THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT

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This paper argues that until the early twenty-first century the Northern Ireland conflict retained an unstable triangular form (the legacy of the long-past colonial period), where the British state was inextricably imbricated in a communal conflict. By its very structures and modes of statecraft it reproduced the conflict which, by its policies, it attempted to ameliorate and manage. The Good Friday agreement changed all that. It did not resolve the conflict, although it began to create the conditions whereby this might be possible, allowing the British state to reposition itself, so that it could arbiter those aspects of the conflict which were internal and manage those which were ethno-national. In effect, the conflict moved from an unstable triangular to a stable symmetrical form of conflict management. Although the provisions of the agreement appeared to mark radical change, aspects of the older form of conflict management returned in its implementation, suggesting that the triangular structure of conflict is not yet gone. Rather than a move towards stable binationalism, we may be seeing an uneven move towards an unstable multi-variable form of conflict, where the communities compete for alliances and resources in a context of a multiplicity of power centres. In this respect globalisation and the changes in forms of territorial management in the archipelago may be less conducive to stability in Northern Ireland than was initially hoped.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I focus on the underlying structure of conflict in Northern Ireland, and changes within it which made the Good Friday agreement possible, but which have also crucially affected the agreement's implementation and functioning. Here I am distinguishing structures from institutions, laws, or the provisions of the agreement. The structure of conflict refers to those social relations which are causally important in generating, reproducing, or ameliorating communal conflict in Northern Ireland. These relations may or may not coincide with legal, institutional or constitutional relations, or with the provisions of the agreement (that is an empirical question). I argue that these social relations do not coincide with the provisions of the Agreement, but have crucially affected its implementation, so that the "ideal" or "formal" agreement defines a set of relations quite different from that which actually exists.

STRUCTURES OF COMMUNAL CONFLICT

We begin with a typology of structures of communal conflict which focuses on the basic power relations between the main (causally important) actors. Note that this is not a typology of institutions, of modes of conflict regulation, of motivations or of constitutional arrangements. If we were to combine a structural typology with motivational, institutional and constitutional typologies, a complex and powerful comparative theoretical grid would be developed; this is not the task of this paper.

Table 1 proposes some logically possible structures of conflict. Each is an ideal type—power relations are seldom so simple. Nonetheless, for each particular type historical examples can be found. Type 1, communal conflict, is one where the communities in conflict are unaffected by state logic; the conflict may pre-exist state-formation, as in clan conflict, or transcend it, as in religious conflict where the wider communities take precedence in organisation and mobilisation over state forms. The logic of conflict in this case takes a form of reciprocal violence theorised, *inter alia*, by Girard (1975) and Wright (1988).

Types 2- 6 introduce the state as a core actor in the conflict. Type 2 represents the extreme case of an internal conflict where the state is simply an instrument of the dominant community, an "ethnic state". In this case, the dominant ethnic group uses state resources to secure and reproduce its own dominance and to exclude the dominated group. In more complex cases, state institutions, including formally liberal democratic institutions, may function to reproduce the power of one group over another. In these cases, however, where the logic of state functioning takes on a certain autonomy of the dominant community, there is an ever-present possibility

of contradictions between formally universalistic procedures and substantive ethnic dominance.

Type 3 has the state as an arbiter in communal conflict. In one set of cases, a powerful Hobbesian authoritative state breaks cycles of communal violence and guarantees social order. Its procedures are neutral as between the conflicting communities. In another set of cases, the conflicting communities confer on the state the authority to regulate their relations according to agreed rules.

Type 4, triangular conflict, is one where two communities come into unequal and mutually dependent relations with a state. It was paradigmatically found in cases of colonialism. In this case, state functioning—in particular the securing of order in the territory—is itself affected by the logic of communal conflict.

Type 5, symmetrical conflict, involves two communities and two states. To the extent that there is mutual dependence between community and state, it is equal and symmetrical. Examples exist in ethnic frontiers. Developed models of how such symmetrical authority could function have been presented by O'Leary et al (1993) and by McGarry and O'Leary (1995).

