

# Hope and History: Looking Backwards to Move Forwards<sup>1</sup>

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The paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 and the peace agreement of 1998 provided an ‘opportunity to hope’ (to quote John Hewitt<sup>2</sup>), hope that Northern Ireland could move on from the sustained violent conflict of the previous 25 years and become a more peaceful society. However, rioting during the summer (at Ardoyne and Carlisle Circus in 2012, in East Belfast and Ballyclare in 2011) remains a worrying reminder of the underlying divisions and tensions that should prevent us from becoming too complacent about the progress that has been made. But equally the violence should not blind us to the reality that significant changes have taken place: the situation at Ardoyne in 2012 is not the same as the situation around Drumcree in 1996. Progress has been made and Northern Ireland is a more peaceful society than it was 16 years ago. It is therefore important to take stock and reflect on the changes that have occurred in order to assess the level of progress in peacebuilding to identify what still needs to be done. This short essay aims to reflect on the progress that has been made since the Agreement was signed in 1998 and to highlight some of the work that still needs to be done if we are to move on from the current transitional phase, where we have moved on from a persistent armed conflict but have yet to reach the mundanity of a sustainable peace.

The title for the paper was stimulated in part by comments by various community workers in North Belfast over the past few years. Often if people were asked to comment on the progress that they felt had been made in building peace there appeared to be a reluctance to be too positive, it seemed that people could only see the problems they faced in the immediate future. So much time and energy was spent in dealing with the localised tensions that people struggled to retain sight of the bigger picture, they were reluctant to reflect on the changes that had occurred and progress that had been made. This in turn seemed to limit their capacity to hope and to be unduly positive about how far their work had come.

## **The Angel of History**

In early 1940, and in the context of another conflict, Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish literary critic and philosopher, wrote a paper entitled 'On the Concept of History'. In the ninth thesis Benjamin draws on a Paul Klee painting entitled '*Angelus Novus*'<sup>3</sup> or what he calls the Angel of History. In the painting the Angel faces backwards into the past at the same time as he is being 'driven irresistibly into the future' by what Benjamin terms the 'storm of history' and from the Angel's perspective, on the edge of the approaching storm, history has become a 'catastrophe', in which all past events have become part of a singular whole:

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm.

My reading of Benjamin is that the challenge is to re-adjust one's focus to acknowledge the diversity of the range of distinct but inter-related events that comprise the singular sense of 'History' that collectively we are caught up in. Too often the reaction is to simplify our view of the past and group together a range of related, but separate, issues into a singular notion of the past. In Northern Ireland the peace process (again a singular) has largely involved focusing on the legacy of 'the Troubles', the armed conflict between 1969 and 1994, and which in turn stands both as a singular entity but also as an agglomeration of problems, conflicts and tensions that have accumulated over generations. Collectively we risk, as did Benjamin's *Angel of History*, being propelled into the future as we struggle to deal with the sheer weight of accumulated history, which we have condensed within the singularity of 'the Troubles'.

However, if we are to deal effectively with the legacy of our conflict(s) we need to be able to acknowledge the component elements that comprise the totality and address them each, if not solely in turn, then at least through

recognising their distinctive particularities. We need to approach our past as an archaeologist might in uncovering the sedimented layers of history that have been built up over time and which provide the foundation for our own present. This involves excavating and interpreting each layer in turn exploring their distinctive characteristics, and their inter-relationships, until we reveal the foundational features. The problem is that the international experience of peacebuilding too often involves simply dealing with the most immediately obvious issues, recent history, over-simplified, by focusing on those issues on which agreement can most readily be reached. At the minimum this means stopping the violence and holding an election, before declaring a job done and moving on. But this approach risks leaving some key issues unaddressed, or may fail to address root causes of the conflict. Too often there is a reluctance to accept how long it can take to deal effectively with the legacy or the origins of any conflict.

And in the absence of time, commitment and resources too often the result of a peace process is what the ‘father of peace studies’, Johan Galtung, defined as a ‘negative peace’.<sup>4</sup> For Galtung this refers to a situation where the violence has been brought to an end, or under some form of control, but where some at least of the core structural problems remain unaddressed. Galtung argues that a sustainable and equitable or what he terms a ‘positive’ peace can only be achieved by addressing the fundamental issues that formed the core of the problem.

