

Violence in Northern Ireland

CORINA PĂCURAR

“Catholic resentment and Protestant fears were formed all those years ago, and these myths are recalled in present-day Northern Ireland, and have a significant impact on current political debate.”

THE DIFFERENT civil rights movements of the 1960s—i.e. the Women’s Liberation Movement, the Black Civil Rights Movement—brought to the forefront of world politics the issue of minority rights. In this context the Civil Rights Association was set up in Northern Ireland, with the aim of improving the situation of the country’s Catholic minority. Although the first manifestations of protest were meant to be peaceful, they caused violent conflicts with the security forces and with members of the Protestant community, as it is well-known that the relationship between Protestants and Catholics here has always been troubled and often violent. So, at the end of the 1960s political violence was back on the Northern Irish stage.

The present work is an attempt to show how this phenomenon has pervaded social, political and cultural life in Northern Ireland and has even extended to the British mainland. The different forms in which political violence has been—and it still is—present in this part of the world will also be examined. The theoretical framework of the analysis relies upon the concept of

Corina Păcurar

Associate professor of English at the Faculty of Economics, Bogdan-Vodă University Cluj-Napoca, author, among others, of the vol. **A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis of the Newspaper Editorial** (2015).

violence and addresses the matters of definition and categorization, and points out the necessity of relating it to nationalism.

In order to facilitate an understanding of the conflict we will be looking at its historical roots, trying to explain how and why they are still relevant for the present realities. Naturally, the analysis will often refer to the common history of Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic since they constituted a single political unit until 1920.

The discussion on the contemporary forms of political violence will be dealing with the paramilitary organizations on both sides of the (national, political and religious) divide, attempting to analyze them in relation to the state power, and the two opposing communities in Northern Ireland. More precisely, we will focus on the question of whether the activities of the paramilitaries should be regarded as legitimate or illegitimate. Finally, the paper will examine the impact of the Northern Irish conflict on the political debate in Britain, namely the ways in which the parties involved have tried to find an acceptable political solution to the conflict. This task is particularly difficult, as one has to resist the fascination of history and select those pieces of information that are the most relevant for the subject matter.

An attempt to define the notion of political violence could consider separately the two words that are joined together to form this phrase. However, such an enterprise would be very problematic since there does not exist a clear-cut and widely agreed upon concept of violence; on the contrary, it is “a term that suffers from conceptual devaluation or semantic entropy” (Schlesinger 1991, 5). The difficulties in dealing with contemporary violence come from the fact that it is an extremely diverse and omnipresent phenomenon: “Directly, it is omnipresent in the form of the traffic accident—casual, unintended, unpredictable and uncontrollable by most of its victims . . . Indirectly, it is omnipresent in the mass media and entertainment . . . Even more remotely, we are aware both of the existence in our time of vast, concretely unimaginable mass destruction . . . and also of the sectors and situations . . . Of a society in which physical violence is common and probably increasing” (Hobsbawm 1977, 209–210).

Philip Schlesinger does not even claim to try a definition of the term, limiting himself to an examination of several attempts at definition and categorization made by others, and pointing out the problems involved in these. Thus, in his interpretation of violence, he distinguishes two approaches to the problem: a rational one, and one which is based on myth, considering that violence is “itself symbol and metaphor” (1991, 7–8). The three examples of restrictive definitions quoted below are well-suited to illustrate the problems of rational analysis:

Violence in the strict sense, the only violence which is measurable and characterized as “collective.” Yet it could be argued that politically motivated acts

of violence do not necessarily involve a group of people. Individuals who act in the name of a supported cause very often carry them out by way of a group of people. Should this be interpreted as individual or as collective violence? What if one individual acts on behalf of the group to which s/he belongs, but does not have the approval of the respective group? It seems that the question of defining and categorizing violence is still open and that, for the purpose of this paper, it is best to approach the term in a descriptive way.

