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Selected articles

1.   Crimes of Passion: Sociology, Research and Political Violence
Bill Rolston
Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1998; vol. 8: pp. 93-112

2.   The States of Ireland: Some Reflections on Research
Liam O'Dowd
Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1991; vol. 1: pp. 96-106

3.   Class, Ethnicity and Political Identity in Northern Ireland
Colin Coulter
Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1994; vol. 4: pp. 1-26

4.   Conflict Management vs Conflict Resolution: An Emancipatory Approach to the Northern Ireland Conflict
Joseph Ruane
Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1994; vol. 4: pp. 51-66

5.   Drumcree: A Struggle for Recognition
Peter Mulholland
Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1999; vol. 9: pp. 5-3

6.   Protestant Disillusionment with the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement
Bernadette C. Hayes and Ian McAllister
Irish Journal of Sociology, May 2004; vol. 13: pp. 109-125

7.   Catholicism and the Construction of Communal Identity in Northern Ireland
Claire Mitchell
Irish Journal of Sociology, May 2005; vol. 14: pp. 110-130

8.   Can Civil Society Succeed Where Elites Have Failed in the War on Sectarianism? Towards an Infinitely Demanding Politics for the North
Peter Doran
Irish Journal of Sociology, November 2010; vol. 18: pp. 126-150

Northern Ireland and Irish Sociology, 1991-2016

Katy Hayward

A review of research on Northern Ireland presented over the course of the first twenty-five years of the Irish Journal of Sociology (IJS) reveals a striking consistency in focus, effort and arguments across the years. It is remarkable, for example, that much of Liam O'Dowd's paper in the very first issue of the journal would not look out of place in a current issue.[i] Similarly, Bill Rolston's passion in his 1998 article would feel as challenging and as vibrant if it were only being published today.[ii] Indeed, Rolston's paper, from the year of the Agreement, is a powerful, challenging read. His autobiographical reflections, in an article intended to illuminate the experiences of a 'working sociologist', explain the paradox faced by many sociologists in Northern Ireland. On the one hand, there is a surfeit of social research on this small region and, then, it concentrates on a few particular topics; the very subject thus feels too readily passé and lacking in originality. On the other hand, however, the 'working sociologist' in Northern Ireland sees all around nuances and complexities that are sociologically fascinating and yet still apparently unexplained. Rolston's paper addresses this so well; his quest to imagine the 'radical turn' in sociology in the context of Northern Ireland during the Troubles was a particularly difficult course to take. Against an academic environment of both immense sensitivity and residual complacency, he argues:

> Value-free sociology at its worst is anodyne, effete, technocratic; passionate sociology at its best challenges the canon of state propaganda and everyday prejudice. It does not claim to speak for the powerless and marginalised; rather, it challenges the way in which the powerless are represented by the powerful. Yet therein lies the professional dilemma for the radical researcher; where the powerless are deemed to be beyond the pale of polite society, to give any credence to their concerns and fears is to invite opprobrium and marginalisation in turn.[iii]

In his article, Rolston references Liam O'Dowd, who came to lecture in the then Social Studies Department at Queen's University when he was a postgraduate there – and who himself also challenged the prevailing attitude of the University that the 'academic' approach to the social sciences was to be 'as far removed as possible' from the local 'quagmire'. Rolston's challenge to himself remains a challenge to readers today, across all areas of interest: in what ways is our sociological research continuing to 'view the powerless from behind the lines of the powerful'?

Some of the other most intelligent, challenging and durable contributions on Northern Ireland have come from comparative analysis, including careful comparison with the south. The first article in the Irish Journal of Sociology that covered the topic of Northern Ireland was, fittingly, by Liam O'Dowd – a person whose autobiography is truly cross-border, and as a scholar who has led the way in all-island sociological analysis.[iv] It is notable that he wrote not specifically about the north, but rather about the erosion of state boundaries in other ways, mainly through integration into the international capitalist economy. 'State boundaries in Ireland', he argued, 'have never enclosed self-contained economies'. As Northern Ireland faces the prospect of a post-Brexit UK exit from the Single Market and customs union, the relevance of this claim comes back to the fore: perhaps now, 100 years after the Easter Rising, the potential of boundaries of the state to act as economic as well as political barriers looks set to be revealed.

