

Path-dependence in settlement processes: explaining settlement in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The recent literature on path-dependence provides a model that can be used in explanation of ethnic conflict and settlement processes. Using Northern Ireland as a case study, this article argues that it is indeed possible to identify path-dependent patterns of change, the generation of 'endogenous' processes of change, these. It shows how and why factors such as power, perception, networks and institutions vary in their impact on conflict and explains when they work together to produce settlement.

Keywords: ethnic conflict; settlement; path dependence, Northern Ireland; Good Friday Agreement; longue durée processes; power stalemate; critical junctures, lock-in, endogenous change

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Internal communal conflicts vary so widely in their form that valid generalisations are not easily found (Brown, 1996; David, 1997). Settlements are even more difficult to explain, for they vary not simply in the type of conflict, which they settle, but also in their status and stability (Darby and MacGinty, 2003, pp. 1-6). Much contemporary scholarship searches inductively for recurrent proximate factors (or clusters of such factors) that explain settlement in a particular range of cases (Brown, 1996; Stedman, 2003; King et al, 2005). Other scholars proceed by applying general theoretical models drawn from international relations theory to settlement processes (David, 1997; Lake and Rothchild, 1998; Hauss, DATE). Both approaches assume that similar causes lead to similar effects, that law-like generalisations can be found, at least if we suitably delimit the range of cases, that contemporary conditions are crucial in the causal process. But while existing work has identified a range of factors relevant to conflict and settlement 14, 577, it has not found substantive law-like generalisations (for example Brown, DATE). We propose a different research agenda, one that suggests that *how* these factors function, *when* they are relevant to settlement, may depend on their inter-relations and their embeddedness in historically developing patterns. If timing and sequencing are crucial, if path dependent patterns and *longue durée* processes are important, then we need to explain settlements by a historically-sensitive approach (cf Pierson, 2004 **pp.**). We argue in this paper that such path-dependent patterns and processes regulate how the specific factors highlighted in other approaches function. As we show below, this is not a rejection of comparison or generalisation but a shift in its focus.

In what follows, we do not attempt to deal with the entire literature on settlement processes, but rather focus on four empirically promising and theoretically powerful approaches that highlight, respectively, relations of power, cognitive framing, social networks and institutional opportunities.² Using the test case of Northern Ireland, where a protracted conflict was brought to an agreed (if unstable) settlement in 1998, we show that none of these factors is sufficient to explain agreement in this case although is relevant to the settlement process. We show that these factors are closely interlinked and that the effects of each vary with their context and interlinkages. This is precisely the type of phenomenon where process, temporality, pattern and sequence are decisive (Pierson, 2004). Rather than search for specific factors that correlate with settlement in general, we draw on approaches which build temporality into explanation, identify positive feedback, the path dependent 'lock-in' of patterns, and the modes es of point to by which this may be interrupted (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). Thus we build upon existing explanations, showing when and how the factors they highlight become effective.

associated with such trajectories 1994; , 2004 p. 24. , learning, , shared understandings; 2006, 2004, p. 27; , 2000, pp. 529-35 invites . . 2003; 2002; 2005, 1999, 2002 exogenous factors.

Using the Northern Ireland case, this paper suggests that it is indeed possible to identify path-dependent patterns which generate conflict, embedded in turn in long-term processes of state development whose change may interrupt these patterns. The case-study highlights the impact of long-term state trajectories on patterns of conflict, their interrelation with actors' categorisations, and the impact of wider geo-political processes in intensifying change and in legitimating it for the actors. This resembles a model of institutional change in which exogenous shocks open 'windows of opportunity' which may or may not be taken depending on actors' policy preferences and the distribution of power resources (Cortell and Peterson, 1999). However the endogenous/exogenous distinction is not clearcut in this case.: the path-

dependent pattern is embedded in state structures and relations whose change is not independent of geo-political pressures, and which in turn impacts on policy preferences and power resources.

Competing explanations of settlement processes

Some of the most plausible and fruitful explanations of settlement prioritize one of the following four factors: power relations, cultural distinctions and cognitive frames, social networks (and their role in forming community boundaries) and institutional opportunities.

