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Social movements, structural violence and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland: The role of Loyalist paramilitaries

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Abstract

This article analyses how social movements and collective actors can affect political and social transformation in a structurally violent society using the case study of Northern Ireland. We focus, in particular, on the crucial role played by collective actors within the loyalist community (those who wish to maintain Northern Ireland's place in the UK), in bringing about social and political transformation in a society blighted by direct, cultural, and structural violence both during the conflict and subsequent peace process. Drawing on data obtained through in-depth interviews with loyalist activists (including former paramilitaries), the article demonstrates the role and impact of loyalists and loyalism in Northern Ireland's transition. We identify five conflict transformation challenges addressed by loyalist actors in a structurally violent society: de-mythologizing the conflict; stopping direct violence; resisting pressure to maintain the use of violence; development of robust activist identity; and the measurement of progress through reference to the parallel conflict transformation journey of their former republican enemies. The Northern Ireland case demonstrates the necessity for holistic conflict transformation strategies which attempt not only to stop direct attacks, but also the cultural and structural violence which underpin and legitimize them. In so doing, the article contributes to a broader understanding of how and why paramilitary campaigns are brought to an end.

Social movements, structural violence and conflict transformation: the case of Northern

Ireland

In 1998, political leaders and paramilitary groups, backed by the British and Irish

governments, signed a peace agreement which signalled the end of thirty years of violence in

Northern Ireland (Tonge, 2002). The conflict involved three sides: militant republican

paramilitaries (groups pursuing a united Ireland by force of arms, drawn overwhelmingly

from the Irish 'Catholic community'); the British State represented by the British Army, the

Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the local militia (The Ulster Defence Regiment later

merged into the Royal Irish Regiment); and loyalist paramilitary groups, committed to

maintaining Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom (whose numbers draw primarily

from the Ulster 'Protestant community').

To date, much scholarly work has been written about the elite politics of Northern

Ireland's journey from conflict to peace (Hennessey, 2000; Tonge, 2002); the inner-workings

of the paramilitary groups (English, 2003; McDonald & Cusack, 2004; Rekawek, 2011); and

the role of external actors in facilitating the peace process (Clancy, 2010). Within this body

of scholarship, the role of loyalists has been analysed from a number of perspectives. The

bulk of this work has taken the form of historical analysis, or work by journalists, pertaining

to loyalist paramilitary violence (see e.g. Cusack & McDonald, 1997; McAuley, 2010;

McDonald & Cusack, 2004). The cultural politics of loyalism has also received attention,

including membership surveys of Protestant religious organisations such as the Orange Order

(McAuley, Tonge, & Mycock, 2011). More recently, the contribution of former loyalist

prisoners to the post-conflict dispensation has also been examined (Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley

& McGlynn, 2010; Smithey, 2011). However, the role played by loyalist collective action in

social transformation in Northern Ireland remains neglected and understudied.

Loyalist paramilitary groups were a working class Protestant response to the outbreak of the Troubles in late 1960s and early 1970s. Initially these groups were fragmented and diverse local responses to the threat from Irish republicans. As the conflict persisted and they became more structured, two major groupings began to dominate: the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). These groups were responsible for almost 1000 deaths during the Troubles and almost 100 since the loyalist ceasefire was called in 1994 (McAuley & Ferguson, 2016). Loyalist paramilitary groups are pro-British armed violent extremist groups, with loyalist violence perceived as 'conservative,' or 'pro-state' (Bruce, 1992).

Loyalist groups can also be considered as social movements given their role as a vehicle for working-class individuals to engage in collective political action, albeit, in many cases, violent action. Loyalist groups meet the criteria specified by Tilly (2004) to enable them to be classified as such: engagement in a sustained *campaign* of organized public effort making a collective claim to target authorities; a repertoire of collective action (at times in conjunction with violent action) which involved the creation of special purpose associations and coalitions (across armed groups and with mainstream political actors), and the production of political ephemera and engagement with the media in support of their cause; and 'WUNC' (worthiness, unity, notwithstanding occasional internal contestation, numbers, and commitment) on the part of themselves and their constituencies.

