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## *Chapter Seven*

# The State of Constructive Conflict in Northern Ireland

Lee A. Smithey

Northern Ireland's conflict has been hailed as a textbook example of peace-making, a model of consociational politics. The ending of violence in the region has been remarkable, even as it has required decades of painstaking work. The peace process has involved transition from ethnic polarization and bloody conflict over mutually exclusive political claims to political conflict through institutionalized politics and cultural contestation. Is Northern Ireland's famous trajectory away from armed struggle toward politics complete, given that ethnic and political division and violence remain? After all, students of Irish and British history often note the cyclical or episodic nature of the struggle for sovereignty on the island. On the other hand, Northern Ireland has never been as equitable or as globalized as it is today.

Peacebuilding and conflict transformation occur across multiple domains: political, economic, cultural, and psychological. Each is contentious, as one would expect in any modern society. More apt questions include whether the peace process is stalling in some domains and proceeding apace in others. How does unequal progress impact the overall trajectory of the conflict? I will argue that Northern Ireland's conflict remains primarily constructive because it has been sufficiently institutionalized, and politics have been adopted by the majority of parties to the conflict. Many grievances have been addressed, and while the cultural domain has increasingly become an epicenter of contention, efforts are under way to facilitate the symbolic public expression of political and ethnic identity through the arts and historical initiatives and to encourage incremental identity change and more porous group boundaries.

Conversely, we must acknowledge that the ethnic, political, and geographic landscape remains divided. Infrastructures of violent organizations, both state and nonstate, persist, though they are greatly diminished. Social disparities remain that fuel ethnopolitical polarization, and without a truth recovery process, there has been little success in developing a shared understanding of the conflict. At the very time during which attention turns to ethnic and political-identity claims during centennial events, government funding cuts to the arts and culture budget have been announced, further undermining the longer-term prospects of dealing effectively with the past. It seems that Northern Ireland's incomplete transition from destructive to constructive conflict has stalled in some respects, producing concern that the people of Northern Ireland have not yet completed the path to a diverse democratic society in which political contention is sufficiently normalized and institutionalized so as to be constructive for all.

## CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

The sociologist Georg Simmel ([1908] 1955) theorized conflict as a form of human relationship and argued that conflict is an important and constitutive part of social life. Lewis Coser (1956) later identified a variety of ways in which conflict could be considered functional for groups. A tradition was thus established in which conflict is seen not as a problem to be eliminated but as a form of social interaction with important implications for human rights, social justice, and quality of life. Certainly, violent conflict can generate enormous suffering; the atrocities and world wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries generated growing demands by peace movements for alternatives. International organizations (such as the United Nations), human rights law, and diplomacy all emerged to offer institutional channels through which to manage and resolve particular conflicts. Simultaneously, nonviolent resistance movements have developed increasingly powerful ways to conduct conflict without violence. All the while, our understanding of conflict has become increasingly sophisticated; conflicts can prove immensely complicated, involving multiple parties, asymmetric power relations, deep historical roots, social psychological and emotional underpinnings, and shifting socioeconomic and political circumstances.

In 1998, Louis Kriesberg first published his book, *Constructive Conflicts*, in which he systematically addressed many of the complicated dynamics of conflict, and importantly, he distinguished constructive conflict from destructive conflict according to the means by which they are conducted and their outcomes. He characterized destructive conflicts as those involving means that subject many participants to harm and even threaten their very survival. These often involve the use of coercion or violence resulting in the

unilateral imposition of terms and the humiliation of opponents, a situation ripe for retaliation and renewed conflict. Constructive conflict is more often conducted through persuasion and negotiation instead of coercion, leading to mutual problem solving, outcomes that are acceptable to all parties, and a foundation for cooperative relationships that are important for dealing with future disputes (Kriesberg 1998, 21–22).

Many conflict management methods are based on linear models leading to adjudicated or negotiated outcomes and agreements. However, Kriesberg (1998) points out that conflicts will usually oscillate between constructive and destructive means and outcomes, though constructive means are more likely to drive a conflict toward a constructive outcome (ibid., 22). Thus, many scholars have come to speak of "conflict transformation" processes that acknowledge the multidimensional and often protracted nature of conflicts that requires not only institutional responses but grassroots work to incorporate the interests and perspectives of stakeholding groups and encourage the use of constructive means of carrying out conflict (Lederach 1997; Rupesinghe 1995; Ryan 2007; Smithey 2011).

Conflict transformation is a *process*, a realignment of relationships, understandings, and the conditions under which disputants coexist. It is *a complex series of often slow and uneven processes* that influence one another and make for a nonlinear transition that can be difficult to discern or predict. This is the case in Northern Ireland, a region that has experienced a remarkable shift from thirty years of open conflict between paramilitary organizations and the British state to more than twenty years of ceasefires and the development of power-sharing governance. Yet Northern Ireland remains in a state of transition. Military and paramilitary organizations and activity have greatly diminished, but sectarian and political contention remains. In a report to the US-Ireland Alliance, Peter Shirlow (2013) describes the transition as following two primary tracks. "In sum, the peace process appears to be moving at two speeds in which some communities remain caught in a perpetual cycle of poverty, sectarian asperity and intra-community devotion whilst others are shifting into less antagonistic positions. These shifts are paralleled by a decline in voting and political participation." Shirlow's comments reveal the uneven and multidimensional nature of Northern Ireland's transition. In the following sections of this chapter, I will describe several domains in which Northern Ireland's conflict has become constructive yet contains destructive characteristics, or may be stalling.

## CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT AND OUTCOMES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Paramilitary and military violence probably characterizes Northern Ireland's conflict for most people. In all, more than 3,700 people were killed, and ten times as many injured in political violence (Smyth and Hamilton 2003, 18–19). Direct Rule was imposed in 1973, ending forty years of unionist (pro-British)[1] political dominance but also closing off local politics as an avenue for conflict. Today, by Kriesberg's standards of constructiveness, one can characterize conflict in Northern Ireland as constructive. Even during the Troubles, the means for carrying out the conflict were not exclusively violent. Political negotiations and power-sharing were attempted but failed in 1973, and one can also identify a few important moments of nonviolent civil resistance. By the early 1980s, secret back-channel talks had begun in a long and ultimately successful bid to reach a negotiated agreement in 1998.

### Political

Northern Ireland constitutes a rich and fascinating case of conflict transformation. One need only consider the decline of political deaths over the course of the Troubles (Smyth and Hamilton 2003) and review the history of the peace process in which paramilitary organizations (the Provisional Irish Republican Army [PIRA] in particular) agreed to ceasefires, engaged in negotiations, and entered formal politics. Tremendous progress has been made in the realm of formal politics, and one should note that contemporary political relationships expressed through power-sharing and British and Irish state visits were hard won through over twenty years of painstaking negotiations. The development of political alternatives was shepherded by advocates—such as John Hume and politicians in the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Alliance party—of nonviolent conflict methods, through years of armed struggle and counterinsurgency campaigns. Interestingly, much forward-looking thinking also came from within paramilitary organizations and the ranks of political prisoners (Novosel 2013; Shirlow 2010; Smithey 2011, 58).

The fascinating history of events and efforts that brought bitter and mistrustful opponents together to share governance is far too complicated to relay here, but it is worth noting that, as in many conflict situations, peacemaking efforts and violence coexisted even from the early days of the Troubles (Kriesberg 2015). As early as 1973, negotiations among the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the centrist Alliance, and the constitutional nationalist SDLP produced a short-lived power-sharing Executive to govern Northern Ireland based on negotiations that produced the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 (Melaugh 2014; Tonge 2006, 26–27). (The Belfast Agreement of 1998

resurrected many of the fundamental consociational mechanisms established by the Sunningdale Agreement.) The shift away from armed struggle and British counterinsurgency has been marked by multiple phases of high-level state negotiations, such as those that produced the Anglo-Irish Agreement between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald in 1985 and the Brooke-Mayhew talks that helped produce the 1993 Downing Street Declaration and the 1995 Framework Documents.

However, high-level public talks were accompanied by backdoor and often secret talks, such as those held by Hume (the SDLP leader) and Gerry Adams (the Sinn Féin leader), not to mention contact between republicans and the British government from 1990 to 1993 (and even as far back as 1986) (Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 112–23). In some cases, religious leaders, such as Father Alec Reid, (former priest) Denis Bradley, and Archbishop Robin Eames played important roles as couriers or honest brokers. Progress came in fits and starts against a backdrop of ongoing violence, but the outlines of a political process slowly took shape and eventually led to the Belfast Agreement and the establishment of a power-sharing Assembly and Executive. Implementation of the accords took nearly a decade to complete, but the Assembly has remained in operation since devolution in 2007. Nevertheless, complaints persist about the inability of politicians at the Stormont (Northern Ireland's parliamentary body) to legislate and develop effective social policy.

Still, the extent to which politics has become a shared endeavor is remarkable. During the 2014 Northern Ireland Council elections, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, formerly the most diametrically opposed parties, maintained their positions as the largest parties, each with nearly a quarter of the votes cast. Since 2007, when the firebrand and political provocateur the Reverend Ian Paisley became First Minister alongside Martin McGuinness, a former commander in the Provisional Irish Republican Army, DUP and Sinn Féin politicians have held the posts of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Similarly, at the level of local politics, the first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor, Alex Maskey, was seated in 2002, and the party has regularly held the seat since.

Taboos and symbolic thresholds have been crossed as British and Irish leaders have demonstrated that old rivalries and hatreds can be surmounted, even as they continue to hold incompatible positions about the ultimate status of Northern Ireland. Ian Paisley and Bertie Ahern jointly opened the Battle of the Boyne Heritage Center in 2008, crossing ceremonial swords in jest at the event. Queen Elizabeth paid a state visit to the Republic of Ireland in 2011, followed by a reciprocal visit to Britain by President Michael D. Higgins, the first such visit by an Irish head of state. Even more spectacular, Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness, Northern Ireland's Deputy First Minister, has met the Queen in Belfast twice. Among Catholics, a constitutional preference for a

united Ireland has dropped by 50 percent to 28 percent since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, with 46 percent preferring to remain part of the United Kingdom, within a devolved government (ARK 2013; Morrow, Robinson, and Dowds 2013).

## Social and Economic

From the confiscation of lands by Protestant settlers to colonial-era penal laws, systematic economic and social discrimination against local Irish and Catholics (and historically against nonsubscribing Protestants) has been a major grievance that fueled nationalist resistance to British rule. Similarly, housing policies constituted one of the poles of discontent around which the civil rights movement coalesced. Sixty-three percent of Catholic homes (compared with 72 percent of Protestant homes) had hot water, a fixed bath or shower, and indoor toilet in 1971 (McKenna 2014). Civil rights activists conducted sit-ins in public housing units to demand redress of economic exclusion. The movement lost support under repeated attacks against civil rights marches and the murder of unarmed protesters on Bloody Sunday in 1972. Support for violent resistance grew, fueling the emergence of the Provisional IRA.

