'Remembering': Victims, Survivors and Commemoration
Who are the victims?
Debates, concepts and contestation in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland
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Introduction

Defining the term 'victim' is a task fraught with difficulty within the contested terrain of Northern Ireland. In human terms, 'the Troubles' cost approximately 3,700 lives and imparted a tangible and intangible heritage of loss, pain and suffering to a much wider population. The victim debate has raged for over thirty years but has gained increasing currency with the advent of 'peace' and the political negotiations that led to the new devolved administration on 8 May 2007. Gilligan (2003), for example, believes that throughout the peace process the 'victim' has become the dominant cultural icon.

In the literal sense of the word a victim, according to the Collins English Dictionary, is defined as a person or thing that suffers harm. Synonymous with notions of vulnerability and passivity, the victim is free from culpability and blame. The victim is seen as deserving of sympathy, attention, validation, support and assistance. Accepting the literal definition of a victim as a person which incurs harm or even death then we can conclude that there have been an estimated 3,722 fatal victims of the Northern Ireland Troubles (McKittrick et al. 2007) and an estimated 40,000 others injured. If we take harm to include those who sustained psychological damage as a result of bereavement or involvement in a conflict-related incident then we can only guess as to how many people were affected in some way during almost four decades of violence.

Definitions of victimhood are also influenced by a range of other factors such as socio-political factors; legal definitions of victims and the cultural influences of victims. The latter category is usually contingent on personal and environmental perceptions.

Notions of victims and perpetrators have been politically contested in Northern Ireland (Knox 2001) and definitions are contingent on the constantly changing political landscape (Dillenburger et al. 2007). One of the most contentious arguments since 1997 has surrounded the existence of a hierarchy of victims, based on the premise that some victims are more innocent than others. Rolston in his 2004 account of state violence in Northern Ireland argues that a hierarchy of victims does exist with women and children killed by paramilitary organisations placed above all others. At the bottom of this hierarchy, he contends, are those members of paramilitary organisations killed by the state.

Conceptual approaches to victimhood

Victimhood more generally is characterised by two concepts of universalism and exclusion. Universal definitions of victimhood allow all groups in society to claim that they have been affected by conflict and are, as a result, all victims. This universalistic definition of victimhood permits a degree of justification for perpetrators of violence. "Without the status of victimhood" Smyth notes, "violence becomes politically inexplicable and morally indefensible" (Smyth 1998). According to McLernon et al. (2002), in Northern Ireland "opposing sides often see themselves as the victims of the other's hostility". This trend works toward a more exclusive definition of what it means to be a victim. Northern Ireland, according to Morrissey and Smyth (2002), is "compounded by the political cultures of victimhood". Both Loyalist and Republican paramilitary groups have used the status of 'victim' to justify acts of violence and see the other as the perpetrators of their suffering. Republicans, for example, feel victimised by the British state and Loyalist 'sectarianism' while Loyalists describe the IRA as the perpetrators of violence against their communities (Smyth 1998).

Perpetrators are unequal and undeserving, and rarely extended forgiveness (Straus 2004). Borer, discussing victimhood within a South African context, has argued for a more subtle appraisal of the terms 'victims' and 'perpetrators' which are commonly used to describe two sets of diametrically opposed groups. These binary understandings fail, however, to consider the complexities and variations of victimhood and perpetration in post-conflict societies. Victims, Borer (2003) asserts, are not all the same (as is the case with perpetrators) and there is also evidence to suggest that within many transitional societies the two groups are no longer separate and distinct, making some individuals both victims and perpetrators. A taxonomy of victims and perpetrators, for example, encapsulating the range of implicit and explicit actors in conflict societies was drawn up in South Africa to help policy makers and practitioners identify victims:

- Direct perpetrators;
- Indirect perpetrators;
- Institutional perpetrators;
- Sectoral perpetrators;
- Perpetrators by default;
- Beneficiaries;
- Bystanders;

- Passive or complicit perpetrators;
- Direct victims;
- Perpetrators by commission vs. perpetrators by omission;
- Bystander complicity;
- Victims once removed;
- Victims by proxy;
- Secondary victims.

No such list has been drawn up for Northern Ireland, although most groups in society would identify with at least one of the above criteria. Dillenburger et al. (2007) believe that many people within Northern Irish society are becoming increasingly reluctant to define themselves as victims because of its connotations with weakness and powerlessness. The term survivor is being increasingly introduced to the victim vocabulary. Considered to be more politically correct, the term survivor is bound up in notions of dynamism and self-empowerment and as a result has been adopted as a key term by policymakers.

