Governing Ethnic Conflict

Consociation, identity and the price of peace

Andrew Finlay
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This book offers an intellectual history of an emerging technology of peace and explains how the liberal state has come to endorse illiberal subjects and practices.

The idea that conflicts are problems that have causes and therefore solutions rather than winners and losers has gained momentum since the end of the Cold War, and it has become more common for third-party mediators acting in the name of liberal internationalism to promote the resolution of intra-state conflicts. These third-party peace makers appear to share lessons and expertise so that it is possible to speak of an emergent common technology of peace based around a controversial form of power-sharing known as consociation.

In this common technology of peace, the cause of conflict is understood to be competing ethno-national identities and the solution is to recognise these identities, and make them useful to government through power-sharing. Drawing on an analysis of the peace process in Ireland and the Dayton Accords in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the book argues that the problem with consociational arrangements is not simply that they institutionalise ethnic division and privilege particular identities or groups, but, more importantly, that they close down the space for other ways of being. By specifying identity categories, consociational regimes create a residual category, designated ‘other’. These ‘others’ not only offer a challenge to prevailing ideas about identity but also stand in reproach to conventional wisdom regarding the management of conflict.

This book will be of much interest to students of conflict resolution, ethnic conflict, identity, and war and conflict studies in general.

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To Margaret and the memory of Vera and Roy
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Abbreviations

AAI         Anglo-Irish Agreement, 1985
CTG         Cultural Traditions Group
ECHR        European Convention for Human Rights
ETA         Euskadi Ta Askatasuna
GFA         Good Friday Agreement, 1998
IRA         Irish Republican Army
NIHRC       Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
NILP        Northern Ireland Labour Party
OFMDFM      Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
PR          Proportional Representation
PUP         Progressive Unionist Party
SACHR       The Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights
SDLP        Social Democratic and Labour Party
UDA         Ulster Defence Association
UNESCO      United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UVF         Ulster Volunteer Force
‘More punk less folk!’ This was the response of a Bosnian community relations worker to a sceptical remark I had made about treating culture as both the cause of conflict and its solution. He described the ‘typical . . . “successful” interethnic (intercultural) project’ favoured by ‘international donors’ as one that ended ‘with a blend of folklore[s] . . . we sing each other songs, tell . . . jokes’. For him, this kind of project was anything but successful: ‘from my perspective, this is just a reproduction/reinforcement of differences’. The kind of cultural project he would like to develop if only he could get the funds would be based in “alternative” (underground, countercultural, OFF, call it as you like) cultural paradigms, which offer . . . additional points of identification, potential (not necessary) transcendence of ethnic identity’. He thought that working with youth was particularly important because they had been raised in an ‘ideological’ environment where ethnicity was paramount. Hence: ‘more punk less folk!’ (personal communication, 4 December 2009 and 12 December 2009).

The community relations worker’s remarks should not be dismissed as fanciful. Think of the role played by the ‘alternative cultural’ scene in Belgrade in the huge protests against the Milosevic regime in 1996 and 1997. Stef Jansen describes alternative music as a ‘vector of dissent’ (see Jansen 2001: 49) during those protests, and there is evidence that it continues to play this role, albeit at a much lower pitch (Murphy 2008). But, the community relations worker quoted above was under no illusions. He was modest about what he thought his preferred inter-cultural, community relations programme might achieve:

if BiH (Bosnia-Herzegovina) is doomed to a post-war reconciliation intervention, and it seems it is, let’s be innovative, introduce some new . . . social, cultural . . . practices into those communities in small scales of
course. This kind of approach would not . . . transform the whole society into heaven of peace, it simply introduce[s] new ‘signifiers’.

(personal communication, 12 December 2009)

In any case, he was reconciled that this kind of programme was unlikely to attract funding from international donors; more’s the pity.

There are some who have illusions about the punk scene in Northern Ireland in the late 1970s and 1980s as a kind of community relations programme avant la lettre. Martin McLoone (2004) has characterised this as ‘punk nostalgia’: an indulgence on the part of a generation of old punks who now occupy influential positions in the media. The political context of the nostalgia he diagnoses is precise: several years after the signing of a peace agreement, and it appeared that sectarian or ethnic divisions, especially amongst the working class, were worse than ever. There is, he suggests, a nostalgic longing for the opportunity that punk music once offered of, ‘an imagining beyond a sectarian politics, a rebellion against the complacent certainties of a sectarian political culture that had delivered nothing but social disharmony and communal breakdown’ (McLoone 2004: 32). Henry McDonald (2004) has written of a ‘spirit of rebellion and personal freedom unleashed in that brief but important flowering of Belfast “counter culture”’.