Whilst the conflict in Northern Ireland (and loyalism's role within it) has been considered through a number of theoretical lenses (see e.g. McGarry & O'Leary 1993; Mitchell, 2011; Probert, 1978; Pruitt, 2007), few studies have explicitly explored the conflict and its transformation through the concept of structural violence. Such a perspective, we argue, provides illuminating new interpretations of how and why the conflict developed, and, ultimately, ended in the ways that it did.

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This article aims to address some of these gaps in the literature by exploring individual accounts of how loyalist paramilitaries transformed from using political violence to achieve political change and began to use peaceful means to deal with structural violence in Northern Ireland. This transformation was part of the UDA, UVF, Red Hand Commando (RHC) organizational processes of conversion towards a non-military civilianized role as part of the wider peace process as outlined in the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement (the Agreement: Agreement Reached in the Multiparty Negotiations, 1998) which are still ongoing (Alderdice, McBurney & Williams, 2016).

The narrative accounts provided by current and former UDA/UVF/RHC combatants and members of their respective political wings in face-to face interviews were analysed through processes common to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1995; 1996).

Structural violence and Northern Ireland

The concept of structural violence has proven highly influential and is much debated in the field of peace and conflict studies. Originally developed by Johan Galtung, it seeks to differentiate diverse forms of violence, and explain the presence of violence within a given context. Instead of conceptualising violence as a singular phenomenon, over the course of his career, Galtung differentiated between discrete manifestations of it (Galtung, 1969, 1990). These were direct, cultural, and structural violence.

Direct violence pertained to actual physical threats to personal security: actual bodily harm, as well as violent utterance directed towards, and directly experienced by, an individual or group. This category of violence contains the types of event which we usually associate with violent conflict, such as war, murder (individual or mass killing), sexual violence, and assault. Direct violence, however, was only a symptom of wider underlying causes, which was fed and sustained by other forms of violence. Direct violence (excluding sexual violence

related to the conflict, which was extremely rare) was certainly a daily feature over the course of Northern Ireland's conflict. Over 3,500 people were killed (McDaid, 2013; Wolff, 2006), with many more injured in bombings, shootings, and punishment attacks.[1] The majority of the attacks were carried out by republican paramilitaries, with loyalists and the security forces making up the remainder (White, 1993).

Cultural violence, on the other hand, does not produce injury by itself. However, it can produce, justify, or reinforce direct violence. Cultural violence can be understood as the collective or societal attitudes about the necessity for violence (Galtung, 1990). This could manifest, for example, as the glorification of martial culture, blood sacrifice, or armed struggle within a given community as part of its foundation myth. Some loyalist paramilitaries look to the sacrifice of the Ulster Volunteer Force at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 to legitimise their armed campaign to defend Ulster's place in the United Kingdom (see e.g. Brown, 2007; Brown & Grant, 2016). Republicans, also look back to 1916, glorifying the sacrifice made during the Easter Rebellion of that year. This sanctification of blood sacrifice in both loyalist and republican collective memory has persisted even after the direct violence of the conflict has largely been brought under control (Ferguson & McAuley, 2016).

Perhaps the most influential aspect of Galtung's theory pertains to structural violence. Structural violence (or 'social injustice') can be understood as a form of social structure, or social (or political) institution which can prevent people from attaining their basic needs or fulfilling their potential (Galtung, 1969). It can take many forms, including intentional deprivation or social exclusion (e.g. Galtung, 1969; Miall, 2007). In other words, the violence is produced, and reproduced, within existing structures, fuelling direct violence and

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[1] Punishment shootings or beatings are attacks in which paramilitaries shoot their victims, usually in the arms or legs or assault them with bats or cudgels.

legitimised by cultural forms of violence. In a Northern Ireland context, it can certainly be argued that such exclusion contributed to the outbreak of conflict.