In a different way, Coulter's article, also prior to the 1998 Agreement, claims that ethnoreligious sentiment in Northern Ireland has material and economic foundations which will be eroded only by significant structural reform.[v] The Agreement did not bring about reform of this type. Notably, one of the boldest steps taken by the Northern Ireland executive in the twenty years since the Agreement has been the decision to offer a corporation tax rate significantly lower than that in the rest of the UK – and matching the rate in the Republic. The active support for this policy by unionist politicians reflects the assumption that this is a move that is one most definitely towards integration with the 'international capital economy' rather than integration with the south of Ireland. If the intentions behind it are to lever the economy of Northern Ireland onto a different track, this track is one of quite unimaginative globalisation than anything more radical in terms of socio-economic transformation – particularly such as the like that Coulter was advocating for in his 1994 article. That said, the socio-economic conditions he outlines are significantly different today, with broader trends of widening inequalities *within* – rather than between – the communities being most apparent. Such widening inequality, however, has been addressed most consistently by 'sticking plaster' solutions using local (mainly single identity) community organisations to ameliorate some of the most obvious manifestations of poverty and structural inequity: crime, youth unemployment, young school leavers, suicide, substance misuse.

Coulter's article was one of several in the May 1994 issue of IJS which together encapsulated the response of social scientists to the Opsahl report. It is somewhat disheartening now to turn to the optimistic recommendations of the Opsahl report, which sought to address persistent problems of poverty and social exclusion in a way that simultaneously enhanced civic society, including advancing the rights and position of women, young people and minority groups in Northern Ireland. Ruth Lister's article in the same issue of IJS demonstrates her incisive and clear conceptualisation of citizenship being put to good use in relation to the prospects for positive, bold change in the region.[vi] Another article which reflects a creative attempt to advance understanding of the situation in Northern Ireland include Joseph Ruane's call for an 'emancipatory approach' to the conflict. In so doing, Ruane's response to the challenges of conflict resolution in Northern Ireland brings together both the aforementioned economic and political/ideological dimensions of the conflict in a characteristically imaginative way.[vii] His article complements that of Jennifer Todd in the same issue, which brings to the fore some of the 'alternative' voices within Loyalism that offered a conception of the conflict that goes beyond the traditional binary identities.[viii] This theme is developed two years later by James McAuley, who examines similar differentiation among political expressions of unionism, which open the way for compromise and self-questioning.[ix] Notably, McAuley warns that such movements are vulnerable to being overshadowed by dominant unionist discourse. The fact that the new forms of loyalist imagination identified by McAuley and Todd are rooted in working class communities reflects another dimension of class oppression and domination that is as evident today as it was then.

This thread is worth bearing in mind when reading Hayes and McAllister's 2004 article on Protestant 'disillusionment' with the 1998 Agreement.[x] I have chosen to include this article because the phenomenon which the authors analyse had such major implications for the working-out of the peace process, right to the present day. The pessimism of Protestant respondents regarding the Agreement and community relations fed into the wariness of Trimble (as the first First Minister) in the exercise of trust, compromise and leadership, the suspension of devolution, the rapid decline of

the Ulster Unionist Party and corresponding rise of the DUP. The restoration of power-sharing under the leadership of the DUP and Sinn Féin determined much about the nature of post-Agreement Northern Ireland, not only in terms of the political landscape but also in terms of social policy and the democratic environment. Hayes and McAllister's analysis offers an important explanation for the DUP's willingness to push Northern Ireland's devolution structures to the brink of collapse (as prior to the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 and the Fresh Start Agreement in 2015) rather than being seen as a too-willing partner with Sinn Féin. Indeed, it also helps to explain the DUP's most recent approach to Brexit – holding onto the coattails of London rather than collaborate with Sinn Féin on identifying and advocating for the particular needs of Northern Ireland.