Thus, according to Schlesinger, the different manifestations of political violence during the past two decades are often nationalist in origin, sometimes anti-systemic, and have acquired an international dimension. To this it could be added that there has been political violence ever since the emergence of the nation-state, and, most probably, its origins could be traced back to the time of the early social formations. As Ernest Renan (1882) put it, “historical inquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality” (quoted in Bhabha 2008, 11). And so is separation. Such early violent events in the history of nations usually acquire mythical qualities and are passed on from generation to generation. Contemporary perceptions and attitudes to political violence in the life of a community draw very much upon these mythical past events. This is especially true for the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland, which is why it is very tempting, as William C. MacKenzie (1975) says, to abandon the rationalist strategy of definition and to approach the problem by way of myth (quoted in Schlesinger 1991, 8), capitalizing on the Northern Irish historical legacy of violence. Tempting as it is, this could not work: even though history is an essential component in understanding political violence, an analysis relying exclusively on data from the past would return a seriously truncated picture of the present situation.

Another point worth considering is the public’s perception of the political violence of “terrorism.” The dominant view on the phenomenon is shaped by the mass media, and so the public is acquainted with it as irrational, pointless destruction and killing of innocent people. A consequence of this in the case of Northern Ireland is that, as Schlesinger puts it, many see “terrorism” as the cause of the conflict there, rather than as one of its symptoms (1978, 243). Moreover, it seems that violence employed by states against their citizens receive much less attention (Schlesinger 1991, 6).

As it has been mentioned above, political violence is often of *nationalist* origin, and it should be related to political power within the borders of a certain state, taking into account such factors as legitimation and delegitimation, in line with the “well-known slogan that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom

fighter” (Schlesinger 1991, 6). A brief look at what is meant by the italicized terms will clarify the connection between them. Thus, Max Weber’s (1948) celebrated definition of the state will lead towards a categorization of violence into ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’: “The state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory* . . . The state is considered the sole source of the ‘right’ to use ‘violence’” (quoted in Schlesinger 1991, 9).

Commenting on this Gellner has shown that the idea behind Weber’s definition is “simple and seductive”: in well-ordered societies, as the liberal democracies are expected to be, private or sectional violence is illegitimate, so it cannot be employed to solve conflicts, as this is the right and the monopoly of the central political authority only, that is, the state (1980, 3). Officially, this may be regarded as still valid. However, as Gellner has pointed out, there are states which lack either the will or the means to enforce their monopoly on legitimate violence.¹ In a way, this could apply to the British state in the case of Northern Ireland, since, as it is claimed by some—Connolly (1990)—the British policy has been to contain the conflict, to “keep the lid on,” but on the other hand it is common knowledge that the Anny and the Royal Ulster Constabulary were not able to put an end to the violent campaigns of the Provisional Irish Republican Anny and to the violent activities of the less conspicuous Loyalist paramilitary organizations.

As for nationalism, Gellner has defined it as primarily a political principle according to which political and national boundaries should coincide; then he goes on to define it as a theory of political legitimacy, requiring that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones (1980, 1). Another factor that should be taken into account is the cultural one, as suggested by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities*, where he expresses the opinion that “Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being” (quoted in Bhabha 2008, 1).

Of course, understanding nationalism in its essence implies an understanding of nation as well, and it is at this point that the cultural factor is used in Gellner’s discourse along with that of will. His definitions, though not claiming to be definitive, are very useful for the purposes of this analysis. Thus, he considers that a community can be considered a nation ‘if and only if its members share the same culture, and recognize each other as belonging to the same nation (1980, 7). In order to define the concept of nation one should also consider Ernest Renan’s celebrated essay “What is a nation?” (1882) which, even if it was written more than a hundred years ago, is still surprisingly valid in ideal terms, with some reservations as far as Northern Ireland is concerned. His discussion of nation can

be summed up as follows: race, language, religion and geographical frontiers are seen as totally insufficient to define a nation—which is true enough. In his view the most important are factors like that of “sharing a glorious heritage and regrets,” and “having, in the future, [a shared] program to put into effect,” or “the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together.” The main point is that the only legitimate criterion in defining a nation is the will of its members (quoted in Bhabha 2008, 8–21)—which is true for an ideal nation, but would be a dangerous generalization if applied to contemporary reality, and was even more so at the time when it was made (1882), a glorious age of imperialist expansion. It is doubtful, for example, that the Ukrainians wished to be part of the former USSR, and it is certain that the radical section of the Catholic nationalist republicans in Northern Ireland do not wish to be part of the British nation. Besides, such factors as race or ethnicity, language and religion are not decisive if taken separately, but they cannot be dismissed since each of them has its share in the complex process of nation formation, and are vitally important for those minority communities who wish to maintain their identities.

