

REVIEW ESSAYS

Conflict in Northern Ireland

McGarry, John, ed. *Northern Ireland and the Divided World: The Northern Ireland Conflict and the Good Friday Agreement in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Wilford, Rick, ed. *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Given the current problems surrounding the implementation of the Belfast Agreement and its imminent suspension (again) this is a very apposite time to review these two books, since both (inadvertently) illustrate what has gone wrong. Both books began with much promise but failed to deliver, although this is less so in the case of Rick Wilford; one might almost say the same of the Agreement. It is what is missing that is the really important, but to know this one probably requires the kind of pre-existing knowledge that would make these books redundant.

However, if one is a constitutional scholar or political lawyer one might revel in the detail of the Agreement, forms of words, processes, and the contortions involved in signing up to the Agreement. If one is a “peace and reconciliation” activist one might find both books contain much liberal and high-minded discussion about creating trust and confidence building. Indeed, if one is happy merely to have an analysis of the terms and conditions of the Agreement and how they were arrived at then both books would be quite satisfactory. Both books contain chapters from reputable academics who examine the detail of process and the technical “ins and outs” of brokering the Agreement, and in this they are quite good. However, what both lack (although Wilford’s does begin to address this in a limited manner toward the end, particularly the chapters by Henry Patterson and Arthur Aughey) is any wider theoretical perspective. Critical analysis from the perspective of the theory of nationalism, conflict theory, sociology, etc, in which to place the Agreement and analyze its chances of success and the real problems (not just individual or psychological mindset) to be overcome are sadly lacking. Neither does either book address the security analysis view of the Agreement, i.e. just how do security analysts assess the real commitment of terrorist groups (e.g. Sinn Fein comes under the command of the Provisional IRA Army Council) and what the tactics and strategy of the different groups might be.

The general thrust of both books is an uncritical and a-historic acceptance of the good intent and purity of purpose of (still) active terrorist groups. For a sociologist, like the reviewer, schooled in conflict theory and the theory of

nationalism and also one who has made a specialism out of security perspectives, the “peace process” had always appeared hopelessly optimistic, and unrealistic. Indeed the very use of the term “constructive ambiguity” as a key concept in getting all parties to sign up to the Agreement seemed to foreshadow its doom: if it’s ambiguous it isn’t an agreement, i.e. you don’t have an “Agreement.” Further, once you have discovered this then it is very difficult to go back and recover all the concessions you made to the terrorists to get your “Agreement.” Nowhere in either book is this even mentioned. But, to be fair, the only people I have heard discuss this factor at all have been the security analysts who are totally lacking from either book, as well as very thin on the ground in Northern Ireland.

It is a question of perspective and critical analysis in both the books and the general political analysis of the entire peace process that has been wanting and thus helps explain the continual breakdowns of the process. In this way both books illustrate much of what has gone wrong. Yet to have made any criticism invariably led to accusations of bias, being anti-peace or even anti-Catholic (i.e. you are against sharing power with Catholics). Moral imperatives for peace and a preference for the internal logic and detail of process has dominated Northern Ireland politics and neither book breaks this mould. However, one could further develop the argument by observing that this is a perpetual problem of the empirically orientated English-speaking academic and political world where pragmatism and detail take preference over theoretically grounded meta-narrative (excepting those who disappear into the world of the post-modern). This is a particular problem given the current demise of Marxism, which not only provided a critical analysis of its own but enforced a degree of reflexive thought on its opponents. The problem with a post-Marxist world (and I doubt that Marx was entirely wrong) is that it leaves the appearance of a non-problematic world in which all one has to do is sort out the detail. Roll on the rediscovery of Marx, and some of the other major classical sociologists and philosophers, to whom I always owed my own grave doubts about the peace process working.