Prior to 1972, Northern Ireland was governed by a devolved legislature, the Northern Ireland Parliament. For fifty years, the Ulster Unionist Party was the governing party. It has been argued that Catholics and nationalists were precluded from control of local government in areas where they comprised a majority through the manipulation of electoral boundaries, restrictions in the local government franchise, and repressive security measures with the goal of 'keeping Catholics in their place' (Farrell, 1976; Mulholland, 2004). Structural violence, in the form of deprivation, was not confined to Catholics and nationalists, however. Often, loyalists, drawn overwhelmingly from working-class backgrounds suffered levels of economic deprivation comparable to their Catholic counterparts (McAuley, 2016).

However, the presentation of their working class Catholic counterparts as a threat to the state itself precluded the development of class politics in the region. Nevertheless, as former loyalist paramilitaries have themselves pointed out, poorer Protestants were prepared to take up arms in defence of the state regardless of what (perceived) material advantages it brought them (Ferguson & McAuley, 2017).

These experiences of conflict, structural violence and building peace at the interfaces between Catholic and Protestant communities living 'cheek by jowl' with each other provide the context for grassroots peace building in Northern Ireland, a context which is highly suited to the application of Lederach's (1995) conception of conflict transformation. The experiences of loyalist paramilitaries moving from armed violence to conflict transformation activities also shares connections to recent work on the disengagement and de-radicalization of violent extremists (Barrelle, 2015; Bjørgo, 2009). How loyalist collective action, through engagement in a peace process, disarming, and peacebuilding, transformed social and

political life in Northern Ireland will now be examined through individual accounts of this activity.

Method

Participants

The 15 participants in this study were adult males, all of whom were members or former members of the UDA (n = 1), the UVF (n=10) or the RHC (n=4). Most of the sample (n =12) had been imprisoned during the Troubles for politically motivated violence. The interviews were conducted between 2005 and 2015. All participants were opportunity sampled via various political and community organizations in Northern Ireland. The leadership of the above groups committed these movements to the peace process, so the sample contained those who had made a personal journey from conflict to peace. However, the participants were not approached based on any distinctive personal or political characteristic, outside of having been a former member of one of the above-named groups and willing to participate in a research interview. The study was not interested in those who actively supported or opposed the peace process, but the role played by former combatants in contributing to the post-conflict political dispensation in Northern Ireland.

The research received prior ethical approval from the respective ethics committees from the universities which the authors are affiliated to. There were no significant barriers to gaining ethical approval, since 'operational matters' were not discussed with the former paramilitaries. The interviews were concerned with personal perspectives on loyalism and the peace process, not what those sampled did, or did not, do whilst involved in the conflict.

Interview Procedure

Two of the authors were involved in interviewing the participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and conducted in a location selected by the participant. Interviews lasted for 30 to 200 minutes and participants spoke for as long as they wished. The interviews were

semi-structured and designed to allow the participants to develop themes and lead the discussion. The interview normally started with an invitation to share their story and reflect upon their personal journey from their initial involvement in political activity, and political violence more specifically, through to their disengagement from violent paramilitary activity. The participants were then 'funnelled' (see Smith & Osborn, 2003) through flexible and focused semi-structured open questions and verbal and non-verbal nudges to produce additional detail. This approach builds rapport, keeps interviewer interference to a minimum and allows the participant to elucidate their story and experiences (see Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood, 2010, for more detail on this interview and analysis process). All interviews were then transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis conducted was based on principles common to IPA and thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith, 1995; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Within this approach, the detailed reviewing of each participant's transcript builds and develops narratives which describe the experiences and perceptions of each individual participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). After analysing each transcript in turn, the themes which were raised from each transcript are compared to determine themes which are shared by the participants.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Five primary themes emerged from the interview transcripts, explored in detail below through extensive quotation from the sample. Whilst the quotations reflect the variations between and among individuals within the sample, the quotations chosen are broadly representative of the views expressed in the sample as a whole (constraints of space prevent are more detailed elucidation of the micro-variations present among responses within the sample).

