

Empire & Terror:

Nationalism/Postnationalism in
the New Millennium

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Postnationalist Identities: A New Configuration

RICHARD KEARNEY

As we move into the third millennium, people are becoming increasingly aware that nationality is a necessary but by no means sufficient source of identity. In addition to the national identity afforded by one's belonging to a nation-state (or a nation in search of a state, viz. the Kurds, Palestinians, and Basques), it is now commonplace for people to lay claim to a model of *multiple identity*, extending from subnational categories of region, province, or county to transnational categories such as the EU or UN. In the case of Ireland and Britain, which I concentrate on in this paper, this third category would also include the British-Irish Council. If the first step in this set of expanding concentric circles is epitomized by Patrick Kavanagh's statement that "the parish is my world," the ultimate step is captured by Socrates's famous assertion that he is "neither Athenian, nor Greek, but a citizen of the world." Between the *ego sum* and the *mundanus sum* there are many worlds to be traversed, and each has its proper place in the postnational jigsaw of identities.

1

While this is new in some respects, it is a very old idea in others. To concentrate on the example of Ireland, it is important to recall that the literature of this land is replete with references to multiple identities. The first book recording its history and genealogy is entitled, tellingly, *The Book of Invasions*; and this serves to remind us that Ireland is not, and never has been, an ethnically homogenous, continuous nation but is composed of layers of migrations and transmigrations making up a palimpsest of differing identities ranging from the Tuatha De Danann and Milesians to the Celts, Vikings, Danes, Normans, and Anglo-Saxons, among others. That is why it is no accident that one of the first lines recorded by an Irishman in English—that of Captain McMorris in Shakespeare's *Henry V*—assumes the form of a question: "What is my nation?" To be Irish is to be someone

who asks the question what it means to be Irish. Ireland is a country that exists in the interrogative mode.

This question of multiple identity reflects itself in turn in the complex question of *sovereignty*. There are four provinces in Ireland—Leinster, Munster, Ulster, and Connaught—but the Gaelic word for a province is *coiced* or “fifth.” So where is the fifth province? The fact is that nobody knows and never has known. Some claimed it was in Tara, others in Uisneach, others in Meath (*Meatha* meaning the “middle” of Ireland); but the general view was that it did not actually exist in any territorial location. The Fifth Province was an extraterritorial or place-less place (*u-topos*) that provided the unifying symbolic space for the other four provinces to come together and interact. Without it, the land fell back into division and conflict. Indeed, as most Celtic scholars like Proinsias McCana and Myles Dillon agree, there never was a concept of political sovereignty in Ireland prior to the creation of a High Kingship (*Ard Ri*) in response to the Viking and Anglo-Norman invasions. The creation of a centralized, homogenous nation was therefore a historical strategy in reaction to violence inflicted from without rather than anything inherited or God-given. And this strategic construction was further consolidated when King Donald O’Neill wrote to the Pope in Rome in 1371 declaring himself sovereign leader of the whole nation of Ireland (*totus hiberniae*), which, he argued, laid claim to the unbroken lineage of a single nation (*nacio* or *gens*) going back to time immemorial. This was of course a mimetic response to the claim of the invading English (*Sasanach*) that *they* were the true and pure *gens* who, as divinely appointed gentlemen of the gentry, had a natural right to the land. This latter claim was copperfastened in the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366), which drove a legal wedge between those colonial planters residing “inside the pale” (*gens*) and those dislodged natives now residing “outside the pale” (*de-gens*): For the former to intermingle or intermarry with the latter was to become “degenerate.” The two “opposed” peoples were in fact ethnically and genetically identical (indeed, to this day the peoples of the islands of Ireland and Britain enjoy the same gene pool), but for political reasons it was felt necessary to keep them apart by artificial categories and conventions of law, residence, property, apparel, language, and manner.

