Student Number: 40200155

Module Title: Understanding Northern Ireland: History, Politics and Anthropology

Module Code: ANTH 1006

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Word Count: 1567

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Northern Ireland appears to be a homogenous society with only 1.8% of residents identifying with a minority ethnic group and 82.8% of residents identifying as Christian per the 2011 census (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency/NISRA). Even though most of society is white and Christian, there are deep-seated divides between two groups which manifests itself physically through the Peace Wall in Belfast. One of the most compelling ways to explain the existence of these two groups is through theories of ethnicity. Nationalists and Unionists compose the two different general groups in Northern Irish society, and using Barth, Jenkin, and Geertz’s definitions of ethnicity, it is evident they can be categorized as ethnic groups. Barth and Jenkin’s ideas of social boundaries and cultural differentiation are established in Northern Irish society through Geertz’s six primordial traits. These social boundaries prevent Northern Ireland from fully realizing a post-conflict society.

Barth suggests ethnicity is formed through social boundaries and by maintaining group identity while interacting with other ethnicities (1998: 15). Jenkins builds upon these ideas by describing cultural differentiation as the process of defining the similarities and differences between social groups to establish ethnicity (1997: 14). Geertz’s six “primordial attachments” (1973: 259) are how ethnicities establish social boundaries and distinguish themselves culturally. The first trait Geertz describes is assumed blood ties which can be essential to the formation of ethnic groups because it can be difficult to trace heritage back to the source of the group accurately (ibid: 261-262). The second trait is race which refers to similar physical features such as skin colour, hair, or stature, and the third trait is a common language (ibid: 262). The last three traits are the ethnic group often lives within the same region, practices the same religion, and has the same customs (ibid: 263). Geertz’s traits can be applied to Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland to explain how they have created social boundaries and excluded the other group through cultural differentiation.

The first trait, assumed blood ties, is evident in the 2011 census on nationality. 39.89% of individuals identified as British only, 25.26% identified as Irish only, and 20.94% identified as Northern Irish only. 93% of the population has never resided outside Northern Ireland, but people still identify strongly with other nationalities (NISRA). Most Unionists would identify their nationality as British, and Nationalists would identify their nationality as Irish even though most of these individuals have always lived in Northern Ireland. These statistics support the idea that even if blood ties do not exist, Unionists and Nationalists identify with British and Irish ancestors respectively. Beyond statistics, assumed blood ties is reinforced through the constitution of the Republic of Ireland in Article Two which confers special status on those who have Irish ancestry living abroad (Craith 2002: 141). For Nationalists, who identify with Irish culture and heritage, this is important because their Irish heritage is validated through an official document, and it is a concrete way to distinguish themselves from Unionists. Unionists would look to the political control Britain exerts over Northern Ireland to establish a concrete connection with British heritage. By establishing these imaginary blood ties with Ireland and Britain, the two groups distinguish themselves both culturally and socially to create distinct ethnicities.

The second trait, race, is problematic for the two groups because they share similar physical characteristics, but Jenkin explains that similarities are also used by ethnic groups (1997: 14). In this situation, the two groups must imagine and create differences that do not naturally exist to create a social boundary. This is shown in a short documentary about two girls who switch school uniforms. The Catholic, and traditionally associated with Nationalism, uniform is green while the Protestant, and traditionally associated with Unionism, uniform is blue. When the two girls switch one of the girls explains how she felt uncomfortable walking around town (*In Peace Apart – Teaching Divided Histories*). The two ethnic groups realize their homogenous physicalities, so they have created in the minds of their members wearing certain colours and clothing establishes a social boundary between each other. By crossing that boundary, the girl’s identity is challenged, so she feels uneasy. The two groups cannot exclude each other based on physical appearance alone, so they engage in cultural differentiation through clothing and colours.

