Girard among the Paramilitaries of Ulster: Identity, History, and Violence

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From my title it almost looks as if René Girard has gotten into bad company. Rather, he is exactly in the right place.

Ulster or Northern Ireland has seen a long-lasting civil war with too many deaths, bereaved victims, and destruction. The core of the thirty years of low-level warfare, locally referred to as the "Troubles," is a sociopolitical conflict over identity, territory, and ideology. To understand the conflict one has to examine the different discourses of identity, the role of history in their construction, and the meaning and function of violence as essential to both the discourses' creation and their practical effect.

Although Girard has explicitly written on neither identity nor ethnicity, his analytical framework provides an excellent tool for examining these phenomena in a context of violent sociopolitical conflict. The reason this framework can be used for these purposes lies in three essential features of Girard's theory that are also essential elements of discourses of ethnicity or identity in general. These are:

1. The celebration, construction, and reenactment of origins
2. The use and narrative of violence
3. The importance of difference.

The concepts of origins, violence, and difference in Girard's theory support a philosophical and anthropological view of ethnicity; without specifically referring to

the term ethnicity, they describe elementary structures of human societies. From this perspective we can analyze the phenomenon of ethnicity, focusing on the question “why does ethnicity work so convincingly?” and explore the “mechanisms” of successful identity formation. Unlike other resources that are only available on the level of group, social stratum, or class, these prerequisites appear to be constantly present even when they do not play a major role; it is this “deep structure” that makes ethnicity such a unique phenomenon and Girard’s theory of such great help. These themes, which form the cornerstones of Girard’s approach, also play a major role in many analyses of ethnicity.

1. Girard and the formation of identity

Difference, the most obvious of these themes, has been explicitly called a characteristic of ethnicity ever since Frederik Barth’s seminal work on boundaries and identity formation (1969). Barth saw ethnicity as a dynamic relationship across borders describing an outside and an inside, “us” vs. “them,” a dichotomy eminent in most discourses of identity, ethnicity, and nationalism. The fact that difference, as affirmed by ethnic or national groups, is primarily a narrative that can alter itself, and in many cases (as in the creation of nation-states) must be created from scratch, leads one to ask what mechanisms encourage or originally generate such differences. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how such differences are converted into traditions and retained, and, at the same time, to see which societal types are involved. Kapferer quite fittingly pointed out that “nationalism (as an ideology of identity) achieves much of its energy in the celebration of difference and of ‘unique’ experience” (1989:164).

This experience uniquely shared by a distinctive group of people to which Kapferer refers may also be described as the *origin* of a group. Every group seems to form what French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle (1990:38) calls an *ethnologie spontanée* to explain its origins, and may be said to utilize the logic of the scapegoat to establish its true origin and distinction from the “other.” In his analysis of African ethnicity Amselle associates identity formation with the mechanism of the sacrificial cult. Ethnic myths and mythologies, legends, and national epics express in their underlying ideologies the origins and unique experiences (Kapferer) through which the establishment of individual identities and differences is shifted to an unspecified former time and thus ontologized and fixed permanently. Hence, myths of origin and tales of various kinds can be used to as the basis for an ideology, as in many forms of nationalism or ethnic identity, by which discrimination against other groups, their persecution, or their exclusion is justified. This brings up the third element of Girard’s theory: *violence* and its connection to various forms of identity formation.

The meaning of violence is central to Girard's thesis because, without it, there is no origin and no differences, hence no community or society. Power and its control through the violence of ritual sacrifice is a central theme of many ethnic and national myths and thus essential for the identities linked to them. McKenna summarizes the dilemma of the relationship between violence, origin, and community (as well as, implicitly, the necessary differences) in Girard: "The beginning, the origin, is a myth, being a misrecognition of violence by itself. For Girard, this is the very function of sacrifice: erasing the human origins of violence in the very expulsion of the victim, in the sacralization of the victim whose divine violence dissimulates the community's own violence" (1992:90).

The function of sacrificial violence is to sacralize the victim, place it outside the society, and in so doing expel violence to the realm of the sacred in order to be safe from it. Rites are used to control mimetic violence through new violence which memorializes the original violence, soothing and deceiving the evil powers by constantly deferring to them. The true nature of ritual must escape its practitioners, according to Girard, since the "evil powers" themselves stem from the community. Ritual thinking can be successful only if it can replay the violence and its impact in its original form (cf. 1992:148). Hence the constant repetition of rituals and of violence to maintain order and communal cohesion.