This colonial campaign of segregation began earlier than the States of Kilkenny, however. Already in 1185, Gerald of Cambrensis visited Ireland in the entourage of the English Prince John and composed an influential *History and Topography of Ireland* in which he cast the native Irish as a “wild and inhospitable people who lived like beasts”—and, were, consequently, in dire need of colonial conquest. These unruly natives included, in Gerald’s account, such odd folk as the bearded lady from Limerick with a mane running down her spine and the Cowman of Wicklow (both progeny of human–animal congress), not to mention the infamous King of Tirconnell who mated with a white mare and then bathed in the broth of her flesh of which he and his people partook. Gerald’s portrait of the Hibernian landscape was no less flattering: “Ireland is a country of uneven surface and rather mountainous. The soil is soft and watery, and there are many woods and marshes. Even at the tops of high and steep mountains you will find pools and swamps...” This

representation of the rural Irish landscape as “degenerate” and “uncultivated” was to enjoy a long lineage of portraiture evidenced in the “sublime” paintings of subsequent generations that inspired terror and awe in the public (see Edmund Burke’s *Essay on the Beautiful and the Sublime*). Such portraits were contrasted with the “beautiful” urban gardens of the colonial Pale and other garrison towns (e.g., the Pleasure Grounds painted by Joseph O’Connor). The Celts could stay sublime and stay put—while the Planters moved about at leisure.

Cambrensis was, needless to say, on a mission of conquest and therefore graphically underscored Ireland’s need for enlightened Anglo-Angevin rule. As Michelle Brown aptly remarks: “Gerald depicts Ireland as a source of savage bestiality, as a land filled with grotesque and uncivilized figures... That the Papal Bull eventually approving Henry II’s annexation of Ireland did so on grounds of the land’s alleged immorality—including bestiality—suggests that Gerald may have helped to legitimize that political enterprise and encourage public support of it.”¹ It is also worth noting that the famous Land War of 1879, when the natives sought to reclaim the land, occasioned a series of portraits of the Irish Frankenstein—and other monstrous personifications—in the pages of *Punch Magazine* (see the illustrations in Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels*, 1997).

But while Ireland was annexed by England, it was never a happy marriage. Irish literature kept appealing to idealized figures of sovereignty—from the ethereal motherland to the dream woman (*speirbhean*) or inaccessible goddess (Kathleen ni Houlihan, Dark Rosaleen, Roisin Dubh, and others)—who might one day return to restore unity to the land. And there are many instances in English literature too of the destabilizing effect that Ireland had on England, as when Shakespeare’s Richard II returns from a visit there to the mainland only to find himself at a loss to know who he is *qua* sovereign: “I had forgot myself, am I not King?... Is not the King’s name twenty thousand names?” (act 3, scene 2). At worst, then, the Irish were considered subversive inferiors who threatened to undo the sovereign unity of the English (and later British) Crown. At best, they were portrayed as exotic creatures capable of composing great fantasies, music, and poetry but incapable of governing themselves. Indeed one of the most impassioned celebrants of the cultural genius of the Celts, Mathew Arnold, was an equally impassioned opponent of the Home Rule for Ireland Bill of 1886.

This is all by way of saying that the equation of sovereignty-territory-nation-state in Ireland was never an easy one. In fact, even when the Irish Free State emerged after the War of Independence in the 1920s it was in the form of a partitioned state, with the Northern Six Counties remaining part of Great Britain. This led in turn to a clash of sovereignty claims by both nationalists and unionists—the former for a United Ireland, the latter for a United Kingdom. Indeed the official constitutions of both the Irish Republic and Britain claimed exclusive unitary sovereignty over the same territory of Northern Ireland. But since sovereignty is by definition “one and indivisible” and since two into one

1. Michelle Brown, “Shaping and Mis-shaping: Visual Impressions of Ireland in Illuminated Manuscripts,” in *Eire/Land*, ed. Vera Kreilkamp (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art; Boston College, 2003), 44.

won't go, the inevitable consequence of this clash of mutually incompatible sovereignty claims was conflict and war. It was not until the Fifth Province returned in the guise of paragraph 6 of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998—declaring that the citizens of Northern Ireland could be “British or Irish or *both*”—that the fatal equation of unitary sovereignty and national territory was dissolved and transcended. Ireland and Britain thus entered a new “postnational” configuration as envisaged in (a) the British-Irish Council and European Union on the one hand, and (b) the simultaneous devolution and decentralization of power to subnational regions on the other.

2

My argument is that postnationalism involves a radical rethinking of the whole notion of sovereignty.

Territorial sovereignty cannot be exercised by two separate nation-states over the same people at the same time. And this is especially the case, as in the Irish–British conflict, where we are talking “absolutist” sovereignty and take this to mean something like “one and indivisible”—as defined by Hobbes, Bodin, and Rousseau.

