

Chapter 5

Conflict Transformation, Cultural Innovation, and Loyalist Identity in Northern Ireland

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Walking through the streets of loyalist¹ working-class East Belfast or the Shankill Road, one encounters political and cultural expressions ranging from hastily daubed slogans and acronyms of paramilitary organizations to flags, banners, and elaborate wall murals. The murals celebrate historic victories and crises in loyalist mythology, commemorate fallen comrades and neighbors, and valorize paramilitary organizations and local bands. They have become hallmarks of Northern Ireland's Troubles, and in recent years have become the subject of a growing tourism industry. Scholars have noted the functions murals serve in expressing communal identity and ideology, marking territory, and delivering statements beyond the locale in which the murals reside (Jarman 2005; Rolston 1991). I will focus on the role murals and other cultural expressions play in expressing and shaping communal identity and communicating beyond the community, and I argue that they constitute mediums through which communities and their leaders can experiment with a community's symbolic landscape and shift the focus of their collective identity from defensiveness and exclusivity to one that is more inclusive and empowering.

Walking through East Belfast, one now comes across murals featuring local historical and cultural topics such as the building of the passenger liner *Titanic* and C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The redesign of paramilitary murals and modification of other traditional forms of cultural expression reflect shifts in historical perspective, offer alternative cultural expressions and a means of pursuing collective grievances, and generally shift the tone of loyalism, even if only relative to

the traditional ubiquity of martial themes that have reinforced siege mentalities and alienated Catholic nationalist communities.² Murals and other forms of publicly expressing loyalist identity provide windows onto a critical process in conflict transformation: changing perceptions of the conflict and softening out-group boundaries by redefining collective identities in ways that are empowering and yet less polarizing.

This essay is part of a larger research project examining a growing shift among loyalists as they attempt to enhance their political cachet by modifying public expressions of collective identity, such as parades and bonfires that have traditionally been seen by Northern Ireland's Catholics and many outsiders as intimidating and triumphalist. Collective action and collective identity are mutually recursive, and a change in one signals or requires a change in the other. To the extent that loyalists begin to publicly emphasize features of their identity, often through cultural expressions and enactments, that are not defensive or retributive expressions toward Catholic nationalists and republicans, they signal a new orientation across the political and sectarian divide. While they aim to maintain in-group solidarity and ontological security through these practices, they also lower the salience of sectarian and ethnopolitical boundaries that have helped fuel conflict in Ireland.

Local community leaders and activists play an important role in experimenting with the boundaries of communal identities, using their own intimate and internalized sense of their communities to carefully choreograph innovative public expressions of loyalism. This process contributes to conflict transformation in Northern Ireland as loyalists attempt to empower themselves, diminish the intensity of their siege mentality, and orient themselves in a more cooperative way to new political and economic circumstances in the region. Here, I present a model for grass-roots conflict transformation, emphasize the importance of identity in ethnopolitical conflict in Northern Ireland, and detail the role murals play as a medium for the expression of and innovation in loyalist collective identity. I use as an illustration the ability of *local* leaders to maintain and yet reorient loyalist worldviews and narratives in ways that could improve the environment for community relations work and continued political progress toward a shared democratic future.

Ethnopolitical Identity and Conflict

Polarized ethnic identities have become a widely recognized factor exacerbating allegedly intractable conflicts as groups develop contradictory, negative, and mutually reinforcing out-group stereotypes. In extreme conflict situations, groups can become so polarized that the conflict itself constitutes a fundamental element in groups' inverse iden-

ties. Adversaries' identities can become defined in such a way that they are mutually exclusive of one another, indivisible, and nonnegotiable. They become inseparable from conflict that tends to be seen in zero-sum terms reflecting exclusive definitions of "us" and "them." Using this calculus, any gain by one side amounts to an unacceptable loss by the other side, and to each group, it seems as if their very existence is under threat. Such groups respond defensively, and further modify their own worldviews to distinguish their opponents in even more stark terms (Brewer and Higgins 1998; Coy and Woehrle 2000; Kriesberg, Northrup, and Thorson 1989; Northrup 1997; Tajfel 1981; Waddell and Cairns 1986). Such conflicts are often called "intractable" because the vicious cycle involving identity and retributive collective action becomes almost seamless. As Northrup (1992) points out, a cultural "collusion" can develop between adversaries in ethnic conflict. When groups define themselves and each other in terms of the conflict, they collude in perpetuating the psychological bases for destructive conflict. Giving up the conflict is akin to giving up an important part of their own identity.

Identity plays such a crucial role in these conflicts because shared schema for perceiving the world around them direct ethnic groups to interpret their actions and those of their opponents in ways that protect in-group ontological security. Ross (2001) calls these schema "psycho-cultural interpretations" or "the shared, deeply rooted worldviews that help groups make sense of daily life and provide psychologically meaningful accounts of a group's relationship with other groups, their actions and motives" (159). We refer to worldviews that become widely shared as "collective identities" that are constructed and reconstructed from origin myths, historical narratives, commentary on contemporary states of affairs, and teleological visions (especially when religion serves as a resource for identity construction) (Brewer and Higgins 1998; Higgins and Brewer 2002).