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With this theoretical background, I will endeavor to analyze the relationship between identity, history, and violence in the context of Northern Ireland. This combination of phenomena stands at the heart of many discourses in Ulster and its analysis suggests a new way of looking at violence and conflict in this particular context and beyond.

To any observer and researcher in this region, the role of myth, sacrifice, and violence becomes quite striking. Examination of the Republican iconography surrounding the hunger strikes and their protagonists, which is displayed in many murals and monuments throughout the Province, reveals a good deal about the narrations, discourses, and actual use of violence by one of the conflicting parties. Violence in Northern Ireland is indeed woven into the social landscape, as Allen Feldman (1998:223) puts it, and forms of violent action such as punishment beatings can be seen in this context, as part of a wider social practice. Also the role and meaning of the term "community" as referred to by many is important. The community is often set against the state, either as a point of reference for violent action to defend the community against the other or as a justification for the very existence of the paramilitaries. A Girardian approach suggests new interpretations of the meanings and functions of violence in Northern Ireland.

2. Researching violence – interpreting oral history

The material from which this analysis takes its motivation was gathered during fieldwork in Northern Ireland between August 2000 and July 2001. The main objective of this research was better to understand the relationship between violence and the formation of identity. Data was gathered in the form of open structured interviews, whose main focus was on how violence is rationalized, narrated, legitimized, and assessed by the very people who have been the subjects and objects of violent events.

In the following discussion I want to focus on the similarities of arguments brought forward by the interviewees, from both Republican and Loyalist sides. Given the differences in the use and arguments for violence and their political meaning, a focus on similarities requires that we look beyond the political sphere to examine the problem from a more fundamental point of view. To show what both sides have in common, I will focus on the way in which violence structures collective identities, both shaping history and using it as a resource.

Research of this kind raises a few methodological problems and challenges. Researching violence by interrogating the victims and perpetrators of violence will inevitably produce narratives that cannot be reduced to standard formulas; the subject is a “layered” phenomenon, as Nordstrom and Robben (1996) observe. The object of ethnographic study is represented in constructed frameworks of explanations, originating in cultural contexts but being made to appear as if they were natural or universal (cf. Nordstrom/Robben 1996:6). Only if they remain focused on the empirical subject can theoretical models and approaches be made to serve as frameworks for the interpretation of oral histories. Feldman (1991) has discussed most intriguingly the interpretation of these histories and the meaning of their construction in the context of Northern Ireland. He sees narration as a process that constructs the self (through the narratives of others) and also constructs an event anew by telling it, “as the event is not what happens, but what can be narrated” (1991:14). In this sense the excerpts presented below may be seen as constructs that emerged from experience in connection with political discourses impacting on them (cf. Feldman 1991:15, 1998:197f).

The texts chosen for the present analysis cover the whole spectrum of political discourses concerning paramilitaries. And although they sometimes appear to contradict each other, they must all be taken as discourses existing *beside each other*. We seek to understand why they exist and how they operate in relation to each other. There can very well exist a contest between interpretations of events and of the violent structures in which they originated (cf. Bryan 2000:10).

I have chosen to examine individual and collective memories of violence and violent

experiences in Northern Ireland and analyze how these shape a sense of history and identity for different groups and individuals. I have therefore made narratives and interpretations of the origins of violence in Northern Ireland the center of attention. In analyzing the interviews, I focus on the role and function of physical violence in establishing, maintaining, and defending an identity defined by a given interpretation of history. Based on past events and their associated myths, current forms of these narratives of violent events can be found in rituals and political strategies that are used to "reenact and remember the origins of a group" (Girard), create a resource for "maintaining communal independence and its laws against a state" (Clastres), and "shape perceptions of the body, the social space and their respective meanings in history" (Feldman).

