Political Demography in Northern Ireland: Making a bad situation worse

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*The past is not dead. It’s not even past.*
William Faulkner

*Men make their own history... but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.*
Karl Marx

Faulkner was writing about the racially segregated southern states of the USA; Marx about history repeating itself as tragedy and farce in 19th century France. But both could be writing about sectarianism in present day Northern Ireland. Yet it is we who make our own history, and while inherited circumstances may not leave a lot of room for manoeuvre, we have a basic choice: either to reproduce the past, repeating it with new versions of the same old ‘bad situation’, or, alternatively, to create some new, more hopeful situations.

Despite the cease-fires of ten years ago, and the Good Friday Agreement, the past here is still very much alive. Some people are still living the nightmare of sectarian violence and fear. In fact many feel that in recent years ‘things are getting worse’. There is a quite widespread belief – a conventional wisdom - that the conflict is actually deepening, that politics are now becoming more polarised and society more segregated. It is widely believed that Northern Ireland is continuing to become more divided along sectarian lines. Protestants, generally associated with British unionism/loyalism, and Roman Catholics, generally associated with Irish nationalism/republicanism, are said to be growing apart. Increasing polarisation in politics and increasing segregation on the ground are seen as two sides of the same coin, the growth of the political ‘extremes’ matched by ‘growing apartheid’.

For some this is proof that the Agreement isn’t working, for others it’s evidence that it’s working in the wrong way. And with conflicts around Drumcree followed by the protests at the Holy Cross Primary School, with violence at some Belfast interfaces followed by the recent allegations of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the Torrens estate in North Belfast, there is clearly no room for complacency. Critics of the Agreement who think it actually strengthens and institutionalises sectarian divisions see increasing segregation as physical proof that the Agreement is leading towards ‘separate development’ and encouraging the very sectarianism that it was supposed to challenge and ameliorate. But is there such proof? Are things really getting worse?
There were three decades of low intensity warfare which we euphemistically call ‘the Troubles’, but it sometimes seems that people have now forgotten how bad they were. It sometimes feels as if we are being blitzed with misinformation, some of it clearly self-serving whether propagated by opportunist politicians, policy specialists, journalists or academics. For instance, the real news from high-profile areas such as Torrens is not quite what it appears or is made to appear. Particular episodes, and Northern Ireland as a whole, are not always as bad as they’re painted. And while certain areas and interfaces remain ‘spaces of fear’, does saturation but superficial media coverage give them inflated importance in shaping public opinion? Rather than being evidence of increasing malaise throughout our society, they could be exceptions which point to more optimistic conclusions. If it’s not too much to hope, are they perhaps becoming residual areas, ‘left-over’ from the period of more generalised conflict, as ‘slow learners’ finally get the message a decade after the cease-fires?

Like other ‘divided societies’, Northern Ireland is highly segregated and sectarian divisions are built-into the very fabric of region. Its spaces of fear are a legacy not just of the recent Troubles but of Troubles before that, and they can hardly be expected to disappear quickly. But ‘growing apartheid’ in the last ten years? We need to get things in perspective. Ongoing work by our C-STAR research group (1) suggests a rather different story. Not all is doom and gloom, in fact many things are better, or getting better. But first the bad news.

**Sectarian territoriality**

Violence and fear have for long been part of everyday life here – at least for some of the people, some of the time, in some areas. On top of ‘normal’ violence - or what local black humour calls ‘ordinary decent crime’ - there is a deep-rooted ethno-national conflict over state sovereignty and territory. On a day-to-day basis this has been played out in microcosm mainly within urban areas and especially in working class districts right down to local street level, most notably but not only in Belfast. Local territory and sectarian borders became a proxy for national territory and the disputed state border. Local conflict, attacking or defending local neighbourhoods, gets dignified or gains significance as an integral part of the national conflict, a way for instance of trying to influence national politics when no other means seem available.

