



Constant Crisis/Permanent Process: Diminished Agency and Weak Structures in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

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The Northern Ireland peace process has been afflicted by recurrent crises. There have been moments of elation, such as the historical declaration of a ceasefire by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1994, but these have often been followed by despair. The proximate causes of the crises have varied, from splits within the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to the IRA's failure to decommission its weapons, and each crisis has been accompanied by recriminations. The IRA ceasefire, for example, broke down amidst accusations from Irish nationalists that the British government was stalling on its promises to establish a new framework for governing Northern Ireland. Unionists insisted that the ceasefire breakdown demonstrated that Republicans had no intention of giving up on their military strategy, and consequently Sinn Fein should be permanently excluded from negotiations about Northern Ireland's future. The persistence of crisis suggests that we should not look to the proximate causes of each crisis for an understanding of why the peace process has been crisis prone, but instead we should seek out more fundamental causes.

At one level the answer suggests itself. Recriminations are not just responses to proximate crises, they are also symptomatic of the unresolved underlying conflict in Northern Irish politics. In this sense the Good Friday Agreement is misnamed.¹ It is neither an agreement about the causes and consequence of past conflict in Northern Ireland (Bell, 2003), nor is it an agreement about the future direction of Northern Irish society; the Agreement, for example, remains agnostic on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland (Agreement, Constitutional Issues, Clause 1). It is an agreement in the limited sense that it attempts to provide a framework through which disagreement can be contained without resort to violence. It allows the major political parties to agree to disagree (Wilson, 2001). The result, Ruane and Todd argue, is that:

powerful structurally based tendencies towards conflict remain, while the uncertainty about the future produces new divisions within as well as between the political parties. This makes for a crisis prone political environment. It follows that current political crises are not simply transitory but endemic within the new situation (2001: 938).

In the academic literature on the peace process there are two broad schools of thought on how to deal with the underlying tendencies toward conflict. The first, which we characterise as the conflict management approach, suggests that the underlying tendencies are real, entrenched and not susceptible to any quick-fix solutions. The Agreement, its proponents argue, should be supported and promoted because it provides the best available mechanism through which the underlying tendencies towards conflict can be managed without resort to violence (see e.g.: MacGinty & Darby, 2002; McGarry, 2001; O'Leary, 1999). The second approach, which often characterises itself as a conflict transformation approach, is critical of the limited horizons adopted by the conflict management approach. Its proponents argue that the conflict management approach entrenches the existing divisions in Northern Irish society through giving institutional primacy to the communal divide between Irish Nationalism and Ulster Unionism. This, they argue, fails to adequately acknowledge a range of other identities that exist in Northern Ireland, glosses over the heterogeneity within Nationalism and Unionism and, worst of all, it undermines the cross community tendencies that exist in Northern Irish

¹ The official title of the document is the 'Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations'. For a note on the Agreement see footnote 1 in the introduction. For the rest of this article we use the term 'Agreement' whenever making reference to the document.

society (see e.g.: Dixon, 1997; Ruane & Todd, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Wilson & Wilford, 2003). The conflict management approach is often characterised as a top-down, elite led, one and this is contrasted to the bottom-up, civil society driven, approach advocated by conflict transformationists (Dixon, 1997; Guelke, 2003; Morison, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Wilford, 1992). The top-down approach tends to focus on structural arrangements as a means to deal with conflict, the bottom-up approach tends to champion human agency as the means to bring a lasting peace.

The authors of this article find the social transformationist approach normatively appealing, but we accept the conflict management theorist's observation that the vigorous agents who are going to transform the conditions of conflict are largely a figment of the social transformationists' imagination. We accept that the peace process has been a largely elite led, top-down, process. But the reason why this has been possible, we argue, is because of a diminished human agency in Northern Irish society. The little resistance there has been to the new structural constraints on human action, imposed through the peace process, have been ineffectual. This feature of the peace process, diminished human agency, is overlooked in most analyses of the peace process. This article sets out to make the case for giving greater prominence to diminished agency in any understanding of the peace process.

This does not, however, mean that we believe that the structures of the peace process are powerful. The diminishing of human agency has had a reciprocal influence on the structures of the peace process. The constant crises that afflict the peace process testify to its structural weaknesses. The existing literature on the peace process not only misses the fact of diminished human agency, it also tends to give a one-sided emphasis to either structure or agency. We criticise this one-sidedness found in the literature and argue for an understanding of structure and agency as relational. The proponents of a conflict management approach may be correct in their observations that the peace process has been elite led and that there have been no vigorous agents of social transformation who have challenged this approach. They fail to notice, we argue, that this is the source of the problems encountered in the attempts to manage Northern Irish society.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a brief examination of the concepts of structure and agency. The second section outlines a number of ways in which a diminished human agency can be seen in contemporary Northern Ireland. The third section argues that a diminished human agency has created weak structures for managing the peace process and these structures act to further diminish human agency. The conclusion points to some of the problems that diminished agency presents for conflict management in Northern Ireland.