I want to use the rest of this essay to draw upon the ideas of Benjamin and Galtung to deconstruct the singular notion of both the conflict and the peace process, in order to disentangle the various issues that have been addressed and those that still need to be addressed in transitioning from violent conflict to a sustainable positive peace. It is useful to do it at a time when we have reached a certain level of peace and security. Notwithstanding the recent rioting, Northern Ireland is more peaceful and there has been progress in institutional reform and there is a reasonably stable government in Stormont. It is an appropriate time to look back so that we can plan how to move forwards.

In order to assess the progress that has been made I want to divide the issues that have been dealt with during the peace process with into six broad categories, which collectively comprise the key elements of the problem to be addressed. However, while they are all contemporary issues, they did not all appear simultaneously, but rather have come to the fore at different periods of Irish/Northern Irish history and thus we may expect that they pose different challenges in terms of both their resilience and our imperative to address them. The six themes are the constitutional questions; violence; equality and human

rights; institutional reform; segregation; and sectarianism. Although they are all contemporary problems, they have emerged as primary social and political concerns at different periods of history:

- Armed violence as the legacy of the Troubles;
- Equality and human rights as the legacy of the Civil Rights era;
- Institutional reform as the legacy of Partition;
- Segregation as a product of industrialisation in the early 19th Century;
- Sectarian and cultural divisions date back to the seventeenth century; and
- The sixth theme, the relationship between Britain and Ireland, and between British and Irish people and identities, underpins and cuts across each of the other five themes, but it came to the fore as the driver of the violence of the Troubles.

Each of these themes impacts on the way that life in Northern Ireland functions, four of them are more associated with institutional processes and governance of society, while the other two have more direct impact on the daily lives of citizens. The next part of the essay very briefly reviews how the peace process has begun to address each of these six strands that collectively constitute a large part of the legacy of conflict and violence in Ireland, and in particular in Northern Ireland.

### **Constitutional Question and Violence**

The Troubles was marked (a) by the militarisation of the conflict in Northern Ireland between nationalists and unionists and between republicans and the British state; and (b) by the focus on an armed campaign for a united Ireland. The peace process has addressed these elements in a number of ways:

- The armed violence has been reduced through various activities:
  - The ceasefires by the IRA, UDA and UVF from 1994 onwards;
  - The release of politically motivated prisoners;
  - The decommissioning of weapons and the demobilisation of the IRA;
  - The removal of the British Army from an active role;
  - The removal of militarised structures and bases.
- The border has been demilitarised and re-opened.
- A number of key constitutional issues have been subject to change:
  - The amendment of Articles 2 & 3 of the Irish constitution;
  - The principle of consent on the future status of Northern Ireland.
- The creation of north south and east west contacts and institutions.

However, not all issues that are a direct consequence of the Troubles have been dealt with by the peace process or the Agreement. In particular I would suggest two major issues that are still to be addressed are the continued legacy of paramilitarism (not simply republicans who are still wedded to physical force so much as those that are nominally on ceasefire) and the failure to agree an approach to dealing with the immediate past.

The issue of the demobilisation of paramilitary organisations was not included in the peace agreement nor was there any formal DDR (demobilisation, demilitarisation and reintegration) process. Rather the focus was limited to the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and the release of prisoners. Nor has there been any coherent government plan to deal with the continued presence of the paramilitary organisations since the Agreement, rather the assumption appears to have been that left to themselves the organisations would gradually disappear. This has not happened, and probably will not happen, at least not without some degree of political leadership and some balance of carrot and stick. But a society in which paramilitary organisations are tolerated as a norm cannot really be said to have moved that far from its conflict.

Similarly, there has been no agreed strategy for dealing with the legacy of past violence, either to meet the needs of victims and survivors of both paramilitary and state violence or to address issues of accountability for past actions. Instead we have had an incoherent and inconclusive mixture of reports, enquiries, initiatives, and demands that satisfy no one. Fourteen years on and no coherent or overarching approach has been developed or agreed.

## **Equality and Human Rights**

The Troubles developed out of the earlier Civil Rights campaign which focused on addressing issues of inequality and discrimination, particularly towards the Catholic nationalist community, under the Stormont regime. The failure to respond promptly to the demands for reform, to manage the protests and the counter protests that accompanied the Civil Rights campaign was the precursor to British military intervention, sectarian rioting and the re-emergence of the IRA.

