
Globalised Symbols of War and Peace

Simone Smala

Introduction

Literature on regional ethnic conflicts acknowledges the role conflicting cultural traditions and territorial claims play in ethnic conflict areas worldwide (Darby 1986; Darby 1997; Fisher 1998; McCall 1999; Horowitz 2000; Varshney 2000; Reychler 2001; Varshney 2002; Osawa 2003). Those traditions and claims are frequently expressed through a variety of symbols, some local and some globally recognizable. This paper examines how territories and identities in Northern Ireland are claimed and dominated through symbols, and how discourse and strategies for improving community relations can address those issues for peace-enhancing structures.

Symbols and signs of community division are everywhere in Northern Ireland. A walk through the streets of Belfast would confront any Northern Irish person with a multitude of visual symbols, and depending on which side of the divide one stands, these symbols are meant to be threatening or reassuring. These symbols immediately essentialise the observers into one of the major group identities: either 'them' or 'us', either Catholics or Protestants. In this symbolic-political terrain, there is no space in-between. The territorial dilemmas in a divided society are expressed most vividly with powerful visual symbols. As Steve Pile (1997) comments,

the spatial technologies of domination – such as military occupation or, alternatively, urban planning – need to continually resolve specific spatial problems, such as distance and closeness, inclusion and exclusion, surveillance and position, movement and immobility, communication and knowledge, and so on.

The most comprehensive works on symbols in Northern Ireland are *Clashing Symbols*, by Lucy Bryson and Clem McCartney (1994), and the compilation *Symbols in Northern Ireland*, edited by Anthony D. Buckley (1998). *Clashing Symbols* charts the way the Community Relations Council has taken to encourage cultural diversity. Flags and anthems are at the centre of the book's attentions, with a theoretical approach that incorporates discourse analysis and social identity theories.

Symbols in Northern Ireland gives a voice to a range of practitioners and researchers and is therefore interdisciplinary in nature and theory. These works form the theoretical and epistemological framework for this paper, which extends their approach to peace-building strategies.

Being Street-wise in Northern Ireland

Northern Irish symbols *are* specific for the local political situation, but they are also expressions of global symbolic identifiers that can be found in any ethnic conflict area. Flags, territorial markers, showing of weapons are just a few of these identifiers. And yet other forms of globalisation also take part in 'local' expressions such as the use of representations which are universally connected with "good" or "bad". Looking at symbols in a divided society sharpen the analytical eye for the universal features symbols of war and peace in ethnic conflict areas, and to an extent, Western discourse can carry.

Ethnic conflicts are almost exclusively about territory and conflicting cultural traditions within it. However, their set of symbols tries to divert the ethnic actors' attention away from this plain message towards a richer scenery of spiritual significance. In a global sense, every public and visual symbol is territorial, but there are some that make use of existing geographical features and turn them into symbolic ethnic landmarks. In Northern Ireland both Loyalists and Republicans signal their political beliefs with three colours: orange, white and green for Republicans (the "Tricolour" of the Irish Republic's flag), and for Loyalists, red, white and blue (the colours of the "Union Jack"). These colours are used for astonishing expressions of territorial threats: they are painted along street kerbs in sectarian communities, making those areas easily identifiable as Loyalist or Republican, and rendering the sector almost off-bounds for members of the opposing side.

Wall murals, often with specific colours and symbols, have been identified as particularly powerful expressions of constructing urban territory (Jarman, 1998). Together with Loyalist or Republican flags hung up on

electricity poles, they are a visible/invisible boundary, claiming a geographical commodity open to the general public for an exclusive group of people. It is therefore more than just a territorial claim, it is deeply divisive and it strengthens the ethno-political separation from street to street.

