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Sectarian demography, territoriality and political development in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The demography of religion in Northern Ireland is politically charged because of the unresolved conflict between Irish nationalists and British unionists, assumed to be Catholics and Protestants, respectively. Territoriality defined in sectarian religious terms is of crucial importance both nationally and locally because the statelet was delimited to give it a "safe" Protestant majority. The region is thus particularly revealing for the study of political geography, territory and power. This was especially so following the 1991 Census which suggested a dramatic increase in the number of Catholics and growing sectarian segregation after two decades of armed conflict. The ensuing public discourse based on empiricist analysis of Census data was itself often explicitly sectarian, which raises important questions about whether research in politically sensitive areas simply adds to the problem being analysed or potentially transcends it, and whether policies based on inadequate analysis perpetuate rather than solve the problem.

Here we discuss, firstly, the limits of Census-based empiricism and the usually unacknowledged problems of data and interpretation which have resulted in a seriously misleading *“conventional wisdom”*. Secondly, we question its sectarian terms of reference, the over-identification of religion and politics, and misconceptions of ethnicity. We discuss sectarianism's complex relationships with ethnicity and territoriality, the functions and symbolic meanings of territory, and the connections between territorialities at different spatial scales. Thirdly, we focus on some of the flawed policy *“solutions”* associated with empiricism and sectarianism, including *“internal”* power-sharing and *“consociational”* strategies for political development. Local sectarian territorialities and conflicts are continually reproduced by the exclusive British territorial sovereignty at state level, which suggests that *“internal solutions”* within Northern Ireland would be *“cures”* perpetuating *“disease”*.



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Keywords

sectarian demography; territoriality; political development; national conflict; sovereignty; consociationalism

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