



Social Work, Political Violence and Historical Change: Reflections from Northern Ireland

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Abstract

In this paper the author outlines the background to the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland which led to the current 'Troubles'. In this discussion a range of key ideas are highlighted, including the nature of sectarianism and patterns of violence which have profoundly affected the society. The second part of the paper reviews a number of issues which face social workers when they try to deal with the effects of such violence as well as highlighting new challenges which have emerged as the society moves towards the resolution of conflict. It concludes with the argument that, wherever there is such conflict in the world, social workers need critically to understand the way in which political and social structures impinge upon their everyday practice.

Introduction

Walter Lorenz, in his seminal text *Social Work in a Changing Europe* (Lorenz 1994), provides a detailed, critical review of the complex factors which inform the way we understand the historical development of social work on this continent. Of particular note is the way he synthesized ideas about history, ideologies and social movements to help explain the various transitions which social work has taken over the last century. Since this publication there has been growing interest how we might further understand the historical development of the profession across nation states and regions, as well as debates about how and the profession can adjust to new social, economic and political realities. Although there is often reference in this literature to the types of social conflict which European social workers have to deal with, relatively little has been said about the impact of political violence on the profession. The following paper sets the scene for a discussion of the relationship between social work and political violence in Europe by reviewing the case study of Northern Ireland, a region within the UK which has suffered from sustained social and political conflict for over thirty years. In doing so, this account will situate the position of social work within the historical, social, political and bureaucratic structures which have shaped practice. The article concludes with a discussion on ways in which a critical understanding of the relationships between such factors can help us explore the social work role in societies where political violence is prevalent.

The history of the conflict in Northern Ireland

The conflict in Northern Ireland is perhaps best known around the world as a relatively recent national or ethnic conflict which arose following the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921. This left the six north east counties remaining within the United Kingdom and the other twenty six counties in an administration which was eventually to become the Republic of Ireland. Yet the origins of the conflict can be traced much further back in history. Inevitably, however, there are multiple, contested versions these events which often reflect contemporary

religious and national divisions (Foster 1988). The island of Ireland sits on the western periphery of the European continent, and has been subject to waves of population movements and social integration and conflict for millennia. In considering the origins of the current problems of Northern Ireland, however, historians tend to focus on the early modern period of English colonialism of Ireland that led, in turn, to conflict between the indigenous population and settlers from the island of Britain.

What is sometimes missing in these accounts is an acknowledgment of the complexity of social and political change in Ireland during this period. Although the relationship between the metropolitan centre and the colonised island of Ireland entailed various degrees of exploitation and oppression over the ensuing centuries, it would be too simple to describe these relationships as linear and one-dimensional. Plantation (a term which described the piece by piece colonization of the island in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) took place in different historical phases involving often contradictory social, economic and political factors. What emerged from these experiences are what Foster (1988) describes as ‘varieties of Irishness’ in which planter (colonizer) and gael (colonized), at various periods in history, both clashed and co-existed. It was, however, the particular character of the plantation in the province of Ulster in the northeast, which created the conditions for the sectarian violence and inter communal violence of the Troubles in the twentieth century (Bew et al 1995; McVeigh 1997).

By the nineteenth century the growing demand for an independent Irish nation (driven mostly by Catholics) was resisted by unionists on the island; they were mostly Protestants and who viewed their identities in terms of Britishness. They were concentrated in the nine counties of the traditional province of Ulster. Unsuccessful attempts in the late nineteenth century to introduce a series of Home Rule bills at Westminster which would have given Ireland some degree of independence led to mass resistance by unionists in the period leading to World War One. However the Easter Rising by nationalists and republicans in Dublin in 1916, and the subsequent Anglo-Irish War of 1919-1921, were key moments in a process that ultimately led to the partition of Ireland in 1921.