Structure and Agency in Social Theory

The term 'human agency' generally refers to the purposive, volitional dimension of human activity. It is employed to distinguish between actions that are freely chosen and those which are imposed on people by social structures. The idea encapsulated in the term human agency has a long history. It can, for example, be seen in the philosophical debates about whether the actions of individuals are predetermined by some external force or are the outcome of the exercise of 'free will'. The individual agent is sometimes referred to as 'the subject' (Ashe, 1999) and in its collective form human agency has been conceived as 'the movement', 'the collective', 'the party', 'the state', 'the people' or 'the vanguard'. In social and political theory human agency is discussed under the rubrics of freedom, autonomy, liberation, emancipation, self-determination, sovereignty and revolution (Heywood, 1994).

Structure is the partner term of agency. Structure is generally employed to refer to those aspects of society which place constraints on the exercise of human agency. The term



'structures' has been used to refer to formal institutions, such as organizations and bureaucracies, which regulate the conduct of their members or client groups. It has also been used to refer to societal wide relationships, such as the class structure, which shape the allocation of power and resources with which individuals and groups exercise their agency (Parker et al, 2003: 137-154). A further use of the term structure is to draw attention to the way that society is regulated through formal and informal rules (Giddens, 1979: 59-69). The avoidance of references to 'controversial topics' in 'mixed' company in Northern Ireland is an example of a tacit rule that often governs interpersonal encounters. The notion of legitimate and illegitimate targets is an example of a widely acknowledged rule that imposed constraints on the use of violence by combatants during the conflict (see e.g.: Darby, 1994).

We say that structure is *generally* employed to refer to constraints on human agency because there is ongoing debate in the literature about the nature of the relationship between structure and agency. Giddens developed his theory of structuration in opposition to those theorists who employ structure and agency as relational terms. He rejects the identification of structure with constraint and argues that:

structure is both enabling and constraining... the same structural characteristics participate in the subject (the actor) as in the object (society)... every process of action is a production of something new, a fresh act; but at the same time all action exists in continuity with the past, which supplies the means of its initiation. *Structure thus is not to be conceptualised as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved in its production* (1979: 69-70; emphasis in the original).

Giddens points out that the social world is not continually made anew from scratch. The structures created through past actions provide the means through which new acts are initiated. This can perhaps be most clearly seen in relation to the process of socialization. We are not born as autonomous human agents. We become self-determining actors through a process of socialisation. The structures through which we are socialised, (e.g. the family, peer relations, education system), may constrain human actions but they also make human actions possible. Or, as Giddens puts it, they should 'not be conceptualised as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved in its production'.

Giddens's theory of structuration has been admired for its intellectual rigor, but it has also been criticised on a number of grounds. He has been accused of over emphasising structures (Thompson, 1984: 171) and of conceiving of human agency only in the person of the individual agent, and thus having 'no concept of the collective basis of agency' (Parker, 2000: 106). Craib points out that the conflation of structure and agency found in structuration theory dissolves 'social structures into social action [and thus] removes the object of social action: it can only act upon itself, not upon social structures' (1986: 19: cited in Parker, 2000: 104).

The limited sense of human agency found in Giddens's theory can be illustrated by giving some consideration to the question of goals. Anderson defines agency as 'conscious goal-directed activity' (1980: 19) and argues that the nature of the goals involved in the exercise of human agency has to be elaborated if the definition is to be useful for social analysis. As he puts it:

if agency is construed as conscious goal-directed activity everything turns on the nature of the 'goals'. For it is obvious that all historical subjects engage in actions all of the time, of which they are 'agents' in this strict sense. So long as it remains at this level of indeterminacy, the notion is an analytical void. To render it

operative, at least three qualitatively different types of goals have to be clearly distinguished (19).

Anderson has a relational conception of agency. Each of the three different types of goals he distinguishes – private, public and social transformative – are defined in relation to the scope of the structural constraint that they seek to overcome. He points out that ‘the overwhelming majority of people for the overwhelmingly major part of their lives have pursued “private” goals: [such as] cultivation of a plot, choice of a marriage, exercise of a skill... [and these] personal projects are inscribed within existing social relations and typically reproduce them’ (19). The exercise of free will within the constraints of a broader social framework, Anderson says, is a limited exercise of human agency. People may be acting of their own free will, making choices and decisions, but their choices are circumscribed by and generally reproduce the framework within which they are made. This limited exercise of human agency is consistent with the conception of human agency found in Giddens’s theory of structuration.