Sectarian conflict is thus highly territorialised. It is structured by *territoriality*, by the use of bordered spaces to include and exclude, to control, influence and express relationships of power. This is inherently two-sided. A piece of territory can be a sanctuary or somewhere safe for one group, but a space of fear for the other, somewhere threatening, a place to be avoided. Territoriality can be nice or nasty, simple or simplistic, and in divided societies it is typically both nasty and simplistic, a crude if not brutal means of control where spatial borders slice through or pre-empt social relationships. It is associated with violence or threat, some of it highly ritualised. Territory is claimed, labelled and imbued with sectarian symbolism, often reinforced by paramilitary organisations. They gained local legitimacy as defenders of territory, and then they were provided with ‘ready-made’ territories when some of them turned to ‘ordinary decent crime’ like drug-dealing. The ‘sanctuary’ becomes a ‘prison’ when people are trapped or threatened by their ‘own side’. And all ‘outsiders’ become a threat to those in control of the territory, as seen for instance in the recent racist attacks on minority ethnic groups in loyalist areas. Some of the attacks may be carried out by ‘ordinary decent racists’, to adapt the black humour, but in many cases...
it seems that they are bound up with preserving the paramilitary control of local neighbourhoods.

The difficulty in 'taking the terror out of territoriality' is suggested by the fact that both words come from the same Latin verb 'to terrorise or frighten', and the conflict is intractable partly because it is territorially embedded. Where people have to navigate through segregated spaces of fear in their everyday lives, they tend to reproduce the conditions for conflict and help to keep it going whether they like it or not. And the cumulative costs of the conflict include its effects on ordinary, everyday life, whether in closing off personal opportunities, for example, or requiring a costly duplication of public services, and these effects can continue long after the violence subsides. Furthermore, where the loss or gain of local territory is a measure of failure or success in the national conflict, territoriality generates further conflict. It directly feeds the 'zero-sum' thinking typical of national conflicts, because territory has a fixed total and there can't be more for everyone (as there can be for most of the good things in life, like economic wealth or democracy). With territory as the symbolic measure, more for one side does mean less for the other, and vice versa, in a flawed symmetry of triumph and defeat. In reality it's often a 'negative-sum game' where everyone's a loser.

Thus territoriality creates, maintains or enforces the residential segregation which still defines many parts of Northern Ireland. And these are the main 'circumstances transmitted from the past' within which people now have to 'make history', whether they simply reproduce the past or act in ways which would transform spaces of fear into spaces of hope.

Making history and geography

With built-in sectarianism, the physical fabric of buildings, institutions and symbolic places often has a structural fixity in space which is resistant to change. On the other hand, people's behaviour patterns in the city have greater fluidity and they can change, and in fact are changing, much more quickly. Significantly, the conventional wisdom of 'growing apartheid' tends to concentrate on the more fixed spatial structures and largely ignores actual behaviour.

Spatial structures are however changing slowly, and sometimes in ways which disrupt or eradicate sectarian divisions rather than reinforcing them. Of course both tendencies - to eradicate or to reinforce - co-exist, which makes any snap judgement of the overall net outcome suspect. But Northern Ireland like any modern society is subject to 'normal' processes like suburbanisation and gentrification, de-industrialisation and re-development. These are often ignored by people with tunnel vision who only see sectarian causes behind everything; or they get (mis)interpreted in local sectarian terms, though as we shall see, de-industrialisation and suburbanisation have applied particularly to the Protestant section of the working class. But these 'normal' processes have a logic to transform social structures which owes more to calculations of profit and loss or personal advancement, and a dynamism which can over-ride sectarian considerations. Whether it is an improvement in all respects is very debateable, especially in class terms, but Belfast's Laganside and similar re-developments in other places have meant a substantial de-sectarianisation of territory in new workplaces and residences - we now have 'corporate' space, not 'Protestant' or Catholic' space. Likewise many of the other new apartment blocks and town houses which have sprung up across Belfast in the last ten years also seem to be breaking the sectarian mould: in part they are investment outlets overspilling from the Dublin property boom and the South's 'Celtic
Tiger'; and it would be interesting to know the religious composition of their new residents. Anecdotal evidence suggests it would contradict the notion of increasing spatial segregation whatever the degree of social mixing in the new housing.

The notion of increasing segregation is also generally contradicted by more fluid behaviour patterns. It certainly remains the case that in many parts of the city people still have to be careful where they go or don't go, how they behave, whether or not to wear anything that would be taken as a badge or indication of religious association or national identity. They still have to adopt various coping strategies and here the local geographical knowledge required can be quite intricate - on which side of the street to walk, where to cross the road, which bus or bus stop to use, and so forth (see Lysaght and Basten 2002). But in general people feel much safer to move around for work or leisure than they did ten or even five years ago. And both 'sides' are making much more use of so-called 'neutral' areas and venues which have expanded considerably. It does not necessarily follow that spatial mixing in such areas amounts to significant social mixing across the sectarian divide, but it certainly does not point to 'growing apartheid'.

