co-operation, and the overcoming of Europe's splintering into nation-states as well as the acknowledgement of the plurality of nations were indispensable to achieving lasting peace in Europe. In many ways, the Idea, as interpreted by MacBride, was the opposite of the colonial episteme: plurality versus homogeneity (nation) and integration versus demarcation (across nations). The Idea made new identity formations imaginable. MacBride (1949) maintained that the Irish ought to understand themselves as a European nation and cease seeking isolation. One of the Republic's three national newspapers supported this point of view. Several editorials in the *Irish Times* (1949; 1950) had already endorsed the Idea of Europe and a European identity as early as the late 1940s and early 1950s. Throughout the Republic's application process to the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1960s, the Idea of Europe

gained increasing support among elites. *Dáil* deputies such as Lionel Booth (1959; 1963), Liam Cosgrave (1962), Declan Costello (1961; 1963), James Dillon (1962), and Noel Lemass (1962) selected the Idea of Europe to make sense of Irishness.

Attempts to re-invent the Irish nation based on the Idea of Europe gained momentum when the violence between Nationalists and Unionists escalated in the North in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Two politicians and journalists emerged as the main advocates: Garret FitzGerald and Conor Cruise O'Brien. Both published highly influential books in 1972. FitzGerald's *Towards a New Ireland* and Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland* are both underpinned by the Idea of Europe and call for the re-construction of Irishness. Exclusive Irishness ought to be replaced by inclusive Irishness. FitzGerald's book largely deals with his vision of a diverse Irish nation. Cruise O'Brien's focus, in the tradition of revisionist historiography, is on re-constructing the identity narrative.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, national identity remained deeply contested. FitzGerald and Charles Haughey, chairmen of *Fine Gael* and *Fianna Fáil*, respectively, and elected *Taoiseach* several times, were the main protagonists of this debate. FitzGerald analysed Irishness through the perspective of the Idea of Europe. He reached the conclusion that the construction of national identity in post-independence Ireland had gone fundamentally wrong. The Catholic majority had imposed its view of Irishness. In this way, the Republic had become 'a sectarian state' and was partly responsible for the partition of Ireland as well as the violence in Northern Ireland: 'the fact is our laws and our Constitution, our practices, our attitudes, reflect those of a majority ethos and are not acceptable to Protestants in Northern Ireland' (FitzGerald quoted in Keogh 1995: 357). Thus, overcoming partition and ending the violence in Northern Ireland was, according to

FitzGerald, only possible if the Republic re-thought what it meant to be Irish. Inclusion would have to replace exclusion. At the beginning of his term as *Taoiseach* in 1981, FitzGerald (quoted in Keogh 1995: 357) announced: ‘I want to lead a crusade, a republican crusade, to make this a genuine republic.’ For FitzGerald, the latter meant primarily the construction of an inclusive identity for a pluralistic society. ‘Crusade’ referred mainly to Constitutional change.

Charles Haughey was FitzGerald main political opponent. He was the chairman of *Fianna Fáil* and this party, consistently the most successful in national elections, assumed the role of the guardian of exclusive Irishness. Haughey continued to take the colonial episteme for granted. This led to a markedly different evaluation of Irish identity. In Haughey’s perception, FitzGerald crusaded not in order to establish, but in order to destroy a true republic. He emphatically rejected FitzGerald’s portrayal of the Republic as a sectarian state. Haughey criticised his opponent’s crusade sharply. It would be ‘the first time in history that a crusade was started by the infidels’ (quoted in Herz 1989: 58).

Hence, clashing epistemes marked out different spaces of imaginable and plausible national identities. Seen through the lens of the Idea of Europe, de Valera’s exclusive Irishness was an obsolete identity construct that contributed to violence and hindered reconciliation. The Idea delineated the construction of a different identity, revolving around the respect for diversity within the nation and the positive identification with other nations. Seen through the perspective of the colonial episteme, however, the attacks against de Valera’s legacy were implausible and reckless.

### **Idea of Europe and inclusive Irishness**

In the early 1990s, Haughey participated in the post-Cold War negotiations about a new European order. While in office as *Taoiseach*, he was involved in the Paris Summit of the Conference of Security and Cooperation (CSCE) in 1990, and the negotiations that led to the Maastricht Treaty in 1991. In the course of these events, he came to employ the Idea of Europe to make sense of Irishness. He celebrated European unification efforts in the *Dáil* and juxtaposed Europe's dark history with the prospect of a new, co-operative and integrative beginning after the end of the Cold War (Haughey 1990). In 1992, Haughey's political career ended abruptly over allegations of corruption and tapping phone lines of journalists. His successors as chairmen of *Fianna Fáil* and *Taoisigh*, Albert Reynolds and Bertie Ahern, also fully embraced the Idea and placed increasing emphasis on the plurality aspect in their speeches.<sup>7</sup>

