

Factual – Measured - Critical

Culture, Class and Protestantism in Urban Belfast **John Brewer**

Belfast seems at war once more. There are nightly protests, clashes with the police, stone throwing across so-called 'peace walls', road traffic disruptions, bomb threats, even a permanent camp of protestors on a North Belfast street. What sort of peace process is this outsider observers rightly ask? But there has been a fundamental shift in the nature of conflict.-It has moved from being a political conflict to a 'culture war', with contestation now not about the legitimacy of the state, but cultural symbols like flags and parading. Accordingly, attention has shifted away from Republicans (articulating Catholic demands for reform) towards Loyalists (articulating resistance to reforms).

What drives this is the feeling that peace has delivered injustice, unfairness and inequality to working class Loyalists. It is now they, not Catholics, who feel oppressed. Accurate or not, this perception reflects the failure to achieve reconciliation in society despite the gains in political reform.

Much of the focus on modern-day Loyalism concerns its politics. The sociology of Loyalism, however, is more insightful in explaining the current travails in Northern Ireland's peace process.

There is no one Loyalism; there never was, given its fragmentation into several organisations. But Loyalism is also distinguished now by the social settings in which it operates. What can be called 'rural Loyalism', 'single-identity town Loyalism' and 'urban interface Loyalism', of course, share common features, but are also diverging. In particular, the dynamics facing 'urban interface Loyalism' are helping to separate it from other forms. By this term, I refer to those parts of Belfast, largely in the East and North of the city, where there is a patchwork of small neighbourhoods of Catholic and Protestant residents, sometimes only comprising a few streets at a time, who confront each other across largely culturally-drawn boundaries that mark the place as theirs.

Within this, intra-Protestant class divisions are real despite appeals to common ethno-religious culture. Loyalists are perceived by some middle class Protestants, the mainline Protestant churches, and the mainstream Unionist political parties, variously as 'scum', 'white trash' and 'people not like us'. This view has, to some extent, been taken up by urban interface Loyalism itself as a self-categorisation. This negative portrayal has been turned into a positive self-image to be expressed by many in their view that 'we don't care'.

This self-image is further isolating urban interface Loyalism, making it introspective, mistrustful and incapable of seeing where its best political, economic and cultural interests lie. Above all, the mentality of 'ourselves alone' is counter-productive in the

Factual – Measured - Critical

long run because it will not deal with the social dynamics of urban interface areas, but, rather, make them worse.

The social dynamics isolating and separating urban interface Loyalism are a potent mix of economic decline, social deprivation, endemic conflict with Catholic neighbours (with whom there is no co-dependency, as is the case in rural areas), and a lack of effective political representation. The latter has now reached the point where non-voting is highest in urban interface Loyalist areas (in complete contrast to working class Catholic areas where bread-and-butter class issues articulated by Sinn Fein have led to a sense of empowerment).

The loss of status for the Protestant working class as a 'labour aristocracy', one of the few gains from the old Unionist ascendancy, has coincided both with economic decline of the basic industries they once dominated and the wider peace process, encouraging the latter to be perceived as the ultimate cause of their social problems. It is widely felt by those in urban interface areas that the so-called peace dividend has passed them by, that the peace process delivered a Republican agenda and that their culture is under threat as its symbols become subject to restriction.

This is why *culture* now assumes greater importance in Loyalist conceptions of identity than *class* and supersedes their experiences of economic decline and social deprivation. They feel the peace process is to blame and that working class Catholics got a better deal from the peace dividend. All this resentment gets funnelled into opposition to a peace process that they think of as largely anti-Protestant.

This misconstrues their problem. Educational attainment levels are very low in Loyalist urban interface areas in marked contrast to working class Catholic areas (largely in part because qualifications were not needed historically by the Protestant working class in order to enter the 'labour aristocracy'). Measures of social deprivation are high, in terms of unemployment, welfare dependency, crime, anti-social behaviour and paramilitary activity. There are weak levels of both political capital (a feeling of powerlessness, save the default position of strength in street protest), and social capital (high levels of mistrust, social distance from local Catholics and the Protestant middle class, and lack of co-dependency with Catholic neighbours). This is also manifested in an undeveloped civil sphere, where there is a shortage of civil society groups to challenge the dominance of the paramilitary bodies and the Orange Order.

