

“Dealing with the past and envisioning the future: problems with Northern Ireland’s peace process”

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Plenary Address  
International Conference *Ireland: Shared Futures?*  
University of Rennes  
10-12 September 2015

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It is a pleasure to be speaking here this morning and I thank the organisers for the honour and privilege of doing so. The theme of the conference is on the possibility of Ireland developing a shared future. I take this to mean both a shared future between the North and South of Ireland, and between everyone within the North. Immediately this gets to the heart of the problem. In stating that the two parts of Ireland need to develop a shared future, am I talking about a united Ireland? The meaning of the term in Northern Ireland implicates its meaning when I refer to it as necessary for the island as a whole. So, what do I mean by a shared future? Let me first deconstruct the word 'share'.

In one sense of the term, when we share we divide up, we apportion, we allocate: perhaps equally; but mostly not. Sharing determines how access to a joint resource, or good or space is distributed. We might call this the distribution model of sharing. It divvies up and allots. It is essentially amoral for the allocation is done regardless of the moral purpose of sharing as a human and social interaction. It is the kind of sharing done on economic markets. This is why equality in the size of the shares is irrelevant in the distribution model. Sharing, in this meaning of the term, is instrumental not moral; it is merely a distribution mechanism.

In another sense, though, sharing means to participate in, to use, enjoy, or experience a resource, or good, or space jointly. In this view, we hold the resource, good or space together with others, having a share of the responsibility for it. Again not necessarily equal responsibility, but shared commitments nonetheless. We might call this the responsibility model of sharing. It is moral because it determines that a resource, good or space we jointly enjoy and experience is the responsibility of everyone who shares it.

With responsibility comes moral obligation. Where you share a resource, good or space with someone and have responsibility in common towards it, sharing imposes a moral obligation to ensure that whatever it is that is experienced, enjoyed or participated in together remains

shared and joint. After all, to restrict others' access to it, or to keep it solely for oneself, is the very opposite of sharing.

In the responsibility model, no one is suggesting that there is a moral obligation to experience the resource, good or space in a common way. What is common is only the moral obligation to ensure the resource, good or space remains jointly shared, that the responsibility towards it remains common.

The responsibility model of sharing implicates my view on what a shared future in Northern Ireland means and thus also for what it means for the two parts of Ireland. In Northern Ireland it does not mean everybody becoming the same, sharing a rainbow identity. It is not about garnering a future that is exactly the same for everyone who inherits it. A shared future is not about becoming alike.

A shared future means having a common responsibility for its delivery and maintenance, and feeling a moral obligation to ensure the future is jointly experienced, enjoyed and participated in regardless of differences. The distribution model of sharing delivers difference. It does so by allocating and dividing up differentially. The responsibility model manages difference. It does so by transcending differences under the moral obligation to share. I will be come back to this point in my Conclusion since it is the key to the responsibility model of a shared future.

Shared responsibility for the future is a moral obligation for people in Northern Ireland as they learn to live together after conflict, and for the people of Ireland as together its two parts build a better future for the Island as a whole. With this perspective, the responsibility model of a shared future makes the question of a united Ireland small beer compared to the much bigger issue of ensuring a better Ireland for all.

I will not focus on the all-Ireland dimension of the responsibility model but deal instead with Northern Ireland, but it is important to remember there is a broader dimension to learning to live together in the North.

The biggest problem for the future in Northern Ireland is the past. Legacy issues emerge as a natural part of peace processes since the problem of the past is inherent to the process of conflict transformation itself. The problems that Northern Ireland faces over dealing with the past therefore are not peculiar to its peace process, although there are specific conditions that make legacy issues particularly problematic in Northern Ireland. First let me establish the past as an ever present problem for peace processes.

No matter how successful the introduction of new governance structures and the institutional reform of politics, societies emerging out of conflict are left with a series of legacy issues that are important to reconciliation and healing in society and, if not adequately addressed, will destabilise the political gains. Legacy issues concern specific policy questions like amnesty for former combatants and the range of victim and survivor policies, but also more broad matters like dealing with the past, and the meaning of values like truth, justice and forgiveness.

These legacy issues rarely surface in the immediate aftermath of a negotiated settlement for the euphoria and expectations at the ending of conflict sideline them. The paradox of legacy issues is that they emerge only sometime later, in the long and difficult process of learning to live together once the violence is largely over, when people's expectations of change have been disappointed or re-evaluated in the light of experience, and the peace process seems to bounce along at the bottom. This is precisely when the peace process is at its lowest ebb, a point where post-conflict societies come to realise that learning to live together is not automatic and does not follow naturally once the violence has ended. Therefore, legacy

issues seem to supporters of the peace process, only to make it worse, while to opponents of the peace settlement, legacy issues epitomise the fraudulence of the whole process.

