

Introduction

Shared Space: A journal for learning, dialogue and change in a divided society?

Duncan Morrow

Northern Ireland is not ultimately distinctive because of inter-group conflict. Conflicts between politically, culturally and ethnically competing states and groups exist across the globe, often resulting in terrible death and destruction. Nor are we particularly poor; in fact, a case could be made that, in global terms, we belong to the particularly rich. The competing national allegiances that so divide the six counties are allegiances to the fourth largest economy in the world or to the second richest country in the European Union. The theory and practice of liberal democracy are well-established in historical terms in all communities. Indeed, the American Revolution in the eighteenth century established one of its first consular offices in Belfast. In terms of education, and in spite of the difficulties surrounding selection, we are a well-educated people. By speaking English, we have direct access to the international market. Even those looking for reasons for conflict in social structure cannot overlook the fact that Northern Ireland does not suffer from any remarkable hangover from feudalism or communist collectivism. So most of the 'reasons' for conflict provided by social science are only *relatively* and seldom absolutely true. Relationships matter in Northern Ireland as much as absolutes. Victory and defeat are not absolute issues but quickly threaten to become a question of how much 'they' won compared to 'us', or vice versa. Everything, as Einstein knew, is a matter of relativity and relationship.

What does make Northern Ireland slightly different is the conjunction of deep, persistent and violent inter-community divisions and the economic and political resources which location in Western Europe allows us to take for granted. Thus, in spite of serious violence, the state did not ultimately collapse. Lethal confrontation between the state and unarmed citizens at

Bloody Sunday resulted in the abolition of Unionist single-identity rule in Northern Ireland and a multi-layered policy of stabilisation not simple military-political escalation. Early flirtation by the government of the Irish Republic with support for the Provisional Movement did not translate into full scale support for the IRA. Unusually, the democracies of Ireland and the United Kingdom have been driven together by conflict, not apart.

Within the North, the result was not peace or stability but thirty years of ambiguity and uncertainty in which the brutal narrative of conflict sat alongside the welfare state, peace walls, containment, moves to dismantle discrimination and attempts at power-sharing. The result was not a conflict resolved but a conflict attenuated. Instead of escalating into Armageddon (as seemed at least possible in 1972), violence in Northern Ireland petered out as it increasingly lost any long term political rationale. Talks were triggered not by imminent victory or defeat but by evident political pointlessness.

In political terms, the fact that a shared peace is still thinkable after decades of conflict and enmity is an achievement in itself. The fact that it is possible does not make it easy, however, as the last decade has shown. The logic of inter-group conflict is that definitions of cause and effect are ultimately a question of opposite starting points. The logic of violence is that *we* must engage in conflict because otherwise *you* are triumphant. Primary responsibility for my or our violence lies, however, squarely outside the group. This makes 'us', at least relatively, innocent, the structural good guys forced into killing by the alternative of being killed. It is unsurprising that we cannot agree on the causes of conflict in the north of Ireland, when we have already made up our minds that the cause is 'them'.

Any other answer would require us to become major contributors to change. As it is, there is a permanent risk that politics in Northern Ireland becomes an endless blame game, stuck in the eternally passive logic that the first move must come from the guilty others. This logic compels us to defend the rightness of our cause over the tragedy of the outcome in human terms. While we can 'regret' the death or injury of individuals, each event is ultimately relativised and rendered harmless by the primacy of the cause. The primary obstacle to a truth process in Ireland is not the absence of information, evidence or well-grounded suspicion. Nor does the absence of a formal truth process stop the past from poisoning the present with its fixed ideologies shaping interpretation. Still, the fact is that no major political tradition or actor has been prepared to subject their narrative to the public humiliation of

measurement against the death and injury of thousands of victims. A truth process in this context has not happened for fear that it could ignite endless political rationalisation and, instead of reconciliation, could easily become the next arena for bitterness and mutual loathing.

