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# 'Race to the Park': Simmel, The Stranger and The State

Tanya M. Cassidy

## Introduction

In 1909, Georg Simmel opens his essay entitled 'Bridge and Door' in the following way, '[t]he image of external things possesses for us the ambiguous dimension that in external nature everything can be considered to be connected, but also as separated' (Simmel, 1997: 170). Ambivalence, meaning occupying two spaces at one and the same time, provides a stabilising social paradigm, and not a provisional condition of uncertainty. This paper discusses a socio-political drama in Ireland which makes active use of an ambivalent rhetoric, specifically linking notions of transcending boundaries.

In her inaugural speech (Tuesday, November 11, 1997), President Mary McAleese stressed notions of building bridges and inclusion.<sup>1</sup> The rhetoric of inclusion and building bridges had been a feature of her campaign from the outset. At the launch of her campaign on September 26, 1997, the front page of *The Irish Times*<sup>2</sup> reported that 'Prof. McAleese spoke several times of embracing and building bridges' and was questioned about whether her 'reaching out to unionists might not be as welcomed by some as [it] was [by] President Robinson.' The week before, on September 19, Mary Robinson, the newly appointed UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was quoted in the foreign news section of *The Irish Times*, vowing 'to dedicate her new role to building bridges between North and South, referring to the developed and developing worlds, while standing up for victims of injustice.' Obviously Robinson had extrapolated her Irish visions to her new role in the UN, but McAleese was adopting the same political rhetoric so as to suggest a logical continuity between herself and Robinson long before she made any explicit 'claim as natural Robinson successor', to quote the front page headline for the October 10 edition of *The Irish Times*. The success of this bridge-building rhetoric can be gauged from the headline of *The Irish Times* on October 1, the first day after the close of the presidential nominations: 'McAleese is clear to win.'

## Linking theory with method

*The Irish Times* front pages provided a discrete source of potentially fascinating socio-political data. Accordingly, the majority of *The Irish Times* newspapers from October 1 to October 29 were collected (the entire official election campaign period). Initially some *Independent* newspapers were also gathered, but later the decision was made to concentrate on *The Irish Times* largely because of its extensive Internet coverage. *The Irish Times* for the first time had a constantly updated web page devoted entirely to the presidential campaign, as well as being available essentially in its entirety on the net.

Both the print format newspapers and the Internet coverage were read, and reread, and coded for topics. Previous work on drinking in Ireland conducted by this author (Cassidy, 1996; 1997, forthcoming) had led to an exploration of theories of ambivalence dating back to Simmel, and it was felt that these theoretical notions were at play within this political performance. In one sense, we could argue that such ideas might help explain Mary McAleese's successful presidential campaign and the political rhetoric of bridge building and inclusion. Moreover, this data could serve as another example that might help illustrate and expand notions of ambivalence and socio-political theory.

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1. In 1999 Mary McAleese was elected President of Ireland in succession to Mary Robinson. The other candidates were Mary Banotti, Rosemary Scanlan (Dana), Derek Nally and Adi Roche.

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2. All references made to *The Irish Times* can be accessed via their website <http://www.ireland.com/>

## Simmel and ambivalence

Simmel stands out among the founding fathers of sociological thought as one who attempted to deal with 'the ambivalences of human action' (Levine, 1985: 9).

Simmel repeatedly expressed the view, for example, that a condition for the existence of any aspect of life is the coexistence of diametrically opposed elements. Simmel treated conformity and individuation, antagonism and solidarity, compliance and rebelliousness, freedom and constraint, publicity and privacy, as so many sociological dualisms co-present in social interactions and constitutive of various social relationships. These dualisms, he held, are inherent in social forms both because of man's ambivalent instinctual dispositions and because society needs to have some ratio of discordant to harmonious tendencies in order to attain a determinate shape (Levine, 1985: 9).

Only fragments of Simmel's ideas, argued Levine (1985), have ever entered mainstream sociology, and Merton (1976) stands out as one of the few sociologists of the last generation who took up the challenges of ambivalence.

Merton notes that sociological ambivalence 'focuses on the ways in which ambivalence comes to be built into the structure of social statuses and roles' (1976: 5).

It refers to the social structure, not to the personality. *In its most extended sense*, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behavior assigned to a status (i.e., a social position) or to a set of statuses in a society. *In its most restricted sense*, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations incorporated in a *single* social status (Merton, 1976: 6, italics in the original).

