

## Unionists, Loyalists, and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland

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## Introduction

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter introduces the social psychology of ethnic and political division in Northern Ireland, documents continuing segregation and division since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and calls for culturally oriented conflict transformation. Many of the circumstances on which unionists and loyalists based their political assumptions and the institutions on which they relied have changed significantly. Feelings of disorientation and alienation persist. With the end of Direct Rule, political persuasion, lobbying, public relations, and grassroots organizing have become increasingly important, and it is critical that unionists, and particularly working-class loyalists, feel empowered and have the organizing capacity to influence democratic politics without violence.

*Keywords:* collective identity, conflict transformation, empowerment, ethnic identity, Northern Ireland, social psychology

But if we grant that symbolic systems are social products that contribute to making the world, that they do not simply mirror social relations but help constitute them, then one can, within limits, transform the world by transforming its representation.

—Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:14)

In 2005, as we drove through Portadown, a primarily Protestant Northern Ireland town, a friend and colleague who lives there pointed out a mural<sup>1</sup> and said simply, “There's King Rat.” The mural featured a portrait of a man with close-cropped hair and a goatee flanked by garlands of poppies and orange lilies. Banners over and beneath the portrait read, “In honour of Grenadier William

'Billy' Wright LVF." Below, two masked gunmen wearing spats and white belts brandished automatic weapons and gazed up at the visage of Wright. Between them, a scroll displayed a verse from the New Testament of the Bible: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends — John 15:13" (see figures 1.1 and 1.2).

The mural on the Brownstown Road valorized a contentious figure who not only threatened Catholics but was a lightning rod for divisions within loyalist paramilitary organizations.<sup>2</sup> Wright was a notorious dissident loyalist paramilitary leader who was ousted from the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and formed the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) in 1997 after his organization allegedly killed a Catholic taxi driver, Michael McGoldrick. In December 1997, Wright was assassinated in the Maze prison by fellow prisoners who were members of the republican Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). Like many murals, Wright's could conjure fear, mistrust, grief, triumph, or honor, depending on the viewer's own experience and perspective.

On a return visit to Portadown only two years later, I found that the mural had been replaced with a commemorative tribute to the famous footballer<sup>3</sup> George Best, one of Europe's all-time best players who hailed from East Belfast. This time, the banners on the mural were blue and simply read, "George Best 1946–2005" above the logo of the Irish Football Association.<sup>4</sup> This clear and intentional change in public symbols on the Brownstown Road has become common in Protestant, unionist, and loyalist (PUL) communities across Northern Ireland as initiatives are undertaken to alter familiar symbols and practices including flags, parades, and bonfires as part of a cultural transformation in the region.

In a commemorative garden a short distance from the mural, at the center of a flagstone patio sat a large polished granite stone with the inscription: "In memory of all victims of conflict." In the background, at the rear corners of the patio, sat **(p.4)**

two small tablets, each inscribed: "In loving memory of" alongside several individuals' names. One held the names of Billy Wright and another LVF member; the other listed four UVF members. Each stone bore the familiar loyalist commemorative phrase, "At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them," from Laurence Binyon's poem, "For the Fallen" (see figures 1.3 and 1.4).

I had the opportunity to interview Gareth and Daniel, two men involved with a local community organization that helped organize the mural redesign and commemorative garden.<sup>5</sup> Gareth pointed out that the garden was carefully arranged so that the larger stone could be read by passersby on the sidewalk or the road while the smaller tablets were intentionally inclined upward so that they

could only be read by people who entered the garden and walked to its back corners. The arrangement of the garden diminishes the prominence of the kinds of violent images and references that had dominated the original Billy Wright mural nearby. However, according to Gareth, the design of the mural and garden projects involved a difficult, months-long process of consultations, and while the removal of the Wright mural brought tears of grief to some eyes during the unveiling, others expressed **(p.5)**



*Figure 1.1* A mural honoring Billy Wright, a founder of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), photographed June 29, 2005.

their appreciation and a sense of liberation. He described the thought that went into the design of the garden:

The symbolic nature of those two constituencies [LVF and UVF] sharing the same space as a reflective space, I think, was a considerable achievement locally. But, we were very conscious we didn't want that space to become a shrine for paramilitarism .... We then secured a huge bit of Mourne granite, and we said, "We want to rein this back into being a community space," and there is a huge stone right in the middle that a blind man can see. Literally, "In loving memory of all victims of conflict," full stop. You can interpret that whatever way you want.

One must wonder whether everyone grieving a victim of the conflict would feel comfortable reflecting on their loss in a garden in the presence of the two smaller stones, but the change is nonetheless significant.

Such shifts in the symbolic landscape lead us to inquire about concomitant changes in the social psychological landscape of a region where ethno-political conflict has been perpetuated by both violence and prejudices. If the downward spiral of fear and retaliation that characterized thirty years of paramilitary and military violence accompanied a proliferation of antagonistic symbols and **(p.6)**



*Figure 1.2* A mural honoring Billy Wright was replaced with a mural celebrating George Best. Brownstown Road, Portadown, photographed January 20, 2007.

rituals, what accounts for a widespread, if incomplete, trend in the opposite direction? How are such changes negotiated within and between polarized communities? Who is involved in the mitigation of polarizing cultural expressions and why? What does the process look like, and what does it tell us about the potential to transform intractable conflict? Those are the questions we will explore.

Collective identities and the ritual and symbolic actions that shape and maintain them are recursively related with one another, and much of this book concerns itself with the

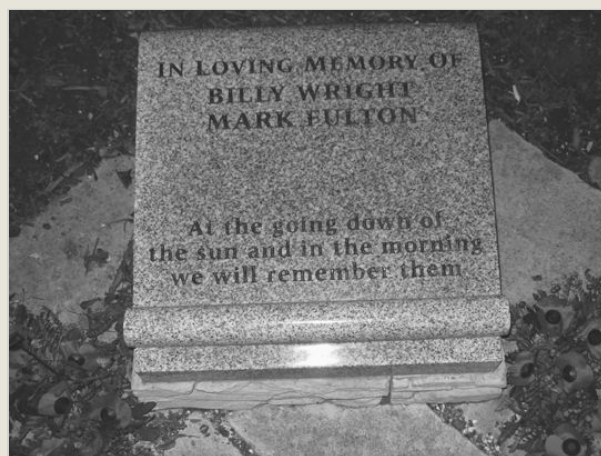
renovation of public displays of Protestant unionist and loyalist identity. By redesigning bonfires and murals (such as, the Wright-Best mural in Portadown) or choreographing Orange and loyalist band parades in ways that mitigate some of their most offensive facets, unionist and loyalist activists introduce new values carefully reconciled with long-held understandings of their collective identities. The result is a softening of a politically charged symbolic landscape and a reconsideration of polarized ethnopolitical identities. In some cases, symbols can become shared across the ethnopolitical divide. In other cases, the process of adopting new symbols and practices or shaping collective memories through the construction of historical narratives can open opportunities for cross-community dialogue.