Theme 1: Demythologizing the Troubles

The main themes are illustrated with extracts from the participant's transcripts. The first theme "demythologizing the Troubles" relates to cultural violence, and the attempts made by the participants to challenge the glorification of the Troubles and the maintenance of cultural violence after the peace process. Although almost 20 years have passed since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the legacy of the Troubles still sustains cultural violence which facilitates recruitment to republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, sectarian and political protests and obstructs political accommodation and conflict transformation (MacGinty, Muldoon & Ferguson, 2007).

These participants were involved in trying to challenge this cultural violence through educational and restorative justice projects by demythologizing the glorification of the Troubles and violence taking place in their communities:

We were talking about the conflict days [with a group of young men in a community group]… and one of them or two or three of them eventually said "I would love to live in those days", and I just lost it. I said "do you have any idea, you know it seems glamorous now", I said "but wait till you're carrying a coffin of your mother and father dead in the street, or you're carrying a coffin of your wife or your brother, or your best mate down the street", and it's getting this message through that it wasn't glamorous, it wasn't nice, it was ugly, it was rotten, and it's people like myself and others, we have to get this message out to the younger generation, that it wasn't glamorous. You know it's easy sticking up murals glorifying [the violence of the past], but it wasn't [glorious], you know, which is why we are trying to get rid of them and replace them with other stuff. By constantly glamorising you are attracting, and filling the minds of the kids with crap, and it's only people who, like myself, who came through it and who were involved in the conflict and carried the coffins of their

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mates and seen the atrocities who can make them see the horror of the conflict.

(Participant 7, Belfast, 2008)

Paradoxically the participants felt that it was the 'macho kudos' of having been a purveyor of violence which gave them the credibility needed to sell this counter-radicalizing narrative to young people and provide a robust challenge to the legacy of cultural violence.

Theme 2: Stopping the Violence

The second theme of "stopping the violence" illustrates attempts to move away from direct violence and the barriers facing those involved in conflict transformation by lingering structural violence within the working class Protestant communities. The participants therefore strove to leave violence behind and build peace after 30 years of conflict:

> I wanted to end the war you know…so I was happy to either have the political role, community role, or a paramilitary role, as long as all three were married in together and all going in the same direction, and the basic direction, you know one was peace, two was to give the community the confidence, sort of stand on their own two feet.
>
> (Participant 3, Belfast, 2008)

For others a key motivator for dismantling the culture of violence was so their children or the children of Northern Ireland more generally did not have to endure violence like they did:

> I just look at my kids. I would dread them to have the upbringing, come through what I did. I don't want that for them. I don't want them to live the fear, always looking over their shoulders, always looking over their back, can't go in to certain areas and carrying the coffins of their friends, and relatives and stuff, I don't want that for them. I want a better society for them, so I do, and that's what motivates us. It motivates a lot of us who have been there and done it. (Participant 1, Belfast, 2008)

However, they felt hindered by the remaining legacy of cultural violence which led to demands from members of the wider community for them to return to violence to deal with

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problems such as anti-social behaviour within the community or what the community viewed as an existential threat:

> There was a couple of incidents after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement where respectable, what they would call respectable unionists, two women and a man probably in their 60s who came to where we were standing as Gerry Adams [leader of Sinn Féin] was being interviewed by one of the TV stations. And we were standing there and they came round…and they said "shame on youse, 'coz you're with the PUP's" [Progressive Unionist Party, linked to UVF and RHC]. I said "what?" They said "in the old days the UVF wouldn't have let them stand over there. They'd have sorted them out". (Participant 3, Belfast, 2008)

Theme 3: Organizational Pressures to Maintain

In addition to the pressures from outside the organization to remain engaged in violence as discussed above, the third theme "organizational pressures to maintain" describes how organizational discord, the clandestine nature of these illegal armed groups and a lack of positive political leadership within loyalist communities makes the transformation away from the use of politically motivated violence difficult. Most participants likened these difficulties to the 'turning of a tanker':