The new political and constitutional arrangements which followed from the partition of Ireland were to have a profound impact on the lives of those living in the new state. Northern Ireland, with a population of only 1.5 million people and constituting, from the very beginning, a contested geopolitical space, has often been viewed a ‘place apart’ within the United Kingdom. Many Catholics, who constituted a large minority of Northern Ireland’s population, perceived themselves as nationalists whose political aspirations to be part of the new Ireland had been thwarted. Conversely, most Protestants saw the union within the United Kingdom as a guarantee of civil and political rights and felt threatened by what appeared to be an alien and hostile culture in the Irish Free State, which was later to become the Republic of Ireland. Constitutional arrangements, such as regular referenda and all island institutions which might have eased such fears, became moribund or neglected.

These conditions partly account for the levels of social and political violence and failure of the political system which characterized the state for the next fifty years. For example in the early 1920s 428 people lost their lives in a spate of sectarian violence; two thirds of these were Catholics (McKittrick and McVea 2001:4). In response to perceived insurgencies by nationalists and republicans, draconian laws were sometimes used to detain suspects without trial and some aspects of policing was carried out using paramilitary methods. Meanwhile republican paramilitaries continued to carry out sporadic campaigns of violence against the

state and members of the security forces. Throughout the following fifty years only one party – the Unionist Party which represented the majority population of Protestants – formed governments, effectively excluding Catholic nationalists from power. Simplistic notions of national identity, religious affiliation and ethnic difference cannot, however, fully explain the history of the political conflict in Northern Ireland. In particular the issue of class as an explanatory concept has often been disregarded in such analyses (Farrell 1992; Bew et al 1995).

The sense of fracture and fear was compounded by harsh socio-economic conditions experienced by many working class Catholic and Protestant communities as the economy weakened following the decline of the industrial sector after world war two. A failure by the local and Westminster regimes to deal with mostly Catholic complaints about social and economic discrimination compounded the sense of crisis of state and led to the eruption of the current Troubles.

The Troubles in Northern Ireland

These complex ethnic, social, political and economic factors can be used to explain the events leading to the recent Troubles in Northern Ireland which began in the 1960s. Since then over 3,700 people have been killed, and it has been estimated that tens of thousands have experienced physical and psychological trauma (Fay et al. 1999). These are high levels of violence in the context of a population which now barely reaches 1.7 million people. When disaggregated, these figures reveal something about nature of the violence and the social cleavages which characterize the society. Fay et al (1999), in their analysis of deaths, found that young men were much more likely to be victims, primarily because they tended to be the protagonists at the point of violent conflict. This was true for both for members of the security forces and paramilitary groups. What should be also remembered, however, was that women were often left as main care givers for families, after violent incidents. Although state forces were often involved in violence during these years, most deaths were the result of actions by paramilitary groups, both loyalist and republican. In addition Catholics were more likely to die than Protestants; this can partly be explained by random sectarian killings carried out periodically by loyalist paramilitaries, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. It is also important to point out that there was a discernible ‘ebb and flow’ to the violence over these decades. For example nearly 500 people died in the single year of 1972 when civil order was at its most fragile, and indiscriminate bombings and shootings were commonplace.

Since the initiation, in the mid 1990s, of what has been described as the Peace Process, the numbers of people who have died has reduced to single figures, although there is evidence of sustained levels of ‘low level’ violence occurring in the subsequent years. Of particular concern by many social commentators has been the use of ‘punishment beatings’ carried out on young people who have been alleged to have carried out crimes on their own community. These beatings are often administered by paramilitaries in the absence of a policing presence a situation which has arisen as a result of the conflict and mistrust of the police force in some communities. It is not yet clear what effects that three decades of constant and pervasive violence has had on such a relatively small, self-contained society. A perception is that it may be a generation before the traumatic effects of this violence can be resolved, and only then if a period of consistent peace can be maintained.

