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Book Review

Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process: A Volume edited by Timothy J. White

Sarah Hanisko

Ireland's history is well known for the intense violence between Irish natives and English "conquerors." Throughout the decades, Irish Catholics and English Protestants came to violent blows through the country in an attempt to cement political and social control over the Island. Only recently has the work by a number of politicians, activists and scholars provided an environment in which the road to peace can be paved through intense work and engagement with the surrounding communities. *Lessons from the Northern Ireland Process* details the events, circumstances and opportunities for continued learning about how ethnic conflict can be effectively resolved allowing for communities to redevelop identities which allow them to work together to create a peaceful society. The text is a collection of chapters written by various authors analyzing and revealing the important components of The Good Friday Agreement; the volume is edited by Timothy J. White, currently a professor of Political Science at Xavier University, with expertise in Irish Politics and Irish Political culture. The authors included in the publication illustrate an understanding of the workings of Irish political culture and various degrees of understanding of conflict analysis and resolution perspectives.

While the stories of the Northern Ireland peace process are promising and many lessons have been learned, it is vital to understand that each lesson is held within a certain context and may not be easily applied to other circumstances as implied in the text. There is a great deal to be learned and extracted but as conflict resolution practitioners we must be extremely wary of broad-based application of lessons from one peace process to another. In this review, I will briefly cover the various factors described by the authors within the text that they believe contributed to a successful resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland as well as provide a critical analysis of each aspect as well and an evaluation of the book as a whole. These factors can be divided into seven distinct categories, not all of which will be covered within this review:

redefinition of identities and interests, the use of inclusive negotiations and settlements with few or no pre-conditions, the changing of structural conditions such as the policing organizations and the provision of security, civil society and reconciliation, and finally intense engagement in the process while supporting moderates and marginalizing spoilers. For the purpose of this review I will cover redefinition of identities and interests, the use of inclusive negotiations and settlements, and civil society and reconciliation. Each of these components provided distinct lessons to learn according to each author.

Redefinition of Identities and Interests

Each of the puzzle pieces of lessons that fit into the Northern Ireland peace process can be effectively applied to other conflicts if, and only if, the true nature and context of the conflict is understood. Since identity played a key role in the perpetuation of conflict in Northern Ireland, it is important to stress that these lessons may be better applied in ethnic conflicts that are drawn along lines of political control. In Northern Ireland, the majority of the population is Protestant and segregation of Catholic minorities played a key part in perpetuation of violence. Redefinition of the identities of the key players in the violence can, according to the authors, assist in creating “salience” within the identity of groups. This, according to Landon Hancock (2013), allows for the limiting of each side to see the other as an “enemy”. In the case of Northern Ireland, Hancock is correct in insisting that communities find a way to depolarize the importance of the identity, however, the process is essentially unending and difficult to achieve. Our identities, our stories are woven into our lives with such care and tight knit strings that it is not that simple to open up the weave and allow ourselves to change. Loyalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland may find it very difficult to let go of that identity, unless there is a reward for doing so. Applying this lesson to other ethnic conflicts can certainly prove to be difficult. Imagine a negotiator attempting to ask a Palestinian to give up or let go of their identity of “Palestinian” in order to achieve peace with Israel. This cannot occur without concessions in power or political control from other groups. While this occurred in Ireland, we, as conflict resolution practitioners should accept this factor of letting go of identity with skepticism when approaching negotiation or mediation with other groups.

Identity salience can be achieved, according to Hancock (2013), in the text, if and only if structural changes occur that allow it to happen naturally. In the case of Northern Ireland, this was achieved through the complete restructuring of the policing system and security organizations. When a population feels safe from violence, feels as if the security systems in place will protect rather than marginalize them, identity salience can occur with greater

frequency. John Doyle (2013), the author of this chapter, insists that policing created “an apparently unbridgeable divide between the two communities” (p. 148) in Northern Ireland. Social inequalities between Protestants and Catholics required that the primarily Protestant police forces be transformed into a system that was politically impartial. This was achieved in Northern Ireland and could successfully be implemented into other conflict situations, with relative ease, if parties are willing to cooperate.

Inclusive Negotiations and Settlements

Another important contextual unit that can be applied from the lessons learned in Northern Ireland includes the use of inclusive negotiations and settlements with few pre-conditions, and intense engagement with moderates and the marginalization of spoilers (essentially people or groups who are insistent in not reaching agreements). In the case of Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein, viewed by many as a terrorist group, was included in the negotiations and settlements with very few preconditions. Decommissioning of weapons proved to be the most important precondition and took place quickly by the political group after the U.S. was attacked on September 11, 2001. Again, inclusive negotiations are vital, however, it is very difficult to imagine certain groups coming to the conclusion that this is an acceptable position to take. There is a natural tendency to believe that allowing the inclusion of certain groups creates a sense of weakness in one or more of the parties involved. Negotiators may have more success using this lesson, provided they have, once again, a deep understanding of the context of the conflict, according to the author (White, 2013).

Civil Society and Reconciliation

The most important lesson learned in the case of Northern Ireland is the re-establishment of civil society and reconciliation. Violence, especially in the case of ethnic conflict, cannot be eradicated without the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation within the groups involved. It is important to note that there is likely still a great deal of distrust within Catholic and Protestant populations in Northern Ireland and as more time passes without episodes of violence, with more community interaction this distrust will fade. White, Owsiak and Clarke (2013), discuss the importance of this aspect in Northern Ireland in great detail within the text; emphasizing that the Good Friday Agreement failed to transform the relationship between opposing communities. Without the transformation of relationships from that of violence to tolerance and eventually compassion, a true peace cannot form in Northern Ireland.

Each lesson learned in Northern Ireland is incredibly valuable, as this conflict has literally raged for hundreds of years. Though, as conflict resolution practitioners, we must be,

once more, very wary of applying these lessons to other conflicts without understanding and having a deep knowledge of the context of the conflict we are addressing. The participants in the peace process must be willing to work together, with few preconditions, be inclusive and be willing to restructure society and communities with the help of third parties if they are to achieve a lasting peace. *Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, provides an excellent introduction to the effective aspects of the peace process as well as emphasizing the importance of context in each situation. The collection of chapters contributes significantly to the understanding of conflict resolution processes in relation to long-lasting ethnic conflicts for students and practitioners alike. While more time is needed to fully understand the impact of the lessons from Northern Ireland the basic recommendations, cautions and advice provide an initial look at how negotiators can assist conflict parties in coming to an understanding on the creation of peaceful societies.

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