The evidence from the world of work is if anything more positive. Already In 1991 the Census showed that the geography of employment was less segregated than the geography of residence. Fear of violence does still prevent many people working in certain areas (Shuttleworth and Anderson 2002), and research on young Belfast job-seekers, both Catholic and Protestant, reveals that their mental maps and knowledge of sections of the city are still highly circumscribed by the respective spaces of fear for Catholics and Protestants (Shuttleworth, Green and Lavery 2003). Of course, deprived young people in other countries also have limited spatial horizons, but in Northern Ireland sectarianism further restricts their knowledge of the city. Together with the 'chill factor' which discourages people working in or travelling through the 'other side's' territory, this lack of knowledge significantly cuts off opportunities for young workers and also for potential employers. But generally it does not apply to the central areas of cities and towns, some of the major employment locations; and in fact within workplaces the amount of mixing across the sectarian divide has increased substantially in recent years. This evidence is ignored however in the misinformation about 'growing apartheid'.

Interfaces, residence and employment

We can isolate three separate components in the misinformation: the almost complete neglect of the world of work and behaviour patterns in general; its corollary in an over-reliance on Census data for static residential location patterns; and inappropriate generalisation from some urban interface conflicts which are often wilfully misrepresented. We get flawed reporting, flawed analysis and a neglect of counter tendencies.

So pervasive is the 'bad news' of interface imagery that the obvious needs stating: high-profile interfaces such as the Holy Cross School and Torrens areas of North Belfast are not typical of Belfast as a whole, much less of Northern Ireland. On the contrary they are quite atypical, and while obviously important for people in those areas and of wider symbolic significance, we should be wary of any generalisations drawn from them. Firstly, as sectarian 'border areas' they differ from most of Belfast's sectarianised territory - whether in the large Falls and Shankill sectors or in most of loyalist East Belfast - which is not directly accessible or vulnerable to the 'other side'. Secondly, even for interface areas, the high-profile ones have experienced exceptionally high levels of sectarian violence. Most of the city's interfaces are quite
peaceful in comparison and never make the local news. And that includes the 'good news' from the Suffolk/Lenadoon interface in West Belfast where the dividing 'peace wall' has been replaced by a row of shops used by both communities and above which their respective community organisations share the same corridor. Thirdly, it seems that some of the 'bad news' from interfaces has been consciously created by paramilitaries and then amplified by 'responsible politicians'. If proof that the Agreement is 'not working', it is 'proof' which has been manufactured by those actively trying to prevent it working, and then it's paraded by people who opposed the Agreement all along or at best have been lukewarm and inconsistent supporters.

So the few high-profile, high-conflict interfaces may indeed be exceptions to trends now going in the other direction, and the recent Torrens case is certainly exceptional, though maybe not so untypical in the misrepresentations surrounding it. It hit the front pages after some of the last residents in this small loyalist enclave decided to leave and their MP, Nigel Dodds of the DUP, alleged 'ethnic cleansing'. But the real news is more complex and interesting. Apparently the residents had managed to arrange a group re-housing and re-imbursement package even though it was not strictly warranted by the normal criteria of intimidation. The area had in fact calmed down after much more serious violence in previous years, mainly against Protestant residents. But it had also included loyalist paramilitaries pipe-bombing neighbouring Ardoyne Catholics and retaliatory action by them; and there was internal feuding among loyalist paramilitaries associated with Johnny Adair. Protestant families had been leaving the area and the population had been declining for some time, and others claimed this was because of conflict precipitated by their co-religionists. The question of causation is further complicated by de-industrialisation and suburbanisation which have applied disproportionately to Protestant workers - they had more of the traditional industrial jobs to lose in the first place, and they also had more opportunities to move out of Belfast to other Protestant-dominated places like Newtownabbey, Bangor or Carrickfergus. The result has been a general 'residualisation' (Murtagh 2002) in many loyalist areas which leaves behind a smaller, older and generally more socially-disadvantaged population - and it was suggested, for instance, that Torrens as a de-populated, run-down interface area was 'used as a dumping ground for problem families'. 'Residualisation' has also occurred in loyalist areas such as the central Shankill which are safely away from interfaces. But the particular significance of interface areas is that some adjoining Catholic neighbourhoods, with much less opportunities for suburbanisation, have acute housing shortages, and the 'normally' sensible idea of Catholic families moving into areas vacated by Protestants is resisted because it means a loss of precious territory. All these complexities, however, were missing from Nigel Dodds' simple story of 'ethnic cleansing'. And, not to be outdone, in the ensuing City Council debate UUP and DUP politicians in East and South Belfast quickly chimed in with allegations of Protestants being 'ethnically cleansed' in their areas too (2).

