

Section 6: Life and the Land

6.1 Introduction

“Group interests are best served by the existence of social closure and an absence of land transfer across the religious divide” (Kirk, 1993, p.334).

In an exhaustive study of land transfers in Glenravel ward, Co. Antrim, between 1956 and 1987, Kirk showed how maintenance of land ownership patterns involved limited “seepage” (p.367) between dual land markets in the area. The duality of the land transfer system is analysed through case study material in this section. Kirk’s empirical analysis sets the context for the description of one exchange of a farm in the study area called, for the purposes of this paper, Pine Hill. The instruments operating dual and often symmetrical land exchange systems are described and some outline comparisons with analogous urban systems suggested. The core of the section is a discussion of the implications of rural territoriality for community relations practice at the micro spatial scale.

6.2 Dual land markets: preliminary evidence

Table 6.1 is drawn from Kirk’s research in Glenravel. It shows the limited extent of cross-religion sales in the land exchange system. For example, of all the sales between 1958-87 only 12.8% happened between Catholics and Protestants. Most exchanges were within-religion sales leading Kirk to conclude that, “There seems to be generally accepted rules defining situations which pertained only to personal relationships as distinct from where group interests were involved” (Kirk, 1993, p.480) and specifically that personal interests were relegated when decisions about the sale of land would negatively impact on group interests.

Table 6.1 Land transfers between Protestants and Catholics in Glenravel Ward 1958-1987

Flow	Acres	% acres	Number	% number
Protestant to Protestant	4460	36.5	226	45.1
Catholic to Catholic	2171	27.5	211	42.1
Protestant to Catholic	840	10.6	41	8.2
Catholic to Protestant	429	5.4	23	4.6
No religion	333	4.1	28	5.3

(Source, Kirk, 1993, p.496)

In short, ethno-religious cleavages are the key determining variable when attitude to land and retention of territory is assessed. Preliminary interviews with local community leaders supported the operation of similar processes restricting land transfer in Armagh.

"It has happened in the past but you rarely see it now" (local community leader).

"I am not saying that it doesn't happen it is just not done in the area...it would no/ be acceptable" (local churchman).

This latter point is significant because it suggests a measure of outside control on land exchange. Reports of threats, abusive phone calls and, what one interviewee referred to as, "Rendly advice" are all used to ensure that land stays within a particular ethno-religious group. While all of this is difficult to verify empirically, it is clear that some element of control is used. One Protestant interviewee revealed how he inherited a farm from a relation but as he lived and worked in Belfast he wanted to sell it quickly at the best price. The interviewee received what he clearly perceived to be threatening phone calls urging him not to sell to a Catholic. (The farm was sold to the highest, and in this case, a Protestant bidder).

The system of land exchange in rural Northern Ireland seems more complex than in urban locations. There are definable gatekeepers principally, the auctioneer, solicitor and to a lesser extent the estate agent. Often there is a Protestant property infrastructure and a Catholic infrastructure each serving the respective communities. However, behind the scenes negotiations at a personal level characterise their style of mediation in land exchange in rural areas. Because the system is closed and not open to public scrutiny, suspicion and rumour about corruption and sectarian practice have room to grow. In some cases this has led to intense and long standing bitterness over the sale of individual property.

6.3 The battle for Pine Hill

This micro-case study illustrates the complexity of the process of interest mediation and sectarian outcomes. A small farm of about 8 acres with a dilapidated farm house came onto the market in 1987. The farmland itself was not of primary agricultural value or use. However, the house carried with it the potential for planning permission for a replacement dwelling. In an area of relatively strict planning control and housing shortage, the farm was therefore 'valuable' for economic, housing and, to a lesser extent, agricultural reasons.