One of the most iconic moments in Northern Ireland's social and political history in the past twenty five years was the image of David Trimble and Ian Paisley's 'victory jig' – hands joined and aloft – down Garvaghy Road in 1995. The marriage of politics and culture, protest and triumph, was embodied in this act, and spurred the Orange Order to a position of renewed influence and defiance. Mulholland's paper offers a well-considered insight into the dynamics behind contested parades – the sectarianism, the spatial segregation, the communal distrust – and the reason why they continue to prove so difficult to resolve up to the present day.[xi] In his in-depth analysis of everyday social experiences in the case study of Portadown as a 'bitter' and divided town, Mulholland sheds light on the private fears and prejudices that are made manifest in the very public displays of the Twelfth July parades. This paper covers a lot of ground, offering marvellous reminders of the damaged relations from which a peace process had to be formed. Although many of the elements of this paper would still be familiar in Northern Ireland, it does feel like an historical piece – a snapshot of a very different era in Northern Ireland – and in so doing offers some positive sense of the progress made in the years since. Although contested parades are still an issue, the success of mediation and accommodation in this particular area is worth noting.

Claire Mitchell's article on Catholicism in Northern Ireland is unusual not only in that it tackles this subject directly, but also in its argument, which directly challenges the constructionist assumptions about the role of religion.[xii] The same logic that dismisses unionism as delusional disregards the powerful function of religion in contemporary Northern Ireland. Mitchell's doctoral research came at a time when the characterisation of religion as merely an 'ethno-national marker' (led by the work of Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry)[xiii] held sway in social science circles, and helped prop up the assumptions behind the consociational approach to a settlement in Northern Ireland. Mitchell's careful work on the role played by religion in shaping identities, preferences, institutions and differences offered the reader substantive evidence for better understanding its importance, even in an increasingly secularised context. The fact that her arguments resonate so significantly among a new generation of readers (her work is a consistent favourite among my students each year) is testament to the insights she offers, and a credit to her courage as a young researcher in putting forward a sociological argument that stood its ground despite apparent contradiction from renowned professors of political science. (May her example offer some encouragement to present day early career researchers in Irish sociology!)

The momentous 1998 Agreement was not marked any flurry of publication in IJS on the topic. Indeed, it was not until over a decade later that one of the most exciting articles on the subject was published. Peter Doran's question: 'Can Civil Society Succeed Where Elites Have Failed in the War on

Sectarianism?' resonates still today.[xiv] His article responds to the 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' strategy document that was – as it turned out, and ironically enough – never to be put into action, as a result of the inability of those charged with implementing it to move into agreement on the matter. As Duncan Morrow so aptly described it, the model of cooperation that is manifest at all levels in Northern Ireland is one of a 'shared out' rather than a 'shared' society.[xv] Reassurance as to fairness is based on the fact there is the same amount given to each community rather than on the accountability or transparency of the use of the money. In light of this, Doran's vision of a different type of role for civil society seems all the more remote, and all the more necessary.

It is with some regret that space constraints prevent me from including a number of other articles here. Monica Feng-Bing's article on Hong Kong teenagers growing up in Belfast offers an important addition to our understanding of how culture, identity and habitus are manifest in the contemporary city.[xvi] The fact that the habitus of the children is predominantly Chinese suggests an underlying exclusion or alienation between local children and others that has implications for how difference is accommodated in contemporary Northern Ireland. A different perspective on the experience and narration of segregated Belfast is present in Madeleine Leonard's piece on 'dark tourism'.[xvii] The banter and stories of the different tour guides reflects their efforts to present an 'authentic' tale about their city, one that plays on tourists' curiosity regarding the violent past whilst attempting to seize upon the city's slow immersion into the trends of modern globalised capitalism. Rosemary Moreland's paper on adult education in the border region is a fascinating depiction of some of the progressive forms of cooperation at the local level – and the obstacles posed by the border and by community differences – [xviii] obstacles that may well grow stronger as a result of Brexit and rising trends of border securitisation that are happening around Europe and around the UK.

