Depoliticising victims in Northern Ireland

Depoliticising victims in Northern Ireland

Maire Braniff [1] and Cillian McGrattan [2], 18 September 2012

Subjects:
- Conflict [3]
- Civil society [4]
- Northern Ireland [5]
- Reconciliation and Peacebuilding [6]
- Security in Europe [7]
- Reconciliation [8]
- Conflict Prevention [9]
- Peacebuilding [10]

The recent riots in Belfast seemed to hark back to the ethno-religious conflict many presumed over: Northern Ireland is being rebranded within the neo-liberal fold. But deeper issues may be deferred by the rhetorical constructions of peace. The prospect of dealing with victimhood in a meaningful way is being erased.

The latest riots in Belfast precipitated international news coverage: unsurprisingly so, since their intensity (which left almost 60 police officers injured over two nights) seemed to hark back to the ethno-religious conflict that many had presumed Northern Ireland had moved beyond. Coming near the end of one of the most contentious ‘parading seasons’ of recent years, many commentators looked for someone to blame, with the common answer being that the ethno-nationalist power-sharing government had gone AWOL: the Independent, for example, blamed the riots on ‘poor politics’, contending that politicians had failed to face down those prepared to mobilise ethnic sentiments. The Dublin-based Irish Examiner went further, criticising political elites for a ‘dereliction of duty’.

Interestingly, however, the Examiner’s correspondents suggest that those elites have simply been acting in the interests of peace – or, at least, a form of what might be called negative peace: ‘As long as politics remains designed solely to ward off the return of the conflict, peace will never be a possibility’. This form of peace characterises much of what constitutes the political culture in Northern Ireland. While its effects might superficially be gauged in the ferocity of riots (indeed, another perspective might suggest that the riots were the product of loyalist paramilitaries flexing their muscles), that culture continues to give rise to peculiar and troubling incidences in which the language of peace seems to militate against the imperatives of justice.

Emblematic of this trend is the recent appointment of a new Victims’ Commissioner in Northern Ireland, which is perhaps indicative of top jobs being outsourced. At one level, the appointment of someone from outside the region is indicative of a deep-rooted cynicism within the political classes in Northern Ireland: undoubtedly, Kathryn Stone is well-qualified – though her excellent work in the United Kingdom does not seem to have included much experience of the kinds of zero sum calculations that characterise dynamics within ethnically divided societies such as Northern Ireland’s. At the same time, and paradoxically, the appointment also seems to echo certain ethnic logic: namely, that someone from Northern Ireland could hardly be trusted to handle sensitive issues fairly.
Depoliticising victims in Northern Ireland
Published on openDemocracy (http://www.opendemocracy.net)

It speaks, secondly, to the desire to rebrand Northern Ireland within a new neoliberal order: Northern Ireland has come in from the cold and has embraced the norms of globalisation [18].

The essentially problematic tendency of these ideas is that they constitute, in effect, a depoliticisation of societal issues. The fact that Stone’s appointment was overshadowed by the dramatic events in the north of Belfast city is simply symbolic of that tendency. While this is not to say that riots are not societal issues, rather the point is that deeper issues may be deferred through the rhetorical constructions of peace. The unresolved (and, of course, at one level, unresolvable) issue of victimhood constitutes one important consequence of that deferral.

The victims’ lobby in Northern Ireland has lost political traction since the installation of devolved government in 2007, coupled with a rolling reduction of funding. What this has meant is that the estimated 40,000 victims and survivors of a conflict that claimed the lives of 3,700 people are once again being sidelined, re-marginalised and silenced. The implicit suggestion that victims can be dealt with in the absence of ethno-national, religious or socio-economic context is the driving force behind that marginalisation. In other words, re-victimisation is directly linked to de-politicisation and is given a patina of moral and democratic respectability through the verbiage of (negative) peace and neoliberal ideology.

An inhospitable milieu has replaced the once rich and vibrant community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. The financial insecurity arising from the withering of international donors together with government-led criticism regarding the “lack of focus on what is actually being delivered [19]”, threatens the professional capabilities, prominence and position of groups previously sustained by Peace Programmes I, II and III and a range of state, non-state and individual sponsoring. For the victims’ groups, this re-marginalisation at the political and financial level hits particularly hard: the social fabric that is being woven is decoupled from the much longed-for peace. The shifting sands between truth recovery, justice, transparency and healing threaten to diminish the results of activity and re-silence and re-marginalise the voices of victims. The prospect of engaging with victimhood in a meaningful way as a society is being increasingly erased.

The activity of the Victims’ Commissioner may well be shaped and served by the Victims’ and Survivors’ Forum [20] which is composed of 13 women and 12 men regarded as representing victims. Perchance the appointment of the Victims’ Forum consolidates a representative engagement with these issues, and the relationship between the Forum and Commissioner is reflective and effective, the opportunity for champions [21] of victims may well exist. Damned however by precedent and side-lined from debates the challenge confronting this initiative is to engage the victims who feel disenfranchised into a state-led process. Rather, the luxury afforded by the international and sub-state process was a supportive one whereby victims could engage with and feel supported on their journey through whatever state led process they found themselves such as the Historical Enquiries Team. In its place, the re-marginalisation of victims far from the political debate offers no expression of care toward victims, further perpetuating a sense of victimhood, isolation and being forgotten; the political, the judicial and the victim have failed to connect.

Championing victims may well lie in the responsibilities of the civic and political leaders [22]. Dominated by the struggle for votes and power, this seems unattainable. Shining a light on injustice and seeking out truth continues to be driven by the families that are left. There are challenges and the answer does not and cannot lie in vulnerable groups and support networks, but unless these are taken into account in a systematic fashion then the opportunity to respond to the challenges is reduced.

Sideboxes

Related stories: Reconciliation and the destruction of the past in divided societies [23]
Purposeful inquiry: detoxing the poisoned chalice [24]
Haunted by racism in Northern Ireland [25]
The long war gets longer: the campaign of violent dissident republicans [26]

Country or region: Northern Ireland
Topics: Civil society
Conflict

View the discussion thread, [27]
Depoliticising victims in Northern Ireland
Published on openDemocracy (http://www.opendemocracy.net)


Máire Braniff is based at the University of Ulster where she lectures in Sociology. Her areas of expertise include conflict resolution, peace mediation and peace agreements in the following areas: Balkans, Northern Ireland, South Caucasus, Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Congo and Great Lakes. Her book “Integrating the Balkans: from conflict to integration” was published by IB Tauris in 2011.

Related Articles
Reconciliation and the destruction of the past in divided societies [23]
Cillian McGrattan Purposeful inquiry: detoxing the poisoned chalice [24]
Eamonn Baker Haunted by racism in Northern Ireland [25]
Fiona Haughey The long war gets longer: the campaign of violent dissident republicans [26]
Paul Nolan

This article is published under a Creative Commons licence. If you have any queries about republishing please contact us [29]. Please check individual images for licensing details.

Source URL:

Links:
[13] https://twitter.com/BBCMarkSimpson
[28] http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/
[29] http://www.opendemocracy.net/contact