The theoretical ideas that have been discussed up to this point can by no means be regarded as absolute; neither can they offer solutions to such complex problems as political violence and nationalism. However they can facilitate the understanding of these phenomena, often incomprehensible for those who are not directly affected by or involved in them. They can also help in looking for explanations of how some sections of certain states’ populations have come to be in serious conflict with other sections and/or with the central political authorities of the respective states, to the extent to which they view the use of force as just and legitimate, without regard for the suffering inevitably caused by it. In brief, the role of the present chapter is to provide the theoretical basis for the analyses in the next chapters of the paper.

Bhabha (2008, 1) says that the origins of nations are lost in myth. If the affinity between myth and history is to be taken into account, the same could be said about Ireland and its conquest by the Normans back in the twelfth century. The conquest was the result of what looked like a re-enactment of the myth of ancient Troy, the fall of which was caused by Helen. The analogy is evident in the account of Peter and Fiona Somerset Fry: “in 1151 . . . an event of apparent insignificance took place. Diarmait Mac Murchada, the king of Leinster, carried off *Derbforgaill*, the wife of Tigernan Ua Ruairk, the king of Breifne (where Cavan and Leitrim are now). The next year *Derbforgaill* was back under her husband’s roof; a trivial escapade seemed to be over; but as a result of it, everything was to change” (1988, 61).

INDEED, THE insulted Tigernan organized a successful expedition of revenge and Diarmait lost his kingdom, so that in 1166 he appealed to Henry II of England for military help to take it back. And help came in the form of an army led by Richard Fitzgilbert de Clare, the Norman earl of Pembroke, generally known as Strongbow, who conquered Leinster for Diarmait and Ireland for King Henry II. The Normans had come to Ireland to stay, and this was what “blackened his [Diarmait’s] name forever” (Fry and Fry 1988, 61). So Oakland’s statement that Ireland was first attacked and settled by England in the twelfth century (2006, 102) is true but incomplete: the English—the Normans according to Foster (1989), Fry and Fry (1988) and Connolly (1990)—attacked Ireland because they were asked to.

Of course, with neighbors like the Normans, “aggressive cousins of those Vikings” who had almost conquered Ireland a hundred years earlier had it not been for Brian Boroime (Boru) (Fry and Fry 1988, 57) this was bound to happen sooner or later. Diarmait’s story could be considered as the first of the series of myths born out of the relationship between the Irish and the English, only that, for the two opposing communities in Northern Ireland, these myths have different and opposite meanings and their celebrations are still causing inter-communal violence.

In his *Tragedy of Belief*, Fulton examines what he calls the key mythical structures of Protestant-loyalist popular religion in Ulster which, he argues, together with the Orange order, play a part similar to that of the centralized clerical organization of Roman Catholicism in providing some element of religious unity among Protestant loyalists (1991, 122). Thus, one such crucial event in the history of Ireland that acquired a mythical value is the war of 1689–1691, more precisely the Battle of the Boyne (1690), where William of Orange won the decisive victory against the Catholic Irish army of the exiled king, James II. This was on 12 July, and the Protestants of Ulster still have huge celebrations on the same date of every year, when bonfires, marching, flags and singing are destined to remind the Protestants of their victory and the Catholics of a sad defeat.

Yet, Fulton claims that the Battle of the Boyne is not the strongest myth, that is, “not quite the one which appears to have penetrated everyday life,” suggesting that the reason for this might be that the place of the battle is within the borders of the Republic of Ireland (1991, 123). It could be argued that this claim is a bit far-fetched, since the manifestations occasioned by every 12 July provide yearly evidence of the importance of this day for the Protestant community in Northern Ireland.