The political uses of victimhood

Claiming the status of victim is an inherently political act as it is often employed to justify or legitimate certain objectives or actions. In Northern Ireland, as noted above, it is frequently used by combatants to justify violence against the 'other'. Rock (2007) suggests that those who are categorised as victims often have been manipulated as pawns in the political debate and indeed in the media spotlight to serve particular interests and motivations. The status of victim is too inexorably linked to the construction of (collective) identity. In present-day China, for example, negotiating a strong national identity is bound up in representing itself as the victim in international affairs. According to Susuki (2007), the Chinese government has often depicted Japan as the 'other', the perpetrator of China's turbulent past. Similar examples can be found in most contexts. In the Balkans, the status of victim has been employed to construct separate Serbian and Croatian identities (Gödl 2007). By identifying the 'other' as the perpetrator of their suffering, both groups can legitimate aggression in the present and collectives and mobilise national support.

Who is a victim? The empirical evidence

To assert that everyone in Northern Ireland qualifies as a victim is, as Smyth (1998) suggests, not viable on empirical grounds as different groups within the populations have disproportionate experiences of the Troubles. Belfast, for example, has the highest death rate of any area in Northern Ireland. Within the city North and West Belfast suffered more casualties than other parts. In absolute terms more Catholics have been killed than Protestants while civilians sustained more deaths than combatant organizations. Research undertaken by Cairns and Mallett in 2003 found that only 12 per cent of the adult population considered themselves to be victims of the conflict. Hamber and Kulle (2001) have argued that many people in Northern Ireland do not like to be identified as a victim because the term "traps them in a specific moment when they experienced loss and it reduces their identification to that experience".

Objective evidence undertaken by Cairns and Mallett (2003) however suggests that 16 per cent of Northern Ireland's population (which includes children) could be said to be direct victims of the conflict (those who have suffered the direct effects of violence - they have been killed, physically or psychologically abused) and some 30 per cent indirect victims (those who are linked to direct victims in such a way that they too suffer because of that link). The UN Commission on Human Rights defines an indirect victim as the family members of a direct victim. In Northern Ireland these parameters are being increasingly extended. The 2004 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey (ARK 2005) revealed equally telling results with 22 per cent of respondents identifying themselves as victims of 'the Troubles'. Twenty-six per cent of all those interviewed had a family member either killed or injured throughout the conflict while almost two-thirds of respondents (62%) had known someone who was either killed or injured throughout 'the Troubles'. When asked should all people who were killed or injured as a result of the Troubles be seen as victims, the response was extremely varied along gender and religious lines. Twenty-four per cent of Catholics, for example, agreed strongly that all those killed in injured in the conflict, regardless of their political or religious affiliation should be seen as victims in contrast to only 7 per cent of Protestants. Twenty-eight per cent of Protestants disagreed strongly with the above statement compared to only 5 per cent of Catholics. Slightly more women than men strongly agreed that all those killed should be seen as victims (18% and 15% respectively). Again when asked should all people who are bereaved as a result of the conflict be treated equally 26 per cent of Catholics agreed in contrast to 9 per cent of Protestants. These conflicting opinions reveal the complexity in defining the term victim in post-conflict Northern Ireland and add to the multiplicity of issues arising from almost four decades of violence.

Since the 2004 NILT survey these parameters have again altered. Of late, trans-generational victimhood has emerged. A number of victims' groups now offer assistance and representation to the grandchildren of those killed in the early years of the conflict in Northern Ireland who see themselves as victims of 'the Troubles'. This occurrence is not specific to Northern Ireland and is pervasive in a number of societies. Trauma as Huyse (2007) notes can be handed down and the second generation often absorb and retain pain and grief, consciously or unconsciously.

Government definitions

Government definitions of the term 'victim' were initially quite vague. In October 1997, Marjorie ('Mo') Mowlam, Labour Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1997-1999), announced government plans to investigate the possibility of remembering and commemorating the victims of the conflict without giving any indication as to who exactly she was referring to. Only three months later Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair announced government plans for a fresh Inquiry (replacing the hugely controversial Widgery Inquiry which failed to consider all the evidence) into events surrounding the state shooting of fourteen people in Derry in January 1972 ('Bloody Sunday'). While accepting that civilians could be victims of state violence and state injustice, in his speech to the House of Commons he differentiated between victims when he referred to all the 'innocent deaths' and 'victims of bloody terrorism' (Blair 1998). Such comments revealed an overtly exclusive definition of victimhood.