In 1996, the *Dáil* debated the Republic's first White Paper on foreign policy. While there was disagreement about policy issues, the debate showed that there was a far-reaching consensus on the Idea of Europe across party lines. The White Paper stated that the division of Europe into nation-states and the assumption of homogenous states had caused a series of catastrophes in Europe's past. In order to prevent history from repeating itself, nation-states and their external relations would have to have two critical features: accommodate diversity within and overcome the borders of nation-states through co-operation:

If the nation state is to serve as a basis for peaceful and prosperous co-existence, (...) it must be accompanied by arrangements for the recognition and accommodation of internal diversity, and be

situated within a framework providing for dialogue, consultation and cooperation between states (Government of Ireland 1996: 48).

The stronger the consensus on the episteme became, the more elites embraced the inclusive variant of Irishness. Beginning in the 1980s, the exclusive variant was increasingly criticised in films and fictional literature. Bob Quinn's work, in particular, chastised the myth of the homogenous Gaelic and Catholic Ireland of which most of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-builders had dreamt. In a three-part television documentary, entitled *Atlantean*, Quinn (1983) ridiculed the conviction of traditional nationalists that Ireland is the land of the Gael. He countered this longing for authenticity with his assertion that many traditions that are seen as defining Irishness were actually imported from North Africa. Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) is a film about the transgression of boundaries – between North and South and between Unionists and Nationalists. This is also a *Leitmotiv* of fictional literature, such as in Bernard Mac Laverty's *Cal* (1983), Glenn Patterson's *Burning Your Own* (1988), Patrick Quigley's *Borderland* (1994), and Joan Lingard's *Across the Barricades* (1995).<sup>8</sup>

In the *Dáil*, there was agreement across party lines on what FitzGerald and Cruise O'Brien had started advocating in the 1970s. Declan Bree (1995) asserted that Irishness ought to be the opposite of sectarianism, i.e. an identity that left room for different political aspirations. Richard Spring (1993) assured Unionists that Nationalists would respect Unionist aspirations: 'We are not an enemy of your rights and aspirations; we aspire to be your friends and partners.' Bertie Ahern (1993) emphasised that the Irish nation provided a home for both Nationalism and Unionism. Proinsias De Rossa (1993)

explained that Republicanism, so central to Irish national identity, was partly defined by its respect for minorities and the protection of their rights.

Furthermore, Irish elites came to share the identification with Europe. When the Republic applied for membership to the EEC in the 1960s, it felt compelled to do so because Britain also sought entry into the common market. Given the interdependence of the two economies, Britain's accession to the EEC was regarded as extremely damaging if the Republic stayed outside. By the 1990s, the identity discourse by Irish elites showed a distinct Europhilia. The White Paper formulated this as follows: 'Irish people increasingly see the European Union not simply as an organisation to which Ireland belongs, but as an integral part of our future. We see ourselves, increasingly, as Europeans' (Government of Ireland 1996: 8). Again, this issue was entirely uncontested in the *Dáil* debate on the paper. This shift towards a European identity also had policy repercussions. By the early 1990s, all political parties that are relevant to decision-making in the Republic had adopted a pro-European stance: *Fine Gael*, *Fianna Fáil*, Progressive Democrats, Labour, the Workers' Party and the Democratic Left (Goodman 1996: 200-201).

Both aspects of the inclusive Irish identity – integrative vis-à-vis Europe and respect towards Unionist aspirations – were endorsed by the Republic's three national newspapers. With regard to identity discourses, the *Irish Times* was the most progressive newspaper. Editorials called already in the late 1940s for some measure of Europeanisation of Irish identity (*Irish Times* 1949; 1950). From the mid-1950s onwards, the *Irish Times* (1955; 1956) featured editorials calling for recognising the diversity of the Irish nation and respecting Unionist aspirations. This advocacy pattern continued in



the following decades (*Irish Times* 1971; 1980; 1993). Representations of inclusive Irishness appeared in the *Irish Independent* (1971; 1979; 1980; 1985; 1999) from the 1970s onwards. The *Irish Press*, closely affiliated with *Fianna Fáil*, endorsed the inclusive identity only in the 1990s (*Irish Press* 1993; 1995).

In short, the 1990s mark a watershed in elite representations of Irish identity. The Idea of Europe became the dominant episteme. Based on a new set of fundamental beliefs on what a nation is and what it ought to do, the exclusive variant of Irishness came increasingly under siege, and more and more actors came to imagine an inclusive variant.

