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Social Conflict Theory in Studying the Conflict in Northern Ireland

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the usefulness of social conflict theory as a theoretical framework for analyzing the conflict in Northern Ireland. The social conflict theories under consideration are Lewis Coser's functionalist theory of conflict, Ralf Dahrendorf's theory, and Randall Collins' sociology of conflict. The main question is whether social conflict theories provide a useful analytical tool in understanding ethnic conflicts: their nature, bases, and the actions of the social actors involved.

Keywords: conflict theory, Northern Ireland, social conflict, ethnic conflict

Uses of Social Conflict Theory—The Case of Northern Ireland

Social conflict theories emphasize the role of conflict as an integral factor in shaping social conditions and the dynamics of social life (Mucha 1978). In fact, as we study and/or participate in social life, we often encounter conflicts or potentially conflictual situations among individuals, social groups, political parties, and so forth. The question to be posed is whether conflict theories provide an equally useful analytical tool for understanding a conflict that is ethnic in nature. In other words, can sociological social conflict theories provide us with a better and a more in-depth understanding (*verstehen*) of what is involved in an ethnic conflict, including its underlying conditions and the motivations of its social actors.

The aim of this article is to discuss the usefulness of social conflict theory as a theoretical framework for analyzing the conflict in Northern Ireland. I focus on three selected theories, ranging from Lewis Coser's and Ralf Dahrendorf's classic theories of conflict to Randall Collins' sociology of conflict. This theoretical approach is not often used by scholars writing about the conflict in Northern Ireland; there are no analyses based specifically on sociological conflict theories (Coser's or Dahrendorf's theories or Collins' conflict sociology). A psychological framework would seem to be much more popular: a considerable amount of research and analysis has been based on it (Cunningham 1998). Although there are publications exploring a macro-social approach, many of these are based on Marxist theory (see chapter 2).

The selected authors have published many works, both articles and books. In my analysis, however, I focus on the works that are most useful for understanding the authors' ideas. For the same reason I briefly refer to—rather than explore in-depth—selected aspects of the above-mentioned theories that are relevant to analyzing the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Not many Polish publications, especially in the scholarly discourse, have explored or analyzed the conflict in Northern Ireland. Most authors of those that do exist have considered the history of the conflict: for instance, Witold Gruszka (1972, 1977), Stanisław Grzybowski (1998), or more recently Agnieszka Piórko in *Historia Irlandii Północnej* (2008). There have also been interesting publications analysing the political dimensions of the conflict, especially the role of the republican Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army: for example, the works of Witold Gruszka 1986, Wawrzyniec Konarski 1991, 2001, or Szymon Bachrynowski 2010. However, the conflict in Northern Ireland does not seem to attract the full attention of Polish researchers, sociologists, or anthropologists; it is more often mentioned in passing in articles or books analysing ethnic issues (for example, Walter Żelazny 2006, Małgorzata Budyta-Budzyńska 2010) rather than being the main topic (for example, Dorota Woroniecka 2012; Ewa Szczecińska-Musielak 2011, 2012).

Social versus Ethnic Conflict

However, theoretical frameworks emphasizing a conflict approach have inspired Polish scholars. Ralf Dahrendorf's and Lewis Coser's theories, among other conflict theories, have been precisely and comprehensively analyzed by Janusz Mucha (1978), Marek Mlicki (1992), and Janusz Sztumski (1987; 2000). Janusz Mucha also used the interactionist approach presented in Collins's conflict theory in his own theory of an interactionist sociology of ethnic relations (2012). Henryk Białyzewski (1983) defines social conflict as the consequence of conflict between different social roles and statuses (especially occupational roles) and also analyses conflict situations at work.

Anna Adamus-Matuszyńska (1998) emphasizes the impact of beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes, and needs in conflict situations. Although the title of her book is social conflict and the topic includes the conflict theories of Johan Galtung, Dean Pruitt, Jeffrey Rubin, and John Burton, in the last chapter she analyzes a specific ethnic conflict, as an example of social conflict. Unfortunately, she does not explain or define ethnic conflict; in particular, she does not say why she considers ethnic conflict to be an example of social conflict.

Jacek Szymanderski (2013) discusses issues of social and ethnic conflict from the perspective of his research into refugees' opinions about Polish refugee camps. He defines conflict practically, as conflict between an individual refugee and the camp administration. He distinguishes social conflict, which is in fact a conflict of interests, access to work, or valued goods, from ethnic conflict, which is based on cultural or religious differences. The author uses the term 'ethnic social conflict,' by which he means conflict between a refugee and the administration or wider Polish society in a clash of interests.

Ethnic conflicts are specific forms of social conflict in that they involve ethnic groups and nations (cf. Kwaśniewski 1994). Furthermore, the people involved in the conflict have specific goals of securing the emergent interests of their ethnic group, such as protecting their ethnic and cultural identity (Kwaśniewski 1994, Mucha 1996; Szykiewicz 1996).

Aleksandra Jasinska-Kania, in offering a more in-depth approach to understanding the genesis of ethnic conflicts, points to the sociobiological perspective, the perspective of rational choice theory, and the perspective of modernization theory (Jasińska-Kania 2001:

15–26, see also 2002: 115–135). Lech Nijakowski, in his analysis of the symbolic dimensions of conflicts, outlines the following three explanatory models of ethnic conflict formation: economic, culturalist, and political (2006: 33–35).

