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Social Immobility, Ethno-politics, and Sectarian Violence: Obstacles to Post-conflict Reconstruction in Northern Ireland

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Abstract Through analysis of interviews with community leaders and newspaper reports and police data on sectarian violence, this study identifies dynamics and conditions which underscore fluctuations in ethno-political tensions and violence in Northern Ireland. Findings suggest that political provocations which promote such tensions are facilitated by the economic marginalization of communities historically susceptible to violence, ongoing community influence of paramilitary factions and disjuncture between the political priorities of upper- and lower-classes within each ethno-political community. More generally, the research highlights how a lack of investment in social and economic modes of reconstruction undermines the development of new political forms of cross-community cooperation and contributes to the reconstitution of intergroup division.

Keywords Class inequality · Post-conflict society · Political leadership · Sectarian violence · Northern Ireland

Introduction

Post-conflict societies with generally successful peace agreements continue to experience intergroup tensions and violence (for examples, see Berdal et al. 2012; Dionisio 2012; Eide 2012; Jarman 2004; Manz 2008). For many within divided societies emerging from conflict, "peace" is an ambiguous term. For some, it can mean defeat and/or invoke anxiety about their place in the future of the society. The cessation of violence is only the beginning of a long, peacebuilding process which, ideally, intends to more

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fundamentally transform ethno-political relations and deepen social integration and interdependency between historically polarized groups (Lederach 1997; Levin and Rabrenovic 2004). The development of cross-community interests and alliances connecting members of historically divided groups is imperative for the promotion of social and political heterogeneity and thus the strengthening of democracy (Coser 1954; Gurr 2000; Varshney 2003). Yet intergroup integration remains rare in post-conflict societies. With a particular focus on Northern Ireland, this study examines how limitations in social and economic reconstruction underscore the persistence of (low-intensity) conflict and facilitate leaders' ethno-political and sectarian provocations.

Research which evaluates post-conflict reconstruction has been disproportionately concerned with political reconstruction, such as, legislative and criminal justice reform. While necessary in providing legitimacy for post-war and power-sharing governments and providing a sense of public security, such an approach is, by itself, not sufficient in establishing long-term, sustainable peace. Peacebuilding efforts which also take into account the unique impacts on post-conflict communities of particular sociostructural conditions, shaped along various dimensions of power and identity, will have greater likelihoods of promoting a more transformational type of peace. For example, there has been increasing attention to the significant, limiting impact of unequal relations of political power across gendered lines on the scope of peacebuilding (Cockburn 2004; Zuckerman and Greenberg 2004; Ashe 2009). Yet other sociostructural conditions which undermine post-conflict reconstruction have received less attention, including issues of social class and economic inequality.

Prominent authors have documented how relative deprivation and overlapping political, economic, and social inequalities—or "horizontal inequalities"—between ethnic or religious groups increase the likelihood and scale of intergroup violence (Gurr 2000; Stewart 2008). However, such work is mostly concerned with early stages in the escalation of mass violence, rather than periods of peacebuilding. There has also been some recognition of the importance in considering the availability of employment and state entitlements for ex-combatants as integral in post-conflict reconstruction (Rolston 2007; Ginifer 2003). Yet how dynamics of inequality which cut-across polarized groups following peace accords undermine positive intergroup relation-building have received less empirical examination.

Moreover, while initial escalations of conflict toward mass violence depends significantly on the capacities of leaders to direct ethno-constituencies' attention to some perceived threat (Bowen 1996; Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Fearon and Laitin 2000; Gagnon 1995; Renshon 2006; Wilkinson 2002), it is possible that similar—albeit less extreme—self-serving approaches are pursued by elected leaders in post-conflict societies as well. When ethno-political insecurities and resentments still linger from past violence, they can be strategically appropriated in political discourse and social policy. In fact, given that few survivors within societies emerging from conflict desire a return to the violence of the past, such a dynamic might be *especially* instrumental in escalations of ethno-political hostilities during periods of "peace." In Northern Ireland, for example, relative stability of state institutional reform has allowed more space for intracommunity political debate; this can be viewed as both enabling the development of a greater variety of political relations and goals (Smithey 2011) while potentially threatening the sense of electoral security among ethno-political leaders.

Specifically, this article offers an empirical account of the ways in which poverty and class inequalities within both Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland underscore or facilitate ethno-political provocations which threaten peacebuilding. The study has a dual purpose: (1) to highlight how rising intragroup class divisions and simultaneous shifts in

distributions of power between the polarized communities sharpen social and political anxieties and mentalities of loss in underserved, working class communities; and (2) shape consequences of contentious political leadership. Findings show how political leaders channel socioeconomic anxiety toward the ethno-religious Other, framing their discourses around culturally contentious signifiers that activate ethno-political or ethno-sectarian schemata. Not coincidentally, manipulation of such symbols elicits emotionally charged, hostile responses and increases the likelihood of violence. By identifying such a dynamic, we offer an empirical example of a "*specific process* by which identities are produced and reproduced in action and speech," and through which (low-intensity) conflict is reconstituted (Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 850, emphasis in original). Findings also point to the imperative of reducing not only "horizontal inequalities" between ethno-political groups in post-conflict situations—the primary focus of attention in the literature—but also class inequality across ethno-national groups more generally. Without the working and lower classes of the main ethno-national blocs being incorporated sufficiently into the post-conflict society, efforts concerned only with measures of interethnic equality per se risk falling short of providing a sustainable peace.

Literature on Post-conflict Societies: a Critical Review

The literature on post-conflict societies has become increasingly comprehensive, putting attention on a variety of important issues effecting political and social reconstruction, including the reform of political bodies and state institutions (Horowitz 2000; Lijphart 1999; Norris 2008) and formal mechanisms of forgiveness and reconciliation, such as, truth commissions (Hayner 2002; Rotberg 2000). There has also been much research on the functions of social capital and interethnic contact in fostering trust and changing political attitudes (Hewstone et al. 2006; Pickering 2006; Rydgren and Sofi 2011; Rydgren et al. 2013; Svenson and Brouneus 2013; Tam et al. 2009), and the potential leadership of grassroots organizations in peacebuilding and restorative justice (Arriaza and Roht-Arriaza 2008; Knox 2010; Erikkson 2009; McAuley et al. 2010; Parver and Wolf 2008). Yet how ethno-political divisions are *reproduced* or politically re-activated following the formalities of "peace" merits further critical and empirical attention. The relative lack of such attention is due largely to the optimism inherent in many post-conflict studies, the closed timing of much of the research to initial resolutions of conflict, and disproportionate focus on institution-specific forms of cooperation.

For example, cases of cooperation within particular institutions, networks, or localities documented in the post-conflict/peacebuilding literature tend to be exceptional, not representative of general trends. An obvious example is the research of Rydgren and Sofi (2011) and Rydgren et al. (2013) on bridging social capital and trust between ethno-religious groups in Iraq. Other examples include research from Northern Ireland on the impact of interethnic contact and trust on political attitudes and interpretations of the "Other" (Hewstone et al. 2006; Hughes et al. 2011; Tam et al. 2009), as well as the promise of integrated education in reducing ethnic or religious intolerance and mistrust (McGlynn et al. 2004). In Northern Ireland, effective cooperation among grassroots peacekeeping networks (Erikkson 2009; Jarman 2006; Knox 2010; McAuley et al. 2010) takes place, somewhat paradoxically, within a backdrop of extreme polarization between Protestants and Catholics (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006, p. 33–34; Hughes et al. 2007). For example, 95 % of children attend religiously segregated schools (Smithey 2011, p. 15) and two thirds of residents live in neighborhoods that are at least 90 %

Catholic or Protestant (Harland 2011, p. 416). Pickering's (2006) study of the capacity of workplace integration to foster interethnic trust also takes place within a backdrop of ethno-religious polarization in Bosnia-Herzegovina which exceeds pre-war levels (Gagnon 2004; Berdal et al. 2012). Why the very forms of intergroup integration discussed in the literature are so rare in post-conflict societies is linked, in part, to social and economic conditions which become entrenched despite or—paradoxically—*because* of "peace."