A recent study on the effects of territorial threatening in one interface area of Belfast found that “despite five years of relative peace and the continual decline in the level of violence between Ardoyne and Upper Ardoyne it would appear that social relations between the two communities have not significantly improved. Indeed, it could be interpreted that the divisions, which exist between the two communities, which are due to fear and the contestation over housing, are continually reproduced in a climate of apprehension, low inter-community contact and the complex use of ‘avoidance’ strategies. In more general terms it would appear that the growth in ‘normality’ as indicated in the reconstruction of the city centre and the augmentation in the city’s nightlife and arenas of consumption has had little affect upon living in this particular interfaced area. Thus it could be cautiously argued that the present ‘peace process’ has not significantly altered the social relationships that existed prior to 1994. Of course this is not surprising given the immediacy, potency and impact of a long attritional conflict.” (Mapping the Spaces of Fear Research Team, 2001, p.1)

Symbols of Sectarianism

Religious symbols like crucifixes, the Virgin Mary, bible quotations on large billboards outside churches and bible quotations on wall murals to justify the killings are local Northern Irish expressions of the type of violent sectarianism that can be found in many ethnic conflict areas worldwide. They also illuminate the age-old assumption of warring groups of people that a spiritual deity is on their side, indeed is urging them to fight this ‘just’ war. In Northern Ireland each side favours certain religious images: the Loyalist fight a righteous war, the Republicans fight the war of the oppressed. Religion, of course, has very little to do with the present conflict. In fact, most Republicans and Loyalists involved in politics would avoid speaking of a religious divide, but instead point out the ethno-nationalist conflict of identities between Irish and British. A participant in the (Protestant) Shankill

Symbols and signs of community division are everywhere in Northern Ireland

Think Tank summed up a feeling that many Protestants share: “It comes down to your experience of Irishness, and for many of us our only experience of ‘Irishness’ is IRA men planting bombs on the Shankill, killing babies in their prams and murdering people doing their shopping.

If ‘Irishness’ is about blowing the British out of Ireland – and they know fine well that *we* are the real British presence in Ireland – then you question whether you want to have anything to do with this Irishness. We’re probably more British than the people in Finchley, because we’ve had to defend our Britishness daily. If somebody threatens your identity, you cling onto it even more” (Shankill Think Tank,

1998, p.14).

Religion itself, therefore, can be seen as a symbol of opposing sides and not the cause for conflict. Identity is here described in ethnic terms, not religious ones. Yet, belonging to either the “Catholic” or “Protestant” community symbolizes the Northern Irish division much more clearly than referring to ethnic terms. Similarly, belonging to either Hindus or Moslems epitomizes an ethnic conflict in India that at its core is not about religious freedom, but possession of territory (Varshney, 2002).

The Symbolic Identity

Identity, especially the conflict identity, is therefore expressed through many symbols. Symbols of traditional culture appear in the forms of costumes, dress codes, sashes, songs, dance, replicas of old signs. In Northern Ireland, an orange sash over a black suit is equally loaded as wearing a T-shirt with the replica of the ancient Celtic twirls at Newgrange; aesthetics might play role in choosing those outfits, but it is predominantly an expression of being Protestant/British or Catholic/Irish. By watching symbols of traditional culture exclusively being claimed for one or the other side, many people in Northern Ireland feel robbed of their ability to enjoy this tradition. Many Protestants’ experience of traditional Irish music is tainted by the fact that everything “Celtic” is usurped by the Republican movement, whereas the enjoyment many Catholics had in watching the colourful parades of Orangemen is now all but destroyed by the politicised role parades have taken especially in the last five years. The Irish Language plays a particularly symbolic role, as it is not really spoken by any significant number of people, yet is widely used as an identifier for the repub-

lican course (O'Reilly, 1998). As a result, a renewed focus on "Ulster Scots" as the language variety of the Protestants was established to counteract the Catholic/Gaelic construction. This usurpation of tradition plays a consequential part in the further division of communities, a division that was not always present in Northern Ireland: "The way we were reared there was no mention of Protestants. My daddy used to take us to watch the parades and the bands; it was a holiday for us, you got an ice cream an' all" (Falls Think Tank, 1996, p.6).

The violence of the "Troubles" put an end to the cross-over enjoyment of cultural and traditional expressions, also to cross-over identities who might have conceived themselves within in range of experiences, both "traditionally" Catholic and Protestant. A pleasant childhood memory of watching a parade or listening to enjoyable music becomes a "tradition" in itself, removed from essentialist thinking of who should own the parade or the music. John Darby writes: "in a society divided by ethnic conflict, the badges of identity, even apparently neutral ones, are often interpreted as the property of one side or the other" (Darby, 1997, p.51). Ethnic actors yield and are subjected to discriminatory power through the reduction to a Protestant essence or a Catholic essence.