The Belfast Agreement of spring 1998 means that the British and Irish nations are compelled to redefine themselves. The “hyphen” has been reinserted into their relations, epitomized in the new British-Irish Council of Isles (BIC), which had its first meeting on December 18, 1999, and whose aim, as the Agreement tells us, is “to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of the British and Irish islands.” Membership of the Council is drawn from the British and Irish governments, the devolved assemblies of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the Channel Isles. It acknowledges the fact that the citizens of both islands are inextricably intermingled thanks to centuries of internal migration, cultural mixing, and political exchange. And it purports to deal with a whole range of common interests running from the environment and transport to the knowledge economy (see in particular the meeting held in Jersey Island on June 15, 2002). Speaking at the launch of the BIC in Lancaster House in 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair described its inaugural session as “an extraordinary and historical event that we have all the people of these islands finally coming together and saying we share certain things in common, that we can resolve our differences. The British and Irish people feel closer together now than at any time in their lifetime.”² And the vintage Scottish political theorist Tom Nairn hailed it as “an imagined community disconcertingly different from anything in the political arsenal of the old British State.”³ The fact that the BIC was able to secure the enthusiastic support not only of both sovereign governments but also of the two leaders of the traditionally opposed republican and unionists communities of Ulster—John Hume and David Trimble—was decisive.

2. Quoted by Dennis Dworkin, “Intellectual Adventures in the Isles” in this volume.

3. Tom Nairn, “Farewell Britannia,” *New Left Review* 7 (2001), 60; see also his *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Granta, 2000).

The sea-change signaled by the establishment of the BIC was reflected in a radical paradigm shift in the constitutional relations between the two islands. The Irish government endorsed the removal of articles 2 and 3 from the Constitution of the Republic (a move ratified by the vast majority of the electorate), while the British government redrafted the 1922 Government of Ireland Act and held referenda to establish regional assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The zero-sum game of mutually exclusive “national identities” seemed over at last.

The emerging postnationalist scenario permits, according to the model I sketched at the outset, that citizens of Northern Ireland profess differing degrees of allegiance to an expanding range of identifications: from regional townland, parish, or province to national constitution (British or Irish or both) and, larger still, to the transnational union of Europe. As John Hewitt prophetically wrote to his fellow Ulster poet John Montague: “I always maintained that our loyalties had an order: to Ulster, to Ireland, to the British archipelago, to Europe, and that anyone who skipped a step or missed a link falsified the total.”

If, in the Irish context, the issue of unitary national sovereignty was always, as suggested above, in question—a matter of aspiration rather than acquisition, of imagination rather than possession—this was not always the case for Britain. Indeed it could be said that the British crisis of sovereignty only reached its peak in recent times. This was brought on by a variety of different factors: (1) the final fracturing of the long-enduring empire (with the Falklands, Gibraltar, and Hong Kong controversies); (2) the end of the Protestant hegemony (with the mass immigration of non-Protestants from the ex-colonies—including India, Pakistan, the Caribbean, and of course Ireland); (3) the entry of the UK, however hesitantly, into the Single European Union, which ended Britain’s isolationist stance vis-à-vis its traditional “alien-nations” in Europe, namely Ireland and France; (4) the ineluctable impact of global technology, finance, and communications; (5) the devolution of power from overcentralized government in Westminster to the various regional assemblies of Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast—and most probably, in due course, to different English regions also (a 1999 MORI poll, conducted by the *Economist*, showed 50 percent versus 27 percent of the English in favor of more devolved power to English regions); and finally, (6) the ultimate acknowledgment, with the mourning of Princess Diana and the election of Blair’s New Labour, that Britain is now a multiethnic, multicultural, multiconfessional community that can no longer sustain the illusion of an eternally perduring sovereignty. The old Tory vision of Great Britain as a timeless Anglo-Saxon Empire presided over by indomitable “little Englanders” is well and truly spent. Influential recent publications like the Parekh Report, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (2000), Yasmin Alibhai Brown’s *Who Do We Think We Are Now? Imagining the New Britain* (2000), and Andrew Marr’s *The Day Britain Died* (2000) all cogently demonstrate that new modes of postnational politics are now as ineluctable as they are desirable.