Type 6, multi-variable conflict, involves two communities and a multiplicity of states or power centres with resulting communal competition for alliances. One may find examples both in cases of imperial rivalry over an internally divided territory, or—as I argue below—in the new world order.

Figure 1. A typology of the structures of communal conflict

Type	Actors	Logic	Historical example
1 Communal	2 communities	Zero-sum conflict	Clan or religious warfare
2. Internal	2 communities, 1 state	State as instrument	Ethnic state
3. Perpendicular	2 communities, 1 state	State as arbiter	State-building, assertion of order
4. Triangular	2 communities 1 state	Inequality between communities and in community relations to state	Colonial state
5. Symmetrical	2 communities 2 states	Each community owes loyalty to and allies with its state	ethnic frontier
6. Multi-variable	2 communities multiple states/ nodes of power	Each community seeks alliances with many states/power centres	imperial rivalry globalisation multi-levelled government

Working with our ideal-type models, we see that conflicts of type 3 and type 5 are most easily stabilised because there exist agents—the state or states—able to per-

form a stabilising role, asserting order over the conflicting communities. Conflicts of type 1, in contrast, go beyond the reach of state power, while in conflicts of type 2, stability comes only from the dominance of one community. Note that conflicts of type 4 (triangular) are inherently unstable because there is no agent able to assert order; the state is itself imbricated in conflict, its actions are constrained by its dependence on (at least one of) the conflicting communities. Conflicts of type 5 (multivariable) are unstable for different reasons: the power-centres may not be dependent on the communities in conflict, but the very multiplicity and the variability of possible alliances encourages power struggles without the existence of any clear overarching power-centre to assert order.

It should be noted that the logical form of conflict in each case can be "filled" with a range of motivations. In the "ethnic state" the communities may conceive of themselves in religious terms; in the "colonial" form, the felt link between dominant community and state may be ethno-national or religio-political, as David Miller (1978), among others, has suggested; and in the symmetrical form, the communities may be tied to "their" respective states for primarily religious reasons. It would be possible to come up with a typology of self-definitions or motivations independent of the structural typology. Application of the typology would, however, be likely to be extremely complex, since the motivations of the different actors typically do not cohere: state elites may have one set of understandings and motivations, and each community may have different ones. Moreover, motives, unlike structures, are fluid, with religious motivations taking on colonial resonances (Akenson, 1992) and ethnonationalist motivations subsuming all others into the totalising nationalist identity. It follows that interpretations of the Northern Ireland, or any other, conflict as essentially religious, or colonial, or ethno-national, are misleading. We need to construct a model of the relations generating conflict that has multiple determinants, one that combines cultural self-definitions with structural analysis.

THE STRUCTURE OF CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND TO 1998

Here I give a very brief overview of the changing structure of conflict in Northern Ireland over 400 years. An argument and evidence for this interpretation is presented elsewhere (Ruane and Todd, 1996). Up until the very recent period in Northern Ireland, the form of conflict was triangular. It was a structure of dominance, dependence and inequality. Initially this was the configuration set down by plantation. Irish Protestants, Irish Catholics and the English-British state were locked in relations of inequality (between Protestant and Catholic) and mutual dependence (between state and Protestants) such that each, by pursuing its interests thus defined, generated and reproduced communal conflict.

With partition, this configuration changed: Irish Protestants became Northern Protestants, Irish Catholics slowly became Northern Catholics (whose boundaries with Irish Catholics were always partial and porous both in reality and in the perceptions of all actors). The Irish state came into existence, but was ineffectual with respect

to Northern Ireland. From the perspective of many in the British political elite, it was thought of as "semi-detached",[1] perhaps closer in power to the Northern state than to the British state, a view shared by unionists. In real terms, the important social relations remained the triangular ones outlined above.

With direct rule, the formal alliance between the British state and the Protestant/unionist community that characterised the Stormont period came to an end. But the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike of 1974 showed the continuing substantive dependence of the British state on the Protestant community for the very functioning of Northern Ireland. Merlyn Rees noted in his autobiography that the government could take on the IRA but not a "whole community" (Rees, 1985).