On the other hand, for many people in ethnic conflict areas the concept of clear identity, an essential "I" is perhaps not as controlling as their identification with traditional images might suggest. The postmodern idea of shifting identity is apparent in this Protestant's reflection on cultural identification:

The word "culture" worries me, because when I think of it in extreme terms I think of Hitler or Pearse or in terms of Hamas or whatever. And yet for me one's culture isn't something you need to run round the streets proclaiming, or send people to the gas chambers in order to "protect" it from "contamination," but quite a "soft" thing, almost unspoken, that you born with, that you live with and that you are. And the problem, when you are asked to define it, is that such a question creates an unnatural situation, because you are forced to draw a line around it almost, and define it in a very hard fashion, and be specific about something you're normally quite vague about. I mean, I wonder what people down South would

think about us trooping down there and demanding that they define their culture for us. I'm bloody sure they would find it totally unnatural (Shankill Think Tank, 1998, p.13).

It is quite surprising how cultural insularity and cultural openness are juxtaposed here, on the one hand identifying culture as something you are born with, on the other hand admitting that culture is vague, soft, almost impossible to define. It is a local voice reflecting what can be observed globally: the increasing inability to name a finite number of cultural traditions as belonging to one, and only one ethnic/racial group involved in interethnic violence.

Celebration/Intimidation

Parades are one form of celebration in Northern Ireland. The bonfires on the evening before 12 July are the most visible expression of Protestant/British celebration of their history. On 12 July 1690 the Battle of the Boyne took place in which the Protestant King William of Orange, the King of England, defeated the Catholic King James II, the agent of King Louis XIV of France and himself the former King of England. The history surrounding this battle is immensely complicated and most people would not really know more than the fact that this battle won the English sovereignty in Ireland for the next 231 years. The Protestants therefore celebrate this day as the victory over the Catholics, a celebration as a symbolic assertion of their right to be here. The experiences usually associated with celebrations, joy, laughter, communality, sharing, fun, are more than tarnished with a mantle of hostility towards the other ethnic group. The Northern Irish playwright Gary Mitchell in his play "Marching On" poignantly points out how the bonfires have become an opportunity for young working-class Protestant men to engage in fights with Catholics or the Police (Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast, 2000).

Signs of the bonfires accumulate over weeks before the actual date. Wood and rubbish is collected in huge quantities at spots throughout Northern Ireland, serving as a constant reminder to thousands of people, Protestant and Catholic, who pass the wood piles every day, that an aggressive assertion of territory, history, religion, ethnicity is about to take place. On the one hand, this is a cultural tradition that Protestants have owned

Northern Irish symbols are specific for the local political situation, but they are also expressions of global symbolic identifiers that can be found in any ethnic conflict area

for over 300 years, on the other hand, the symbolic message of this celebration to the “other side” is clearly intimidating and asking Catholics in more than one way to keep of Protestant territory.

The symbols that are claimed to forge an identity in Northern Ireland are territorial, religious, traditional, and all of those are built up on representations of past historical events, boundaries and battles lost and won.

Most working class Protestants would be hard pressed to explain the complicated events that led to the Battle of the Boyne, but they know, ‘We won that one!’ Most working-class Catholics would not personally engage in paramilitary action, however, there seems to be a general feeling of pride concerning the historical achievements of the Irish Republican Army in the establishment of the Free State. The wall murals especially express the link between visual representation of history and identity in Northern Ireland.

To what extent those symbols of historical identification and celebration reflect contemporary feelings of power and powerlessness becomes clear in Colin Coulter’s observation that

During the troublesome decades of the 1960s and 1970s few new murals appeared within loyalist districts. Moreover, existing murals were rarely restored. The neglected portraits of King Billy crossing the Boyne, sabre aloft in triumph, left to deteriorate in many loyalist areas provided crude metaphors for the dramatic decline in the political fortunes of the unionist community (Coulter, 1999, p. 203).