Anderson points out that ‘collective or individual projects whose goals were “public” in character’ have been ‘qualitatively far fewer, involving lesser numbers in more fitful endeavours’ (19). And in this category he includes ‘[r]eligious movements, political struggles, military conflicts, diplomatic transactions, commercial explorations’ (19). He goes on to point out that, unlike with private goals, will and action ‘acquire an independent historical significance as causal sequences in their own right, rather than as molecular samples of social relations’ (19). Public goals make an impact on history in a way that private goals do not, because the attempt to attain them makes a broader and more dramatic impact on the world. They have more far reaching consequences. Many individuals in history have cultivated plots of land; the Levellers stand out, however, because their cultivation of the land was tied to a political programme demanding equality in society (Hill, 1991).

Anderson makes a distinction between the vast majority of public actions and more ambitious attempts to remodel whole social structures. He cites the American and French Revolutions as presentiments of this qualitatively different exercise of free will, before going on to say that the Russian Revolution was the ‘first time [in which] collective projects of social transformation were married to systematic efforts to understand the processes of past and present to produce a premeditated future’ (20). Anderson’s theory foregrounds human consciousness as the key feature of human agency, it is through engaging with and attempting to overcome the barriers to human progress (understood in a collective sense) that humanity gains greater understanding of these barriers and how they can be overcome.

Giddens’s theory, and his political outlook, limits the scope of conscious goal-directed activity. He is ambivalent about the activities associated with ‘public’ goals, he expresses skepticism towards the idea that conscious human action can bring about major social change and he is positively hostile to the ‘transformative’ notion of agency (Heartfield, 1996: 22). For Giddens social change is something which happens largely outside of human control. In his later work on the ‘risk society’ and the ‘third way’ the end of transformative projects is welcomed because the consequent shift in society’s focus enables people to pursue individually defined goals such as self-realisation (Giddens, 1994, 1998).

The failure of leftist inspired social experiments such as the Soviet Union and European-type welfare states do provide *prima facie* evidence to support structuration theory, it has discredited the very attempt to consciously engineer social change. Furedi points out, however, that this defeat has consequences beyond the confines of left political parties and their supporters. The suspicion of conscious social change casts conscious human



agency as problematic, even destructive, *in and of itself*. Human agency is thus viewed as a problem rather than a solution (1997: 59-65). This suspicion of human agency can be seen in the peace process.

The understanding of structure and agency found in Giddens's structuration theory, we believe, provides an accurate description of the relationship between structure and agency found in the peace process. We argue, however, that this is not a vindication of Giddens's structuration theory as such, but is the outcome of a historical process, the diminishing of human agency. This diminished agency has helped to bring about a peace process, but it also circumscribes the peace process. As long as a diminished human agency exists the peace process will survive, but it will also be unable to engage the population of Northern Ireland.

Diminished Agency and the Peace Process

In this section we present evidence to support our claim that the peace process has been characterised by diminished human agency. The first part of the section focuses on the theme of agency and volition through a critical examination of the claims that 'people power' has been an important driver in the peace process. The second part looks at the question of goals and autonomy and argues that the evidence suggests a diminished human agency. If diminished agency is a feature of the peace process then we might expect this to be manifested in a conception of the human agent as weak or determined, rather than self-determining. The third part argues that a changing conception of the human agent as weak or determined can be seen in the elevation of 'the victim' as a prominent cultural icon of the peace process.

People Power

The argument that the peace process has come about and been founded on a diminished sense of human agency is contrary to those analyses that claim that 'people power' has been an important driving force behind the peace process (Cochrane & Dunn, 2002). Bleakley, for example, draws parallels between the popular protests against the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, and 'the power of people in Ireland [which] is triumphing over defective political theories and the flawed political structures which they spawned' (1995: viii). Evidence of the existence of a popular will for peace can also be seen at the breakdown of the IRA's ceasefire in 1996. Thousands of people took to the streets in Belfast, Dublin, Armagh and Enniskillen to attend peace rallies. And when the Belfast newspapers organised an 'anti-terror telephone poll... calls were running at about 7,000 an hour' shortly after the lines opened (Marshall & Geraghty, 1996: 1). The idea that it is 'people power' that is driving the peace process is also articulated in Wilson's suggestion that after the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire 'a collective outpouring for peace across Ireland' helped to restore 'political momentum and a sense of direction' to the peace process (1996: 42).

Boyle and Hadden claim that, on the contrary, there has been a decline in popular participation in 'street politics', not an increase. They point out that the street mobilisations in support of the peace process have been much smaller than the 'demonstrations of communal solidarity' such as the funerals of the Hunger-strikers in 1981 and the protests against the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 (1994: 116; see also MacGinty & Darby, 2002: 139-140). The protests in favour of the peace process have also been smaller than the demonstrations of communal solidarity that took place around the parading issue. Even these protests have been unable to sustain their momentum (see Jarman in this volume for more on the peace process and the parading issue). The barometer of popular protest pointed to by Marshall and Geraghty, the telephone poll, is more hi-tech than a petition campaign or street rallies, but it also involves a lower level of engagement in activity. It does not even require participants to leave the confines of their own home. The idea that it was rallies in favour of peace that drove the peace

process also overlooks the fact that the peace rallies in the 1990s were not on as large a scale and did not have the same momentum as the Peace People rallies and marches in the summer and autumn of 1976 (McKeown, 1984).