Polarized communal identities are constructed and reconstructed on a daily basis over long periods of time, sometimes spectacularly (through intimidation and direct attacks), symbolically (public rituals, flags, and emblems), and sometimes in quite mundane ways (what newspaper one buys, where one shops, or where one attends school). Each becomes invested with emotional value, and one of the greatest challenges in addressing intractable conflict in divided societies lies in slowing and reversing a vicious and yet often subtle cycle of out-group prejudice, dehumanization, coercion, and fear. To the extent that opponents in a conflict situation ignore, condone, or openly advocate intimidation or violence, they will heighten out-group boundaries and cast responsibility for violence on one another. Intergroup boundaries can become so rigid and others vilified and dehumanized to such an extent that group

members become more likely to sanction and employ the use of lethal force, fueling a cycle of fear, retribution, and division.

In intractable conflicts, according to social identity theorists, natural tendencies to create in-group/out-group distinctions become heightened as each group feels under threat and rallies around increasingly defensive collective identities seeking to maintain ontological security. However, the process is not aberrant; the construction of in-group and out-group identities is part and parcel of social life. Cognitive psychologists, through social identity theory, assert that all people have a limited capacity for processing stimuli from the world around them. They simplify the world through social schemata, stereotypes, or ideologies, thus meeting a need for ontological coherence and maintaining a positive sense of self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity. The combination of these drives produces solidarity and in-group cohesion, while strongly differentiating one's own group from out-groups facilitates the process (Cairns 1994; Gecas 2000; Melucci 1995; Tajfel 1982).

In societies that have become deeply divided and in which groups have come to fear one another, the options of leaving one's own group are limited, either because the social solidarity costs are so high or there simply are not other groups readily available to which one can switch. As Cairns (1994) has put it, "What I hope Social Identity Theory will do is influence people to see the conflict as a form of behavior which is determined by essentially normal psychological processes, but normal psychological processes which are operating in exceptional circumstances" (14). Those circumstances include a long history of colonialism, resistance, discrimination, open conflict, and in many cases poverty. Political struggles of this sort that involve core group identities (consider Israel and Palestine, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia) have proven particularly contentious and susceptible to intractability (Kriesberg 1998b; Northrup 1989).

In Northern Ireland, a range of political, religious, and ethnic traditions tend to align broadly into Protestant unionist/loyalist and Catholic nationalist/republican blocs that maintain incompatible views on the history and sovereignty of six of the nine counties of Ulster that make up Northern Ireland. Religious sectarianism, language, music, and communal values, to name a few, are employed to distinguish one community from another or signal out-group differences, either through public display, such as ritual, or in discourse and narrative within and between groups.

Over centuries of conflict in Ireland and over the course of the "Troubles," from approximately 1968 to 1998, Northern Ireland has become a deeply divided society in which Protestants and Catholics have been pushed and pulled into segregated public spheres. British colonialism,

Protestant unionist rule through the middle of the twentieth century, paramilitary intimidation, and radical political movements have each contributed to the trend. Protestants and Catholics motivated by fear, anger, habit, and tradition have routinely segregated themselves in education, housing, sports, and arts, to name a few domains. While a great deal of attention is paid to the working-class communities in which paramilitarism and the state's counterterrorism efforts have been focused, ethnopolitical division is subtly perpetuated or allowed to continue throughout society (Liechty and Clegg 2001).

Conflict Transformation

Conflict in Northern Ireland has taken remarkable turns toward peace in recent years. Tentative and secretive back-channel contacts and negotiations in the early 1990s led to the 1994 ceasefires, followed by difficult negotiations that produced the Belfast Agreement (often called the Good Friday Agreement) and powersharing governance in the form of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The assembly collapsed in the wake of an espionage scandal in 2002 but was restored in the spring of 2007, again after much political turmoil and negotiation, under the leadership of erstwhile adversaries Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness of the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, respectively. Throughout the political peace process, careful negotiations, impression management, risk-taking, and artful diplomacy on the part of politicians and influential leaders in civil society have made an imperfect but viable plan for democratic politics possible.

A comprehensive attempt to make sustainable politics work in Northern Ireland will have to consider the immense influence of polarized ethnic identities. Political peace processes are essential to the transformation of ethnopolitical conflict into constructive politics, but they are inevitably tied to grassroots community relations. Over time, as conflicts become inseparable from the cultures and identities of the communities in which they are waged, political negotiations become increasingly difficult. Political leaders' abilities to make compromises and embrace new initiatives are enabled and limited by their support bases and the extent to which their respective communities have become alienated from one another and feel that their traditions and identity are under threat. If agreed structural arrangements that facilitate political cooperation allow the cultural and psychological underpinnings of division to persist, they bring the sustainability of peace into question. Rev. Gary Mason of the East Belfast Mission, who has undertaken a great deal of community development work in the area characterized the challenge: "I think my worry always about this peace process is if you do end up building a

benign apartheid, there's nothing to say that in ten or fifteen years the thing cannot begin all over again, but you know there are big questions. How do you heal memories? How do you get people to engage genuinely? There are lots of models out there. But what is genuine engagement? What does that mean? And, how do you stop people when the doors are closed, the curtains are closed, telling stories, passing pain, hatred, and sectarianism down to another generation?"³ The persistence of mutually polarized social worlds and identities remains an important concern with which practitioners and scholars continue to wrestle as peace processes are largely dependent on changes in grassroots identities and aspirations that have often been forged and hardened over decades of violent conflict.