With the institution of Direct Rule from Britain, a range of policies to ameliorate economic disparities between Catholics and Protestants was established, though significant improvement did not materialize until the 1980s (Ruane and Todd 1996, 163; Russell 2012). In 1971, the local Stormont government established the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to oversee the allotment of social housing, an issue around which the civil rights movement coalesced (McKenna 2014). A Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR) was formed in 1973, followed by the 1976 Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act and the Fair Employment Agency, all of which imposed new standards of equality. The MacBride Principles established in 1984 called on US companies to only conduct business in Northern Ireland with organizations that upheld fair hiring and employment practices. Shareholder activists used the principles to demand corporate reform, thirteen states passed legislation, and the US Democratic Party incorporated them into its 1984 Presidential platform. Adrian Guelke (1996) credits the MacBride Principles campaign for having a significant impact on the passage of the 1989 Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act (Guelke 1996, 526–28), and President Bill Clinton signed the principles into federal law in 1998 (Cochrane 2007, 218).

Today, Protestant and Catholic shares of the workforce are indistinguishable, as measured by the respective percentages of their populations that are available for work. Similarly, the differential in unemployment rate has practically disappeared (8 percent for Catholics and 6 percent for Protestants in

2012)[2] (Nolan 2014, 85–87). Progress can be traced directly to the conflict over civil rights out of which the Troubles were born, and the transformation of conflict remains linked to economic and development concerns. Northern Ireland remains segregated, though ethnonational attitudes are becoming less polarized, and considerable effort has been put into funding peacebuilding initiatives that seek to undermine out-group fears, prepare people for engagement across the ethnopolitical divide, and build new inter-community networks (Byrne et al. 2009; Eyben, Morrow, and Wilson 1997).

## Cultural and Social Psychological

The social work of building relationships in a traumatized and segregated society constitutes a primary sector of any shift toward constructive conflict. Like the long history of political negotiation described above, a multitude of community relations organizations, nongovernmental organizations, youth clubs, churches, and para-church organizations have challenged sectarianism throughout the Troubles (Fitzduff 2002; Liechty and Clegg 2001). Indeed, the unique government-funded quasi-nongovernmental Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (founded in 1990) exemplifies the attention paid to dealing with difference and sectarianism. Admittedly, however, determining the impact of community relations work has proven difficult methodologically (Cochrane and Dunn 2002; Gidron, Katz, and Hasenfeld 2002).

When political disputes fall along socially constructed lines of out-group categorization, they can become exponentially difficult to transform. In such "identity conflicts," mutual social psychological tendencies to construct group boundaries emerge (Lederach 1997, 8). Commitments to one's own group and corollary fears of "other" groups become emotionally charged and contribute to structures of division. Trauma deepens group loyalties, heightens out-group antagonisms, and increases the likelihood of violent retaliation, generating a downward spiral of intractability (Brewer and Higgins 1998; Cairns 1994; Jenkins 2008; Kriesberg, Northrup, and Thorson 1989; Ross 2001; Smithey 2011, 11–14; Weiner 1998). In the process, resistance itself can take on existential tones that can radicalize conflict (Simmel [1908] 1971, 87).

Conflict in Ireland has long been underpinned by psychological and cultural divisions, though it was only in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century that religious, ethnic, and political currents aligned to produce the prominent divisions between Catholic-Nationalist-Republicans and Protestant-Unionist-Loyalists that, in turn, contributed to the partition of Northern Ireland in the first quarter of the twentieth century and the Troubles during the last quarter of the century.

Mistrustful attitudes are in transition and yet persist. Survey research indicates that, despite progress in political arrangements, residential patterns and social attitudes in Northern Ireland remain polarized (Devine and Schubotz 2004, 2–3; Hayes and McAllister 2009; Leonard 2008; MacGinty, Muldoon, and Ferguson 2007; McAuley 2004; Shirlow 2003). Since 1989, increasing numbers of both Protestant and Catholic adults report that community relations are better than five years ago, though the trend has been interrupted during periods of political contention or communal violence (Morrow, Robinson, and Dowds 2013). As recently as 2010, 67 percent of Catholic adults and 60 percent of Protestant adults reported improved community relations, but the trend has declined significantly since (to 50 percent of Catholics and 44 percent of Protestants) (ARK 2010; 2013). When asked about future community relations, only 40 percent of adults in Northern Ireland in 2013 said they thought relations would be better in five years. Those figures are down from 64 percent in 2007 (ARK 2013; Devine 2014). Meanwhile, youth in segregated communities in Belfast continue to experience intercommunal tension and attending mental health and behavioral problems (Shirlow 2013).

As for sharing resources and spaces, clear majorities of both Protestant and Catholic adults would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighborhood, and Protestant attitudes have been catching up with Catholics' in this regard (Morrow, Robinson, and Dowds 2013). The same sort of preferences persists across Northern Ireland for mixed-religion workplaces (71 percent in 2013) and schools (56 percent in 2013) (ARK 2013; Devine 2014). Similarly, a comparison of census data collected in 2001 and 2011 reveals a sharp decline from 55 percent to 37 percent in the proportion of "single identity" wards in Northern Ireland, though street-level segregation remains (Nolan 2014, 115). In short, seventeen years after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the social psychological divisions that have characterized conflict in Northern Ireland for approximately 130 years remain. We can identify important trends of softening attitudes across the ethnopolitical divide, but they are gradual, incomplete, and have been shown to reverse themselves in moments of political uncertainty.

The cultural and social psychological dimensions of the conflict are deeply intertwined with collective action. Parades, music, murals, commemorative events, memorial sites, and flags continue to serve as vehicles for the construction of polarized ethnonational identities. Parades, which have proliferated to over four thousand events per year, serve as sites for face-to-face contestation as nationalist and loyalist residents' groups literally face off in the streets to protest one another's rituals. For republicans, music, language, murals, and commemorations (among other expressions) rally adherents to the cause and allow both dissident organizations (that have rejected the peace process) and Sinn Féin (a party that chose politics over armed struggle) to

connect themselves to the republican mythos. For unionists and loyalists, parades, murals, bonfires, and bands constitute ways to continue to express their loyalty to Britain (or at least a British identity). Such public symbolic displays serve as a kind of virtual test of the security of the union with Great Britain. To the extent they are challenged, Protestant unionists and loyalists perceive threat.