At this point of lowest ebb, legacy issues come to assume almost as much importance in political debate as the original conflict itself, making discussion of the morality of the conflict a route into revisiting the terms of the settlement that ended it. I will return later to this point that there comes a time in peace processes when debate about the conflict in the past is replaced by contestation over the morality of the past.

At this juncture let me just say that legacy issues can thus become politicised and function as the sole or main arbiter of the future, determining the confidence people have in the whole settlement and in the likelihood of people learning to live together. Therefore, the legacy issues of violence that were once parked while negotiators dealt with the more immediate task of ending the violence, come back to haunt the negotiation process and fuel opponents' accusations of it being a 'dirty peace'.

Managing the problems that legacy issues cause is therefore vital to both stabilising the political reforms that introduced new governance structures, as well as to progress in healing and reconciliation in society. Legacy issues tend not, however, to receive the policy attention or public finance that institutional and political reform gets or, at least, do not do so until a crisis emerges within the peace process around one or more of these legacy issues. When this crisis or series of crises arrive, it can be very difficult for people to keep a sense of perspective by focusing on how far society has come in its post-conflict phase, for legacy issues encourage them to continue to look backwards to the past.

Thus, at the point when legacy issues dominate political debate, the peace process is often likened to driving a car by only looking in the rear view mirror, awaiting the inevitable crash. There is no way of escaping these legacy issues, since they emerge inevitably in the course

of a peace process at the point when memory of the violence recedes and debate about the morality of the conflict supersedes that about the conflict itself.

Northern Ireland thus faces issues about the past that are generic to processes of conflict transformation. However, there are four local conditions in Northern Ireland that make the management of its past very difficult: i) Northern Irish essentialism that makes it averse to learning comparative lessons; ii) the absence of debate in the public sphere on a shared future; iii) the continued reproduction of old-style sectarian identity politics; and iv) the poverty of civil society. These claims are nothing if not controversial, as befits the closing plenary at the end of an intensive few days when spirits and attention are draining.

The first condition refers to Northern Ireland's policy conservatism toward dealing with legacy issues. There is a context to this conservatism deriving from Northern Ireland's tendency to see itself as unique and peculiar, unable to learn from the experience of similar societies. Its issues are not seen as generic but unique. Commentators and analysts on Northern Ireland eagerly contribute to this misperception. I recall one writing floridly that each peace process beats to the rhythm of its own drum. This essentialism is a myth, but it is replicated in popular culture. It is captured well in two common sense sayings within popular culture - "unless you're from the place you can't begin understand it" and "anyone who isn't confused here doesn't know what's going on". These adages imply Northern Ireland is both unintelligible and unique. Conflict transformation specialists who emphasise the possibility of cross-national lessons therefore constantly confront the complaint that "this could not work here"; and they meet a policy sector that is unimaginative and lacks innovation. The policy response in Northern Ireland to dealing with the past is simply unadventurous.

The second local condition that inhibits the development of a shared future is the lack of debate in the public sphere on what a shared future means. This is as much a failure of civil

society as politicians. I would like to explore this absence further. There are two points to emphasize arising from the responsibility model of a shared society. First, this model suggests that for those who want the future to be shared, there is a moral obligation to work towards achieving it, rather than just an instrumental motive; and secondly, it sees this moral duty as lying on everyone who wants to learn to live together.

But, of course, not everyone does want a shared future. Peace processes tend to suffer from what elsewhere I have called the problem of expectations. There are two dimensions to the problem of expectations. Most people want peace but without themselves having to change. It is the 'other' who has to make the compromises; it is 'them-uns' not 'us' who have to reform. Most people expect accommodation in others, not themselves; they do not consider they have to move an inch.

The second dimension to the problem of expectations is that some people want the benefits of peace to accrue to themselves and their group, not to 'the other'. They do not want to see former enemies benefitting; if it seems the 'other' is being rewarded, some people's commitment to the peace process weakens in the view that it is one sided. For these reasons, the problem of expectations can stymie the peace process, and the flashpoint outbreaks of renewed conflict that the problem of expectations provokes can impact negatively on people's perspective of the future and the past.

It cannot therefore be assumed that everyone wants a shared future, or is prepared to take any responsibility for achieving it. Even if they want it, many see it as someone else's responsibility, not theirs. The responsibility model of a shared future however, argues that working toward a shared future is a moral obligation for everyone who wants the future to be shared. This means civil society as much as politicians.

This leads me to the third and fourth local conditions in Northern Ireland that makes dealing with its past particularly problematic. I am aware that these two are the most controversial since they challenge two assumptions that have long undergirded Northern Ireland's fragile peace. Let me deal with them in turn.