Research on "bottom-up" or grassroots peacekeeping has emphasized the need for a more holistic understanding of peace which emphasizes the role of civil society (Arriaza and Roht-Arriaza 2008; Parver and Wolf 2008; Knox 2010; Erikkson 2009), and challenges dominant paradigms which often implicitly restrict its meaning to the cessation of violence. Yet due largely to local, organization-specific focuses, the primary emphasis on community-based initiatives also tends to inadvertently reduce attention to obstacles to peacebuilding rooted in broader political and economic structures and processes. For example, in Northern Ireland, while more than 5,000 grassroots peacebuilding organizations have collectively received over four billion pounds from the International Fund for Ireland and the European Peace and Reconciliation Fund since the 1998 peace accord, the peace process has entered an increasingly liminal state at the time of writing.[1] As a result of standardized, international approaches toward the promotion of voluntary peacebuilding organizations in post-conflict societies more generally, innovative grassroots organizations geared toward more fundamentally integrating divided communities hold inadequate power in framing definitions and objectives of "peace" (Mac Ginty 2011, 2008).

Moreover, a disproportionate share of research on post-conflict reconstruction is centered in traditional analytic frameworks from political science that focus, for example, on the formal redesign of political bodies and voting trends. Because formal state reforms generally mark the official advent of "peace," it is not surprising that a general optimism pervades the literature on political reconstruction and that analysis is often centered on the relative stability of new state institutions (see, for example, Barnes 2001). Mainstream analysis of Northern Ireland's peace process is a prime example of this trend (Coakley 2008; McGarry and O'Leary 2006; Mitchell et al. 2008). When recent violence and ethno-political hostilities *are* discussed, it is often with implicit assumptions that they simply mark residuals of the past that will soon fade out, or are primordial inevitabilities that should be expected.

On the contrary, constructivist approaches increasingly document how escalations in ethnic or political conflicts generally result from the political construction of fear and threat, rather than ahistorical ethnic or religious hatreds (for examples, see Gagnon 1995; Renshon 2006; Wilkinson 2002). It is easy to assume that the polarization that persists in such societies after a negotiated peace is merely the result of the extreme violence of the past, and is symptomatic of the resentment and mistrust of perpetrators—or the "Other"—that remains. Memories and the past certainly matter in this respect (Rydgren 2007); however, exclusive focus on such phenomena without simultaneous attention to ongoing dynamics of political, economic, and social power tends, unwittingly, to underscore pseudo-primordial arguments which frame limitations of peace processes as consequences of "inevitable," mutually exclusive interests

[1] The hierarchical, bureaucratic nature of the "peace industry" has come under criticism by some, who point out that many organizations receiving disproportionate support from state and international funders remain limited in terms of the scope of change in ethno-political identities they pursue, and work largely within a framework which subtly reconstitutes polarized ingroup and outgroup identities (for more in-depth discussion on this issue, see Fissuh et al. 2012; Creary and Byrne 2014a).

of polarized ethno-constituencies (Nascimento 2011; see the evaluation of McGarry and O'Leary 2006 of the consociational arrangement in Northern Ireland as one example). Evaluations rooted in limiting assumptions about "realistic" approaches to peace processes might preclude adequate recognition of particular dynamics of power which undergird the (re)*construction* of ethnocentric identities and ethno-political or ethno-sectarian mentalities. In this sense, the line between "peace" and "war" is not as straightforward as many theoretical paradigms implicitly suggest; such conditions might be more accurately perceived as extremes on a "continuum of violence" and conflict (Cockburn 2004). By illustrating how "identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple"—along intersecting lines of class, gender, and nation, among others—researchers are "hard pressed to 'understand the sometimes coercive force' of identity" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 1, quoted in Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 846). Following such logic, this study traces the (re)productions of ethno-political identities and uses of violence to structural class inequalities (income, education, etc.) and the practices and discourses of ethnocentric political elite. In doing so, we illustrate how the "coercive" forces of class and ethno-nationalist identities are inextricably linked, and how processes in the reproduction of conflict mentalities and practices are underscored (in part) by social and economic inequalities within—as much as between—historically divided ethno-political communities.

Dynamics of Social Class and Political Leadership in "Post-conflict" Northern Ireland

In its 17th year at the time of writing, the milestones of Northern Ireland's peace process generally remain intact, including the establishment of a power-sharing, consociational government, significant reforms in policing, and (partial) paramilitary disarmament and demobilization (Coakley 2008).[2] Belfast city center, once occupied by British soldiers, now resembles other cosmopolitan centers across Europe, becoming an increasingly popular tourist site. Moreover, while (mostly) low-intensity paramilitary attacks and sectarian rioting continue (Creary and Bryne 2014b; Harland 2011), and the threat of Irish republican terrorism remains (Horgan and Morrison 2011; Kearney 2016), Northern Ireland has not experienced a surge in crime related to the "greed and grievance" of ex-combatants (Rolston 2007), unlike many other societies emerging from conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 2004).

Efforts toward the promotion of equity and elimination of "horizontal inequalities" between Catholic and Protestant communities have also been relatively successful, in certain respects. While Catholics still "out-score Protestants on almost every measure of social deprivation" (Nolan 2014, p. 13), the gap in economic advancement between Catholics and Protestants has narrowed greatly. At least "60 % of entrants to higher education are Catholic and 60 percent are female" (Clarke 2012), resulting in the "rebalancing [of] the communal shares of professional and managerial occupations" (Nolan 2014, p. 13). The same sources indicate that middle-class Catholics have also experienced increases in residential mobility, moving into historically Protestant neighborhoods, and filling vacancies resulting from middle-class Protestant

[2] The terms "Protestant" and "Catholic" signify ethno-political orientations as much as religious affiliations (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006, p. 15). Although not all Protestants or Catholics are unionist/loyalist or republican/nationalist, respectively, almost all unionists/loyalists and republicans/nationalists are Protestant and Catholic. Republicans are generally more uncompromising in their call for a United Ireland than nationalists. The underlying political ideology of both unionists and loyalists is their demand that Northern Ireland remains independent from the Republic of Ireland. However, differences between loyalists and unionists are more complex (see Shirlow 2012 and Rolston 2006).

emigration and an aging Protestant demographic (see also Shirlow and Murtagh 2006). Yet the Catholics experiencing strong educational achievement and employment mobility are generally those from middle-class—rather than working-class—backgrounds.[3] Not coincidentally, though middle-class Catholics continue to vote mostly for their traditional nationalist parties—Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic Labor Party (SDLP)—their ascendancy in class status parallels their increasingly favorable attitudes about Northern Ireland's membership in the UK (Clarke 2012).[4] On the contrary, the goal of a united Ireland retains ideological importance within relatively deprived republican communities which were impacted disproportionately by the conflict, and in which anti-accord dissident republican groups maintain some degree of influence.

For underserved, working-class Catholic *and* Protestant communities, signs of progress are quite ambiguous. One third of all young people who left the school system in the 2011/2012 reporting year were 16 years old and disproportionately working-class males from both Protestant and Catholic communities (Nolan 2014, p. 98). Employment prospects are especially grim for such individuals. Unemployment among those aged 18 to 24 was at least 20 % in July 2015, according to Northern Ireland's Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (2015). For Protestant males ages 16 to 24, it is even higher (Nolan 2014, p. 13). Underemployment is also a major problem (Coulter 2014, p. 767). By 2011, "Absolute poverty before housing costs" in Northern Ireland was at least 24 % (Nolan 2014, p. 78). The promise at the early stages of the peace process that inflows of multinational capital would bring exponential growth in prosperity has only proved partially true; the "peace dividend has accrued not to the poorest sections of society… but rather to those that already enjoyed considerable privilege" (Coulter 2014, p. 767). The global economic crisis of 2008 only exacerbated economic problems, aggravating intercommunal divisions most apparent in working-class locations (Creary and Bryne 2014b), where young people "consider themselves imprisoned within their neighborhoods" (McAlister et al. 2014).