Although death and injury are obvious and explicit expressions of conflict, more subtle forms of violence have also been present during this period. One of the enduring legacies of the long history of conflict in Ireland, described above, has been the corrosive effect of sectarianism –

an issue which has quite profoundly affected social workers, like other professionals in Northern Ireland. As with other forms of discrimination, however, the notion of sectarianism needs to be interrogated beyond common sense ideas. The characterization of the Northern Irish Troubles in terms of an outdated religious war between Protestants and Catholics war inadequately explains the lived experience of the communities who have had to bear this violence for so long. Such popular discourses often ignore the role of British and Irish political establishments, as well as other international players, in managing and at times, exacerbating the conflict (McGarry 2001). The labels 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' tend to be convenient, but generalized social markers which obscure more complex sets of identities. McVeigh (1997) has argued that we need to recognize sectarianism as a pattern of relationships that emerged from the colonial process and which are manifest in a wide range of contexts – social, legal, political and economic. At times the effects of sectarianism are easy to recognise. Sectarianism appears to be literally a facet of most aspects of life, and death, in Northern Ireland. Only around 5% of school children are taught together in fully integrated schools, social housing is largely segregated, and much sporting and leisure activity is carried out within separate communities. Catholics are more likely to be unemployed than Protestants, although past allegations of intentional discrimination by employers has been replaced by an acknowledgment of the unintentional consequences of the way the economy is structured which makes it more difficult for Catholics to find work. In a society which is so explicitly divided, it is hardly surprising that tension and inter communal conflict arises, particularly at times in the year when past historical events are eulogised – for example when Orange Order marches celebrate the Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 or republican marchers remember the Hunger Strikers in 1981. Such conflicts often occur at working class interface areas where attacks on homes and property take place. In conclusion, sectarianism functions at many levels in Northern Irish society and its insidious effects are often reflected in everyday thoughts and action which, in turn, creates distrust and fear. Sectarianism is maintained and reproduced, not just through the explicit use of violence and physical and social separation, but also by negative and discriminatory representations of the 'other'. This leads to repetitive and circular expressions of fear and mistrust and a reluctance to cross boundaries, whether these are geographical, social or psychological. Such are the conditions which shape social work practice in Northern Ireland.

Social work, sectarianism and political violence

It should be no surprise, given this history of political and social conflict, that social workers employed in Northern Ireland would be expected to face difficulties in understanding their role and identities. Yet there is no evidence to indicate that they like others living with these fears, are necessarily free from the 'dead hand of history', despite the profession's commitment to anti-oppressive forms of practice in recent years. Most social workers have lived and worked in the region during the years of political violence and inter communal strife described above, although these experiences vary according to age and length of time in service. There are many stories about how social workers and their colleagues carried out their duties in brave and dedicated ways in the early period of the Troubles (Darby and Williamson 1978). Service delivery in the late 1970s and early 1980s was substantially disrupted by a collapse of civil authority and policing; social workers were often left to reinterpret agency guidelines and negotiate with paramilitary groups in order to access areas in which their clients lived. Pinkerton and Campbell (2002) have reflected upon the social work response to this early period of violence of the Troubles. Their argument is that social workers found it understandably safer, even rational, to maintain a neutral, apolitical approach to their work. They, like most other professionals and citizens, were caught up in a society

driven by fear of current and impending violence and mistrust of 'the other'. Significantly, by 1972, the London government assumed responsibility for the local Northern Irish parliament and imposed an integrated system of health and social care which was largely unaccountable to local politicians and communities. Arguments remain about whether this was a strategy to either defuse or just manage the conflict; the effect nonetheless was to create a 'buffer zone' between state bureaucracies and the ongoing sites of conflict and inter communal violence. As a consequence, the agencies in which social workers were often employed tended to reinforce such attitudes. The *leitmotiv* of the time was to remain silent, to accept neutrality as a norm and to avoid conflict with colleagues and clients (Campbell and Healy 1999). Everyday practice experiences necessarily mirrored the social conditions of the time, whether this was in terms of dealing with the effects of large scale civil and political violence (Campbell and McCrystal 2005) or to accept the sectarian boundaries which determined service delivery (Traynor 1998). Despite attempts to develop new strategies in social work education and training (Smyth and Campbell 1996), attitudinal change amongst agencies and practitioners has been slow, probably reflecting the pace of change in wider society.