A focus on changing power relations has typified rational choice and neo-realist models of ethnic conflict and settlement processes (David, 1997; Lake and Rothchild, 1998). These approaches typically take as given the self-definition of the actors and their categorisation of their aims, and focus on their resources and strategies. Power is the key resource, and if power instability gives incentive for conflict, power stalemate – where actors can prevent each other from attaining their ends – gives incentive for settlement; settlement in turn is unstable without a credible guarantee that the weakening of one party's resources by compromise (disarmament etc) will not be exploited by the other (Zartman, 1989; Lake and Rothchild, 1998; Walter, 2001). The clarity and relevance of these arguments in highlighting factors which foster or subvert the quest for settlement are clear. But so too are their limits. s'They assume actors' awareness of power stalemates, recognition of long-term objectives, belief in external guarantors, thus putting categorizations and perceptions back at the heart of analysis (Zartman, 2003). Moreover, distinctions between different orders of time – the potential tension between short-term power stalemate and projected long-term shifts in the power balance – which are routinely made by actors in their calculations are insufficiently brought into this explanation.

A focus on cultural distinctions and cognitive frames is typical of 'new international relations' theories and cognitivist approaches to ethnic conflict. Some argue that the central factor in moving from conflict to settlement is perceptual - a perception of a hurting stalemate, a recognition that a win-win situation does, or can, exist - and that this can occur at any stage of conflict (Hauss, 2001, p. 218). This approach also informs analyses of micro-processes of conflict which study how and when actors adopt or reject ethnic labels, link or de-link ethnic categories to personal dignity (Kakar, 1996; Brubaker, 2002, Petersen, 2002). Yet why such re-categorisations occur when they do is seldom adequately explained. One typical explanation appeals to the role of ideologues (or political entrepreneurs) as key agents in the process of collective self-definitions (Brubaker, 2002; McAdam et al, 2001). Yet this raises the further question why some political entrepreneurs are effective, and others not. Another explanation goes beyond the cognitive to point to the importance of experienced cooperation with 'enemies' in exemplary micro-interactive contexts, for example informal diplomacy (Arthur, 1999). Yet if this explains elite change, it opens up the question of what produces the changes in public attitudes necessary to sustain settlement. In short, this approach points to set of mechanisms relevant to settlement processes but leads to further questions why and when they become effective.

A third approach focuses on civil society and social networks. Institutionalised interactions across boundaries are shown to lessen the propensity for conflict (REF: THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS; Varshney, 2001; Wimmer, DATE;), while civil society constitutes an arena where linkage politics and 'people power' can replace self-seeking ethnic and national politicians (see 1996, 176-83). Network-oriented analyses link the cognitive with the interactional so as to see how communal boundaries are constituted as 'bright' or 'blurred' in everyday interaction, and how this defines the range of choices which actors face (Alba, 20052006). These approaches build variously on theories of 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2003), the role of civil society in transitions to democracy (for discussion, see

Keane, 1998) and theories of how boundaries and distinction are challenged and maintained (Lamont, 2000). While these approaches, however, can explain constraints on conflict and local variations in its form, they do not explain the move to settlement (see Farrington, 2004).

A fourth approach gives particular attention to institutions – whether specific institutional design or longer-term institutional configurations - and the opportunities that they may give for compromise settlements (Keating, 2001; McGarry and O’Leary, 2004; Coakley, 2003). In general, institutionalists see ‘the institutional organisation of the polity or political economy as the principal factor structuring collective behavior’ although they may also incorporate considerations of power, cultural frames and informal networks into their analyses (Hall and Taylor 1996, 936-42). The focus on institutions however raises the further question of the context in which these institutions are embedded (including cognitive frames, power relations and informal networks) which may subvert formal institutional rules and ‘convert’ old institutions to new functions, or new institutions to old (Thelen, 2003, pp. 228-230). is compatible with

Each of these four sets of factors gives incentive for settlement. Yet the effect of each is not constant. Whether or not institutional changes or a new power balance give overriding incentives for settlement depends on the wider context, including the presence or absence of the other factors. yet sometimes it is only the prospect of future, potentially still more dangerous, power shifts that gives an incentive to compromise.

Given these interlinkages, with the effects of each factor varying with its context and combinations, then the detailed analyses of each must be supplemented with an historical and contextual approach which shows not only *that* but *when* each one becomes important.

In this paper we focus on one case where a settlement was finally reached after a quarter century of conflict.

