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Does identity change matter? Everyday agency, moral authority and generational cascades in the transformation of groupness after conflict

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Abstract

Everyday identity change is common after conflict, as people attempt to move away from oppositional group relations and closed group boundaries. This article asks how it scales up and out to impact these group relations and boundaries, and what stops this? Theoretically, the article focusses on complex oppositional configurations of groupness, where relationality and feedback mechanisms (rather than more easily measured variables) are crucial to change and continuity, and in which moral authority is a key node of reproduction. It uses the normatively weighted concept of transformation to augment existing research on boundary and identity change, while elaborating it to recognise the role of everyday agency in furthering change and moral inertia in impeding it. Substantively, the article compares the processes of everyday transformation of groupness in three cases that are very similar in historical depth, social embeddedness, symbolic opposition and everyday change, but very different in time-scale and with contrasting outcomes: successful transformation of reformation religious groupness; partial transformation of national groupness; and failed transformation of complexly-configured ethnic groupness in Northern Ireland. This allows tracing of the patterns and mechanisms at work. To anticipate, the article argues that everyday identity change can erode the moral authority of groupness. Its impact is generational and dependent on institutional linkages. The article highlights the importance of moral mechanisms as drivers of and obstacles to change; and it suggests ways that the obstacles could be overcome by radical policy interventions.

Keywords Groupness · Social-transformation · Moral authority · Religious division · Everyday cosmopolitanism · Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Everyday identity change is common after conflict, as people attempt to move away from constraining group identities, closed group boundaries, and particularist group perspectives. It takes a multitude of diverse, individualised forms that are socially substantive and politically relevant: breaching and blurring group boundaries socially and symbolically; challenging group norms and authority in friendships, partnerships and modes of childrearing; transversal identification and intermittent activism; new modes of everyday reasoning that lead to more universalist values; and everyday acts of kindness across boundaries. [1] These practices of everyday identity change may be uncoordinated and dispersed but together they create new pathways of understanding and moral interpretation; they are exemplary of how relations could be re-configured precisely because they are undertaken by neighbours and workmates.[2] Such everyday processes have been described by analysts as 'extra-ordinary' (Lamont & Mizrachi, 2012), 'creative and unexpected' (Curato, 2019, 9), 'creative' and with 'transformative potential'(Todd, 2018, 7), with 'disruptive and pacific potential' (MacGinty, 2021, 2) and as 'genuinely transformative of society' (Brewer et al. 2018, 267). But their impact after conflict is limited: even in paradigmatically successful peace processes, where violence has ceased and the structural conditions and state biases which incentivised group formation have been overcome, group division remains strong (Guelke, 2023). This article asks when and how these processes of everyday change may scale up and out to impact socially by changing oppositional group relations, closed group boundaries and particularist group identities in more universalist, open ways? [3]

This is to pose a foundational question about the relation of everyday agency and group division, and to focus attention on complex oppositional configurations of groupness, where relationality and feedback mechanisms (rather than more easily measured variables) are crucial to change and continuity. From a constructivist perspective there is every reason to expect everyday agency to impact on group division, and not simply through the force of numbers. Groupness – to use and adapt a term introduced into sociology by Brubaker - is a complex multi-levelled relational configuration.[4] If in hard cases it is embedded in structure, formal institutions

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[1] For analyses from Syria to Lebanon to Nepal to South Africa to Northern Ireland, see Bachleitner, 2021; MacGinty, 2021; Nagle, 2024; Riley, 2022; Brewer, 2018; Todd, 2018. For discussion of identity change in general and amongst community-, peace-, gender-, and women-activists and victims after conflict, see respectively Todd, 2005, Smithey, 2011, Nagle, 2017, Hoewer, 2014, O'Keefe, 2013, Brewer et al., 2018. There is now considerable sociological work on the patterns of identity change, but little on its social impact.

[2] The everyday is here understood as the broad sphere of home, work, neighbourhood, leisure, distinct from party politics, ideology and formal organisation. Everyday identity change is understood as dispersed socially-situated change by individuals with intersubjective intent and impact; it is at once individual *and* social.

[3] 'Scaling up and out' is the phrase MacGinty (2021) uses to discuss the potential impact of what he calls 'everyday peace-making'.

[4] Brubaker (2002) emphasised the relationality and emergent quality of group identification and solidarity. Lamont et al. (2016) broadened the concept explicitly to include social and symbolic boundaries. I broaden it to include what Cammet (2014) has called the institutional 'infrastructure' of group division.

and legal and military power, its social base, moral authority and personal anchors of identification lie in the everyday realms of family, home, neighbourhood, leisure, which are directly impacted by identity change and boundary work. Everyday agency can – in principle at least – incrementally hollow out the moral authority of group division. The predominant scholarly focus on power, violence and insecurity has directed attention away from this potential impact and the socio-cultural and moral mechanisms that block it.

In order to highlight these everyday processes and show what makes the difference between success and failure I compare three cases of similarly embedded and embodied groupness where violence has ceased but where everyday agency has contrasting outcomes: reformation religious groupness (with particular reference to parts of contemporary France and the Republic of Ireland); national groupness (with particular reference to the contemporary Republic of Ireland); and ethno-communal groupness in Northern Ireland after 1998.

Both modernisation theory and theories of ethnicity already address the question how change or continuity at the individual level impacts the group. A key insight of modernisation theory is that groupness is a simple variable that will change through the diffusion of modernising beliefs and norms (for example individual freedom, meritocracy) once violence and censorship end.[5] From an ethnic perspective, in contrast, change in group division is limited by individual psychology: ethnic identity is taken as a simple variable usually marked by category, and it is argued that in hard cases it is psychologically too deeply embedded to change.[6] Both answers are inadequate empirically. If diffusion of modernising values and beliefs is part of the process of change in groupness, it is radically insufficient to identify the mechanisms of and obstacles to change, or to explain the very long periods when closed groupness persists after violence ends and horizontal inequalities are reformed. Conversely, even where identity categories remain over a long period, and they do not always, the configurations of boundaries, values, beliefs and practices that make up everyday identity can change radically, impacting on group relations and understandings.