The property was on the market initially for 9 months during which three bids, all from Catholics, could be identified in the research. The respondents complained about delays in the response to their bids, lack of information and lack of access to the selling agent. Those interviewed remained convinced that, because they could be identified as local Catholics, the solicitor deliberately placed obstacles in their way. Each applicant was informed that their bid was inadequate and the property was taken off the market for a year. One of the applicants believed that he had offered above the realistic local value for the property because he wanted the farm for his son who was intending to get married and stay in agriculture. The applicant, a local farmer then explained that the next he knew of the farm was that it was sold to a Protestant farmer with a large farm in the area. The respondent was convinced that the land was taken off the market until "one of theirs could be found" to buy it. He noted that the sale was not the product of open negotiation.

In the case study most evidence related to the retention of Protestant land and protectionism from potential Catholic buyers. This has caused some problems for the local rural economy. In the County Armagh area the Catholic population is growing, has a younger age structure and has higher than average household size. The demand for agricultural land to provide employment for the children of Catholic farmers is increasing. The inability of the land exchange system to release land in response to demand has, some community leaders would argue, resulted in inefficient and uneconomic farming, loss of population and often intense family friction due to competition for scarce land resources. This problem has to some extent been eased by the process of letting land through the "conacre system". This system involves leasing fields on a long terms basis to individual tenants and it highlights some of the contradictions revealed in the survey data. While Protestant land owners are reluctant to sell their land to Catholics they will let their land on long leases and this further extends to sharing machinery and labour at peak times of the agricultural year.

6.4 Cross-religion sharing

The case study revealed three types of sharing and exchange that highlighted the complexity of relationships among rural communities. The first is about the letting of land. The process of conacre is well established in rural Ulster and affords both the land owner and tenant significant advantage. The tenant can use the resource in a flexible way, disposing of it as he or she no longer needs it or if they change farming practice or type. The landowner retains the capital value of the property, makes an economic return and keeps ownership within the ethno-religious group.

Social relationships can also be found in labour and machinery exchange between farmers. There was a degree of pride among those interviewed in the system of mutual help and support among the farming community. The lack of monetary exchange, mutual friendship and shared interest in weather, European Union grants or the effects of BSE bond farmers in a meaningful and clearly sincere way.

While the land exchange system does not work effectively, trading in stock and produce operates as a recognisable market. Markets or local "marts" are places to buy and sell livestock but they are also a setting for social interaction between farmers. In these environs religion plays no significant part in exchanges either social or economic. The farming issues dominate and the distinctive farming culture is obvious in mart life. There is a sense of overt satisfaction in the way religion plays no part in such relationships:

"Nobody ever mentions religion here... we do business... and if your a good man and honest – that's what counts" (Farmer in the Keady area).

6.5 Discussion

Vasquez has reviewed the role of territoriality in neighbourhood disputes at a national scale. He concluded that,

“One way to increase peace might be to ‘de-terrorize’ identity issues. When an issue is delinked from territory (i.e. its demands are not tied to controlling a piece of territory), then it is likely to produce war, even though it may generate conflict ... if territorial issues can be de-coupled from other issues, the probability of violence will drop considerably” (Vasquez, 1995, p.289-290).

One of the central features of the empirical research has been the extent to which territory can not be de-coupled from community relations and contact in the study area. Control and ownership of land is the pivotal defining feature of the Northern Ireland conflict. Maintaining territory involves a complex interaction with the local market system, closed negotiation, influence over key agents in that system and at times, intimidation of both seller and buyer. In Belfast, territorial boundaries are sharpest and segregation most intense in public sector housing. The highly regulated system of public sector housing planning, development and allocation facilitates the maintenance of ethnic geography. The Housing Executive have rarely attempted to redraw long established territorial boundaries and respect for the territorial imperative has helped to diffuse violence in contentious areas of the city (Murtagh 1994). In rural areas the private exchange system which involves a small number of key gatekeepers takes on crucial importance. The potential of these *gatekeepers* for independent action is limited in the same way as the Housing Executive in Belfast have limited potential to re-draw an ethnic map that has less to do with ownership of parcels of land and more to do with the way that ownership expresses the legitimacy and permanence of ethnic identity.