A great deal of effort has been directed at undermining prejudice and stereotyping, especially among youth in Northern Ireland, in attempts to "transform" conflict. Conflict transformation involves *both* a shift away from coercive means of conducting conflict to persuasion or reward *and* subjective redefinitions of out-groups (Kriesberg 1998a).⁴ Unlike conflict resolution initiatives, which tend to focus more narrowly on encouraging adversaries' representatives to negotiate over discrete aspirations and grievances, often with the assistance of a third-party neutral mediator, conflict transformation efforts recognize the importance of building and improving *relationships* at multiple levels, from grassroots to the "highest" levels of politics. A conflict is in a state of transformation when fundamentally polarized in-group and out-group perceptions have begun to change, albeit slowly and incrementally, and when each side's narratives and the society's symbolic landscape become less polarizing (Ross 2007). These shifts can be understood as both indicators of social structural and political change and as prerequisites for future change. Emotions, identities, ideologies, prejudices, and the rituals and expressions that express and sustain them in both Protestant and Catholic communities must begin to accommodate one another such that an increasing level of trust can be established that enables conflict resolution work to establish an infrastructure of nonviolent politics and cooperation in civil society (Lederach 1997). Ethnopolitical identities in this model are sturdy to be sure, but they are also malleable, opening possibilities for the mitigation of deeply polarized collective identities.

Transformation Within Communities and Traditions

Cultivating pliable collective identities remains a central challenge for peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. I argue here that much of the critical work of developing less polarized collective identities takes place *within* even the most traumatized communities, and I offer examples

from loyalist neighborhoods in Northern Ireland where mural redesign projects and other innovations in traditional cultural expressions may contribute to reshaping contours of loyalist identity. In urban communities, where the violence of the Troubles has been concentrated, organized violence and cultural expressions exert an influence within communities and foster stark out-group divisions, often between Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods that adjoin one another. This chapter focuses primarily on loyalist East Belfast, but I hasten to reemphasize that while contention between urban loyalist and republican areas can be particularly severe, sectarian and political division in Northern Ireland is perpetuated across the region in rural and middle-class communities, often through the daily structuration of parallel Protestant and Catholic lifeworlds.⁵

A great deal of time, effort, and resources have been expended in Northern Ireland over the past twenty-five years in important programmatic attempts to improve community relations (Bloomfield 1997; Fitzduff 2002). Some refer disparagingly to the “community relations industry” of professional researchers, trainers, administrators, and youth and community workers who have worked to bridge the sectarian gap, most often among youth. Mediation programs, cross-community clubs, art initiatives, international travel programs, and sports tournaments, to name a few, have aimed to diminish alienation and fear generated by three decades and more of ethnopolitical conflict. Research by Gidron, Katz, and Hasenfeld (2002b) shows that peace and conflict resolution organizations (PCROs) in Northern Ireland have made significant, if sometimes subtle, contributions that can prove difficult to quantify (Gidron, Katz, and Hasenfeld 2002a; Schubotz and Robinson 2006). Still, the challenge of overcoming the polarization of Protestant and Catholic communities remains, as evidenced by high levels of residential segregation and the continued prominence of ethnopolitical identities (Poole and Doherty 1996; Shuttleworth and Lloyd 2006).

Much of the community relations work carried out by PCROs has been based on contact theory which holds that bringing groups (usually youth) who are alienated from one another into contact can help break down stereotypes and prejudices, opening the way for dialogue and mutual understanding. Research has focused on determining the most conducive circumstances in which contact produces the desired results (Amir 1969; Cairns 1994; Connolly 2000; Hewstone and Brown 1986; Pettigrew 1998). During the 1990s, however, many community relations practitioners found that bringing Protestant and Catholic groups together for brief periods of time was less effective than they had hoped, especially if each group lacked a critical level of self-awareness regarding their own identity, history, and fears. Thus, “single-identity” work, as it

has been called, became prominent among practitioners (Church, Visser, and Johnson 2004; Hughes 2003). The work is premised on the idea that groups of people who are not confident in their own identity are more likely to feel anxiety in their encounters with members of other communities, to respond aggressively, and are less likely to overcome stereotypes and broaden their identification outside of their traditional community (Niens, Cairns, and Hewstone 2003).