Reflecting briefly on the very process of drawing together this special issue, I must note that the presence of Northern Ireland as a subject in IJS was not what I had anticipated. Of the forty-odd articles and book reviews in IJS (since its foundation in 1991) that relate to Northern Ireland as a key word or topic, only a small proportion had the region as a primary focus (the issue responding to the Opsahl Commission report in 1994 was exceptional). Most articles refer to the north as part of broader considerations of all-island patterns of change (cf. works by James Anderson and James Goodman on north-south economic integration,[xix] or by Tom Inglis and Susie Donnelly on national belonging and globalisation),[xx] or indirectly, as part of articles critiquing concepts such as violence (cf. Mennell)[xxi] or post-nationalism (cf. Paul Blokker).[xxii]

Indeed, it is notable that book reviews on Northern Ireland outnumber the articles by a ratio of at least 4:1. This may suggest a proactive effort by the IJS Book Review editors to ensure some north-south balance across issues of the journal but it more likely reflects the fact that the 1990s and early 2000s were bumper years for publishing books on Northern Ireland. One thing that is quite clear: whilst there are several articles on Protestant and Unionist communities and perspectives, and – to a lesser extent – all-island Irish identities, there is a dearth of analysis on Catholicism and nationalism in the north. It is notable that most of the authors on loyalism, unionism and Protestantism explore a purported crisis – or at least significant flux – in their articles for IJS; [xxiii] an overview of twenty-five years' worth of papers of this nature would perhaps lead a reader to draw the conclusion that flux and insecurity is part of the condition of unionism… and one in which it has learned to flourish. The

negative implications of this for those who suffer the indignity of being the literal flag-bearers for unionism whilst being largely held at arms' length from the locus of power are apparent. The Flags Protest of 2013 and the Twaddell encampment (dismantled in 2016) are but the most recent manifestations of loyalist anger at seeing Sinn Féin strutting the corridors of power previously exclusively occupied by a Unionist elite… whilst the representation of working class loyalism remains predominantly confined to images of the Twelfth parades or to lurid gangland gossip in the Sunday Life.[xxiv] This leads to a question that those of us concerned with the sociology of contemporary Northern Ireland really need to ask ourselves: in analysing some of the more curious aspects of northern culture, do we risk reproducing layers of inequality and marginalisation that keep loyalism as something of an anachronistic curio?

A review of academic articles on Northern Ireland included in IJS articles over the past twenty-five years also points to the acuity of sociologists in identifying the problems (their sources, exacerbating factors, implications) that have proven to be profoundly consequential as the peace process has matured. Although these articles and their authors have clearly influenced academic thinking and understanding of the situation in the north, it is impossible not to wonder about the wider 'impact' of such research. There are many reasons why research that challenges policy or political practice is not taken up – lack of interest, lack of money, lack of influence, lack of initiative – such excuses are easy to name. In a socio-political environment that thrives on complacency and pillarisation, we cannot expect an open door when it comes to making an 'impact' where it matters. Evidence and argument is insufficient; change will require imagination, effort and collaboration. In another twenty-five years' time, what will academics have had to have done differently in order to have at last been able to defuse any one of these persistent problems? It is appropriate at this point to refer back to Rolston's conclusion, writing almost two decades ago: "there will continue to be reason and space for passion and commitment in social research, despite the consequences".[xxv]

[i] O'Dowd, Liam, 'The States of Ireland: Some Reflections on Research', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1991; vol. 1: pp. 96-106

[ii] Rolston, Bill 'Crimes of Passion: Sociology, Research and Political Violence', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1998; vol. 8, p.93-112.

[iii] Rolston, Bill 'Crimes of Passion: Sociology, Research and Political Violence', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1998; vol. 8, p.97.

