

Sharing space? Geography and politics in post-conflict Northern Ireland

– *Brian Graham (Geography), University of Ulster (Northern Ireland)*

As in other unagreed societies, it is commonly and unquestioningly assumed, not least by governments, that political processes and injections of economic capital can solve the conflict in Northern Ireland. But it is also a conflict in which contested and contesting representations of identity are based in - and then reproduce - an embittered human geography of territoriality. This reflects the wider dilemma that political processes often fail to engage with cultural questions in theorising the state. This paper seeks to explain the intensely geographical nature of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland and analyse the ways in which the political invisibility of this dimension is compromising and undermining the attainment of a peace process that might extend beyond the limitations of power-sharing (or power splitting) between two anti-pluralist political parties, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party.

The establishment of Northern Ireland in 1921 resulted from an attempt to guarantee an electoral majority for those who wished to remain in the United Kingdom (UK) but created a (large) minority for whom the existence of Northern Ireland violated the 'natural' unity of the 'Irish nation'. Ostensibly, this constitutional issue was resolved by the 1998 Belfast Agreement in that Northern Ireland will remain part of UK until a majority agree otherwise, while the Republic of Ireland subsequently repealed its constitutional claim to the six counties. Yet, while unionists/loyalists believe that the national question is now settled, for nationalists and especially for republicans both Northern Ireland and the Peace Process can be seen as interim arrangements on the road to a united Ireland. Contested identities are still at the core of Northern Ireland's politics, as is clearly reflected in the current creation of a power-sharing Executive comprising two political parties with diametrically opposed political endgames.

Both the 1998 and 2006 St Andrews Agreements depend upon a political negotiation of Northern Ireland's future that elides such difficult questions of contested identity. Segregation, sectarianism and racism are largely ignored, the implicit hope of the British and Irish governments, arguably, being that a political agreement will promote the development of a consumerist material culture that, ultimately, will subsume division. Hence, the negotiations surrounding future political structures are accompanied by an official rhetoric of a 'shared future' and 'neutral space'.

The paper argues, however, that there are at least four principal dimensions to the ways in which identity politics have to be addressed in the negotiation of a post-conflict society that embodies alternative spatialities:

- responsibility for the past and processes/practices of commemoration;
- the escalating stress on identity and culture and, in particular, the problem of sectarianism;
- the territorial embedding of identities in ethnically-defined and often very local places;
- the concept of equality between ‘two traditions’ is undermined by the inability of fragmented unionism and loyalism to match the ideological certainties espoused by republicanism and particularly by Sinn Féin.

The discussion concludes with a brief evaluation of those alternatives.