I propose we can take the single-identity lesson further by seeking to identify and better understand attempts developed *within* communities to define, critique, and modify their own senses of identity. According to Schubotz and Robinson's (2006) analysis of the 2005 "Young Life and Times Survey" in Northern Ireland, 45 percent of respondents identified their family as the most important influence on their views about the other religious community. Nineteen percent identified friends as most influential, predictably suggesting that out-group attitudes are sustained within communities. Contact theory research finds that projects designed and executed with the initiative or approval of local community leaders allow greater freedom for participants to experiment with new orientations toward out-groups (Amir 1969; Pettigrew 1998). When local community leaders and authority figures undertake to alter or selectively emphasize familiar expressions of communal identity, they do so with a credibility and legitimacy that is often not part of programmatic community relations initiatives.

Leadership and Collective Identities

Less polarizing worldviews are best developed as closely as possible to sources of communal legitimacy through internal transformation that emphasizes the articulation of constructive alternative visions from *within* each communal tradition. Liechty and Clegg (2001) have stressed the importance of internal or local transformation in their excellent work on religious sectarianism and reconciliation: "What is far more constructive is for a community to learn to hear its own ancestral voices anew, with or without the aid of outside voices . . . When destructive ancestral voices are countered from within the tradition, they are weakened and silenced as effectively as they ever can be" (178).

Research shows that leaders have the ability to shape collective identity and its cultural expressions (Brewer 2003). This is true only within limits, however, because authority is a communal product. Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) work on politics proves useful here because he recognizes that authority is not something that political leaders possess; authority is a resource within their constituencies which they access. Leaders command cultural capital that allows them to speak in such a way that their

language is recognized as legitimate; they are able to tap into wells of meaning that make up collective identity. With that ability, they represent the group to itself in innovative ways, but leaders who go too far in jettisoning the cultural trappings of their community often find themselves with diminished influence in the community. As Lederach (1997) argues, leaders “are under tremendous pressure to maintain a position of strength vis à vis their adversaries and their own constituencies. . . . This, coupled with a high degree of publicity, often constrains the freedom of maneuver of leaders operating at this level” (40). And yet, they must seek some measure of freedom to maneuver in order to be effective negotiators. Politicians in Northern Ireland are no strangers to the dilemma. Since the early 1980s, Sinn Féin’s political leadership has worked tirelessly to hone the party’s ability to utilize the deep well of republican myth, both claiming the cachet of the armed struggle and cultivating politics as an equally powerful strategy in the hearts and minds of the republican movement (Shirlow and McGovern 1998).

Gormley-Heenan and Robinson (2003) refer to this careful dance as “elastic band leadership.” Leaders in negotiations must deliver their constituencies, so they must pay careful attention and present themselves as the receptacles of core beliefs and commitments. However, in order to be effective negotiators, they must also stretch their constituents to embrace new ideas and jettison some former commitments (such as “not one inch” or “not one bullet,” in the Northern Ireland case). The process of introducing new ideas and opening the community to new possibilities can be a slow one. Collective identities must have ontological continuity; they must have authenticity and be recognized as bearing the imprimatur of the community. Moving too quickly can endanger ontological security and create a backlash and a retreat to insularity.

The potential also exists for local figures in communities to innovate and contribute to the constructive reframing of their communal identities, and consequently, the way in which conflict is conducted. Referring to peace processes in South Africa and Northern Ireland, Brewer (2003) states, “In some cases local spaces are opening up in which, for example, grassroots peacemaking and reconciliation are possible, and in which new identities can be experimented with and perceived as possible or in which existing identities come to be seen as more flexible and inclusive than previously imagined” (163). In these cases, collective identities and their cultural expressions can be subtly altered in ways that are ontologically consonant, but that open the group’s orientation to hear their adversaries in a new constructive way or at least minimize the alienating effect of a particular cultural expression. Liechty and Clegg (2001) refer to this process as “mitigation” and define it as “. . . the capacity to lessen

or eliminate possible negative outcomes of a belief, commitment, or action. What cannot be negotiated can sometimes be mitigated” (229). In short, practices that threaten and intimidate out-groups can be modified so that they are less likely to cause offense and feed destructive relations.

Action, Identity, and Feet-First Persuasion

Similarly, McCauley (2002) calls for “feet-first persuasion” noting a “power of small steps to motivate larger steps in the same direction.” One might consider it a slippery-slope model. The central mechanism lies in the setting of precedents within communities. There is something to be said for instances of innovation, moments in which groups redefine themselves and even conduct conflict with opposing parties in less destructive ways. Even experimentation can set precedents for further development, at least in part because action and identity are recursively related. The actions that groups or communities carry out both reflect and contribute to the formation of their collective identities. Rituals and expressions that feature less exclusive narratives and images can open the way to a shared symbolic landscape and enhance the potential for cooperation and coexistence.