Another general criticism, but again, less so in the case of Wilford, is the general acceptance of a “soft” nationalist perspective. Throughout both books there is a tendency to simply accept that most of the Catholic/Nationalist criticisms made of the Northern Ireland state could be taken at face value, such as anti-Catholic discrimination, hence all you had to do was address Catholic grievances. However, most of the more serious work in the area has shown a much more complex problem of mutual hostility and discrimination and a sectarianism that both communities are happy to maintain. This is particularly important where international comparisons are made (the major thrust of John McGarry’s book). Northern Ireland never was like South Africa, it had a majority faced with the problem of a minority that wished to undermine the state so that it could be taken over by what the majority saw as an hostile and alien Irish Republic. Nor was Northern Ireland an apartheid state; it was at least technically open to all at all levels and those Catholics who did accept the state and worked for it often had

very successful careers. It was Catholic policemen who were the main target of the IRA since the IRA had a vested interest in ensuring the police were predominantly Protestant and in maintaining the sectarian divide between the majority Protestant and minority Catholic population, even if this suited many Protestants. Bigotry was two way and had positive effects for political and community activists. There is no doubting much Protestant bigotry but that should not be a cover for ignoring Catholic bigotry.

The above criticisms are where the importance of a theoretical and historical perspective and a more critical and wide-ranging choice of contributors would have made for a much more informative book in both cases. At times one almost gets the impression that there is an agreed line on Northern Ireland both at the academic and political level and that the peace process is so fragile that it must be protected from any critical analysis whatsoever. But having said that, neither book set out to claim a critical appraisal, so what of them in their own right?

Both books would have benefited greatly from a good concluding chapter that attempted to draw together all the threads and lessons from the different contributors. As it was one was left with just a collection of individual thoughts, all drifting in roughly the same direction – but so what? McGarry's book in particular suffered from much repetition, due to the fact that each contributor (13 in all) went over the same ground concerning Northern Ireland in making their chosen comparison with another conflict. Better planning could have provided us with a couple of good chapters on Northern Ireland, followed by chapters purely on other conflicts (making them less superficial) with the editor making the comparisons and possible lessons in a thorough concluding chapter. One suspects a rush to get one's book in early may have precluded the extra time involved in such a project, but if edited books are to be of more use than just another publication for the c.v. they need to be better thought out in terms of end product.

Wilford's book certainly had the edge in terms of a slightly broader and more critical perspective, although the competition was weak. But it too suffered from a degree (albeit less) of repetition. It was also a slightly easier and more interesting read given its broader range of contributors and less emphasis on technical detail. And it did start to address a few real problems of perspective, even giving a glimpse of the Protestant/Unionist view of the world, unfortunately not followed up.

Both books had a very limited perspective and demand much background knowledge of Northern Ireland to really make sense and even then the assumptions of what passes for knowledge are rather alarming. However, both also contain a wealth of technical knowledge and detail which will probably make them good source and reference works. But beyond that both best illustrate what was wrong with the Agreement in a way which I doubt neither editor and most of the contributors had in mind when they sat down to write. Reality has rarely been

allowed to intrude on process in the Belfast Agreement and both books continue the tradition.

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Religion and Violence

Hoge, Jr., James F., and Gideon Rose. *How Did This Happen?: Terrorism and the New War*. New York: Public Affairs, Perseus Books, 2001.

Talbott, Strobe, and Nayan Chanda, eds. *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11*. New York: Basic Books and the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, 2001.

Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Updated ed. Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press, 2001.

Appleby, R. Scott. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Berger, Peter L., ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center; and Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.

On 11 September 2001, the attention of the entire world was riveted on the hijacking and commandeering of passenger aircraft that culminated in the deaths of several thousand people when those aircraft were flown into the World Trade Center twin towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. Not only were observers perplexed that anyone could commit such atrocities but what was profoundly confusing to many was that such acts had been committed in the name of religion. Initial reactions took one or the other of two forms. Some saw such acts as simply confirming their belief that religion fostered fanaticism and violence; others asserted that such acts were so at variance with their understanding of religion as to be an inherently inauthentic expression of religious faith and practice. Although most of the works reviewed here were written prior to 11 September, and, as a consequence, do not discuss these specific events, all the works reviewed here address the issue of the relation between religion, on the one hand, and violence, on the other.

How Did This Happen?: Terrorism and the New War, edited by James F. Hoge, Jr. and Gideon Rose, is a collection of essays on the events of 11 September, and on subsequent events, sponsored by the Council on Foreign