> The tragedy is that for 30 years the popular loyalist paramilitaries have controlled these areas and breaking that is not going to happen overnight, and it is something which we have worked and worked and worked towards. To try to bring paramilitarism from conflict and into community activism. (Participant 1, Belfast, 2008)

A perceived lack of leadership within loyalism was deemed as a contributing factor to the difficulties in moving loyalists away from violence and dealing with structural violence in working class Protestant communities. A former loyalist paramilitary integral to the

negotiation of the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) ceasefire in October 1994

discusses how the leadership within loyalism has depreciated and this stalls movement

towards conflict transformation:

> I just had flashbacks to the day we declared the ceasefire and that day the world's
>
> media was there. Satellite dishes, thousands, everybody, and that's where loyalism
>
> was then. And I walked up on Sunday [to Fernhill House, site of the CLMC ceasefire
>
> statement] and it was quiet and I was saying to myself, you know where have I gone
>
> wrong? What's happened? Because now we're in a worse position. The UDP [Ulster
>
> Democratic Party] has collapsed so the UDA haven't got no voice. We have gangsters
>
> flauntingly running about you know. So where's leadership and loyalism going now?
>
> (Participant 10, Belfast, 2005)

These barriers were also reinforced by pressures to maintain the coherence and integrity of

the organizations against splits and moves into criminality by the membership who faced an

uncertain future:

> Since 1994 when the ceasefire was called, it's "what do you do now mate, we're
>
> redundant aren't we?"… How do paramilitaries justify their existence if there's no
>
> conflict? Yes, we've tried to move and alter culture, trying to get people involved in
>
> the community, trying to get people involved in politics. (Participant 5, Belfast, 2007)

In this way, those pushing for a peaceful transition faced pressures which might have resulted

in more direct violence, and a linked threat of criminal activity that contributed to structural

violence and inequality within their areas.

Theme 4: Activist Identity

Theme four "activist identity" illustrates the role of identity and commitment to the cause in

maintaining the transformation into non-violence, not some 'deradicalization' process which

weakened identity and ideology. As within other social movements, identification was key to

the participants' involvement in both military and peaceful activities (Huddy, 2001; Klandermans, 2002; Louis, Amiot, Thomas & Blackwood, 2016):

> I have no hesitation in saying I'm still very much into loyalist politics, that's my identity and culture and it's where I come from. (Participant 6, Belfast, 2015)
>
> What they don't realise is that there are people like me who gave their liberty in defence of their community, rightly or wrongly, and it would be very silly for me to spend 16 years in jail and to leave it at that and not come out and want to try and give something back to the community. (Participant 4, Belfast, 2005)

In addition to this strong sense of identity, the participants indicated a high level of commitment as illustrated by this former UVF member:

> You know, the other thing is I'm a single parent with three kids. People say to me 'coz you've brought the kids up on your own you've done this, for the last I think 7 years I've been a single parent. They say you're a good dad, I say no I'm not because at each point over the last few years I've been willing to go to jail, I've been willing to die and leave my children. Such is the strength of my conviction. (Participant 3, Belfast, 2008)

These strong bonds of identity and commitment amongst the participants were still as key to driving their conflict transformation work as their earlier political violence. So while there were clear behavioural changes, in that most were now working on building community capacity or were involved in community politics, ex-prisoner support groups, youth work and education initiatives, rather than engaging in politically motivated violence, they could not be considered to have become deradicalized or have weakened in their commitment or bonds of identity.

Theme 5: "Through the Looking Glass"

The fifth theme "through the looking glass" explores how the loyalists gauged their own transformation in light of how their republican adversaries in the Provisional Irish Republican

Army (IRA) and their political party Sinn Féin have managed their transformation to non-violence. During the conflict loyalists firmly viewed the IRA as the enemy and republicans as a dangerous outgroup (McAuley & Ferguson, 2016). However, during the peace process these relationships have altered and, while still problematic, there was a degree of respect and veneration:

> You can't fight an enemy and not start to admire [them] because the minute you start to take them for granted, you're a dead man. I always held them in high esteem that way. I admire their commitment. (Participant 14, Mid-Ulster, 2007)