Merton's discussion concentrates mainly on the most restrictive sense of sociological ambivalence the 'conflicting status demands an individual may have within a particular social relation' (1976: 8). One of the famous examples that Merton gives of this core-type of ambivalence is the physician-patient relationship. He stressed that this is 'not merely a matter of social psychology but of role-structure' (1976: 19).

Simmel's social type of the stranger similarly has an inherent conflicting or ambivalent role-structure. Simmel's stranger does not conform to the traditional notion of someone who comes today and leaves tomorrow, but rather Simmel's stranger comes today and stays tomorrow: 'the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going' (Simmel, 1971: 143). Simmel's stranger is someone who crosses boundaries and therefore defines and defies boundaries, or builds bridges over them.

Using the notions put forward by Simmel and introduced to an English speaking audience by Merton, Mills says that 'the theory of sociological ambivalence proposes that individuals derive a positive benefit from normative dissonance, and, in some cases, depend upon it to manage the conflicting demands of complex role or status set' (1982: 2). Ambivalent norms or values within a society work to 'protect' the 'social order and provide a constraint against extreme behavior in groups' (1982:1). For the individual it gives a degree of 'moral autonomy within the framework of continued group conformity' (1982: 1). Mills goes on to put his argument in the context of social psychological field theory (Lewin, 1936), recognising that we all 'exist within a value space bounded by the varied partially inconsistent values and norms of our reference orientations' (1982:3). 'Our moral decisions are made within these boundaries' (Mills, 1982: 3).

One of the most important properties of this value space is the inconsistency of the various positions, which form its boundaries. That is, the group accords legitimacy to more than one normative position. By balancing incompatible claims, or using one set of values or norms to counter the demands of another, group members enjoy some degree of autonomy in the face of such demands (Mills, 1982: 3).

Thus, the inconsistencies, ambivalences, or ambiguities of the boundaries of the group are tied to the interplay between the individual and the group.

## Religion, anthropology and ambivalence

In some ways, the moral dimension inherent in this discussion makes it understandable that people interested in the study of religion have taken up similar issues. At the 1996 American Sociological Association meeting, R. Stephen Warner explored diversity in religious communities in American society, stressing the role ritual has in religion 'to bridge boundaries, both between communities and individuals' (Warner, 1997: 218). Warner argues that 'rituals can create – not only express – social solidarity' (1997: 16). Using ideas from authors such as Kertzer (1988), Warner says, '[i]t is as much the *emotional power of doing things together as the compelling logic of ideological agreement* that produces solidarity' (1997: 224; italics in original). Furthermore, he says 'the symbols around which ritual centres can and do carry multiple meanings; the more symbols are ambiguous, the more they produce solidarity in the absence of consensus' (1997: 17).

Bringing in notions of ritual, is reminiscent of the anthropologist Fredrik Barth who argues, like other reflexive interpretative anthropologists, that we need 'to discover the meanings, for the actors themselves, of their institutions and concepts – i.e., the interpretations by which they variously construct their worlds' (Barth, 1993: 97). We need to look at the duality of meanings in 'symbols, concepts and knowledge' (1993: 332). The answer lies in recognising and understanding the complexity of meanings associated with symbols. Rather than viewing symbols as providing a 'template or blueprint for organisation of social and psychological processes,' as Geertz (1973: 216) says, Barth argues that 'symbols are not in themselves the representation of ideas; their power of meaning arises in the conjunction of an image and the knowledge and experience you bring to it' (1993: 332). This is compatible with Bourdieu's ideas about the class distinctions associated with cultural artefacts such as food and drink. Barth concentrates on a religious social division, but his broader point is that the multiplicity of meanings should come from historical divisions identified by the actors themselves, whether class-based, or religious, or something else. Barth argues that this complex picture is accessible to the researcher and warns that:

[A]ll is not chaos: people pursue purposes, schemes, and conscious designs stubbornly and often collectively, thereby shaping many events; and various traditions of knowledge are taught and embraced, allowing people to build and repair conceptual worlds even while these are being undermined by other teachings and other experiences. From such crossing processes is generated the vast cacophony of discordant voices, ideas, and interpretations that coexist in a complex civilization: a characteristically shaped, disordered system containing emergent events and discrepant worlds, in a flux generated by identifiable processes, which we are in part capable of modelling (1993: 354).

The analysis of this complexity and variation, as Warner says, needs to move from an 'either/or polarisation' to a 'both/and inclusion' (1996: 7).