On the other hand, the “Troubles” themselves have become the source for historical referencing. Many wall murals depict fallen heroes, martyrs for the cause, the great tradition of this or that Battalion from a particular area. The danger here is, of course, the self-fulfilling prophecy, the war that feeds itself from itself. In ethnic conflict areas, any celebration of past achievements carries within it an intimidation towards the other side of the political divide, therefore symbolically perpetrating the conflict further. The confusion of historical events and tit-for-tat contemporary revenge actions is, of course, not confined to Northern Ireland. The Balkans and ethnic conflict areas in India or the former Soviet Union are full of such actions in which the historical claim or justifi-

fication becomes more and more blurred (Jourek 1995 - 97; Varshney 2000; Roudometof 2001).

Corpses and Bodies, the Good and the Bad

But can you take the emotions out of history, territorial claims, cultural traditions when there are martyrs to mourn? Bobby Sands has transcended a life as an Irish Republican that tragically ended in his death while on

hunger strike, and has been raised to a figure of mythology. The new Sinn Fein headquarters on the Falls Road depicts a ten-meter portrait of him on an outside wall of the building. It is the biggest wall mural you will see in the Falls. What global message does a depiction like that convey in an ethnic conflict? That there were others before us who died for our cause. That our cause is important enough to sacrifice one’s life for it. That you will be a hero when you die fighting. That the identity you will be part of if you join our cause is he-

roic, exciting, everlasting. And what exactly was the cause again? Depicting martyrs over and over again does, above all, raise the emotional level to the desire to belong to a group identity, forsaking all constructions of individual identity.

All martyrs, from Che Guevara to Martin Luther King to Bobby Sands, carry a load that is globally identifiable. They are mostly men, they are “charismatic,” they have died young, they were champions of a cause. And they are being used by a new generation of political players to entice more young people into supporting their particular political ambition. In Northern Ireland this translates into a myriad of different martyrs from opposing Loyalist sides, from opposing Republican sides, and of course, those larger-than-life figures like Bobby Sands.¹

It also translates into the embodiment of group identity with the male expression of belonging, the tattoo. Here we have the visual symbol, the martyr, the body as territory, the celebration of cultural traditions, the historical reference and the global expression of belonging all rolled into one man. A tattoo might show an Irish Republican Army (IRA), or Oglagh Na h-Eireann in Gaelic, emblem, a bird of prey carrying a machine gun over barbed wire, a symbolic complex long associated with republicanism (Kenney, 1998). Such a tattoo says it all: this is Irish (speaking) territory (=Oglagh Na h-

**In ethnic conflict areas,
any celebration of past
achievements carries
within it an intimidation
towards the other side
of the political divide,
therefore symbolically
perpetrating the
conflict further**

Eireann), we are in a historical line of Irish Republican Army fighters for Ireland's independence, we are moving as one (male) group identity (e.g. by including the sentence "Boys are back in town"), we have weapons and will use them (military prowess and threatening), we are fighting against the odds and are the historically wronged ones (barbed wire, indicating IRA members as political prisoners), we will overcome the odds in our pursuit of freedom (=bird of prey flying over the barbed wire).

This whole package has a significant currency in an ethnic conflict: in a climate filled with dead paramilitary combatants it is hard to criticise the glorification of violent counter-action. The suggestive message of such a tattoo makes the carrier almost untouchable amongst Republicans, glorifying violence and the "supreme sacrifice" for the sake of one's people's freedom.

The barbed wire, however, also provides an entry into the analysis of globally recognisable representations of "good" and "bad" in the Northern Irish semiotic landscape. Barbed wire, of course, stand for repression, a global symbol for the oppression of freedom, rights, social justice. It is ideal to represent one's own group as the "underdogs," the wronged ones. Using barbed wire links one's own struggle with such respectable human rights organisations like "Amnesty International", which has as one of its most recognisable signs a burning candle which is surrounded by barbed wire. And fighting for human rights is "good!"

What's really "bad", then? Yes, that's right, anything to do with Nazis. Using a Nazi sign for the opponents links them to unspeakable crimes against humanity, to terror and oppression, and justifies violent action almost naturally. Depicting members of the Ulster Police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) as German shepherd dogs with SS caps on wall murals makes clear what they are meant to be in the eyes of hardcore Republicans: oppressors who are legitimate targets for anybody fighting for freedom.

