5-1-2004

Metaphors for One Another: Racism in the United States and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland

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This article explores the possibility that an analysis of racism in the United States and sectarianism in Northern Ireland inspired by literary, psychotherapeutic, religious and philosophical conceptions of metaphor might yield new insight into the two situations by attending carefully to similarities and differences between them. Following brief summaries of the current state of racism in the U.S. and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, the article offers two perspectives from the field of psychotherapy that seem particularly germane to both situations. Then we turn to the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt for a reflection on the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action, and what can be done within the limits of those conditions. Finally, we find in contemporary broad-based community organizing in the tradition of Saul Alinsky our closing metaphor: interracial and interfaith citizens organizations as crucibles that enable citizens and people of faith to imagine a way forward in societies struggling with racist and sectarian histories.

Author Bio(s)

John Lord Alderdice, was educated at Queen's University Belfast, graduating in Medicine in 1978. He specialised in psychiatry and psychotherapy and was appointed Ireland's first Consultant Psychotherapist in 1988. He is a Fellow and Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and an Honorary Affiliate of the British Psychoanalytical Society. To apply his psychological ideas to political conflict resolution he entered Northern Ireland politics and served as elected leader of the nonsectarian Alliance Party from 1987 to 1998. During this time he was one of the key negotiators of the Good Friday Agreement. In 1998 he was elected to the new Northern Ireland Assembly established under this Agreement and appointed its Speaker. He is also a member of the British House of Lords, and the Deputy President of Liberal International, the world-wide federation of 90 liberal political parties.

Michael A. Cowan was educated at Loyola University (Chicago), graduating in psychology in 1967. He holds master's and doctoral degrees in psychology from the Ohio State University and a master's degree in systematic theology from St. John's University (Collegeville). He currently serves as professor and executive director of the Lindy Boggs National Center for Community Literacy, Loyola University New Orleans. He is a founding leader of three interracial, civil-society organizations: the Jeremiah Group (the New Orleans Industrial Areas Foundation [IAF] affiliate); Shades of Praise: The New Orleans Interracial Gospel Choir; and the Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans. He has lectured, consulted, and learned in Northern Ireland annually for the last 20 years.

METAPHORS FOR ONE ANOTHER:
RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES AND SECTARIANISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

John Alderdice and Michael A. Cowan

Abstract

This article explores the possibility that an analysis of racism in the United States and sectarianism in Northern Ireland inspired by literary, psychotherapeutic, religious and philosophical conceptions of metaphor might yield new insight into the two situations by attending carefully to similarities and differences between them. Following brief summaries of the current state of racism in the U.S. and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, the article offers two perspectives from the field of psychotherapy that seem particularly germane to both situations. Then we turn to the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt for a reflection on the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action, and what can be done within the limits of those conditions. Finally, we find in contemporary broad-based community organizing in the tradition of Saul Alinsky our closing metaphor: interracial and interfaith citizens organizations as crucibles that enable citizens and people of faith to imagine a way forward in societies struggling with racist and sectarian histories.

Introduction

In the same way that even tranquillised force relationships destroyed real communication in the U.S. South, so that blacks developed the habit of saying what they thought whites wanted to hear, tranquillised force relationships in the North of Ireland erected another kind of barrier …. A precondition of friendly relationships was the systematic avoidance of any topic of conversation that might touch politics or religion and the concealment of everything that in fact divided them…. All the benign tendencies to be good neighbors, to treat others as you would be treated yourself; all the small or large gestures of intercommunal goodwill that may or may not have been made were inarticulate because the fundamental source of division was too dangerous to talk about. *(Wright, 1987)*

Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. *(King, 1963)*

The U.S. has been legally desegregated for nearly forty years, while Northern Ireland continues the long struggle to dismantle a segregated society. But segregation in America today is in certain important respects more extensive than during its legal period, and there is much evidence that Northern Ireland is now more polarized than at any other time in living memory. Social and historical parallels between the two situations are strong. In both countries, a political and economic system was designed and maintained to advance one group's interests at the expense of another's (Wright, 1987, pp. 164-216). In both countries, painful social transformations sparked and inspired by the U.S. Civil Rights movement have been underway for approximately half a century in a concerted if uneven attempt to redress their respective histories of institutionalized racism and sectarianism. Given these parallels, do the two societies have any practical lessons for each other as they strive to overcome the profound divisions at the heart of their respective histories? We offer the following thesis: Racism in the United States and sectarianism in Northern Ireland can serve as metaphors for each other, revealing complex patterns of similarity and difference, and suggesting a way forward in both fractured societies. During the past two years we have tested this thesis in public conversations on both sides of the Atlantic in the belief that reflection along this line may yield practical implications for constructive social change in the United States and Northern Ireland.