Against this, there are those who would argue that a haircut is the easiest form of rebellion. Des Bell has argued that it was the youth, often with Mohican haircuts and leather jackets and punk music, who re-invigorated ‘traditional’ loyalist politics in the 1980s and 1990s (Bell 1990 and 1996). Bill Rolston has pointed out that, with one or two exceptions, the message of punk bands was ‘remarkably tame’ politically (2001: 65), and that this was precisely because ‘groups played to young people from both sides of the political divide’: they could not afford to alienate half their audience. He concludes that the notion of punk music as the beginning ‘of a new cross-community youth culture that would lead to an end of the conflict’ was fanciful (2001: 59).

My experience of punk in Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s would tend to support the analysis of Bell and Rolston. I recall the derision with which a very good friend (still) responded to my suggestion that we go to see a fairly well-known English punk band (my memory fails me here – I can’t remember which one), who were playing a ‘rock the [H] block’ gig in West Belfast as part of a broader campaign for political status for republican prisoners. I also recall the hostility with which friends at the Harp Bar, then epicentre of the punk scene, met the suggestion (the source of which I cannot remember),
that we should create a ‘rock against sectarianism’ on the lines of rock against racism in Britain.

And yet, this is not to dismiss the significance of punk. My guess is that escapism was probably the main thing for most, and this escapist spirit was not unique to punk. Nor was punk unique in its ability to bring together ‘large numbers of young people from different backgrounds, with kids from Catholic and Protestant areas mixing together freely without fear or intimidation’ (O’Neill and Trelford 2003, quoted in Campbell 2007). Punk was not an aberration, but one of a sequence of underground scenes based around different genres of music that ebbed and flowed after punk (and before it too I am sure): hi energy, electro, dance music – Belfast had its own ‘summer of love’ in the early 1990s (see also Rolston 2001: 66 note 25).

In the context of a post-conflict society in which the underlying logic appears to be that ‘good fences make good neighbours’, ‘punk nostalgia’ is seductive and should be resisted. But with distance, it is also too easy to dismiss punk’s significance. In any case, what should not be underestimated is the value in an ethnically divided society of bringing together people on the basis of a shared interest or activity where their ethnic identity is not the highest virtue. In the words of the Bosnian community relations worker mentioned earlier, the alternative inter-cultural projects he would develop if he were given the chance would have the modest aims of ‘creating additional points of identification, potential (not necessary) transcendence of ethnic identity’ (personal communication, 4 December 2009; see also Pickering 2006).

To which I would add the modest aim of encouraging friendships. Leela Gandhi in her book, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, argues for the importance of ‘those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axis of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against possessive communities of belonging’ (Gandhi 2006: 10). I say ‘modest’, because friendship is not innocent of power, and as Begona Aretxaga has argued: ‘any readiness to model political relationships on the principle of friendship requires awareness that there can be no good friendship when a fluid negotiation of power differentials in the relationship is lacking’ (2005: 282).

I am still friends with many of the people I met through Belfast’s ‘counter-culture’: they remain my ‘affective community’. So my first acknowledgement is to them, and to the places where we met: the Harp Bar, the Pound, Dubarry’s, Lavery’s, Jules, the Delta and the Plaza ballrooms (run by Ernie and Jim – two of the unsung heroes), the Carpenters, Just Books, the Anarchy Centre, the Crescent Centre, the Midlands, the Rathcoole Self Help Group, Sugar Sweet, Choice.
Amongst other things, this book offers a genealogy of a particular approach to peace agreement and conflict resolution, exemplified by the Good Friday Agreement and the Dayton Accords. As befits a book concerned with intellectual history, the research draws largely on documentary sources produced by international organisations, government departments, non-governmental organisations, and academics and consultants of various kinds. While much material is now available online via the Internet, libraries remain crucial, and not just for the obscure stuff. I would like to thank staff at Northern Ireland Political Section of the Linen Hall Library, Belfast and in the library at Trinity College, Dublin – especially the Inter library Loans Section – for their help and advice.

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