It's much easier for politicians to feed the 'victim status' of working class Protestants rather than solving their real material problems, never mind the problems of working class constituents in general. And counter-claims from nationalist politicians that it is Catholics who are being driven out simply reinforce the sectarian terms of the familiar negative debate.

As for more general segregation, those who claim 'growing apartheid' rely ultimately on residential data from the Census, but both the data and the analysis are inadequate. Again the reality is more complex. While some areas are more segregated, others are less segregated, and much of the media discussion of increasing segregation simply re-cycles ideas from before the cease-fires with little reference to contemporary evidence (Anderson, McEldowney and Shuttleworth
2004). Much of the public discourse about increasing segregation was actually established at the beginning of the 1990s or earlier, and even then some of it was already dated. For instance, there were widespread reports that between 1971 and 1991 the number of electoral wards which were either predominantly Protestant or predominantly Catholic had increased significantly. But the reports neglected to mention or take into account the fact that with re-drawn electoral boundaries there were more wards in 1991 than in 1971, with the result that the increase in segregation was significantly exaggerated. The 1990s reports were also written in the present tense when in reality much of the increased segregation actually happened nearly twenty years previously in the early 1970s (Anderson and Shuttleworth 1994, and 1998), though changes in the way Census data are compiled have made accurate analysis very difficult. (3)

Moreover, even if properly analysed, it's debateable how residential data are best used to measure segregation (see Shuttleworth, Lloyd and McNair 2004); and whatever the method used, residential location as the conventional measure of segregation has limitations. It assumes that spatial separation equals social separation and that spatial mixing equals social mixing. Now they may do, but there again they may not - in neither case do the assumed consequences of social separation or mixing necessarily follow from the 'spatial facts' of residence. For this evidence refers only to home location not to what people actually do or where they go in their daily lives, for leisure and all sorts of other activities, including crucially, for work.

Not only is the workplace an important social milieu in people's daily lives, it is often a base for a further set of social networks and activities outside work. And in both realms it is highly probable that social mixing across the sectarian divide has been increasing in Northern Ireland generally. For example, an analysis of the Equality Commission’s Monitoring Returns (Osborne and Shuttleworth 2004) showed that the number of highly-polarised workplaces fell during the 1990s, and the proportion of employees who work in mixed workplaces increased substantially during the decade.

The conventional wisdom about 'growing apartheid' and 'things getting worse' needs to be taken with more than a pinch of salt. Spaces of fear still exist, as they have done for a century or more, but it's now spaces of hope which are growing.

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Notes and Selected References

1. The group includes Dr. Ian Shuttleworth, Director of C-STAR and a Lecturer in Geography at Queen's University Belfast; Prof. James Anderson, Co-Director of C-STAR and Professor of Political Geography; Dr. Chris Lloyd, Lecturer in Geography; two research assistants, Ciaran Higgins and Owen McEldowney; two doctoral students, Stuart Lavery and David McNair; and visiting researchers from Hungary and The Netherlands.


From The Irish Times, 27 August 2004: 'Protestant families quit interface area'

"The DUP MP for North Belfast said their story was emblematic of post-ceasefire Belfast. 'As people talk about the 10th anniversary of the so-called IRA ceasefire, there is a graphic illustration today of the ongoing orchestrated and organised campaign of intimidation against vulnerable Protestant communities being waged by republicans', said Mr Nigel Dodds. 'This isolated Protestant community has been systematically targeted by republicans over many years. The people living there simply can't take any more.'"

The Council debate on Torrens was reported in the News-Letter, 5 October, and the East Belfast Observer, 9 October 2004.
3. Ciaran Higgins is now creating a consistent time series of Census data from 1971 through to 2001 which will facilitate a proper analysis of change over time.

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Shuttleworth I. and Anderson J. 2002 'Does fear of violence influence where people are prepared to work in Belfast?', *Labour Market Bulletin* 17, 147-154, Belfast: Department for Employment and Learning NI.

Shuttleworth I., Green A. and Lavery S. 2003 *Belfast Area Perceptions Study: Mobility, Employment and Exclusion*, Belfast: Department for Employment and Learning NI.