### (p.7)

This is not a post-conflict process but rather a continuation of conflict by other means. Conflict in Northern Ireland has long been contested by many means: political, economic, cultural, and military. The central story of the peace process has been a long shift away from violent and coercive methods toward persuasive and political ones, and we might do well to adopt Brewer's (2010) nomenclature of "post-violent society" while acknowledging (as Brewer does) that political and



*Figure 1.3* Granite monuments to "all victims of conflict". Brownstown Road, Portadown, photographed January 20, 2007.



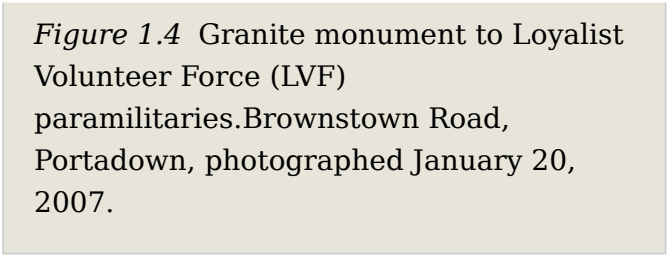
sectarian violence does not necessarily end neatly when political negotiations get under way (Brewer 2010:16–28, 32–33). The conflict is, instead, in a state of transition. Such shifts are not merely the product of strategic calculations, though they may be shaped by pragmatism. They are imagined, debated, and adopted by people with collective identities that have been catalyzed in threatening, unjust, and often violent circumstances. Indeed, ethnic and political identities have become closely linked to calculuses of winning and losing. This is not to say that identities or strategies are monolithic. New strategies can be and have been introduced, but unless or until they align, or are made to align, with collective identities, they are unlikely to be fully adopted. How even the most ideologically committed organizations come to mitigate or replace violent or offensive activities warrants our attention as well as the ways in which collective identities and community relations change in tandem.

**(p.8)** Although I have chosen to focus on the Protestant community, a study such as, this could be productively undertaken within Catholic and nationalist organizations and communities. Republican

leaders in Sinn Féin, the largest political party within the republican movement, have carefully reframed republicanism since they rediscovered the potential of nonviolent action and then constitutional politics over the course of the hunger strike of 1981 (Shirlow and McGovern 1998). Protestants are arguably facing equal if not greater challenges in adapting to new political and economic circumstances. Many of the institutions around which Protestants, unionists, and loyalists historically rallied have been relinquished or suffer from decline. Working-class Protestants, especially, feel they need new organizing skills, a shared sense of confidence, and more social capital to participate and benefit fully in the newly emerging Northern Ireland.

This book documents an emerging, if tenuous, process in which prominent conservative unionist and loyalist organizations, such as, the Orange Order<sup>6</sup> and other voluntary organizations, are seeking to cultivate political and social capital by abandoning practices that are seen as sectarian or offensive and engaging more proactively in public relations. These are unfamiliar strategies for Protestants who have tended to feel that change is a harbinger of defeat. Thus, the process of internal transformation is a slow and contentious one as leaders work to introduce new policies and practices while continuing to hew to deeply held beliefs about themselves, the conflict, and their role in it.

Brewer and Higgins (1998) identify three domains in which sectarianism and division have been perpetuated in Northern Ireland: *ideas, individual behavior, and social structure*.<sup>7</sup> The prominence of each domain can vary across a range of social situations, such as, class divides, but each reinforces the others in an extensive system of division and inequality. Prejudices and stereotypes reflect



*Figure 1.4* Granite monument to Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) paramilitaries. Brownstown Road, Portadown, photographed January 20, 2007.

power differentials in the social structure and underpin destructive individual behavior in the forms of discrimination, intimidation, and violence (pp. 2, 183).

The structural contexts in which conflict transformation occurs are important, and much strong scholarship on Northern Ireland tracks the shifting interacting political, economic, and demographic contours that influence the trajectory of the region's conflict. Thus, chapter 3 will present essential historical and political background information that is essential for interpreting an ever-important micro-sociological context. In this book, I focus on ideas (cultural schemata and identities) and behavior (political and cultural collective action), asserting that conflict transformation involves both a shift from coercive means of engaging in conflict toward more persuasive ones as well as subjective redefinitions of in-groups and out-groups. Paradoxically, much of the critical work of transforming conflict and developing less polarized collective identities takes place *within* even the most conservative and traumatized communities and organizations, and we will consider the experience of Protestant/unionist/loyalist (PUL) activists and organizations in Northern Ireland where innovations in traditional cultural expressions contribute to reshaping the contours of unionist and loyalist identities.

### **(p.9)** Northern Ireland and the Possibility of Sustainable Peace

For a sustainable peace to emerge, emotions, identities, and ideologies, as well as the rituals and cultural expressions that sustain them, must begin to accommodate one another. The process of replacing a culture of mistrust and fear with one of cooperation is a slow tenuous process, and contention across the ethnopolitical divide will continue. However, we can say that a conflict is in a state of transformation when fundamentally polarized in-group and out-group perceptions have begun to change, albeit slowly and incrementally. For more than twelve centuries, Ireland has been marked by legacies of invasion, colonialism, and conflict. With the wide-scale influx of English and Scottish settlers from the beginning of the seventeenth century and the subsequent rebellions and subjugation of the Gaelic Irish population, the stage was set for four centuries of conflict over the merits and injustice of British rule, even though the lines of contention never perfectly conformed to a religious divide between Catholics and Protestants. From the seventeenth century to World War II, economic interests, European geopolitics, and British concerns about the security of its western flank drove British policies with regard to Ireland. However, religious and ethnic divisions increasingly came to parallel political contention over issues such as, sovereignty and equality. The potent combination of divergent political agendas and ethnic and religious prejudice, or "sectarianism," has limited dialogue, creative problem solving, and compromise, leaving suspicion, fear, and often violence to feed on one another (Liechty 1995; Liechty and Clegg 2001).

