

# “It’s Only a ‘Hate Crime’ if You’re a Black Catholic.” Divisive Conceptions of Sectarian and Racist Hate Crime in Belfast

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## **Introduction**

This paper draws on qualitative data from a chapter in my PhD study.<sup>1</sup> It conceptualises hate crime as a negative expression of ‘in-group’ identity dynamics. In other words, hate crimes are a pernicious manifestation of ‘us-versus-them’, for the purposes of this article. Both racist and sectarian hate crimes have the potential to create or exacerbate inter-communal tension and hostility. What is of interest here is how stakeholders (such as community workers, media and politicians) appear to be engaged in contentious political wrangling over the term ‘hate crime’ itself within the sectarian context of Belfast. Controversial and divisive issues surrounding ‘hate crime’ are particularly pronounced when it comes to ‘symbolic’ attacks on cultural identity – for instance, targeting Orange halls, churches, or burning national flags.

The quotation in the above title is cited from a member of a loyalist organisation in the community and voluntary sector. This view reflects a sense of how loyalists feel that hate crimes against ‘us’ by ‘them’ are not treated as seriously as attacks on ethnic minority groups or Catholics. The article therefore accounts for notions of loyalists as hate crime victims of a Catholic/nationalist ‘culture war’ – particularly in the recent context of ‘symbolic’ disputes over flags, parading and commemorations, which the first section of this paper deals with.

Moving on to exploring issues around racist hate crime, the latter section draws from a debate on the apparent negative stereotype of the loyalist community ‘as racist’. This debate was notably marked in the summer of 2012 after the media highlighted Polish flags being burnt on loyalist bonfires. In turn,

community workers felt that the media attention on the issue served to ‘demonize’ the loyalist community. Such debate – or accusation – that the loyalist community are ‘more racist’ than their Catholic/nationalist neighbours is used in an attempt to provide a balanced critique on the issue. Hence, it is argued herein that neither ‘CNR’ or ‘PUL’<sup>a</sup> community are ‘more racist’ than the other; but such debate illustrates divisive and controversial conceptions surrounding hate crime as a ‘blame game’ between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

### **Symbolic Attacks on ‘Us’ by ‘Them’**

Craig<sup>2</sup> argues that hate crime constructs antagonistic communities and provokes retaliation. In this way, group-motivated hate crimes may often come under McDevitt *et al.*’s<sup>3</sup> ‘retaliatory’ typology because of the cycle of violence these attacks create, such as ‘tit-for-tat’ sectarianism in Northern Ireland<sup>4</sup>. For Craig, hate crimes are ‘symbolic crimes’ because the perpetrators’ desire to convey a message of hatred towards a particular social group is based on deep-seated resentment. Craig states: ‘hate crimes are regarded as serving a symbolic function to the extent that a message, albeit one of hate, is communicated to a community, neighbourhood, or group.’<sup>5</sup> As follows, it is argued here that hate crimes are ‘symbolic’ of intergroup tension and hostilities. For example, in Northern Ireland, an attack on an Orange Hall, GAA Club, or Church/Chapel is a symbolic hate crime as it is rooted in long-standing hatred for the ‘Other’ communities’ cultural, political, or religious differences. In relation to sectarianism, then, Kelly and Maghan<sup>6</sup> provide a salient argument:

‘Hatreds based on identities, lifestyles, cultural values...appear to have a historic continuity and keep simmering across generations. Thus, a reservoir of biases and bitter memories are widely shared within groups.’

Kelly and Maghan would suggest that sectarian hate crime in Belfast is a violent manifestation of such longstanding tensions, biases and antagonism between divided communities.

Members of the PUL community appear to be under the impression that hate crimes against their identity neither count nor are taken seriously by the authorities. Robert<sup>b</sup> (loyalist community worker, west Belfast) complains that attacks against the Protestant community such as targeting Orange halls and churches, are not being classed as hate crime ‘but would be if it was attacks on the Catholic community.’ For example, Robert argues: ‘there’s attacks on Orange halls all the time; it’s not called hate crime.’ However, there have been cases highlighted in the media where sectarian attacks on Orange halls were indeed identified as sectarian ‘hate crime’ by both the PUL community and the

