



Hard to miss, easy to blame? Peacelines, interfaces and political deaths in Belfast during the Troubles



Niall Cunningham^{a,*}, Ian Gregory^{b,1}

^a CRESC: ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, University of Manchester, 178 Waterloo Place, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK

^b Department of History, Bowland College, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YT, UK

ABSTRACT

Keywords:
Belfast
Troubles
Walls
GIS
Segregation
Violence

As Northern Ireland moves further from the period of conflict known as the 'Troubles', attention has increasingly focussed on the social and material vestiges of that conflict; Northern Ireland is still a deeply-divided society in terms of residential segregation between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists, and urban areas are still, indeed increasingly, characterised by large defensive walls, known as 'peacelines', which demark many of the dividing lines between the two communities. In recent years a body of literature has emerged which has highlighted the spatial association between patterns of conflict fatality and proximity to peacelines. This paper assesses that relationship, arguing that previous analyses have failed to fully take account of the ethnic complexity of inner-city Belfast in their calculations. When this is considered, patterns of fatality were more intense within the cores or 'sanctuaries' of highly segregated Catholic and Protestant communities rather than at the fracture zones or 'interfaces' between them where peacelines have always been constructed. Using census data at a high spatial resolution, this paper also provides the first attempt to provide a definition of the 'interface' in clear geographic terms, a spatial concept that has hitherto appeared amorphous in academic studies and media coverage of Belfast during and since the Troubles. In doing so it embodies both the material and demographic aspects of social division in Northern Ireland, and suggests an urgent need to reappraise the true role of these forms of social boundary in influencing patterns of violent conflict.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

Introduction

Over the past decade, an increasing amount of public and academic attention has become focussed on the 'peacelines' which divide highly segregated Catholic and Protestant communities across urban Northern Ireland, but most notably within Belfast. Despite the fact that Northern Ireland is now some fifteen years on from the Good Friday Agreement and a new consociational political dispensation, these peacelines have not only persisted but have actually increased rapidly in number since the substantive 'resolution' of the Troubles (McDowell, 2009; Nagle, 2009: p. 137; Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006: pp. 66–67). During the Troubles the existence of these defensive barriers was easier to justify in the face of the threat posed by paramilitary activities, but in a time of

nominal 'peace', they often appear to outsiders as socially retrograde and anachronistic.

Another reason for the attention which peacelines garner is the fact that these are typically a feature of 'interface' areas, a wider term which has come to embody the spaces that lie between these highly segregated neighbourhoods. While the threat posed by paramilitary groups has largely receded in Belfast, these interfaces remain sites of contestation and antagonism, particularly in the summer months when tensions between the two communities rise during the marching season. Annual Orange parades to celebrate the victory in 1690 of the Protestant King William III over the Catholic James II are particularly problematic because they disrupt Belfast's delicate *modus vivendi* as Protestant marches are seen by Catholics to be both inherently supremacist at a general level (McGarry & O'Leary, 1995: p. 235), but also antagonistic a local level by transgressing the religio-political geographies which are at once both highly pronounced and severely contested (Bryan, 2000: pp. 1–10; Cairns & Smyth, 2002: p. 147). So in short, while the major constitutional conflict has been addressed, Northern Ireland is still far from being a 'normal' society because so little territory is

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0)161 275 8998; fax: +44 (0)161 275 8986.
E-mail addresses: niall.cunningham@manchester.ac.uk (N. Cunningham), i.gregory@lancaster.ac.uk (I. Gregory).

¹ Tel.: +44 (0)1524 594957; fax: +44 (0)1524 846102.

'neutral' in a religio-political sense (Graham & Nash, 2006: pp. 270–273), and it is in the contested margins or interfaces, where these battles are believed to have played out with increasing intensity over the last decade (Boycott, 2011; Brown, 2011).

While it is therefore clear that the boundaries between polarised Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods remain sites of tension and hostility, this paper seeks to address specifically the relationship between peacelines, interfaces and conflict-related fatal violence during the Troubles (Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011: p. 209; Mesev, Shirlow, & Downs, 2009: p. 901; Shirlow, 2003a: pp. 80–81). It analyses the association between peacelines and deaths on both spatial and temporal grounds, before addressing the role of interface zones in the Troubles more widely. It argues that while existing work has accurately identified deaths as occurring primarily in neighbourhoods bounded by peacelines, the scales of analysis employed have been unable to reflect the religio-political complexity of inner-city Belfast. By applying spatially-detailed data and sensitive methodologies we argue that death rates were actually lower in immediate proximity to peacelines than they were deeper within Catholic and Protestant enclaves. These findings extend to a fuller analysis of interface areas, giving putative form to what is currently a vague spatial concept. The overall result provides quantitative support for the qualitative research conducted by Allen Feldman for his landmark ethnographic study of west Belfast, *Formations of Violence* (1991), in which he identified that over the course of the Troubles it was the cores or 'sanctuaries' of these highly segregated neighbourhoods that became the primary arenas of conflict.