Each approach is also conceptually limited. One emphasises the form of change, not the barriers to it, while the other attributes group inertia to individual psychology. Each ignores the thresholds of change: the group inertia before diffusion finally takes place, the tipping points which lead to rapid change or reversal. Neither distinguishes change in an element of identity or groupness from change in the configuration. So for example the maintenance of group boundaries and oppositions is consistent with value change: reputational value cascades take place during and after conflict – in North Macedonia and Northern Ireland 'we are all pluralists now' – while the meaning and resonances of the new values remain group specific. Equally change in the identity category may signal adaptation of the old

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[5] 'Modernisation' covers many approaches from Inglehart and Welzel (2005), to some versions of critical theory. 'Diffusion' is a useful term used to explain cascades of change in single elements, for example beliefs or values (Kuran, 1998).

[6] For discussion focussed on ethnicity but relevant to both approaches see Conversi (2002).

configuration rather than change in self-other relations, while radical change in the configuration is consistent with maintenance of the category.

In this article, I take identity and groupness as complex relational configurations, with multi-levelled and multi-directional relations between them. Identity is understood here as a configuration, a 'multidimensional classification of the human world and our place in it' that also has evaluative implications (Jenkins, 2008, 5–6). It forms a 'prism' of perception, informed by a whole range of values, aims, assumptions and feelings, that interrelates self and other and orients practice (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015, 7). Identity change is understood as a process of distantiation from the socially-dominant classifications, that involves reshuffling, reinterpreting, adding and subtracting values, categories, assumptions, feelings, and that always takes place in an already meaning-saturated intersubjective context where it has immediate implications for relations with others (Todd, 2005). It is itself a form of agency and is discussed as such in the article. Groupness is understood as a multi-levelled complex relational configuration, underpinned by state and institutional structuring of relations, formed in dispersed everyday organisations and networks, from family to work and leisure where values are forged and boundaries enforced, and expressed in competing discourses. Configurations of identity and of groupness are thus mutually entwined, partly but only partly constitutive each of the other. Causal relations are therefore complex, not a matter of variables but of multi-levelled processes and feedback loops (Jong, 2023).

Given this understanding, the prospect of disjuncture between everyday identity and groupness is always present. Everyday identity in all its individualised forms is but loosely connected to wider ideological and political discourses: national and religious identity is typically 'personalised' (Cohen, 1996), with the motivating power of the collective category lying in its situatedness in micro-level social practice and personalised perception, and yet the organising processes and ideologically defining power of groupness lies elsewhere. There are likely to be multiple mechanisms by which everyday identity and boundary work may impact on groupness, reproducing, eroding, replacing, or remapping group boundaries and identities, and multiple counter-mechanisms by which symbolic and social exclusion is maintained (Wimmer, 2013; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Lamont et al., 2016). But it is easy to lose the wood of radical social change in the trees of micro-agency. In the analysis that follows I use the concept of social transformation (Sewell, 2005) as a tool to analyse the impact of everyday agency. The concept of social transformation adds five things to current work on change in configurations of identity and groupness: the decisiveness of change (its threshold quality whereby reversal is highly unlikely in the normal course of events); the moral directionality of change (towards greater openness and universality); the collective agency involved in such change (in particular convergent everyday agency); the sequencing of structural, institutional and identity change; and, by conceptually identifying a possible transformative outcome, it allows a focus on the obstacles which hinder this.

The article continues by clarifying the spectrum of groupness, showing the set of cases where transformation is possible and relevant, and the concept of transformation, arguing that recurrent questions in the literature can be addressed by exploring the everyday transformation of groupness. It proceeds to compare processes of

successful transformation of religious groupness, partial transformation of national groupness, and failed transformation of complexly-configured ethnic groupness in order to show the mechanisms and counter-mechanisms at work. My aim is to provide an account of the patterns of and obstacles to everyday impact on group division that is better than the available alternatives. The article concludes with discussion of moral agency, and the importance of creating a strong shared universalistic public arena of interaction and discussion that can counter the moral authority of groupness.

The spectrum of groupness and its transformation

Groupness

Groupness is a sprawling, relational phenomenon that spans fields; it is a matter of boundaries, meaning and institutionalised social practices, which give a basis for identity configurations which in turn reinforce or subvert the boundaries, meanings and practices.[7] It is treated here as a complex configuration whose properties are given by the intersection of distinct dimensions: the extent of social closure, from the most open and voluntary to the most harshly policed social boundaries; the form of identification, from ascribed and imposed to assumed and embraced; the comprehensiveness of institutionalisation across different fields; the thickness or thinness of cultural meaning, value and identity associated with group membership; and the extent of cross-cutting and overarching symbolic repertoires, especially normative ones, that give common reference points for shared understanding and aims.[8] In each respect, movement takes place up or down a spectrum; for example, closure or permeability can be assessed by such indicators as the degree of social mixing in neighbourhood, work and marriage, and of symbolic sharing of discursive repertoires in different fields; comprehensiveness can be assessed by the character of the party system, the segmentation of employment and ownership, and of the institutions of leisure and sport; policing by the responses to breaches of group norms. In hard cases, opening on one dimension or one field within it may be balanced by strengthening on another; decisive change in group division is then not a matter of a single variable – one belief or value in a single field of practice – but rather of the interlinkages between the parts.

Transformation is unnecessary at the hyper-fluid ends of the spectrum, and impossible at the traditional ends where groupness is taken simply as a fact of life. It makes sense in many modern societies where groupness is institutionally embedded but with cross-cutting and intersecting relations that generate heterogeneity and

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[7] Brubaker (2002) noted its 'contextually fluctuating' quality, and initially emphasised the fluctuating sense of group solidarity, although he goes well beyond this in his analysis of infrastructure in Cluj (Brubaker et al., 2006) and in his comparison (Brubaker, 2017) of different forms of groupness from nationality to citizenship to gender.

[8] See Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Wimmer, 2013; Lamont et al., 2016.

dynamism. Groupness is then at once a relation of unequal power and resources (between groups and within them) and a reservoir of moral authority; the obstacles it poses to transformation include not simply interests and security concerns, but also dispersed, endogenous frames of understanding and valuation that constitute the substance of the self. Moral authority is important practically because it is how people buy into groupness and actively self-police boundaries. It is important theoretically because it shows how groupness combines power and value, leading to identities at once embedded and contested, at once self-policed and constraining. Everyday transformation can take place as group moral authority comes into question, for example when new practices and new experiences generate evolving everyday moral understandings that are dissonant with group authority. Then the experiential glue of groupness – the key node where power and value are interrelated and mutually strengthen one another - begins to dissolve.