I agree with Janusz Mucha that ‘common goods of a non-ethnic nature—territory, economic niches, access to labour and power—are often at the heart of many interactions (...) considered to be ethnic conflicts’ (1996: 31). I believe that ethnic conflict is social conflict although not every social conflict need be ethnic; and equally an ethnic group is a kind of social group. Ethnic groups take part in social processes in an active or passive manner; they are either subjects or objects of human action, as they constitute a part of wider society. Within social groups various phenomena and processes take place that lead to the formation of social ties and the construction of identity based upon difference and a perceived commonality of economic and political interests. Social ties and cultural identity are also shaped through social relations with other groups or the rest of the society.

Ethnic groups that exist within the wider social and structural system are also interest groups in terms of power, prestige, or economic activity. They are engaged in political action and are attracted by socially valued privileges and rewards; they also occupy a given place in the social hierarchy, and therefore a given social position (see also Gordon on ethnoclass 1964). Considering ethnic conflict to be generated solely by ethnic factors is very limited in scope and offers only a partial view of social reality, significantly narrowing the research area. Still, the most important factor that binds ethnic groups is their shared culture, expressed through tradition, language, religion, and symbols (cf. Fenton, Nowicka 2007). Common ancestry and a ‘shared’ (blood) relationship also lead to the formation of ethnic ties, which are at the heart of ethnic identity and an awareness of ‘us.’ The presence of ethnic ties distinguishes ethnic groups from other forms of social groups.

Ethnicity can be viewed as a resource, in that it is crucial to the processes of forming shared belonging and ties; it is invoked by ethnic groups as part of their identity and its manifestations are present in the formation of ethno-political movements. Ethnicity as a resource is present in myriad dimensions of social life, including in social, cultural, linguistic and political spheres. As social capital, ethnicity plays a vital role in establishing social networks and connections, and creating expectations and obligations of trust and reciprocity. Ethnicity, as a symbolic and cultural resource, provides individuals with values, norms, and a worldview: an intrinsic knowledge of the given group’s beliefs and traditions. In the linguistic sphere of social life, ethnicity enables individuals to acquire knowledge of a language and its contextual use. Finally, in the political sphere, ethnicity may be invoked for the purposes of group mobilization.

Interpretations of the Conflict in Northern Ireland—Review of Theories

There are two dominant approaches—structural and cultural—in the literature on conflict in regard to explaining and interpreting the conflict in Northern Ireland (cf. Ruane, Todd 1993, 1996; Dixon 2001; McGarry, O’Leary 1995; Whyte 1990).

The proponents of the structural approach, built on Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, consider the Troubles to derive from a conflict of interests. More specifically, they look

for the source of the conflict in the structural-institutional situation, which appears to engulf people in the conflict. The Unionists, supported by Great Britain, exerted political and economic dominance over the region, creating a state that was supposed to protect their interests. Irish nationalists, who since the early days (that is, 1920) refused to accept the legal status of Northern Ireland, were considered 'disloyal.' They did not have equal access to political power and were subjected to economic, political, and cultural discrimination. These kinds of actions against Catholics were supported by a discriminatory legal system (Stormont and local authorities were dominated by Protestants) and enforced by Protestant forces (including the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Ulster Special Constabulary). As a result, the Catholic community was pushed to the margins of social life. The privileged and dominant position of the Protestant community was maintained by formal and informal discrimination against the Catholic minority in the political sphere (through gerrymandering), and in many other areas of social life, including in housing, education, work, and employment (cf. Gruszka 1986, 1977; Melaugh 1995; Rowthorn, Wayne 1988). The Protestant authorities treated Catholics as an untrustworthy and undesirable minority. Both communities—Catholics and Protestants—were in a structural trap: the fundamental interests of either could only be guaranteed at the expense of the fundamental interests of the other (Ruane, Todd 1993: 34).

The proponents of a cultural interpretation of the conflict—including sociologists, cultural anthropologists, social psychologists, and political scientists—vary in the extent to which they consider cultural factors to be the cause of the conflict. In general, scholars emphasize the importance of national identity, traditions, values and norms, symbols, myths about the conflict, and political and cultural boundaries between the Protestants and Catholics. Religion and religious identity, considered in their institutional, integrating, and axio-normative dimensions, are the cultural factors most frequently associated with the cause of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Terms such as 'atavism' and 'tribalism' are common in descriptions and analyses of the conflict. The authors seek explanations for the persistence of the conflict in the politics of memory and remembering, pointing to the reoccurrence of certain myths and traditions. This is particularly noticeable in persistent commemorations of the 1690 Battle of the Boyne victory by the Protestants, and in recounting myths of oppression and victimhood by the Catholics.

Other scholars examine the issues of ethnicity in Northern Ireland in connection with territorial issues, for example by differentiating between Ulstermen and Irishmen, often introducing topographic elements to this distinction. Attention is also paid to people's different attitudes to the 'historical territory' of Ireland. One of the more common distinctions is also division along political lines, namely between the unionists and nationalists.