In these circumstances, Progressive Loyalism finds it hard to develop roots or for the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) to grow a political mandate. Indeed, what adds to this mix is the feeling, amongst the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), that a political strategy has failed. The UVF has largely given up on the conflict resolution commitments it showed at the time of the Good Friday Agreement (the IRA, in contrast, can show the virtue of abandoning the military campaign by the political gains of Sinn Fein, which is now sharing in government).

Factual – Measured - Critical

There has, thus, been a resurgence of militancy amongst the UVF, in part to assert dominance over rival organisations like the UDA, but also to assert its local control. There has been a growth in participation in Loyalist bands, if not also in the Orange Order, whose normal Christian ethos is downplayed as a result of secularisation in these neighbourhoods. This has loosened religious constraints on members. Parading has become the only way in which people feel their culture can be expressed, such that its denial is perceived as a threat to that whole culture, accordingly magnifying its effects. The Orange Order is unable to assert control over this situation, including over the behaviour of bands and a minority of its members in urban interface lodges, and the PUP fears being seen as irrelevant when the UVF openly ignores its advice.

In an already distorted civil sphere, the normal restraints are relaxed. The Loyalist protesters are thus at the point of becoming a law unto themselves, resistant to conventional appeals and values, and subject to the authority, if at all, of new leaders with little organisational skill or political judgement, who have emerged from among the mass street protesters themselves. Events are driving the crowds, not political leadership or strategic political and cultural gains.

Meanwhile the disorder drives away trade, worsens levels of social deprivation and educational disadvantage, increases anti-social behaviour and weakens normal community constraints. Urban interface Loyalist neighbourhoods are not only communities that have turned their face against the outside world, they are communities against themselves, as disorder threatens more social breakdown in the future. This is self-inflicted as much as resulting from victimisation from outside.

A regrettable outcome is that dissident Republicanism finds sustenance amidst resurgent Loyalist aggression. Urban interface areas have become the last battlefield in an old war. Sinn Fein's lack of manoeuvre in responding to initiatives over parades is the result of fear at the growth of dissidents.

Thus, we now have in Northern Ireland processes of cosmopolitanism coming up against resistance from countervailing processes that sustain localism. The cosmopolitan lifestyle of the Protestant and Catholic middle classes in the suburbs is sustained by two opera houses, several theatres, a world-class Ulster orchestra, wonderful restaurants vibrant riverside and street cafe culture, and low house prices, with accordingly high levels of disposable income. People for whom ethno-religious labels are losing saliency, amongst whom support for integrated education is growing, respond to the resurgence of the ancient conflict with disbelief, frustration and growing withdrawal into their hedonistic cosmopolitan life style. Middle class congregations commute into inner city churches but are disconnected from the evident problems in the vicinity. Many others abjure religion at all, with the growth of non-identification and decline in observance rife amongst the suburban affluent, both Catholic and Protestant (but especially the Protestant middle class).

Factual – Measured - Critical

Polls show that the Catholic middle class have largely lost interest in the idea of a united Ireland (Sinn Fein know they would lose a border poll and only Republican dissidents keep to this dream) and growth in a 'Northern Irish' identity rather than a 'British' one is growing amongst the Protestant middle class.

But cosmopolitanism encounters strong counter forces of localism in urban interface areas, where socio-economic and political dynamics sustain ancient identities that are peculiarly local and spatial. True, a 'Northern Irish' identity is also adopted by many Loyalists, but for reasons that Britain is seen as duplicitous in causing their plight, meaning that they can rely only on themselves.

This withdrawal into an image of themselves as the last defenders – of Protestantism on the island of Ireland or a united Ireland – means also an avowal of the past. Remaining faithful to the past, to the sacrifices shed and the pain of its many victims, has the effect of keeping alive old hatreds and divisive outcomes. The Haass Commission, currently dealing with the issue of the past, is thus encountering a sociological problematic for which it is ill-equipped.

The travails of the peace process are spatial, local, even parochial, but they represent a buffer against which cosmopolitanism has come to a dramatic halt.

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