Among cases such as, the former Yugoslavia, Cyprus, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Israel/Palestine, in which core ethnopolitical identities have contributed to zero-sum mentalities, Northern Ireland has received considerable attention, especially with regard to “the Troubles,” the period of armed conflict among paramilitaries and state security forces that is usually considered to span the period from 1968 to 1998. The conflict produced over 3,700 deaths and ten times as many injuries between 1969 and 2001 (Smyth and Hamilton 2003:18–19). Thankfully, Northern Ireland has also become remarkable for its ongoing political peace process. Negotiations between the British government and the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA) as well as between John Hume, the leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Gerry Adams, the leader of the republican political party, Sinn Féin, developed into more than two decades of political negotiations involving the British and Irish governments, local parties, and international intermediaries.<sup>8</sup>

As the paramilitary cease-fires have remained relatively stable since 1994, and political negotiations have continued despite intermittent suspensions of the power sharing Northern Ireland Assembly<sup>9</sup> that was established under the terms of the 1998 Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA), the prospects of a return to widespread violence have diminished, and the future of politics has **(p.10)** increasingly become a question of when political institutions will stabilize. Backdoor political negotiations and all-party talks have led to a political peace process that, at the time of writing, features a legislative power sharing arrangement in the form of the Northern Ireland Assembly, led by Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), formerly the most diametrically opposed parties. After having been suspended several times, the resurrection of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2006 was followed by an executive partnership in 2007 between firebrand Free Presbyterian Church founder and staunch unionist politician, Ian Paisley, and Martin McGuinness, who served as Officer Commanding of the Provisional IRA in Derry in the 1970s. The friendly relationship between the new first minister and deputy first minister astonished even the savviest pundits.

Northern Ireland's peace process and power sharing government have rightly become celebrated examples of patient and painstaking peacemaking underpinned by decades of largely unsung grassroots work by peace and conflict resolution organizations (PCROs). Yet, the challenge of grassroots peacebuilding remains (Cochrane and Dunn 2002; Fitzduff 2002; Gidron, Katz, and Hasenfeld 2002).<sup>10</sup> Significant structural and psychological barriers persist, not to mention the relative fragility of the political process. We should celebrate the tremendous progress that has been made in ending one of the world's longest running violent conflicts while acknowledging that the collective psychological and emotional wounds that need healing must continue to be addressed as all involved build a vibrant and cooperative democracy.



Polarized ethnopolitical identities remain among the most significant obstacles to building a healthy multicultural civil society in Northern Ireland and elsewhere around the world. Subjective interpretations of the conflict and intercommunity and intracommunity relations among Protestants and Catholics are all subject to change, and yet, they are not easily changed, especially while the trauma of thirty years of recent violent conflict remains fresh. However, subjective dimensions of the conflict have been shifting in ways that have made space for much of the political progress to date and have in turn been facilitated by political developments, such as, the cease-fires and power sharing governance.

How political change takes place in the context of the paradoxical malleability and tenacity of ethnopolitical identities deserves attention (Hayes 1990:4). A sustainable peace depends on the ability of even the most ideologically committed organizations and individuals to develop new interpretations of themselves and adversaries that make space for dialogue, cooperation, and coexistence. By delving into the contemporary experience of Protestants involved with unionist and loyalist organizations and activities, we find an uncharted and difficult process of renegotiating the past, present, and future that is central to contemporary peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. This volume explores those subterranean cultural and social psychological processes that accompany the more visible headline-making developments in the political sphere.

**(p.11)** In subsequent chapters, we will examine how charged ethnopolitical symbols and rituals among unionists and loyalists, such as, Orange parades, murals, music, dancing, and historical activities, influence and facilitate the construction of ethnopolitical identity. Among Protestants who have long felt “under siege,” redesigning murals to replace images of masked gunmen with local historical figures and World War I battle scenes in France and Belgium and working with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to attract visitors to annual Orange parades signal a shift from their former defensive orientation. It is important to note that innovations in traditional cultural expressions are not attempts at reconciliation. They continue to communicate narratives of a distinctive Protestant experience and thus inscribe difference, but they constitute a reorientation, an interest in enhancing Protestants’ abilities to engage effectively in discourse and debate. The overall effect is to soften social psychological boundaries and make dialogue and relationship building across the ethnopolitical divide more likely. The results may seem modest, but they reflect the depth of division that has made intractable conflict so difficult to manage in Northern Ireland.

### Intractable Ethnopolitical Conflict

Intractable ethno-political conflict, of which Northern Ireland has been considered a primary case, has proven a prominent and growing global social problem over the past century and can be found at the root of most ongoing major violent conflicts and wars in recent decades (Scherrer 2008). Social scientists have struggled to conceptualize the powerful forces that can be generated when major political disputes parallel lines of ethnic and racial division. Symbolic expressions of ethnic identity and political ideology represent and reproduce psychocultural schemata in which groups find ontological security and through which organizations build consensus and mobilize for (sometimes violent) political action. Conflict over human rights, inequality, and sovereignty within disputed borders all take place within what Marc Ross (2009) has called contested “symbolic landscapes” in which collective senses of identity among warring or contending populations can become magnified and mutually polarized, providing fertile ground for fear, dehumanization, violence, and a downward spiral of retaliation and division.

Intractable ethno-political conflicts, which Mats Friberg and John Paul Lederach refer to as “identity conflicts,” are so tenacious in large part because they are driven by deeply psychological and emotional forces converging with large-scale structural forces (Lederach 1997:8). At the individual level, victims of bombings, assassinations, and punishment attacks struggle with the trauma that accompanies the brutalization of a neighbor or loved one. At group or community level, intimidation and fear encourage defensive attitudes, stereotyping, and racism or sectarianism as cultural schemata are constructed that interpret and legitimize the grievances and aspirations of each community, and in many cases, valorize **(p.12)** those who have taken up arms in the name of communal defense (Liechty 1995:15; Brewer and Higgins 1998).