Understanding the ways in which the meaning of the conflict is constructed by parties to the conflict is important. Even more important for the topic of this book is the way in which the meaning of the conflict and thus the relationships between opponents is interpreted and framed, setting new precedents for further antagonism or cooperation. A reciprocal relationship exists between the schemata through which parties understand the conflict and one another and the ritualistic actions they undertake to construct those schemata and collective identities. Therefore, a crucial part of conflict transformation involves the reconstruction of cultural schemata through reflection and the modification of ritualistic actions (Smithey 2011).

Elsewhere, I have argued that conflict in Northern Ireland has shifted from the martial realm into the cultural realm, and we can understand the shift as a feature of the constructive trajectory of Northern Ireland's conflict (Smithey 2011). Symbolic displays, which can range from antagonistic to invitational, constitute a crucial shift away from overtly violent forms of interaction and thus help open space for dialogue and cooperation. We should not be naïve; because symbolic displays and the narratives of sacrifice, grief, and pride that accompany them evoke deep emotions, they can also easily reinscribe polarized collective identities and refresh old narratives of mistrust.

However, public rituals and symbols can become sites of experimentation in which the narratives and meanings behind the symbols may be reinterpreted or made more historically sophisticated, particularly in a transitional period after violence has ended. This dynamic has underpinned a significant portion of community relations work in Northern Ireland that aims to encourage even the most committed nationalists and unionists to participate in the unraveling of ethnopolitical division. Examples include "cultural traditions" work, mural redesign schemes that encourage the removal of paramilitary themes, initiatives to redesign and choreograph bonfire events, and efforts to make parades more public-friendly. Murals, for example, have proliferated in recent years, but they are also collectively taking on a new complexion. Research conducted by Lee Smithey, Gregory Maney, and Joshua Satre (2013) reveals that the number of mural sites in West Belfast has been growing since 2009, but a comparison of surveys of all murals in West Belfast in 2009 and 2010 reveals that paramilitary themes are being replaced by non-paramilitary themes, albeit often retaining ethnonationalist themes (especially in republican neighborhoods). Murals with paramilitary themes

appear most frequently in densely populated, structurally disadvantaged, and highly segregated areas. However, they are mostly absent from areas near peace walls, suggesting a conscious attempt to improve community relations (Maney and Smithey 2011).

The modification of symbols offers opportunities for reflection and discussion about the narratives to which symbols refer. Such moments become opportunities to invite others into mutual exploration of one another's histories. As nationalistic narratives are subjected to scrutiny and critique, they can begin to incorporate multiple views and humanize former adversaries. Commemorative events related to conflict in Ireland often serve as highly symbolic and deeply charged rituals that construct polarized ethnonational identities. With this in mind, academics and organizations, such as the Community Relations Council, have sought to proactively establish a frame of historical exploration and mutual dialogue as Northern Ireland enters a decade of potentially contentious centennial commemorations (approximately 1912–1922) that will reflect on World War I, the ascendance of the physical force tradition in republicanism, and the formation of the state of Northern Ireland. However, some academics have expressed pessimism over whether official state-sponsored commemorations can deliver the kinds of nuanced narratives that might help deconstruct the masculine nationalist ones that characterize ethnopolitics in Northern Ireland and north-south and east-west relations. Dominic Bryan and Mike Cronin, in particular, note that acts of commemoration and the choreography of remembrance are as important as historiography because they are important means by which exclusive group identities are constructed (Bryan et al. 2013; Smithey 2011).

Conflict always requires elaborate meaning-making in the public sphere as opponents justify their actions to themselves and bystanding publics, and work to mobilize activists and sustain their struggle. Northern Ireland is no exception and arguably has developed an especially rich and colorful symbolic landscape, including music, street art, parades, commemorations, uniforms, emblems, and more. Much as conflict moved from the martial realm into the political realm, it has also moved into the cultural realm with a proliferation of traditional rituals and symbolic displays that are often modified in ways that incrementally make them less oppositional. All of these shifts together drive the constructive trajectory of conflict in Northern Ireland, even as political and cultural fault lines remain and threaten to destabilize the progress that has been made.

## External Intervention

Elsewhere I have argued that conflict transformation is most effective when it is driven by legitimate community and political leaders who command the cultural capital necessary to frame new possibilities in ways that resonate

with diverse local populations (Smithey 2011). However, influence by external parties is important and often necessary to address power asymmetries (Kriesberg 2015). The long history of interventions in Northern Ireland can hardly be covered here, but several prominent examples stand out.

The United States has repeatedly attempted to facilitate conditions conducive to negotiation, and American statespeople have often served as mediators or observers during political negotiations. During the campaign leading up to the 1992 US Presidential elections, then Arkansas governor Bill Clinton opened the door for a new phase of external intervention when he stated that he thought it could be helpful for the US government to reverse itself on a long-standing policy and permit a visa for Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Féin, to travel to the United States. At the time, the British and Irish governments considered Adams a terrorist, and his voice was banned from news broadcasts in both countries. After Clinton won his first term in office, Adams was granted a visa in January 1994, infuriating the British government (English 2003, 273). However, allowing Adams to travel and speak in the United States contributed to a rehabilitation of Adams and Sinn Féin that positioned and encouraged them to move toward politics and the negotiations that were to come (Guelke 1996, 534). Clinton also granted a visa in 1994 to Provisional IRA founder Joe Cahill (who had already been deported twice previously) so that he could help convince republican supporters in Irish Northern Aid (NORAID) of the wisdom of the new republican strategy to pursue negotiations (Guelke 1996, 525).