### **Conclusion**

Irish identity has changed remarkably in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Early in the century, elites constructed an exclusive national identity. According to the dominant elite discourse, it was the destiny of the Irish nation to recover its authentic Self. Gaelic language and culture, Roman Catholicism and the rejection of modernity were constitutive of this authenticity. Preserving the authentic Self meant demarcating and isolating it from Other. Ireland would have to be undisturbed by outside influences in order to restore its authentic Self. Beginning in the 1970s, the dominance of the exclusive identity discourse waned and was increasingly replaced by an inclusive variant of Irishness. Elites in the Republic came to see Ireland as European, modern and pluralistic nation that left room for different beliefs and aspirations. By the 1990s, the vision of a pluralistic and integrative Self had replaced the authentic Self as the dominant elite representation of Irishness.

What made this re-invention of Irishness possible? I argued that elites came to imagine a different kind of nation. The shared background knowledge about what a nation is and what it ought to do changed. The construction of the exclusive variant of Irishness was delineated by the colonial episteme. Given this episteme, it was axiomatic that nations are homogenous and have to defend their uniqueness against outside interference. This made the invention of a Gaelic and Catholic authentic Self imaginable and intelligible. Furthermore, it precluded the construction of a national identity that embraced plurality and sought to overcome borders among nation-states. The more widespread the Idea of Europe became, however, the more the exclusive identity turned into an implausible and beleaguered identity construct. In elite discourse, it developed from an ideal to a culprit of violence. The Idea delineated the discursive space in which an inclusive identity emerged. The new episteme chastised rigid borders and the presumption of homogenous nations as recipe for disaster. It made it possible for a new group of nation-builders to imagine and endorse an inclusive form of Irishness. In other words, fundamental knowledge about social reality, which does not necessarily stop at the borders of a nation, marks out the discursive space in which elites construct national identity. Epistemes, therefore, matter for the invention and re-invention of nations.

Many interesting questions for future research follow from this study, including the following two clusters: First, how do actors select an episteme? The Irish case seems to suggest the relevance of trans-national diffusion processes involving socialisation. Through the interaction with elites from other countries, nation-builders learn to look at the world from a certain perspective. FitzGerald appears to have learnt the Idea of Europe through his participation in the European movement. He was the first chairman of the

Irish Council of the European Movement. Haughey may have been socialised into the Idea at a series of European summits on a post-Cold War European order. Much more research is needed on these socialisation processes and on the question of how an episteme diffuses domestically.

Second, how do epistemes interact with other ideational and material factors? Modernists, ethno-symbolists and constructivists have outlined a variety of factors influencing the creation and the evolution of national identity. This study sought to show the salience of an ideational force that has been overlooked so far, i.e. the episteme. This opens up interesting avenues of research on the interconnectedness of national and ethnic identities, socio-economic processes, norms and epistemes; on the constraining (limitation of choices) and enabling (making it possible to conceive of) influence of configurations of these forces on nation-builders; and on the facilitating or hindering role of these configurations for the attempts of nation-builders to make a national identity stick with the masses.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms nationness and national identity, defined in detail below, interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the evolution of this constraining factor requires empirical scrutiny. This applies in particular to the question of how agents construct and re-construct the *ethnie*. Otherwise, ethno-symbolists risk of being dismissed as primordialists.

<sup>3</sup> This conceptualisation is similar to that of Emanuel Adler and Peter Haas (1992).

<sup>4</sup> On a methodological note, the results that I present in this article are a brief summary of my empirical research. It relies on two primary sources: *Dáil* debates (lower chamber of Parliament) and the reactions to these debates in the Republic's national newspapers. I analysed those debates between 1937 and 1998 that related to the Irish Question (partition and violence in Northern Ireland), because these debates allow access to the identity narrative. I then scrutinised the reactions to these debates in the Republic's three national newspapers: *Irish Independent*, *Irish Times* and *Irish Press*. I analysed the editorials of the two issues following the parliamentary debate. In addition to these two core sources, I examined speeches by leading government officials, school syllabi, and the role of the arts in constructing Irish identity.

<sup>5</sup> *Hibernia* is Latin for Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> When I refer to inclusion and exclusion in this study, my referent is this two-fold exclusion – the authentic Self versus other nations and Unionism – as represented in dominant elite discourse. Sharp demarcation with regard to this referent was replaced by inclusion in the dominant elite discourse by the late 1990s. This does not mean that there were no alternative identity representations. Yet for the purposes of this study, I focus on the dominant variant as constructed by elites. It also does not mean that the dominant elite discourse on Irishness has become inclusive with regard to other referents as well. Other referents are simply outside of the scope of this article.

<sup>7</sup> Ahern's and Reynold's different approach was already visible in the 1980s (Ahern 1985; Reynolds 1988).

<sup>8</sup> For a good overview, see Cleary (2002: 77-115).

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