In extreme conflict situations, adversaries’ identities can become defined such that they are mutually opposed to one another, indivisible and nonnegotiable. They become inseparable from the conflict that comes to be understood in zero-sum terms of “us” and “them.” Using this calculus, any gain by one side amounts to an unacceptable loss by the other side. Each group feels as if its very existence is under threat, and each responds defensively, further modifying their own interpretive schemata to distinguish their opponents from themselves in even more stark terms, justifying more extreme action against opponents (Tajfel 1981; Waddell and Cairns 1986; Kriesberg, Northrup, and Thorson 1989; Northrup 1997; Brewer and Higgins 1998; Coy and Woehrle 2000).

Such conflicts become “intractable” in part because the vicious cycle involving identity and violence becomes almost seamless. As Terrell Northrup (1992) points out, a cultural “collusion” can develop between adversaries in ethnic conflict. By defining themselves and each other primarily in terms of their mutual antagonism, they collude with each other in perpetuating the psychological bases for destructive conflict. Political struggles, such as, those in

Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia, that have centered around core group identities are known to be particularly contentious and susceptible to intractability (Cairns 1994; Kriesberg 1998b; Northrup 1989).

Identity plays such a crucial role in these conflicts because shared schemata for perceiving and making sense of the world direct ethnic groups to interpret their actions and those of their opponents in ways that protect in-group ontological security (Kriesberg 2007:55–56, 157–58). Ross (2001) calls these schemata “psychocultural interpretations” or “the shared, deeply rooted worldviews that help groups make sense of daily life and provide psychologically meaningful accounts of a group's relationship with other groups, their actions and motives” (p. 189). Worldviews that become widely shared as “collective identities” are constructed and continually reconstructed from origin myths, historical narratives, commentary on contemporary states of affairs, and teleological visions (Brewer and Higgins 1998).

Ethnopolitical conflict features closely related symbolic and social dimensions. Narratives that shape collective identities may compel people to collective action, sometimes to violence. Participation in conflict shapes the way groups perceive themselves and their opponents and how they express collective identities. Rituals and the public display of symbols organize perceptions and call people to solidarity by celebrating in-group narratives and values and casting others in adversarial roles. They stake claims to rights and preferred political arrangements and demonstrate a collective will. Symbolic displays can themselves become central issues of contention, perpetuating conflict. Irish language signs and band parades, for example, are often said to mark out territory in Northern Ireland in exclusive ways.

**(p.13)** Polarized communal identities are constructed and reconstructed on a daily basis over long periods of time, sometimes spectacularly (through intimidation and direct attacks) or symbolically (public rituals, flags, and emblems), and sometimes in quite mundane ways (what newspaper one buys, where one shops, or where one attends school) Hamilton, Hansson, Bell, and Toucas 2008. Each becomes invested with emotional value, and one of the greatest challenges in addressing intractable conflict in divided societies lies in slowing and reversing a vicious and yet, often subtle cycle of out-group prejudice, dehumanization, coercion, and fear. To the extent that opponents in an ethnopolitical conflict situation ignore, condone, or openly advocate exploitation over another group, those parties will heighten the boundaries between them by intensifying distinctions and casting blame. Inter-group boundaries can become so rigid and others vilified and dehumanized to such an extent that group members become more likely to sanction, overlook, or employ the use of lethal force, fueling a cycle of fear, retribution, and division.

In intractable conflicts, according to social identity theorists, natural tendencies to create in-group and out-group distinctions become heightened as each group feels under threat and rallies around increasingly defensive collective identities seeking to maintain ontological security. It is worth noting, however, that the construction of in-group and out-group identities is part and parcel of social life. Cognitive psychologists assert that all people have a limited capacity for processing stimuli from the world around them. They simplify the world through social schemata, stereotypes, or ideologies, thus meeting a need for ontological coherence (Tajfel 1982; Cairns 1994). They are also compelled to maintain a positive sense of self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity (Melucci 1995; Gecas 2000). The combination of these drives produces solidarity and in-group cohesion, while comparison with out-groups facilitates the process. Two leading scholars of social identity theory, Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, (1986) have derived the following theoretical principles:

Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity.

Positive social identity is based largely on favorable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups: the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant out-groups.

When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct (p. 16).

Unfortunately, in deeply divided societies in which groups have come to fear one another, the option of leaving one's own group is often limited, either because social solidarity costs are too high, or there simply are not other groups readily available to which one can switch.

As Ed Cairns (1994), a psychologist at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, has put it, "What I hope Social Identity Theory will do is influence people **(p.14)** to see the conflict as a form of behavior which is determined by essentially normal psychological processes, but normal psychological processes which are operating in exceptional circumstances" (p. 14). Those circumstances include a long history of colonialism, resistance, discrimination, open conflict, and in many cases poverty. Political struggles of this sort that involve core group identities have proven particularly contentious and susceptible to intractability (Kriesberg, Northrup, and Thorson 1989; Northrup 1989; Cairns 1994; Kriesberg 1998b; Weiner 1998; Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2005). Once destructive conflict is under way, a range of factors can cause the conflict to deepen. These include groupthink, organizational inertia, specialized vested interests, miscommunications, coercive strategies, changes in organizational makeup, and external intervention (Kriesberg 2007:155-81). The institutionalization of

conflict parallels the polarization of ethnopolitical identities contributing to a vicious cycle of conflict escalation.

### Ethnopolitical Division in Northern Ireland

A range of political, religious, and ethnic traditions in Northern Ireland tend to align broadly into Protestant/unionist/loyalist and Catholic/nationalist/republican blocs that maintain incompatible views on the history and sovereignty of six of the nine counties that make up the region called Ulster.<sup>11</sup> Over centuries of conflict in Ireland, especially since the late eighteenth century, and more recently over the course of the “Troubles,” from approximately 1968 to 1998, Northern Ireland has become a deeply divided society in which Protestants and Catholics have been pushed and pulled into segregated public and cultural spheres. Often, division and segregation have been the direct result of British colonialism, unionist rule through the middle of the twentieth century, paramilitary intimidation, and radical political movements. Protestants and Catholics have also routinely segregated themselves in education, housing, sports, and arts, to name a few domains. Motivating factors include fear, anger, habit, familiarity, and tradition, and while a great deal of attention is paid to the working-class communities in which paramilitarism and the state's counter-terrorism efforts have been focused, ethnopolitical division is subtly perpetuated throughout society (Liechty and Clegg 2001:107-10).