Despite the normative appeal of an actively engaged citizenry there is very little evidence to substantiate the claim that the peace process has come about due to a sense that popular protest can affect change. 'War weariness' rather than 'people power' seems to be a better characterisation of ordinary people's relationship to the peace process. This can be seen in Wilson's observation that the protests against the end of the IRA ceasefire 'were placard-less protests. The "silent scream" of some 100,000 people across the island was just that - a humanistic cry for a peace without preconditions... In as far as there was any slogan, it was "Give us back the Peace"' (1996: 62). The non-ideological character of the protests, however, was an important reason why the protests were unable to build up, or even sustain, any momentum. There was no clear objective, just an inchoate sense of wanting peace. In this sense the mobilisations in the mid to late-1990s in favour of peace, or against sectarianism in early 2002, have more in common with the public mourning of the death of Princess Diana than the 'people power' mobilisations in favour of civil rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Furedi, 2003: 56-57; Purdie, 1992).

A central problem with the 'people power' argument is that it fails to acknowledge the fact that the peace process has its origins in, and has been advanced through, the exclusion of ordinary people. Part of the reason that the protests against the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement failed is because the Agreement was deliberately designed to circumvent popular pressure. Unlike the failed Sunningdale Agreement (1972) it was between the British and Irish governments and did not involve elected representatives in Northern Ireland. Dixon has pointed out that the selling of the Agreement to the population of Northern Ireland in 1998 has involved 'choreography and play-acting', smoke screens, 'hard cop/soft cop' tactics, 'constructive ambiguity' and 'necessary fictions' (2002: 733-7). All of these forms of deception were deployed to demobilize parties and voters from a conflict orientation and 'reeducate' them in the realities of the peace process. It is true that public assent for the Agreement was sought, and gained, through a referendum. Mass participation, however, has only been sought when it has been considered advantageous to advancing the peace process. When John Reid² temporarily suspended the Assembly in the summer of 2001 he was motivated by fear that fresh Assembly elections would become a *de facto* referendum on the Agreement (Cowan, 2001; Simpson, 2001). Those who advocate a conflict management approach have also articulated suspicion of the electorate. O'Leary, for example, argued against a referendum on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland because of 'the danger of a referendum... becoming a second referendum on the Agreement itself' (2001: 363).

Goals

All of the pro-Agreement parties in Northern Ireland present the Agreement as a vindication of their goals. Pro-Agreement Unionists argue that it has secured the Union (Aughey, 2000: 67). Irish Nationalists argue that the Agreement acknowledges the legitimacy of their claim to a united Ireland and it provides the means to bring this about (SDLP, n. d.; Shirlow, 2002). The goals of a united Ireland and the maintenance of the Union with the United Kingdom are, however, mutually exclusive. It is impossible for them both to be achieved simultaneously. The hope is that the institutions established under the Agreement will resolve the paradox of irreconcilable claims through depoliticising the national question (Aughey, 1999, 2001).

The Agreement attempts to depoliticise the national question in a number of different

² Reid was the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at the time.



ways, through separating goals from realities, providing a halfway house on a united Ireland, recasting the national question as a cultural issue, pluralizing politics and shifting to a technocratic approach.

A united Ireland is recognised as a legitimate goal, but only on the condition that Nationalists recognise the reality of the existence of the Union. The legitimacy of a united Ireland is recognised but the achievement of that goal is postponed indefinitely. It subordinates the goal of a united Ireland to the means to achieve that goal, the Agreement. Irish Nationalists have a *right* to national self-determination, but only on the understanding that they might never be in a position to exercise that right. The Agreement also provides little comfort for Unionists, it recognises the reality of Northern Ireland as part of the Union, but leaves the future status of Northern Ireland uncertain. The Agreement renders the ultimate goal of both Nationalists and Unionists indeterminate.

The Agreement consolidates the Union through removing the irredentist territorial claim from the constitution of the Republic of Ireland, neutering the military threat to the Union posed by the IRA and establishing a Northern Ireland Assembly with legislative and executive powers, but an Assembly which is firmly situated within the United Kingdom and subordinate to Westminster. But it also provides a confederal, or quasi-federal, halfway house to a united Ireland through the North-South Bodies, which constitute an all Ireland dimension of government, and British-Irish Bodies which allow the Government of the Republic of Ireland to act as representatives of Irish nationalism in negotiations with the British Government (Hadfield, 2001: 97-102; O'Leary, 1999: 79-87). The Agreement also continues a trend, initiated by 'revisionist' Irish nationalists, to recast the national question as a cultural and psychological issue rather than a territorial one. The Agreement does this through providing institutional recognition for Unionism and Nationalism as national identities (Gilligan, 2002b: 116-161). The Agreement also makes a limited attempt to complicate the issue of identity by acknowledging that a range of other identities – 'race', gender, sexual orientation – exist in Northern Ireland. Finally it is hoped that by working together on the administration of the region Unionist and Nationalist political elites will realize that they have enough in common for them to be able to set aside their political differences and work together to the mutual benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland (Hughes et al, 1998).