Dynamics of inequality in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK are linked—as anywhere—to global economic trends. For example, working-class Protestants, who had in previous generations had reliable access to jobs in the shipbuilding and manufacturing sectors, have experienced economic and social displacement as a result of deindustrialization (McGovern and Shirlow 1997). Yet policies of the Conservative government in Westminster, generally supported by the largest unionist parties—The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)—are compounding economic problems for the least privileged groups from both main ethno-religious communities. The real spending power of modest- and low-income families has gradually declined in recent years, the implications of which will be exacerbated by cuts in public spending and "welfare reform." According to an article by Jane Merrick in the UK's *Independent* (July 20, 2013), citing economist Howard Reed, the British "Council tax, for example, charges low-to-middle-income families a much higher percentage of their disposable income than the richest households." The same article indicates that "The poorest families will lose more than 12 percent of their net income on

[3] "[T]he highest achievers of education are Catholic girls who do not qualify for free school meals… [with] more than 74 % of them obtain[ing] two A-levels. By contrast, just 11 % of poorer Protestant boys who qualify for free school meals achieve two A-levels" (Clarke 2012)—the lowest overall rating in the UK, with the exception of Roma youth. Educational and employment prospects for working-class, Catholic young men are not much better (Nolan 2014).

[4] However, it is unclear whether the recent British vote to exit the European Union will reverse the trend of middle-class Catholics' support for Northern Ireland's UK member status.

average, compared to around 3 percent of net income for… the second most wealthy income bracket" (see also Nolan 2014, p. 73). Critics of Westminster's regressive economic policies cited by Merrick warn that they will have worse effects on inequality levels than those implemented by the 1980s Thatcher regime.

Moreover, with respect to issues over which the power-sharing executive does hold substantial power—unlike macroeconomic policies (taxes, social entitlements, etc.), which are disproportionately controlled by Westminster—recent evidence of failure in leadership has mounted. For example, the DUP motioned to dismantle the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which "is widely credited with the depoliticisation of housing" so that it is allocated purely on the "basis of need," and is respected for its promotion of "community cohesion" (Nolan 2014, p. 114). Even as numerous buildings in working-class urban neighborhoods in Belfast have become derelict, "the shortage of public housing is acute" (ibid, p. 114), exacerbating insecurity in marginalized communities. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2015) charged the government's Department of Social Development with failing "to comply with its commitments" to equality of opportunity. Some unionist leaders have apparently prioritized support for contentious ethno-cultural issues in their policy agenda, reflected in the fact that "official recognition of and funding for Orange[5] cultural themes and 'Ulster-Scots' are… at unprecedented levels" (Nolan 2014, p. 12). Such trends parallel unionist fears of a "culture war"—or that "Britishness" is being removed from Northern Ireland—signified by recent restrictions on Unionist flags and parades. Moreover, at the time of writing, agreement between the largest unionist and nationalist parties—the DUP and Sinn Fein, respectively—is rare. These two parties control a combined 62 % of the vote in the Assembly, giving them "unchecked power" (ibid, p. 142). The mutual veto accorded to Sinn Fein and the DUP as part of the consociational arrangement has led to a "series of logjams," as the other parties have expressed concern over being marginalized in the Assembly (ibid, p. 142; see also Noble 2013).

Finally, unionist support for policies which permanently criminalize and marginalize former paramilitary prisoners (Rolston 2006; Shirlow 2012), in line with their intention to punish former IRA militants, undermines the efficacy of community-based ex-combatant reintegration efforts.[6] Certain elements within the loyalist and republican ex-prisoner communities, with few job prospects and limited social legitimacy (Mitchell 2008)—and who witness the stagnation of their communities amid shifts toward neoliberal modes of "development"—may feel inclined to ratchet-up political hostilities in the future.

Methods

The analysis utilizes a mixed-method approach, drawing on data retrieved from interviews with community leaders, newspaper reports about sectarian incidents in Belfast, and secondary,

[5] The reference to "Orange" here corresponds with themes linked to the Orange Order, an Irish Unionist organization generally considered sectarian by Catholics.

[6] Millions of pounds in funding from international donors have been allocated to community-based restorative justice initiatives often spearheaded by former political prisoners. Yet the criminalization of the same group via state policy has limited the meaning of ex-combatant reintegration, as many feel betrayed by their elected leaders (Rolston 2006). Those previously imprisoned for violent political offenses tend to suffer chronic unemployment due to the state's support of employers who prefer not to hire them; are often unable to obtain visas; are unable to obtain various forms of insurance; and are unable to adopt children (Rolston 2006; Shirlow 2012).

quantitative data on rates of sectarian violence.[7] Data on rates of hate-motivated incidents in each region of Belfast were retrieved from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and were used as proxies in interpreting fluctuations in sectarian tensions. Such data is based on police reports and is subcategorized according to police district, allowing for comparisons between each of the four parts of Belfast, north and west (police district A) and south and east (district B). The PSNI data is also subcategorized by incident type (sectarian, racist, homophobic, etc.). Thus, the data allows for comparisons between distinct regions of the city, which can then be linked with other dynamics identified by the qualitative methods.

Like any official police data, the frequencies of incidents recorded by the PSNI are underestimations. Further, it is important to recognize a history of bias in policing that may underscore skepticism about the validity of the data. Among Catholics especially, the police continue to be commonly perceived as predominantly serving unionist/British interests, underscored by a near century-long history of acute police repression of this group before the 1998 peace agreement.

Notwithstanding these potential limitations, PSNI data contain the best quantitative estimates available, especially with respect to serious incidents involving firearms and explosives, as they are almost always made known to police. We believe that the data is sufficient for our purposes and pose only minimal implications for validity and reliability. If anything, the trends we report, including increases in violence within loyalist locations, are likely *more* prevalent in reality than the data suggest.

Content Analysis of Newspaper Reports

The authors also draw on data retrieved from reports about sectarian incidents from a variety of newspapers based predominantly in the UK and Republic of Ireland. Such reports were retrieved by the authors from the LexisNexis academic database, using a limited set of search terms. These terms included "sectarian," "violence," "paramilitary," "terrorist," and "Belfast." All reports discussing sectarian incidents were marked, and variables were coded and entered into a SPSS data file. Many variables were recorded, including location, time period, motive, perpetrator and victim identities (age, religion, paramilitary membership), and community and political response. Although only a fraction of incidents recorded by the PSNI receive media coverage, newspaper reports contain variables not available in police data. Thus, such data allows for an examination of contextual factors which help in identifying why incidents occurred and why they did or did not result in conflict escalation. Discourse surrounding incidents that receive significant press coverage often indicate which issues are most contentious and thus significant in undermining intercommunity trust and cooperation. Moreover, the newspaper reports contain interviews with politicians and community leaders, among others, which help illuminate contexts in which (de)escalations of conflict occur. In order to undertake an analysis of such discourses, every newspaper article containing quotes from any involved party (politician, witness, victim, community activist) associated with an event were retrieved, uploaded into NVivo 9 and subsequently analyzed by the authors.

There are limitations to this method, of course. First, different newspapers may report differently about a given incident, and there is no comprehensive way to account for potential bias in reporting. For example, *The Irish News* is read predominantly by Catholics and may be perceived as biased by Protestants. Similarly, the *Belfast News Letter* is generally read by Protestants. The *Belfast Telegraph*, in contrast, is considered a more neutral newspaper (though

[7] For a discussion of the definition and epistemologies of the mixed-method research, see Johnson et al. (2007).

Table 1 Incident rates of Belfast sectarian violence by district, April 2009–March 2014

	W Belfast	N Belfast	S Belfast	E Belfast
2009/2010	124	532	74	67
2010/2011	99	389	74	101
2011/2012	87	211	90	172
2012/2013	103	288	106	131
2013/2014	74	246	102	152

Data retrieved from the Police Service of Northern Ireland

Catholics tend to see it as a less vehemently unionist publication). Another potential limitation of reliance on newspaper reports is that some important actions or events which could significantly impact a dispute or incident of violence may simply not be reported by particular newspapers, if at all. It is for this reason that we decided to retrieve data from all newspapers in the same way, in order to obtain as much relevant information as possible.