President Clinton continued to play an important role by lending international status to the peace process, though unionists and loyalists have long harbored suspicions about American intervention, especially given the favorable view of nationalism and republicanism that has prevailed in American public opinion. Nevertheless, the annual White House St. Patrick's Day celebrations that involve political leaders from Ireland—from both north and south—have continued to direct attention to the region and support Northern Ireland's ongoing peace process by renewing international expectations.

Perhaps the most high-profile and crucial intervention involved the international committee of US senator George Mitchell, Canadian general John de Chastelain, and former prime minister of Finland Harri Holkeri. The US senator chaired the group that issued the Mitchell Report determining that all-party talks should be initiated before the decommissioning of weapons but that decommissioning should begin during negotiations. The report presented six principles, including a commitment to "democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues" (Hennessey 2000, 100–101). Mitchell went on to chair the difficult negotiations that led to a power-sharing system of government established by the Belfast Agreement of 1998 (Mitchell 1999). Between 1997 and 2011, his colleague, General John de Chastelain, chaired the Independent International Commission on Decom-

missioning (IICD) that oversaw the process of decommissioning paramilitary weapons.

Diasporas may also wield significant influence in the trajectories of intractable conflicts, especially in a globalizing world wired for mass media and instantaneous communication (Ellis 2006). The Irish diaspora in America played a notable role in the transformation of conflict in Northern Ireland. The participation of the Clinton administration resulted from decades of organizing and lobbying. Irish American activism during the 1970s was characterized by NORAID and its support of armed republican struggle and the voices of prominent Irish American politicians, such as Senator Edward Kennedy and Speaker Tip O'Neill, who criticized British policy in Northern Ireland and worked with SDLP leader John Hume and the Irish government to introduce constitutional nationalism into Irish American political discourse (Cochrane 2007, 219). However, during the 1980s and 1990s, a new wave of interest groups, including the Irish National Caucus and the Friends of Ireland, became the primary political voices of Irish America. By the 1990s, during a critical phase of strategic realignment toward politics within the republican movement in Ireland, the aptly named Americans for a New Irish Agenda successfully cultivated President Clinton's support. Guelke (1996) characterizes the influence of Irish Americans on the peace process: "In the first place, the growth of influence of the Irish-American lobby has not stemmed from a weakening of the American government's opposition to political violence, but rather from a moderation of Irish-American attitudes towards the conflict" (536). Feargal Cochrane (2007) goes further to credit Irish American activists with generating sufficient "soft power" to facilitate and support republicans' move toward negotiations. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001 consolidated that shift. The revulsion against terrorism that the attacks generated sealed off the possibility of a return to Irish American support for armed struggle and pressed the IRA to take further steps toward ending its campaign (Cochrane 2007, 226).

It is worth noting that, in the latter phases of the ongoing peace process, Protestant unionists and loyalists have turned to the Scots Irish diaspora in the United States to amplify their cultivation of Ulster Scots heritage and identity. As conflict has moved into the cultural sphere in Northern Ireland, some unionists and loyalists have sought to claim a "parity of esteem" with nationalist culture through the development of the Ulster Scots dialect, poetry, literature, music, and history. They have often pointed to early waves of immigration from the Ulster region to the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the role Protestants have played in American political leadership, claiming that seventeen of the first forty-four Presidents have Ulster Scots ancestry (Ulster Scots Agency 2009). One also finds connections made between Ulster Scots and country or Appalachian music as well as plentiful reflections on the US and UK alliances during the first and

second world wars. Most of these efforts have taken place since the turn of the twenty-first century, and they differ from the political lobbying and activism by Irish Americans who supported nationalism during the Troubles. Instead, ties with the United States have provided a form of cultural legitimacy that has helped to reassure some Protestants during a period when they have otherwise felt unsure about their status in the wake of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (Smithey 2011, 133–35, 165–66).

External monetary support constitutes another prominent feature of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. As Sean Byrne et al. explain, "The idea is that economic assistance will create a milieu conducive to peacebuilding by providing resources to stimulate constructive inter-group contact and mutual engagement, diminish social marginalisation, encourage local networks, and tackle structural inequalities to build the peace dividend and peaceful coexistence" (2009, 339). Funding from the European Union (EU) and International Fund for Ireland (IFI) have supplemented local and national (British and Irish) funding streams. The IFI, sponsored by the United States, the European Union, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, was established with the aim of "promoting economic and social advance and encouraging contact, dialogue and reconciliation between nationalists and unionists throughout Ireland" (International Fund for Ireland 2005, 6). The IFI's 2014 annual report reveals that, to that date, the fund had committed £713 million (€897 million) (International Fund for Ireland 2014, 8).

The European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland, established in 1994, has provided even larger sums of financial support. The Peace I program (€667 million; 1995–1999) emphasized economic development and social inclusion and was followed by the Peace II program (€1.2 billion; 2000–2004 and 2005–2006 extension) that incorporated a focus on reconciliation work that the Peace III fund amplified (€225 million; 2005–2006). Though the Peace III fund was thought to be the last major infusion of EU peace funding, the Special EU Programmes Body has opened a new round of public consultation over how to spend over €500 million of Peace IV and Interreg funds from 2014 to 2020 that will focus on shared education, shared spaces and regeneration, community relations, health, and environmental sustainability (BBC 2014).