Social transformation

Social transformation involves what Sewell (2005) calls the dislocation of power and a concurrent relocation of meaning, through crystallising events that cascade into decisive change. Crucially, these meaning-saturated events are taken forward by collective agency, which is conceived not simply as the vehicle but also the emergent product of the transformative process which creates a new collectivity that is more universal, autonomous, reflexive.[9] Thus much of the literature on social movements emphasises the creative, active, diverse, experiential and iterative process of collectivity formation within social movements, and its capacity to resist ascription of polarised group identity and move towards a more open and universalistic stance.[10] Recent work has broadened the concept of transformation to a very wide range of contexts, from micro processes to transnational ones, and for phases of longer processes - potentially far-reaching institutional dislocations of power/meaning which have yet to translate to wider publics, or grassroots relocations of meaning which have yet to 'scale up and out' to general social impact.[11] In such cases, we have to think of beginning-transformations that may stall or fail, not simply completed ones. Most important for the purposes of this article, there is increasing emphasis on everyday agency as itself intersubjective, interactive, patterned, and potentially transformative.

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[9] The classic discussion is in Marx's Theses on Feuerbach, and this is continued in the critical theoretical and social movement traditions.

[10] Flesher Fominaya, 2015, 2010. See also Della Porta (2016, 2020), for whom the intense accelerated time of activism allows creative movement beyond the routine ascriptions and anticipations of daily life.

[11] In the past four years, there have been important publications on social, symbolic, structural, institutional and moral transformations (Fowler, 2020; Seeliger & Sevignani 2022; Petzke, 2022; Akhlaghi, 2022); political transformations of the EU (Laffan & Telle, 2023; McNamara, 2023), and in South Africa and Northern Ireland (Guelke, 2023); everyday transformations of social and political relations in post-disaster Philippines (Curato, 2019) and in war and post-war situations (MacGinty, 2021); transformations of democratic decision making (Curato et al., 2022; Della Porta, 2020), of sustainability (Scoones et al., 2020) and climate action (Lidskog et al., 2022).

Groupness, however, comes into the transformation literature as a contingent hindrance rather than as a theoretical challenge. A baseline assumption is that group particularisms can be overcome through collective action. Honneth (2017) argues that this is possible because a normative direction – an emancipatory interest - is inherent in the transformatory process when domination is symbolically asymmetric. Then the dominated, ascribed a negative identity by the supposedly universalistic dominant group, can re-claim the universalistic values and rid them of their resonances of power and particularism. If, however, this gives the conditions of possibility of normatively-directional transformation, empirically it may be uncommon. Not all relations of domination are binary and asymmetric, and thus movements against unjust power may themselves be informed by group-particularist perspectives. Moreover Honneth's schema may underestimate the contingency in the relation between structured practice, perceptions and ideas, whereby, with or without asymmetry, the values that an individual picks up in practice may be the universalistic resonances of a particularist perspective, or vice versa. Groupness, in short, remains a problem.

The social movement literature gives many examples of how groupness subverts or even colonises seemingly transformative processes (O Dochartaigh & Bosi, 2010); it reverses some of the achievements of pro-democracy movements (Della Porta, 2016); it crystallises or even generates group division (Useem & Goldstone, 2022); and it informs counter movements (Zaremberg et al., 2021). This is often taken as exceptional, the impact of an already divided society. But the interrelation of movement and field, recently demonstrated by Useem and Goldstone (2022), makes it an ever-present possibility. Collective agency develops within the crosscutting layers of organisation and meaning that surround domination and takes place in and through multiple layers of already pre-worked cultural and social materials, each of which must be rejected, adapted or assumed. Movements that prioritise one set of issues and creatively adapt concepts to deal with them may alienate or marginalise those concerned with others or may hit against symbolic boundaries and crystallise latent group antagonisms, so that collective identities 'do some things for us and others to us' (McGarry & Jasper, 2015, 6–8).

It is thus necessary to explore empirically the processes by which groupness is – or is not – undone. This article focusses on the everyday transformation of groupness itself, and shows how core transformational concepts – collective agency, the interrelation of meaning and power, cascading change, normative direction – appear in everyday form.

Transformation of groupness: contextualisation, case selection and method

The interlocking processes of modern European state, nation and religion building through successive wars produced a paradigmatically modern form of groupness that spread comprehensively over the fields of state, politics, education and economy, was densely embedded in familial and local institutions and networks, and decisively shaped by the locally and nationally dominant religion. In each field, whether religious or national or ethnic, the legacy was 'an inter-group rather than

inter-institutional conflict, with many of the same properties as an ethnic one and the same ability to reproduce itself. ..[It was] about difference and identity in the social sense, about access to resources, rights, and political power, about inclusion and exclusion, all of which became cumulative over time.'[12] In each field, groupness was articulated through moral and civilising notions of liberty and community, rights and justice, which claimed universality albeit with opposing group interpretations. This common context allows comparison of everyday agency across the very different fields. Within this, I focus on particular areas and phases of everyday transformation across the island of Ireland and France: the transformation of religious groupness in the Gard in France and in the Republic of Ireland, where it lasted well into the late 20th century; the contemporary everyday cosmopolitan challenge to national groupness, in particular in the Republic of Ireland; and the everyday challenges to group division in post 1998 Northern Ireland. In each case, violence has ended and groupness has been weakened by global flows, individualising processes and egalitarian reform (see Table 1).

In the empirical discussion that follows, I take strong groupness to include the following characteristics (adapted from Lamont et al., 2016, 23–26):

Unqualified self-identification; social segregation, including endogamy; comprehensiveness of institutional embeddedness (e.g. state, church, economy); oppositional symbolic boundaries, in particular the moral authority and moral opposition seen in discourse, judgements, boundary-policing.

Correlatively, marks of dissolution of groupness include:

Weak if any self-identification; little or no social segregation ; voluntary entry and exit; permeable symbolic boundaries and overarching moral principles

Marks of everyday identity change include distantiation from group norms through self-identification (categories, values, assumptions) and choices (of friends and partners, activities, institutional involvement).