It is important at the outset to identify something of the experiences and interests that the authors bring to this essay. For one of us, engagement with political life has been through electoral politics and leadership in the official apparatus of the state; for the other, political involvement has been through community organizing within the domain of civil society, a form of political engagement that those involved proudly insist on calling, "non-partisan, non-electoral politics." Given those differing political histories, one question that interests us is what constitutes healthy relationship between the electoral and civil-society dimensions of politics in a pluralistic world. In the United States, for example, the most efficacious current forms of democratic participation involve building relationships of public, mutual accountability between elected officials and non-partisan, civil-society organizations (Greider, 1992). Broad-based (interfaith and interracial) community organizations can sometimes give politicians the constituency or "political cover" they need to make and keep public commitments towards which they may be personally inclined but would otherwise hesitate to undertake. In other instances, the public clout of such organizations is sufficient to create

the political will in office holders and candidates to adopt aspects of a community-generated agenda that they might not otherwise have considered. In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, events of the last forty years make it plain that political violence in a contested state threatens non-violent political organizing. Absent a stable civic order, the "ordinary" political actions of free assembly and speech, including non-violent forms of political action, become riskier activities.

Both authors come to our respective political engagements from "careers of origin" as psychotherapists, and teachers of psychotherapists. So a second question that engages our attention is the relevance of the wisdom of that world to politics. It is clear to us that part of the challenge of pursuing that question is avoiding the trap of psychologizing the difficult and very real social facts of competing group interests, unequal constellations of power, and varying shades of historically thick, malevolent perceptions of the "other." That said, we share a keen interest in how a psychotherapeutic view might inform everyday, on-the-ground efforts of politicians and citizens to resolve inter-ethnic and inter-religious differences through an inclusive, non-violent public politics that is based on building bridges within civic relationships around common interests on local ground. That contribution must be one that keeps the hard realities of power and group interests at the center, rather than imagining some kind of psychotherapeutically informed transcending of the messy real world of conflicting interests. Our conversation has been about how insights about some irreducible elements of the human condition, gleaned from that most private context of psychotherapy, may have relevance in very public ones like peace negotiations.

Three interplaying senses of metaphor guide the following reflections. In one sense our reference to metaphor is *literary*. In literary studies, the form called "metaphor" has a technical meaning: something is like (and not like) something else. Metaphors don't suggest identities, but rather intricate and often surprising patterns of similarity/difference (Ricoeur, 1977). The second sense of metaphor here is *psychotherapeutic*. Metaphors often "get through" to patients, allowing them to derive meaning from a story or image that would not have been available to them through straightforward literal explanation (Rosen, 1982). In a related vein, there is no doubt that part of the transformative power of group psychotherapy is the reiterative process wherein group members' lives become metaphorical sources of information for each other (Yalom, 1970). Indeed, how often do all of us see relevant things in others' lives that may initially or chronically elude direct self-scrutiny? The final sense of metaphor relevant to this essay is *religious* or

theological (McFague, 1982; Tracy, 1981). All speech about ultimate realities like God's will, human destiny, or good and evil, is metaphorical, poetry "mutely appealing for an imaginative leap" by those who encounter it (Whitehead, 1978). Racism and sectarianism are metaphors for the divisions within humanity that wreak havoc on the world's peace and limit the development of all people. When we address them, we address the spiritual condition of humankind, recalling the ancient hope for a world in which differences do not serve as a basis of oppression, in which "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no male and female" (Galatians 3:28).

Racism in the United States Today

The U.S. is caught in a double impasse on race today. On the one hand, we have the "new racial conservatives," whom sociologists suggest may constitute a majority of American adults, and who sincerely believe that racism is primarily a thing of the past.

> White Americans … are unduly sanguine about the state of black America. According to a recent survey, while a majority of whites think blacks are worse off than they are, 38 percent think blacks' economic status is about the same as their own. Fifty percent of whites think America has achieved racial equality in access to health care and 44 percent think African Americans have jobs that are about the same as whites.

In contrast,

> African Americans are deeply disillusioned about the future. At the turn of the millennium, 71 percent of African Americans believed racial equality would not be achieved in their lifetime or would not be achieved at all. Seventy three percent of African Americans believe they are economically worse off than whites (Dawson, 2001).