Because intractable conflict is driven largely by polarized communal identities and the mode of conflict methods employed, it is important that transformation include changes in both of these factors. In many cases, experimentation with a new collective action or a new twist on an old tradition can trigger a reassessment of collective identity. McCauley (2002) captures this in his discussion of dissonance theory: “When we act in a way that is inconsistent with our attitudes and values, we are likely to change our beliefs to rationalize the new behaviors. The motivation for the change is to avoid looking stupid or sleazy to ourselves or others” (253). There are times during which a movement toward persuasive conflict methods, toward a more constructive stance, can provoke a constructive redefinition of collective identity. Somewhere in this cycle of action and identity, change takes place, both in the kinds of actions in which communities engage when they encounter one another and the construction of meaning and identity.

Influential meaning makers (intellectuals, artists, writers, poets, political and civic leaders) articulate group identity through various media that represent communities to themselves. In the process of disseminating rhetoric within the community and promoting persuasive or rewarding actions over others, they may incrementally influence communal preferences concerning the conduct of conflict. Though this chapter does not attempt to formally assess levels of local support for these initia-

tives or degrees of implementation, they are among the factors that will determine the extent to which initiatives can help undermine polarization between Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. Further research assessing the success or failure of these and similar projects will reveal the ability (or inability) of alienated and traumatized communities to contribute to postconflict peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.⁶

Murals and Loyalist Cultural Innovation

Of particular relevance here is a new trend of cultural innovation developing within loyalist communities. Initiatives are emerging that aim to reform cultural practices such as paramilitary murals, Orange Order parades,⁷ and bonfires, to make them less offensive to nationalist and republican communities, the British and Irish governments, and the international community. On 12 July each year, the Orange Order celebrates the victory in 1690 of King William III's victory over the Jacobite forces of James II at the Battle of the Boyne. The Twelfth celebrations are preceded on the Eleventh night by the burning of large bonfires in Protestant communities across Northern Ireland. Tricolor flags of the Republic of Ireland and other nationalist or republican symbols are often burned with the bonfires.

The Orange Order in recent years has moved to make Twelfth parades more family-friendly by sponsoring historical reenactments, fun fairs, and Ulster-Scots musical performances. Indeed, in 2006, the British government pledged £104,000 to support the creation of an "Orangefest" to make the Twelfth celebrations more welcoming to tourists (BBC 2006b). Belfast City Council has pledged £90,000 in a scheme to downsize enormous Eleventh-night bonfires to symbolic beacons (BBC 2006a). Plans have been proposed in some neighborhoods to ensure that flags and banners do not linger on lampposts after the summer parading season has passed (see Bryan and Gillespie 2005). Leaders in loyalist communities presumably hope through these initiatives to maintain solidarity within their communities, diminish the sense of isolation and exclusion they have experienced, and develop political advantage by undermining the charges of triumphalism often leveled against them. This focus is particularly timely, as the British and Irish governments turn their attention to loyalist communities in an attempt to win support for devolution and decommissioning of loyalist paramilitary organizations.

Murals in Northern Ireland have become one of the more famous expressions of collective ethnopolitical identity. Historically, they have been found primarily in loyalist neighborhoods. The practice can be

traced to the turn of the twentieth century and became increasingly common as partition was established in 1920. The Northern Ireland state that followed ensured unionist ascendancy, and murals became a widely accepted way for Protestant communities to declare their support for unionist politics, and Protestant expressions of British loyalty were approved if not officially sanctioned by the unionist-controlled Stormont government. Early murals featured reproductions of King William of Orange crossing the Boyne River atop his steed during the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Not surprisingly, murals have been connected to annual Twelfth commemorations of the same battle in which the forces of the Protestant “King Billy” defeated the deposed Catholic King James II and his Jacobite army. During the Twelfth holidays, murals were often unveiled and retouched to complement a range of other traditional activities such as the erection of arches, bunting, and flags, the painting of curbstones, and of course, parades by the loyal institutions, such as the Orange Order (Bryan 2000; Jarman 1997; Rolston 1991).

As Rolston (1991, 1992) reports, the comfortable relationship between Protestants and the British government became strained with the advent of the Troubles in the late 1960s, and as the local Stormont government was superseded by direct rule from Westminster. Loyalist murals declined amid unionist and loyalist confusion over their new status as British citizens who were increasingly dissatisfied with British policy in Northern Ireland. The murals that did appear largely abandoned the traditional themes of Britishness and Protestant ascendancy and turned to iconic references to Ulster,⁸ such as the flag of Northern Ireland, which features the Red Hand and St. George’s cross. Through the late 1980s and 1990s, loyalist murals proliferated and became militant, featuring loyalist paramilitary organizations such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Ulster Defense Association/Ulster Freedom Fighters (UDA/UFF), and the Red Hand Commando. Younger politicized painters commonly produced images of balaclava-clad paramilitary members wielding automatic weapons surrounded by flags, slogans, and emblems. Intimidating murals such as these in both loyalist and republican neighborhoods are common and have served to mark territory and project threat to outsiders while discouraging dissent within communities. In loyalist communities, paramilitary murals have also been used to distinguish territory controlled by rival paramilitary organizations.