Interviews

The authors also conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with community leaders in Belfast, which helped to achieve a more in-depth analysis, enhance the validity of the study, and increase the likelihood of identifying important factors not adequately discussed in newspaper reports. Responses included here refer to semistructured, in-depth, or qualitative interview questions about the greatest obstacles to peacebuilding and the challenges faced by the respective public or grassroots peace organization in which each respondent worked. The interviews were conducted in May and June of 2014 in the private offices of the interviewees and were audio recorded, transcribed and coded by the authors through NVivo 9, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The interview sample is comprised of 23 respondents. Interviewees were recruited first through contacts at Northeastern University (Boston, MA) and the Institute for Conflict Research in Belfast. Respondents were subsequently recruited via "snowball" or referral sampling. Respondents—15 men and 6 women—work across the ethno-political divide in a variety of leadership capacities at the grassroots level and/or public commissions and councils, and thus have keen insight into the dynamics of both loyalist and republican communities. One current elected party official also participated in interviews, in addition to a former elected official. In addition to being active in peacebuilding, at least five men—four loyalists and one republican—are also ex-political prisoners. (Other republican respondents may have been as well, but did not acknowledge so to the authors.) All interviews were one-on-one with the exception of one group interview with five members of a loyalist peacebuilding organization.

The Flags Protest, Sectarian Violence, and the Crisis of Political Leadership

Between the reporting periods of 2008/2009 (April 2008 through March 2009) and 2011/2012, frequencies of sectarian violence generally declined in north Belfast—typically the most violent

part of the city, holding a disproportionate number of sectarian interfaces.[8] However, the number of incidents recorded by police then increased in 2012/2013 in both north and west Belfast (see Table 1). At the same time, even while incidents declined between 2008 and 2012 in north and west Belfast, frequencies actually increased each year in east and south Belfast over the same period (though overall rates were higher in north Belfast), and remained relatively high for the following 2 years. Analysis of newspaper reports similarly points to a rising problem in the majority loyalist/unionist area of east Belfast. For example, reports about anti-police violence there accounted for 37 % of all such reports in 2013 retrieved by the authors, up from 17 % in 2012.

The sharp rise in loyalist violence in particular during this time—as both interviews and content analysis of newspaper reports suggest—is not coincidental to practices and discourses of ethno-political elite. The most visible threat to political and social stability came from the "Flag Protest," which was largely initiated by unionist elected officials in response to legislation proposed by the Alliance and nationalist Sinn Fein parties. Sinn Fein City Council officials brought the proposal to remove the Union flag from city hall to a vote, initially intending to ban it altogether. After deliberations with officials from the Alliance Party—the largest political party in Northern Ireland with no ethno-religious affiliation—Sinn Fein agreed to compromise by accepting that it fly on British holidays—the standard policy across the UK. Unionist politicians responded aggressively, arguing that the vote was undemocratic and symbolized an attack on unionism. Alliance party members, blamed for selling out unionist interests to the benefit of nationalists, were the primary recipients of the immediate loyalist backlash and paramilitary-sponsored violence that subsequently ensued.

National flags hold much symbolic political and ideological significance in Northern Ireland, especially for unionists and loyalists. Throughout some working-class Protestant neighborhoods in Belfast, Union flags are literally everywhere and fly year-round, meant to claim territory and intimidate nationalists. The hostile reaction to Belfast City Council's legislation to take down the flag illustrates the fragile political identity of loyalists and unionists and the insecurities they continue to feel over their tenuous place in the UK and the prospect of a united Ireland. The largest unionist party in the province (the DUP), holding a central leadership position, chose to focus public attention to the issue and seemed rather disingenuous in their haphazard public condemnations of the violence which subsequently occurred. Most unionist leaders accused Sinn Fein of intentionally invoking unionist/loyalist hostility for political gain, by "bulldozing" controversial decisions about culturally divisive issues.[9] Some leaders even seemed to subtly legitimize the sectarian environment during periods of heightened tension. For example, in summer 2013, the Sinn Fein Mayor of Belfast was attacked by a mob of 40 while attending the opening of a park in a working-class loyalist estate. Unionist representative refused to condemn the incident on radio, while another said that "It seems that advice was given that the lord mayor should not go to Woodvale Park, but he decided otherwise."[10] The incident occurred in the immediate aftermath of rioting linked to restrictions on Unionist Orange parades from marching through a contentious north Belfast interface, and tensions ran particularly high. Nonetheless, it was clear that many unionist leaders were not willing to risk reaching across the ethno-political divide by unequivocally condemning the loyalist violence. As one Protestant community leader acknowledged, "Here,

[8] The term interface refers to the border areas between urban Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods which experience a disproportionate amount of sectarian violence.
[9] *Morning Star* (January 8, 2013)
[10] *The Irish Times* (August 8, 2013)

sometimes it's easier for the politicians not to lead and upset their own, and to pander a wee bit… The DUP [also] had difficulty condemning… the flag dispute. They did after it started, but they already started it."

As violence over the flag ruling escalated, political rhetoric became increasingly divisive, with each ethno-political bloc blaming the other for the crisis. At the early stages of the violence, for example, the Unionist First Minister responded by saying that "The decision to pursue the removal of the flag from City Hall and other council buildings, despite warnings of the likely consequential impact on community relations, was foolish and provocative."[11] Other unionist leaders made similar comments.[12] Shortly thereafter, during a heated exchange over Twitter with critics, the First Minister defended the decision of his party to disseminate 40,000 leaflets around east Belfast, encouraging people to contact the Alliance Party in protest of the flag decision, while providing contact information of Alliance officials who would later receive death threats and have their homes and offices attacked.[13] An elected official from east Belfast notes how the city council vote regarding the flag resulted in

> all sorts of attacks… You had the DUP basically ensure [that] that would be the reaction by releasing 40,000 leaflets around east Belfast letting everyone know that according to them, the Alliance Party had torn down the flag from City Hall. That was very inflammatory and it certainly didn't calm people down.[14]

A community worker from east Belfast makes a similar point:

> They're [loyalists] being fed by the DUP and the senior unionists… Billy Hutchinson, who is a [publicly visible] loyalist, accepted that the flag should only be flown on designated days. The loyalists accepted it then. All of a sudden, these leaflets are going around saying "they've taken our culture." Then the loyalists are going, "they've taken our culture, fucking Fenians!"[15] [16]

Apparently, the leaflets had a significant impact in invoking emotionally charged, hostile reactions from loyalists. By inciting outrage over culturally sensitive ethno-political symbols—or flags in this case—such leaders ensure that constituents remain focused on divisive ethno-cultural or ethno-national issues and that other parties with greater commitment to cross-community alliance-building remain relatively marginal.

Following the flag violence, the consequent strain in intercommunity relations remained entrenched throughout 2013 and well into 2014, when the authors visited Belfast. The escalation of violence around ethno-political rituals and emblems was especially intense in 2013. Twenty-five percent of all newspaper reports retrieved about violence in unionist/loyalist east Belfast between 2008 and 2013 was linked with flags and parades, and 66 % of these were in 2012 and 2013.

In the summer of 2013, tensions that had been simmering since December 2012 again boiled over during the notorious July 12th parades in north Belfast. Loyalist mobs rioted after police restricted their annual parade from marching through a Catholic part of north Belfast after

[11] *Belfast Telegraph* (December 4, 2012)
[12] *News Letter* (January 7, 2013); *News Letter* (December 15, 2012); *Belfast Telegraph* (December 5, 2012)
[13] *Financial Times (London)* (January 10, 2013)
[14] Interview with author, May 2014
[15] "Fenian" used to be a self-described, prideful term for Catholic warriors, but is now a derogatory term used toward Catholics by Protestants.
[16] Interview with author, May 2014

residents, loyalist and republican community leaders, and politicians failed to come to any agreement. Such parades are seen as provocative by Catholics and often result in sectarian clashes and attacks on police. Nationalist and unionist officials immediately blamed each other for the violence and for contributing to sectarian mentalities.[17] The Northern Ireland Assembly was subsequently "recalled to debate a DUP motion which said efforts to build a shared future had been harmed by the decision to ban Protestant Orangemen from marching on a contested stretch of road in north Belfast on July 12."[18] The aftermath of the event serves as another example in which politicians concentrate discursive and legislative focus on controversial, ethno-national symbols and rituals in order to re-center politics around resentment of the outgroup, reminding constituents of the importance in supporting "their" respective ethno-political parties.

