

# Novelty in unionism & loyalism

Du 14 octobre 2021 au 14 octobre 2021


**One-day workshop at the Gustave Eiffel University, Paris**



**Novelty in Unionism and Loyalism**  
Journée d'étude

14 octobre 2021  
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Université Gustave Eiffel  
Rue des Frères Lumière,  
77420 Champs-sur-Marne

Organisatrices  
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In February 2020, in the wake of PM Boris Johnson's Brexit deal, Susan McKay asserted that "A century after the foundation of the Northern Ireland State, unionism is demoralised" (Susan McKay 2020). It appears timely to take a close look at unionism & loyalism, as the new political circumstances create uncertainty and also because the prospect of the commemoration of the foundation of Northern Ireland reignites debates over the status of Northern Ireland and encourages political posturing.

The aim of this one-day workshop is to explore the diversity of unionism & loyalism. Many authors have insisted on the plurality of identities that exist within it (McAuley *et al.* 2000, 2008 ; Shirlow 2012). There are Ulster unionists and British unionists (Todd 1987), those belonging to « middle » unionism (Edwards and Bloomer 2008) and « transformative » loyalists and « regressive » ones (Shirlow 2012). Besides, a series of pamphlets published

in the 1990s by Michael Hall shed light on the specific, multi-layered identity of working-class Protestants and « grassroots » activists (Farset 1994).

From a historical perspective, the organisers of the workshop wish to investigate what resources have been exploited by unionism & loyalism to adapt to shifting circumstances since 1921, in a variety of domains : politics, identity, community activism, rights and the arts. Unionists & loyalists created new discourses, new rites, new forms of cultural and/or political expression at certain key moments in history such as in the 1980s after the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Hutchinson contended that the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement led to a new process of “self-examination” and “self-discovery” among Northern Protestants (Hutchinson 2000) and gave way to a reappraisal of what constitutes Protestant identity. It gave birth to new projects notably in the field of community drama: for instance, Tom Magill worked with the Shankill Community Theatre Company in 1993 while the Ballybeen Community Theatre Group – founded by three women in 1991 – devised and produced *The Mourning Ring* (1995-1996) – an exploration of cultural identity issues (Alfaro-Hamayon 2009).

Since the Good Friday Agreement, new forms of activism, expression, dissent, and radicalism have also emerged. Connal Parr (2017) has sought to dispel misconceptions in relation to culture and theatre-making in particular. He describes theatre as a “safe thinking space” and playwrights as “myth-breakers” who are ready to challenge stereotypes and postures. He refers to the dramatists whom appear in his book as “a ferociously creative group of mythmakers and myth-breakers. They represent but one of Ulster Protestantism’s alternative cultures” (8). This is exemplified by the work conducted by Etcetera, a theatre company founded in 2013 in north Belfast’s Mount Vernon estate, or by Jo Egan on the Shankill (*Crimea Square*, 2013) and more recently by the Heel and Ankle Community Theatre Company (*Flute Flags and Flames*, 2015).

Moreover, in a recent study on Ulster-Scots identity, Hutchinson (2018; 2020) stressed its originality within the unionist tradition. He described it as a unique cultural form which offers multiple geographical imagined places – Ulster, Scotland, the United States. Interestingly, this polycentric form of identification runs contrary to mainstream attempts to build clear, delineated regional or national borders (2018, 2020).

Finally, as regards political developments, academics such as McAuley *et al.* (2000) and Shirlow (2019) have stressed the contribution of the Progressive Unionist Party and how this has instilled “novelty” in political thinking by opening a new ideological space and by promoting dialogue. Additionally, a number of authors (McAuley *et al.* 2000, Parr 2017) have emphasized the diffidence that exists towards mainstream unionist politicians. We wish to explore the links between this diffidence and the development of transformative loyalism and of community activism in various areas such as the arts, conflict transformation, education and human rights. As part of the G.I.S E.I.R.E.’s focus on the notion of rights in Ireland, the organisers of the workshop also wish to explore how groups within unionism & loyalism have referred to their “rights” over time and in what fields, the “right to march” of the 1990s standing as a case in point (Bryan 2000).

**Possible themes include, but shall not be limited to, the following:**

- \* The resources of unionism & loyalism in times of crisis since 1921
- \* Novel elements in discourse and/or in the forms of activism
- \* What imaginary sites/places have nourished unionism & loyalism?
- \* Shifts in identity: class identity; the links between language (Gaelic, English, Ulster-Scots, other) and identity
- \* Alternative voices within unionism & loyalism:

The arts (theatre, music, other); community activism (community groups); minorities (the LGBTQ+ community, women, age groups, other)

- \* New struggles for new rights
- \* Educational issues and projects
- \* The notion of “transformation” in unionism & loyalism: peacebuilding/conflict transformation; the experience of imprisonment, the contribution of former prisoners

**Please send proposals including a title, an abstract (250 words), and a short biography to Joana Etchart ([joana.etchart@univ-pau.fr](mailto:joana.etchart@univ-pau.fr)) and H el ene Alfaro-Hamayon ([helene.alfaro@univ-eiffel.fr](mailto:helene.alfaro@univ-eiffel.fr)) by June 12, 2021.** The language of the conference will be English.

**Organisers:** H el ene Alfaro-Hamayon (Laboratoire LISAA, Universit e Gustave Eiffel) and Joana Etchart (Laboratoire ALTER, Universit e de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour)

### Guest speakers :

. Wesley Hutchinson (Professeur  m erite, Universit e Sorbonne-Nouvelle, sp cialiste de la civilisation irlandaise) (*confirmed*)

. Susan McKay (journalist and author). (*Not confirmed yet*)

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