To be sure, Thatcherism represented one last desperate exercise in “denial” fantasy, finding its perfect foil in the IRA. Terrorist bombings of London and Birmingham momen-

tarily served to rally the British people against the alien Irish in their midst: people who looked and spoke like them but were secretly dedicated to their destruction. But even the IRA at its most menacing—and however associated with similar anti-British “monsters” like Galtieri, Gadafy, and Saddam Hussein—could not save Britain from itself. Thatcher’s last stand to revive one-nation Toryism was just that, a *last* stand. It could not prevent the dissolution of absolute unitary power, ultimately leading to the formation of regional parliaments in Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast. (The British and Scottish Election Studies of 1997, for example, already showed that less than 4 percent of the inhabitants of Scotland considered themselves British not Scottish.) The breakup of Britain was as inevitable as it was overdue. So much so that the enormous outpouring of grief at Princess Diana’s demise was mourning not just for a particular person but for an entire imperial nation.

If Ireland was present at the origin of the British *natio*, as I suggested in my account of the Statutes of Kilkenny, then it is equally present today—in the guise of the Ulster crisis and resolution—precipitating its end. Ireland is the deconstructive seed at the heart of the British body politic. A cracked mirror reflecting Royal Britannia’s primal image of its split-self. John Bull’s other island sending shock waves back to the mainland. An island behind the island returning to haunt its inventor.

3

The British-Irish “Council of Isles” is now a reality. This third spoke of the 1998 Agreement’s wheel—alongside the internal Northern Ireland Assembly and the North-South cross-border bodies—harbors, I suggest, particular promise. What the transnational model effectively recognizes is that citizens of Britain and Ireland are inextricably bound up with each other: mongrel islanders from east to west sharing an increasingly common civic and economic space. In addition to the obvious contemporary overlapping of our sports and popular cultures, we are becoming more mindful of how much of our respective histories is shared: from the Celtic, Viking, and Norman settlements to our more recent entry into the European community. For millennia the Irish Sea served as a waterway connecting our two islands, only rarely as a *cordon sanitaire* keeping us apart. And this is becoming true again in our own time with almost 30,000 trips being made daily across the Irish Sea, in both directions. It is not entirely surprising then that over eight million citizens of the United Kingdom today claim Irish origin, with over four million of these having an Irish parent. Indeed a recent survey shows that only 6 percent of British people consider Irish people living in Britain to be foreigners. And we don’t need reminding that almost a quarter of the inhabitants of the island of Ireland claim to be at least part British. Finally, at a symbolic level, few can fail to have been moved by the recent unprecedented image of the president of the Irish Republic, Mary MacAleese, standing beside the Queen of England on the battlefield of Flanders commemorating their respective dead—Irish and British. Poppies and shamrocks are no longer considered irreconcilable symbols of identity.

In light of this reawakening to our common memories and experiences, it was not surprising to find Tony Blair receiving a standing ovation from both houses of the Parliament of the Irish Republic on November 26, 1998, in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement. Such a visitation had not occurred for over a century, and the ghost of Gladstone was not entirely absent from the proceedings. Blair acknowledged openly on this occasion that Britain was at last leaving its “post-colonial malaise” behind it and promised that a newly confident Republic and a more decentralized UK would have more common tasks in the scenario of European convergence than any other two member states. East–West reciprocity was back on track for the first time since the divisive Statutes of Kilkenny.

Although no one is shouting about it, a *practical* form of joint sovereignty has been endorsed by the Irish and British peoples. The pluralization of national identity, epitomized by the provision of the BIC, entails a radical redefinition of the hallowed notion of sovereignty. In essence, it signals the *detritorialization* of national sovereignty—namely, the attribution of sovereignty to peoples rather than land. (A fact that finds symbolic correlation in the Agreement’s extension of national “belonging” to embrace the Irish diaspora, now numbering over seventy million worldwide).

The term *sovereignty* (from the Latin *superanus*) originally referred to the supreme power of a divine ruler, before being delegated to divinely elected “representatives” in this world—kings, pontiffs, emperors, monarchs—and, finally, to the “people” in most modern states. A problem arose, however, in that many modern democracies recognize the existence of several *different* peoples within a single state. And many peoples mean many centers of sovereignty. Yet the traditional concept of sovereignty, as already noted, was always *unitary*, that is, “one and indivisible.” Whence the dilemma: How divide the indivisible? This is why, today, sovereignty has become one of the most controversial concepts in political theory and international law, intimately related to issues of state government, national independence, and minority rights.