All of the authors writing on the Agreement express a note of skepticism about whether the national question can be depoliticised. There is, for example, concern that the consociational nature of the Agreement undercuts the depoliticisation of the national question by institutionalizing the communal divide. The concern that the Agreement could founder, however, fails to sufficiently acknowledge the role of diminished agency in the creation and maintenance of the peace process. Republicans entered into a peace process because they felt that: 'at this time and on their own do not have the strength to achieve the end goal' of a united Ireland (cited in: Mallie & McKittrick, 1996: 381). Ryan argues that the significance of Republican participation in the peace process is that for the first time in its history it 'has adapted to, rather than fought to overcome, its marginal position within Irish politics' (1997: 74).

The Agreement disperses Nationalist and Unionist goals, but it represents a vindication of the central goal of the British state. Most academic commentators on British policy during the peace process point to the long-term continuities in British policy on Northern Ireland (Bew, Patterson & Teague, 1997; Cunningham, 2001; Dixon, 2001; O'Leary, 1997; Wolff, 2001). They argue that since at least the early 1970s British policy has been directed towards establishing an 'internal' (to Northern Ireland) power-sharing settlement with an Irish dimension. Seen from this perspective the Agreement is a modified, and successful, version of the settlement attempted in the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973.

This would suggest that, from the point of view of the British state at least, the peace process has not been built on a degradation of their ambitions. We have two responses to this suggestion. The first is that the ambitions of the British state have been fairly limited, their central goal amounts to a desire to keep Northern Irish affairs at arms length. The second is that this fails to recognize that the realisation of this ambition relied on diminished agency on the part of Republicans.

The Agreement attempts to render the national question irrelevant, but does so in a way that allows the national question to exist as a ghost in the machinery of its operation. This can be seen in the fact that both Unionists and Nationalists hope to achieve their ultimate goal *through* the Agreement. Pro-Agreement Unionists hope that Irish Nationalists, having now accepted the reality of the Union, will settle down to a stable future within the Union. Republicans hope that demographic factors will work in their favour and that Irish Nationalists will outnumber Unionists in a generation and there will thus be a majority in favour of a united Ireland. This means that in the immediate, and foreseeable, future the main goal of the pro-Agreement parties is maintaining the process. Consequently their long-term strategy is at the mercy of short-term considerations. In this context it is difficult for party followers, and even elites themselves, to keep in mind the bigger picture. Advocates of a conflict management approach welcome this shift in focus to immediate issues, but fail to acknowledge the long-term costs of a short-term focus.

Conception of the Subject

If, as we argue, Northern Ireland is afflicted by diminished agency then we would expect to find cultural representations of the diminished human agent in society. A sense of victimhood is perhaps the clearest expression of a diminished human agency in Northern Ireland, and it can be found amongst both Protestants (see e.g. Finlay, 2001) and Catholics (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002). As the peace process has developed the 'victim' has become arguably the dominant cultural icon in Northern Ireland.³

Since the signing of the Agreement in 1998 victims of the conflict have gained a high profile in the public imagination. A number of books on the 'victims' of the conflict have been published (Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002; Fay et al, 1999; McKittrick et al, 1999; Morrissey & Smyth, 2002; Restorick, 2000; Rolston, 2000). The best known of these books, *Lost Lives* (McKittrick et al, 1999), was a best seller and, on Christmas Eve 1999, extracts from the book were read out simultaneously on BBC Radio Ulster and RTE Radio One by a range of political leaders including; the President of the United States, the British Prime Minister, the President of the Republic of Ireland and the leaders of all of the main pro-Agreement parties in Northern Ireland.⁴ Throughout 1999 BBC Radio Ulster also broadcast recollections of the troubles by ordinary 'victims' of the conflict.⁵ There has also been a growth in groups that work on victims' issues. Before the ceasefires in 1994 Widows Against Violence Empower (WAVE) were one of the few groups dealing explicitly with victims. Since then a range of groups, such as Victims and Survivors Trust (VAST) and Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR), have emerged as advocates for victims, other groups have expanded their service provision to provide

³ The 'victim' is a construct and one that the majority of the population of Northern Ireland would not apply to themselves. Cairns et al, for example, found that only 12% of the adult population self-identified as 'victims' while 'more "objective" evidence of victimhood' suggests that 16% could be said to be 'direct' victims of the conflict and some 30% indirect victims. The discrepancy between the two, they point out, 'suggests that people in Northern Ireland may be setting stricter criteria for those who are to be accorded the label "victim"' than official and academic studies suggest (2003: 29).