The materials of oral history presented in this text are used to illustrate the discourses of violence and the different narratives of its legitimization. They are interpreted according to the theoretical framework of Girard, and, to a lesser extent, those of Pierre Clastres and Allen Feldman. To use three different approaches to the collected oral histories is to see the world in three different ways, as Aijmer (2000) points out. The late Pierre Clastres and Allen Feldman accompany and support Girard in this analysis: Clastres, on issues of state, violence, memory, and law; Feldman, on memory and violence, which for him are closely linked and represent a relationship essential to the narrative theme of *defense and violence*. It is Girard, however, who provides the main framework, as his theory allows us fully to grasp the nexus of violence and identity in the constructions of origins and the discourses of history.

3. The narrative of defense as the origin of violence in the *Troubles*

The rhetoric of violence used to "defend" oneself is linked to the many personal histories told about the *Troubles*. The ways of describing one such incident range from very personal accounts to more general, almost historic excursions, involving the individual's position and perspective. Although my questions were very open-ended, all interviewees chose to tell about violence that harmed them personally or as part of a collective entity, even when they stated that they were themselves involved in rioting, which is itself an act of violence. Irrespective of political, religious, and paramilitary affiliations, people on both sides felt under personal and cultural threat.

> 3.1. Ah, I was a child of ten or eleven and I mind the adults breaking up paving stones and things like that there, because the riots were taking place here in the city after the Civil Rights march. And there was a great fear within the city at that particular time that the Protestants were going

to be burned out, intimidated out and attacked. (Loy. UDA/UFF, 43 m, Protestant)(2)

3.2. And in fact, it was, it was our own people that was murdered and when you hear it on the radio, and they recount reportings from the Inquiry, and you are listening to what it being said, there is just a pain (Rep. IRA, 38, f, Catholic).

3.3. I didn't believe there was such a thing as our own religion. You had to fight for your own religion, do you understand what I'm saying, you had to fight to maintain your religion. So we eventually moved to a place called the Fountain, which is just over the bridge, which is surrounded again by all Catholics.

Nils: But you joined it somewhere back in the 70's, just because of…?

Interviewee: Just because of things that happened. I perceived that we were getting pushed back into the sea again. (Loy. UDA 45, m, Protestant).

3.4. I suppose, just, there is a lot of instances of sectarian agitation around that time. . . . Gradually as things progress you sort of become involved in things, and in your school . . . whenever you see action being taken against your own community and your community was just left standing on its own feet you have to become involved and take action.

Because they [the paramilitaries] come [from] working class people, they are the only people defending the working class protestant people (Loy. UVF, 30, m, Protestant).

3.5. There would have been rioting nearly every day or well, maybe every week and people getting shot all the time, bombs going off in the city centre regular. So there was this constant feeling of being under attack. I mean you always seemed to be, every time, as one incident ended, day something else would come up (Rep. IRA, 46, m, Catholic).

The statements, all describing the personal perception of what was happening in the early days of the Troubles, make it quite clear that the people felt threatened and that this threat was transformed for them and many others into some sort of violent engagement to defend themselves and their people and culture/religion. Crawford (1999) has also seen this as a major feature of his interviews among loyalist paramilitaries who state that, "yes we were reacting against republican

violence; we didn’t start it. It was counter-terrorism” (1999, p. 129). Violence is initially seen as purely defensive, to maintain or defend some sort of identity. Particular identities on both sides were developing into a source of reaction, because the general perception of their own identity became more and more linked to images of inferiority and negativity. Defensive violence was a way out of this dilemma and out of the situation in which they believed themselves to be.

This however also meant that identities had to be filled with new and constant meanings, to be reliable, to be adaptable by the many different social and demographic groups that existed on both sides. They had to be reduced, essentialized, which turned them from dynamic resources into empty and static vessels.

Although “defending one’s own territory,” as one interviewee put it, was the main motivation, the violence didn’t stay defensive at all; instead, this rationale was used to rationalize all subsequent, very often retaliatory, actions.