police. The following cases provide examples. On the 3rd of July 2012, the police investigated a 'sectarian graffiti attack' on an Orange hall in north Belfast.<sup>7</sup> On the 18th of July 2012, the News Letter confirmed that the PSNI were treating a spate of paint bomb attacks on Orange halls across Belfast and Lisburn as 'hate crimes'.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, these incidents cited here occurred around the same time I interviewed Robert (July 2012), which somewhat undermines his above claims that sectarian attacks on Orange halls are not dealt with as 'hate crime', whilst symbolic attacks against the CNR community are. Indeed, on an extensive and careful trawl through online media reports on sectarian attacks in Belfast, one can find that there are more reports on hate crimes against PUL 'symbolic premises' than CNR ones. This is a moot point, but illustrates a cautious consideration over Robert's provocative claims. Despite numerous examples one could pick and choose from on highlighted attacks against Protestant symbolic premises, loyalists such as Robert feel that the PUL community are under-represented as victims of hate crime. The reasons why this may be the case are arguably drawn from a deeper sense of alienation within the loyalist community that they 'no longer matter'. Thus there is an apparent sense of unfair treatment within the loyalist community in the post-Good Friday Agreement era – despite its emphasis on 'good relations' and equality between differing ethnic communities, for instance. Loyalists feel that they have not 'benefitted' economically nor politically from the peace process as much as their Catholic/nationalist neighbours<sup>9</sup> and this sense of unfair victimization perhaps reflects the context underpinning notions that loyalists are not taken seriously as victims of hate crime.

Nevertheless, Robert is careful to state that he 'is not blaming Catholics' for what he sees as bias in defining hate crime when it comes to attacks on 'symbolic premises': 'I blame the police', he states. Indeed, Robert claims that the police and local politicians are 'playing politics with hate crime' through allegedly making certain incidents into hate crimes against one particular community whilst ignoring attacks against another. For Robert, these inconsistencies in definitions of 'hate crime' perpetuate intergroup rivalry, tension and hostility between the CNR and PUL communities since one side feels the 'Other' is treated more favourably. This is reflected in a Facebook site, 'List of Anti-British Hate Crimes in Northern Ireland'<sup>10</sup> which provides a partisan view on hate crime victimization since it only details attacks on 'British' or 'Protestant' identities. In doing so, it arguably embodies a sense of 'they'-did-this-to-'us' and therefore perpetuates a divisive dichotomous mindset behind the issue of hate crime. Symbolic attacks and the ways in which they are discussed by politicians, community workers, and in social media, arguably accentuate intergroup differences and perpetuate conflict between 'rival' identities in Belfast. It is ironic, then, that the *raison d'être* of 'hate crime' as a

social, political and legal concept is supposedly a means to harness collective opprobrium against prejudiced acts of hostility; this is apparently not always the case in Belfast.

Crawford (loyalist community worker) also points the blame at the PSNI for creating, in his words, 'a hierarchy of victims' within hate crime: 'at the bottom of that rung will be the white Protestant working class, I believe, because it's a case of "how can it be a hate crime against you? Sure, there's a lot of you about".' This implies that hate crimes against Catholic/nationalists and ethnic minorities are taken more seriously by the authorities than hate crimes against the PUL community. Indeed, when I asked Crawford to define a hate crime, he replied: 'I would define a hate crime as an offence committed against somebody who's not from Northern Ireland, or who's not white, Protestant working-class.' This partisan assertion implies that the majority PUL community are not accounted for as victims of hate crime, since 'hate crime' victims are apparently reserved for either foreign nationals or Catholics/nationalists. Crawford's aforementioned definition does not account for the fact that Catholics/nationalists are also a 'majority' community in Northern Ireland and can experience hate crime victimization also. That is, Crawford's views illustrate a relatively recent shift in Northern Ireland from a Protestant/unionist hegemony towards two majority camps of CNR/PUL existing alongside burgeoning multicultural identities. His views also significantly highlight the accentuation of 'us' and 'them' rhetoric underpinning divisive conceptions of hate crime.

Furthermore, during my fieldwork, Sally, a member of a loyalist community organisation sardonically commented: 'sure it's only "a hate crime" if you're a black Catholic.' This view also coincides with Crawford's 'hierarchy of victimhood' notion which allegedly omits white, British Protestants as hate crime victims. It is perhaps very telling that members of the loyalist community feel there is hierarchy of victims within definitions of hate crime. The enactment of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order (2004) officially recognised the violent victimization of minority groups in Northern Ireland as 'hate crime'. Loyalists like Robert, Crawford and Sally feel that they do not 'fit in' to such a category since the PSNI are more likely to record hate crimes against minority groups. This arguably reflects an ironic shift from institutional bias in favour of PUL majority in the province during the early years of the 'Troubles' to more recent perceptions of unfair treatment towards loyalists in the changing social and political landscape of Northern Ireland.