Unionist officials did receive some internal criticism for promoting sectarian division by their more moderate counterparts from the unionist parties.[19] Moreover, signs of intergroup cooperation during this period include an increase in donations to Alliance party and modest increase in its membership enrollment, as well as some evidence of support for Protestant victims of sectarian attacks by their nationalist neighbors in west Belfast.[20] Despite escalating tension, there remained some extent of commitment to cooperation among civilians and community leaders from both sides of the ethno-religious divide. However, little evidence exists that such phenomena are widespread. Rather, the overall picture is generally grimmer than what these exceptional cases when observed in isolation might suggest.

Moreover, according to newspaper reports and interview respondents, the gradual rise in "ethno-cultural" violence in east Belfast is linked to a sense of disenfranchisement among the working-class population—and loyalist working-class communities especially. As one elected unionist official explains,

> In my constituency of East Belfast, I continue to witness at first hand the impact of economic recession on an already deprived section of our society. Wages are low, costs are rising, and not a day goes past when good, honest people are not losing their jobs. This may sound bad enough, but when we consider the high suicide rates in east Belfast, combined with the pending impact of welfare reform, some people can be forgiven for seeking solace in our national identity, which is represented by the Union flag.[21]

Apparently, threat mentalities, rooted largely in economic problems, manifest as ethno-nationalism and are expressed through hostile ethno-politics.

Poverty, Violence, and Cultures of Paramilitarism

Despite some signs of moving forward, and the gradual decline of violence in north and west Belfast between 2008 and 2012 (see Table 1), findings consistently point to consequences resulting from the interconnections of structural inequity and poverty, cultures of paramilitarism, loyalist/unionist ethno-cultural insecurity, and the ratcheting-up of the ethno-politics of fear among elected leaders—and unionists in particular—in late 2012 and

[17] *The Irish News* (August 9, 2013)
[18] *Belfast Telegraph Online* (July 12, 2013)
[19] *Belfast Telegraph* (August 9, 2013)
[20] *Belfast Telegraph* (July 30, 2013)
[21] *Belfast Telegraph* (December 5, 2012)

throughout 2013. Such trends are hardly coincidental to the increase in sectarian violence experienced across Belfast over the same period.

Various grassroots community leaders note the increasing, detrimental impact of economic strain on relations between working-class nationalist and loyalist communities. *Every respondent* emphasized growing socioeconomic inequality and educational "underachievement" in working-class loyalist and nationalist communities as one of the greatest obstacles to the development of positive cross-community alliances. When asked if he thought that relations between young people from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds were improving, a loyalist respondent, who works with at-risk youth, answered that

> It depends where you're coming from. It depends on the background of those young people. There are a lot of young people who just get on with life, because they've had an opportunity, and maybe they've gone to a better school, and they're going to university and moving on and doing things properly. But in the broad republican and loyalist areas where younger people aren't getting that opportunity, it's just making things worse. Things are as bad now as I ever remember them to be, in terms of cross-community culture, getting together, speaking to each other. It just doesn't happen.

As another respondent similarly explains, referencing her work with young people on the Life and Times Survey on Northern Ireland, "young people were optimistic and looking forward to the future" in 2007. However, by 2013, "it was something totally different. Young people had become more pessimistic… You've had the flags protest, economic decline, all of that. No jobs for young people…" Other respondents elaborate on attitudes underscored by the intersectionality of class and gender, pointing out that working-class masculinities remain central in directing the choices of young males at a time in which they prove increasingly futile, and contribute indirectly to ongoing sectarian tension and violence. According to a nonelected public official in Belfast,

> A number of men that I've met said to their sons, "build a pair of shoulders." And I said, "What does that mean?" A couple of men said that it meant stop doing that sissy stuff about handwriting and your brain. A pair of shoulders is about bricklaying and carrying metal. And so their parents are saying to them, in an outdated way, "go and become a manual worker." But there is no manual work. So they drop out of school.[22] Then when they can't get a job, someone political says to them, "you can't get a job because the nationalists have educated themselves and they're taking your jobs." But there's a political game that has gone on. When you cut somebody off here, all they feel is anger and resentment and what happens? An explosion; you have the [flag] protests.

At the same time, to blame the families of working-class young people who struggle in terms of education and employment would mean overlooking the roots of the problem of inequity rooted in the practices of elected officials and problems of social policy. *Lack of opportunity* more generally among working-class boys and young men in communities most impacted by legacies of conflict increases their risk of involvement in sectarian violence and recruitment into paramilitary organizations. This analysis is offered by most

[22] A study by Harland and McCready (2012) shows that "those boys reporting highest levels of normative masculinity scored lower in levels of academic motivation/preference and higher in levels of misbehavior" compared with their counterparts who report low levels of normative masculinity (Ashe and Harland 2014, p. 757).

interviewees and implicated in various newspaper reports. [23] A community worker from east Belfast emphasizes the aggravating circumstances of inadequate education in underserved communities in this sense:

> Young people are disaffected, that's why they're up there [at sectarian interfaces] throwing stones. They don't feel they have any future. They feel like they're being left behind in the education system. I'm meeting them and they have no GCSE's [General Certificate of Secondary Education exams], which is the exam you do when you're finishing school and need to get a job.

The same respondent offers the following viewpoint, focusing on the republican community in particular:

> It's great that there are not bombs going off in the streets and kids are starting to mingle and go out in nightclubs and do different stuff. But if you haven't got leadership bringing the working class with them, the working class is going to be left behind and be apathetic. They'll be disaffected. So, what do young kids do? They could go into drugs. Or other kids say, "It's the Brits' fault that you're like this, do you want to do something about it? Well, join a [paramilitary] group and we're going to get the Brits out of Ireland."

A senior activist in west Belfast similarly notes how, for young men in that part of the city with poor educational records and few job prospects, "the only way that you can become a lad or somebody within the community is usually through a [paramilitary] group." Paramilitary recruiters offer a simple explanation for the plight of their families and communities, and a route to positions of status and influence in a situation otherwise defined by boredom, immobility and fear. According to community leaders in loyalist neighborhoods, their ability to control young people engaged in rioting and other violence became increasingly restricted in 2013. Economic marginality, poor political leadership, and related feelings of "losing" from the peace process are reasons indicated by community leaders from both newspaper reports and interviews.

The broader neglect of working-class interests among elected unionists and the British government has contributed to the persistence of paramilitary influence in other ways as well. As a prominent community leader explains, the ongoing control paramilitaries exert in working-class loyalist neighborhoods "comes from the disconnect between [middle-class] political unionism and [working-class] loyalism; the paramilitaries become the default to get things done, to make things happen in their community."

Political neglect of working-class communities, in addition to impending cuts in public spending from Westminster and gradual reductions in "peace monies," risks exacerbating what one respondent describes as "a scarcity mindset." According to her, "people here are still poor…and they believe that they still have to fight. They can't cut this pie with any thinner slices… We have no vision of politics beyond this." A woman from loyalist west Belfast adds that young people are "not just there to attack the other side; they're there to protect their communities." Disaffection, combined with lingering mentalities of threat from the Other, contributes to the importance of ethno-political conflict in providing a purpose for young males, and is appropriated by paramilitary elements which remain influential in the same, underserved communities.

[23] See, for example, *Belfast News Letter* (January 24, 2013)

Moreover, for young people with low levels of educational achievement, and little social mobility, emotionally charged ethno-political rituals, such as, unionist parades—celebrating past Protestant military victories over Catholics, and interpreted by the latter as provocative and sectarian—provides opportunities to be "defenders of their communities," and find meaning and solidarity within their ethno-religious community. One respondent encouraged one author to "go watch the tapes [of the July 12th parade violence in 2013]. One kid hits the cop with a rock, and everyone cheers. He's got his hands up in the air, you know, like he did something great. He was probably waiting all year for that." In parts of Belfast where boredom and poverty persist, ritualistic sectarian battles bring opportunities for young people to gain status in their communities, if only for a moment.