> 3.6. So I didn’t need to sit down and think about the rights and wrongs of committing violence and violence was being acted upon me. Every day it was being acted upon my community, every day. . . . What I needed was to think how can I stop what is happening to my community, and the lesson was that might be right, whoever inflicts the most. (Rep. IRA, 46, m, Catholic)

> 3.7. Another boy in the hospital to go to. But what justifies all this killing? That’s why our side. We went on the defensive. We took it to them. Do you understand what I’m saying? They were giving it to us, so we decided we’ll take it to them. (Loy. UDA 45, m. Protestant)

> 3.8. There was no way back. Everything was escalating at that stage then and then you had the counter then . . . the Protestant community. . . the Protestant paramilitaries were counter-attacking on the attacks the IRA were doing and Republican splinter groups. (Loy. UDA/UFF, 43 m, Protestant)

> 3.9. We only had two/three years of that before the cease fire was called, so at that time I was very happy the cease fire didn’t . . . I believe we shouldn’t have called the cease fire until we really have made the Republicans paid for what they have done. At that time, you had a generation that was coming of age and was moving into positions in leadership that were pushing older people out, that weren’t prepared to go the full length. (Loy. UVF, 38, m, Protestant)

> 3.10. It was unavoidable [to become involved in the conflict] because of the conditions which the nationalists were living in. (Rep. IRA, late 40s, m. Catholic)

Identity and violence are intimately linked in these testimonies, where violence is a means to maintain and defend an identity. The meaning of identity in the context of Northern Ireland very much stressed the factor of difference from an "other" who was indeed threatening this identity. Violence served to maintain this difference or to remind people of its importance. Hence, violent counter-attacks are rationalized as a legitimate form of defense. The origins of the current conflict are traced back to the defense of one's identity; retaliation becomes a way of reconstructing history over and over, tracing it back to the initial defensive act.

Thus individual and collective histories are dependent on the cycle of violence that has its origin in the retaliatory practices deemed necessary for defensive purposes. Feldman (1998:200) also notes the relationship between revenge, violence, and memory, and states that violence has become the means to inscribe social memory onto the social landscape. In his analysis of the role violence plays in establishing a social order, Clastres (1976 and 1994) points out that violence is a mechanism through which societies' laws are "re-engraved upon the bodies of the individual members," a metaphor that is masterfully developed in Franz Kafka's "Penal Colony." Violence links society's present with its history, as it hands down the laws of society and projects parts of the tradition onto the body, for example, in initiation rites. The retaliatory cycle of violence seems impossible to break, as the formation of republicanism and loyalism, the two foremost identities in the conflict, depends on this cycle as a motor of tradition and identity construction. The refusal to recognize violence as a problem defines what Girard calls *méconnaissance*, whereby the societies/communities are able to avoid any responsibilities and instead focus on their retaliatory practices. Feldman sees in this violent relationship between the two parties that make up the cycle a mimetic reciprocity that does not establish hierarchy and hegemony. As Girard points out, without any sacrificial rite to break the cycle, the many can never become one; hence in the Northern Irish context no solution to the sectarian tit-for-tat can emerge from within (1991:258f).

It is violence itself which is sacralized here. Girard notes that in historical texts the dimension of the divine is present only in reference to honoring the victim, not in reference to violence (1988:60). This secularizing development necessarily leads to a crisis that must in the end destroy modern societies, since they require an ever increasing number of victims to unify the community. For McKenna, the violence that is a consequence of such a development can only continue to exist through terror(ism) (Girard 1988:169; 1997:113; McKenna 1992:159): "Terrorism exhibits

the vocation of the state to violence in its relatively pure form; being as Dispot observes, its ‘aesthetic’ form, ‘plus étatique que l’Etat.’ (58). If terrorism is the last religion which kills, it is because, as Girard argues, the religious as such is sacrificial. It is never more lethal than when its transcendence is dethroned and democratized” (McKenna 1992:159).

Feldman suggests a similar reading of the sectarian killings in Northern Ireland, whereby the victim becomes both a sacred victim for one community, as expressed in the many mural and commemoration rituals, and a simulacrum of the Other who has killed. Feldman stresses that the killing of an individual is always a attack on the community, as it is commensurate in its political and polluting impact to the forced movements of entire communities; an essential discovery of paramilitary practice is that terror has its own circuits of amplification that do not require material destruction on a large scale (1991:78f). In this context, many people in Northern Ireland would say that the conflict was not severe enough to have been resolved earlier. But the key to the relationship between identity, violence, and the construction of history can only be found through examining the role and make-up of the communities in the context of the conflict.

4. Community, history, origins, and the state

The community, as the main subject of the attacks, becomes the central feature in many narratives of violence and maintenance of one’s identity. History is an essential part of the fabric out of which these communities are constructed.