In comparing the degrees of groupness across cases and over time, data from surveys and census are important, not always available (e.g. in the French case for religion) or commensurable (between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), and always radically insufficient. They can quantify decline in churchgoing, not decline in the moral authority of the religious group. They give nominal self-identification, not its practical interactive significance. They do not show moral agency or new ways of thinking about old categories. Thus I make much use of interviews and participant observation, triangulated with other evidence and with conclusions checked with experts in the field. (Details in online appendix).

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[12] Ruane (2021, p. 116) is writing here of Irish religious conflict but the point has wide relevance.

Table 1 Conditions and processes of transformation of groupness

	Fields	Gard religion	Republic of Ireland religion	France nation	Republic of Ireland nation	(N)Ireland community
Long history 16th c. - present[a]	State support	16th -18th c. Presence until late 19th c.	1922. Presence through 20th c.	To present	To present	Late 20th c.
1950s- 60s	Violence ends	Early 19th c.	Early 20th c.	Mid 20th c.	Early 20th c.	Late 20th c.
Economic globalisation	State role	None	Mixed	Strong	Strong	Strong
	Self-identification	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Ideas of modernisation taken up by post-war generation	Social segregation	Mixed	Strong	Territorial boundaries strong	Territorial boundaries mixed (open to UK, NI)	Very strong
Radicalisation in late 1960s	Endogamy	Enforced	Enforced	n/a	n/a	Enforced
	Institutional practices	Churches very strong, economic niches	Churches and schools very strong, economic niches	State, army, politics, sports, arts media very strong, EEC from 1957	State, politics, sports, music, media very strong. Opening of economy from 1958	State, churches, politics, sports, leisure, media, very strong, economic sectorisation
	Moral authority	Strong but contested	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
	Agency	Individual contest, exit	Individual contest, later social movements	Social movements anti-war and student	Individual contest, some social movements	Individual contest, intenses social movements
	Groupness	**Strong**	**Very strong**	**Very strong**	**Very strong**	**Very strong**

Table 1 (continued)

	Fields	Gard religion	Republic of Ireland religion	France nation	Republic of Ireland nation	(N)Ireland community
1970s-90s Globalisation, Europeanisation and normative force Europe. Pluralist, post-sovereigntist and regionalist ideas	*State role*	None	Weak	Strong, moderates national groupness	Strong, moderates national groupness	Strong, reproduces groupness until 1990s
	Self identification	Important not over-riding	Strong	Strong, plural meanings	Strong, plural meanings	Strong
	Social segregation	Rapidly decreasing	Rapidly decreasing	Permeable regionalism	Permeable, Europeanism	Strong
	Endogamy	Rapidly decreasing	Yes but decreasing	Na	Na	Slowly decreasing
	Institutional practices	Church attendance collapses	Church attendance declines Schools strong+permeable	More permeable	More permeable	Strong
	Moral authority	Collapse	Contested - weakening	Strong and contradictory	Strong and contradictory	Strong and contested
	Agency	Cascading individual choice	Increasing Social movement+indiv choice	Regionalism, pluralism, Social movement	Limited	Individual contests, social movement
	Groupness	**Weak**	**Rapidly weakening**	**Strong+permeable**	**Strong+permeable**	**Strong**

Table 1 (continued)

Fields	Gard religion	Republic of Ireland religion	France nation	Republic of Ireland nation	(N)Ireland community
2000s–2020s Cultural globalisation, economic globalisation, end of post-sovereign moment. Cosmopolitan ideas					
State	None	Almost none	Moderating contradictory	Moderating contradictory	Weak+contradictory effects,
Self-identification	Weak	Moderate	Strong, different meanings	Strong different meanings	Mixed
Social segregation	Weak	Weak	Open borders	Open borders	Mixed
Endogamy	Unimportant	Unimportant	na	na	Enforcement less effective
Institutional practices	Churches empty.	Churches weak Schools permeable	Strong contradictory	Strong and moderating	Decreased, but politics, education,
Moral authority	Weak	Collapsed	Problematic	Strong, pluralist	Weakened
Agency	Individualised	Cascading choices	Cascading culture shift	Cascading culture shift.	Very strong individualised contest
Groupness	**Collapsed**	**All but collapsed**	**Permeable contested contradictory**	**Permeable contested contradictory**	**Strong**

[a]See online Appendix T1

Sequences, mechanisms and obstacles in processes of everyday transformation of groupness

Phasings

Table 1 schematises the forms and depth of institutional embeddedness, the sequences and timescales of change, and the resulting forms of groupness since the middle of the last century. I follow Lamont et al. (2016, 24) in using 'strength' as a 'heuristic device to aid comparison across cases'. The table shows major similarities across the cases in strength of groupness in the post-war period, in the contemporary processes impacting (including economic globalisation, EU political development, and later cultural consumerisation), and the global ideas diffusing (modernising in 1950s-60s, pluralist in 1970-80s, cosmopolitan in 2000s), and in the extent of everyday agency. On a modernisation perspective, each of these cases should be a prime candidate for loosening and weakening of groupness. Even allowing for other differences in timing and sequencing, however, Northern Ireland groupness does not weaken comparably to the other cases.

Case 1: Religious groupness in the Gard, France and the Republic of Ireland. Recursive change and a generational cascade

Across Europe, in areas where the different populations lived in proximity, religious closure continued into the second half of the twentieth century yet change, when it happened, was swift and generational. [13] In the 1950s in the department of the Gard in France, there was a sizeable Protestant minority, territorially concentrated in villages and in parts of Nîmes, with its own economic networks and niches (Appendix R1). Churchgoing was very high amongst both Protestants and Catholics, self-identification was on most accounts strong, and endogamy enforced by family and neighbourhood. By the 2000s, the demography of the area was totally changed, churchgoing had collapsed, intermarriage was so common it was hardly noted and even those who continued to self-identify only occasionally highlighted this (Appendix R2). Religion kept some importance as heritage and sometimes as belief, but not as closed groupness (Ruane, 2014b). Voluntary networks continued among Protestants – associations, bookfairs, tours of the Protestant cemetery in Nîmes and of the Musée du Désert in the Cévennes – but now staffed by a few volunteers, who might be incomers, converts or just interested helpers.