⁴ Each person read an extract from the book. Their readings were broadcast on Christmas Eve 1999 <http://www.rte.ie/news/archive/lostlives/>.

⁵ Some of the recordings are archived at the BBC website 'Giving voice to the unheard victims of the troubles' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/history/legacy/index.shtml>



specific support to victims of the conflict.⁶ The broad appeal of the 'victims agenda' can be seen in the fact that claims to victimhood have been made by groups as varied in their ideological outlook and membership as anti-Agreement unionists (FAIR, n. d.), Sinn Fein (Adams, 2000) and the Police Federation of Northern Ireland (PFNI, 2003: 1, 10, 14). Concern with victims has also been a central feature of discussions about how best to remember the conflict (see e.g.: Bell, 2003; Hamber, Kulle & Wilson, 2001; Healing Through Remembering, 2002).

The 'victim' is the diminished agent *par excellence*. Victims are, by definition, passive objects who have been acted upon by other forces, not active agents. They are defined by the mark that has been made on them rather than the mark that they have made on the wider world. In as far as they are victims they are devoid of volition or intent.

Structure and Agency in the Peace Process

If our relational understanding of structure and agency is correct then the diminished human agency outlined in the previous section has negative implications for the structures of the peace process. This section explores this in more detail. The first part explores the arguments that the debate about the 'victims agenda' is an example of the way that the conflict has not gone away, but has simply taken on new forms, Unionists and Nationalists are still trying to achieve their objectives, but they are now doing so through different means.

Peace as both Ends and Means

The development of a peace process has involved the development of some shared rules that have governed the interactions between the different parties to the peace process. MacGinty and Darby identify 'five essential criteria' that define a peace process (2002: 4). These features, they argue, are common to the various peace processes underway in different parts of the world in the 1990s. These features – 'protagonists are willing to negotiate in good faith', 'key actors are included in the process', 'negotiations address the central issues in dispute', 'negotiators do not use force to achieve their objectives', 'negotiators are committed to a sustained process' – act as rules that govern the conduct of participants (2002: 3-4). The five essential criteria outlined by MacGinty and Darby are all directed at the same goal; keeping the peace process alive. They note that peace processes may stagnate, but the 'ultimate test of its durability is its ability to retain all of its key characteristics and to leave open the possibility of restoring momentum' (4). The underlying rules that govern peace processes have come into conflict with each other in Northern Ireland, despite this the process has endured and momentum has been restored. This subsection outlines the way that two of these rules, the inclusion of key actors and the rejection of force to achieve objectives, have come into conflict with each other. We point out that the peace process has endured despite these conflicts and argue that the resilience of the process illustrates both the strength and weakness of the rules that govern the peace process.

The protocols of the peace process have been widely promoted. They have governed the political parties, but also groups in civil society. The issue of Orange Order parades provides an example of the latter. In July 1998, a few months after the signing of the Agreement, the security forces barricaded the traditional route of the Drumcree parade, which went through the 'nationalist' Garvaghy Road (Bryan, 2000: 173-6). The decision to prevent the march from proceeding down the Garvaghy Road was made by the Parades Commission and justified on the grounds that the Orange Order refused to engage in negotiations in good faith with the Garvaghy Road residents (Gilligan, 2002a:

⁶ A list of groups that provide services to victims of the conflict can be found on the web at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/victims/victimgroups.htm>

89-92).⁷ The treatment of Orange Order marchers at Drumcree is in marked contrast to the softly-softly approach adopted towards the violent activities of the Loyalist paramilitary groups associated with the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) in the period following the signing of the Agreement. One commentator has pointed out that it was only after '250 bombing incidents and the murders of a lawyer and journalist' that John Reid acknowledged that the UDA were in breach of their ceasefire (Drennan, 2001: 5). At first sight this appears absurd, refusal to enter into dialogue is punished but bombings and shootings are not. The different approach to the two issues, however, can be explained by the relationship of the two issues to the peace process. Reid's reluctance to declare the UDA to be in breach of their ceasefire was born out of a concern that this would strengthen the hand of those within the UDA who were opposed to the peace process. In comparison with the UDA ceasefire the Drumcree parade had become a focus for popular opposition to the peace process.

The breakdown of the IRA ceasefire in 1996 provides an earlier example of a conflict between the protocols of inclusion and non-violence. The bomb in Canary Wharf broke the protocol of non-violence and led to the exclusion of Sinn Fein from multi-party negotiations. Republicans, however, argued that the bomb was intended to kick-start a process that had been stalled by John Major's attempts (prompted by Unionist insistence) to exclude Republicans from the talks. This might appear to be a self-serving argument, but it is one that was accepted by other Irish nationalists and by non-nationalist observers. The point was perhaps made most directly by Coogan when he claimed that the bomb which ended the IRA ceasefire was detonated in an 'attempt to further the ceasefire's goals, not to destroy them' (1996: 490). One British newspaper columnist drew attention to the necessity for inclusion of, and dialogue with, Sinn Fein when he said that '[t]alks that exclude Sinn Fein and therefore any conversation with republican terrorism may do many useful things. They may help marginalise the violent republican core... But what they cannot do is bring peace' (Marr, 1996: 16).