Like other forms of collective cultural expression, murals represent communities to themselves and help define collective identity in a number of ways: through shaping collective memory, commemorating lost comrades and community members, declaring that the community is under pressure or attack, or memorializing a long history of sacrifice.



Figure 5.1. UVF mural in West Belfast, a typical paramilitary representation.

Rolston (1992) describes the expressive character of murals: “Through their murals both loyalists and republicans parade their ideologies publicly. The murals act, therefore, as a sort of barometer of political ideology. Not only do they articulate what republicanism or loyalism stands for in general, but, manifestly or otherwise, they reveal the current status of each of these political beliefs” (27). Murals exhibit political ideology, and in the case of Northern Ireland’s loyalists, the decline and resurgence of mural painting as well as its content have reflected the broad outlines of the unionist and loyalist psyche. This, incidentally, is not to say that all residents of loyalist neighborhoods appreciate or condone paramilitary activity or the murals that valorize them and mark territory. In fact, murals are often placed without the consent of local residents under an unspoken threat of intimidation that ensures paramilitary organizations can claim territory as they see fit through the placement of murals. Nonetheless, Neil Jarman argues that murals have not just reflected but have promoted solidarity in both loyalist and republican

neighborhoods. From the beginning, “Murals helped to transform ‘areas where Protestants lived’ into ‘Protestant areas,’” and “All murals create a new type of space, they redefine mundane public space as a politicized place and can thereby help to reclaim it for the community” (Jarman 2005:176, 179).

However, as Jarman argues, collective expressions such as murals can also be appropriated in innovative ways for new agendas and thus, I would argue, have the potential to shape collective identity. In a similar fashion, they could perform the mitigating work of redefining collective identities in less polarizing ways. To examine this idea, I consider the role that murals have played recently within local initiatives to redevelop some of Belfast’s struggling working-class neighborhoods. In these instances, local organizations, many with hardline loyalist credentials, have undertaken to modify cultural expressions, in particular murals, in order to improve their neighborhoods. These initiatives take up some of the aspirations of the earlier community arts program but also aim to enrich loyalist identity.

Local leaders, for example ex-combatants and Orangemen, grasp the depth of trauma their communities have experienced, even if they have contributed directly or indirectly to that trauma. They are themselves deeply immersed in loyalist communal identities, but for a variety of reasons, they perceive a need to reframe loyalism in new ways that are less intimidating and offensive. *Newsnight*, a BBC news television program, cleverly borrowed one of their video segment titles, “The Writing on the Wall?” from a mural redesign initiative in East Belfast titled, “The Writing’s Not on the Wall” (2003b). The titles refer to a growing recognition among Protestants that a return to majoritarian governance is impossible. Powersharing is inevitable, especially in a Europe where borders are dissolving. Some loyalists understand that working-class Protestants need to adapt to new political circumstances and develop the necessary political skills to effectively engage nationalists and advocate for their communities.

Murals have provided one avenue for experimenting with the reframing of loyalist identity, and loyalist paramilitary organizations in some areas have agreed to relinquish militant murals to be replaced by “cultural murals” that present historical themes or other features of communal life that loyalists can claim as their own. In other cases, murals have begun to take on a political tone that is not militaristic, but that still expresses loyalist grievances and concerns in more articulate ways than the iconic murals of the 1980s and the militaristic murals of the 1990s could (though these are still quite common). In either case, one finds a growing recognition, identified by Jarman, that murals, by virtue of their media appeal can deliver messages beyond the confines of the neighbor-



Figure 5.2. Titanic mural in downtown Belfast, a source of Protestant pride.

hoods in which the murals are painted (Jarman 2005). Indeed, several of these projects have gained significant media attention.

Recently founded loyalist cultural organizations have redesigned paramilitary murals to display nonsectarian and nonexclusive local historical themes, such as the building of the Titanic. The most extensive of the mural schemes in East Belfast was developed by a coalition of local clergy, community development organizations, representatives from local paramilitaries, and statutory bodies such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), a collaboration that is notable on its own in terms of the cooperation between a range of state and nonstate organizations. In all, at least nine murals were placed or redesigned featuring local historical themes that included: the building of the *Titanic* in the East Belfast shipyards, the famous footballer George Best, Protestant reformers, a local primary school, Belfast native C. S. Lewis's novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and Northern Ireland's football team.

The mural project constitutes one manifestation of an effort to recast the loyalist narrative and of a broader shift among some loyalist paramilitary commanders (especially older ones) who want to avoid a return to open conflict in Northern Ireland. They want to maintain their place within communities as defenders, perhaps not against republican attack, but against poverty and unemployment. As one commander said, “We’ve been part of the problem, we need to be part of the solution.” Mural redesigns have allowed loyalist leaders to test the waters of becoming involved in community development, and may also have begun to shift the balance of the content of loyalist identity. Instead of loyalism being associated primarily with the violence of the Troubles, it begins to take on new dimensions. “Cultural murals” highlight community history and achievements and thus sustain community identity while simultaneously tweaking the community’s symbolic landscape by replacing overtly sectarian themes with others that define “us” without direct reference to “them.” Even murals that make political arguments about grievances in the Protestant community, such as the conditions placed on parades or the disbanding of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (which Protestants have seen as a crucial bulwark against republican violence) signal an engagement in political discourse that is more nuanced and constructive than murals that emphasize the paramilitary defense of loyalist neighborhoods, tit-for-tat retribution between loyalist and republican paramilitaries, and factional infighting among loyalist paramilitaries.