“Community” in an Northern Irish context has many different meanings. It may include the community of Northern Ireland as a whole, as well as the two (opposing) religious communities, or the tight and rather cohesive (mostly working-class) neighborhoods throughout Northern Ireland. Sometimes large estates, sometimes only a few streets are called “a community.” Although varying in setup, geography, and politics throughout the Province, local communities are a prime source of identity and a common point of reference. These smallest units should not be forgotten when analyzing the relation of community in general to the state as the unit diametrically opposed to it.

Violence as a means to maintain the independence and autonomy of one’s own community is especially important when it comes into conflict with the state’s attempts to impose law and order, which tend to be viewed as denying the community its independent power to maintain order inside its own borders. Law and order within various communities have been (and still are) enforced with punishment beatings (cf. Knox/Monaghan 2000), mostly carried out by paramilitaries on behalf of the community. As many of the interviewed

paramilitaries pointed out to me, they were asked to do this by the people in their respective communities; this in turn made them the bearers of law and order and set them against the state, the entity that would normally fill this role in other modern Western democracies.

The violence used to maintain the integrity of a given community can be interpreted in two ways. Both interpretations are applicable here and highlight different narratives and discourses of violence and its legitimization. As punishment beatings are almost always carried out on members of the same community, the idea of a scapegoat, central to Girard's theory, suggests itself. The victim is chosen because of his or her offences against the community, which sees him or her as a threat. There seem to be no individual perceptions of crime–also referred to as anti-social behavior–but rather a dominant collective one, in which anything done to one member is seen as a threat against the collectivity. In beating, mutilating, or shooting the victim/scapegoat, the community can reaffirm its own integrity, and, by expelling the victim, once again reestablish a sense of identity. Furthermore, the perpetrators carrying out the beating come to symbolize this identity, as it is through their action that identity is kept intact.

Where Girard's theory explains the choice of the victim and the function of a scapegoat, Clastres' approach would examine the inner dynamics of such communities to explain their difficult relation to the state in Northern Ireland. Clastres sees violence as a necessary means to the unity and autonomy of a society, especially in those societies that opt "against a state," that is, that choose or opt to be stateless (1994:149). To use violence to punish independently of the institutions of the state is to opt out of the state and its institutions. This makes the end of violence more unlikely, since no higher institutions exist (or are able and effective enough) to regulate and eventually stop this cycle of violence. As Girard pointed out, humanity evolves from ritual with its surrounding myths and sacred meanings to profane institutions without violence losing its role, even though it has lost its cultural meaning. Although there are state institutions in Northern Ireland, these prove to be unable to provide the necessary level of integration, security, and resources to generate an overall identity, culture, and tradition. For a long time now the respective communities have been the prime bearers of culture and tradition. Identity comes from the Protestant and Catholic communities, which can be labeled as two distinctive ethnic groups, each generating a social memory (cf. Jarman 1997:6).

> 4.1. As I was growing up I was experiencing what it was like to live as a nationalist in the north but I also was from what history I knew, right, not the history you learnt at school, but like what your community passes on

to you and you know all of these things that have happened to the community in the past and sort of the position you're in (Rep. IRA, 46, m, Catholic).

4.2. It is more or less the circumstances dictate the way your life goes. And I suppose you could divorce yourself from it, but if you are in a working class loyalist community, you are part of that community, so therefore the whole community moves that way, and if you are still part of that community you have to go that way. There were some conscious decisions, but a lot is the community (Loy. UVF, 30, m, Protestant).

History is embedded in the notion of community. Being Republican or a member of Orange Order is often passed down through the family and this tradition is often used to make sense of a felt loss or perceived threat.