On the 25th July 2013, The News Letter reported a union flag stolen from an Orange hall in Whiterock, west Belfast.<sup>11</sup> Allegedly perpetrated by nationalist

youths, the incident was branded a 'cultural hate crime' against Protestants by a local DUP councillor. The conception of hate crime here as 'cultural' has arguably gained ground following the removal of the union flag at city hall in December 2012, and grievances against the Parades Commission prohibiting a contentious Orange Order march through Ardoyne in the summer of 2013. This chimes with what appears to be popular (albeit sensationalist) discourse in the PUL community that republicans/nationalists are embarking upon a 'culture war' to erode British identity in the province.<sup>12</sup> That is, the CNR community are accused of 'promoting' their in-group identity at the expense of denigrating another identity. Post-1998 Agreement, the Protestant/loyalist community perhaps feel that they've lost significant social and political power in Northern Ireland as witnessed in the removal of the union flag at Belfast city hall in December 2012. Indeed, Jarman<sup>13</sup> suggests that the Union flag dispute 'is almost a symbol of national neurosis in Northern Ireland...I think that is because of the sense of threat and potential loss that the Protestant community feel the need to reaffirm their presence and status.' It is interesting, then, that the PUL community are positioning themselves as an out-group experiencing apparent victimization by a hostile in-group, because this reflects meandering and contested formations of hate crime underpinned by 'blame game' politics of who-did-what-to-whom. In turn, this arguably encapsulates the wider conflictual, sectarianized context of Northern Ireland.

The above News Letter report highlighted the potential for sectarian hate crime to exacerbate intergroup tension and hostility. Indeed, the aforementioned DUP councillor claimed: 'I have no doubt that this hate crime was designed to increase tensions at an already tense time' – i.e. the incident occurred during the contested parading season in Belfast. In this way, sectarian hate crime is seen as having dangerous potential to evoke tit-for-tat retaliation characteristic of sectarian intergroup conflict in Belfast. Moreover, an arson attack on an Orange hall in west Belfast in June 2013 was condemned as 'a hate crime against the Protestant community' by a senior member of the Orange Order, who claimed that the perpetrators were 'clearly attempting to whip up tensions ahead of the main parading season.'<sup>14</sup> The incident was also condemned by a north Belfast DUP Assembly member, who blamed 'certain republicans' for 'displaying their bigotry and intolerance by attacking Orange halls particularly in the run up to local parades.'<sup>15</sup> However, this statement seems to contradict the DUP minister's own assertions about heightening tensions during a contentious time of year. As an elected (and influential) representative of the PUL community, the minister uses divisive 'us and them' language imputing blame on republican antagonists – which arguably further serves to heighten tension and exacerbate intergroup differences between communities. Such contradictions in mainstream unionism have also been marked by discussions

around the burning of the Irish tricolour on bonfires during the Twelfth of July celebrations. On June 27th 2013, a DUP MLA, Paul Girvan, reportedly claimed that he has ‘no problem’ with burning the Irish tricolour on Eleventh Night bonfires. The MLA defended his views by suggesting that burning the Irish flag on top of bonfires by loyalists is ‘part of their culture.’ Thus a mainstream politician is proposing the idea that a symbolic expression of hatred is a ‘legitimate’ ‘cultural’ celebration of identity. Such views arguably fuel negative ‘us and them’ identity dynamics in Belfast which perpetuates hate crime between seemingly disparate communities.

### **‘They’ Are More Racist Than ‘Us’**

From significant data gathered in this study, it appears that the PUL community are more commonly seen as perpetrators of hate crime rather than as victims, in contradistinction to the above assertions. For instance, during the Twelfth of July period in 2012, this ‘cultural celebration’ was reportedly marred by racist expressions of hatred – the burning of Polish flags on loyalist bonfires in inner-east Belfast.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because media reports showed the burning of an election poster by a Polish candidate for the SDLP, this gave events a sectarian twist – which arguably reflects a blurring of distinction between racist and sectarian hate crime. Over recent years, there have been significant reports of anti-Polish hostility within loyalist working class areas in Belfast. Nevertheless, the allegation of loyalists as ‘racists’ has been countered by the view that the loyalist community have been unfairly ‘demonized’ in the media, in drawing from a series of interviews I conducted with ten individual members of a loyalist community group working in east Belfast who are largely involved in cross-community projects. These community workers unequivocally condemned the Polish flag-burning incidents; but they nevertheless were keen to emphasise how media attention on these events exacerbated intergroup tension between loyalists and Polish residents in inner-east Belfast. This view was also highlighted in the media in response to the reports of Polish flag-burning by one interviewee in the group who claimed that the media spotlight on the issue perpetuated ‘the continued demonization of the loyalist community’.<sup>17</sup> However, counter to this view, these incidents arguably reflected a telling indication of racist and sectarian hostility within a particular area of Belfast which was downplayed by loyalist community responses. First Minister Peter Robinson markedly condemned these incidents also<sup>18</sup>, but tellingly remained silent about the issue of burning Irish tricolours alongside Polish flags on loyalist bonfires. Moreover, members of ‘Charter for NI’ (including members of Polish national origin within their group) felt that the media attention on the issue was the ‘wrong way to go about it’, arguing instead for a more grass-roots dialogue between local loyalist community workers and representatives of the