Scholars also point to the different participation of Catholics and Protestants in various cultural spheres, ranging from the mass media, leisure activities, and sports, to education, language heritage, and so forth. Segregation in so many areas of social life within one nation leads to the development of 'parallel societies' within a single state.

Sports deserve special attention here. The Gaelic Athletic Association was established in the late 19th century to promote and foster Irish sports such as hurling and Gaelic football (camogie and rounders). On the other hand, cricket, hockey, and rugby are British sports.

In the cultural reproduction of the conflict, importance is not only attached to the kind of sports activities a person is involved in, but also to the team the person supports, or the location of a favorite stadium or football club (Bairner, Shirlow 1999).

The culturalist approach is also embraced by historians. Historians link the persistence of conflict in Northern Ireland to national myth-making and the overcrowding of people of different ethnicities within a very small territory; they also allude to the history of Gaelic romanticism and Anglophobia.

Other common interpretations involve theories of rape culture in Northern Ireland, which assume the existence of a cult of violence in both communities. Elements of rape culture include the stereotype of the fighting Irish; distrust for the modern nation, which encourages a political culture favoring violence and physical coercion over the rule of law; and the patriarchal socialization of men into soldiers.

Finally, language is an important element of ethnic and national identity. Both groups use English in their everyday lives; individuals who speak Gaelic as their second language are in a considerable minority. Gaelic plays a symbolic role here; it is an ethnic identity marker that differentiates Catholics from Protestants and hence could be seen as yet another boundary-reinforcing element (McGarry, O'Leary 1995).

Lewis Coser's Conflict Theory

Lewis Coser (2009) drew heavily on Georg Simmel's work in his conflict theory. This was particularly visible in his view of conflict as part of social history, in his assumptions about the various forms that conflict may take in different social and historical conditions, and in the macro-social scale of his analysis, where conflict is seen as a homeostatic mechanism.

In his functionalist-conflict approach, Coser presents a static model of a society divided into groups, which in turn constitute the whole social system. The functional perspective of Coser's model emphasizes the fact that conflict plays a vital role in maintaining the social system. Societies dispose of mechanisms to channel discontent and hostility while keeping intact the relationship within which antagonism arises. Such mechanisms frequently operate through 'safety-valve' institutions, providing substitute objects upon which to displace hostile sentiments. Coser also argues that, on the other hand, conflict suppression sets the stage for social explosion, as tension will build until it finally erupts. By allowing smaller releases of tension with more minor, manageable conflicts, major social catastrophes can be avoided. Drawing on Simmel's work, Coser maintains that the intensity of the conflict depends on whether the division of power is considered legitimate.

When the basic premise of the functionalist approach—that conflict is functional for the social structure—is applied to the conflict in Northern Ireland, it could be considered controversial, particularly because the term 'functional' itself may be interpreted in various ways. From the macro-structural perspective of the wider state political system, which is based on discrimination against and exclusion of the Catholic minority, conflict legitimizes the existing social divisions, the organization of society, and the state political system. The status quo is also reinforced by constantly referring to and reminding people of the conflict, emphasizing worldview differences between the majority and minority group, organizing

public rituals, such as Orange Parades, that aim to legitimize power and social identity, and finally, hostile and aggressive actions aimed at ‘the other,’ including terrorist attacks and assassinations. Doubtless, conflict is ‘functional’ for those who benefit from the existing order, particularly, for example, political leaders and extremist political parties such as the DUP and Sinn Féin.

If the conflict is considered from the perspective of the Ulster Catholic minority—then conflict appears to be dysfunctional, as it has pushed them to the margins of social life in every possible sphere: political, cultural, and professional, hindering their advancement and making their daily existence difficult. Seen from this angle, the political-legal system does not meet the basic needs of its citizens.

Coser analyzes the ways in which the conflict impacts the social system in two spheres of social interaction: in intra- and inter-group relations. He highlights the role of conflict in strengthening social ties at an intra-group level, as the conflict reinforces the group’s awareness of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and strengthens people’s sense of distinctiveness. At an intra-group level, conflict can be regarded as a form of social interaction.

However, if the conflict is considered in a wider inter-group perspective, as encompassing both Ulster Catholic and Protestant communities, then mutual suspicion, distrust, aversion, and hostility have been founded upon the basic and key distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The identities of both groups confront each other (cf. [Jarman 1997](#)); stereotyping ‘the other,’ as well as auto-stereotyping, not only strengthens a sense of ethnic belonging but also contributes to strengthening social ties, particularly in the context of an ongoing spatial and social divide. This is noticeable in acts affirming ethnic identity; the conflict has been deeply ingrained in people’s everyday lives, in community history, the symbolic sphere, and in social memory.

Coser observes that regular hostility maintains social divisions and social stratification, preventing other forms of social relations. Another element that affects the conflict is the proximity of antagonistic groups, whose members experience both strong and negative feelings. It could be argued that this ambivalence of feeling may be the primary source of anxiety and conflict. When parties are in close proximity, the intensity of the conflict is increased.

Northern Ireland was created in 1920 as the result of a conflict that had been underway for centuries between Protestant settlers and the Irish. This division—considered dangerous and insurmountable—lies at the foundation of the political and legal system, which was supposed to protect the Protestants from the ‘disloyal’ Catholics, who were stigmatized as second-rank citizens.