Up to now, this paper has painted, some would say, a pessimistic picture about the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the role that social work has played in it during the last three decades. Yet to generalize about this history would be to miss the point that in any political or social context contradictions emerge which allow for freedom of individual and collective decision-making (Pinkerton 1998). Even in the darkest times in the 1970s and 1980s, when practitioners were faced with harrowing and traumatic situations, sometimes attempts were made to challenge sectarianism, collectively through the trade union movement or by individual decisions made by social workers and team members. A range of circumstances can determine when and where such space opens up to allow such decisions to be made. These opportunities are dependent, for instance, on the type and purpose of agencies in which social workers are employed. For example, a perception exists that the voluntary and community sectors are more likely to have policies and practices in place to enable anti-sectarian skills and strategies to be employed (Brewer 1991); this may be contrasted with the state sector which, traditionally has not been well equipped to deal with wider community politics. These positive changes to practice are of course made more possible if and when a society can deal with the underlying conditions which create conflict, and a case can be made that this has been happening in Northern Ireland over the last decade.

The momentum for these changes in social work training and practice has, at least partly, been created by a period of conflict resolution which dates back to the late 1980s, culminating in paramilitary cease-fires in 1994 and the Belfast Agreement of 1998. Nearly a decade later the signs are that a locally devolved power sharing administration will practically and symbolically demonstrate reparation between the parties to the conflict, and social workers can have a part to play in the healing process. In recent years the increased interest by politicians and communities in seeking ways to help those most traumatized by political violence has challenged social workers to find new ways of helping individuals and communities. This is a critical issue which faces many societies who have experienced such conflict and are in transitions to more peaceful circumstances (Hamber and Wilson 2002). Campbell and McCrystal (2005) in their survey of mental health social workers' experiences of the Troubles found that practitioners, as well as their clients, had experienced a range of traumatic incidents, but that they had not been well supported through supervision and training to deal with such incidents. On the other hand most felt that they had appropriate skills to deal with the aftermath of traumatic events.

Such experiences are important when considering the context of new policy initiatives designed to deal with unmet need caused by the Troubles. Since the Belfast Agreement the government has allocated around £44m to fund a variety of projects designed to meet the needs of a wide range of groups and individuals. Although these changes do present many opportunities for new forms of practice, it is not clear how well professionals, including social workers, are equipped to deal with such a wide range of social and psychological problems which have followed thirty years of political violence, let alone whether they have the capacity to address their own painful thoughts and memories of the past (Reilly 1999; Rice and Kapur 2002). There are, however, signs that the profession is reconsidering its role in dealing with the traumatic effects of longstanding political violence and sectarianism. Of particular note are the number of specialist, community base projects have been funded to deliver a range of services and psychotherapeutic approaches in which social workers are well established. Thus professionals have been involved in working with school children traumatized by sectarian conflict at interface areas in Belfast and elsewhere (Stewart and Thompson 2005). A well established unit uses family therapy techniques to deal with Troubles related trauma (Reilly et al 2007) and a range of post trauma techniques have been used following major incidents (Gillespie et al 2002; Gibson and Iwaniec 2003). It is important also to note other aspects of this changing political and policy landscape which implies a retreat from the bureaucratized approach of earlier decades towards a greater sense of engagement by professionals with the communities who have suffered most disadvantages because of political violence. Pinkerton and Campbell (2002) highlight the need for social workers to grasp these opportunities and be more willing to consider community development approaches, which may be just as effective as individualized therapeutic interventions for many groups and communities. The message is that social workers in Northern Ireland appear to possess a broad skills base which can address such problems in holistic ways, but there are doubts about the willing to critically review the social and political causes of the conflict and examine their role in challenging the discrimination which flowed from it.