One is then led to ask several questions: Who is most credible in loyalist communities and therefore capable of developing and advocating the transformation of cultural expressions? How do they manage cultural capital to best effect? Which of their initiatives prove successful and why? At what point and under what circumstances do new cultural initiatives fail? Do they fail because they are perceived as alien and become labeled as disloyal or treacherous? Is there evidence that, when successful, they open the door for improved community relations and political cooperation? If so, can these initiatives be encouraged and sponsored by other parties to the conflict or external actors? Answers to all of these questions cannot be offered here, warranting further culturally and psychologically based research into the transformation of similarly intractable conflict situations.

Conclusion

The mitigation of intimidating or polarizing cultural expressions is a modest but important contribution to improved community relations. Jim Wilson, a local loyalist community activist interviewed by the BBC in

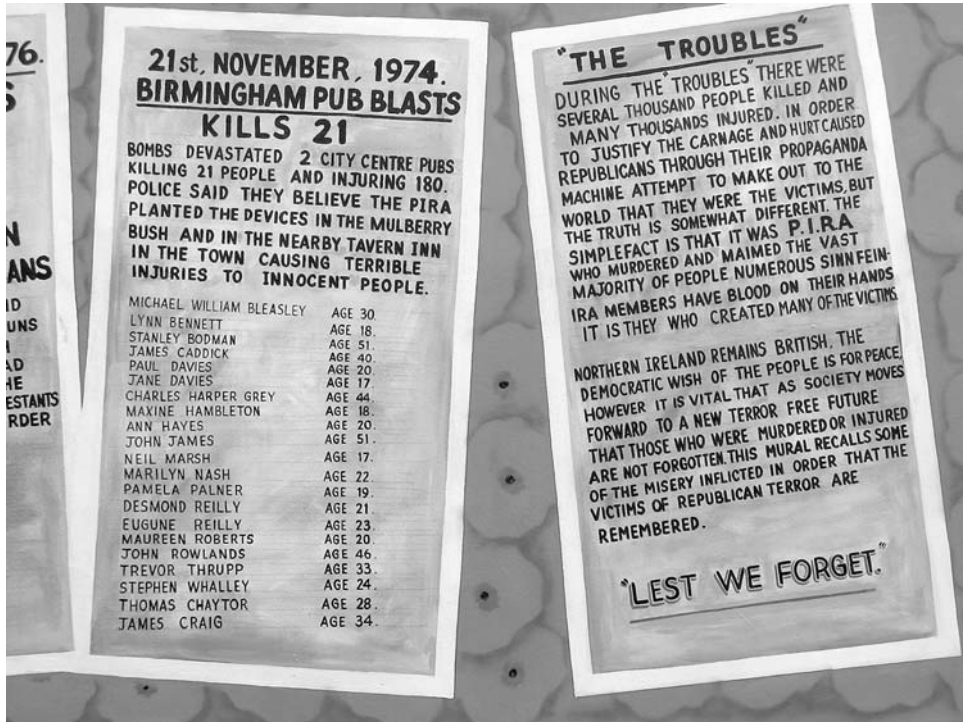


Figure 5.3. "Lest We Forget" mural in Belfast.

2003, acknowledged, "There's only so far you can go in asking people to remove murals, you cannot wipe away history and you cannot wipe away what has happened in this country in the last thirty-five years just by taking murals down" (BBC 2003b). Nevertheless, the process is critical to breaking down the deep psychological barriers that have perpetuated intractable conflict in Northern Ireland. We need not be naïve either and trumpet mural redesign and new parading policies as the ultimate indicators of change in loyalist paramilitaries or other loyalist organizations. Paramilitary murals are still commissioned, and paramilitary leaders are careful not to appear as if they are selling out their organizations, and they will be wary of removing their murals without reciprocity among rival paramilitary organizations (BBC 2005).