On the other hand we have those who believe that racism is alive and well but transmuted into a subtler form called "laissez faire" or "soft" racism. The definition of racism in the U.S. has changed dramatically in the past and is changing again today from "the evident superiority of white ways," to "prejudice based on skin color," to "prejudice plus power," to "the defense of group prerogatives" (with or without prejudice) (Wellman, 1993).

So the first racial impasse in America is between those who believe that race is no longer a significant social issue and those convinced that it is. Within the group of those who believe that racism remains a major problem in the U.S., there is another impasse between pragmatists convinced that we must get on with building interracial partnerships to act for the common good in concrete ways, and anti-racists who believe passionately that unless people are explicitly confronted with how racism works, historically, psychologically and institutionally in some form of deliberate anti-racist education, racism will subvert efforts at interracial work for the common good. Proponents of the two approaches tend toward antagonism with each other, which divides the energy and limits the effectiveness of those who agree that racism's effects continue to be a major problem in the U.S.

And here we believe the racial facts of the U.S. converge with the realities of sectarianism in Northern Ireland. In keeping with our opening quotation from Frank Wright describing cross community communication in Northern Ireland, it must be said that everyday interaction between blacks and whites in the U.S. today is likewise typically characterized by polite avoidance of everything that in fact divides us. This avoidance profoundly limits inter-group communication in both societies because both sides are aware that explosive matters are lying just below the surface of their interactions, and neither wishes to trigger off a vicious cycle of anger, recrimination and defensiveness. The problem with this understandable strategy, of course, is that what cannot be confronted directly and honestly can never be resolved. This accounts at least in part for why interracial and cross-community dialogue in our two societies is stuck today.

So how do we escape the historical inertia that keeps us trapped in such false and collusive civility? Unless a seasoned and tested ability to engage one another across lines of race and sect in direct conversation and joint decision-making about our common life, including when necessary the dangerous subjects of race and politics, gradually becomes integral to the public cultures of the United States and Northern Ireland, the divisions within our respective societies, of which race and religion are only the most potent instances, will continue to cripple and may eventually destroy the capacity to increase the peace of our common life. This possibility becomes ever more real as ethnic segregation in America and sectarian polarization in Northern Ireland increase.

Sectarianism in Northern Ireland Today

The 1990's like the 1690's, the 1790's and the 1890's brought pressure for political change in Ireland. Unfortunately, the nature of the change taking place is not yet fully clear. Is there indeed, real change? It is possible to have change on the surface and continuity in the depths. We may be forewarned by Sir Winston Churchill's oft quoted comment about the dreary steeples re-emerging from the deluge of the First World War, the integrity of their quarrel one of the few unmodified features of the old world order. We may also be cautioned by our experience in recent generations of the difficulties faced by those in Northern Ireland who have sought to create a stable, peaceful, just and prosperous community where everyone feels at home in their own place.

Those of an optimistic frame of mind will maintain that we are going through the difficult and prolonged birth pangs of a new order in Ireland, and will assert that a qualitatively different and better society is undoubtedly coming into being. They will point to the increasing pluralism and prosperity of the Republic of Ireland, and will identify as conclusive evidence of a "new order" the Peace Process with its extended cease-fires and the overwhelming adoption of the Good Friday Agreement by the people of Ireland in referendums, North and South.

In a thought provoking book entitled *'Northern Ireland: The Choice'*, Professors Tom Hadden and Kevin Boyle (1994) analyzed whether the problems of the North would be likely to result in separation or sharing. They pointed out that almost all attempts to address the problem in the last generation had aimed to facilitate the development of a single shared community, with institutions in which all could participate. In this model of sharing, the present divisions are deemed to have resulted from the exclusion of sections of the community from effective participation. The rights that should have been available to all had not been guaranteed to some, especially in the Roman Catholic nationalist section of the community. If all could be involved, and everyone believed their rights were guaranteed, then a shared community could grow out of the divisions of the past.

The other option Hadden and Boyle described was a much less optimistic one. They suggested that the demographic evidence pointed to an increasing separation between Protestant unionists and Roman Catholic nationalists, and speculated that this might be reflected in attitudes to such an extent that the future might only be found in separate development with joint, rather than shared institutions. In this vision of the future, there would not be

a growing area of shared space populated by an increasing centre ground of people who identified more with the community as a whole than with either cultural/political background. Instead the community would become increasingly bipolar, with each managing their own space, and co-operating only on those matters that require a joint regional approach. This pattern of increasing separation, we should observe, would resemble the increasing residential segregation of America since the Civil Rights movement, dubbed "American apartheid" by sociologists Massey and Denton (1993).