Many of the issues raised by the civil rights campaign had begun to be addressed from the early 1970s with the fair employment legislation, voting reforms and the creation of the Housing Executive, However, by that stage the argument had moved on to the constitutional issues. Nevertheless the principles of equality and human rights were addressed within the Agreement with the

creation of the Human Rights Commission, the introduction of the Human Rights Act, the formation of a unified Equality Commission and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. These developments have all been important in reducing institutional discrimination towards members of the two main communities and have also provided a legal framework that has helped foster a culture of respect for the growing diversity of minority ethnic, LGB, Trans and new migrant communities.

However, despite the extensive equality legislation that has been introduced the recent Peace Monitoring Report, written by Paul Nolan and funded by Joseph Rowntree,<sup>5</sup> revealed that there were still considerably higher levels of poverty and deprivation, and higher rates of economic activity, among Catholics than among Protestants. This may not be an issue on the scale of previous forms of discrimination, but it remains an unacceptable reality that needs to be investigated, acknowledged and acted upon.

### **Institutional Reform**

The inequalities of the civil rights era were in turn a result of the policies and practices that were developed in the years following Partition and the establishment of the government in Stormont, and which ruled for some 50 years as a Unionist administration and without any effective opposition. The Agreement was fundamentally focused on addressing the institutional legacy of Partition in two main ways: through the establishment of a devolved administration based on power sharing between political representatives of the unionist and nationalist communities and through the reform of the police. The current devolved power sharing administration was established in 2007 (albeit after some false starts) following the St Andrews Agreement. And although the government appears increasingly stable, one of the growing concerns that has been voiced about the new Stormont is the absence of any formal opposition to hold government to account and offer an alternative set of policies. This might be viewed as a somewhat worrying echo of the earlier Stormont regime. Policing reform occurred following the Patten Inquiry in 1999 and the new Police Service of Northern Ireland was established in 2001. One of the key indicators of the acceptance of the reform process was not so much the endorsement by Sinn Féin, although that was important, but whether individual Catholics would be willing to join and an acceptable level of 30% of Catholic police officers was deemed to have achieved in 2011.

Thus the implementation of the Agreement has had some success in addressing, or at least reaching working compromises, in relation to constitutional issues, the reduction of paramilitary violence, and the

development of a more inclusive institutional infrastructure around governance, human rights and equality. However, there has been less progress, both in policy and practice, in tackling the remaining two issues, segregation and sectarianism, neither of which were included in any meaningful way within the framework of the Agreement.

The challenges that these issues present to the building of a more shared society can be illustrated by the fact that one key area where institutional reform has not taken place has been in education. The system was formally divided into the state controlled (or Protestant) and Catholic maintained sectors in the 1920s, and despite repeated calls from various quarters for greater levels of integration fewer than 7% of children currently attend an integrated school. And despite an over-supply of schools, school places, school teachers and teacher training, real reform of the education system is still not effectively on the political agenda.

### **Segregation**

The issue of segregation is the fourth of the five layers. The current patterns of division were initiated, at least in urban areas, by the industrialisation and urbanisation of the nineteenth century. Since then the scale of segregation has oscillated in response to periods of inter-communal tension and violence, although it was always present. The Troubles thus helped to consolidate established patterns, but also reinforced and extended them, particularly in Belfast and Derry Londonderry, where the construction of physical barriers at key locations in residential areas served to reinforce not only segregation but also division and difference.

It is worth noting that the residential interface barriers are the last of the three categories of defensive architecture that were developed as part of the Troubles, but while the security barriers around the border and in town centres across Northern Ireland are now long gone, residential barriers have continued to be built through the peace process, with the last government built barrier being constructed as recently as 2007. Segregation and barriers remain, at least in part, because of people's concerns for their safety and security, whether these are currently real, based on past experiences or on stereotypes. The CRC has been at the forefront of raising the issue of the continued presence of barriers and has been supporting localised dialogue to seek agreement to begin to remove or transform some of less physically imposing barriers. It has been a slow process but the work is continuing.