The less well-known Interreg Programme has provided EU funding for cross-border initiatives aimed at promoting regional cohesion and infrastructure for economic cooperation. Today Interreg funding addresses both the Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland border and Western Scotland, treating the Irish Sea as a maritime border. Interreg appears to have had little direct effect on grassroots relations, though it has helped build cross-border relations among local politicians (Potter and Egerton 2011; Special EU Programmes Body 2013).

In short, external funding for community relations work and economic development are well-established and highly intentional attempts to maintain a constructive trajectory for conflict in Northern Ireland. An overwhelming consensus about the impact of such funding has not emerged, but there is clear proof that most practitioners have found IFI and EU funding productive.

## ECHOES OF DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

As of 2016, eighteen years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed, conflict continues in ways that echo the sectarian polarization between Catholics and Protestants that helped fuel the conflict during its worst stages. To the extent that relationships are intended or are perceived as coercive, intimidating, or threatening, we can say that the conflict retains destructive threads.

### Political

Armed struggle has not entirely disappeared in Northern Ireland. While the Provisional IRA began decommissioning its weapons on October 23, 2001, other organizations, such as the Real IRA (or New IRA), the Continuity IRA, and Óghlaigh na hÉireann continue to carry out paramilitary operations, and campaign organizations, such as the 32 County Sovereignty Movement and Republican Sinn Féin, do not reject the use of physical force in the pursuit of a united Ireland. Fortunately, few attacks in recent years have resulted in deaths, as dissident organizations are often infiltrated by intelligence and security forces. Numerous bombs have been intercepted, but when bombings and assassinations occur, they are roundly condemned by all parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Notable examples include the killing of two soldiers in 2009 outside Massereene Army Base as they emerged to retrieve a pizza delivery. Two other soldiers and two pizza deliverymen were wounded in the attack. In 2010, Kieran Doherty and Bobby Moffett were killed by their own republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations, respectively. Ronan Kerr, a Catholic police officer, was killed by a booby trap placed in his car, provoking local and international outrage. On November 12, 2012, a prison officer, David Black, was assassinated as he drove to work. In April 2012, a large, six-hundred-pound bomb was found on the border, and nearly a year later, on March 4, 2013, police and army units intercepted a van in Derry modified to carry four mortars.

Violence by loyalist organizations, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), occurs less frequently; their weapons are formally to have been decommissioned and their organiza-

tions transformed (often into historical or voluntary organizations), but in-fighting and occasional incursions at flashpoint interfaces, such as a coordinated attack on Catholic homes in the Short Strand area of East Belfast in 2011, have suggested that paramilitary capabilities remain. A steady but diminished tempo of pipe bombings and arms finds constitutes background noise beneath the media coverage of efforts to sustain working political structures.[3]

The violence of the Troubles also continues to dog contemporary politics. As the Legacy Investigations Branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the forthcoming Historical Investigations Unit continue the work of "policing the past" formerly carried out by the PSNI's Historical Enquiries Team, the possibility remains that current political leaders may be at risk of prosecution, thus destabilizing the political process. The PSNI's attempts to seize the "Boston College Tapes," academics' recorded interviews with paramilitary leaders from both republican and loyalist organizations, represent a particularly high-profile example of the challenges of reconciling power-sharing with the destructive dynamics of the Troubles. In May 2014, as a result of the Boston College case, Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Féin and elected member of Dáil Éireann (a house of the Irish Parliament) for County Louth, was arrested and held for four days of questioning about the 1972 abduction and murder of Jean McConville. The theatrics of a republican leader being interrogated by police had the potential to undermine republican support for the police service and stir old animosities over internment policies during the Troubles.

Investigations by the police ombudsperson into collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and security and police officials have also strained trust and political relationships. In February 2014, a court case involving an alleged IRA bomber revealed that, during the peace process, nearly two hundred republicans were quietly given letters of assurance that they would not be arrested or prosecuted for past crimes. The First Minister of Northern Ireland threatened to resign (and thus collapse the Assembly) unless an inquiry was launched.

Despite ongoing dissident violence, political power-sharing, particularly between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, has proven remarkably stable. At the time of writing, more than nine years of continuous governance from Stormont have passed. However, in September 2015, the Northern Ireland Executive came within a hairsbreadth of collapsing after the Ulster Unionist Party withdrew its one minister from the Executive, and the Democratic Unionist Party, for over a month, repeatedly withdrew and reinstated all but one of its ministers, blocking normal business but forestalling a formal suspension or direct rule by the British government. The August 12 murder of Kevin McGuigan, a former member of the Provisional IRA, and the subsequent arrest of leading republicans, including Bobby Storey, Sinn

Féin's chairman in Northern Ireland, precipitated the crisis. Party talks commenced on September 21, and an independent panel was appointed by the British government to produce an independent assessment of paramilitary organizations. The report provided enough cover for the DUP ministers to return to their posts on October 20.

As of late 2016, Northern Ireland's political system faces a new and wholly unexpected challenge: the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, or "Brexit." On June 23, 2016, 51.9 percent of UK citizens voted to leave the European Union while 48.1 percent voted to remain. Majorities in England and Wales voted to exit, and majorities in Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to remain. The potential impacts on trade and finance are vast, with Northern Ireland reported to bear greater economic risks than the other regions of the United Kingdom (Phinnemore and McGowan 2016, 7, 15). Equally concerning, however, are the implications for political arrangements in Northern Ireland. Fears over immigration and borders fueled the pro-Brexit campaign and raise questions about the open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that would become the United Kingdom's new land border with the European Union. With the rising specter of a renewed hard border, Sinn Féin almost immediately raised the prospect of a "border poll" on the unification of Ireland that would also allow the majority to "remain" voters in the North to maintain their status as EU citizens. It is also not clear what Brexit will mean for the substantial European funding of peacebuilding initiatives, the work of the cross-border political institutions that are fundamental to the Belfast Agreement, or the legal status of the agreement itself, which is based in part on the European Convention on Human Rights. Perhaps the mediation and negotiating skills that produced the political peace process in Northern Ireland can be harnessed to generate new, workable post-Brexit arrangements if the government initiates the process of separation from the European Union.