If these authors were right in their assessment of the growing evidence, the implications are substantial. The future would not see a pluralist society. It might be qualitatively different from the past in terms of the protection of Roman Catholic nationalists, and the struggle for control would be converted into a solely political affair rather than a clash of politically motivated terrorist campaigns. This would of course be an enormous achievement in itself. Politics is not about everyone agreeing with each other, it is about different views struggling together in a civilised manner, and the separation model could potentially achieve this too. It would be less likely however to achieve a settlement of the ancient feud between Northern Ireland's two communities, which would continue, albeit in a more civilised form. It would also fail to achieve a quantum development in political thinking and cooperation in a pluralist society. This would be regrettable because liberal democracy is much in need of a next step and a new form of inclusive society that protected not only large groups but also individuals and smaller groups would be such a step. Such a new development would be a harbinger of hope, an event of great significance.

The evidence of Hadden and Boyle could, of course, however persuasive, be simply an expression of the unresolved problem. The polarisation caused by the continuing struggle is an obvious source of pressure towards separation. This could also be the explanation for the strikingly partisan results of the elections to the peace negotiations in 1996, because the communities could be expected to mount their most doughty defenders to protect their interests at the negotiating table. The first opportunity to assess the mood of the community in the changed context of an Agreement that could potentially be a settlement of the old quarrel came after the heady outcome of the Referendum in May of 1998, when elections were held for the new Assembly in June of that year. The results were very clear. The Peace Process had led to an increasing polarisation. Hadden and Boyle's model of separation rather than sharing had won out.

There are many ways that one can explain this outcome. One of the most obvious is that it reflects the Agreement itself, which puts a substantial

weighting on community identification of the elected members when voting on contentious issues. What can scarcely be doubted is that for any foreseeable future the change which we are seeing in Northern Ireland is not towards structuring society on a new set of pluralist principles, but rather a radical strengthening of pre-existing group identities, albeit with a new set of political institutions for co-operation between the two main sections of the community. This analysis may not be taken to be an entirely negative one. As anyone inhabiting Northern Ireland since 1969 knows only too well, ending the terrorist campaigns would be a real achievement. Such an outcome may not yet be guaranteed, but there is at least more reason to hope than was the case ten years ago.

It may be that in coming out of the deeply polarised atmosphere of a long-standing conflict, such as we have in Northern Ireland, or in Cyprus, the Balkans, and the Middle East, it is not possible to get an agreement without mutual vetoes for the main protagonists. Such mutual vetoes have the almost inevitable effect of institutionalising the divisions, but it is arguable that this is better than what went before. The change that we are seeing in Northern Ireland however is, at least in the short term, not towards a resolution of the conflict, a settlement of the ancient feud. Rather it is a movement towards that struggle being conducted in a different way, a change to a new phase of the struggle. To use an Irishism, we are not so much changing to something different as changing to something that is more of the same.

A hypothesis under test in conflict resolution in different parts of the world in recent times has been the notion that long-standing conflicts can be resolved without winners or losers, and that honourable compromise could make the "win/lose" framework of victory or defeat an anachronism in international affairs (Fisher and Ury, 1981). The outcome in Northern Ireland to date tends to suggest that on the evidence available a more modest outcome is the best that can yet be achieved. There may be change to be managed, but it may be less fundamental than many had hoped. A non-violent politics characterized by separation, not sharing, much like the situation obtaining between blacks and whites in America, is what the peacemakers of Northern Ireland seem to have achieved.

If this analysis of the nature of the change bears any weight, the first conflict-management issue facing Northern Ireland may be the different expectations of the "new dispensation." One suspects that for nationalists and more especially republicans, there is not only an opportunity to right past wrongs, but also a new context in which to work towards the ultimate aim of the unification and full independence of Ireland. For those unionists who supported the Agreement in the understanding that it was an historic

settlement, the dawning realisation that it is *not* an end of the matter has led to an angry retrenchment, which endangers the institutions themselves. Managing the change or lack of it will require the divergent expectations of the Agreement to be held together.

The second challenge will be found in managing the high expectations and heady experiences of recent years. Ordinary people, who have been led to expect that everyone will be an economic winner, will have to accommodate themselves to the reality that a politically non-violent society is not a perfect society. Normality means that Northern Ireland suffers the same difficulties as other ordinary communities with increasing drug abuse, less public expenditure, and the transience of traditional industries, including such staples as agriculture and heavy engineering (especially ship-building and aircraft manufacture). In themselves these transitions are manageable, though not everyone will find them pleasant.