Polish community to resolve the issue. This may well be a fair assessment of sensationalist media reportage; but one could suggest that if racist and sectarian acts of hatred and hostility cannot be highlighted in the public domain without turning into a controversial, sensitive and divisive issue, then perhaps this reflects a sense of Northern Ireland as an 'abnormal' society.

Following the infamous racist hate crimes against the Roma community in south Belfast in 2009, *The Guardian* reported that racism 'doesn't happen in republican areas only in loyalist areas' in attempting to account for the alleged involvement of loyalists in these attacks.<sup>19</sup> This report, however, arguably pandered to a sensationalist generalisation about the PUL community in Belfast as 'racists', whilst serving to downplay or ignore racism existent in Catholic/nationalist areas. Brian (nationalist community worker, west Belfast) claims: 'racism is mostly in the loyalist areas...I don't think hate crime happens [in the CNR community] to the extent as it does in loyalist areas, I just don't think ours is anywhere near as bad.' Brian uses contentious 'them and us' rhetoric here in suggesting that 'our' community are not 'as bad', and makes a generalised assumption that the PUL community are 'more racist' than their CNR counterparts. However, Dominic (another nationalist community worker based in west Belfast), contradicts this view by recalling an incident in a prominent CNR community – whereby members of an ethnic minority group experienced racist hostility whilst handing out flyers for a local event – and states: 'there's no point in pretending that racism doesn't happen in our areas; it does.' Geroid also provides an honest account of racism occurring within a Catholic/nationalist area, by drawing on experiences of Roma victimization in the 'Holy Lands' of south Belfast. This is reiterated by 'Belfast Counterfire' who reported on 'a virulently racist meeting in the lower Ormeau area of South Belfast' during October 2011, held to discuss rising tensions felt by local residents against Romanians. After this meeting, there was reportedly 'at least three physical attacks on people from the Roma community in that area.'<sup>20</sup> These aforementioned instances contradict the assumption that racism 'only happens' in Protestant/loyalist communities, not Catholic/nationalist areas. Racism arguably cannot be 'blamed' on one particular community in Belfast: acts of racism/hate crimes cut across both CNR and PUL communities.

It would appear, at a glance of PSNI statistics<sup>21</sup>, that racist attacks occur more often in Protestant/loyalist areas (namely, parts of east and south Belfast, or 'B District'). Nevertheless, the reasons why this may be the case are outlined by Jarman<sup>22</sup> who challenges the assumption that racism in Northern Ireland is much the blame of Protestants/loyalists: 'the association between racism and Protestant working class communities is in part due to the demographics of urban areas of Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast, where between thirty

and fifty per cent of racist incidents have been recorded over recent years.’ The point is that Protestant areas in inner-city, working class parts of Belfast have experienced more influx of ethnic minorities than Catholic areas, mainly due to cheaper housing available in such neighbourhoods: ‘it is therefore not necessarily that Protestants are more racist than Catholics but rather that they have more opportunities to express their racism in their own communities.’<sup>23</sup>

There is evidence to suggest that, in some cases, ethnic minorities in Catholic/nationalist areas have apparently been discouraged in contacting police when experiencing racism. For instance, Geoghegan<sup>24</sup> claims that in CNR areas of west Belfast ethnic minorities were reportedly advised by local community representatives not to contact the police if they experienced any racial harassment. The unwillingness to engage with police in Catholic/nationalist areas arguably reflects an historical socio-political context stemming from grievances against a partisan RUC during ‘the Troubles’. That is, Catholic/nationalists in areas such as west Belfast perhaps prefer engaging with alternative modes of authority, such as being encouraged to report problems to local Sinn Fein councillors or community workers as opposed to ‘telling’ the police. At the same time, however, experiences of racist victimization for ethnic minorities in such cases go undetected, if not unresolved. It is rather worrying, therefore, that victims of racism should be ‘silenced’ in any way. In relation to PSNI figures, then, the lack of engagement with police may partly explain the apparent low levels of racist hate crimes recorded in the CNR community. Indeed, I attended a WARN (West Against Racism Network) conference in west Belfast during the summer of 2012, and the issue of the under-reporting of hate crime in Catholic/nationalist west Belfast emerged. A representative of the Traveller community at this event was concerned that racist attacks against this particular ethnic group were not being reported widely enough; and members of the panel also alluded to a culture within the CNR community of not reporting certain problems – such as racism – to the police.