Ethno-religious identification, which was crucial to the conflict, influenced (and still has an impact) on every sphere of individuals’ lives. It determined a person’s place in society and also his or her possible career paths. Place of residence, school, employment, and lifestyle all depended on whether one was Protestant or Catholic. Social mobility and chances to move up the ladder depended on religious affiliation. The segregation of Catholic and Protestant communities was visible in their separate education systems: there were state schools (managed and funded by the state), voluntary schools (schools for Catholic students managed by the Catholic Church) and a small number of mixed schools (with limited access) ([Morgan, Smyth, Robinson, Fraser 1996](#)). Discrimination in access to social

benefits—primarily Housing Executive accommodation—triggered protests in the 1960s. Initially there was also formal discrimination, which turned into informal discrimination in the 1980s, in the employment sector (the Orange Order existed as an informal labour market for ‘proper’ loyalists; the unemployment rate was higher among the Catholic, who also occupied lower positions in the workplace (cf. [Melaugh 1995](#); [Rowthorn, Wayne 1988](#)).

Social relationships alone, according to Coser, provide institutions for the outlet of hostile and aggressive feelings. Coser differentiates between ‘realistic’ conflicts (conflict as a means to a desirable end) and ‘unrealistic’ ones (triggered by a need to discharge aggressive tension). In this approach, the conflict in Ulster would be regarded as a realistic conflict.

Coser believes that in contrast to intra-group relations and conflicts, conflict between social groups may serve as a stimulus to create new rules, norms, and institutions; it can also initiate new types of interactions between the parties involved in the conflict. For example, the parties to a conflict may form associations and alliances to strengthen their position.

As mentioned above, in the case of Northern Ireland, the conflict between the two groups, the two main actors, was a stimulus to create a new nation, and then to form a legislative (and also customary) system which in fact validated the existing divide. However, once imposed, an original social and political order has a tendency to persist, even in a case where there is an escalation of the conflict related to it, with violence and aggression. The structural and political change that is the backbone of a peace process was simply impossible in the previous social order.

From the 1980s on, external players were also engaged in the peace process, including the British and Irish governments, the US authorities, and to a lesser extent the EU. It was only through their support of mediation efforts and exertion of political pressure that an agreement and compromise were achieved.

Coser also argues that a realistic conflict may come to an end when the social actors find another, more satisfactory, way of reaching their goals. It appears that Sinn Féin, under the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness (former IRA soldiers), adopted a conflict resolution strategy that was in line with the theoretical premises of Coser’s conflict theory. The party abandoned its long-term practice of resigning electoral seats won in democratic elections to focus on parliamentary activities both in Stormont and Westminster.

The Sinn Féin leaders, who were able to exert some control over IRA commanders, used this paramilitary organization as an instrument in political negotiations (influencing to a certain extent decisions on ceasefires, peace agreements, or the contrary), and undertaking terrorist attacks (a ‘bullet and ballot box’ strategy). This strategy turned Sinn Féin into the main political player representing the Catholic minority. Their opinions were taken into account by succeeding British governments, although negotiations were secret because of the refusal of Ulster Loyalists to engage in peace talks with the political arm of the IRA.

The reconciliation strategy made Sinn Féin the second largest and most powerful party in Stormont, with significant influence on internal politics in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin MPs take part in parliamentary sittings not only in Westminster but also in the Dail Eireann (House of Representatives) of the Republic of Ireland ([Dixon 2001](#), [Feeney 2003](#), [McIntyre 2008](#)).

Ralf Dahrendorf's Conflict Theory of Society

Ralph Dahrendorf's theory draws on Marx's theory and proposes a dynamic view of society and social relations, in which the conflict is a source and cause of social and systemic changes (2008).

The source and driving force of social conflict is power and superiority. Conflicts emerge everywhere there is power and relations of superiority and inferiority (including such places as political parties, churches, and chess clubs). A society is composed of 'imperatively coordinated associations' (a term that Dahrendorf borrowed from Weber) (Dahrendorf 2008: 151).

In imperatively coordinated associations there are individuals who have access to power and play superior roles and functions and those who occupy inferior positions. Persons who occupy inferior and superior positions have different interests that are dependent on social roles and the individual's place within the social stratification system. Ralf Dahrendorf differentiates hidden interests, of which people are not fully aware, from conscious interests, which are consciously articulated goals. Groups that are differentiated on the basis of having access to power are considered to be social classes. Society is divided into two classes: dominant and subordinate ones.

Dahrendorf's theory introduces an additional element, not present in Coser's theory, which is that power is considered as a dynamic entity, a kind of social relation defined and determined by power. It is not entirely clear whether this power or sovereignty is strictly limited to clearly defined formalized power—such as the power of a chess club president or head of the largest political party in the country—outlined in the organization's statutory law.

According to Weber, power is not only in the hands of persons located in formalized structures of dominance and subordination but also of individuals endowed with charisma, who are considered authorities by the local community. Power may also come from prestige or high social position. Power is not always 'visible' and members of a given social group or community do not always see, or are not aware of, actions taking place behind the scenes.