4.3. I grew up in a Republican family. I was a Republican, I was a member of the Republican movement, albeit the junior movement but long before the Troubles, these present Troubles actually started, which was in 1969. I was a member of Na Fianna Éireann in 1966 so I mean I had a very in-depth Republican background and breeding. My father had been interned for six years in the 1940's (Rep. IRA, end 40s, m. Catholic)

4.4. I've been a member of the Orange Order since I was born. My family were all, –my great, great granda was a master of the lodge. My granda, my father, my father's brothers, my brother, my mother, my grandmother, two of my sisters have been mistresses of the lodge. My uncles. Orangism is part of me. I don't know anything different. . . Orangism to me is not an add on. It's an integral part of me. It gave me my values today, my church, my Orangism. It gave me my values. (Loy. m, 55, Protestant)

The opposition of the two groups is seen in historic terms, that is, as something that has always been there. But the accounts given of social memories are not so much recollections of the past as part of the present understanding of the past that provides justification for today's antagonistic relationship between Protestants and Catholics (cf. Jarman 1997:5). Hatred and the threat represented by the other are seen as being part of the tradition of each of their cultures. Given the cohesive nature of these communities, there seems to be no way out of this thinking and its often brutal consequences.

4.5. The important part about that was when we came back, I indicated to

> them that there was a possibility that if funding came, we might get that group up to N. Ireland. They plagued me literally daily, they stopped me in the door, ‘when are they coming up.’ So there was a connection there. Even though historically and religiously they would be enemies (Loy. m, 55, Protestant).
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> 4.6. It’s something that’s been bred in them for centuries and it’s something that a lot of middle-of-the-road unionists would recognise and say well this is a problem here. Sectarianism in unionism and the way they see nationalists, Irish people has been taught to them over the centuries and it’s going to be very, very hard to eradicate that from their culture. (Rep. IRA, 46, m. Catholic)

The individual stand of my interview partners, when telling about experiences of violence, was always embedded in a narrative of collective history that explained the start of the Troubles. It never started somewhere at random, but always incorporated the “tale of origins” as seen from a Loyalist or Republican perspective. Memory in Northern Ireland is not about a distinct linear history, but itself becomes a generator of meaning, as Jarman argues (1997:7). Events therein are lacking an obvious ordered narrative form. Social memories removed from their originating context are signifiers without signifieds. Hence there are various interpretations of the tensions building up to the 1969 riots, the no-go areas in Derry and the reaction of the state forces. There is a rough consensus about the relatively peaceful times before that, but polarity in explanations of everything that happened in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement’s rise and its suppression by the state forces. The riots of 1969/70 as well as the events of 1972 and thereafter are shared history with different interpretations and meanings. What the Republicans see as the reaction of an oppressive state to the demands of the Catholic people for equal rights, the Loyalists interpret as the betrayal of the Protestant people by Britain in the face of Ireland’s threat to continue where they left off in 1922 when Ireland was partitioned. Republicans use the events of the last thirty years to underline the unwillingness of the British state to respond to their demands; Loyalists see every change as a concession of the British state to the Catholics to their detriment. Both use their version to rationalize their use of violence and their will to continue if nothing appropriate happens. In examining this relationship, Frank Wright makes use of Girard’s thesis of mimetic desire (1987). In a situation that he calls *communal deterrence,* where there is a balance between antagonistic groups that regulates their relationship, the desire for peace may disappear from view and rivalry become the main aspect of that relationship. Rivalry, as Wright notes (1987:121), generates excellent reasons for the next escalation and thus violence in itself breeds more violence.

Differences are more likely to be increased than liquidated in such a relationship, especially when the antagonism is experienced in the most threatening and aggravated acts of the “other,” for example, through vigilante practices that reinforce this antagonism as they are themselves reinforced by it (1987:122).

While there are shared historical events with different interpretations, there is no agreed origin, as both groups claim that the origins of the conflict were the result of defense against the attacks of the other. Such a perception of history establishes origins that are basically retaliatory and antagonistic. Violence has become a main feature of culture, identity, and, indeed, history as founded on these origins. And even for people who claim that “history is not an interest to me” (Loy. UDA/UFF, 43 m, Protestant), the same narrative structures are used to explain an involvement in paramilitary activities and to rationalize their violence.

Although the recent conflict started only thirty years ago and its origins are seen as being a development of the politics of the 1960s, paramilitaries on both sides see themselves as being part of broader and older historical traditions. Thus does the Republican movement make use of the Easter Rising and its various protagonists. The IRA, with its own history of renewing and inheriting the original idea of a fight for freedom and self determination–from the IRA to the Provisional IRA (Provos or what we know as the IRA today), to the Continuity and to the Real IRA–sees its origins in the events of 1916.