Like in most situations of stratification, moreover, the immobility of some is not unrelated to the distinct mobility and privilege of others.

Class Inequality and Dynamics of Ethno-political Resentment

Respondents' discussions illustrate how structures of class inequality are deeply implicated in the continuation of ethno-nationalist hostility and violence, and in complex ways. One senior peace activist explains how vested interests in the status quo by those who benefit from it—namely, the middle and upper classes—underscore political practices that undermine social transformation and contribute indirectly to sectarian tensions:

> The peace dividend has not hit poor communities the way we thought it would [at the time of the peace agreement]. Secondly, the middle-class people in Northern Ireland have less recurrent costs in terms of water rents and housing rents then people living in England and Wales. So the middle-classes have been cushioned in this society by the current political parties. Sinn Fein and DUP, who have historically presented themselves as an advocate for the poor and the disenfranchised [in Catholic and Protestant communities, respectively] have, in my view, looked after and sought to maintain the support of middle-class voters. You've got a middle-class that conspires in silence to avoid contested issues. Everybody first of all assumes that they're the people who are sectarian—the poor and working class—which I think is rubbish. And that they're the people who should move first, which I think is ridiculous. Those who have position, those who have power, and those who have money often don't want to move because they would threaten those positions of power and money. They are the ones who have a place in this society, and they are the ones that tend not to use it.

Ironically, some political parties who rely largely on voters in working-class areas are complicit in socioeconomic policies which disproportionately serve the interests of the middle classes, who tend to be relatively withdrawn from the more contentious forms of grassroots politics. This dynamic, according to some respondents, sustains a tacit complicity of the same middle classes in maintaining the *status quo*. Ethno-political parties are able to gain sufficient support from middle-class residents from their respective communities in elections, while the relative disengagement of the same constituents from issues that drive sectarian strife only helps to sustain the fear that politicians appropriate in rallying their bases in working-class locations. Not coincidentally, the more "hardline" unionist and nationalist parties—DUP and Sinn Fein, respectively—have seen exponential growth in support since the 1998 peace

agreement, while historically more "moderate" parties have seen corresponding declines in parliamentary seats.[24] The disjuncture between who is supported in terms of economic and social policy, and whose interests are reflected in the discourses of political leaders, dually contributes to the domination of the more "hardline" parties.

Another respondent similarly indicates that "middle-class people feel it's very comfortable here," and points to examples from Derry—such as, its success in hosting the UK's City of Culture—which suggest that there is "great confidence [in urban development] and people love it." Yet she also acknowledges that for those from lower income backgrounds, there is a "sense of hopelessness." She also echoes the observation of others, who point out that discussion of issues of social class and inequity are often avoided by those with the most economic influence. As she concludes, "class is the big white elephant in the room we're not allowed to talk about." An activist and elected official from east Belfast explains how, increasingly, a "pronounced class divide…in unionist communities… [has] kind of hardened [ethno-political] opinions. 'Unionism as a whole' can't be said anymore." The same respondent elaborates on how, "in unionist communities [especially], class politics is not discussed. I think that reflects that there's a lack of political articulation about the issues of concern for working-class communities." Another interviewee commented on how, in unionism in particular, elected officials generally come from privileged backgrounds and are thus not forced enough to recognize the seriousness of the issues faced disproportionately by working-class communities. "In unionism," he says, "there are very few councilors living in working areas. So there's a disconnect between them. The community feels it's being left behind a bit." A loyalist respondent discusses spatial inequalities across Belfast to make a similar point: "When you go into the center of town [in Belfast] you'll hear that it's a nice place and everything. And it is. But when you come into the hearts of communities… people [are] living the same way that they did 30–40 years ago, and sometimes worse."

Several respondents make similar observations regarding the importance of class inequalities in understanding the political grievances of working-class people from both main communities. Catholic respondents also commented on an increasing sense of disillusionment with the largest nationalist parties among a significant number of working-class republicans. As one interviewee explains, some former IRA prisoners now serving as elected officials, and once referred to by the republican community as "blanket men, when they went on the dirty protests,"[25] are now referred to by some republicans as "banquet men, as all they seem to do is go to banquets." He goes on to explain how his "comrades… agree that the working class is being left behind by the so-called peace process." The lack of economic and social investment in working-class republican communities does little to compel greater contentment with the constitutional arrangement, and potentially deepens anti-agreement mentalities among "dissident republicans."[26]

Both loyalist and republican interview respondents from working-class areas convey similar, unfavorable attitudes about the dominant parties from both ethno-political blocs, and reflect a critical awareness of the economic forces which shape the *status quo* and exacerbate

[24] *Belfast Telegraph* (September 3, 2015)

[25] The "dirty protests" refer to the refusal to bathe by Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners in the early 1980s, in protest of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's refusal to acknowledge their self-proclaimed status as political prisoners. During the protests, they refused to wear their prison uniforms, covering themselves only with the blankets from their beds (Arextaga 1997).

[26] Although the main political parties and news media in the UK generally use this term to describe republican terrorist groups still active to some degree, one respondent in the study who considers himself a dissident republican claims that most like him oppose violence, but are also opposed to the power-sharing executive and to ongoing British influence in the province.

frustrations in working-class areas. However, such similarities, cutting across loyalist and republican networks, do not correlate with greater movement toward a cross-community, working-class politics. A self-proclaimed "dissident republican" interviewee reflects on one experience in which political protest over issues specific to the working classes failed to connect loyalist and republican activists:

> I went to a May Day parade a couple of years ago and [the] working class was carrying their banners for equal rights and all that. There was a small congregation from the PUP [or Progressive Unionist Party, founded by UVF leaders]… And we had an Éirigí[27] flag and the guys were standing with the PUP flag. And they took our banner down and walked out of the parade. I was thinking that we have more in common with those people than we do with the SDLP, who are a middle-class Catholic party. We've all got the same issues in our communities; we don't have jobs, our kids are being left behind by the education system. It's a sectarian mentality they have.[28] My reasoning on [the mentality of most politicians] is this, "we want you to vote for us, but we don't give a shit about your kids, your poverty or your education." And this is the way we're going. It's now happening with the nationalist community.

Although avoidance of addressing social class inequities is common across Western societies the ethno-political and ethno-sectarian dimensions intertwined with such issues in polarized societies, such as, Northern Ireland, have distinct—and grave—implications. As one prominent community leader elaborates, anti-social behavior is not uncommon among young people "in Manchester or Liverpool or Dublin. The difference here is that young people end up joining gangs that put bombs under people's cars." During the weekend prior to our interview, "there were two attempts that the guards[29] stopped, with people bringing across bombs [from the Republic of Ireland]. So it brings with it a different level of threat."

Discussion

Findings indicate how structural economic inequality and immobility among communities most directly impacted historically by violent conflict facilitate aggressive leadership strategies which restrict the formation of cross-community political coalitions and minimize opposition from more moderate parties. More specifically, our analysis identifies the following conditions which facilitate the promotion of (low-intensity) conflict in this respect: leaders' ability to manipulate readily available, ethno-cultural symbols in the promotion of threat; the economic marginalization of communities historically most susceptible to violence; the ongoing influence of independent factions unique to a given society (such as, paramilitaries in Northern Ireland) on local politics and community relations; and distinct political priorities of middle- and lower-classes *within* ethno-national communities.

In Northern Ireland, elected leaders—and Unionists especially—focus political discourse around cultural symbols (flags) and rituals (parades) that predictably cause strife between

[27] Eirigi is a socialist republican political party founded by former Sinn Fein members who became critical of Sinn Fein following the peace agreement.

[28] It is important to point out that the ethno-national background of this respondent might influence his lack of attention on the extent of sectarianism within the Catholic community. Although less overt in recent years, some Catholics also hold sectarian attitudes and have engaged in sectarian violence.

[29] The "guards" referred to here are the police force of the Republic of Ireland, An Garda Siochana.