Over a decade after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement,<sup>12</sup> Northern Ireland remains significantly divided despite continuing progress in developing a pluralist agenda (Hughes, Donnelly, Robinson, and Dowds 2003; MacGinty, Muldoon, and Ferguson 2007). The consultation paper *A Shared Future* (2003) published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister outlines concerns over ongoing ethnopolitical division.

- In order to achieve this vision we must deal with the very deep and painful divisions in our society that have been exacerbated by more than 30 years of conflict. Some progress has been made, but there is clear evidence that deep divisions remain.
- **(p.15)** • Violence at interfaces between communities continues to affect lives, property, businesses and public services.
- Whilst levels of tolerance and respect for diversity within the Protestant and Catholic Communities had been improving, there is evidence that they have decreased recently.
- Housing has become more segregated over the last 20 years. More than 70% of Housing Executive Estates are more than 90% Protestant or more than 90% Roman Catholic.
- Around 95% of children still attend separated schools. Despite evidence that more parents would prefer this option, there has only been a small increase in the number of children attending integrated schools.

- There are high levels of racial prejudice in Northern Ireland and the situation has recently become worse. The rate of racial incidents here is estimated at 16.4 per 1000 non-white population, compared to 12.65 per 1000 in England and Wales.
  - There is little change in the extent of inter-community friendship patterns.
  - In some urban areas further divisions are emerging within local communities. This is linked to paramilitary influence, especially at interfaces.
  - People's lives continue to be shaped by community division. Research suggests that, in some areas, community division plays a large part in the choices that people make about where they work, and how they use leisure facilities and public services.
  - Northern Ireland remains a deeply segregated society with little indication of progress towards becoming more tolerant or inclusive.
- (pp. 1-2)

As Stephen Farry (2006), a former general secretary of the Alliance Party, has declared in a United States Institute for Peace Special Report on Northern Ireland, "Peace has come at the price of reconciliation" (p. 27).

Survey research indicates that despite progress in consociational political arrangements, social attitudes remain significantly polarized. More worryingly, young people's attitudes tend to be less favorable to integration than adults', especially among Protestant youth (McAuley 2004a; Leonard 2008; Hayes and McAllister 2009). According to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILTS),<sup>13</sup> the decade leading up to and immediately following the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1989-1999) witnessed a general improvement in adults' attitudes about community relations, especially among Catholic respondents. However, between 1996 and 1999, both Protestants (17 percent to 26 percent) and Catholics (11 percent to 18 percent) increasingly reported wishing to live in neighborhoods populated by only people of their own religious background, essentially returning to 1989 levels.<sup>14</sup> The same trend held for preferred workplace arrangements, though more Catholic adults (57 percent rising to 72 percent) came to prefer integrated schools in contrast to fewer Protestant adults (65 percent declining to 57 percent), a **(p.16)** trend that fluctuated between Protestants and Catholics until 2003 when Protestants began to more consistently prefer mixed religion schools (ARK 1998-2008; Hughes and Donnelly 2003:652-53; Hayes and McAllister 2009).

Census data for 2001 show that 66 percent of the population in Northern Ireland live in areas that are more than 99 percent Protestant or more than 99 percent Catholic (up from 63 percent at the 1991 census; Brown 2002; Shirlow 2003). The 2003 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland reports that living in segregated areas significantly diminishes the likelihood of

having friends from the other religious community (Devine and Schubotz 2004: 2-3),<sup>15</sup> and research by Peter Shirlow (2003) indicates that 68 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds in neighborhoods in Belfast separated by “peace lines” have never had a meaningful conversation with anyone from the other (Protestant/Catholic) community.

Attitudes about mixing tend to be more stable than attitudes about community relations (Schubotz and Devine 2009:4), and among adult respondents who participated in the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes and NILTS surveys, Hughes et al. (2003) have noted a growing pessimism about the state of community relations since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed, especially among Protestants. By 2001, the percentage believing relations between Protestants and Catholics “are better now than five years ago” had returned to nearly 1994 levels (before Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries declared cease-fires) of just below 30 percent. The same was true for Protestants’ predictions of the state of community relations in five years’ time.

As of 2003, the YLT survey indicated that youth attitudes about community relations were ambiguous. Large minorities of respondents reported “favourable” attitudes toward the other community (38 percent for Protestants; 45 percent for Catholic), and larger percentages were more likely to say they felt “neither favourable nor unfavourable” toward the other community (49 percent for Protestants and 43 percent for Catholics). Just over half reported that they often or sometimes socialized with people from a different religious background. Levels of geographical segregation seemed more severe than youths’ attitudes, but national identities remained important for three out of five YLT respondents (Devine and Schubotz 2004; Muldoon, Trew, Todd, Rougier, and McLaughlin 2007). From 2003 to 2007, 16-year-olds in the YLT have been significantly and consistently less open than NILTS adults to religious mixing in neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools. In 2007, just under 50 percent of youth (Protestant and Catholic) supported integrated educational settings, with Catholics more reticent than Protestants (Schubotz and Devine 2009).

The picture with regard to community relations has improved but continues to signal fundamental divisions. By 2008, in the wake of renewed devolution, the percentage of adult respondents reporting they felt relations were better than five years ago had more than doubled from 2001 to 65 percent. Preferences for mixed religion neighborhoods rose to 83 percent, preferences for mixed educational settings rose to 70 percent, and preferences for mixed religion workplaces rose (**p.17**) to 94 percent. In each of these domains, percentages fell between 2 percent and 8 percent in 2009 for adults, and while youths’ attitudes tracked adults’ on improvements in community relations, they continued to lag on integration concerns by 17 percent to 20 percent (ARK 2008a,b; ARK 2009a,b). NILTS results indicate rising optimism among adults,

but the potential for polarization remains, especially considering youth preferences to maintain structural divides along traditional ethnonational lines.