One of the first government documents on victims, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's 1998 report We Will Remember Them was criticised by representatives of the Fermanagh based victims' group Fírinne (www.firinne.com) who felt the report had sowed the seeds of elitism with its references to "innocent victims". Fírinne felt that the report had confirmed the existence of a hierarchy of victims. It is worth pointing out that all but one of the references to "innocent victims" appeared in an appendix to the report which contained suggestions submitted to the Commission. However Bloomfield (1998) did make a case for a more universal approach to victimhood in Northern Ireland by finding "some substance in the argument that no-one living in Northern Ireland through this most unhappy period will have escaped some degree of damage". The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has published a number of documents relating to victims' issues many of which have laid down a criterion for victims. In 2000 the Northern Ireland Office and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy Minister (OFMDFM) established the Victims' Unit to streamline the departmental initiatives dealing with victims' issues. In 2002 the Victims Unit published a report entitled Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve which made an attempt to define victims:

> …as the surviving physically and psychologically injured of violent, conflict-related incidents and those close relatives or partners who care for them, along with the close relatives or partners who mourn their dead.

Yet the government has had to be more concrete in their categorisation of victims regarding compensation and other monetary schemes. In a number of government funded initiatives, applicants must meet the criteria to qualify for compensation. The more open and inclusive definition used by NIO in Reshape, Rebuild and Achieve while undoubtedly progressive in propagating a more open-minded approach to victims in society does not filter down into practical and financial issues. Government definitions have had to be more clearly defined where money is concerned.

Political parties

Political parties in Northern Ireland are divided on the issue of victims and have frequently clashed over their respective definitions. The two main Unionist parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) both subscribe to more exclusive definitions of victimhood. The DUP detailed its thoughts on the victim debate in its 2002 publication The DUP-A Voice for Victims. Blaming the Belfast Agreement for not dealing with the issue of victims effectively, it contends that many victims are isolated by the linkage of victims to those who were responsible for creating those same victims throughout "campaigns of terror":

> We contend that there is a fundamental distinction between those who have suffered at the hands of terrorist gangs and those terrorists and former terrorists who contributed to the terror campaign and wrought untold suffering through the period of the Troubles…. The DUP does not endorse the wide-ranging definition of victims given by the human rights commission or expressed in the programme for government as it could include terrorists ….

Upper Ban MP David Simpson reinforced the party line in 2005. Commenting on the appointment of an RUC officer's widow as the interim victims' commissioner for Northern Ireland, he argued that "there should be no question of recognition being given to those who set out slaughter neighbours …" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/norther-ireland/4375816.stm). The UUP have taken a similar stance. In the Northern Ireland Assembly Debates Paul Hussey argued the point that: 'only those who have suffered through illegal and criminal actions - not the perpetrators themselves, are the true victims of the Troubles' (http://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?gid=2006-09-26.4.63).

The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), however, do not share in such exclusive definitions of victimhood. The then Party leader and former Ulster Volunteer Force commander, David Ervine (1994-2007), frequently argued the point that everyone in Northern Ireland is a victim, products of a culture of violence and division. Ervine's definition precludes any element of choice. As Smyth notes: 'at a moral level, it is incorrect to lay claim to victimhood on the basis of paltry experiences of the Troubles, in comparison to the immense suffering of others' (Smyth 1998). To claim victimhood for the 'small atrocities detracts attention (and ultimately concern and eventually resources) from the people on whom it should be rightly focused'.

Nationalist/Republican political parties work towards more inclusive definitions of victimhood. For example, the Social Democratic and Labour Party's (SDLP 1999) interpretation of a victim is much more wide-ranging and extends to those outside Northern Ireland. Contending that a victim can be any individual "whose life has altered its course as a result of the bitterness and division in our society and who believes that the alteration was negative", this definition encompasses not only people who live or who have spent time in the region but also can include people from other countries. It also "includes individuals who might be perceived by some to have brought suffering upon themselves". The SDLP

acknowledges that "some individuals would be distressed to be classed as victims, even though wider society might perceive them to be such. Some victims have suffered more than others, but because suffering is such an intensely personal feeling, the level of suffering cannot be predicted by the type of experience" (1999). It contends that support should be available to all "traumatized individuals, according to their need, regardless of the scale of the incident in which they were involved" (SDLP 1999).