Inherited notions of absolutist sovereignty are being challenged both from within nation-states *and* by developments in international legislation. With the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907, followed by the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Charter of the UN, significant restrictions on the actions of nation-states were laid down. A system of international checks and balances was introduced limiting the right of sovereign states to act as they pleased in all matters. Moreover, the increasing *interdependence* of states—accompanied by a sharing of sovereignties in the interests of greater peace, social justice, economic exchange, and information technology—qualified the very principle of absolute sovereignty. “The people of the world have recognized that there can be no peace without law, and that there can be no law without some limitations on sovereignty. They have started, therefore, to pool sovereignties to the extent needed to maintain peace; and sovereignty is being increasingly exercised on behalf of the peoples of the world not only by national governments but also by organisations of the world community.”⁴

4. “Sovereignty” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* 11, 57.

If this pertains to the “peoples of the world” generally, how much more does it pertain to the peoples of the islands of Britain and Ireland? This is why I argued in *Postnationalist Ireland* (1997) for a surpassing of the existing nation-states in the direction of both an Irish-British Council and a federal Europe of regions. The nation-state has become *both* too large *and* too small as a model of government. Too large for the growing needs of regional participatory democracy; too small for the increasing drift toward transnational exchange and power-sharing. Hence my invocation of the Nordic Council as a model for resolving our sovereignty disputes—in particular the way in which these five nation-states and three autonomous regions succeeded in sorting out territorial conflicts, declaring the Aland and Spitsbergen islands to be Europe’s two first demilitarized zones. Could we not do likewise under the aegis of a new transnational British-Irish Council, declaring Northern Ireland a third demilitarized zone?

To date, such sovereignty sharing had been largely opposed by British nationalism, which went by the name of Unionism. It was, ironically, the Irish republican tradition (comprising all democratic parties in the Irish Republic as well as the SDLP and Sinn Fein in the North) that was usually labeled “nationalist,” even though the most uncompromising nationalists in the vexed history of Northern Ireland have been the Unionists. It was the latter, after all, who clung to an anachronistic notion of undiluted British sovereignty, refusing any compromise with their Irish neighbors, until Tony Blair blew the whistle and moderate unionism realized the tribal march was over. The final showdown probably came when the Unionists faced off against Her Majesty’s Army in Drumcree, prepared to do combat with the very Crown to which they swore unconditional loyalty. At that fateful moment it must have dawned on even the most fervid loyalist that the United Kingdom was no longer united. By contrast, John Hume’s “new republicanism”—a vision of shared sovereignty between the different peoples of this island—had little difficulty with the new “postnationalist” scenario. Indeed Hume had called himself a “postnationalist” for many years without many taking heed. And, curiously, one might even argue that Michael Collins was himself something of a postnationalist when he wrote that as a “free and equal country” Ireland would be willing to “cooperate in a free association on all matters which would be naturally the common concern of two nations, living so closely together” as part of a “real league of nations of the World”;⁵ a sentiment echoed by Linda Colley in her Downing Street address on the status of Britishness in the wake of the Belfast Agreement, where she concluded that “these islands may actually move closer together in the next century.”⁶

That the Blair government was prepared to grasp the sovereignty nettle and acknowledge the inevitable long-term dissemination of Britain, *qua* absolute centralized state, was to its credit. But it is not a decision taken in a vacuum. There were, of course, precedents for sovereignty-sharing in Britain’s recent experience, including Westminster’s consent to a limitation and dilution of sovereign national power in its subscription to the European Convention on Human Rights, the Single European Act, the European Com-

5. *Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 1921.

6. Linda Colley, “Britishness in the 21st Century,” *10 Downing Street Magazine* (1999). At <<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page3049.asp>>.

mon Defence Policy, and the European Court of Justice. If Britain had been able to pool sovereignty in these ways with the other nation-states of the EU, surely it was only logical to do so with its closest neighbor, the Irish Republic. Moreover, the EU principles of subsidiarity and local democracy, promoted in the European Charter of Self-Government, already signaled a real alternative to the clash of British-Irish nationalisms that had paralyzed Ulster for decades.