Though this study focuses on adults, it delves into the social landscape where deeply socialized identities, political fears, and their expressions meet new structural circumstances and inspire strategizing and innovation. To capture the deeply held beliefs and ideas that constitute communal identities and buttress prejudices and stereotypes and to document the strategic thinking and activities through which identity transformation occurs, it can be necessary to focus on one community or set of organizations on one side of an ethnopolitical divide instead of undertaking cross-community research. In this case, I have focused on Protestants, often on working-class Protestants, who, either by virtue of their organizational affiliation or the areas in which they live and work, endorse, advocate, or are familiar with unionist and loyalist ideology and identity, which I refer to as “grassroots unionism”; McAuley (1997) refers to this domain of unionism as “community unionism” or “communitarian unionism” (p. 159).

In focusing on a range of distinctly Protestant and unionist or loyalist organizations and communities in this project, I adopt Liechty and Clegg's (2001) “chastened ‘two-traditions’ logic,” which recognizes considerable religious, political, and economic diversity across Northern Ireland but also acknowledges an unavoidable and prominent religious and national divide between Protestants and Catholics (p. 36; Muldoon et al. 2007). In describing the divide, Eyben, Morrow, and Wilson (1997) said, “Churches, sports, political parties, central policy makers, law and order, local government, community sector, business all reflect, and sometimes contribute to the division of people in Northern Ireland into two major identity groups. Sometimes, the fault line appears dormant; at other times it lies wide open and raw. Whatever its state, it is always present” (p. 1). At the same time, identity change is a central theme of this book, and it is dangerous to generalize and overlook diversity within the Catholic and Protestant population (Rolston 1998; Nic Craith 2002). This is perhaps especially true for Protestants, among whom one finds considerable class divisions, a disjointed organizational infrastructure, and denominational divisions. I will endeavor to represent the complexity of intracommunity networks and worldviews (cf. Shirlow and McGovern 1997b), but I will also address experiences that are commonly shared among many Protestants, whether they prefer to define themselves as Protestants, unionists, or loyalists, and thus I will often refer to the Protestant/unionist/loyalist (PUL) population or community. That said, the data collected for this project lean toward working-class and traditional organizations and “hard to reach” communities where one finds strong Orange, loyalist, or unionist in-group identification.



**(p.18)** Protestants, Unionists, Loyalists, and Ethnopolitical Identification  
Since the partition of Northern Ireland in 1921 and throughout the Troubles, Protestants have depended on political ascendancy and the strategic and political interests of British governments to protect, both militarily and economically, what Protestants have considered a necessary refuge in Ulster. The proroguing of the unionist controlled Stormont government that presided over Northern Ireland affairs from partition of the island in 1921 (separating Northern Ireland from the southern Irish Free State) until the imposition of Direct Rule from London in 1972 was a bitter pill for many unionists. However, it was preferable to the alternative of a wholesale British withdrawal, the potential of a civil war, and the prospects of becoming absorbed into a united Ireland (Walker 2004:195–96). During thirty years of the Troubles, most Protestant unionists' attentions were turned to maintaining strategic pressure on British governments through political maneuvering at Westminster and supporting the police and military, and in some cases, paramilitary forces.

Today, Direct Rule has ended, including the long-anticipated devolution of justice and policing powers; the principle of the consent of the majority has been enshrined in political agreements, and the responsibilities of government have been devolved to a power sharing executive at Stormont. Many of the circumstances on which unionists and loyalists based their assumptions about life in Northern Ireland have changed significantly. Under devolution, the concepts of civil society and politics take on greater significance, and many Protestants find themselves in a position for which they were not fully prepared. In the absence of normal politics, and with the exception of moments of crisis, there has been little development of an infrastructure of voluntary grassroots organizations. Under the threat of republicanism, unionist politicians wielded significant political capital in the halls of Westminster, but relatively little working social capital has developed among Protestant organizations.

Often, Protestant communities in need of resources, such as, jobs and housing, are not sufficiently empowered to advocate for and make full use of government programs. Research by Blackburn and Rekowek (2007) argues that the social and economic dividends of peace have been pursued more aggressively in Catholic communities than Protestant ones (pp. 80–81). A sense of British identity remains strong among Protestants, and the union would appear politically secure for the foreseeable future, but the quality of that future now rests in their ability to organize and navigate a new and changing political landscape.

In the introduction to their edited book on Protestants, unionists, and loyalists, Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern (1997a) express the importance of forging a new shared vision for relations on the island of Ireland: "In overall terms the crisis facing Ireland, North and South, Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist, is to reconceptualise who 'the People' are in order to achieve a new

social and **(p.19)** political consensus” (p. 9). Since the publication of their book, a young and contested political dispensation has developed through the negotiation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and more recently through the reestablishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly via a remarkable coalition of Sinn Féin and the DUP, who were previously the most opposed among the large political parties. The “social consensus” that Shirlow and McGovern propose is less clear, however. Lingering sectarianism and polarized identities, while showing signs of improvement, constitute a vexing backdrop to the end of the Troubles and the establishment of power sharing governance.

### Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland

If polarized and entrenched identities contribute to intractable conflict, the transformation of those identities into ones with less defensive and more inclusive orientations should occupy a central place in peacebuilding models. Constructivist models offer a framework for understanding the opportunities for and limits to identity change and the important role that symbols and cultural activities play in mediating identity change, and chapter 2 addresses the central role of identity formation in conflict transformation.

Three themes shape the analysis of conflict transformation among Protestant unionists and loyalists that follows: capacity building, cultural innovation, and pragmatic motivations. Cultural entrepreneurship figures prominently, but it is important to pay attention to the strategic imperatives that motivate cultural innovation and the organizational changes that contribute to the empowerment of alienated Protestants.

### Capacity Building

Material conditions, the capacity to organize in pursuit of collective interests, and how a community perceives itself and its neighbors are closely related. Each feeds into the level of security or insecurity that influences whether various segments of unionism and loyalism are able and prepared to participate fully in planning for the future and the transformation of conflict in Northern Ireland. If fear, uncertainty, and inequality lie at the root of ethnopolitical conflict, conflict transformation involves the development of resources that empower polarized groups to engage nonviolently as equals and then acknowledge and take advantage of their interdependence (Eyben, Morrow, and Wilson 1997; Mac Ginty and du Toit 2007:29). Those resources may be political, economic, or cultural, and it is worth noting that the distribution of resources within the Protestant population is not uniform. Middle-class Protestants have been able to avoid the worst of the violence of the Troubles and have tended to maintain a comfortable distance from local politics, influencing policy through professional organizations that lobbied **(p.20)** Direct Rule ministries. Historically, unionists have looked at relatively poorer economic conditions in the Republic of Ireland and argued that a united Ireland would mean being absorbed into an inferior economy without British subsidy and would inevitably sacrifice quality of life.

