

Abandonner la violence? Comment l'Irlande du Nord sort du conflit

Reviewed by Anne-Alexandra Fournier

Abstract

Féron, Elise (2011), *Abandonner la violence? Comment l'Irlande du Nord sort du conflit*, Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages [*Abandoning violence? How Northern Ireland gets out of conflict*], Paris: Payot & Rivages Editions. 20€, pp. 236, pbk.

Elise Féron discusses the difficulty of achieving “social peace” in Northern Ireland, 14 years after the political peace agreement. She focuses on what has been the core issue of many years of political negotiations and policy-making: the issue of violence. The latter has not disappeared, as if by magic, but has been transformed and has found new ways and actors through which to express itself. Its impact on the people of Northern Ireland continues to be vivid and leaves ahead the real challenge of social reconciliation.

The book is divided into three main parts, successively studying the problems arising from the peace process, new expressions of violence, and the potential evolution towards a post-conflict era.

The first part lays the foundation for a better understanding of the current situation and argues that an “hyper-politicisation” of the conflict has led to the freezing of two communal cultures and community referentials. Social institutions such as family, school, and church underpin foundations of identity culture, and their actors foster and implant conflict. Stemming out of this is a situation characterised by high spatial segregation, high endogamy, no public space that would allow some confrontation of ideas, and a community identity that is socially constructed by the influences of religious and political organisations. Elise Féron explains that the 1998 Agreement implied a consensual – but unsatisfactory – political trade-off that communities were not yet ready to accept. Facing a gradual fracture between political organisations and their respective communities, the political peace process turned to be unable to eradicate social representations of conflict and powerless to achieve social reconciliation.

The conflict remains the same indeed, but it has travelled from nationalists’ to unionists’ dissatisfaction, from political elites to communities, with new forms of community and intra-community violence, and from a clear communal opposition to a focus on “internal enemies” within each community. Transition from Direct Rule – when Northern-Irish political organisations had no structural attachment to policy-making networks and whose only mission was to symbolically represent a community – to democratic dialogue is not easy. New political leaderships remain highly dependent on symbolical features (and then, to a certain extent, on the perpetuation of conflict) while being strained to seek for accommodation in the new political system. Elise Féron argues that the issue is no longer *manifestations* of violence so much as on-going *justifications* of this violence, which make ongoing conflict profitable to political and social actors.

At this point, broader, conflict-reinforcing features become evident: influence of communal identities and their social echo, historical roots of violence (which often imply that past violence legitimizes present violence), protracted poverty, and the unchanging goals of some paramilitary groups. In this context,

“peace” must be considered as the outcome of a cumulative process, which would aim at reversing the balance of risk and the actors’ belief that the game is actually not worth the candle.

The second part of the book studies physical and symbolical community separation. Separation allows the “social memory of the conflict” to spread and violence henceforth holds a true social utility for the actors. It is expressed in daily-life sectarian attacks and intimidations, often following vendetta logic. Political leaders’ legitimacy still depends on their capacity to handle violent situations, to protect “their” community, and in doing so, to distance themselves from members of the “other” community. High levels of violence near “peace lines” illustrate as well, to Féron, an increasing community demand for separation and a new form of “leisure violence”, particularly for the youth of socially disadvantaged areas.

To Féron, paramilitary groups also mirror divisions of the province. These groups have kept their own specific structures while reforming their activities around local criminal misdeeds and social control in some nationalist neighbourhoods. They echo Northern-Ireland society’s factionalism, which ingrains fear of mixing and of “the other”. Criminalisation of violence and drifts towards Mafiosi-type organisations seem then to lessen the political dimension of violence but do not stop its use as a traditional means of action.

Finally, rituals and commemorations are of high social importance in Northern Ireland, as they reassure communities about their own cohesion, collective memory, and legitimacy. Inter-community confrontations have become ritualised, parades have gained in importance for both communities and the symbolical use of territory has increased. The communal dimension of territory encapsulates the Northern Irish population into a geographical scheme that offers only few possibilities (“mixed areas”, “ghettos” or “peace lines areas” for example), and little hope for flexibility within political and social relations. Segregation inexorably remains a more favourable option for communities.

The last part of the book inquires into the evolution of national and international contexts, where “liberation wars” are no longer legitimized, democratic processes are favoured, and British/Irish relations are normalised. Both unionists and nationalists need to assert their uniqueness, but the former have to face the uncomfortable position of “colons” whereas the latter have to face recent theories on “the end of nation-states” and the limits of nationalism. These paradigmatic evolutions, the international condemnation of violence, and the influence of European integration have positive political and economical consequences: elites’ cooperation and economic exchanges between the North and South of the island. The problem is that such integration does not seem to be mirrored at the community level. Within the national context, reintegration of former paramilitaries remains a thorny and controversial issue, with destabilising consequences on the local level, and bitter feelings towards political actors.

Building trust is far from being an easy task: Elise Féron argues that a decrease in inequalities and discrimination cannot be enough to reach reconciliation if local communities do not appropriate this goal. The author’s main point is that local intercommunity dialogue must be complementary to the more general discussions on the province’s political future, and that political leaderships must operate some changes at the local level: they are often accused by social workers of rekindling tensions and favouring community cohesion (on an exclusive basis) to fulfil vote-catching ambitions. Social workers, political actors, former paramilitaries, and representatives of the police forces need to be part of dialogue initiatives, organisational rules need to be discussed beforehand, and daily-life problems (that can be linked to the conflict or not) must be at the core of discussions. Depoliticisation at the local level, security and justice in neighbourhoods are necessary to allow empowerment of the population and their active participation in the negotiations process.

Elise Féron is led to the conclusion that military pacification and political agreement in Northern Ireland have not implied, or even triggered, social reconciliation. On the contrary, the community level is now the main grounds on which the conflict is expressed. To the author, it highlights a deep disassociation and lack of understanding between political parties and their communities, and more generally, between a political

level that advocates intercommunity dialogue and a local one that prioritises a social-type approach to conflict.

The great insight of the book is that it explores the impacts of violence, in all its traditional and new ways, and in so doing – in a transversal way – emphasizes the importance of communities’ attitudes and those of political actors. While never pinning the entire responsibility for the current situation on one group or the other, it does raise some key questions: who holds, or is willing to hold responsibility for reconciliation? Following political peace, what is necessary to the success of “the next step”?

Within a political system where many actors, including political parties, have no interest in the end of communal division, where communities are not attached to the reconciliation goal, Elise Féron argues for a culture of democracy against a culture of violence. She explains that the province needs to develop deliberative practices to counter the lack of public space and the lack of citizens’ involvement, and a process of “un-tribalisation” to escape community-based social and political patterns. It would finally allow the spread of common values within Northern Irish society. Along with local intercommunity dialogue, this culture of democracy may provide Northern Ireland with the opportunity to restore – even create a new – dynamic towards peace and a break with traditional and new uses of violence.

The book offers new insights on reconciliation and conflict resolution: the issue of actors’ leeway is once again dramatically ambiguous as it does seem that conflict in Northern Ireland is still trapped into structural and cultural schemes that have simply found new (or reinforced existing) ways of expression. Easing this gridlock is a challenge that must be tackled: drawing a parallel with the literature on failed states, which asserts that “elections do not make democracy”, this book offers convincing evidence for the argument that political agreement does not mean *de facto* social reconciliation.

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