In 1985 the Anglo-Irish agreement (AIA) ushered in a configuration that was weakly and ambiguously symmetrical and binational in institutional form. The agreement ushered in a phase where the Irish state played an increasingly important role in conflict management in conjunction with the British state. The preamble of the AIA echoes the phrasing of the New Ireland Forum Report (1984), which had argued for a strongly binational settlement. The actual institutions set up by the agreement, however, were only weakly symmetrical and binational because the Irish state's input was not executive; its influence depended on the British state's willingness to accept it through the mechanism of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (AIIGC). They were ambiguously symmetrical and binational, because the Irish state's role was defined as representing Northern Ireland nationalists, and the remit of the AIIGC extended over all issues affecting Northern nationalists, while the British state's role was authoritative with respect to Northern Ireland as a whole. In effect, the Irish state was functioning as a counterbalance to the inequality between nationalist and unionist within Northern Ireland, rather than as an external power equivalent to the British government.

What, then, was the configuration after the AIA? One interpretation is that it was becoming a symmetrical conflict; both governments saw the need to engage together in conflict management. There is certainly an important truth here. Another interpretation is that—from the British perspective, and perhaps also from that of the unionists—it was less a move to binationalism than the British state engaging a new local agent to assist in administering this troublesome periphery. This argument would follow Jim Bulpitt's theory (1983) of the British mode of territorial management, and it would account for the formal role of the Irish state (representative of nationalists, without the substance of power and with no implications for sovereignty). If this was the case, the AIA reproduced the structure of dominance, dependence and inequality, although now the British state was dependent on both Northern Protestants and Irish Catholics (via the Irish state) for stability in Northern Ireland.

[1] A striking metaphor used by a British Conservative party political advisor in discussion with the author [spring 1997] to describe attitudes up until the 1980s

The answer is that the configuration after 1985 was an emergent one. There were elements of binationalism, furthered by the Irish government and indeed by the formal equality of the states within the EU. However it was clear that in the actual power structure the British state was the dominant actor. The British habit of statecraft, administering peripheries with the assistance of local agents, still exercised some force on political habits of mind. Which type of conflict structure did the AIA represent, triangular or binational? It was both, and the question was which direction was going to be followed in the future.

THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT AND THE REDEFINED STRUCTURE OF CONFLICT

Among the many achievements of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was the fact that it repositioned the British state, so that it no longer sat at the apex of an unstable triangular structure of conflict. Now the British state is defined as having two roles. First, it is an arbiter of the internal communal conflict, managing it via consociational devolved institutions and strong reforming policies. Second it is a co-manager of the ethno-national conflict together with the Irish state.

At a stroke, it appeared, the GFA replaced a structure of dominance, dependence and inequality with an egalitarian, rights oriented regional political system within a potentially federal British system, a confederal Irish system and a more weakly confederal but substantively co-operative British-Irish relationship. The elements of this new variable geometrical form of binationalism could be changed by the vote of the majority in Northern Ireland and the Republic, should the majority in Northern Ireland vote themselves out of a federal British system into some form of all-Ireland system. However, this would not affect individual or group political rights.

I am not going to give a detailed analysis of the provisions here—just a few of the contentious issues and typological aspects.

Consociational institutions

First, the internal communal conflict is managed by consociational institutions. Within the Assembly there is a grand coalition, proportionality in all elections and appointments, mutual vetoes and, socially, there is limited segmental autonomy. However it is a very specific form of consociationalism, one that goes far to prevent the freezing of community identities. Intra-bloc competition gives a dynamic to community development, which may in the process encourage community fragmentation. Segmental autonomy is only limited, for the agreement encourages social transformation of the communities, advocating mixing in schooling, and in housing, reconciliation and tolerance, and adds to the consociational Assembly a pluralist Civic Forum.

Moreover, the consociational elements exist in the context of an agreement that was conceived holistically, not just as a stable set of institutions but as institutions which would themselves develop and transform in the course of their functioning.