Geertz’s third trait is a common language. Unionists and Nationalists speak English, but many Nationalists emphasize learning Irish to assert its distinct ethnicity and affinity for the Republic of Ireland. This is obvious on the street signs in Nationalist areas of Belfast which are written in both English and Irish to assert their physical dominance in the location and distinguish themselves as separate from Unionists. Irish became associated with Nationalists during the Troubles in the 1970s and 1980s and was politicized to prevent it from dying out (Craith 2002: 150-151). Many Unionists also identified the Irish language with Nationalists during the Troubles which further reinforced the idea of two ethnicities with different languages even though both groups speak English as their first language (ibid: 151). This is another example in which both ethnicities are similar, but they must distinguish themselves as different. Nationalists and Unionists associate Irish with Nationalism even if most Nationalists do not speak Irish, therefore cultural differentiation is occurring to separate the two groups.

The fourth trait is the ethnic group living within the same region, and it is most obvious in Belfast. In the 2001 census 3.89% of Catholics in Belfast lived in East Belfast while 44.82% lived in West Belfast. On the other hand, 38.30% of Protestants in Belfast lived in East Belfast while 7.4% lived in West Belfast. North Belfast and South Belfast are both composed of one-quarter Catholic and one-quarter Protestant. The 2011 census showed little change in these demographics with the number of Catholics residing in East Belfast, a traditionally Protestant area, rising 2.47% and Protestants residing in West Belfast, a traditionally Catholic area, rising 1.27% (NISRA). Religion is not synonymous with ethnicity, but many Unionists identify with Protestantism and many Nationalists with Catholicism. This census data indicates how the two ethnic groups regionally exclude each other. Also, considering the percentages of Catholics and Protestants living in each other’s region has risen less than 3% over ten years, the exclusion appears very much purposeful. Each community is maintaining its identity in the physical space of Belfast to build cultural differences and prevent integration of the two communities.

The fifth trait, religion, is perhaps one of the most well-known characterizations of Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland. While most Nationalists identify as Catholic and most Unionists identify as Protestant, religiosity has decreased in the United Kingdom, and Catholicism specifically is much less important to many Nationalists. Even so, Unionists still associate Catholicism with Nationalists which establishes differences between the two communities even if it is not completely accurate (Craith 2002: 144-145). Another way religion defines the two ethnicities is evident in the results of a poll conducted in 2014 by the Belfast Telegraph which shows 81% of Catholics would support a vote on a united Ireland whereas only 24% of Protestants would want a referendum on a united Ireland (Clarke). As this issue is one of the main defining characteristics between Nationalists and Unionists politically, it is evident that religion defines the ethnic groups to an extent. Even so, the idea that Unionists are Protestant and Nationalists are Catholic is more important than the actual numbers. As long as the two groups believe the other groups is different in this way a social boundary exists and the groups other through religion.

The last trait Geertz discusses as essential to the formation of ethnicity is common customs within the ethnic group. Nationalist and Unionist communities claim distinct customs and traditions, but they express themselves similarly. Both ethnic groups use sports in similar ways to differentiate themselves and establish customs and traditions that are unique to their ethnic group. Unionists express their culture through the tradition of playing rugby because of its association with Britishness. Even though rugby is accepted by Nationalists more so than other British sports, Craith argues Unionists do not care if Nationalists play because the sport itself is a reminder of Britain’s control over the region (2002: 176). Nationalists, on the other hand, participate in the Gaelic Athletic Association which actively promotes the Nationalist ethnicity through displaying the Irish flag during matches and playing the Irish anthem beforehand (ibid: 145-146). The traditions of Nationalists and Unionist sports teams from the anthem sung and the flag displayed to the sport itself promote othering of the different ethnic group. These customs are how each group maintains its unique culture and identity.

Today in Northern Ireland the two ethnicities that exist, Unionism and Nationalism, use Geertz’s primordial traits to set up social boundaries and create cultural differences to exclude each other. This is preventing a cohesive society from forming because each group believes they are vastly different in at least the six ways Geertz describes. Integration of the two ethnicities in schools would potentially break down the imagined barriers the two groups set up, and a new generation would grow up without emphasizing differences. But, because each group programs its members to stay within the ethnic group via schools and social activities, little integration is occurring. Northern Ireland looks homogenous statistically, but by keeping imagined and physical barriers up between the two ethnic groups, society will never realize its similarities.

Word Count: 1567

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