## Political action and ambivalence

Neil Smelser has discussed some issues surrounding ambivalence as a counter to rational choice theory, one of whose main proponents was James S. Coleman. Smelser argued, 'Rational-choice theory does not deal with the possibility that we can actively love and hate the same object simultaneously, or that such affective orientations can not come into an equilibrium with one another so as to permit optimising choice and action based on that choice' (1998: 4). Smelser goes on to say 'The sobering paradox is that although we as sociologists are perhaps among the best equipped to understand ambivalences, we scarcely think about or study them' (1998: 10).

Smelser's argument culminated in a discussion of political ambivalence. He announced that 'political institutions and processes offer opportunities for converting ambivalent feelings into univalent preferences' (1998: 11).

In the electoral process, voting converts individual ambivalence into absolute preference. Votes, too, are not revealed preferences but conversion of ambivalence into univalence (1998: 11).

Smelser's comments are focused at the level of voter preference, whereas this analysis of the Irish presidential campaign discusses the tendency of some political interests to maintain, and even perpetuate ambivalences. As Bauman has argued, the '*national state is designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers, not enemies*' (1991: 63, italics in original).

The typically modern practice, the substance of modern politics, of modern intellect, of modern life, is the effort to exterminate ambivalence: an effort to define precisely – and to suppress or eliminate everything that could not or would not be precisely defined (Bauman, 1991: 8).

Postmodernity, for Bauman, is a reconciliation with ambivalence, not in the sense of representing a later historical condition, but rather in the sense of being a reflexive awareness of and deconstruction of scientific and political positivisms. For Bauman, drawing inspiration from Simmel, the nation state as a political construct is specifically designed to manage ambivalent categories. Theories of the ambivalent aspects of the nation state are naturally attractive when treating a political figure claiming to represent the whole of Ireland.

## The Irish presidential campaign and ambivalence

The notion and rhetoric of bridge building or builder is ambivalent enough to be applied to a variety of issues, not only the notion of being Robinson's successor, but also to issues of Northern Ireland and the Irish Diaspora. On the day of the launch of her campaign, September 26, before the close of nominations, Mary McAleese (the government's presidential candidate, supported by Fianna Fáil, but not of Fianna Fáil) evoked two images from the United States. Like Martin Luther King she said she had a dream, and like Bill Clinton she said she wanted 'a bridge to the new millennium.' At the same time she is forced to defend this rhetoric in relation to her connections with 'the unionist spectrum' from which she claims to have received 'literally a mountain of correspondence and phone calls... telling her how delighted they are and wishing her well in this candidacy'.

As was remarked at the beginning of this paper, the campaign began with a defiant proclamation about McAleese leading the polls. This poll was taken the week before the close of nominations and did not include Derek Nally. The second day of the campaign once again discussed this poll (obviously *The Irish Times* was attempting to exploit the one poll for all it was worth), but this time the poll was discussed in relation to the support for the various parties (rather than in relation to the various candidates) and

with a picture of Adi Roche waving to supporters. It was not until the next day that Nally is mentioned. In *The Irish Times*' only article on the campaign that day, he is described as the 'cock of the walk'. In terms of media studies, it is significant that although this article appeared on the front page, it was below the fold and at the very bottom.

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Ray Burke, Minister for Foreign Affairs in the Fianna Fáil Progressive Democrats Coalition, was forced to resign because of alleged political corruption.

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In the second week of the campaign, attention shifted towards the Ray Burke affair.<sup>3</sup> This scandal culminated with his resignation, and was linked to a reflection on the new coalition government, in particular Fianna Fáil. The presidential campaign is not mentioned again on *The Irish Times* front-page until Thursday when an article appears discussing the car crash involving Mary Banotti's campaign team. The next day *The Irish Times* reports on a speech that Mary McAleese delivered in Cork where she 'stakes a claim as Robinson's successor', which is, incidentally, the title of the article. Once again, however, this article appears at the bottom of the fold, and significantly is coupled with a relatively light-hearted treatment of Bushmills whiskey and sectarian prejudice. This is the first of many linkages between McAleese and relationships between the two communities in the North. The following day, within the paper but referred to on the side of the front page, there is an article entitled 'Spring challenges McAleese - not a natural successor.' Incidentally, the only other presidential campaign story covered on the front page that day concerned Dana and the journalist Vincent Brown.

The front-page headline on the Monday of the third week of the presidential campaign is 'Blair to bridge gap by meeting SF' (Sinn Féin). Immediately below this is an article discussing McAleese's attitude to abortion. At the same moment, Blair talks of building bridges the discussion of McAleese reverts to her ability or inability to mediate conservatism and liberalism on social issues, a theme which *The Irish Times* web page coverage announced in their discussion of the candidates, where McAleese is profiled under the slogan 'Liberal Feminist or Catholic Conservative.'