However, leaving these considerations aside, Dahrendorf's theory, which sees society as divided into dominant and subordinate classes, was a useful analytical tool for describing Northern Irish society several decades ago. The divide between power-holders and the subordinate group was determined by the ethnicity ascribed to Catholics by the Protestants. Power inequality was present in all domains of social life, starting with legislative power and ending with decision-making at the local level, where Protestants received better treatment than Catholics.

However, it is worth noticing that both communities are internally diverse and the extent of power held by their particular members may vary. In the case of both Protestants and Catholics, there have been differences between the members of each group along the lines of social (class) status, level of education, occupation, gender, and political views (cf. Shirlow, McGovern 1997). It seems, however, that regardless of a person's social status, the Protestants have had better access to power than Catholics.

Dahrendorf's theory therefore omits space for other sorts of conflicts than class ones. It is not quite clear whether, in Dahrendorf's understanding, these other types of conflicts are

free of power struggle elements, or whether the class conflict over legitimization of power overlays ethnic relations. Dahrendorf, inspired by Marx's theories, distinguishes between 'quasi groups,' which are aggregates of incumbents of positions with identical role interests; and 'interest groups,' which have structure and organization, a common aim, and an explicit programme of action, with the potential to turn into 'conflict groups.'

A good example is the influence that political parties and paramilitary organizations have on the continuation of conflict in Northern Ireland. With regards to the political parties, there are two main extremist parties: the republican Sinn Féin, and the loyalist Democratic Unionist Party under the leadership of late Ian Paisley. Other political groups that were also important in the peace-building process include the NICRA (Northern Ireland Civic Rights Association), which was formed in the 1970s as a response to discrimination against the Catholic community in the social-security sphere, and the Alliance Party, whose main strategic aims included reconciliation, cooperation, and building the bridges necessary to deal with the conflict and its consequences.

With regards to well-organized, hierarchical paramilitary organizations such as the IRA (in particular the Provos or Continuity IRA wings), UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), or UDA (Ulster Defence Association), their main goal was to 'secure' the ideological interests of their communities—and the appeal to force was the source of their power. The conflict—or 'war' (as the IRA called it)—constituted the reason for their existence, assured the paramilitaries' influence on both group members and antagonistic 'outsiders,' and was a source of prestige and social status. The actions taken in different periods by the paramilitary organizations, including terrorist attacks and assassinations, determined how violent the conflict was.

Ralf Dahrendorf suggests analyzing social conflict according to two scales: a scale of intensity and a scale of violence. Dahrendorf maintains that social deprivation—and absolute deprivation in particular—is an important factor determining the scale of a conflict's violence and intensity (cf. Ted Gurr's theory of relations between deprivation and rebellion, 1970). In this context, it should be mentioned that studies on the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland suggest that in both Catholic and Protestant communities, the most violent, brutal, and aggressive behaviours were commonest among working-class people.

Dahrendorf argues that the class conflict cannot be either resolved or suppressed; it can, however, be managed. The causes cannot be regulated but rather the ways in which the conflict is expressed in the public sphere. In order to make regulation of a conflict possible, the social actors partaking in it must fulfill three conditions: acknowledge the conflict, form interest groups, and set rules for conflict resolution (including the time and place of peace talks, a plan of action, a decision-making process, penalties for not adhering to procedures, etc.) (2008: 198–200).

If these conditions are met, there are various forms of conflict regulation. For example, parties to the conflict may create institutions that provide a framework for decision-making procedures in contested matters, such as parliamentary or quasi-parliamentary institutions (in which case we are dealing with reconciliation). Another possible solution is the intervention of parties that are external to the conflict—the third party may act as a mediator. Another alternative form of conflict resolution is arbitration, where the parties to a dispute refer it to one or more persons by whose decision they agree to be bound. This is a resolution

technique in which a third party reviews the evidence in the case and imposes a decision that is legally binding for both sides and enforceable.

Conflict theory provides space for different forms of conflict regulation, and this was the case of the peace process in Northern Ireland. It appears that the vast majority of Northern Irish society (with the exception of political extremists) had grown weary of the long-lasting conflict and to some extent were agreeable to engaging in a reconciliation process leading to an end of the conflict, or that would at least tranquilize or normalize everyday life in Ulster.

In the 1980s and 1990s, attempts were made to organize meetings between Protestants and Catholics that would allow both parties to become familiar with each other. Despite certain differences, the political and ideological programmes of both the Alliance Party and the SLDP, which were formed in the 70s, were directed at the Protestant and Catholic middle classes and put emphasis on the need for reconciliation and on making Northern Ireland a place where both communities would be able to coexist and develop.

I assume that reconciliation is a long-term process and as such it should be considered as a non-linear process that does not necessarily progress from one stage to another in a straight line, but may make sudden detours and is not free of regressions, changes in direction, or even a return to the point of departure. The peace processes of the 1970s and 1980s can be seen through this lens. Both initiatives, in particular the second peace process, started the long-term process of difficult negotiations and the search for optimal or satisfactory solutions, in the course of which both sides weighed their negotiating options but also gradually accepted the need for the social transformation required to ameliorate or end the conflict.