## **Sectarian and Cultural Divisions**

The barriers are only the most obvious physical manifestation of residential segregation, which pre-dated the Troubles, and the reality of living segregated lives has also continued since the formal ending of the conflict. Outside of Belfast, there are fewer physical barriers but instead spaces and places are all too often marked out in people's heads, with routine movements and decisions often taken on the basis of mental maps based on notions of 'our space' and 'their space'. Relations between members of the two main communities are still too often based on practices of avoidance or polite neutrality, rather than any more positive interaction.

The patterns of segregation are based on the assumption that there is something fundamentally different between 'us' and 'them', and which in turn is too often based on sectarian stereotypes of cultural practices and a lack of knowledge of the other, and worse a fear of the other. These have unfortunately only been reinforced, rather than challenged, over recent years by segregated living and by recurrent outbreaks of rioting and low level violence associated with issues like the disputes over parades or the summer marching season. Again there has been only limited institutional lead on tackling sectarianism. A clear example of the priority that is being given to both segregation and sectarianism is that five years have passed since the devolved government abandoned the *A Shared Future* policy, which had been produced by the Northern Ireland Office, but it has yet to replace it with anything new.

This is not to say that there has been no work done in reducing inter-communal tensions or building relationships. Much effective work has been done at grassroots or community level and has involved a diverse array of participants including youth and community workers, former prisoners and ex-combatants, faith groups, victims groups and others who have worked to develop and build relationships, understanding and trust, both horizontally across the divide, but also vertically with the state and statutory agencies. This community-level bottom up work has helped provide the foundations for a more peaceful and shared society. Although much of the progress that I have highlighted above relates to forms of institutional reform, this can only be effective if it is made to have an impact on the ground. Elite level peace processes by themselves are insufficient, and while strategic leadership is important the process of embedding a transition must involve a significant engagement with, and impact in, grass-roots communities and areas and this will only occur because peace makes a difference to people's daily lives.

## **In Conclusion**

While in some ways the rioting in 2011 and 2012 was similar to that of the late 1990s, the context is also very different. In 2012 the violence was contained in time and space, one riot over a few hours at one location. In the late 1990s such disorder often (a) sparked similar riots in other locations in Belfast and perhaps elsewhere; (b) led to further riots over the following days and weeks, and (c) provoked a series of tit-for-tat sectarian attacks on people and property. This did not happen in 2012. But neither did it not happen by accident. Sectarian tensions remain as a persistent backdrop to the lives of many people, particularly in working class communities across Northern Ireland, but they are also being managed on an ongoing basis, in large part by people from within those communities.

Over the past eighteen years we have become quite good at managing tensions and also in reducing and limiting the acts of inter-communal violence that are associated with segregation and sectarianism. But we really need to move beyond the management of such tensions if we are to build a sustainable peace. We need at very least to get to the situation where a riot is a jolt to our expectations, as they were in England in the summer of 2011, and not simply a reminder that it is July once again.

Peacebuilding work has helped transform NI over the past fourteen years, but at this stage we are on a cusp. We have secured a version of Johan Galtung's negative peace. We have reduced inter-communal tensions and largely ended armed violence and we have reformed key political institutions. We have thus addressed, or begun to address, many of those issues that emerged over the course of the twentieth century: the legacy of partition, institutionalised inequality and discrimination, the legitimisation of violence for political ends, as well agreeing a framework for the long term resolution of the constitutional questions.

But the question is do we have the appetite to create a society that is built on a more positive peace? Do we have the appetite to continue the process of peacebuilding and conflict transformation and challenge the issues of sectarianism and segregation, issues that long predated the Troubles, which helped create the conditions from which the Troubles emerged, and which remain as legacies that can undermine attempts to build a sustainable peace?

## **Notes**

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at the 2012 John Hewitt Summer School.
- 2 [http://www.johnhewittsociety.org/poetry3.php?thisid=43&page=14&total=15&cat\\_id=37](http://www.johnhewittsociety.org/poetry3.php?thisid=43&page=14&total=15&cat_id=37)
- 3 <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>
- 4 <http://www.insightonconflict.org/2012/03/interview-johan-galtung/>
- 5 [http://www.community-relations.org.uk/fs/doc/publications/NIPMR\\_2012\\_new\\_1.pdf](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/fs/doc/publications/NIPMR_2012_new_1.pdf)