The third local condition that distorts the idea of a shared future is that Northern Ireland's peace process has not disrupted old-style sectarian identity politics. Indeed, the peace process delivered a consociational political settlement that embeds and enshrines it. The settlement offers no incentive for new politics. In saying thus I am challenging the whole idea promulgated by the proponents of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement – and its iterations – that it has at least solved the Northern Ireland's problematic politics, if not yet delivered reconciliation and healing in society. This view is naive.

There are several features to this part of the problem of a shared future. The generation of war politicians has not been replaced by new, younger politicians eager for the peace and unencumbered by their past contribution to the conflict, irrespective of whether their participation was military or political. Northern Irish politicians have to deftly walk an all-night impossible line between envisioning the future while being reticent about their role in the past. This constrains them. They are held back in debating the future by allegations about their responsibility for the past. Any move away from the old shibboleths simply sees these same shibboleths used as political weapons by their opponents, inhibiting the quality of the debate about the future.

I have argued elsewhere also that the very nature of political discourse clouds debate about the future. For one thing, the discourse of formal politics is inimical to the sensible discussion of the value positions and moral stances that debate about the future entail. Professional politics is focused on the here-and-now. 'The vision thing', as George W Bush once disparagingly put it, is difficult for professional politicians, for the 'long term' tends to

mean to them only the next election. They tend not to share the interest I have in what the future is like for my young grandchildren.

Professional political discourse is also adversarial, dominated by point scoring, which Norn Iron-speak has wonderfully rendered into the term 'whataboutery'. This tends to mean that politicians eschew discussion of complex issues that do not accord to party lines or which do not permit stark black and white policy responses. Professional politics does not cope well with complexity, and as moral and ethical issues tend by nature to be complex, professional politics tends to be instrumental not value oriented. Politicians think about what will win them the next election, not about what is right – or, at most, they claim the two are equivalent. But when values are reduced to votes like this, so that what politicians believe in as a value orientation is merely what will win them elections, we have good reason to claim that they are incapable of sensibly debating the future.

The fourth local condition that contributes to this incapacity is the poverty of civil society in Northern Ireland. The role of civil society in peace processes is beginning to be championed in the literature but it can be over-romanticised given that there are regressive elements in civil society. In Northern Ireland, civil society should be putting pressure on politicians, it should be utilising the public sphere to discuss the key issues involved in learning to live together, and it should be shaping the discourse and debate. It is not. The media, still dominated by conflict journalism, and the churches, rapidly losing public legitimacy, are only amongst the most obvious sections of civil society to ignore the principle of a shared future. Such a suggestion is highly controversial given that Northern Ireland has one of the most well developed and funded civil society sectors amongst societies emerging from conflict.

This scale is in some ways its problems, for it has become bloated by an over-reliance on public funding, leading it to bulge and over-develop in some areas where funding happens to be available to the neglect of others. Some important work in civil society is thus seriously

underfunded, making it highly localised, as the sector chases the next big money programme.

Large parts of civil society are also in need of repair and rebuilding after conflict, and some groups are still fractured along sectarian lines, but taken as a whole civil society has largely failed in its task to mediate between the grassroots and the state. It has not occupied that critical space that moves the grassroots on from the particularism of its own obsessions and which also holds the politicians to account. Civil society in the North has largely been co-opted by the grassroots or by the politicians, and is not the independent sector that is envisaged in the conflict transformation literature when it accords civil society a vital role in peace processes.

There is a critical edge within some sections of civil society in Northern Ireland that properly mediates between the grassroots and the state, which puts the concerns of the grassroots in a broader framework, even when this means they challenge the grassroots, and which holds politicians to account. Examples include some oral history and local memory work, creative arts and writers, young offender initiatives, and some work with ex-combatants and victims. But this section is small, seriously under-funded and goes largely under the radar. It reminds me of the old ecumenists in the North in the 1970s and 1980s, who for all their liberalism and critical attitude were highly conservative and exclusive by not breaking out from a constituency of people just like themselves.

Together these local conditions have contributed to the loss of energy and positive momentum in the peace process. This loss of momentum is reflected, amongst other things, in public bickering over the meaning of the terms of the initial peace settlement, the growth of anti-agreement sentiment amongst its opponents, frustration and desperation amongst its supporters at the lack of progress, and slowness, hesitancy and dissimulation amongst those politicians and governments responsible for making the agreement work.

This has allowed anti-agreement forces – Republican, Unionist and Loyalist – to grow by using a series of legacy issues that should now have been dealt with, as the means to mobilise anti-agreement sentiment and thus prevent debate about a shared future.