According to Fulton the most powerful myth of the Protestant-loyalist account is the less decisive defense of the city of Londonderry in 1689, which

provided a walled shelter for the Protestant refugees, the inhabitants and the soldiers of the city garrison in the face of James II's army. William of Orange, the husband of his Protestant daughter Mary, had ousted the Catholic king from the throne of England, and Ireland was his last hope. The Irish Catholics had very good reasons to help James, whose accession to the throne in 1685 had revived their hopes of recovering their lands from the Protestants and of securing their rights and an official position for their religion (Canny 1989, 149). However, despite the help of the Irish and French troops, James was defeated and fled to France. As for the siege of Derry, writes Connolly, it offers the historical explanation for such terms as 'No surrender,'²² 'Apprentice Boys'²³ and 'Lundy'²⁴ which are common today and continue to influence thinking and action (1990, 17).

All these have sad and negative connotations for those on the Catholic-nationalist side of the divide. In fact, their legacy is a sad one, that of a conquered people, a legacy which has been kept alive by a sense of frustration with the past, reinforced by the events of the very recent past (i.e. the years of the Stormont rule). So, the Catholic-nationalist Irish North and South have built their own mythical-historical structures, the most powerful of each are of a comparatively recent origin, as their nationalist movement crystallized only in the nineteenth century.

However, Catholic grievances can be traced much further in the past, when the conflict was not so much about national identities. As a matter of fact, it is doubtful that anything of the kind existed, for instance, at the time of the Norman conquest of Ireland, since Kee (1986, 10) claims that some Normans became "more Irish than the Irish themselves" (quoted in Connolly 1990, 13). Going back to the grievances of the Catholics in the past, in 1641 the native Irish rose in revolt hoping to take back their lands and 2,000 English settlers were killed. This rising is an interesting one because historians' opinions differ on this point. For example, Boyce (1991, 83) claims that Cromwell's reprisal, in its turn, was extremely cruel: "A Cromwellian army came which was in no mood to distinguish between one kind of Catholic or another, between those innocent of massacre and those who were guilty."

On the other hand, according to Connolly's account (1990, 16), many of the poor and the men-at-arms were not treated very badly, the latter being allowed to emigrate, revenge being reserved for those who owned land. So, the conflict was basically about landed property, which meant power, and if the things are looked at from this angle, then indeed such past violence can be viewed as political violence. In terms of mythical-historical structures, the 1641 rising secured for Cromwell, as Connolly has put it, the highest place in Irish Catholic demonology.

Probably one of the most vivid memories is the Easter Rising of 1916 which is still commemorated today. Organized by radical nationalists who believed in

blood sacrifice—though not in victory (Fry and Fry 1988, 292)—the rising did not elicit popular enthusiasm in the beginning.⁵ Nevertheless, overreaction on the part of the government turned the initial fury and disgust at the human and material wastage into “a sentimental cult of veneration for the martyrs” (Fitzpatrick 1989, 240) who were imprisoned and shot by the English by way of reprisal. For the Catholic nationalists Easter 1916 has a double significance: it marks the yearly commemoration of the martyrs and the celebration of the first proclamation of the Republic of Ireland.

Another important event in the same vein is connected with one of the emergency measures authorized under the Special Powers Act of 1922, and reintroduced on 9 August 1971, that is, internment without trial. Hadden (1990) speaks about complaints that this measure was used mostly against republicans (6) and if Foster’s figures are right this was indeed so: 450 arrests were authorized on 9 August and 346 prisoners rounded up on the basis of outdated police lists, and, despite the prominence of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF),⁶ none of them was Protestant (1989, 590). This is commemorated in the Catholic areas in Northern Ireland as ‘Internment Night,’ on 8 August, and it is marked by manifestations which have often caused riots and violent confrontations with the security forces or between members of the two opposing communities.