Catholics and Protestants. At the same time, the inability and/or unwillingness of elected unionist leaders to properly address quality-of-life matters which cut across ethno-religious lines sustains openings for paramilitaries to exert influence in working-class communities, in both productive and disruptive ways. The very re-entrenchment of paramilitary influence, in turn, provides an asset for leaders who opt to provoke sectarian tensions for self-serving political purposes. It is unlikely that unionist leaders were unaware that the leaflets they disseminated in east Belfast would incite anger about the removal of the Union flag and entice the east Belfast UVF—the loyalist paramilitary faction identified by several respondents as the most disruptive and dangerous. On the other hand, nationalist officials are not completely innocent with respect to the flags dispute, either. Respondents acknowledge that few people were even aware that the Union flag was flying over City Hall before the measure to remove it was introduced. Nationalist officials did not need to bring attention to the issue, but chose to.

The aforementioned dynamic is not unlike others documented in periods of initial conflict escalation elsewhere, in which leaders "transform… politics from an issue on which they are likely to lose power into one on which they can retain power" (Figueiredo and Weingast 1997, p. 1; see also Tilly 2003). Even in Northern Ireland—a post-conflict society which has achieved impressive peacebuilding milestones—leaders prove capable of similar—yet subtler—provocations. Findings suggest that rather than merely responding to residual hatreds and mutually exclusive ethno-constituent interests, leaders also play proactive roles in reconstituting division. To some extent, the increasingly contentious nature of ethno-political posturing documented here, and the increasingly evident dysfunction of the Stormont Assembly (Noble 2013; Nolan 2014) following the relatively more productive politics of the immediate devolution period, might partially reflect leaders' attempts to respond to constituent frustrations while holding minimal legislative capacities to do so.[30] At the same time, signs of the possibility of moving toward greater ethno-religious integration, and fears of being perceived as having little consequence in the lives of their ethno-constituencies in terms of "bread-and-butter" issues might elicit anxiety among leaders who fear losing their niche in the political landscape. While limited in time and place, the authors' findings suggest that leaders took strategic, proactive roles in reconstructions of ethno-political threat, and in ways which mostly served the interests of themselves and their parties. The manipulation of ethno-political symbols in this respect reflects how leaders might simply use what is readily available in preeminently promoting their electoral interests. It is also possible that as post-conflict stability is taken for granted and post-conflict reforms remain in place, leaders may underestimate the extent to which tensions they promote might rise or overwhelm the capacity of the state to deter violence. For example, the consequences of DUP leafleting and other provocative actions and discourses spiraled out of their control as street violence escalated in loyalist/unionist areas in 2012 and 2013. Such violence put unionist officials in a difficult position, increasing their dependence on paramilitary elements in regaining order and garnering some significant

[30] Pressures to cooperate in the implementation of the devolved, power-sharing Assembly in 2007, and in the subsequent creation of the cross-community Policing Commission in 2010—co-chaired by Sinn Fein and DUP officials—seemed to dissipate following the successful implementation of these institutions, as discontent among working-class communities deepened following the 2008 recession. Such apparent shifts in political behavior might reflect what Gormley-Heenan (2006, p. 54) terms "chameleonic leadership," or a contradictory and "inconsistent form of political leadership which shift[s]… according to the opinion of others and the climate in which it exist[s]."

intracommunity debate over the legitimacy of their leadership.[31] At the same time, though, the DUP continued to dominate the unionist vote in the following elections.

Sectarian provocations by unionist elected leaders in particular is nothing new in Northern Ireland and was a significant factor in the escalation of the Troubles (Bew et al. 2002; Shirlow 2012). Ian Paisley was perhaps the most notorious of such figures, whose fiery rhetoric about the impending unification of Ireland and the threat of "Popism" incited loyalist fears and sectarian attitudes and violence (Bruce 2009; Miller 2007). Unionist political alliance across classes had been historically reinforced throughout the twentieth century through the combination of "token privileges… [offered by] the perpetually governing Unionist Party to its [working-class] supporters" (Tonge 2002, p. 28), and contentious political discourse focused on combating Irish republicanism and Catholicism. Due to their status as an oppressed ethno-religious minority and the influence of socialist, Irish republican ideology, nationalist politics and violence have historically corresponded—in part—with objectives of economic justice and equality. On the contrary, loyalist sectarian violence was geared primarily toward combating republicanism and maintaining Northern Ireland's constitutional status as an independent entity, having little association with economic grievances. The 2015 stand-off over "welfare reform," for example, which nearly collapsed the power-sharing executive in Stormont (McDonald 2016) reflects how problems which cut across the two main communities are often framed in ethno-political terms. The "welfare reform" dispute also illuminates the relative disconnect between unionist class identities and its distinctively reactionary political culture. Even while many working-class Protestants are economically reliant on state entitlements, DUP officials have used the language of "welfare dependency" to justify their support for cutbacks, while criticizing Sinn Fein of using support for a strong welfare state to appeal to their republican base while ignoring their responsibilities of governing within the UK.

Historically and contemporaneously, the lack of any secure cultural identity beyond evangelical Protestantism (Bruce 2009), and the deficit of any distinct political identity which transcends narratives about being *against* something—namely, a change to the constitutional status of the North and the historical, ethno-national "Other" (Finlayson 1999; Peatling 2004)—compounds the likelihood that unionist ethno-political insecurities remain or even deepen, and is not coincidental to the particular importance given to ethno-cultural or ethno-political symbols and rituals, such as flags and parades. In many respects, forms of unionist cultural expression are also forms of political expression, and this phenomenon largely transcends class difference. The numerical decline of the Protestant population vis-à-vis Catholics and shifting geographical borders[32] are likely to only exacerbate the cultural and

[31] For more details on the escalation and aftermath of the flags dispute, see Nolan et al. (2014).

[32] The European Union's ideas of the Europe of the Regions, which facilitated greater collaboration between the British and Irish governments in promoting supranational identities which transcend the traditional ethno-national mindsets has had some—albeit limited—success (Hayword 2009). The vote by the British electorate on June 23, 2016, to withdraw from the EU could lead to further re-entrenchment of traditional, mutually exclusive identities, undermine British-Irish fluidity and contribute to the reconstitution of old—and dangerous—notions of British and Irish sovereignty. It is also possible that the Irish nationalist population in the North will feel increasingly uneasy about their representation within the UK as a result of "Brexit," if "Britishness" is reconsolidated in the region and border controls between the North and Republic of Ireland are strengthened. The UK's exit from the EU also risks a re-escalation of ethno-political opportunism among unionist and nationalist leaders which, as findings here suggest, has the potential to incite violence. Immediately following the British vote on EU withdrawal, Sinn Fein called "for a referendum on Irish reunification," with top officials implying that the interests of the Irish nationalist population are no longer sufficiently represented in Westminster (Joseph 2016). Finally, "Brexit," if fully implemented, could result in a substantial reduction in European funding of grassroots peacebuilding projects.

political insecurity of the former and, in addition to economic uncertainties, "culture wars," and contentions over the past,[33] help in bolstering ethno-political provocations.

The greater disconnect between elected unionists and their working-class constituencies vis-à-vis those in the nationalist community is also important in explaining why loyalists have been more visible in street violence over flags and parades, especially considering that the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast—and Northern Ireland generally—are disproportionately occupied by working-class Catholics (Coulter 2014; Nolan 2014), and that unionist symbols are still most visible in public space. Unlike Sinn Fein, with many of their elected officials being former IRA associates—coming from, and often still residing within, relatively deprived working-class communities—most unionist politicians come from middle-class areas less affected by legacies of conflict. At the same time, loyalist paramilitary prisoners are generally treated as pariahs by middle-class unionism; the latter has historically believed in the state's monopoly over the use of "legitimate" violence, corresponding not only to their claims of moral superiority over republicans, but also their disdain for loyalist paramilitarism (Rolston 2006; Shirlow 2012). Not coincidentally, the impacts of "progressive" elements which do exist within the Protestant community have been minimal. For example, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), which is most representative of working-class loyalist interests, is invisible in parliament; their association with the UVF undermines their credibility among unionists. Accordingly, most people vote for the main, right-leaning unionist parties—and DUP in particular—to ensure that they maintain sufficient power vis-à-vis Sinn Fein and thus protect unionist interests (Mitchell et al. 2008).