A third area where the difficulty will be substantial is that of ensuring that those who do not wish to identify with either main grouping have their rights and interests protected. In legal terms the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights will give an element of remedy and protection to individuals, but it is not easy to see how this will be able to be maintained in the more political realm. In this context one suspects that fairness will largely be interpreted almost exclusively in the allocations between the two main communal sections.

In the long run the most difficult issue to manage however will be the more traditional one. If David Trimble's Unionist interpretation of the Agreement is correct, republicans are likely to find the degree of change unacceptably minimalist. Facing such a situation without a return to violence in the medium term will require much greater sophistication than we have yet seen. If Gerry Adams' Nationalist reading has it right, in the long run the Agreement will not so much be a settlement as an instrument of peaceful transition. In that case the structure of the conflict may not have changed fundamentally, but it will have arrived at an outcome, and that change will require politics of a high order if it is not to have seriously untoward consequences.

The way forward on race in the United States and sectarianism in Northern Ireland is through the dilemmas described in the two preceding sections, and talk alone will not move us ahead. Rather, we must search with others across the lines of race and religion for better solutions to community problems based on common interests. In political terms this is "the art of compromise," the hard work of arriving at wise agreements in our own particular circumstances, agreements which are characterized by integrity

and mutual respect. In religious language it is the effort to "seek the shalom of the city" (Jeremiah 29:7) to attune our common life to what the great biblical traditions hold to be God's intentions for history.

Racism and Sectarianism: Two Insights From Psychotherapy

Sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland and racial divisions in America are no new thing. They are built up layer on layer over hundreds, and in the case of Ireland, perhaps more than a thousand years. In both societies, formerly oppressed immigrants became brutal oppressors of the native peoples whom they confronted in the areas they colonized. These spiraling layers of oppression in the two societies came together when waves of Presbyterian immigrants, whose ancestors had fled to the North of Ireland to escape religious persecution in the lowlands of Scotland in the early 1600's, moved on to North America in the next century still in pursuit of religious freedom, only to become leaders in the systematic appropriation of lands inhabited for centuries by native Americans and the decimation of their inhabitants (Leyburn, 1962; Dickson, 1976; Fitzgerald & Ickringill, 2001). Outside observers of conflict-ridden societies often sigh with despair at the extent to which, in the words of a keen observer of the American South, "The past is not dead, it's not even past." But psychoanalysis has taught us the remarkable extent to which this is in fact the case in all individual and communal lives, particularly in the development of character and in the context of breakdown. If violent conflict is the communal equivalent of individual breakdown, then sectarianism and racism are perhaps the societal equivalent of character disorder. The outsider may see with some clarity the ways in which prejudice in an individual or group is both self-fulfilling and counterproductive—provoking a repetition of the very persecutory experiences against which it protests. Subjectively, however, such prejudice is psychologically consistent, offering perhaps the only "reasonable" explanation of the unfairness of life. The suggestion that any responsibility for the maintenance of persecutory relationships may lie with the one who feels wronged seems like a heaping of even more injustice on the wrongs of the past, another instance of blaming the victim.

Psychoanalysis has also taught us about the salience and intensity of emotions. Our capacities to think and act can be much more profoundly affected by emotion than most people imagine, unless they have had the opportunity to observe it as therapists do. Similarly, even thoughtful and well-disposed people from more stable societies find it almost impossible to appreciate that when people react in a destructive and often self-damaging

way in ethnic or sectarian violence, they are not merely playing games that can be set to the side when they choose. Such communities are in thrall to enormously powerful feelings, ancient affective momentums that can overwhelm their members' capacity to think clearly and act constructively. Perhaps the most significant source of feelings that generate actual violence are rooted in experiences of disrespect and humiliation. Human beings have an ineradicable desire to be treated with respect (Gilligan, 1996). Where individuals and communities are despised and humiliated, a bitter sense of injustice is stored up and an almost unquenchable desire develops for vengeance and the righting of the wrong. The sense that the very existence of a community and all that it holds dear has been threatened provokes deep fears and creates a capacity for responses at least as violent as those that it has experienced. In Northern Ireland both communities have bitter experiences to share of disrespect and the threat of annihilation, just as all African Americans have personal stories to tell of racial humiliation. These experiences of the past generate emotions that are not only a reaction to that past but also anxiously mould the future so as to ensure a repetition. Righting past wrongs can easily be translated into repeating past wrongs with "the boot on the other foot."

This much is clear to us: Community healing and peace-making require the same patience, persistence, understanding and respect that is at the heart of all authentic psychotherapeutic work. As in psychotherapy the desired outcome is to avoid repetition by the creation of new and positive relations.