In the Republic of Ireland in the 1950s, the Protestant population had declined to about 3% but remained substantive in the border counties and parts of the South-West (for comparison with the Gard, Ruane, 2014a, 2021). Churchgoing was very high, still over 90% in 1971, and endogamy was locally enforced (Inglis, 1998). By 2018, churchgoing had fallen to just over 30%. Nominal religious

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[13] The best examples are in the stretch of Europe where a religious mix endured from the 17th century, including parts of France and Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and Ireland. See Benedict et al., 2014; Cabanel, 2022; Ruane, 2021; Wahl, 2004; Wolffe, 2013, 2014.

self-identification remained (in the 2022 census, only 14% declared themselves of no religion) but mixed marriage was very high (in 2006 more than two-thirds of Protestants' marriages in some border counties). In a set of important referenda in 2015 and 2018 the public voted decisively to rid the constitution of the last vestiges of Catholic social morality. The churches remain in control of most of the schools, although now most religiously-controlled schools accept pupils of all religions and none (Appendix R3).

The change in groupness, often attributed to the impersonal process of 'secularisation', was in fact a product of a confluence of factors (see Ruane, 2014a, 2021), including everyday agency that magnified over successive generations and in the end cascaded. Schematically, the first generation in the mid-century challenged group moral authority in the name of shared values – religious, political or humanistic – at considerable personal cost. Older village respondents in the department of the Gard recounted the familial divisions and tragedies that followed mixed marriage in the 1950s, while in Ireland mixed marriage disputes at this time gave rise to the Tilson case which led all the way to the Supreme Court (Jameson 2023) and the Fethard on Sea Catholic boycott of Protestant businesses.

By the 1960s, contest with religious authority was overt and ecumenism brought greater institutional permeability. Mixed marriages increased but still faced social pressure: one mixed marriage respondent in rural Ireland whose husband later died was asked by his family to give back the wedding presents (Appendix R4). But the moral examples were important. In one Gard village, after the first mixed marriage, a spate of others followed. The generation that came of age in the 1970s and 1980s imbued with values of modernisation, took for granted what the first had achieved with difficulty. They negotiated more permeability in boundaries, routinely contesting the moral authority of the churches in particular arenas. In the Gard this coincided with demographic shift and the collapse of the village economy so that by the 1990s, religious groupness had lost all moral authority for the young (see Ruane, 2014b).

In Ireland a parallel process was closely interrelated with slow institutional change. In the 1970s, the Protestant minority opened their schools and social institutions to Catholics, in part to stem the exit of their own young, Catholics took up the offer, and religious mixing and mixed marriage increased. The scandals around the Catholic church in the 1990s accelerated the implosion of its moral authority. For the third-generation – coming of age in the 2000s –the repertoires of religious openness that had been morally heroic for the first generation became common sense and were further generalised. Religious boundary-blurring no longer breached family and community norms but fed back into them in interactive fashion to change them further (Cañás Bottos & Rougier, 2006).

The outcome was sudden and decisive. In Ireland, the young led the movements to remove the last vestiges of Catholic teaching from the Constitution. Religious belief may remain but the moral authority associated with religious groups has gone, the emergent church is a voluntary one, and religious difference – where it is noticed at all – no longer carries closure (Ruane, 2021; Inglis, 2008; Ganiel, 2016). What makes this a decisive transformation of groupness is neither individual exit (which could and did happen earlier), nor a secularising battle that created a new group

division, but the increasingly voluntary character whereby configurations of identification and belief are remade in plural, non-binary ways.

The process was phased; everyday change came after the hollowing out of institutional and structural power was all but complete, and it accelerated the institutional process (Ruane, 2021). But the final phase was largely accomplished by everyday agency in an ongoing interactive process of challenging, eroding and finally – in a cumulative and recursive generational process - decisively dismissing the moral authority of religious groupness. The feedback processes that had once linked group moral authority, churches' political power and parishioners' economic interests were decisively broken. The moral repertoires opposed to religious authority became part of convergent common sense and young people moved on to a more generalised openness (see next section).

Case 2: National identity, nationalism and everyday cosmopolitanism: cultural cascade and uncertain interactive effects

National groupness involves a more complex matrix than religious, with a multiplicity of groups-in-relation institutionally embedded in a multiplicity of states, polities and national movements in conflict or cooperation. Within this matrix, particular sets of national boundaries may be permeable and overlapping and national identities nested, feeding into and facilitated by more open state policies and transnational institutions.

In the post-war period, global economic processes led to more sharing of sovereignty that gradually undermined the infrastructure of national groupness (in the European Union (EU), motorways, legislation for women's equality, food safety, travel conditions, and finance now embody EU rather than nation-state decisions and belonging). This was accompanied by sequential culture shifts – diffusion of modernisation, pluri-nationalism and proximately everyday cosmopolitanism repertoires. One can read Keating's extensive work as arguing that when institutional options open, then recursive change takes place in which everyday agency plays an important part – for example the plurinationalism and postsovereigntism typical of regionalist movements and voters in the 1990s and early 2000s that promised to bypass national opposition and nationalist conflict (Keating, 2001). Conversely, when states reassert their power and moral authority within and without, traditional nationalist claims to separatism and conflicts over sovereignty return (see Keating, 2021). One might generalise Brewer's (Brewer et al., 2018) insight, that without recursive avenues for action, disillusion and reversal set in. But despite the political reversal, there is some indication that the identity-work of the previous phase carries over cumulatively to the new phase (for Scotland, see McCrone & Keating, 2023).

The new phase of 'everyday cosmopolitan' culture shift has taken place in a context where recursive action to weaken national groupness seems more and more difficult. 'Everyday cosmopolitanism' has been defined as a reconfiguration rather than a rejection of nationality: 'a cultural disposition involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of 'openness' towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially those from different 'nations'' (Szerszynski

& Urry, 2002, p 468). Only in the last decades has it become a mass phenomenon, culturally cascading amongst youth, from France to Korea, and from the USA to Brazil (Cicchelli et al., 2021; Cicchelli, 2019; Zilberstein et al., 2023) and supported not simply by the diffusion of new ideas but also by the varied new globalising practices – from educational exchanges to the tech and communication industries to the global marketplace. It has been shown to be highly diverse, both between different states and within them (Cicchelli et al., 2021; Cicchelli & Octobre, 2017; Zilberstein et al., 2023). Lamont (2023) argues that it offers a new imaginative direction and new moral repertoires for action that have already impacted on inclusion within the state.