Conclusion:

Social work and political violence: the need for a comparative perspective?

A number of authors have argued that the conflict in Northern Ireland needs to be understood in terms of other international conflicts (Smyth and Robinson 2001; McGarry 2001). Conversely a question which can be posed in the context of this paper is whether this account of the way social workers experience, and seek to deal with, the sequelae of political violence in Northern Ireland has any resonance for those working in other troubled regions in Europe and elsewhere in the world (Ramon et al 2006). Throughout the history of European social work, from its early beginnings in the nineteenth century to current preoccupations about terrorism and state violence in the twenty first century, individual social workers and their organizations have had to deal with the consequences of world wars, regional conflicts and local insurgencies. Usually this has taken place unnoticed and unheralded. Some of these conflicts have a long history – for example national and ethnic disputes in South Tyrol, the Basque country and the former Yugoslavia. The more recent prospect of large scale economic and political migration, from east to western Europe and from the southern to the northern hemispheres often create the conditions for conflict, particularly if states and their agencies are not equipped to understand the needs and aspirations of new citizens.

It does seem rather curious therefore that a wide ranging literature on social work organization and practice is dedicated to other related social problems such as domestic violence and crime, whilst not dealing adequately with the impact of political change and

conflict which the profession needs to address. Perhaps we can learn from the examples of research and practice which tend to be focused on zones of conflict outside the European continent - particularly in Latin America, the middle east and sub-Saharan Africa. More recently north American academics in particular have begun to explore the ways in which social workers might deal with the traumatic aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Centre in September 2001. These accounts often focus on the skills and knowledge needed to 'treat' those who have been traumatized (Itzaky and Dekel 2005); this is indeed an area which social work has an important role to play – as is the case in Northern Ireland. It may be that assuming a neutral, technocratic position can be effective in some of these contexts (Sveaass 2000). What appears to be missing in many analyses of the social work role in situations of conflict, however, is an acceptance of the need to consider this role in the context of wider social political and historical processes, however difficult a proposition that might be. The avoidance of such issues may exacerbate and prolong the conflict which creates the problems which social workers are expected to alleviate and solve. Shamaï and Bohem (2001: 343-4) illustrate this point by reference to the peace process in the Middle East, with particular reference to Israel:

“The source of the threatening issues – that is, the national policy – is often not discussed in professional activities, since it is not related to the typical problems addressed in social work. Social workers are usually not perceived as responsible for national political decisions, nor are they perceived as having any influence on them. Therefore, the subject is barely discussed between social workers and clients, among social workers or in social work literature.”

In some situations of political and ethnic conflict, particularly where there is suspicion about the purpose of the intervention and the identity of the professional, a neutral approach can in fact be dangerous and counterproductive (Jones, 1988). Social workers therefore need to be aware of the competing interests in any political conflict which leads to violence, and understand how this affects their view of their own and client's identities.

It is sometimes a comfortable place to be, to view these problems as outside the mainstream of everyday practice in many European countries. A perception might exist that, at least since the second World War in Europe, nation states have managed to avoid the major political conflagrations which affect other parts of the world. It might be also be argued that, in some ways the case study of Northern Ireland, or the former Yugoslavia, appear an exception to this rule – age old conflicts which have their roots in a past, conflicts which have long been resolved elsewhere in Europe. Of course the shifts in world politics in recent decades has challenged this complacency, whether this has to do with the collapse of the eastern bloc and the disintegration and reforming of communities and nations, the expansion of the European Union and the loss of confidence in world order following the attack on the World Trade Center. If anything, social work has a greater task at hand, to understand the interaction of international, national and local domains (Houston and Campbell 2001) in the creation of, and solutions to, problems created by political violence. This requires a synthesis of views about the construction of our own identities and the historical, political and social which inform practice judgements. It is only then can we fully engage with clients who have been harmed by political violence.

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