The importance of these particular issues is not coincidental. They reflect, as I stated earlier, contestation over the morality of the conflict, whether or not it was justified, and for what purpose.

Permit me three observations here. First, this is a debate about the legacy of the past, not about what a peaceful, shared future might look like. The past has become the arbiter of the future. We argue about the morality of the conflict, not about the moral imagination, as John Paul Lederach puts it, needed to re-envision the future. Secondly, these legacy issues are being openly exploited to focus mobilisation against the peace process, used strategically by opponents to try to reverse political gains, which makes their interest in the past and in victims a means to electoral advantage. Thirdly, in this maelstrom of anti-agreement mobilisation, we are experiencing a downwardly spiralling cycle of moral recalibration that is counter-productive to progress in the future.

Moral recalibration is evident in selective moral condemnation of the past and in the re-emergence of old-style whataboutery. Selective moral condemnation is palpable in many ways. For example, it is obvious in the dismissive and flippant attitude amongst most of the Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist community toward the indisputable evidence of state collusion in murder. Selective moral condemnation is plain also in Sinn Fein's insensitivity towards PUL community feelings over some Republican memorialisations. It is apparent in the way respective communities honour their own combatants but criticise when the 'other community' honours theirs, and in demands for amnesty for one's own ex-combatants, but not for all. Selective moralisation is manifest also in the strident assertion of the right to one's

own cultural practices but the unwillingness to accept the cultural practices of the 'other'. It is apparent, above all, in the adoption of a victim hierarchy in which one's own community is said to have suffered the most, with the 'other' community's behaviour being the more heinous.

I wish to draw my lecture to conclusion by emphasising the most important implication that follows from its argument. Namely, that the problem Northern Ireland faces in achieving a shared future is not so much political, but moral.

The responsibility model of a shared future as I have described it is inherently moral because there is an obligation on every individual who desires a shared society to help achieve it. It is not just the responsibility of politicians, nor even of civil society. It is everyone's. Given the poverty of our politicians and the failure of civil society up to this point, everybody in Northern Ireland who wants a shared future should be emboldened enough to take moral responsibility for it.

But so what, you might ask? After all, the former debates about reconciliation were always framed in ethical terms. But this was mostly because reconciliation was framed in religious terms, dominated as the discussion tended to be by ecumenism. So much so that today reconciliation as a term is highly problematic as a foundation to a shared society because of its ethical religious connotations. This is why I prefer the idea of tolerance, since it embeds the further idea of respect for diversity, which is a much bigger issue than reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants since it covers other forms of cleavage relevant to a shared society.

I am also saying something much stronger than these earlier ethical debates about reconciliation. A shared future is a moral not a political idea and people's responsibility to ensure the future is shared constitutes itself as a moral duty not a political goal.

I want to close by referring back to two themes I raised at the beginning. First, I said that part of the problem with the idea of a shared society is that many people immediately think of shared identity. This is completely wrong. It is not about developing one common identity; what matters is respect for other people's identity – giving as much respect to others' identity as one asks for one's own identity. It is about respect for diversity rather than us all being the same.

In a shared society, then, people's identity fragments into several, so that no one identity marker – say religion or politics – comes to absorb everything we consider important about ourselves. In this way we become people not group categories – and people are different and respect for that difference is the key to living together in tolerance.

This brings me to the second point I raised at the start of this lecture when I said that the distribution model of a shared society delivers difference by allocating shares differentially, while the responsibility model transcends difference.

It does so by fragmenting identity. Under the moral obligation to jointly share the future, which is the overriding principle of the responsibility model, those committed to sharing cannot consider their identity, and its social, cultural and political expressions, as the sole inheritor of the future. Sharing responsibility for the future requires toleration of difference and thus the move away from zero-sum notions of identity.

Commitment to the moral obligations of the responsibility model perforce implies the end of zero-sum identities. Northern Ireland's problem, of course, is that there are not yet sufficient numbers with these moral commitments. Learning to live together is not understood as a moral duty.

More might become so perhaps if, as I have said elsewhere, we reversed the negative moral recalibration that is occurring in our damaged peace by re-envisioning peace, by recommitting ourselves to peace as a positive vocation, to developing a value orientation, if you like, that shapes a new moral imagination. We need to refill what has become a moral vacuum, but replenish it not with the same old divided and competing moral frameworks that shaped the conflict in the past, but infill it with an embracing, uplifting, hope-inspiring vision of peace. We need to debate the sort of moral framework necessary that commits us to *want* to learn to live together in tolerance. Twenty or so years on from the ceasefires, it is disgraceful that Northern Ireland has yet to have this sort of discussion in public.

With such a debate, I am convinced that a shared future can be ours, if we care to take moral responsibility for it. Thank you.