Paradoxically, the very success of conflict management across the North has created its own obstacles as we move forward. There is, in Direct Rule with a green tinge, a well-worn alternative to final local agreement to share. After 1975, more than 90 per cent of the deaths and direct injuries in Northern Ireland were borne by people in three broad groups: the urban poor, particularly in North and West Belfast, the rural populations of historically contested political zones – South Armagh and Newry, the Fermanagh Border, Mid-Ulster from Cookstown to Armagh –, and the security forces. Large swathes of Northern Ireland – Greater Belfast, Antrim, Bangor, Downpatrick, Coleraine and Limavady – were spared the worst of the violence while watching in horror on television or fuming at disruption and inconvenience. For the comfortable, the discomfort of transition is not without costs. Relying on those at the frontline of community antagonism to do all the trusting, however, is to load responsibility for changing the whole system on the most injured.

JK Galbraith could have been speaking about Northern Ireland when he remarked that politics is the art of choosing the unpalatable over the disastrous. Putting off the day when the choice has to be definitively made, or seeking to play the odds to make the choice less difficult, are understandable – if frustrating – reactions. Ambiguity remains the name of the game in Northern Ireland. Of the three routes to social stability – reconstruction, social inclusion and shared future – progress towards a really shared future presents the really sharp choices. Unanimity over the requirement for infrastructural investment or for including people who, it is agreed, have been disadvantaged in the past does not present the same political and social choices as embracing those who have been experienced and characterised for generations as a blood-thirsty enemy. In some shape or other, this remains the alpha and omega of peace-making in this small corner of the world.

Undoing the presupposition that defence and deterrence are common sense will not be easy in Ulster. The task of change is, in general, harder than that facing people living in places where shared ownership and citizenship are taken for granted. There is no recipe book or general guidance from Britain, Ireland, America or Europe which neatly fits the challenge. On the other hand,

because we have resources, Northern Ireland is in a position to experiment and take risks that is simply not possible in poorer settings. The greatest challenge of all will be to move on from limited but partly effective policies of containment to preventative policy which comprehensively undermines the desire or need for hostility. In the language of Peter Senge's business jargon, how do we move from learning to adapt to given circumstances (adaptive learning) to acting on those circumstances themselves (generative learning)? The answer will, of course, be tentative and characterised by reverses. The primary task, if it is to be successful, is that we are orientated towards learning, especially from those whom we do not normally see as partners.

A requirement for such learning is spaces and places where different contributions can be brought to the table. Sharing after enmity requires exploration and testing, before trust can be normalised. Dialogue, the exchange of ideas and experience from different perspectives, is a critical element of real meeting. This journal is intended to aid the quality of dialogue contributing to the quality of what is debated, agreed, contested and changed. The Community Relations Council's commitment is to keep it shared. That does not mean that the contributions are bland or uncommitted. In the round, the journal reflects the Council's commitment to inclusion, interdependence, fairness and diversity. But that commitment means that we must expect to meet difference and opposition in context where there has been violent divergence on such basic premises as the causes of conflict, responsibility for violence, the role of the state or the nature of justice. What defines a research journal is that each contribution is argued with intellectual rigour, is subject to evidential rules and must be open to the possibility that others may have different evidence to bring. Because it is research rather than opinion based, this journal will particularly concentrate on contributing new evidence to complex issues.

Belfast City Council's Chief Executive, Peter McNaney, contends that successful change in Northern Ireland will require safe space, public space and political space: safe space – where people can speculate and toy with breaking long held positions without the danger that they will be humiliated through a merciless media; public space – where people from different backgrounds can exchange ideas and challenges and make new, surprising and supportive relationships; and political space – where political leadership gives permission for an entirely new world to begin to emerge. Journals must undoubtedly be safe but they are also public. Over time, it is hoped that can also contribute to

changes in the political arena as well as reflecting the impact of political change on many other areas.