Some of the main Irish architects of the agreement agreed that it was conceived as a "moving balance". There are provisions within the Agreement for:

- each of the main institutions changing their remit and powers
- constitutional change
- the equality and security provisions which ensure that there will be quite radical social transformation within Northern Ireland itself.

In this context, the consociational elements of the Assembly were intended as safeguards for communities undergoing a process of transformation generated by the configuration of institutions, as emergency brakes rather than as barriers to all change.

Egalitarian binational measures

The agreement manages the ethno-national conflict by egalitarian binational measures.[2] It provisions are highly egalitarian, not merely proportional: for example the parity of roles of First Minister and Deputy First Ministers, and the strong equality and rights legislation, which is to be made equivalent both North and South.

The agreement has explicitly binational institutional and legal elements such as the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and the right to be either British, or Irish or both. Furthermore it has a substantively binational thrust including the North/South Ministerial Council and implementation bodies which create a potential for island-wide administrative integration in the fields identified for the implementation bodies, and in their effects of changing political and civil service culture more generally (Coakley 2002).

Constitutionally and normatively, the agreement is ambiguously egalitarian; the section on constitutional issues at once affirms the legitimacy of British sovereignty (thus meeting the core unionist constitutional demand) and at the same time vests the right of self-determination in the people of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts, and without external impediment (thus accepting the core nationalist constitutional principle). This is an ambiguous egalitarianism, because it is en-

[2] There is some disagreement as to just how egalitarian it is. My reading is that the agreement is balanced, in a complex holistic sense. In the final agreement, the major formal unionist demands were met. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was replaced by a new British-Irish Agreement. Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution were to be amended to guarantee the principle that a united Ireland would require the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, the SDLP's desired model of the assembly, with consociational guarantees and a powerful and representative executive, was largely achieved. Sinn Féin did best on issues at the margins of the political agenda: a strong equality agenda and prisoner releases, with a policing commission to sit with a radically egalitarian agenda. The major formal nationalist demands, for strong North-South institutions, were, however, seriously weakened in the negotiations. Formally, unionists had won, and the more legally minded, as well as the more moderate, recognised this. In terms of substantive power resources, however, the result was less clear. Nationalists had reason to believe that they had achieved substantial advances in terms of access to resources and rights which could be further expanded, a view shared by the DUP and dissident UUP members.

shrined in the Irish constitution but not in British law, and is consistent both with the Irish nationalist view that the ultimate locus of sovereignty has changed utterly (from the British parliament to the people of Ireland) and with the British view that the provisions of the agreement do not affect British sovereignty (noted also in the agreement in Strand One and Strand Three) (O'Leary, 2001).

In formal terms, the agreement marks the end of the structure of dominance, dependence and inequality. Inequality in Northern Ireland is no longer evident in the outlined political institutions, and the proposed reforms promise to remedy it in the economic and cultural spheres. The role of both states has changed in this outline of institutions; each has a role in Northern Ireland, while neither, in terms of the promised rights culture, can favour one community over another. The reform programme, if implemented, ensures that neither state will ever again be dependent on one community for the administration or security of the region. Indeed, given a radical reading, the powers of the British state have so been constrained as to make it a significantly less important player in Northern Ireland politics than ever before.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The above, however, takes the outline political and legal structures at face value. The formal political map of authority may disguise the actual functioning of institutions and the exercise of authority and power within and between them. Actors with significant power resources, inside and outside institutions, may mobilise these resources to achieve their aims using informal networks parallel to the formal ones, or reinterpreting or changing the formal structures. The Good Friday agreement is particularly prone to this sort of action. Despite the detail of the text, its formal provisions leave much ambiguous and vague about the actual functioning of the institutions. The most glaring ambiguity—that of the sovereign powers of the British government—has already been referred to. But there are many other minor elisions or gaps, including:

- the powers of committees
- the "defined authority" of Ministers within the North-South Council
- the ways in which the executive will function
- the extent to which the Intergovernmental Conference will give an effective voice for the Irish government
- the timing of decommissioning and demilitarisation; and
- the full implications of the ministerial "pledge of office".