Until the political crisis of 2015, the principle of consent, proportional representation, and consociational systems of mandatory coalition sufficiently managed fears that one quarter could take advantage of another. However, those very mechanisms have come under criticism. The rules that allow either of the main political communities to veto legislation mean that the Assembly has found it difficult to legislate efficiently. Growing public dissatisfaction with the pace of reform, particularly with respect to social welfare, has prompted First Minister Peter Robinson to propose a move away from the "mandatory coalition" among the political parties. Safeguards established by the Belfast Agreement assign ministerial positions in the Executive based on the D'Hondt system of proportional representation. Thus, major parties may not be excluded. A new system of "voluntary coalition" would permit a government to be formed by any willing coalition, even if a system of weighted voting became necessary to ensure some form of cross-

community representation. Republicans have reacted negatively, with Sinn Féin fearing exclusion and a return to the majority rule that oversaw discrimination against Catholics between the formation of the state and the imposition of Direct Rule in 1973 (Cochrane 2013, 304–5; Devenport 2014).

Some have expressed concerns about the fundamental way in which the Belfast Agreement contributes to bifurcated identity politics. By including reassurances about the cultural aspirations of the two main identity camps (Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists) through commitments to "enhance and protect" the Irish and Ulster Scots languages, the Agreement may legitimize monolithic identity categories and inhibit attempts, both in politics and in civil society, to move across ethnopolitical boundaries and make them porous (Nic Craith 2002; 2003; Smithey 2011, 162, 175–76). It is these overly simplified categories into which people retreat in times of threat and uncertainty.

## Social and Economic

I have noted important corrections across a number of economic fronts, such as jobs and housing, and these undoubtedly contributed to the circumstances in which political power-sharing could be established. However, even with greater procedural equality, housing remains a site of contention as the growing Catholic population creates demand for housing at interface areas, where Protestants feel encroached upon. Housing results from the 2011 census offer some confirmation of Protestant fears, revealing that a steep decline in single-identity local government wards has occurred primarily in Protestant areas (Nolan 2014, 114–15).

Nowhere is the tension over control of space more evident than at the "peace lines" or high barrier walls that separate Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods in working-class areas, mostly in Belfast. More peace walls have been constructed since the Good Friday Agreement was established than existed in 1998. They have increased from twenty-two when the agreement was signed to a total of fifty-three in 2014, a conservative measurement of division that is down from the 2013 figure of fifty-eight (Nolan 2012, 10; 2014, 67–70). In a 2012 report, the Belfast Interface Project identified ninety-nine "security barriers and forms of defensive architecture" across Belfast (Belfast Interface Project 2012, 11). Despite high-profile initiatives by local politicians, statutory bodies, and major peace funds, most proposals have been blocked by local residents who feel that the walls remain necessary to protect them from vandalism and confrontations with neighbors. However, the first of the walls owned by the Housing Executive to come down was removed in February 2016.

## Cultural

The shift of conflict away from armed struggle and into cultural contention is a pillar of conflict transformation and may be welcomed. However, when rituals, such as republican commemorations and Orange parades or the hanging of nationalist flags, conjure exclusive political claims and memories of the Troubles (intentionally or unintentionally), they can perpetuate trauma, sustain mistrust, and polarize attitudes between Protestants and Catholics. Increasingly, one hears reference to "culture wars" in Northern Ireland.

Flags and parades constitute the most heated front of such culture wars. A small number of summertime loyalist parades regularly spins off riotous confrontations with police, especially during the massive July 12 parades that celebrate the victory of the Protestant King William of Orange over the Catholic King James at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. With the ending of violence twenty years ago, the number of parades each year has increased to a record level of nearly four thousand (primarily unionist and loyalist). Though only a small number of parades are contentious, those that local nationalists protest or that require policing garner much media attention and become annual indicators of mistrust across the ethnopolitical divide. A confrontation outside of St. Patrick's Catholic Church in 2012 led to days of rioting when a republican activist filmed a loyalist band playing a sectarian tune as it marched in circles in front of the church. Annual restrictions placed by the Parades Commission on a North Belfast parade past the Ardoyne storefronts led in 2013 to a perpetual encampment on the Woodvale Road and weekly protests by loyalists that only ended after an agreement was brokered in September 2016.

Political flags constitute another site of contention. The erection of Union Jacks, Tricolours, and paramilitary flags has long been understood as a means for marking out ethnically segregated territory. Loyalists, in particular, hang flags to coincide with the parading season and the annual July 12 celebrations. For a small number of people, flags are a seasonal ritual and a public expression of collective identity, but for others they can be annoying or even intimidating. Between 2006 and 2013, significant majorities of Protestants and Catholics (ranging from almost 70 percent among Protestants to just over 80 percent for Catholics) reported that they do not support flying flags from lampposts in their own neighborhoods (Kelly 2014). A decision by the Belfast City Council in December 2012 to limit the days on which the Union Jack is flown over City Hall brought flags to the forefront again. Loyalists conducted sustained protests and marched to City Hall on several occasions. Paul Nolan et al. have identified 55,521 acts of protest related to the flying of the Union Jack at City Hall between December 3, 2012, and March 17, 2013 (2014, 108).