In such terms, the Good Friday Agreement (1998) was a victorious milestone which did not resolve the conflict but did provide solid ground and a negotiated platform for building peace. Before the agreement was signed, the social actors had to consent to far-reaching changes, including the formation of parliamentary and quasi-parliamentary interest groups (cf. Dahrendorf). This was particularly the case of the Sinn Féin political party. Before the party was allowed to participate in the peace talks and round-table discussions, the DUP and UUP loyalist opposition obliged them to meet certain conditions, for example, to urge IRA demilitarization and to conform to the 'rules of the game' imposed by the government in Westminster.

Acceptance by both parties of the same rules of the game (division of power in the region and a devolution system in Northern Ireland), allowed political negotiations to be undertaken and successfully brought to completion. On the other hand, entering a set political game and conforming to its rules—receiving invitations to political salons (Gerry Adams' meeting with Bill Clinton, for instance), obtaining well-paid positions in the administration, receiving government funding, etc.—weakens the position of the most radical organizations that seek confrontation. It could cynically be remarked that the risk of losing high social status or wealth causes an individual's desire to engage in street fights and plant bombs to disappear. In Marxist terms, 'being determines consciousness.' Nevertheless, the space for negotiations is no longer constrained to the streets and mass media coverage only; now the 'talks' and roundtables are beginning to provide a new platform for thoughtful discussion.

According to Ralf Dahrendorf's theory, the struggle for power and privileged social status never ends. Even if the conflict leads to changes in the social structure, the new social order creates new inequalities in the access to power, new relations of subordination and domination, and thus new conflictual situations.

Randall Collin's 'Conflict Sociology' Theory

Randall Collin's 'sociology of conflict' (1975) is not strictly a theory of conflict, that is, it does not assume that conflict is the basis or a key element of social life. Collins examines conflict from the micro-structural perspective of an active individual. Within such a framework, conflict is one of the kinds of interaction available to individuals or to people who interrelate.

According to Jonathan Turner, Collins' conflict theory is based on Max Weber's theoretical thought, Emile Durkheim's functionalism, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, conversation analysis, and sociology (Turner 2004: 211–222).

In the sociology of conflict, Randall Collins, following Durkheim, emphasizes the significance of social density, which is the extent to which people are in the presence of other people (1975). A large number of supporters, or of people sharing the same opinion, may serve as a material resource. For Collins 'material resource' does not refer only to material wealth and control over capital but also to control over physical space and the placement of people in it. Two other elements that make up an individual's resources are power and symbolic resources (linguistic skills, communication skills, and the ability to manipulate ideas, values, and beliefs).

Collins examines ritual and its social meaning through the anthropological lens. He pinpoints the important role of ritual not only for strengthening community cohesion and integration but also in generating definitions and making sense of reality. Rituals are emotionally loaded and heighten the shared mood and sense of effervescence (Collins 2011). In such an intense atmosphere, group symbols and sacred objects are formed. These symbols persist through the continuous reenactment of rituals. There is nearly a sense of moral obligation among the group members to protect these symbols against those who could potentially destroy them. Such attempts provoke deep and 'justified' anger among the defenders.

For a person (or researcher) visiting Belfast for the first time, the overwhelming presence of ethnic symbols may seem striking. These symbols mark (in Erving Goffman's understanding) the urban spaces inhabited by Catholics and Protestants. The expressive power of these symbols is so strong that they should be considered as 'sacred symbols.' There are murals, painted kerbstones, wall paintings, and most importantly flags: the Irish/republican Tri-Colour and the British Union Jack not only symbolize political allegiance (nationalists and republicans versus unionists and loyalists) but are also markers of ethnicity (Irish and British), religion (Catholics and Protestants) and morality (victims and oppressors). The importance of the flag for the 'British identity' of Ulster Protestants who are loyalist/unionist has recently been manifested in several weeks of marches and riots in the streets of Belfast. The reason for the unrest was a decision made by the City Council on December 6,

2012 to allow the union flag to be flown over the Council building on seventeen designated days. Sinn Féin and the SDLP wanted to remove the flag, but Alliance (a pro-union, non-denominational party), which holds the balance of power in Belfast, succeeded with its motion. This was perceived as a betrayal by loyalists, who began a reactionary protest.

The Orange Parades taking place every year on 12 July, commemorating the victory of a Protestant army over the Catholics some three hundred years ago, is a ritual that defines the contemporary situation (cf. Bryan 2000, Jarman 1997). These parades (the Twelfth) are of particular importance to loyalist identity and myth-making. The Orange Parades not only commemorate a military but also a moral and spiritual victory; most importantly, the victory enabled Protestants to impose their rule and social order on the area of Ulster (the stronghold of Protestantism on the island).

Conversation is another key element in the sociology of conflict (Turner 2004: 213). Conversation is a common element of any social interaction. Collins argues that social inequalities are created, constructed, and maintained through chains of ritual encounters, where individuals with lesser material resources express their deference towards those who possess more, through words and gestures (in a way that is culturally meaningful to them). Collins considers expression of deference through gestures as a presentation of self.