The lack of any defined authority to interpret the agreement leaves these issues to be struggled over in practice. In a benign scenario, an issue would be decided jointly by the two Governments. In the worst instance, it would be defined by the most powerful players, reintroducing power struggles and relations of dominance,

dependence and inequality into the implementation of the agreement. Moreover outside the formal political arena in Northern Ireland, the power balance remains both unequal and unstable, giving rise to strong communal interests in the continuing power struggles. Even though the agreement promises to equalise power resources and remove the incentives for power struggle, in the interim inequalities exist and may crucially affect the implementation of the agreement.

Precisely such a struggle characterised the implementation of the Agreement between 1998 and 2002; there was no attempt to impose on the parties a literal interpretation of the agreement. Rather, elements were changed and adapted to meet political needs and political pressure. The long decommissioning story illustrates this. Political pressure was first put on Sinn Féin to secure IRA decommissioning. When they did not budge, attention focused on the unionists. When unionists in turn threatened resignation, pressure was put again on Sinn Féin. And so it went, until eventually the Colombian debacle, when IRA and Sinn Féin members were arrested in Colombia, and the intense US anti-terrorist thrust after September 11 2001, produced a first act of IRA decommissioning. The bowing to alternate political pressures was seen most clearly in the Police Act; amendments of the Patten Report to meet unionist objections were eventually partially reversed, under nationalist pressure, but not enough to satisfy republicans. Finally a “resolution” was reached when the SDLP felt able to join the policing board, not just because of its remit, but also because its competitor, Sinn Féin, had been weakened in the context of the Colombian incident.

In effect, the governments acted as power brokers, swaying to different pressures, rather than as upholders of an agreement which could, if implemented, put some constraints on the communal power struggle and create a political space which was open to dialogue, interim agreement and moderated change. This approach is indicative of the political styles of the government leaders. Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern made their political reputations through their ability to get agreement and to put an honourable face on uneasy and pressured compromises. These skills and habits allowed the leaders to broker agreement in the first place. They were not, however, suited to the process of implementation, which required more formal respect for the principles of the agreement. Instead, government actions encouraged power play within the institutions of the agreement. Furthermore, the American card—the greatest single power resource in the situation—was in play and all the actors attempted to get it in their hands. In Bill Clinton’s presidency it added weight to the broadly nationalist side, but, with the election of George Bush Jr, a general conservatism combined with the Sinn Féin presence in Colombia re-directed US pressure onto republicans. This became all the more important with the added American pressure against terrorism after 11 September 2001.

THE NEW STRUCTURE OF CONFLICT

In its formal provisions, the agreement breaches the older structure of conflict, and obviates the very need for power struggle. In practice, it has served as a site of ongoing power struggle and of endemic crises. Is this because the older structure of

conflict remains unchanged? Is there still a triangular structure of conflict, despite all the reform? Or is it truly the case that the British state has successfully repositioned itself, and is now arbitrating some internal aspects of conflict and co-managing others in a symmetrical way, with the Irish government?

Let us consider a third possibility, a variable geometry model. This has some plausibility both institutionally and in terms of the wider power nexus. Institutionally, the Good Friday agreement introduces a number of interlocking loci of institutional authority (British, British-Irish, Northern Irish, North-South). The potential weight of each institution is explicitly variable and changeable according to rules set down in the agreement. More important, the weight of each is itself contested (between the communities and between British and Irish governments). This institutional configuration exists in a new power structure where the resources of the two communities within Northern Ireland are rapidly equalising.

Externally, the British government keeps major power, with the Irish government an important if secondary actor and the American government a very important occasional actor. During the Clinton period, it was tempting to see this configuration as simply a development of binationalism, where the United states occasionally helped to level the British-Irish power imbalance by adding its clout to the Irish government and nationalist side; as such, the configuration could be seen as a stable and stabilising one. By 2002, however, nationalist unity had become less secure. The US role had also become more open. In a statement to the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in January 2002 in New York, Richard Haas spoke of the need to counter unionist alienation. In addition, it is not at all clear how strong the alliance between the Irish government and Sinn Féin will remain, if electoral competition in the South becomes intense and lasting. Furthermore, British-Irish policy unity has proven shaky over the past years. The British government has at times seemed content to distance itself from Northern Ireland, and where it has taken a proactive role it has typically continued to reflect in its policies the local balance of power.