Recognition that territory, and how it is protected, is a feature of day to day interaction between the two communities emphasises the need for more realistic strategies to manage conflict at a strategic and local level. Approaches that ignore deep structural factors in the configuration of the Northern Ireland conflict will have limited currency. In a comprehensive review of community relations projects at District Council level, Knox (1994) divided activity into five types only one of which involved what he called "focused community relations" aimed at tackling, head on, controversial community relations issues. "This approach suggests that such issues, if left unresolved, compound insidious sectarianism and bigotry" (Knox, 1994, p.603). The other categories relate to the funding of high profile events such as festivals; mainstream community development work; cultural traditions that reinforce the identity of each tradition; and substitute funding, through which community relations resources are used to fund projects that would have been supported anyway. The District Council's *Community Relations Programme* for Newry and Mourne emphasised the role of reconciliation and festival based events,

“Most of the cross-community relations projects are based on community events such as festivals, a local ‘hiring fare’ and a concert at Christmas” (Community Relations Officer)

The Community Relations Officer points out that it is difficult for community relations work to get beyond local religious divisions which often run deep and have been sustained over a relatively long period of time. Therefore, community relations activity in the District has centred around the softer issues where contention and conflict are unlikely to surface or be addressed.

In broad terms Bloomfield (1995) locates this type of work within ‘resolution’ theory. In short, this approach is,

"subjective, relationship-based, needs-based, comprehensive, aiming to remove or transform the roots of conflict through joint analysis and co-operative problem solving. A third party takes a non-directive, facilitative role to help the conflicting parties redraw their relationship co-operatively around a mutual problem in order to generate a self-sustaining, integrative resolution" (Bloomfield, 1995, p.153).

On the other hand, the ‘settlement’ approach "is objective, issue-based, power-based, pragmatic aiming at reduction in conflict through negotiation and compromise... Settlement prides itself on its pragmatism in aiming at the achievable, and questions the scope of the approach demanded by resolution" (Bloomfield, 1995, p.153). The empirical research presented here suggested that the reality of conflict at the local level requires a more realistic and pragmatic response than that offered by initiatives predicated on an analysis that suggests resolution is a realistic alternative. Hard issues, such as the system of land exchange and its role in reinforcing territory, need to be understood and addressed. They are not reducible to resolution based measures that characterise much of community relations activity in Northern Ireland. Centuries old practices and beliefs are locked into the rural socio-cultural and economic system and to talk about ‘resolving’ them is to miss the complexity of the conflict and how it is acted out in small communities every day. The best we can hope for in the short-term is to minimise their negative consequences and to hope for

settlement of contentious territorial issues at the micro or local level.

6.4 Conclusions

It does not imply that the system of land exchange in rural Armagh is transformable, even in the long term. But it does imply that a serious engagement between community relations practice and the reality of community division as it is acted out across communities all over Northern Ireland must occur. In particular, the balance of activity needs to reflect the limitations of resolution based activity and the need to pursue what Knox has described as “focused community relations work”. These implications are addressed in the final section.

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Section 7: Implications of the Research

7.1 Introduction

This section sets out the implications of the research for elements of policy and practice. The research highlighted an under-looked issue in territorial and segregation analysis which has important effects on the type, purpose and impact of community relations practice at the local level. This is the process of residualisation whereby sectarian population shifts have left behind some communities who are experience abandonment and isolation which itself conditions community relations values and attitudes. This provides a context to review the strategic implications of territory and the need to address its consequences comprehensively. The role of policy and planning are then discussed before highlighting the options open to community relations practitioners.

7.2 Territoriality and the process of residualisation

The processes of residualisation are already well established in the field of public sector housing. Saunders shows how the younger, more mobile and employed population are leaving the public rented stock for owner occupation with council renting being left to a 'residuum' of old poor and unskilled people who can not afford anything else, while the rest of the working class makes good its escape into the home owning middle mass" (Saunders, 1990, p.319). An analogy can be drawn with the processes of change among Protestant communities close to the border.