The issue of symbolic contention was deemed sufficiently problematic that US ambassador Richard Haas and professor Meghan O'Sullivan convened Northern Ireland's political leaders in talks about parades and flags. By the end of December 2013, their negotiations had produced a proposal that most feel politicians are unlikely to carry forward. With regard to flags, Haas and O'Sullivan called for the establishment of a Commission on Identity, Culture, and Tradition to hold public discussions throughout Northern Ireland in hopes of generating grassroots momentum in the absence of political leadership. They also called for a streamlined process for conducting investigations into historical crimes, a mental trauma service, and a new governmental body, the Authority for Public Events Adjudication, to replace the Parades Commission in setting conditions on contentious parades.

Renewed talks sponsored by the British government in 2014 saw US secretary of state John Kerry appoint former US senator Gary Hart as a special envoy to Northern Ireland to assess how the US government might support further peace and reconciliation efforts. Northern Ireland secretary of state Theresa Villiers and the political parties managed to reach new agreements on the establishment of an opposition at Stormont, the budget, and welfare reform through the Stormont House Agreement of December 23, 2015. Issues over flags were to be handed to a new Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition for further discussion, and several new bodies were to be established for the gathering of information and investigations of Troubles-related deaths. It appears the cultural realm will continue to serve as a primary battlefield on which ethnopolitics are waged, a far more constructive alternative than armed struggle, but one on which dialogue and cooperation are often strained.

## MAINTAINING A CONSTRUCTIVE TRAJECTORY

A great deal of evidence points to the conclusion that Northern Ireland has been engaged in a process of constructive conflict transformation, even from the early days of the Troubles, confirming that conflicts are rarely purely constructive or destructive at any given point in time. Though the civil rights movement was eventually subsumed by armed struggle, it pushed political and economic equality to the top of the agenda in Northern Ireland. Direct Rule brought the systematic implementation of policy designed to end economic discrimination against Catholics. Elaborate and often clandestine negotiations that eventually produced ceasefires and a power-sharing government represent a clear shift in the means of conflict from armed struggle and counterinsurgency to politics.

Conflict transformation is, however, a multifaceted and fluid process with the potential for constructive or destructive outcomes. As we have seen, the

very activities that one could consider constructive often hold the potential for breakdowns and threaten a return to destructive means of conflict. Assessing the constructive or destructive nature of a conflict in transition is nearly always going to be difficult. No clear metric exists. Indeed, as Simmel ([1908] 1971) reminds us, all social relations are a matrix of harmony and disharmony (72–74). The question is whether a case can be made that sufficiently constructive dynamics are at play in relation to destructive risks.

Oscillation between the two poles is to be expected. As Kriesberg (1998) argues, "Struggles generally consist of a sequence of conflict modes, with varying degrees of constructiveness and destructiveness" (22). Plus, as John Paul Lederach (2005) tells us in *The Moral Imagination*, there is an important element of immeasurable serendipity in peacebuilding. For that matter, serendipity may work in favor of a destructive trajectory. Contention over unrelated matters may devolve into ethnopolitical conflict, or important leaders may be lost. The death of the Progressive Unionist Party (Loyalist) politician David Ervine comes to mind. Ervine, a former UVF combatant who served jail time, played a critical role in pioneering the peace process. His funeral in 2007 in East Belfast drew thousands, including prominent republicans, but his absence in faltering loyalist politics has been felt ever since.

Even if we cannot yet be precise about the pace or quality of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, it seems important to take stock of the balance of developments in constructive and destructive directions to help orient ourselves to the continuing work of peacebuilding. Here again, Kriesberg (2005) set an important precedent with his holistic model of an arc of intractable conflict based on grievances, identity, means of conducting conflict, and group goals, influenced by internal and external constraints and agency. All interact to shape an arc of peacebuilding within otherwise intractable conflict.

In Northern Ireland, the questions are whether the prevailing constructive trajectory has stalled and, if so, in what domains, and whether a stall presages a return to destructive modes of conflict. The peace process itself and successive rounds of political negotiation (such as the Haas/O'Sullivan and Villiers initiatives) suggest that grievances, goals, and the means of struggle can often be addressed procedurally, through negotiation and mediation. These processes are often slow, painstaking, and fraught with political risk. Nevertheless, political progress in Northern Ireland has been remarkable, if halting.

The important subjective dimensions of conflicts are slow to change and difficult to manage. Perhaps the most interesting development in the arc of Northern Ireland's conflict since the ceasefires has been the growing emphasis on ethnonational identity. Sectarianism and ethnopolitical commitments have always been a prominent feature of conflict in Ireland, but where even the most fundamental political goals (such as a united Ireland or British sovereignty in Northern Ireland) could be fudged, ethnic identities and their

public expression have remained salient. In this dimension, both political and civil society leaders have repeatedly struggled and failed to reach a consensus about multiculturalism, despite decades of groundbreaking community relations work.

Cherished identities and collective psychological scars require sensitive interventions by community relations practitioners and innovative citizens who are themselves committed to ethnopolitical identities and command the necessary cultural capital to influence their own communities. I have argued that authentic change in this dimension must be generated from the inside out, with consistent participation by legitimate community leaders (Smithey 2011). However, debate continues over whether single-identity work (*within* as opposed to *across* ethnonationalist camps) serves to diminish the fears and insecurities that lead to defensive and sectarian attitudes or whether it merely serves to further fetishize polarized identities (Nolan et al. 2014).

Finally, we must also consider whether and how public expectations and perceptions about the pace and trajectories of change impact the trajectories themselves. At what point does frustration with lack of progress begin to turn to despair? How can populations in conflicts in transition cultivate the kind of marathon mentality that is necessary to sustain the work of unraveling decades of trauma and mistrust, even as destabilizing events persist and new priorities demand attention? The capacity to continually press for incremental change at the margins of ethnic and political division, especially in the cultural realm, remains crucial to sustaining Northern Ireland's ongoing transition toward constructive conflict.