Middle-class unionists were no exception, and they oriented themselves toward Britain to pursue their business interests and send their children to university (Coulter 1997).

Working-class Protestants, with fortunes closely tied to manufacturing bases that predominated in Northern Ireland, have seen the union as inextricably linked with Ulster's industrial successes but have suffered from declines in industrial production and its replacement by service and technology industries. Economic and social problems including unemployment, low educational attainment, and substance abuse plague working-class Protestant communities. The trauma of the Troubles remains a fresh memory for adults and still echoes today in interface tensions and outbreaks of violence that perpetuate a sense of alienation, both from neighboring Catholic communities, which Protestants have watched advance economically and politically, and from the Protestant middle class, by which they feel abandoned (Blackbourn and Rekawek 2007). They therefore draw on whatever sense of security their collective identity as British citizens affords, insisting that their loyalty and service to the union, especially in terms of military service, amounts to political capital. However, they are simultaneously unsure or even skeptical about the value of that capital, as British governments have signaled their willingness to see Northern Ireland leave the union under the right conditions of popular consent (Coulter 1997: 116). Undermining insecurity remains a fundamental task for improving community relations (Mac Ginty and du Toit 2007).

In her typology of approaches to community relations work, Mari Fitzduff (1991) refers to "contextual community relations work" as activities, such as, community development, building trusted and accessible security forces, encouraging pluralist or mixed environments to encourage contact, targeting social need, and training in critical thinking, that are necessary to create a suitable environment for improvements in community relations. Unfortunately, the fields of community relations and community development have often been disconnected from one another, and yet, both are fundamental to the prospects for sustainable peace (Eyben, Morrow, and Wilson 1997). This research takes up the challenge of assessing the extent to which and the ways in which organizations within the Protestant/unionist/loyalist (PUL) population are seeking to adapt themselves to new political circumstances by building social and cultural capital and organizing capacity.

### Cultural Innovation and Collective Identities

In some cases, community development work parallels a kind of local single-identity work that involves modifying cultural expressions and undertaking historical education projects. To the extent that historical and cultural identity work **(p.21)** helps to diminish a sense of uncertainty, builds confidence, enables cross-community cooperation, and develops organizing skills that allow grassroots organizations to advocate effectively for collective interests, it might

be considered part of conflict transformation, though we should also consider the countervailing trends that act as obstacles to such a process.

Modifying public expressions of collective identity, such as, parades and bonfires, that have traditionally been seen as triumphalist, cannot simply be programmed or made policy within an organization or community. The adoption of new schemata is never a wholesale proposition. New ideas are smuggled into group discourse in the very rituals and practices that sustain the continuity of collective identities. Change, even heresy, is never far from tradition. Often symbolic rituals, such as, bonfires and parades, can become sites at which somewhat unorthodox group members, out of devotion to a tradition or institution, seek to influence the discourse and dispositions of fellow participants. Symbols closely associated with authority and tradition retain their power even when they are appropriated and modified (within limits) to express new ideas and new iterations of collective identity (Kurtz 1983; Smithey and Young 2010).

Collective action and collective identity are thus closely related and mutually recursive; a change in one signals or requires a change in the other. To the extent that loyalists begin to emphasize publicly features of their identity that are not defensive or expressions of mistrust or antipathy toward Catholics and nationalists, they signal a new orientation across the political and ethnic divide. They aim to maintain in-group solidarity and ontological security through these practices, but as they adopt new forms that are less exclusive, they incrementally lower the salience of sectarian and ethnopolitical boundaries that have helped fuel conflict in Ireland and thus participate in conflict transformation.

### Pragmatics and Public Relations

Attempts to reorient collective identities are influenced by groups' perceptions of their adversaries and other influential social actors and are deeply implicated with the ways in which they present themselves to those parties. Cultural traditions projects attempt to shore up communal solidarity and improve community esteem and confidence, but they also reframe collective identity in ways that are more widely palatable to the general public, funders, and other sources of local and international support. Thus, there is a pragmatic dimension in which unionists and loyalists use cultural activities in the pursuit of political, social, and economic goals. Protestant interviewees often speak of their cultural traditions work in comparison with the successes that republicans have enjoyed in their own transition to politics, community organizing, and international public relations. Increasingly, Protestant organizations in Northern Ireland are undertaking to build capacity for social change by developing community organizing and public relations skills.

**(p.22)** Yet, decisions to emphasize particular features of group history or beliefs are not merely strategic. Leaders may not simply dictate core identities to members. Modifications must be negotiated by individuals and groups, sometimes leading to conflict internally, but the benefits to the group's political or social capital may incentivize such attempts to reframe group identity. This often takes the form of public relations work, media management, and the modification of public expressions of identity.

### Overview of the Book

Unionists and loyalists have not abandoned their objections to nationalism, and they often continue to frame their agendas in relation to the real or imagined threat of a return to republican violence and restrictions on their cultural expressions. In this sense, ethno-political conflict in Northern Ireland continues but in ways that open possibilities for cooperation and constructive competition. Conflict is thereby transformed from the inside out among partisans, many of whom once prioritized paramilitary or military violence. In 1995, after the IRA committed itself to a cease-fire, Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Féin, famously declared, "They haven't gone away, you know," to the disgust of Protestants across Northern Ireland. (Many unionists still question whether the IRA has gone away if its Army Council continues to exist.) Portadown's District Orange Master, Daryl Hewitt, echoed the line after his Orange lodge's leadership met with Adams to discuss their dispute with nationalist Garvaghy Road residents (2008). Neither has gone away, but they have not stayed the same either.