The same can be said about the Ulster Volunteer Force and its origins before and during World War I. And here again history is seen through a narrative of violence and sacrifice, that of members of the original Ulster Volunteer Force, an illegitimate paramilitary group that wanted to keep Ulster British, who were incorporated into the 36th Ulster Regiment of the British army and gave their lives at the Battle of the Somme to defend Britain.

> 4.7. It is the same army that defended our country and backed Britain up in 1916-18 war in the battle of the Somme, so you were joining a legitimate army, proper structures, Lord Carson and Craig and these people, it wasn’t as if you were joining a gang of bandits. (Loy. UVF, m., mid 30s, Protestant).

Likewise, the Ulster Defense Association (UDA, founded in the early 1970s) sees itself “going back,” linked with defense groups in the past. It seems necessary for these groups, despite the limited and rather recent origins of the Troubles, to establish a link to a more enduring history. In this perspective, the recent conflict becomes only a part of a larger condition that has been there for centuries. While

the reaction might only be the result of recent events, the means chosen link the groups to a more distant past and therefore a more creditable rationale. Solutions that disregard this narrative are doomed to failure, as they do not take into account the history and thus the real identity of the groups. But these histories themselves are seen through narratives of violence; the establishment of the original paramilitary groups has its roots in conflict and war, or, in the terms of the involved parties, in strategies of defense.

5. Conclusion: Community-History-Identity-Violence

History in the Northern Ireland conflict is largely made up of social memory that is constantly reinterpreted and generates social meaning. It traces back the group's origin and constructs it at the same time. The relationship between identity, violence, and history must therefore be described as a vicious circle that without mediation from a third party can only very slowly take on a non-violent direction.

Identity is formed through the community in its various meanings, traditions, and cultural traits. As these communities and their identities have become threatened, defensive violence is seen as necessary to the maintenance of one's identity. This also holds true for most of the offensive attacks, as they can be understood as defensive or at worst retaliatory acts of violence. Violence becomes a trait without which cultural identity would not exist or would be in danger of annihilation.

History, especially in the last thirty years, is primarily seen and continuously narrated as a history of violence, that is, violence as inflicted upon oneself and one's community. Because history, as expressed in the larger context of the group's traditions, values, and identities, has become threatened, violence comes to be not only part of history but also the means to maintain it.

Just as violence, in the form of defensive action, retrospectively establishes the origins of the conflict, it also serves to maintain the history that was felt to be under threat. This leads to a cycle of retribution and retaliation that makes it impossible today to detach history from violence. Violence originates in the perception of a history under threat and at the same time safeguards this same history, as it also provides the fabric from which a collective identity is woven.

The only possible way out of this crisis is therefore through negotiation, by means of which the features of the different identities may be brought forward and violence come to be seen for what it is, destructive and exclusive. A way out can be found only in strategies that stop blaming others and leave the control of the discourse of identity to the community independently of the paramilitaries–not excluding them from the process, but clearly pointing out their role. As long as violence structures identity, a way out of the cycle of defense and attack, blame, and retaliation cannot

be found. There is no neutral third party who can break the cycle. Violence here is originary only for each group; it is never a unifying violence for all. The state, which normally takes on the role of the neutral third party, is here itself part of the crisis, which may be seen as creating an anomic situation in a Durkheimian sense. There are no rituals to replace the violence with, no overall accepted legal system that would work to that end. In this reading Northern Ireland finds itself in a situation of sacrificial crisis and communal deterrence in which violence, although at the heart of historical narratives and the social memories of the ethnic groups and their identities, ultimately threatens their very integrity and existence. The people of Northern Ireland must put an end to communal deterrence and the perception of the other as a competitor and come to a general understanding of communal reciprocity, where the gain of one does not mean the loss of the other. But this cannot be achieved by the communities alone; it must involve the institutions of the state, which have until now acted weakly in political governance, if not in the exercise of military power.

Notes

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2. All numbered citations are from interviews recorded by myself between Aug. 2000 and July 2001 in Northern Ireland. The persons are identified by their affiliation, age, gender and religious denomination. Rep = Republican/IRA (Irish Republican Army); Loy. = Loyalist; UDA = Ulster Defense Association; UFF = Ulster Freedom Fighters, a name taken on by the persons involved in killing actions of the UDA, the combat groups of the UDA; UVF = Ulster Volunteer Force. (back)

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