The conflicting positions on Sinn Fein inclusion in the talks involved two different interpretations of the protocol that force should not be used to obtain objectives. The British Government interpreted this to mean the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons before talks could take place, supporters of Sinn Fein inclusion took a wider view of the principle of the use of force and accused the British Government of abusing their position of power to exclude Republicans. The protocol of non-violence, thus, has come to be broadly interpreted as taking a more conciliatory approach to politics. In this sense the principle of non-violence merges into the principle of inclusion. Non-violence is not simply a reference to giving up the 'armed struggle' and pursuing political goals by democratic means. Non-violence also refers to a way of doing politics; engaging in inclusive dialogue rather than taking a confrontational or adversarial approach (Aughey, 1999). The peace process collapses the distinction between ends and means. Peace is both the goal of the peace process and the means by which it is supposed to be achieved. The result, as MacGinty and Darby note, is that '[t]he peace process has no endpoint. It is a process of managing rather than of ending conflict. In a sense, the peace process has become permanent politics in Northern Ireland' (2002: 75).

We have noted MacGinty and Darby's argument that the ultimate test the durability of a peace process 'is its ability to retain all of its key characteristics and to leave open the possibility of restoring momentum'. This is not true in the strict sense that all participants have to adhere to all of the key characteristics all of the time, but in the looser sense that the participants must be committed to the protocols of the peace process in principle, even if they find that they are not adhering to all of the protocols in practice.

⁷ The Parades Commission is a government quango established to depoliticise the parading issue by taking the decision out of the hands of the RUC.



Strict application of the protocols would stymie the peace process. In practice the protocols of the peace process are effective only in as far as they help to enable more peace process. The consequence of all of this is that the peace process has become objectified – political actors are only provided a role in the peace process in as far as they help to promote more process. The peace process, thus, collapses the distinction between structure and agency. The structures of the peace process serve to promote more process.

Victims Agenda Debate

The growth of the cultural icon of the victim is an ambiguous register of diminished agency. Smyth points out that pro-Agreement politicians used victims to attempt to push the peace process forward and anti-Agreement Unionists have used victims in their attempts to oppose the Agreement. Other uses of victims for political ends include the Ulster Unionist Party's support for legal action by a woman bereaved as a result of an IRA bomb as a means to try to get Sinn Fein excluded from the political institutions established through the peace process (2000: 128-132). Sinn Fein have been sensitive to the politicisation of the victims issue and have attempted to depoliticise it by arguing against an exclusivist 'hierarchy of victims', insisting that no one has a monopoly on suffering (Adams, 2000; Sinn Fein, 1995). The use of victims for political ends extends beyond the ranks of the political parties. Mulcahy (2000), for example, says that a self-identification as victims is '[o]ne of the most visible aspects of the RUC's official discourse... [Which] characterizes the force as a long-suffering and heavily victimized organization' (75). The presentation of the police force as victims is not used in an attempt to undermine the integrity of the organisation but in order 'to demand a response from the community, namely support for the RUC' (75). Mulcahy also argues that the claim to victimhood was also employed as 'part of an effort to thwart proposals for radical change and to ensure that an "evolutionary" perspective of police reform prevailed' (82).

The 'politics' of victimhood suggests a vigorous contestation between political adversaries, not a diminished agency. On closer inspection, however, the use of victimhood for political ends tends to support the argument that a diminished human agency underlies the peace process. The very fact that various actors attempt to use the language of victimhood to pursue political ends suggests that they believe that there is something to be gained from articulating their political position in these terms. The political saliency of victimhood in contemporary Northern Ireland suggests that victimhood has a resonance with the wider population of the region. Smyth notes that the 'victim functions as a potential or actual moral beacon. It is this function that politicians have striven to appropriate. By association with victims, they bring unassailable moral authority to their cause' (2000: 134). The fact that politicians have sought to appropriate the moral authority of victims indicates that the 'politics' of victimhood is not a fundamental challenge to diminished agency, but is parasitic on it.

There is a paradox in the 'politics' of victimhood. In making a claim to victimhood victims groups are demonstrating that they are active agents, but the moral authority of their claim rests on their lack of agency. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the attempts, by groups like FAIR, to exclude Republicans from the victims agenda. Arguing against an inclusive definition of victimhood FAIR say:

The argument is that terrorists are victims of circumstance, and have experienced suffering in their own way. The implication is that these people are not accountable for their actions - and this is fundamental - the fact is they chose to go out and murder, they chose to torture and maim. Their actions are not excusable on the grounds that they are 'victims' too. The people they killed had no choice as to what happened to them. The families they destroyed had no say in

the matter... We reject the inclusive definition of a victim on the basis that it excludes *real* victims from their rightful status by degrading them to the same level as the perpetrators' (n. d., n. p.; emphasis added).