"No pasaran," on the other hand, links back to Spanish and Bolivian/Cuban freedom fighters, movements that enjoy high global status especially among left-wingers. Using the words "No pasaran" on a wall mural to express opposition against Orange marches along Belfast's Ormeau Road therefore gives the protest something noble, and casts Catholics clearly in the globally recognisable role of oppressed, whereas the Protestant marches are stripped of anything other than being an

expression of oppression. This rather clever republican strategy enrages unionists endlessly, who feel caught in an ungracious dichotomy of being typecast as the oppressors while they are steadily losing political ground. The result is a shift in identities, both on the republican and the unionist sides, where notions of the oppressor and the underdog are on the move, redefined on an almost daily basis, depending on the previous day's victims.

Conclusion

Visual and cultural symbols in ethnic conflict areas confront us with most issues that are at play when two groups are at war. Identities are expressed through territorial and cultural claims, often by claiming certain symbols for certain groups without acknowledging the difficulties in clearly demarking cultural borders. When globally identifiable symbols are employed, the power of visual and cultural symbolism cuts across local differences in the densely semiotic and political landscape of ethnic conflicts.

References

- Bryson, L. & McCartney, C. (1994). *Clashing symbols: A report on the use of flags, anthems and other national symbols in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast.
- Buckley, A. D. (1998). *Symbols in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast.
- Coulter, C. (1999). *Contemporary Northern Irish society: An introduction*. London: Pluto Press.
- Darby, J. (1986). *Intimidation and the Control of Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan.
- Darby, J. (1997). *Scorpions in a Bottle: Conflicting Cultures in Northern Ireland*. London: Minority Rights Publications.
- Falls Think Tank (1996). *Ourselves Alone? Voices from Belfast's nationalist working class*. Belfast: Island Pamphlets Number 15.
- Mapping the Spaces of Fear Research Team (2001). *Fear, mobility and living in the Ardoyne and Upper Ardoyne communities*. Coleraine: University of Ulster.
- Fisher, G. (1998). *The Mind Factor in Ethnic Conflict: A cross-cultural agenda*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

- Horowitz, D. (2000). *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jarman, Neil (1998). Painting landscapes: The place of murals in the symbolic construction of urban space. In A. D. Buckley (Ed.), *Symbols in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast.
- Jourek, O. (1995 - 97). Ethno-political conflicts in post-communist societies: prospects for resolution and prevention in the context of international law. [<http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/95-97/jourek.pdf>] 2003.
- Kenney, M. C. (1998). The phoenix and the lark: Revolutionary mythology and iconographic creativity in Belfast's Republican districts. In A. D. Buckley (Ed.), *Symbols in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast.
- Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast (2000). *Marching on* [programme] by Gary Mitchell, directed By Stuart Graham. Belfast: Lyric Players Theatre.
- McCall, C. (1999). *Identity in Northern Ireland: Communities, politics and change*. London: Macmillan.
- O'Reilly, C. (1998). The Irish language as symbol: Visual representations of Irish in Northern Ireland. In A. D. Buckley (Ed.), *Symbols in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast.
- Osawa, J. (2003). Ethnic minorities and conflicts: Quest for self-determination. [<http://nippon.zaidan.info/seikabutsu/1996/00187/contents/001.htm>]. 2003
- Pile, S. (1997). Opposition, political identities and spaces of resistance. In Steve Pile and Michael Keith (Eds.), *Geographies of resistance*. London: Routledge.
- Reychler, L. (2001). How to prevent violent conflict. In L. Reychler & T. Pfaffenholz (Eds.), *Peacebuilding: A field guide*, (pp. 3-20). Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Roudometof, V. (2001). *Nationalism, globalization, and orthodoxy: The social origins of ethnic conflict in the Balkans*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Shankill Think Tank (1998). *At the crossroads*. Belfast: Island Pamphlets Number 18.
- Varshney, A. (2000). Ethnic conflict and civil society: India and beyond. [<http://www.spc.uchicago.edu/Nation/papers/2000/varshney.doc>]. 2003
- Varshney, A. (2002). *Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. New Dehli: Oxford University Press.

Author

Simone Smala lectures in Teacher Education at the University of Queensland.

E-mail: simonesmala@optusnet.com

Footnotes

¹ I am not aware of any equally larger-than-life figure in the Loyalist communities, but there are plenty of wall murals depicted fallen heroes of the different battalions.

Copyright of Social Alternatives is the property of Social Alternatives and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.