'An ounce of prevention is better than a ton of cure': historical and theoretical contexts

Primary documents from the early phase of the Troubles in Belfast seem to make it abundantly clear why much of the city is now characterised by a complex network of defensive fortifications constructed between Catholic and Protestant areas. The first deaths in the summer of 1969 in the conflict that would become known as the 'Troubles' should be viewed not as the start of a process but as the result of a deepening political and social crisis in Northern Irish society since at least the mid-1960s. The causes of the Troubles are both complex and contested, with contributions by Whyte (1990) and McGarry and O'Leary (1995) remaining as scholarly landmarks in interpretations of the period. The unresolved argument between the Catholic minority, most of whom were nationalists and sought a united Ireland, and Protestants, the vast majority seeing themselves as pro-British unionists, re-emerged violently in the late-1960s. Over the next three decades, some 3500 people died as a direct result of the conflict, the bulk killed by loyalist and republican paramilitaries claiming to represent the interests of their wider Protestant and Catholic populations (Bardon, 2005: pp. 622–666; Bew, Gibbon, & Patterson, 2002: pp. 137–187; Buckland, 1981: pp. 106–131; Foster, 1989: pp. 582–592; Hanley & Millar, 2009: pp. 70–107; Whyte, 2003: pp. 309–316).

From the earliest stages of the conflict with the deployment of the British Army in 1969, a dominant strategic imperative has been to keep the two communities apart (JSC, 1969). Inter-communal blockades have been part of the city's social history since at least the early-nineteenth century (Hepburn, 1996: p. 123; 2008: p. 220). However, these barricades were temporary affairs, appearing only in periods of increased tension. With the advent of the recent Troubles that changed as the number of permanent structures increased dramatically (BIP, 2012: pp. 12–13). The continual challenges faced by the security services in managing low-intensity interface hostilities between the Catholic and Protestant communities in large part explains the rationale for the building of permanent impediments between the two:

It is true to say that there is a high incidence of hooliganism [at the New Lodge interface]...At lunchtime and in the afternoons schoolchildren of different religions engage in throwing stones at each other. In the evenings, in connection with attendance at youth clubs and at nights after public houses close there are similar and frequently more serious incidents – only timely police intervention prevents many such incidents becoming riots (APS (MD), 1970).

Despite being designed to protect life and prevent violence, peacelines have themselves become a key source of conflict in debates on the Troubles (Jarman, 2001: p. 36). Recent research shows that for many residents of interface areas, physical barriers offer them protection (Byrne, Heenan, & Robinson, 2012; Calame & Charlesworth, 2009: p. 61) but academic critics have argued that peacelines have had a formalising effect on religio-political differences, rendering a 'culturally opposed immediate community as a menacing spatial formation' (Shirlow, 2001: p. 68). This creates fear which in turn engenders violence so peacelines and interfaces more generally are 'an outcome of the broader structuration of conflict but they also produce a dynamic of their own which, in turn, feeds back into the wider reproduction of both spatial and social distance' (Murtagh, 2004: p. 461). These are used 'to construct narratives of inclusion and exclusion that define communities and the ways in which they are rendered specific or differentiated' (Graham, 2002: p. 1008).

At a conceptual level, arguably implicit in all of the above criticisms is the sense of peacelines as articulations of state power. But if this is indeed the case it is in the qualified and partial exercise of that power, as the violence which has afflicted these areas can be seen as a manifestation of the sort of 'uncontrollable autonomy' identified by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991: p. 26). Furthermore, Till et al. (2013: p. 9) have recently argued that in many respects, such barriers represent not the authority of the state but rather the limits of that authority, or as Brown (2010) has put it, as being emblematic of 'waning sovereignty', declining civic deference and the inability of states to control their populations by any means other than the crudest of techniques. For Loyd, Mitchelson, and BurrIDGE (2012: pp. 5–6) however, the proliferation of walls, prisons and other spaces of incarceration are symptomatic of a much wider crisis in late-capitalist societies in which these instruments of state violence act to protect the interests of wealth holders and accumulators. This may well be true, but in the Northern Ireland context walls have not acted to protect the interests of citizens from advancing 'would-be' citizens who both share common capitalist self-interests (Loyd et al., 2012: pp. 6–8) as is the case for example, on the border between Mexico and the U.S.A. or on the margins of the European Union. Rather, they have tended to define pre-existing boundaries between groups who cannot be reconciled in terms of religio-political identity, and therefore Reece Jones' (2011: p. 215) conceptualisation perhaps has greater salience when he has argued that borders more generally act 'as important sites for the performance of both security and citizenship. They are the line that symbolises the distinction between the 'homeland' and the outside world'.

The identification of these liminal spaces as performative zones gains even greater conceptual and empirical substance through a consideration of the work of the American cultural anthropologist Allen Feldman. In *Formations of Violence* (1991) he explores through a detailed and spatially-nuanced qualitative approach how the working-class Catholic and Protestant communities of west Belfast sought to organise space in ways that subordinated patterns of violence to the needs of everyday life:

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7493534>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7493534>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)