Asymmetrical rituals are particularly interesting. They take place among individuals who occupy different social positions, as they not only reproduce the social hierarchy and the symbolic order inscribed in it, but also serve as a channel for an exchange of emotion (2011). This micro-social perspective opens up a new area of research in cultural anthropology. Collins offers a set of intellectual tools useful in studying the dynamics of interactions between individuals and small social groups, particularly in a conflict situation. How do individuals act in conflict situations, and why do they act in this manner and not in another? How do interactions or encounters turn from being neutral to being hostile? What tools do individuals use to identify or define the other side of an interaction as an enemy?

In regard to Fredrik Barth's concept of ethnic boundaries (1969) (and also Stanisław Ossowski's), the question could be posed as to how ethnic boundaries are created and re-created (for example, the boundaries between Protestants and Catholics) through individual/group actions and interaction ritual chains, which are based on permanent modes of behavior in a given community and on the ways in which its members think of, or relate to, the 'enemy' or 'the other.'

These boundaries may take different forms. For instance, spatial boundaries designate parts of the city, or streets, or towns that are divided along lines of ethnic belonging: Catholic and Protestant. They are marked by painted curbs, murals, and peace walls. Educational boundaries determine an individual's education level or the type of school attended, for example, voluntary schools for Catholics and controlled schools for Protestants. Occupational boundaries relate to unequal employment opportunities, professional status, and the unemployment rate in the communities. Worldview boundaries relate to divergent value systems, social norms, and ethical guidelines, which are often based on religious affiliation. Political boundaries refer to the distinction between Republicans and Loyalists. These types of boundaries are only a few examples of the complex system of social boundaries that permeate all the domains of social life. They are expressed through different political or religious ideas, ways of communicating with one another, presentation

of self, social actions, attitudes towards ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and ways of dressing and acting (cf. [Donnan, Wilson 2007](#)).

The theoretical perspective proposed by Randall Collins provides space for research on the dynamics of different actions that are primarily meant to affirm group identity (ethnic identity) but whose importance also lies in confronting a direct or indirect attack by the other group (considered an enemy), as in the case of the riots and Orange Parades in particular. Doubtless ‘social density’ plays a key role here; equally, ritual interaction chains add a special dimension to these riots and parades. Janusz Mucha ([2012](#)) points to the usefulness of Randall Collins’ micro-sociological theory in the sociology of ethnic relations.

A researcher studying the conflict in Northern Ireland may also find Collins’ concept of ‘class culture’ to be a useful analytical tool. ‘Class culture’ refers to the ways in which relations of domination and subordination are created and re-created in the course of interactions. It also concerns the ways in which the dominant group (or rather an individual that represents it), enforces the subordination of individuals who are outside the group’s boundaries. Finally, this term relates to the ways in which the dominant group shapes others’ perception of their power, and how it coerces them to obey their commands.

It is also worthwhile taking into account the convergence and overlapping of ethnic structures and social hierarchies. The domination of the Protestants and the discrimination against Catholics in various spheres of social, political, and cultural life was insurmountable; it was encoded in the law (especially regarding the suspension of Stormont) and was considered by both sides as a given, as ‘the way things worked.’ The micro-sociological perspective opens new space to study these ‘things’ (that is, occurrences of discrimination and segregation) and the ways in which they ‘worked.’

Conclusion

In sociological and anthropological literature, the conflict in Ulster is defined (and classified) as an ethnic conflict and this seems to be the right approach, as ethnicity is the axis of the conflict. Ethnicity is the basic dimension of individual and group identity, which orders the social world and directs an individual’s or group’s actions. It is the first and last point of reference in social relations between Catholics and Protestants. Using ethnic labeling (including by researchers studying the conflict) in such a situation is explicable—in the case of Northern Ireland the links between religion and ethnicity are very strong and deep.

Nevertheless, the conflict in Ulster should not be viewed as an ethnic conflict per se, as in many aspects it is a social conflict: it is about power and its enforcement, about access to socially valued goods, and about the struggle for social status. In this case, referring to sociological and other theories of conflict, which explore its social and structural aspects, seems fully justified.

The theories examined in this article describe the mechanisms and processes of social conflict through the lens of various paradigms. However, the empirical and theoretical consequence of mono causal theories is that their usefulness in studying a certain process or social phenomenon is limited to the factor (or mechanism) considered to be crucial (for example, power, valued goods, position, or social prestige). The researcher, concentrating on

this particular factor, loses sight of others and consequently narrows the research field and reduces the complexity of the phenomenon. Taking these limitations into account, it would seem that an inter-disciplinary approach in studying ethnic conflicts could make invaluable contributions to both theoretical and research perspectives.

Social conflict theories may, however, uncover many hidden aspects of a conflict situation. I would like to point out a few interesting issues.

Lewis Coser saw social conflict not as a negative and destructive factor—according to the common view—but as a factor that has positive influence on group functioning. Conflict may be a useful way to achieve goals, but it also strengthens a group's identity and solidarity. The conflict in Northern Ireland defined and—to some groups—still defines the ethnic identity of the two leading social actors, Catholics and Protestants. Ethnic identity is created and re-created in an exclusive manner, based on opposition and an emphasis on difference. To some extent the 'enemy' defines the group, and this kind of attitude has often been observed among Ulster Protestants, especially loyalists. They build their 'British' identity in opposition to the local—Irish and Catholic—identity, seeing it as a threat (so-called 'siege mentality' or 'siege attitude').