This quote speaks volumes about the link between diminished agency and victimhood. *Real* victims are those who 'had no choice as to what happened to them'. In making their claim FAIR believe that they have to disavow any agency on their own part, while investing their opponents with agency. The victims agenda debate provides an example of the way that structure and agency has become conflated. The exercise of agency paradoxically acts as a self-constraint on the exercise of agency. This is different from the past when the exercise of agency acted as a constraint on the actions of others. In the victims agenda the exercise of agency acts as *self*-constraint. Or, in other words, the exercise of agency acts as a structure on action.

Conclusion: Uncertainty, Mistrust and the Corrosion of Politics

The exclusion of ordinary people from the peace process is one of its strengths and also one of its weaknesses. The evacuation of the field of politics has allowed political elites greater room to manoeuvre, but it has also led ordinary people to increasingly switch off from politics. Aughey identifies two forms of public skepticism amongst the Unionist population, which he characterizes as stoicism and a sense of absurdity. The stoical response is to turn away from engagement in politics either through the 'material consolation of globalised consumerism' or 'a retreat into nostalgia to protect against the disintegration of values and against a political world in which there is nothing left to respect' (2002: 13). For other Unionists the deceptions through which the peace process has been advanced have blurred the distinction between truth and lies and thus undermined the foundations for any kind of judgment. The world appears absurd and incomprehensible and the result is disorientation and uncertainty. Keenan notes a similarly confused and quiescent response amongst Republican sympathizers (1996). These responses to the peace process are borne of a sense of powerlessness and inability to influence events, but they also further promote diminished agency.

This retreat from politics might be seen as healthy for the peace process. It does allow elites room to manoeuvre, but it also threatens the peace process. The initial optimism that accompanied the Good Friday Agreement has given way to cynicism about the political process and mistrust of politicians. The traditional mutual distrust between Nationalist and Unionist has become subsumed within a wider distrust of the political process itself. Surveys carried out by Irwin show that 'trust... is in "free fall" for all the pro-Agreement parties, and for the British and Irish governments, in both the Protestant and Catholic communities' (Irwin, 2002: 75).⁸ In 1999 37% of Protestants trusted the parties and governments 'a lot' or 'a little', by 2003 this had dropped to 17%. For Catholics, the average fell from 48% in 1999 to 34% in 2003. All political parties are trusted less today than four years ago, even those parties such as the Women's Coalition and Alliance Party that have tried to stand outside the traditional Nationalist/Unionist divide. Support for the Good Friday Agreement amongst Protestants has plummeted; with only 36% of them saying that they would vote 'Yes' if voting today (compared to the 53% who claimed to have voted 'Yes' in the referendum).

The general sense of disorientation also affects political elites. The pro-Agreement parties hope to achieve their objectives through the peace process. This ties them to keeping the process going and so for the foreseeable future their primary goal is maintaining the process. The lack of clear goals for the process itself means that it is difficult for elites to orientate themselves in relation to the process. It is also difficult for them to orientate their actions in relation to their opponents. Prior to the peace process it was not difficult

⁸ The survey did not ask about anti-Agreement parties.



for political elites to read the actions of their opponents and respond accordingly. As the peace process has developed it has become increasingly difficult for elites to read the actions of their opponents, sometimes it is even unclear who their opponents are, and consequently this does not provide a useful guide to action. The disengagement of the population from public life makes their intentions difficult to read. As politics becomes increasingly a private matter elites lose touch with people on the ground. Ruane and Todd point out that 'in a situation of such uncertainty and ambiguity, it is rational for political actors to hold open several possibilities and to move between positions depending on the needs of the political conjuncture' (2001: 935). All of this adds up to a situation in which elites are increasingly rudderless, and ordinary people increasingly disengaged.

In this situation anti-Agreement Unionists can sit on the sidelines and hope to reap the electoral rewards of not being tainted by association with the Agreement. The strength of anti-Agreement Unionism does not derive from any vigorous agency on its own part, but from the diminished agency of others. Consequently a victory for them would mark a victory for cynicism and political retreat rather than a return to active political engagement. This same cynicism and political retreat, ironically, allows anti-Agreement Unionists to prop up the peace process. Aughey notes that the DUP's acceptance of posts in the Executive 'put it very much inside the process' (2000: 72). Political disengagement allows them to do so without coming under sustained criticism for their actions. The peace process is unlikely to be destroyed by such a weak opposition. It is likely to endure even if the DUP become the largest Unionist party in Northern Ireland. As long as cynicism, retreat and uncertainty are the main features of the political landscape in Northern Ireland, however, the peace process will continue to be characterized by recurrent crisis.

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