Nor should one forget that the forging of Britain into a multinational state constitution was predicated, at its best, on a *civic* rather than *ethnic* notion of citizenship. We need only recall how dramatically the borders of the British nation had shifted and altered in history (e.g., in 1536, 1707, 1800, and 1921) to envisage how they might shift and alter yet again—perhaps this time so radically as to remove *all* borders from these islands. The fact that British nationalism was often little more than English nationalism in drag does not detract from its salutary constitutional principle of civic (rather than ethnic) belonging.

The implications of the Good Friday Agreement are especially relevant here: The conflict of sovereignty claims exercised over the same territory by two independent governments—issuing in decades of violence—is now, as we have been suggesting, superseded by a postnational paradigm of intergovernmental power. The dual identities of British-Irish relations have long belied the feasibility of “unitary” forms of government and shown the necessity of separating the notion of *nation* (identity) from that of *state* (sovereignty) and even, to some extent, from that of *land* (territory). Such a separation is, I submit, a precondition for allowing the coexistence of different communities in the same society and, by extension, amplifying the models of identity to include more pluralist forms of association—a British-Irish Council, a European network of Regions, and the Irish and British diasporas. In sum, it is becoming abundantly clear that Bossuet’s famous seventeenth-century definition of the nation as a perfect match of people and place—where citizens “lived and died in the land of their birth”—is no longer tenable.

The fact is there are no pristine nations around which definitive state boundaries—demarcating exclusivist sovereignty status—can be fixed. (Germany’s attempts to do this from Bismarck to Hitler led to successive and disastrous wars.) The Belfast Agreement recognized the historic futility of both British and Irish constitutional claims on Northern Ireland as a natural and necessary part of their respective “national territories.” Instead, the Council of Isles (BIC) promises a network of interconnecting regional assemblies guaranteeing parity of esteem for cultural and political diversity and an effective comanagement of such practical common concerns as transport, environment, social equity, and e-commerce (the main items on the agenda for the second meeting of the BIC in June 2000). We are being challenged to abandon our mutually reinforcing myths of mastery (largely British) and martyrdom (largely Irish) and to face our more mundane postimperial, postnationalist reality. Might the BIC not, as Simon Partridge suggests, even serve as an inspiration to other parts of Europe and the globe still embroiled in the devastations of ethnic nationalism?

Conclusion

What the new Agreement allows, in short, is that the irrepressible need for identity and allegiance be gradually channeled away from the fetish of the nation-state, where history has shown its tenure to be insecure and belligerent, to more appropriate levels of regional and federal expression. In the Irish–British context, this means that citizens of these islands may come to express their identity less in terms of rival sovereign nation-states and more in terms of (a) locally empowered provinces (Ulster, Scotland, Wales, North and South England, the Republic, etc.); and (b) larger international associations (the BIC, EU, World Court, etc.). The new dispensation, I repeat, fosters variable layers of compatible identification—regional, national, and transnational—allowing anyone in Northern Ireland who wishes to declare allegiance to the Ulster region, the Irish and/or British nation, the European community, and, in the widest sense, the cosmopolitan order of world citizenry.

Citizens of the British-Irish islands might, I suggest, do better to think of themselves as mobile mongrel islanders than as eternal dwellers of two pure, God-given nation-states. There is no such thing as primordial nationality. If the nation is indeed a hybrid construct, an "imagined community" as Benedict Anderson says, then it can be reimagined again in alternative versions. The task is to embrace this process of hybridization from which we derive and to which we are committed. In the face of resurgent nationalisms in these islands and elsewhere, fired by rhetorics of purity and purification, we do well to recall that we are all mongrelized, interdependent, marvelously mixed up. So doing, we might be emboldened to replace the nationalist template of homogeneous identity with a postnationalist palimpsest of multiple identities.

What is true for the Irish-British situation is equally true for sovereignty crises in other parts of the world. One thinks of Bosnia, the Basque country, Chechnya, Cyprus, and, of course, Israel and Palestine. Several thinkers have been gesturing toward a post-nationalist vision of politics from Kant and Voltaire in the eighteenth century to more recent theorists like Hannah Arendt and Habermas in Germany, Derrida and Ricoeur in France, and Vattimo and Agamben in Italy.