The impact on national groupness and nation-state boundaries – and indeed the channels by which it might so impact – is much less clear. In EU states it informs radically opposed parties and positions, and channels for impact on EU politics are absent. This invites political disillusion and reaction. It is here that the Irish case – although still inconclusive – is instructive in showing how the new repertoires may reshape existing institutional channels and impact on national identity and boundaries.

In the Republic of Ireland change in national groupness is a matter of meaning not categorisation. In 2011, after a massive wave of in-migration, 86% of the population identified as Irish only and, if the foreign-born are not included, the proportion of 'Irish only' is 99%. But economic boom and bust, immigration, continued tensions with and within Northern Ireland, highlighted the impossibility of taking the meaning of national identity for granted. Young people have responded in a distinctive way with a major generational shift in voting behavior and attitudes to social morality (Quinlan, 2016). In loosely semi-structured discussions between 2020 and 2022 with 32 young people, of whom half in the Republic of Ireland (Appendix N1), that centred on contentious national issues, we found many of the repertoires of everyday cosmopolitanism: general universalistic values, openness to diversity, capacity to relativise different viewpoints including their own, egalitarian values of social justice rather than meritocratic pursuits. In the Republic of Ireland, these were used to critique what the young people saw as a conservative national consensus while opening the symbolic boundaries towards Northern Ireland that had been closed by previous generations shocked by the violence there (Appendix N2). In effect they took the island of Ireland as the unit and unification as the project that could help realise everyday universalist values and create a new and more progressive union of different peoples on the island. They did so by adopting and changing older national tropes (a united Ireland) and nationalist vehicles (they voted for the political party of Sinn Féin) but qualifying both in light of the institutional and identity achievements of the previous generation: the institutional pathway towards a united Ireland provided for in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998, and the removal of Catholicism from the centre of Irish national identity. They recursively adapted universalistic norms for the local situation, and local institutions for universalistic aims. This cumulative generational process is closer to the religious pattern of everyday change than may appear at first sight, and shows how political events, social pressures and the diffusion of ideas impact through the very specific prism of identity (McCrone and Bechofer, 2015, 7,17). Whether the outcome opens up national groupness or

renews closure, depends in large part on the conversations and negotiations that may develop on an all-island basis.

Case 3: Counter-mechanisms in a deeply divided place: Everyday agency and continued groupness in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement 1998

In the area that became Northern Ireland after partition in 1921, transnational processes of reformation, state formation, nationalist mobilisation, as well as colonial displacement, had led to a multi-vectoral form of groupness, and group inequality became comprehensively institutionally embedded and symbolically oppositional across (almost) all fields.[14] Barritt and Carter (1962) note the 'stability' of group relations in the 1950s while Harris (1972, 148) notes their embeddedness and embodiment in a rural area. In a wide-ranging review of the contemporary literature which assesses 'ethnic' interpretations, McBride (2023) concurs.

The institutional infrastructure of groupness was very slowly undermined. Only from the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, and in a new alliance with the Irish state, did the British state unevenly withdraw from its support for unionism. The final stages of withdrawal came only after the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998, with the definitive cessation of republican violence and decommissioning of weapons, the dismantling of British military infrastructure, the reform of the security forces, and, on the socio-cultural level, a weakening of the symbolic impact of British sovereignty and a making permeable borders with the Republic of Ireland. This made Northern Ireland an open post-sovereigntist region with the prospect of future change to a united Ireland if and only if there were concurrent majority consent in referendums in each jurisdiction.

Deindustrialisation in the 1980s all but erased the heavy industry in which Protestants had advantage, while an effective state programme of fair employment from 1989 removed communal inequality in employment. The GFA completed this process, with its provisions for undoing most of the remaining horizontal inequalities, marginalising violence, and instituting a strong equality and rights regime (Coakley & Todd, 2020, 545–547). Group-centred institutions continued to exist (churches, schools, parties, sports clubs, local and charitable associations) but they coexisted with mixed organisations and, with the exception of education, they were for the most part voluntary. There was also a strong peace-building civil-society sector.

The GFA was followed by a decade of very extensive everyday identity change as more people distanced themselves from closed, totalising and oppositional forms of group identity and boundaries. In a range of works, Brewer shows that a majority of self-defined victims were open to compromise rather than group opposition (Brewer & Hayes, 2013; Brewer et al. 2018). Mitchell and Ganiel (2011) show that a very significant minority (close to a third) of evangelicals, traditionally a very conservative section of Protestants, are religiously liberal and politically moderate. Smithey

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[14] For a modern classic study see Whyte, 1991.

(2011) shows quite radical change in openness and ideals amongst one-time politically active loyalists; although he does not quantify this, that it exists at all is significant. In a largescale comparative study, Todd (2018, 97–122) shows that in the mid 2000s, identity change (assessed in terms of distancing from conventional constructions and norms of groupness, see Appendix NI1) was twice as common in Northern Ireland as in the Republic of Ireland and more radical. Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) surveys through the 2010s showed over half of the population distance from *some* aspect of conventional group identity (religion, *or* national identity, *or* nationalism) although only a few from all (see Appendix NI2). By the mid 2000s, weekly church-going was a minority practice, in the 2021 census increasing numbers (17.4%) had distanced from religious identity, and most were already 'everyday cosmopolitans', in principle at least open to the culture and traditions of others (Coulter et al., 2021, 194-6 and Appendix NI3). Mixed marriage was more common, estimated at around 11% in the 2010s. Meanwhile there had been a sequence of major symbolic events from decommissioning of IRA weapons, to a Sinn Féin/DUP partnership in government, to the Queen's visit to Ireland, to the sequence of public meetings that the Deputy First Minister and ex IRA leader Martin McGuinness had with her.