Toward Inclusive Politics: Forgiveness and Promises

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) observed that human beings can never know how the effects of our actions will spread through the web of relationships over time; this is the *unpredictability* of human action. She further noted that we cannot call back those effects once our actions have launched them; this is the *irreversibility* of human action. The first-century authors of the anti-Semitic passages in the gospels of Matthew and John could not have imagined the systematic extermination of Jews in the heart of Christian Europe in the middle of the 20th century, but the history of effects through which their texts came to be used as justification for that holocaust proved irreversible. The English merchants who financed the African slave trade and the tribal chiefs who colluded with them could not have imagined the devastation of African people that they were initiating, nor the great national blood-lettings at Chancellorsville, Chickamauga, and

Gettysburg by which the demonic institution of slavery would be terminated in America three centuries later. The leaders of the Civil Rights marches in Northern Ireland in the late 1960's, and those with whom they clashed at Burntollet, Derry and Belfast, could not have predicted the 3,000 deaths that would follow in the balance of the century, nor imagined the particular horrors of Enniskilllen and Omagh. Once the trains of events leading to those tragedies had been set in motion, their effects could not be called back.

Given the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action in history, what grounds have we for hope? Arendt believed that the fragility of relationships could be redeemed only by two fundamental acts of which human beings are capable and for which we are responsible. The first is seeking forgiveness when we come to realize that our well being has come partly as a consequence of the unjust suffering of others. Through forgiveness the effects of past actions may be, not reversed, but transformed. The second is making promises or giving undertakings to one another, commitments to which we agree to be held accountable. The mutual accountability that joint promises make possible does not make the future predictable, but can imbue it with a measure of constancy.   Reconciliation accomplished and promises kept are all that sustain the fragile web of relationships amidst the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action. It is often said that what is needed to resolve a conflict is "more trust," but in fact trust is the outcome of a successful process of conflict resolution rather than a pre-requisite for it.

Let us take Arendt's analysis one step farther than she did: Whatever the particular historical circumstances lying behind chronic conflict between two groups, making and keeping promises to each other for which they voluntarily agree to be held publicly accountable as they seek change now on a cross-community basis is more important than gestures of reconciliation for past wrongs, no matter how well intended. They may even render them superfluous. President Clinton's dramatic public apology to African Americans for white America's racist history, the first by an American president, may have touched the hearts of many of its recipients, but the education and employment opportunities that his campaigns promised and his policies intended were an effort to change the actual life chances of African Americans and their children. Reconciliation without making and keeping new promises is an empty, and some may even think duplicitous, gesture. Groups that have been oppressed want deeds, not words.

Those who have felt the pain of breaking or broken commitments understand in their bones the significance of promise and forgiveness. For powerful contemporary instances of this truth we need look no further than

the state of relationships between blacks and whites in America and Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. The most powerful way forward from America's racial impasse and Northern Ireland's sectarian dilemma is also the most practical; it involves the work of cross-community collectives for the common good. Thus far in the U.S. these have been on the civil-society rather than the electoral side, but who knows what the future holds in that regard? Paradoxically, the development of the political Peace Process in Northern Ireland and the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement resulted in a polarization of opinion and a weakening of the electoral fortunes not only of the main non-sectarian political party, but also of other moderating forces in the broad center. It is not even certain whether the current Peace Process can survive these threats and pressures. This raises genuine questions about the limits on what can be achieved in creating genuinely integrated civil societies within our current practices of formal electoral politics.

At this juncture in our respective histories there is no prospect for genuinely integrated or even mutually tolerant communal futures in Northern Ireland and the U.S. unless explicit, honest and respectful cross-community public conversations about the common good in the practical order can be deliberately initiated and sustained within a web of lasting relationships grounded in shared action motivated by mutual interests. The healing of the devastations associated with sectarianism and racism is imaginable only if we are able to engage one another in dialogue across the now paralyzing boundaries of cultural separation, endure the necessary tension of such engagements, and develop powerful inter-group instrumentalities for acting in good faith to bring about the transformations of our common life which such exchanges will demand of us. "Dialogues" about racism and sectarianism that are not wedded to the creation of cross-community collectives with the power to act collaboratively to change things in their communities in concrete and practical ways are of limited value.