> It is positive in that you can engage with them and you can talk to them … they have an affinity with working-class issues, they can recognise the common issues between Protestants and Catholics. But they are no more positive than what the progressive thinking within loyalism is. I mean they have their red necks; they have their sectarianism. (Participant 13, Belfast, 2006)

In particular, there was admiration for how Sinn Féin and the IRA had been able to bring the vast majority of their members with them and gain vast electoral support amongst the nationalist electorate in a way loyalists were unable to do:

> Nearly in every nationalist area that you go into you will find that the community workers are members of Sinn Féin, because they've seen that was the way forward, that was the way of developing the community, but also developing their image as well. So they're getting benefits both ways. The community's benefiting, and them as a political party is benefiting. Their workers are benefiting because they've got jobs, so the whole lot is benefiting. I mean if you look on our side what do you see? (Participant 8, Belfast, 2007)

The following quotation is representative of the beliefs of many of the participants who were interviewed for this study, who believed that the republican model was one to replicate in order to transform working class Protestant communities away from structural violence:

> I don't like doing it, but we need to learn from what they [the IRA and Sinn Féin] done, because they were the best. They were the best at it and we don't have to look that far, because it's just across the road from us, wherever you are in Belfast. And you can learn from them and I know a lot of people say "oh, we are always second fiddle, we're always learning, we're always doing things from them" and you know watching them and following them. Well that's the nature of it. That's the way we are. If we see ourselves, if you see yourselves as counter-terrorists, which they like to be called, then you are always going to be following. (Participant 9, Belfast, 2007).

The emphasis on the local dimension is interesting, and the lessons that loyalists and republicans can learn (or have learned) from each other have arguably been underplayed in the existing literature. It may be that loyalists and republicans have as much to teach each other as they have those engaging in conflict transformation initiatives elsewhere in the world (compare O'Kane, 2010). Nevertheless, challenges to more open engagement between loyalists and republicans remain, such as the residual fear and hostilities between the two communities, despite a willingness to work together for the sake of peace (Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley & McGlynn, 2010).

Discussion

The loyalists' journey from conflict to relative peace has involved a struggle to tackle not only direct violence, but the cultural and structural violence that underpinned it. The potential for groups to drift from direct paramilitary violence into criminality, which would in turn exacerbate structural violence within loyalist communities, merely reinforces the challenges faced by loyalist actors in the context of conflict transition. The themes identified in this

article drawn from the case of Northern Ireland reinforce Galtung's (1969; 1990) conceptualisation of the triangular relationship between different types of violence – structural, cultural and direct – which had a distinct influence on how the conflict developed in the ways that it did, and, consequently, impacted on the ways loyalists sought to bring it to an end.

This article has identified five of the key challenges which former loyalist activists have claimed were crucial to cementing peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. These are: demythologising the conflict, thereby attempting to provide a credible narrative to counter violent extremism among a new generation in their community; stopping direct violence, which was particularly difficult given the cultural violence which legitimized it within the community; resisting organisational pressure to maintain violent action, a further legacy of cultural violence which also risked further structural violence in the form of criminality within loyalist areas; development of robust activist identity which was crucial in preventing recidivism; and the measurement of progress through reference to the parallel conflict transformation journey of their former republican enemies, without any watering down of their own activist identity, or any reduction in suspicions about the 'other' community.

However, whilst suspicion of the other community has not necessarily waned, our research shows that loyalists have begun to think of their former enemies in new ways, up to and including a willingness to learn how republicans have benefitted from the peace process in ways which they perceive their own communities have not, thereby identifying ways to address the economic imbalances and structural violence which besets their locales and the working class population of Northern Ireland more generally (Jeong, 1999). This changing or challenging of discourse around their former opponents suggests that conflict transformation, rather than simply regulation, is a factor, and that loyalists can have an important role to play in furthering a transformative agenda (Lederach, 1995; Miall, 2007).