But the social impact of this everyday agency was limited. Groupness remained strong not just in politics but in social segregation; most workplaces were now mixed, but neighbourhoods and schools were not. After a period in the 2000s when cross-community mixing among young people increased significantly, it has again declined (Knox et al., 2023, p 3). Increasing political conflict in the 2010s fed back into everyday life: on one key indicator of strong symbolic boundaries, those pro-union Protestants who would find it 'almost impossible' to accept a united Ireland increased threefold, from an all-time low of 14% in the mid 2000s to 41% in 2019 (Northern Ireland Life And Times surveys: https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/polatt.html#conpref FUTURE1. see Appendix NI4). While there is much debate about the extent and causes of the political reversals of the last decade the social process is clear: there has been no cascade away from groupness, and no evident generational magnification of change.

There are of course many reasons that people maintain group solidarity, from ontological insecurity (McAuley, 2016), to desire for status (Holland, 2022), to fears of a return to violence, to perceived interest, to rational concerns about the state in control. These create a minority of strong group identifiers in Northern Ireland who are unlikely to change in the immediate future. But they do not explain why the many who distance from groupness do not have longer term generational impact. Why did the everyday changes not multiply and magnify over generations, undermining group moral authority?

Four mechanisms were present in Northern Ireland, that did not exist as strongly, or at all, in the other cases.

First, group moral authority maintained an inertia because there were no shared public normative repertoires to guide change for first movers. Groupness was symbolically comprehensive – at once religious, colonial, ethnic, national and political - and even the few shared reference points created by the GFA were easily assimilated

within group opposition.[15] There was, in short, a moral chasm to overcome. Thus those who moved away from groupness were thrust into radical moral questioning in which they created diverse new repertoires rather than strengthening existing shared ones; thus groupness maintained its moral weight even while very radical rethinking went on amongst a minority. This is demonstrated in Todd's (2018) comparative study of otherwise similar mixed marriage couples in the Gard in France, in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. In each site, their emotions and commitments unambiguously pointed them away from groupness, as they negotiated newly discovered differences on issues like children's upbringing, education, relations with neighbours and family. In the Gard and in the Republic of Ireland, these couples negotiated under a shared normative umbrella of republican values, respect for minorities and/or ecumenism. In Northern Ireland there was no mutually acceptable normative umbrella and each couple had to create their own overarching values, rethinking some of their most basic assumptions in weeks of anguish and crisis.

Second, the proximity of recent violence and associated trauma increased the depth of moral dilemmas and the personal cost of moral rethinking. Even centuries later, it may be difficult to confront the very major moral oppositions around the foundations of a state and its violence past and present: current heated arguments in the Republic of Ireland about a 1922 massacre of Protestants show the difficulty of the moral issues even when trauma is distant.[16] This is compounded when recent trauma encourages a partisan moral outlook – what Bar-Tal (2013) calls a 'conflict ethos' – that justifies the group stance and makes sacrifices appear worthwhile (Brewer et al, 2018, 36). Peace and reform overturn these meanings and require revaluation, sometimes of the individual's entire moral compass. This was evidenced in my interviews: one person spoke of her anguish as she found herself having to revise her view of republicans as 'monsters'; one unionist spoke of his dark night of the soul as he had to weigh the moral benefits of peace against the moral evil of letting terrorists go free (Appendix NI5). Such painful revaluation is hindered by the brutalising effects of violence for those who have closed themselves to suffering neither understand nor respect the process and taunt those undertaking it (see Brewer et al, 2018, 17–26).

Third, dependence on group support networks slows the magnification of change over generations. Despite extensive reform of formal economic and political institutions in Northern Ireland, informal non-market domestic and neighbourhood systems provide support for those working in the formal institutions. [17] Only the

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[15] The GFA was never fully legally codified, and thus never became a shared reference point but rather a continuing object of negotiation and conflict (see Guelke, 2023). Ecumenical tropes were too thin to cover all dimensions of opposition, and while some small groups developed them to do so, it involved major creative effort and remained a minority perspective (see Mitchell & Ganiel, 2011).

[16] For example, four historians of the period recently argued for a less polarised and emotive approach to this event. https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/2024/02/12/the-dunmanway-massacre-of-1922/, accessed 06 March 2024.

[17] In one recent study nearly two-thirds of childcare in Northern Ireland is by family and friends, compared to less than one third in the Republic of Ireland (Curristan et al., 2023). In comparison, by the second half of the 20th century most of the French population had access to early years schooling from age 2 ½ and many to state funded crèches at earlier ages.

relatively advantaged – professionals, the wealthy - can afford to distance from these group networks.[18] This affects not simply those who affirm groupness but also those who partially detach from it. In the 2000s, Theresa O'Keefe interviewed working class single mothers from Protestant backgrounds who returned to their community for practical support and constrained their interactions (and therefore the development of their own ideas) accordingly – for example, it became just 'too difficult' to date Catholics (Todd, 2018, 139 − 40). Dependence meant that challenge to the moral authority of the group was kept hidden, and thus limited in extent and impact. The children were brought up in the same community, socialised not simply by their liberal mothers but also by the wider norms, memories and networks of the community.[19] This constrains the generational magnification of everyday change: the gradual relocation of meaning, provoked by new socio-economic practices, takes place within the ethical constraints of group boundaries and each generation has to renegotiate change anew.

Fourth, the party system gives moral weight to bloc parties. Only a cascade away from groupness would drain the parties of support. Without this, the parties retain political and reputational-moral weight beyond their numbers because those who distance from the blocs are radically culturally, socially and politically diverse – there is little in common between a young Belfast gender activist and a mid-Ulster farmer who is trying to keep good relations with his neighbours - and many have difficulty linking into politics at all.[20] By the 2020s, despite a very large cluster of disaffected and disengaged, the opposing bloc-parties still took 80% of the first-preference vote, giving them disproportionate strength and capacity to slow the 'scaling up and out' of local-level change.

In this case, despite radical structural reform and extensive everyday identity change, the normative structure of the public sphere and widespread social dependence acted as brakes on its magnification, helped by the party system. These mechanisms stop those who positively want change from making an impact: they do not depend on the numbers or strength of committed groupists. Like threats of violence, but in the socio-cultural field, they facilitate a return to oppositional groupness even though most people do not want this.

Patterns of everyday transformation

The comparison shows that groupness has an inertia. It is reproduced by moral authority that outlasts power, violence and inequality. Dispersed, everyday identity change erodes this moral authority. It is a necessary part of transformation, and it

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[18] Thus while identity shift has been widespread across classes, there remains a strong class weighting to its form (Holland, 2022).