Moving Beyond Racial and Sectarian Impasses:
Building Crucibles of Mutual Accountability and Reconciliation in Pluralistic Societies

What is the practical lesson here for two societies struggling to overcome the profound social divisions at the heart of their respective histories? Just as working psychotherapeutically requires the creation of a process in which violent and aggressive thoughts and feelings can be expressed and explored in a contained space, rather than acted out, helping

communities split and in turmoil requires a robust process with continuity, communication and setting of boundaries like those of a therapeutic relationship. Transformative conversation across racial and sectarian barriers requires a context, a place in the real world within which it can happen.

In Northern Ireland an entirely new political context was created in which such joint activity could take place. The Westminster and Capitol Hill models of democracy both require that elections result in a "winner-takes-all" outcome in Government. Whatever the numbers of votes cast, the winner takes full control of the Executive as Prime Minister (based on the number of seats in the House of Commons at Westminster) or President (based on the vote of the Electoral College in the U.S.). By contrast the Good Friday Agreement created a new form of proportionate Government in which the number of votes cast not only produced a precisely proportionate number of seats in the Assembly, and in the membership and Chairmanship of Committees in that Assembly, but also more radically a proportionate number of Ministerial seats in Government. Further to this the Head of Government was split between a First and Deputy First Minister, who had to be elected on a single slate, with a majority of votes from both unionists and nationalists, and these officials could subsequently act only by agreement. They could also only remain in office jointly, the resignation or death of one, resulting in the automatic loss of office for the other. These mechanisms have produced a robust process of partnership which does not assume or require collegiality in advance but whose purpose is to allow for its development out of the practical experience of working together.

Turning to the non-partisan, non-elected context, powerful instances of such a partnership framework are to be found in broad-based community organizations (Chambers, 2003) such as those affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation Network (U.S.), founded by community organizing pioneer Saul Alinsky, and their sister organizations in the Citizens Organizing Foundation (U.K.). In these organizations citizens and people of faith join together through their congregations, schools and civic associations across the lines of race, creed, and class to develop a practical agenda for the well being of their diverse communities based on mutual interests and respect for differences. Then they build the base of power to make that agenda felt within the arena of public decision-making. In more than sixty communities throughout the United States, as well in the six member organizations of the Citizens Organizing Foundation in the United Kingdom, cross-community organizations have been making palpable differences in education, law enforcement, job training, economic development, home ownership, medical care and a variety of other critical issues of public life

for the past thirty years. In these organizations, which are deliberately organized across the lines of race, religion and class, people come to know and often to trust each other in ways that are possible only by acting together on matters of common concern.

The significance of such cross-community organizing for the common good rests not only on the political astuteness and pragmatic effectiveness of the organizations it produces, but on their potential as crucibles for the construction of inclusive civic cultures in a pluralistic world. A crucible is a vessel that will not melt when the ingredients it holds are heated to the point where they are transformed. Given the destructive histories or racism and sectarianism, public work done across the lines of race and sect will inevitably generate moments of emotional heat including grief, anger, shame, mistrust and anxiety. Those wishing to bridge racial and sectarian divides need containers that will not melt when such intense emotions arise, that can hold participants in relationship while public work is done jointly and communities and selves are transformed. By deliberately and patiently building sustainable relationships across the usual barriers of race, creed and class, broad-based cross-community organizations become such crucibles. It is in learning to act together for the common good within carefully cultivated public relationships such as these, that citizens of Northern Ireland and the U.S. today have our best opportunity to create the conditions required for reconciling the devastating histories of sectarianism and racism that continue to burden our societies. Whether those involved will prove able to stand the heat of our respective crucibles remains to be seen, and that will not finally be simply a matter of individual courage and patience, but also of the availability of well organized public relationships.

The practice of broad-based, cross-community organizing also suggests a way of dealing with the tension described above between pragmatist and antiracist advocates of social change. The forte of the pragmatists is organizing for change—bringing people together across typical lines of division to take concrete steps that they agree will make a local community a better place for all. Because they focus on what unites people, not what divides them, the pragmatists have not developed ways of encouraging their members to reflect together on differences of race, religion or class as they engage in practical work for change; indeed, they discourage such conversation. This means that an opportunity, albeit a risky one, to deepen relationships by more intentionally creating the relational crucibles described above is lost. By contrast, the strong suit of anti-racists is consciousness-raising education. Because they believe that people who have not explicitly confronted the history and dynamics of racism cannot be

effective change agents where race is involved, they excel in making people aware of how racism concretely structures society by providing opportunities for some at the expense of others. One limitation of this approach is that an analysis of how racism works does not automatically suggest concrete ways to apply it in action. Sometimes anti-racist educators have little to say on the subject of how to organize for change, and often what they do have to offer on that subject are techniques of organizing *against* the status quo, not *for* something new. In doing so, they promote a form of "community organizing" which IAF and other broad-based organizing networks outgrew long ago. A second limitation of this approach is that insisting that anyone who wants to be part of the solution must past through the gateway of anti-racist education alienates potential allies. The tension between these two positions is not over whether racism and sectarianism exist and are significant problems. Rather it is a dispute about tactics.