Northern Ireland: explaining settlement

Agreement was reached between most of the main political parties in Northern Ireland on Good Friday, April 10, 1998. What were the conditions which brought agreement, what explains its timing, **and how stable is the resulting settlement?** How did unionists (at least a majority of them) come to agreement with republicans (extreme nationalists who had only recently ended a campaign of violence) when six years earlier they had failed to reach agreement with moderate nationalists (see Bloomfield, 1998; 2001)? How did republicans come to accept a settlement that, formally at least, appeared to offer fewer constitutional gains than did the Sunningdale Agreement, which they had violently rejected a quarter century earlier (Wolff, 2001)? How could actors who in the recent past had declared conflict, and even violence, to be inevitable, a rational and justified response to threat, injury and insult, now begin to speak as if it were unthinkable, irrational, a feature of a distant past?

Each of the four approaches discussed above finds echoes in the literature on the 1998 agreement. Scholars writing on the Northern Ireland settlement typically look to multiple factors in explanation of conflict and agreement. Yet in showing how these factors interrelate, it is useful to look at each individually. The factor most often cited in explanation of the settlement process in Northern Ireland is power, and in particular power stalemate. By the mid 1990s there was a mutually recognised stalemate between the IRA and the British army. There was also recognition that neither unionists and nationalists could hope immediately to achieve their maximal aims. This gave impetus to all parties to negotiate. This explanation is suggested by English (2003, pp. 307-13) who takes republicans' inability to fulfil their goals at either the military or the political level as the main factor motivating

them to call a ceasefire and to negotiate a settlement (see also Schultze, 1997). Stalemate was certainly important in the 1990s, but that it became important must itself be explained since neither the military nor the political stalemate was new. The military stalemate distinguished the situation in 1998, when republicans negotiated a settlement, from that in 1973, when they had no intention of so doing; but some republicans had perceived a stalemate as early as 1975, and others in the movement recognised a military stalemate by the mid-1980s (English, 2003, p. 307). On the political level, too, stalemate was no more evident in the late 1990s than in the 1980s. Why then did it become relevant only in the 1990s? We might explain this in terms of the actors' new recognition of emerging long term options and of the changing character of state trajectories and international constraints (Arthur, 2000) or of their final slow acknowledgement that they could not capitalise on stalemate in some fields to build victory in others (ENGLISH ... PP). But this is to add different factors into the explanation; why they came together requires further analysis.

Other explanations of the 1998 agreement put shifting cognitive frames and cultural distinctions at the heart of the analysis. Changing ideologies preceded negotiations: all political parties adopted new discourses, which converged around international concepts of pluralism, equality and regionalism (Coakley, 2002; Bourke, 2003). that ,4not as an indication of intent but in the pursuit of conflicting interests 2003).

Another strand in the literature stresses the crucial role of social networks of interaction and civil society organisations where communal boundaries are blurred. This explanation suggests that it was the build-up of bridging social capital that finally did the trick: it was 'people power', a public increasingly able to see beyond ethnic divisions towards everyday interests which sometimes converged and seldom directly conflicted, which impelled politicians towards settlement (Guelke, 2003). Some explain the crises of implementation of the Good Friday Agreement by the failure of politicians to prioritise these civil society

institutions and allow their voice to predominate (Wilson and Wilford, 2003). While there is evidence that cross-community civil society organisations can restrain conflict and even provoke identity shift in settlement-sustaining directions (Darby, 1986; Hargie and Dickson, 2003; Todd, 2006), their importance in producing settlement in this case is open to question. First, there was a relatively small increase in institutionalised contexts of cross-community interaction in the decade preceding settlement.³ Second, voting behaviour shows that the public, far from pressing the parties to maintain the Agreement, have rewarded those parties least likely so to do.⁴

Finally, a major strand in the literature focuses on the consociational, egalitarian and neo-federalist character of the institutions and the ‘double protection’ for minorities in either British or Irish jurisdictions (McGarry and O’Leary, 2004) and on the role of the two governments in brokering agreement. Good Friday Agreement of a Sunningdale Agreement of electoral and demographic sWolff, 2001; 2004, 260-293, Evidently the institutional form of settlement was crucially important, yet it still required the parties to sign up to arrangements that – not long before – they appeared totally to reject. Once again the socio-political context was crucial to the shift in views: for republicans, the increased strength of nationalism and the integration of a now electorally strong Sinn Féin into government and republicans into all levels of civil society (McGarry and O’Leary, pp.... Ruane and Todd, 1999, pp.); for unionists, judgements about the power-balance in the wider British-Irish arena (Farrington? Check? Walker?). In short the institutional provisions were effective in producing agreement because of the context in which they were embedded.