The rest of this book examines a contested process by which self-described unionists and loyalists navigate a contested social psychological landscape where identity and action are inseparably intertwined. As we discuss in chapter 2, conflict transformation involves changes in the way conflict is carried out. The political peace process, a form of sophisticated conflict management, has constructed an arena in which even the most militant parties believe they can pursue their core interests. Support for political parties remains one way of signaling collective identity, but as we will see in subsequent chapters, rituals and other symbolic activities offer another arena in which many unionists and loyalists are active and in which we find an intentional shift toward developing the arts of persuasion.

Chapter 3 details the development of the peace process and the political circumstances in which unionists and loyalists find themselves. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 follow symbolic and ritualistic expressions of ethno-political identity through activities that are often associated with tradition or heritage, such as, murals, bonfires, parades, reenactments, and amateur historical pursuits. In each case, unionists and loyalists have been modifying some of their most cherished activities to expand their appeal within their own communities and further afield. Such modifications are important because they both reflect and

require that they can be justified within the frames of the collective identities they represent **(p.23)** and thus become part of the slow iterative process of identity transformation as well.

The process is not purely endogenous to unionist and loyalist communities and organizations, though it must be said that that is where much of the action of conflict transformation occurs. As we discuss in chapter 6, sea changes in the political sphere have forced unionists and loyalists into reconsidering their positions and their futures. Some have resolved that they must develop a new political influence that is not purely associated with British patronage. The development of public relations skills is not surprisingly applied first to their most public expressions of identity. Moreover, the state has incentivized the mitigation of cultural expressions of identity, which fits into the consociational model embodied in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Thus, while much of the process of conflict transformation detailed in the book revolves around culture, identity, and emotion, there are important pragmatic dimensions to consider as well. The concluding chapter summarizes the findings, anticipates the future of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, and raises cautionary questions about the potential limits and pitfalls that unionists and loyalists might encounter and the ramifications for community relations.

### Notes:

- (1.) Murals are large paintings, often found on the gable ends of houses that, historically, have displayed themes of ethnic identity and political ideology. During “the Troubles,” thirty years of armed conflict since the late 1960s, murals often valorized paramilitaries and armed struggle.
- (2.) Republican and loyalist paramilitaries are non-state armed organizations formed to challenge or defend British rule and unionism in Ireland, respectively.
- (3.) European football is called soccer in the United States.
- (4.) Best had died only five months after my original visit to Wright's mural, which was redesigned and unveiled in May 2006. He had played for both Manchester United and Northern Ireland, and the mural portrayed him twice, once in his red Manchester uniform and again wearing his green Northern Ireland gear.
- (5.) Extensive interviews were conducted within grassroots unionist organizations and communities. Excerpts of these interviews appear throughout the book. All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms.
- (6.) The Orange Order is one of several all-male fraternal organizations that dedicate themselves to the preservation of the Protestant faith and British sovereignty in Ireland. The Orange Order is the best known, though others (some closely affiliated with the Orange Order) include the Apprentice Boys of

Derry, the Independent Orange Order, the Royal Black Preceptory, and the Royal Arch Purple. On July 12 each year, the Orange Order celebrates the victory in 1698 of King William III's victory over the Jacobite forces of James II at the Battle of the Boyne. The Twelfth celebrations are preceded on the Eleventh Night by celebrations and the burning of large bonfires in Protestant communities across Northern Ireland. Tricolour flags of the Republic of Ireland and other nationalist or republican symbols are often burned with the bonfires.

(7.) Ruane and Todd's (1996) approach to conflict transformation similarly calls for action at cultural, structural, and relational levels (pp. 306–15).

(8.) The distinctions between unionism and loyalism or nationalism and republicanism are often not clear, and usage is contested, changing from context to context, but I offer a brief explanation here for readers uninitiated in Northern Ireland politics. In its broadest sense, nationalism refers to the universe of political positions that advocate a united Ireland. More specifically, “nationalist” refers to those people, primarily Catholic, whose political goals emphasize civil equality for all and redressing decades of discrimination against Catholics. Many nationalists value Gaelic culture and a united Ireland and prefer constitutional means of pursuing their political goals. “Republicans” are nationalists, often working class, who insist on equality and a united Ireland but have been willing to use both violent and institutional political means. The paramilitary Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the political party Sinn Féin are the most prominent organizations within the republican movement.

Broadly, “unionism” refers to a commitment to Northern Ireland's remaining part of the United Kingdom. In its particular sense, unionism refers to a stance institutionalized in political parties supported primarily by Protestants (e.g., the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party) that focuses on Northern Ireland's membership in the United Kingdom and British identity (Miller 1978; Hennessey 1996; Ruane and Todd 1996). “Loyalism” refers to an ideology or cultural stance held by many Protestants, usually working class, who insist on Northern Ireland's remaining part of the United Kingdom while also defending Protestant culture and identity. Loyalists' cultural commitments may include Protestant evangelicalism and a contractual or covenantal view of their relationship to the British crown (Whyte 1990; Brewer and Higgins 1998). Like republicanism, the term “loyalism” also often refers to support for paramilitary organizations, such as, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

(9.) The Northern Ireland Assembly is the elected legislative body established by the 1998 Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA).

(10.) “Peacebuilding” is often used to refer to initiatives that aim to transform attitudes and build capacity in civil society while “peacemaking” usually refers

to attempts to encourage dialogue and negotiations among political figures or individuals with political influence. "Peacekeeping" is a form of conflict management that includes the capacity to keep opponents from attacking one another (Galtung 1975:224; Ryan 1995).

(11.) Northern Ireland consists of six of the traditional nine counties of Ulster. Donegal, Monaghan, and Cavan remain in the Republic of Ireland.

(12.) After protracted negotiations, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement established a power-sharing assembly in Northern Ireland. It was signed by major political parties on April 10, 1998, and it was endorsed in subsequent referenda in both the north and south.

(13.) The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is an annual omnibus survey conducted by Access Resource Knowledge Northern Ireland (ARK) and co-sponsored by Queen's University and the University of Ulster.

(14.) Research by Ian Shuttleworth and Chris Lloyd (2006) using 2001 census data, however, indicates that levels of actual segregation have probably remained the same throughout the 1990s, findings that moderate but do not extinguish concerns about levels of division between Catholics and Protestants.

(15.) Forty-seven percent of youth respondents living in primarily Catholic areas had no Protestant friends, and the corresponding rate for Protestants was 34 percent.

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