Coser made the interesting point that conflict with another group or groups may define group structure and hierarchy. This could explain the dominant position of paramilitary groups within the community and their expectation of full support and loyalty from members of the community. This can very clearly be seen by walking down loyalist Shankill Road or republican Falls Road. The public display of symbols and emblems (murals, painted curbstones, and flags) pass on a very important message: that paramilitaries control and police these areas.

Among the theories examined in this article, only Lewis Coser's functionalist theory assumes the possibility of conflict resolution, in the case of realistic conflicts. It appears that this assumption is too simplistic. Conflict resolution leads to the formation of a new social order and different distribution of resources, which should satisfy the two parties; however, there are always winners and losers in such a situation, as in order for someone to gain, someone else has to lose. This may create a new, potentially conflictual situation. Resolution of one conflict becomes the beginning of another—as happened with those republicans not satisfied with the compromise achieved by the Sinn Féin leaders and with the devolution of power in Ulster (the result being their participation in republican dissident paramilitaries, like the New IRA). Conflict may benefit the actors in many ways, political or economic, as it did for IRA members, and conflict resolution reduces profits and changes the social and political position of individuals. Those who used to be important players, respected 'soldiers,' have now become ordinary citizens.

Lewis Coser's theory shows how an unequal division of valued goods and privileges, and unequal access to power, can lead to the outbreak of hostile and aggressive actions. Economic discrimination against the Catholic minority was indubitably the reason for the Troubles of the 1970s.

Ralf Dahrendorf and Randall Collins emphasize the dynamics of the conflict, analyzing the mechanisms involved and situations that could potentially create or aggravate an already existing conflict between actors. They do not acknowledge the possibility of conflict resolution. Although Ralf Dahrendorf's theory does provide space for conflict regulation, the

division of power between dominant and subordinate groups assumes a certain disequilibrium of power relations, which may become the potential source of a subsequent conflict.

In general, the distinction between those who dominate and have power and those who have to defer is quite obvious—in Northern Ireland only the Protestants had power, and the state and its structures were established to serve and protect Protestant interests (political and economic) and the Protestant way of life. Ethnic distinctions covered other divisions in Protestant and Catholic communities, including class division. The interests of the Protestant middle class were not the same as those of the Protestant working class, but ethnic identity and ethnic solidarity played a significant role: Protestant businessmen employed Protestant workers and staff.

The theoretical framework of Dahrendorf's theory is rather wide; it describes power as a mechanism and basic rule of social conflict. However, the real conditions of ethnic conflict are strongly related to other dimensions of social life, such as culture, identification, symbols, or the ability to live by the ethnic tradition. Dahrendorf's theory misses all these aspects. It also emphasizes interests and conflict from the perspective of social roles and social status or hierarchy, skipping over the individual interests, emotions, and attitudes involved in conflict situations. Power is not the only valued good for which people fight.

Nonetheless, Dahrendorf makes interesting observations on conflict regulation—conflict cannot be resolved, but it can be regulated. Regulation applies only to the public recognition of conflict though, not to its real causes. The Northern Ireland peace process and reconciliation in many ways reflected the mechanism of reconciliation presented in Dahrendorf's theory, especially in the establishment of parliamentary and quasi-parliamentary institutions, which created 'the common ground' for negotiations, and the role of international mediators (the United States, in the case of the Ulster conflict). It is worth remembering that a 'third actor,' an external negotiator, may have his own interests and goals (cf. Jessie Bernard, theory of conflict; [Królikowska 1993](#)).

Randall Collins' sociology of conflict opens new areas in the study of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Collins' theory emphasizes the role of culture, values, and the symbols used—sometimes in very different contexts—by actors in the conflict. The concept of ritual—based on Durkheim works—links the social and cultural aspects of human action, and ritual seems to be an important part of ethnic identity. Rituals inevitably divide society into 'us' and 'them' and thus create social and cultural boundaries. The most important political rituals in Northern Ireland, as I mentioned before, are of course the loyalists' and Orangemen's parades ('The Twelfth'), and the anti-internment parades of the Irish republicans. However, there are many other rituals—less striking but nonetheless important—of everyday life, rituals that recreate ethnic and religious boundaries: like spelling the alphabet or saying someone's name ('tests' that 'prove' ethnic identity based on different pronunciation of a typical Irish or British name).

Traditions and customs—the way of life, circle of family and friends, manner of spending time—are individual but also social rituals. And in a conflict situation, these rituals have been seen as non-military symbols of difference and opposition. Collins' theory offers a theoretical framework for studying how everyday rituals establish or recreate conflict, and also how changes in everyday rituals may create peaceful patterns for social interaction. Changes to Belfast's civic and urban space, which 'open' the city to previously

discriminated minorities, create areas and opportunities for ‘mixed’ cultural events (with Protestants, Catholics, and other minorities, including Polish immigrants) (see **Dominic Bryan 2012**).

As I mentioned before, studying and using social conflict theories may offer new intellectual ‘tools’ (categories and social mechanisms) and inspirations to scholars studying the conflict in Northern Ireland. Although none of the theories fully describes and explains the conflict in Ulster, each adds something new, and opens a new prospect of in-depth understanding.

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