The experience of loyalist groups chimes with the broader literature on how terrorist campaigns do (or do not) end (Barrelle, 2015; Bjørgo, 2009). Our article confirms that desistence from political violence is rarely instant or linear – as the experience of other groups who have operated in Ireland also suggests. For example, the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA), a Marxist-Leninist vanguard movement, took over two decades, and several political transformations, to move away from paramilitarism, during which time it engaged in extensive criminality (Rekawek, 2008). But it does demonstrate that when paramilitary groups do engage in negotiated transitions, some measure of (qualified) success is a likely outcome (Cronin, 2009).

As a major challenge facing former combatants is being drawn into criminality and thus maintaining the cultures of violence; developing support with the reintegration of former fighters back into civil society is vital. Clearly to enable this will involve providing secure employment and tailored educational and training programmes (Bertram, 2015), and this should be considered an essential part of any post-conflict settlement or deradicalization programme.

The experience of loyalists in Northern Ireland further suggests the importance of credibility and a strong sense of activist identity in countering violent extremism, and providing a persuasive counter-narrative to those who advocate violence – an especially challenging proposition given the cultural violence which has celebrated historical instances of armed struggle within the community. This has potential transferability outside an Irish setting. Neumann (2015), for example, argues that former members of the Islamic State (IS) organisation could be extremely effective in preventing new recruits joining the group, due to their perceived credibility and first-hand knowledge of the society IS seek to create.

This also has important implications for the current debates on the effectiveness of counter-narratives in combating recruitment to violent extremist groups (McDowell-Smith,

Speckhard & Yayla, 2017) and about the necessity of deradicalizing former combatants (Clubb, 2015) and indicates that the deradicalization of violent extremists may be impractical, unnecessary and potentially even counterproductive for counter-radicalization. Research on former ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) separatists from the Basque Country supports the notion that it is possible to disengage from violence without necessarily disavowing the legitimacy of *past* violence (Reinares, 2011). This is echoed in research on the reintegration of jihadist extremists conducted in a Dutch context, which emphasises that 'disengagement alone may be able to prevent recidivism among extremists' (Schuurman and Bakker, p. 78). Thus the findings in this article complement those in other national contexts, and contribute to a wider debate about the ultimate utility of deradicalization initiatives.

Many interviewees spoke about how working for peace was harder, and more thankless than engaging in violence. Thus, a strong sense of identity and commitment to the in-group, coupled with a similarly strong belief in the justification of the reasons underpinning their prior involvement in conflict, can be crucial in preventing an individual or group making what might be the potentially easier choice of returning to the path of violence or moving into criminality. It may be fruitful for policymakers involved in peacebuilding initiatives to reflect on how such 'extremist' identities can be understood, developed and mobilised in positive ways during the transition from violence to peace, rather than trying to moderate or dismantle them. Indeed, as Lederach (1997) illustrates without post-conflict encounters which acknowledge the deep rooted identities and perceptions of the differing parties to conflict, you cannot move towards reconciliation.

While most of the transformative activity undertaken by loyalist combatants and former combatants is self-directed and bottom-up (Shirlow, et al., 2010) it would be asking a lot of former paramilitaries and activists on their own to completely eradicate the different forms of violence that plagued their communities for many decades. Furthermore, residual

challenges, in the form of group reorientation (Cronin, 2009) from political violence to organised crime still remains a challenge (Alderdice, McBurney & Williams, 2016). Clearly, to meet these challenges and tackle structural violence requires considerable investment and attention from the state authorities as well as these grassroots approaches.

However, the recent multiparty accommodations (Northern Ireland Office, 2015) around the legacy of the Troubles left many questions unanswered and provided no clear proposals to deal with past violence or the legacy of the conflict, illustrating the problems faced by the devolved government in tackling these issues even 20 years after the Agreement. Indeed, structural violence in the form of inequality of opportunity, deprivation and poverty may never be completely eradicated. Nevertheless, in addressing the five key challenges identified in this article, loyalists have played a crucial role in ensuring that the direct violence which can often stem from structural violence is no longer an inevitable outcome.

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