For example, the research identified a number of communities experiencing decline related to selective 'exiting' of its younger and more able members. In places such as Protestant Glendale, direct and perceived threat has had a cumulative effect of community relations attitudes. These are best expressed in the activity segregation between it and Whiteville, in that, the Protestant village oriented itself North for services and facilities whilst the Catholic village looked south to Catholic towns to, serve their needs. The sale of land and the asymmetrical institutional infrastructure that supports in-group sale, highlights the way in which territory is ingrained into social and economic as well as physical aspects of life in rural Ulster.

The establishment of a review body on parades in Northern Ireland was an illustration of a macro-level response to a crises territorial issue. However, by focusing on the parades issue specifically, the scope of the inquiry is limited to only one of a number of related manifestations of territoriality. Shop boycotts, church demonstrations, traditional parades, avoidance behaviour and the experiences of residual communities are all aspects of territory which runs central to the Northern Ireland conflict. An opportunity was perhaps missed when, instead of commissioning a single issue review, a government supported standing commission on territory was not constituted to review all aspects of territory, its impact on community relations and the potential role played by a wide range of policy actors. As the empirical analysis illustrated, the control and ownership of territory is one of the clearest expressions of the nature of conflict and division and needs to be researched, analysed and responded to in a comprehensive manner. Such a commission, could embrace a wider set of interests than the parades review body and could undertake further analysis of the issues and relationships between territorial behaviour, its consequences for communities and possibly agreed principles about the use of and respect for group territory. As well as providing a framework for research, analysis and discussion, such a commission could sponsor pilot projects to explore best practice to a range of territorial related issues and problems.

7.3 Policy implications

The Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland (EU, 1995) described how mainstream policy concerns including rural and urban regeneration can be developed with community relations as a central objective. For example the sub-programme dealing with Rural Regeneration (2b) highlighted "reconciliation impact" (EU, 1995, section. 2B) as a key criteria in project assessment. There are signs that community relations issues are finding their way into the policy vocabulary of land use planning. In the Regional Strategy for the Belfast Sub-region, planners recognise that "The social characteristics of Protestant and Catholic areas of Belfast's inner city vary significantly, and have been determined by the sectarian geography as much as by the sorts of economic and social factors normally at play elsewhere. The housing stock, almost totally public, is occupied by an increasingly dependent community, within which are found the sharpest territorial perceptions and sectarian divisions manifested in a series of 'peacelines'" (DOE(NI), 1996, p.7). The Discussion Paper goes on to recognise the need to move "beyond land use planning" (DOE(NI), 1996, p.3) and to view the city as a complex

socio-spatial system where the consequences of sectarian division should be a primary policy concern.

This has resonance in recent literature on planning theory and practice. Healey, for example, argues the need for planning to explore what is relevant as defined by individual communities and to recognise the power of argument and negotiation in resolving land use problems,

“Such interaction involves respectful discussion within and between discursive communities, implying recognising, valuing listening and searching for translative possibilities between different discourse communities” (Healey, 1992, pp.154-5).

She encourages the use of negotiation counsels to encourage individuals and groups to articulate their interests together in an environment where interaction is not simply a form of exchange or bargaining around pre-defined interests but is a genuine dialogue between competing interests. In Northern Ireland, the need to locate community relations issues at the centre of such a planning dialogue is crucial. This has implications for planners as well as community relations practitioners. A fusion of the substantive understanding of socio-spatial dynamics, area degeneration and demographics with conflict negotiation and mediations skills is an important training challenge. For example, Healey recognises the implications of community dialogue for traditional planning research skills,

“Planning processes should be enriched by discussion of moral dilemmas and aesthetic experiences, using a range of presentational forms, from ‘telling stories’ to aesthetic illustrations of experiences. Statistical analysis coexists in such processes with poems and moral fables” (Healey, 1992, p.154).