The links to the north become more prominent and explicit the next day when the headline is 'Nally questions McAleese on SF,' and, in probably a deliberate sense of symmetry, the next article is about Blair stepping up the peace process. Nally discusses 'a Department of Foreign Affairs memo purporting to reflect some of her views on Sinn Féin' which he says, if accurate, indicates that Prof. McAleese 'works to a different moral agenda than most people in the Republic'. The following day it is reported that McAleese denies these allegations, but the headline reporting another poll, 'McAleese still in front as Roche vote collapses', detracts from this story. The next day a story appears, once again below the fold, discussing how McAleese questions Nally's motives behind his criticism of her. That morning on the Pat Kenny radio show Gerry Adams says he would 'probably vote for Mary McAleese'—a revelation which appears on *The Irish Times* web coverage that day and headlines their newspaper the following day together with an article that discusses the political disagreements between the government and Fine Gael caused by Adams' 'endorsement'. *The Irish Times* coverage continues to make links to other media coverage the next day when it discusses the appearance of all of the candidates on *The Late Late Show*, concluding that Banotti looked and performed better than McAleese, although conceding that McAleese 'had greater reason to be defensive after the most political week of the campaign.' The headline, however, for this day's paper is 'Reluctant Govt sets up inquiry into memo leak.'

The following week is dominated by a discussion of the government's inquiry into this memo. It becomes a political battle between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and McAleese refuses to comment. For the first time in the campaign, the front page of *The Irish Times* features a picture of McAleese both on Monday and Tuesday. The latter day was headlined with the article 'McAleese peace process role defended by Hume.' The political dispute between Ahern and Bruton continues the following day, although less prominently. Thursday, on the other hand is marked by the headline 'McAleese defends claim to act as bridge builder' surrounding yet another picture of McAleese. McAleese is extensively quoted in this article, and says '[i]t is a mistake to believe that one can build bridges from mid-stream to no man's land.' In other words, she is acknowledging boundaries rather than trying to cloud or obfuscate them. The next day there is no

coverage of the campaign on the front page, and the week ends on Saturday with the reporting of the third opinion poll, which states that 'McAleese remains on course to win'.

The final three days of the campaign begin with a last attempt by Banotti and her campaign team to state that despite the polls she still has a chance to win. The next day the campaign is not covered on the front page, and instead the headline refers to the American Wall Street decline (or near crash) which may indicate the degree of confidence in the outcome. Finally, the last day before the election, *The Irish Times* reports on a poll conducted two days before which, they said, showed McAleese had an 'unassailable lead.' Below this article, which incidentally also featured another picture of McAleese, was a picture of the US Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith and Frank McCourt, the author of *Angela's Ashes*, and the other two articles which appeared on the front page that day were also connected to the US: one about the US stock market recovery, and the other about the trial in the US of the British au pair. Thus, I would argue, *The Irish Times* is making an implicit link between Mary McAleese and the diaspora (a further identification of McAleese as Robinson's successor).

## Conclusion

The concept of ambivalence from the time of Simmel onwards has captured notions of opposites. Simmel argued that it is 'in the correlation of separateness and unity, [that] the bridge always allows the accent to fall on the latter' (Simmel, 1997: 172).

Because the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating – that is why we must first conceive intellectually of the merely indifferent existence of two river banks as something separated in order to connect them by means of a bridge (Simmel, 1997: 174)

Coverage of Mary McAleese's campaign has focused from the outset on the bridging or accommodation of opposites. Derek Nally attempted to portray McAleese as an outsider in the simple sense of being estranged from the normative moral sense of the Republic. This exclusivist, partionist case against McAleese collapsed because of McAleese's successful linkage of herself as a cherishable figure of ambivalence or liminality. The endorsement of John Hume at this point perhaps served to reinforce this, and perhaps link the entire affair to his accepted and highly approved interactions with disparate communities in the north.

McAleese, as was commented earlier, acknowledged rather than obfuscated these boundaries. Bauman remarks:

As boundary-drawing is never foolproof and some boundary-crossing is difficult to avoid, hermeneutic problems are likely to persist as a permanent 'grey area' surrounding the familiar world of daily life. The grey area is inhabited by *unfamiliars*; by the not-yet classified, or – rather- classified by criteria similar to ours, but as yet unknown to us (Bauman, 1991: 57).

Mary McAleese for a long time inhabited this grey area. In many ways, one might say it was by exploiting this grey area that she became President of Ireland.

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