This first edition draws directly on research supported by or developed with the Community Relations Council itself. The perspective in each case is the exclusive perspective of the author or authors, and we have not and will not seek to editorialise on viewpoint unless it threatens the possibility that the space may cease to be shared. This first edition shows just how broad the issue of inter-community relationship extends, and we have reason to hope that future editions will continue this extension.

Neil Jarman casts new light on an old Northern Ireland theme – interfaces. As the demographic and socioeconomic context of Northern Ireland changes, the nature of violent interface is also changing. Whereas most people still conceive of interfaces as inner-city barricades between different parts of the working class, the reality, as Jarman shows is that interface is a word for a relationship rather than a specific setting or place. In a divided and polarised society, interfaces are places of community tension which can emerge in many different social and physical settings as a result of wider political tensions. Potentially anything – a shop, a public park or a library can become contested space, although the specific nuance of each setting makes generic policy response extremely difficult. One of the worrying implications of Jarman’s insights is that interfaces in divided societies are like earthquakes in Japan: it is easy to predict *that* they will occur, but much more difficult to establish when, where and in what magnitude.

David Russell’s article tackles the same issue of urban and rural space from an entirely different angle. In a context where the pressures of polarisation and segregation are considerable, Russell poses the question of how policy-makers and practitioners might conceptualise strategies to transform Belfast into a city which is both integrated and plural. Russell’s key observation, perhaps, is that single identity community-based solutions in social policy will buy time but they will also endlessly reproduce the problem of segregation. Real change will require systemic change in priorities.

The deep legacy of the past in parts of the north of Ireland is the subject of Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern’s research into community-based approaches to truth-telling based on a particular exercise in the Ardoyne area of Belfast. This tiny and strongly-republican neighbourhood has been battered by 99 deaths and a sense of resistance both to Unionism and to the British state

as represented by the security forces. Lundy and McGovern explore the implications both of truth-telling in general and the role which community-based solutions offer in a context where the state is not trusted as a result of hundreds of incidents between security forces and local residents. The report acknowledges the stark differences in views between local residents and Unionists from neighbouring communities, focussing on the core and complex question of whose 'truth' is to be told. On the one hand, unheard voices emerged and intra-community reconciliation in a deeply segmented community could begin. On the other hand, there was no comparable process where those attacked by republican units operating from or through Ardoyne could also be interrogated. This topic is one of considerable importance in public debate at present.

Dirk Schubotz and Paula Devine draw on attitudinal survey material undertaken by the ARK research project at Queen's University. The Young Life and Times survey gives an insight into changing attitudes to community relations among 16 year olds across Northern Ireland. Historically, 16-24 year olds made up most of the active participants in violence in Northern Ireland as well as 40 per cent of all conflict-related deaths. The survey's findings illustrate the deep legacy of the past in Northern Ireland, with 30 per cent of all 16 year old respondents reporting that a close friend or family member had been injured due to a sectarian incident. National identity is as deeply embedded as ever, with most Catholics identifying as Irish and Protestants as British. On the other hand, there is clear evidence that mixed schooling and mixed residential areas make a difference to the pattern of people's friendships and self-understanding. Schubotz also explores the impact of a rising awareness of new minority ethnic groups becoming more visible in Northern Ireland with some disturbing results.

The rising visibility of previously marginalised people is explored in the final article by Helen Lewis. In recent years, violence to many groups has been highlighted alongside violence and exclusion along the axis of sectarian tradition. This is central to the emerging equality agenda and to the introduction of the idea of Good Relations through Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. Lewis highlights some of the opportunities and difficulties which organisations working in the voluntary and community sectors of Northern Ireland have in supporting one another and in raising these important issues to wider public attention. In a world where hate crime is increasingly recognised, opportunities to share experience and best practice from different

fields will be critical both in defining the nature of exclusion in reality and in finding steps to meaningful inclusion.

This first edition of *Shared Space* can only touch the surface of community division in Northern Ireland. It is however a new beginning, an opportunity to bring to public attention in a single space many aspects of a complex problem. We hope that it can be the platform for other spaces and other opportunities as we move forward into our shared future.