Such events as those discussed above prove that the roots of the Northern Irish conflict can be traced very far back in the country’s history, and it is maintained that the events of the seventeenth century influenced developments in Ireland (and Northern Ireland) for over two hundred years. In Connolly’s opinion, “Catholic resentment and Protestant fears were formed all those years ago, and these myths are recalled in present-day Northern Ireland, and have a significant impact on current political debate” (1990, 17).

This is a debatable point. It likely applies to the hardline militants on either sides of the divide and to popular political manifestations, like the Orange march on 12 July, or to the commemoration of Internment Night. However, it is less probable that these myths should influence political debate at the highest levels, were the main issue has been that of re-establishing normal life in Northern Ireland. It is possible that the point made by Connolly applies to those situations when political debate is *about* the very events mentioned above, or about problems connected with them. Besides, it would not be very reasonable to let the past guide judgement on the present too much, for things like forfeited land or killing to acquire/recover it, for example, were the norm till well into the modern age, especially in the case of conquest and colonization.

□

Notes

1. Gellner's example to illustrate this could be a useful resource for a comedian specialized in black humor: "The Iraqi state, under British tutelage after the WWI, tolerated tribal raids, provided the raiders dutifully reported at the nearest police station before and after the expedition, leaving an orderly bureaucratic record of slain and booty" (1980, 3).
2. 'No surrender—the Protestants' watchword during the great siege of Derry.
3. 'Apprentice Boys'—thirteen apprentice boys locked the gates of the city of Derry against the troops of James, defying the city's governor, Robert Lundy.
4. 'Lundy'—Lieutenant-colonel Robert Lundy, governor and commander of the garrison in Derry. He wanted to surrender the city to King James but was strongly opposed by the citizens and had to flee in disguise. Today, being called a 'Lundy' is an insult for a unionist politician (Connolly 1990, 17).
5. Fry and Fry (1988, 291) suggest that this lack of enthusiasm was caused by the German connections of the revolutionaries, which is understandable, given that the rising took place during WWI.
6. UVF—loyalist paramilitary organization founded in 1912 by way of preparation to oppose home rule by force.

References

- Bhabha, Homi K. 2008. *Nation and Narration*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Boyce, George D. 1991. *Nationalism in Ireland*. London: Routledge.
- Canny, Nicholas. 1989. "Early Modern Ireland, c. 1500-1700." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. Robert F. Foster. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Connolly, Michael. 1990. *Politics and Policy Making in Northern Ireland*. London: Philip Allan.
- Fitzpatrick, Rory. 1989. *God's Frontiersmen: The Scots Irish Epic*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Foster, Robert F., ed. 1989. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fry, Somerset Peter and Fiona Fry. 1988. *A History of Ireland*. London: Routledge.
- Fulton, John. 1991. *The Tragedy of Belief*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1980. *New Perspectives on the Past*. Oxford: R. Moore.
- Hadden, Timothy. 1990. *Emergency Law in Northern Ireland: The Context*. London: Routledge.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. 1977. *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*. London: Abacus.
- Kee, Robert. 1986. *Trial & Error: the Maguires, the Guildford Pub Bombings and British Justice*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Oakland, John. 2006. *British Civilization*. London: Routledge.

Schlesinger, Philip. 1978. *Putting 'Reality' Together: BBC News*. London: Routledge.
———.1991. *Media, State and Nation: Political Violence and Collective Identities*. London: Sage.

Abstract**Violence in Northern Ireland**

Approaching the subject of political violence in Northern Ireland is an enterprise both easy and difficult. It is easy in the sense that almost all information about this part of the UK is relevant to the matter under discussion. The difficulty arises from this very point, as there emerges the necessity of a thorough selection of the information needed for a paper of this kind. The present work is an attempt to show how this phenomenon has pervaded social, political and cultural life in Northern Ireland and has even extended to the British mainland. The different forms in which political violence has been—and still is—present in this part of the world will also be examined. The theoretical framework of the analysis relies upon the concept of violence and addresses the matters of definition and categorization, and points out the necessity of relating it to nationalism.

Keywords

conflict, politics, nation, violence, rights