But perhaps the most limiting aspect of the anti-racist approach is the way it further divides communities along racial lines by viewing whites (including this generation of whites) as entirely responsible for the creation and maintenance of the problem and bearing the full onus for bringing about change. In Ireland there are some in the nationalist tradition who would identify with such a "black and white" view of orange and green. Here another insight from the realm of psychotherapy may advance our understanding. Psychotherapists are keenly aware that a patient in difficulties may remain so even if the external causes of their problems are removed. More importantly in therapy the patient's own resistance to change may render all therapeutic efforts nugatory.

In psychotherapy we are familiar with a number of concepts which aid our understanding of why removing the cause of a disorder does not lead automatically to its cure.   The psychoanalytic notion of "the Resistance" describes the experience of the therapist that the presentation of a correct, timely and potentially transforming interpretation may not be welcomed, accepted or used by the patient. This resistance to betterment may be part of the difficulty in effecting any change to established patterns.   It may come from what some behaviorists see as "secondary gain" in which benefits may accrue from a symptom.   It may even result in the paradoxical outcome which we know as the "negative therapeutic reaction" whereby improved emotional understanding leads to a worsening of the patient's condition.   In all of these circumstances and other types of resistance to betterment the appropriate response is not to try to force the patient to accept change, or to blame the patient for not wanting to get better, but to explore with some honesty and empathy the patient's resistance. It should not be assumed that

the opportunity to change for the better is any more easily embraced or embarked upon in communal life than in individual experience. This notion of resistance in political progress is generally and mistakenly assumed to lie only with whites in the field of American racism and with unionists in respect of political progress in Northern Ireland, but our experience of psychotherapy and our close political observation and involvement leads us to believe that exploration of the political analogues of resistance on all sides is an urgent necessity. Such awareness will not lead to immediate resolution of either problem, but it could help prevent us making things worse out of the best intentions.

Change is difficult. One suspects that the anti-racism stance intensifies out of frustration when its prescriptions fail to result in a more equal society. For adherents of this position the temptation may then be to "double the dose of the treatment," but in the medical world we know that this is more likely to poison the patient than to effect a cure. For their part, if pragmatists who are seeking change for the better are chronically at cross purposes with good faith actors in the anti-racist camp they may become the unwitting agents of conservatism. Whether the concern is racism or sectarianism (or sexism, or class struggle or nationalism), pragmatists and antis in all arenas would both be materially strengthened in their effectiveness by learning from each other and from academic disciplines including psychotherapy. When the split over tactics is bridged pragmatists will become wiser about barriers to issue-oriented cross-community organizing, and antis will learn how to move beyond consciousness-raising to organize for lasting change. This mutual learning will also make both more effective in reaching out to the growing majority of people who believe that isms are a thing of the past.

Risking engagement in public conversation and action for the common good across racial and sectarian lines both in civil-society organizing and electoral politics is the challenge that we face. Here the words of Dr. Martin Luther King cited in our opening reverberate, encouraging us forward: "Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing." (King, 1963). Establishing communication with others across tribal lines is a necessary but not sufficient response to Dr. King's mandate. We must do something of mutual benefit together. Returning to the importance of forgiveness, Frank Wright, the political sociologist quoted in our opening, observed that "most of us perhaps owe more to violence done on our behalf than we realize" (Wright, 1987). This is a difficult notion to swallow, but if one considers the historic fate of native and African Americans and of Catholics and indeed Protestants in Northern Ireland, its aptness seems

evident. Physical, psychological or systemic violence historically done to others in public life—in the arena of politics, economics and culture—must be publicly rectified. As we have already noted this may have less to do with words of regret or remorse and more with making and keeping new promises in the pluralistic political, economic and cultural arenas of our time. Attempting to ignore racism and sectarianism means allowing the redemptive possibility of a culturally diverse public life to sink beneath the weight of unredeemed history in the United States and Northern Ireland. In a world where history is both unpredictable and irreversible, and where group differences will not go away, those who believe that our children and grandchildren can have personal lives worth living apart from a public life characterized by inclusion, equity and respect for differences are mistaken. So too are those who believe that change for the better is a simple, rational process.

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