Clearly all the factors discussed above played a role in settlement and all serious scholars should acknowledge them. An approach sensitive to history and process yet they cannot simply be added together in explanation. What was important for settlement was not just their co-presence but the manner of their co-presence. In the 1970s and 1980s they coexisted and yet

conflict was reproduced. Extended periods of power stalemate (where neither side could attain their ends) were seen as phases in a 'long war' and led to increased communal mobilisation and intensified cultural opposition. The radical change in power relations after 1969 provoked perceptual shift: Protestants moved in mass from Irish and Ulster identifications to British (Trew, 1996); Catholics and nationalists of all political hues rethought what it meant to be Irish. But these shifts were in conflict-generating directions. Cross community networks collapsed, only to be built up by state funding which itself served as a new source of contention. A series of new political institutions were proposed and polarised opinion within, as well as between, the communities. Northern Ireland underwent almost constant economic or political restructuring between 1945 and 1995, but change in any one factor (core industries, a political stalemate, a ceasefire, the 1974 power-sharing executive, public shock at another atrocity, peace movements, a process of ideological and identity change) did not initiate a benign sequence of changes in other factors. More often it intensified conflict. Why? What were the mechanisms by which settlement-favouring changes were continually subverted? And what happened in the 1990s so that these factors suddenly came to facilitate settlement? To answer these questions requires a different form of explanation.

-1999-tTpattern of relationships ing. O-Wright, 1996; (1798, 1848, 1916, 1920-1) ; Hirst, 2002

A new . Iteoutlined above , pp. 124-128and militarisation in 1969- -had by On the one hand, a long, incremental, slow-moving process of augmentation of Catholic power resources had reached a threshold where neither repression nor concession could bring stability, and where both republicans and unionists began to have incentive for settlement. This intensified the process of British repositioning that had been ongoing, although very uneven, since 1969, which was facilitated and further intensified in a context of exogenous

geo-political change. The shift in the role of the state(s) broke key aspects of the long-term pattern and opened a 'window of opportunity' that the parties were able and willing to use to reach an agreement.

From the start of the current round of troubles, nationalist pressure had provoked an uneven process of British reform, while the slowness of the process and the extent of repression had hardened nationalist (and particularly republican) resolve. Only by the 1980s did the governments recognise the extent of nationalist alienation and embark on a path to resolve it, breaking with the old pattern of territorial management, taking the Irish state, rather than the unionist community, as their local partner, and intensifying a programme of reform. The process strengthened nationalists institutionally, culturally and economically, with a knock-on demographic impact. By the 1990s, republicans were aware of the new power resources potentially at their community's disposal and were contemplating an unarmed strategy, while unionists wished to negotiate a stronger position for themselves within the union. But there was no plausible form of agreement that did not weaken one or other party in the longer term. Meanwhile both Irish and British governments saw that more radical change was needed to bring stability in the short-term, and still more in the long-term when demographic change might provoke further crises.

The process of state repositioning that began had potentially radical effects. By the 1990s, the government explicitly committed itself to a political reconstitution of Northern Ireland, in partnership with the Irish government (2004). These changes gave a rationale and a possibility for an agreement that was already in the strategic interests of both republicans (who stood to gain influence and build more power resources) and unionists (who needed to negotiate a safe place for themselves within the new United Kingdom). (2006).

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² We make no claims here to cover the entire literature, and in particular a detailed discussion of inductive approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. However our conclusion applies equally to them

³ There was a new large paid professional cross community civil society sector of employees, but at the grass roots less changed, for example, the percentage of children at integrated schools increased from 1% to 4% between the early and the late 1990s, a significant increase but not one that affected a significant proportion of the population. A. M. Gallagher and S. Dunn, 1991; Stephen, 2000, p. 167.

⁴ In the 2003 regional elections, the two ‘extreme’ parties, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, were voted into majority positions within their respective blocs. For the results, see *Irish Political Studies*, Data Yearbook 2004.