[iv] O'Dowd, Liam, 'The States of Ireland: Some Reflections on Research', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1991; vol. 1: pp. 96-106

[v] Coulter, Colin, 'Class, Ethnicity and Political Identity in Northern Ireland', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1994; vol. 4: pp. 1-26

[vi] Lister, Ruth, 'Social Policy in a Divided Community: Reflections on the Opsahl Report on the Future of Northern Ireland', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1994; vol. 4: pp. 27-50

[vii] Ruane, Joseph, 'Conflict Management vs Conflict Resolution: An Emancipatory Approach to the Northern Ireland Conflict', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1994; vol. 4: pp. 51-66

[viii] Todd, Jennifer, 'History and Structure in Loyalist Ideology: The Possibilities of Ideological Change', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1994; vol. 4: pp. 67-79

[ix] McAuley, James White, '(Re) Constructing Ulster Loyalism? Political Responses to the 'Peace Process'', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1996; vol. 6: pp. 127-153

[x] Hayes, Bernadette C., McAllister, Ian, 'Protestant Disillusionment with the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 2004; vol. 13: pp. 109-125

[xi] Mulholland, Peter, 'Drumcree: A Struggle for Recognition', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1999; vol. 9: pp. 5-30

[xii] Mitchell, Claire, 'Catholicism and the Construction of Communal Identity in Northern Ireland', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 2005; vol. 14: pp. 110-130

[xiii] McGarry, J. and O'Leary, B. Explaining Northern Ireland, 1995, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

[xiv] Doran, Peter, 'Can Civil Society Succeed Where Elites Have Failed in the War on Sectarianism? Towards an Infinitely Demanding Politics for the North', Irish Journal of Sociology, Nov 2010; vol. 18: pp. 126-150

[xv] Morrow, Duncan, 'Serious plan needed for real shared future', The News Letter, 18 January 2008.
http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/your-say/serious-plan-needed-for-real-shared-future-1-1863273

[xvi] Feng-Bing, Monica, 'Experiencing Difference: Cultural Alienation of the Hong Kong Chinese Children in Northern Ireland', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 2009; vol. 17: pp. 56-74

[xvii] Leonard, Madeleine, 'A Tale of Two Cities: 'Authentic Tourism in Belfast'', Irish Journal of Sociology, Nov 2011; vol. 19: pp. 111-126

[xviii] Moreland, Rosemary, 'Adult and Community Education in Border Communities: The 'Borderlands Case Study', Irish Journal of Sociology, Dec 2007; vol. 16: pp. 160-178

[xix] 'Problems of North-South Economic Integration and Politics in Ireland: Southern Perspectives', IJS, May 1997; vol. 7: pp. 29-52

[xx] Local and National Belonging in A Globalised World', IJS, Nov 2011; vol. 19: pp. 127-143

[xxi] 'Civilisation and Decivilisation, Civil Society and Violence', IJS, May 1995; vol. 5: pp. 1-21

[xxii] Constitutions and Democracy in Post-National Times: A Political-Sociological Approach, IJS, Nov 2012; vol. 20: pp. 68-90

[xxiii] See, for example, White, Andrew, 'Is Contemporary Ulster Unionism in Crisis? Changes in Unionist Identity during the Northern Ireland Peace Process', Irish Journal of Sociology, Jun 2007; vol. 16: pp. 118-135; and Nagle, John, 'The Ulster Unionist Victims' Movement: Political Opportunities and Injustice Masterframes', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 2009; vol. 17: pp. 19-37

[xxiv] In light of this, it is sobering to note how little distance we have travelled since Graham Spencer's call for a rethinking of the relationship between the news media and politics as a vital means of protecting the health of the peace process. See, 'Keeping the Peace? Politics, Television News and the Northern Ireland Peace Process',
Irish Journal of Sociology, Nov 2001; vol. 10: pp. 57-76.

[xxv] Rolston, Bill 'Crimes of Passion: Sociology, Research and Political Violence', Irish Journal of Sociology, May 1998; vol. 8, p.110.