Arendt and Habermas point in such a postnationalist direction when they call for a move beyond the equation of sovereignty and national independence toward a more cosmopolitan model of coexistence between citizens and peoples. Arendt first outlines her critique of sovereignty in an essay entitled "The Decline of the Nation-State"⁷ where she argues that human rights cannot depend upon national law if these rights truly derive from the fundamental status of human beings as humans—that is, as cosmopolitan citizens bearing universal moral rights over and above those granted by the legislatures of sovereign nation-states. But her critique of nationalist sovereignty becomes even more explicit in her later book *Crises of the Republic* (HBJ, New York, 1972), where she claims that so long as "national independence and the sovereignty of the state are identified" no solution to the problem of war is conceivable and "a guaranteed peace on earth is as utopian as the squaring of the circle."⁸

7. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1948).

8. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: HBJ, 1972), 229.

Jürgen Habermas is moving in a similar direction with his notion of a “constitutional patriotism” for the European community that would place constitutional ideals and laws above questions of ethnic allegiance or national origin. He speaks accordingly of a new cosmopolitanism based on a “postnational constellation.” Noting the erosion of the territorial sovereignty of nation-states, Habermas expresses the hope that this may open up a new space for: (1) cultural hybridization, (2) transnational mobility and emigration, (3) cosmopolitan solidarity, predicated on a neorepublican balance between private and civic liberties opposed to the neoliberal disregard for social justice, and (4) constitutional patriotism on a federal European scale inspired by principles of coordinated redistribution and egalitarian universalism.⁹ But Habermas is not naïve. He knows that such a postnational project has many obstacles to confront. One of the most challenging questions is, he insists, “whether the European Union can even begin to compensate for the lost competencies of the nation-state.”¹⁰ And the related question of the EU’s ability to act effectively, motivating citizens toward social solidarity, will depend in turn on “whether political communities form a collective identity beyond national borders, and thus whether they can meet the legitimate conditions for a postnational democracy.”¹¹ If these questions cannot be answered in the affirmative then no meaningful “Federal States of Europe” is possible. Or in Habermas’s own words: “If Europe is to be able to act on the basis of an integrated, multilevel policy, then European citizens, who are initially characterized as such only by their common passports, will have to learn to mutually recognize one another as members of a common political existence beyond national borders.”¹² This calls for a radical rethinking of both identity politics (the question of recognition and belonging) and constitutional politics (the question of rights and justice). And I fully agree with Habermas that the most promising context for such rethinking is that of a new postnational paradigm. But while I hope to have indicated certain signs of a paradigm shift in the British–Irish context, we are, I believe, still at the beginning. A postnational Europe is not a *fait accompli* but a task.

The Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben seems to be pursuing a similarly postnationalist vision when he calls for a postsovereignty solution to the Israeli–Palestinian crisis. It is necessary, he says, that the nation-states find the courage to question the “trinity of state–nation–territory” and to entertain the possibility that Jerusalem become—“simultaneously and without territorial partition—the capital of two different states.” This paradoxical condition of what he calls “reciprocal extra territoriality” (or aterritoriality) could, he suggests, in turn be generalized as a model of new international relations (*Means without End: Notes on Politics*, 2000). Here Agamben seems to endorse Derrida’s argument in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2002) that a future postnationalist configuration would be based on the model of open cities rather than sovereign bordered states. This means viewing citizens less as homogenous natives than as nomadic residents whose identity remains

9. Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 68f., 73–76, 103f.

10. *Ibid.*, 90.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 99.

flexible and plural. Similarly he recommends reconsidering Europe in terms of an "aterritorial or extraterritorial space in which all the residents of the European states would be in a position of exodus." The status of European would then become the "being-in-exodus of the citizen" rather than the being indigenous of the native. European space would thus mark an "irreducible difference between birth (*nascita*) and nation in which the old concept of people (which, as is well known, is always a minority) could again find a political meaning, thus decidedly opposing itself to the concept of nation (which has so far unduly usurped it)." Agamben concludes on a note of utopian urgency: "This space would coincide neither with any of the homogeneous national territories nor with their topographical sum... European cities would rediscover their ancient vocation as cities of the world by entering into a relation of reciprocal extraterritoriality." For he claims that only in a world "in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated is the political survival of humankind today thinkable."

I cite these contemporary political thinkers in conclusion to indicate that the postnationalist scenario I have been outlining above with respect to British-Irish relations is not an isolated or idiosyncratic dream but a significant part of a jigsaw that is at last taking shape. There are, to be sure, several missing pieces to fill in before the puzzle of sovereignty is solved. But each piece counts.