[19] This augments the impact of a still largely divided school system: children enter school at age four and a half already socialised in their group and attuned to pick up on division.

[20] For the spectrum of 'others', see Agarin et al., 2018; Agarin & McCulloch, 2020. For discussion of their different values and modes of thinking, see Todd et al., 2022.

conditions the impact of other actors, from social movements to international organisations to civil society peace-builders. If social movements are key to overturning political configurations that support group power, and political-economic processes key to shrinking the institutional reach of groupness, everyday agency is key to eroding the moral authority of groupness. It impacts by magnifying generationally, feeding into ongoing institutional change, and creating a new moral common sense that leads to the collapse of group authority (see Brewer et al., 2018, 265-9). It depends on shared normative space and opportunities for interaction and impact outside of group networks, and it develops in generational time, although culminating in a sudden cascade.

The process may be slowed, stalled or stopped at different stages.

Where there is no shared normative frame, first movers have to exit from groupness rather than change it from within. Their actions do not reinforce shared norms for later generations and thus momentum is slow to develop. This is particularly problematic after recent violence where the moral dimension of group opposition is very difficult to address. Even when this is negotiated by first movers, social dependence on group networks limits the generational magnification of this change. Finally, feedback between identity and institutional change is necessary, and the process is hindered where channels of everyday impact are limited, or already group based.

This analysis explains the failure of everyday change to impact in Northern Ireland better than do alternatives. The process of transformation of groupness there was cut short, despite very extensive structural change, quite radical top-down institutional reform, and very widespread distancing from group identities, so that the extensive everyday change did not magnify generationally. This is not primarily a product of past conflict, or of strong emotions, or of a multiplex form of groupness that is socialised early and comprehensively; all existed in the other cases as real challenges for the first movers. It is neither a function of present security concerns, nor of horizontal inequalities, nor of the numbers of die-hard groupists: these factors were propitious in Northern Ireland after 1998. Nor is it simply a product of constitutional uncertainty: even sovereignty change can be discussed in terms of its cultural, social and economic (dis)benefits without the need for groupism. It is rather a function of the availability of shared normative space, the continuing dependence on group networks, and the high political threshold of change, which together prevent the generational magnification of change. These mechanisms are recognised as important in the boundary literature (Lamont et al., 2016; Wimmer, 2013) but their importance has been overlooked in much of the peace-building literature. Compared to these mechanisms, consociational power-sharing, which as Guelke (2023) notes has only functioned intermittently, plays a minor indirect role.

These mechanisms may themselves be weakened by radical interventions.

The absence of shared norms can be countered by careful, creative and iterative negotiation that at once opens new institutional opportunities and takes account of ongoing changes in group understandings and prioritisations. Deliberative systems that work from the local up provide a way forward, which highlights everyday

discursive agency and counters the potential for polarisation.[21] Institutionalisation of systemic deliberation with the aim of articulating and elaborating shared norms would ease the tasks and diffuse the impact of the first movers, while being a step towards agreed constitution-building.[22] If it can be facilitated at local and sectoral levels while including diverse group perspectives it can help relativise moral hierarchies (including victimhood and violence) and counter practices of disrespect. Arguably, when the moral chasms are the deepest, such local, informal deliberation is most needed.

Generational change may be encouraged by egalitarian and family-friendly public policy that erodes the infrastructure of groupness and the socio-economic importance of informal group networks, thus ensuring the magnification of early changes in subsequent generations.

Politicised groupness can be eroded by instituting different levels and layers of democratic decision-making for different territories and issues, for example deliberative forums and/or bottom up referenda that bring in diverse and transversal actors and alliances.[23] A broadening of the political arena may also bring new alliances: for example in Northern Ireland, there is increasing recognition of the need to include diverse voices in a new, all-island arena, to show the prospect of different and unexpected alliances.[24]

Again we return to the phased nature of transformation after conflict. Even under favourable conditions, radical interventions are necessary to provide effective resources for freer everyday choice and to open the way for the magnification of change over generations. There are already good democratic reasons to pursue such policies. A further reason is that they can speed the transformation of embedded group division.

I have attempted to show how everyday identity change matters for transformation of groupness, the limits to its impact, and how these limits can be pushed farther by political interventions. My aim was not to provide a definitive account of the patterns of everyday transformation but a better one than available alternatives. Future research might valuably explore the impact of different sequences and patterns in different peace processes and identify the thresholds and tipping points when everyday challenge to groupness either scales up and out or stalls and reverses, and the political channels and vehicles that can facilitate this. Most particularly there is a need to compare the moral mechanisms of everyday transformation in a much wider range of cases, both after recent violence and where new configurations of groupness are emerging, driven in part by populist politics.

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[21] On the depolarising effects of deliberation, see Fishkin et al., 2021; On peace referendums and deliberation, see Levy et al., 2021. On informal and local deliberation, see Curato 2019

[22] See Suiter, 2021. In the Northern Ireland case, the norms implicit in the GFA would be a starting point for discussion.

[23] Switzerland, with its multiple democratic arenas, provides a model, see Stoyanović, 2021.

[24] See the Irish government's Shared Island approach, https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c3417-shared-island/# accessed 27 July 2023.

Conclusion

In conclusion, groupness is a complex multi-levelled configuration with considerable inertia that hinders efforts to sustain peace and create a more flourishing and open society. Everyday identity change matters because it erodes the moral authority of groupness, promoting new modes of reasoning and interrelations. In post conflict situations, such everyday change can become part of the transformative process, through negotiation, participation, deliberation. A key node lies in the moral dimension: transformation requires a strong shared universalistic normative public arena of interaction and discourse that counters the moral authority of groupness, and that goes well beyond pragmatic reconciliation. To facilitate this, peace-building requires more than an end to violence and reform of horizontal inequalities: in difficult cases it requires a set of radical democratic interventions that allow changing identities and ideas to matter – family friendly social policy, deliberative negotiation of constitutional foundations, and political projects that engage participation of transversal groups. This means reimagining transformation not just as revolution that targets power, or as reform that targets institutions, but also as constitution-making that targets meaning, identity and value, and that takes place in slow deliberative everyday time.

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Conflict of interest The author declares no conflict of interest.

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