The lack of voting across ethno-national lines is a limitation of consociational political systems in divided societies more generally (Horowitz 2000) and has become an increasingly evident problem in Northern Ireland as the "extremes" of both ethno-national communities have mutually benefited in recent elections. Yet while opposition to nationalism unites unionists across classes, the disconnect between middle-class unionism and working-class loyalism limits the ethno-cultural and ethno-social channels elected unionist political elite can tap into in galvanizing support from their more fragmented ethno-constituency. This is a significant dynamic impacting the more noticeably contentious unionist politics, and is not coincidental to their disproportionate role in manipulating culturally sensitive ethno-political symbols. On the contrary, and notwithstanding the ongoing influence of small—though committed—anti-accord dissident republican terrorist groups (Kearney 2016), Sinn Fein leaders and associated former republican paramilitary prisoners are relatively more capable of steering the behaviors of their working-class communities in ways which are commensurate with the party's more diversified political strategy, with emphasis on inclusion of moderate Catholics, immigrant communities, and others unaffiliated with either of the general ethno-national identities.

At the same time, however, the Catholic working-class communities still engage in sectarian violence, if only to a lesser extent than loyalists; intergroup hostilities inextricably linked with deepening frustrations over the lack of "peace dividends" experienced by the working classes have impacted both communities in this respect. And although street disorder linked to frustration with the state has been more evident among loyalists in recent years, our findings also show that some working-class republicans feel increasingly alienated from Sinn Fein leadership, blaming them for not doing more to promote traditional socialist republican

[33] In both the North and South of Ireland, current political tensions remain inextricably linked with unresolved disputes over the past. See Volkan (1998), Rolston (2006), and Nolan (2014, p. 163–175).

ideologies. Though overall more economically "progressive" than their unionist counterparts, Sinn Fein "has come to embrace some key elements of the neoliberal agenda" in some respects, as is evident in their support for large reductions in corporate tax rates in the hope of attracting foreign capital (Coulter 2014, p. 771; see also Kelly 2012). Along with compounding the economic insecurities of working-class people, Sinn Fein's neoliberal turn only helps reaffirm suspicion of the party leadership within "dissident republican" circles.

More generally, findings highlight how structures and dynamics of intragroup class difference within each ethno-political bloc are instrumental to processes of political manipulation. Dynamics of social stratification and increases in economic inequality impact the capacity of political elites to appropriate sectarian fears and resentments. Both Protestant and Catholic young males from underserved communities have few options in terms of education and employment. Because (some) politicians and hardline community leaders—and unionists especially—frame such problems in ways which channel frustration toward the traditional ethno-political or ethno-religious Other, general feelings of loss are directed toward the so-called failures of the peace process, and interpreted in zero-sum terms: perceived gains for "them" automatically translate into losses for "us." Among both Catholics and Protestants, the resolve among disadvantaged boys to protect their communities and, at times, enact revenge against the Other is hardened by their relative deprivation and immobility and the influence of paramilitary elements. Recent increases in racist attacks against a growing immigrant population—the new Other—are also symptomatic of such phenomena. An article by Michael McHugh and Claire Cromie in the *Belfast Telegraph* (May 12, 2015) notes that "A racist hate crime was reported every three hours on a typical day in Northern Ireland" the previous year, disproportionately in loyalist neighborhoods in which many immigrant families can find vacant homes. Yet republicans have also engaged in violence against growing immigrant populations in a displacement of anger and insecurity over their lack of opportunities (Fanning 2012).

Of course, economic problems facing working-class communities are due, in large part, to neoliberal globalization and deindustrialization (McGovern and Shirlow 1997). Yet they are also results of the neglect of concern for issues of inequality in Northern Ireland by British and unionist elected representatives especially, and the disengagement from grassroots politics among middle-class Protestant *and* Catholic communities with vested, economic and social interests in the *status quo*. In a sense, class difference cuts across ethno-political lines and might, in certain instances, result in the de-centering of ethno-national identities in shaping social and institutional relations. Yet this is disproportionate to middle-class Catholic and Protestant communities, which have benefitted materially from the *status quo* and opt to remain silent about contentious issues of sectarianism in order to "get on." On the contrary, for less well-off communities, a shared sense of unfair economic conditions does not translate into a cross-community, working-class politics.[34] This is largely due to the psychosocial effects of deepening poverty and economic and social hopelessness on longstanding sectarian mentalities, and the incitements to conflict in the discourses of certain ethno-political elite which appropriate such mentalities in the language of cultural loss. Rather than resulting in a productive reconfiguration of political identities, it is more likely that increasingly similar levels of relative deprivation within both main communities will threaten the stability of the peace process as feelings of abandonment and betrayal among

[34] There are many grassroots and nonprofit organizations in Northern Ireland within working-class communities which focus on cross-community cooperation. Yet few of these organizations intend to form new, *political* cross-community relations (McAuley et al. 2010; Edwards and McGrattan 2011).

working-class young men fester, and are expressed via hypermasculine, ethno-political and sectarian practices (see also Ashe and Harland 2014; Creary and Byrne 2014b). Such feelings potentially contribute to the growing problem of suicide and domestic violence as well.[35] The budget cuts imposed by Westminster and generally supported by elected unionists is likely to only exacerbate the impact of economic frustrations on inter- and intragroup relations. The "welfare reform" will eliminate hundreds of millions of pounds from Northern Ireland's economy, which depends disproportionately on its public sector.[36]

Conclusion

The importance in accounting for intragroup political divisions (Gagnon 2004), as well as "horizontal inequalities" (Stewart 2008), in explaining *initial* escalations of mass violence has been well documented. Yet specific structures and processes of class inequality *within* communities *after* peace accords have received less empirical attention. This study provides one example of how attention to changing dynamics of social class and relations of power, both within and between polarized ethno-political communities, can help in the construction of a more critical theoretical understanding of ongoing dynamics of conflict in "post-conflict" situations.

The major limitation of the study, of course, is that it focuses on just one research site. Nonetheless, it is very likely that the theoretical implications of class inequity are similarly relevant for other post-conflict societies as well. The ever deepening entrenchment of neoliberal globalization has produced great wealth for some while exacerbating the marginalization of a much greater number of the world's poor (Davis 2007). The increase in a "precariat" class of insecure and redundant workers risks exacerbating "status frustrations" (Standing 2014, p. 971) of those who also struggle disproportionately with legacies of violence in "post-conflict" societies. The consequent growth in class inequalities within post-colonial societies with histories of ethno-political or ethno-religious conflict thus holds the potential to fuel simmering mentalities of threat and loss which risk taking sectarian, racist or otherwise dangerous forms—especially when promoted by ethno-political entrepreneurs. Post-war societies in the Balkans, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere continue to experience both serious economic problems and ongoing ethnic/religious hostilities (for examples, see Berdal et al. 2012; Eide 2012; Manz 2008). Other studies should examine whether similar dynamics documented here are evident in other post-conflict sites as well, and whether more global theoretical conclusions regarding the combined impacts of increased intragroup class divisions, shifts in distributions of power across groups, and ethno-political provocations can be drawn.

[35] Hopelessness and depression are also linked to traumatic experiences during the Troubles, and—not coincidentally—increases in addiction. The intergenerational effects of such phenomena have also manifested in growing rates of suicide among young people growing up in the local communities which were most devastated by the Troubles, especially in Belfast and the border regions. The highest rates of suicide overall are among men born during the Troubles, with a "steep upward trend in suicide following the 1998 Agreement" (Tomlinson 2012, p. 464). Reports of domestic violence have also skyrocketed since the Agreement, as rates in Northern Ireland "are now the highest in the UK" (Nolan 2014, p. 35).

[36] Some 23 % of people of working age in the six counties [of Northern Ireland] were in receipt of at least one key welfare benefit" in 2011 (Coulter 2014, p. 767). Overall, "The public sector accounts for 70 percent of Northern Ireland's Gross Domestic Product and employs 30 percent of its workforce" (Archick 2015, p. 19).

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