Donnan and McFarlane’s work shows how ethnographic methodologies can be powerful in unpacking communities and the tensions and conflicts laden in their daily activity and interaction. The perspectives of the people of Glendale on what might help regenerate their village must be pre-conditioned by an understanding of the different demographic histories of the two communities and the sustained decline of the Protestant population in particular. Helping marginal communities to articulate their concerns in a way that will impact on the prospects for maintaining a viable and sustainable future is a key challenge for both community relations practitioners and planners. June Manning Thomas (1994) has made a similar call for the role of planning in responding to the problems of marginal black inner city communities in the United States,

“It means fighting market forces that are draining the inner city and older suburban neighbourhoods which have been tipped or will tip away from non black or middle class residence” (Thomas, 1994, p.6).

Recalling Frieden’s argument to extend planning “beyond the physical environment” Thomas argues the need for comprehensive community action on ill-health, poor housing drug abuse, low self esteem and economic desperation (Thomas, 1994, p.7). Acting on such an agenda will face formidable obstacles, not least the professional value system of planners and administrators. Hoch recognises this in the context of planning and race,

“Professional norms are not a source of moral guidance here. Instead, planners must turn to examples of democratic citizenship and civility exhibited by those who resist racial injustice and who find practical ways to make the boundaries of conventional American life more inclusive” (Hoch, 1993’, p.460).

Like wise Peach emphasises the policy implications of deeply segregated communities in a Northern Ireland context,

“While ghettos should be unacceptable to planners, it seems to me that we should be more tolerant of ethnic cities. Encouraging ethnic areas without creating ghettos is the challenge of the 1990s but we need to know more about the dynamics of choice, the dynamics of interaction and the consequences of social engineering” (Peach, 1996, p. 149).

Mention has already been made of the inclusion of sectarian realities in local planning strategies including the Belfast sub-regional planning discussion document. The DOE(NI) Planning Agency has introduced training on Community Relations and Planning for all its staff, recent consultation documents on strategies to tackle deprivation in Belfast and Londonderry have highlighted the problems of territoriality in

community regeneration and local Partnerships created under the Peace and Reconciliation Programme have built concerns about segregated areas into their action plans.

7.4 Community relations

However, while there seems to be evidence of progress on the part of the statutory sector, community planners and those in community relations practice have been slower to respond to these issues. It has been argued previously that the emphasis on reconciliation as opposed to settlement based activity in community relations is part of the problem. Darby highlighted the need for a shift in emphasis,

“Moderate opinion, expressed through reconciliation groups, the churches and political action, has played a part in keeping this society together during twenty five years of violence. It will have a major role in conflict management in the future. But now, it must move over and make room for unsavoury bed-fellows. Altruism is an unreliable basis for conflict resolution. Better to rely on hard -negotiation firmly based on self interest” (Darby, 1991, p.12)

A spatial focus on, what in community relations terms, would be the most serious cases - those feeling forgotten, abandoned and powerless - would seem logical for the community relations practitioners. Developing relevant practice in these areas would add greatly to the emphasis in planning on addressing problems through argument, dialogue and interest mediation. The failure to gel the related discipline in that way could marginalise community relations practice in a way that diminishes its relevance. Gallagher quotes the first chair of the Community Relations Commission in terms of its narrow policy brief:

“The problem with community relations, of ensuring that people can live together in a society [is the] central problem of government ... It fails in that, government has failed. Neither is there such a thing as a separate ‘community relations’ policy. All the decisions of government, whether about education, location of industry, housing or law enforcement, have an effect on relationships between the communities” (Hayes 1972 quoted in Gallagher, 1995).

7.5 Conclusions

This research has presented the conclusions of a pilot research study into the nature of conflict in a divided rural community in Northern Ireland. By its definition the extent to which broad based policy recommendations can be made are therefore limited. However, three broad ideas have been set out for discussion:

1. The potential role of a commission to address the issue of territoriality, how it is manifest at the micro-spatial scale and the relationship between events at locality level and the nature of conflict.
2. Territory is clearly fundamental to the nature of conflict and the need to respond with comprehensive policy measures, particularly in the field of area planning and rural regeneration initiatives is vital to the sustainability of marginalised communities.
3. Policy initiative alone can not address the problems of residual communities and the need for community relations practitioners to engage, articulate and positively approach their problems is equally important.

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