Neither CNR nor PUL are arguably ‘more racist’ than the other. To suggest otherwise, one runs the risk of descending into a sectarianized ‘blame game’ – which panders to the negative stereotype that the PUL community are ‘racist’, while downplaying or ignoring racism in CNR communities. It is perhaps more appropriate to suggest that both CNR and PUL communities only differ in the racism question when each appear to have specific victims of racist offences in the dynamic context of their particular social environments. For instance, the Catholic/nationalist community have experienced anti-Traveller hate crimes and are also not immune to aggressively denigrating the Roma community. On the other hand, the PUL community have had hostile issues with Polish and other eastern Europeans within particular areas – such as inner-east Belfast and the ‘Village’ in south Belfast – and this is at times underpinned by the sectarian

context since most Poles are perceived as Catholic. Moreover, certain elements within the PUL community across the city have evidently taken issue with other foreign nationals moving into their communities. In this way, it seems that parochial notions of 'defending' community identity feeds into the argument of an apparent 'siege mentality' within some loyalist areas.<sup>25</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It appears that notions of 'us and 'them' are feeding into conceptions of the term 'hate crime' itself, as a subjective, divisive and controversial label rather than being a banner uniting communities against all forms of bigotry. Symbolic expressions of intergroup hostility and tension predicated on malignant notions of in-group identity are reflected particularly in attacks on Orange halls, churches and national flags. However, conceptions of such incidents are based on partisan notions of both victimization and blame. The apparent divisive nature of 'hate crime' suggests there is a politics being played with the label – particularly involving acts of sectarianism. The PUL community are keen to be recognised as victims of hate crime, whilst playing upon sectarianized lines of division in doing so. What the above discussion highlights is that conceptions of racism and sectarianism in Belfast are at times weighted by one-upmanship point-scoring and notions of unfair treatment between 'rival' identities. That is, some CNRs claim that PULs are 'more racist than us'; and certain PUL members accuse CNRs of waging a sectarian 'culture war' against them – while at the same time turning a blind eye on the burning of the Irish tricolour on loyalist bonfires, to illustrate a contradiction here. Such a mentality operating at both the community and political level in Belfast, undermines notions towards a cohesive and shared society because it is predicated on discordant 'us' and 'them' sentiments – rather than a consensus of condemnation against prejudice of whatever form.

## Notes

a The reader should note the abbreviations CNR and PUL used herein are shorthand for Catholic/nationalist/republican, and Protestant/unionist/loyalist communities. Whilst a generalised labelling of 'two communities' (i.e. 'CNR', 'PUL') arguably ignores both internal fractions within such communities and wider multicultural identities in Belfast, I use these terms deliberately to convey notions of 'us' and 'them' existent within sectarianized discourse.

b All names of interviewees provided here are anonymised by pseudonyms

1 'Challenging "Hate Crime" in a Divided City – Racist and Sectarian Hate Crime in Belfast.'

2 Craig, 2002

3 McDevitt, et al., 2002

4 For instance, see Malcom, 2011

5 Craig, 2002, p. 87

6 Kelly and Maghan, 1998

7 BBC News Northern Ireland, 2012a

8 News Letter, 2012

9 Fennell and Stewart, 2010

10 See: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/List-of-anti-British-hate-crimes-in-Northern-Ireland/237087726312977?fref=ts> (Last accessed on 12/09/2013)

11 News Letter, 2013b

12 For example, see: BBC News Northern Ireland, 2013; Belfast Telegraph, 2013b; News Letter, 2013a

13 Jarman, 2013

14 Belfast Telegraph, 2013a

15 Ibid.

16 For example, see: BBC News Northern Ireland, 2012a; Belfast Telegraph, 2012; UTV News, 2012

17 BBC News Northern Ireland, 2012b

18 Ibid.

19 The Guardian, 2009

20 Belfast Counterfire, 2011

21 Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2010, 2011, 2012

22 Jarman, 2008

23 Ibid.

24 Geoghegan, 2010

25 Irish Times, 2004

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