Political self-interest also drives participation in these and similar schemes. Under a growing recognition that loyalism has a poor public image, replacing sectarian murals can provide positive media spin and new political advantages. A subtle and incremental softening of in-group

and out-group boundaries is desirable, but in the long run, cosmetic changes without cross-community engagement runs the risk of glossing over the pain and trauma of decades of sectarian violence. Only shared justice and reconciliation work will ensure a sustainable peace. For now, mural redesign schemes, for example, do not often constitute cross-community work, though a recent mural redesign of a particularly offensive mural in the staunchly loyalist neighborhood of Tullycarnet commemorates the bravery of a Catholic from the Falls Road who was the only person from Northern Ireland to receive the Victoria Cross for bravery during World War II. According to Frankie Gallagher, a resident of Tullycarnet and a member of the Ulster Political Research Group, which is associated with the UDA,

We brought Catholics, from Dublin and Donegal and all over, into Tullycarnet Estate, who had never been before. And they marched up the middle of the road with an Orange flute band, with a military band, and everybody just walked up the middle of the road around to the community centre where we all had a knees-up after it, and it was fantastic. So there's an educational side, there's a capacity-building side, there's a confidence-building side, and there's a dealing-with-the-past side, and there's this thing: Do you learn anything from it not to make the same mistake in the future?⁹

The development of this sort of new inclusive narrative reveals a potential for community workers and former combatants in Northern Ireland to develop symbols and narratives that challenge old psychological and emotional barriers.

The British government obviously hopes to replicate the Tullycarnet experience. In July 2006, the Northern Ireland Office Minister David Hanson announced a £3.3 million funding package called "Re-Imaging Communities Programs" (BBC 2005). Whether the intervention of a state bureaucracy will undermine the authenticity of local efforts remains to be seen. Across the political divide, nationalists are predictably skeptical. SDLP politician Alban Maginness responded with incredulity to the NIO funding scheme, "It is clear that any paramilitary murals designed to intimidate or mark out territory should be removed. . . . Indeed their very existence is illegal. That is why today's announcement really beggars belief" (BBC 2005).

Modifying or mitigating offensive cultural expressions and hardened in-group and out-group boundaries is a delicate undertaking. It is most effective when leaders with credibility and legitimacy draw on familiar resources such as the language and ethos of the community. Radical departures are likely to be seen as betrayal within the group and departures from the long-established scripts of intergroup relationships are likely to be met with skepticism across ethnopolitical divides. Nonethe-

less, the softening of out-group boundaries is critical for long-term conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, and further research is needed to identify the conditions under which initiatives such as the mural redesign projects develop and how they can be encouraged, remembering that the credibility of local voices is a critical component in the constructive transformation of hardened ethno-political attitudes. Those voices will often belong to individuals who are reviled in out-groups, and in some quarters within groups. The process is bound to prove slow and contentious but necessary.

Notes

1. “Loyalism” refers to an ideological or cultural commitment, held by many Protestants who insist on Northern Ireland’s remaining part of the United Kingdom while also defending Protestant culture, faith, and identity. Loyalists are often from working-class backgrounds, some of whom are involved in or would support paramilitary organizations. “Unionism” refers to a political orientation that emphasizes loyalty to the British crown and a commitment to Northern Ireland’s position within the United Kingdom. Parties such as the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) represent unionist aspirations through constitutional politics. There is often considerable overlap between loyalism and unionism, as loyalists are unionists politically and often vote for the DUP instead of the much smaller loyalist Progressive Unionist Party. “Nationalism” refers to political positions held primarily by Catholics that advocate a united Ireland and emphasize civil equality for all, especially for Catholics, who have historically not enjoyed full political and economic access. “Republicans” constitute a subset of nationalists who insist on equality and a united Ireland and have been willing to employ both violent and political means.

2. It is worth noting that historical murals can also express sectarianism and militancy depending on their content. Images of weapons and violence, even in the context of Cromwell’s seventeenth-century campaign to pacify Ireland can alienate and intimidate Irish Catholics.

3. Interview, July 2005.

4. Kriesberg (1998a) offers an immensely useful scheme for classifying conflict methods on a tridimensional continuum with poles representing coercion, persuasion, and reward. Methods characterized primarily by coercion, as opposed to persuasions and reward, are more likely to polarize opponents and diminish the potential for constructive dialogical relationships.

5. Census data from 2001 show that 66 percent of the population live in areas that are either more than 99 percent Protestant or 99 percent Catholic (up from 63 percent at the 1991 census) (Brown 2002). Recent research by Shuttleworth and Lloyd (2006) using 2001 census data indicates that levels of segregation have probably remained the same throughout the 1990s, findings that moderate but do not extinguish concerns about levels of division between Catholics and Protestants. For example, only 5 percent of students attend integrated schools in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education 2004), though in 2001, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey reports that 73 percent of respondents felt the government should encourage more mixed schooling (Queen’s University Belfast and University of Ulster 2001).

6. I use the term “postconflict” here to refer to the study of peace and reconciliation efforts after peace accords have been reached. The terminology, however, is actually a misnomer. In many if not most of these situations, the conflict is more correctly understood to have entered a new phase of diminished violence.

7. The Orange Order is one of several all-male fraternal organizations that dedicate themselves to the preservation of the Protestant faith and British sovereignty in Ireland. The Orange Order is the best-known, though others (some closely affiliated with the Orange Order) include the Apprentice Boys of Derry, the Independent Orange Order, the Royal Black Preceptory, and the Royal Arch Purple.

8. The northernmost region of Ireland and the political borders of Northern Ireland are often called Ulster.

9. Interview, January 2008. See also BBC (2003a).

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