This open and contested institutional and power arena invites continuing power struggle. In effect the new configuration is an easy transmutation of the older triangular structure. Remnants of that older structure (habits of governance in Britain and attitudes in Ireland) now exist in a situation of a rapidly converging power balance within Northern Ireland and the introduction of new power sources (US and Irish governments, and international pressures) which could, at various times, compete with, balance or even replace British dominance. If there is a movement away from the older triangular structure, it may not be towards a symmetrical structure but towards a multiple, changing and unpredictable set of power centres more attuned to globalisation than to a simple binational structure. This situation encourages power struggle within Northern Ireland and institutional instability.

CONCLUSION

Let me be clear about what I am arguing. I am not arguing that the Good Friday agreement is not binational, or that everyone has misidentified the trend towards binational management of conflict. That trend exists: comparing the situation with, say, 1969, it is unmistakable. Moreover I agree that well managed binationalism can promise stability. That is an important point which Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry have argued for a long time, and before them the late Frank Wright.

But I want to qualify the characterisation of the trend in two ways. First, I want to qualify the formalist and institutionalist emphasis that characterises much analysis. At issue in identifying the structure of conflict is much more than the formal characterisation of institutions, it has to do with power structures, power resources and the ways in which actors—aware of the power balance—work the institutions. Joseph Ruane and I have for long emphasised the need to look at the structural level, not simply the formal governmental or party level. At this structural level, binationalism is a much weaker trend than it is on the formal institutional level; it co-exists with other trends and in practice does not always win out.

Second, I want to qualify the context of binationalism. It is, I have suggested, much more difficult now to achieve stable binational management than it was or would have been one or two decades ago. Now, state functions are being dispersed; the distinction between internal affairs and foreign affairs has become fuzzy in an age of European integration; a new world order, US hegemony, and its ability to intervene in conflicts throughout the world is evident. These factors are particularly relevant to the new order in Northern Ireland, where governing functions have been dispersed, European and US mediation has been invited, and the British and Irish governments themselves cope with the new dispersal of their own policy making functions. In this context, the question is the extent to which the British and Irish states can and will take a strong, principled binational stance in managing the Northern Ireland conflict. The need may be greater than ever, but the answer is not so clear.

Taken together, the two sets of qualifying factors—the ambiguities of the structure of conflict, and the new globalising political context—make binationalism a more difficult option than it may appear in some writing. Let me note a third difficulty. Of all the relevant actors, relatively few are fully committed to binationalism:

1. Irish nationalists have been the main advocates of it, but it is a compromise from an Irish nationalist perspective. They may change their minds if a more attractive option appears. Sinn Féin, late converts, may be the first to change. The Irish state has for long seen binationalism as a guarantee of stability, but if other modes of stabilising conflict emerge, and no-one else is keen on binationalism, why should they remain wedded to it?

2. The British government too is a relatively late convert to binationalism, and perhaps a half-hearted one. The notion of the British state remaining eternally com-

mitted to managing a non-British or part-British island is not one that sits easily with the British political tradition.

3. Unionists have never accepted binationalism, even today when demographic changes might make it a sensible strategic option for them. On my reading, most unionists simply do not believe that it is better to be half-British than non-British.

There is one conclusion and there are two morals to this story. The conclusion is that the trend towards a symmetrical structure of conflict and binational mode of conflict management exists, but that it is much less strong and stable than is often assumed. The moral for policy makers is that at the present stage of crisis in the institutions of the Agreement, it is time again to take a proactive binationalist stance to ensure that other tendencies in the situation, which offer much less stability, do not take hold. And the moral for intellectual commentators is that it is necessary to think beyond the binational paradigm, even if—or perhaps especially if—one wishes to argue for it.

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