Sinn Féin also subscribes to a more embracive definition of what it means to be a victim. In a discussion document published in December 2001, the party rejected the recommendations of a group set up to draft a bill of rights for Northern Ireland on the premise that its definition of victims could not conceivably satisfy all of those groups and individuals who come under this category. The party highlighted in particular the working group's references to perpetrators and illegal actions, illuminating the view held by some that certain groups and individuals were victimized within the existing law and have suffered as a result of institutional, as well as individual actions. Warning against a hierarchy of victimhood Sinn Féin proposed that a definition of victims may include:

> Victims or survivors means persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or psychological trauma, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are or may be culpable. A person may be considered a victim or survivor regardless of whether the perpetrator is identified, apprehended, prosecuted or convicted, regardless of the familial relationship between the perpetrator and the victim or survivor and regardless of any action they may have been committing at the time they suffered harm. The term victim or survivor also includes, where appropriate, the immediate family or dependants of the direct victim or survivor and persons who have suffered harm through the witnessing of a culpable act or intervening to assist victims or survivors in distress or to prevent victimization. (http://www.sinnfein.ie/peace/document/84/17 no longer available, alternative http://www.sinnfein.org/releases//01/billofrights.html)

The Northern Ireland Alliance Party (APNI) accepts the Bloomfield Reports definition of a victim. In its 2003 Party Conference it made reference to all those "people who have been directly affected by the conflict, all those men, women and children who have suffered in so many different ways throughout the Troubles". (http://www.allianceparty.org/speeches/000003html)

Victims' groups

Since the inception of the first paramilitary ceasefires and more specifically since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, there has been a growing number of victims' groups, all of which represent different 'types' of victims and all of which display very different understandings and perceptions of what constitutes a victim. Relatives for Justice (www.relativesforjustice.com) is a victims' group based in West Belfast, and represents the families of victims of state violence, that is, all those whose relatives were killed by members of the security forces. The Border Relatives Group, works for relatives and friends of those civilians who were killed by Loyalist paramilitary organizations in border areas such as South Armagh. Conversely groups such as South/North Armagh Victims Encouraging Recognition (SAVER/NAVER; www.savernaver.com) represent the families of members of the security forces who were killed by 'terrorists' throughout the conflict.

Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR; www.victims.org.uk), an organization based in South Armagh oppose universalistic notions of victimhood and have lobbied persistently against the government's inclusive terminology:

> … we are quite definite as to the criteria upon which our definition is based. The current trendy victim definition is that we are all victims - we have all suffered in some way in the troubles. The most significant aspect of this definition is that it implies that the person injured in a bomb or whose father was shot is on a par as a victim to the perpetrator of that crime. Adolf Hitler and Myra Hindley are therefore also victims using this reasoning. To us this is both perverse and degrading. The argument is that terrorists are victims of circumstance, and have experienced suffering in their own way. The implication is that these people are not accountable for their actions - and this is fundamental - the fact is they chose to go out and murder, they chose to torture and maim. Their actions are not excusable on the grounds that they are 'victims' too....We reject the inclusive definition of a victim on the basis that it excludes real victims from their rightful status by degrading them to the same level as the perpetrators. (http://www.victims.org.uk/whoisvictim.html)

The South Down Action for Healing Wounds (SDAHW; www.sdahw.co.uk) meanwhile defined victims as all those who have been affected by 'terrorist violence', while Families Achieving Change Together (FACT; www.factni.co.uk) talk specifically about the innocent victim of terrorism.

Families of paramilitaries killed by the state have formed separate victims' groups having done so because they believe that their dead are at the lowest possible level of the hierarchy of death in Northern Ireland, reinforcing Rolston's arguments. One of these groups is the Loughgall Truth and Justice Campaign group who were formed after their relatives (IRA paramilitaries) were intercepted en route to bomb a police station in Loughall in County Armagh by the SAS and shot dead on 8th May 1987. All eight men were killed as was a passing civilian. The group has persistently lobbied for 'answers' to their questions about the killings. Such answers, they believe, have been denied to them due to media 'demonisation' of the group because they are relatives of dead paramilitaries. The group approached Community Think Tanks in 2001 as 'grieving relatives' who had been unable to "find avenues through which they could tell their side of the story". In the publication (Hall 2001a) the group talked openly about their loss as 'grief like everyone else's' and referred to themselves as 'unequal

victims' in the Northern Ireland conflict. Another victims' support group, HURT (Homes United by Ruthless Terror) believe their dead are less equal than others. Formed in the Upper Bann in 1998, its membership is drawn primarily from security force families and civilians who are predominantly Protestant. Attracted to the Think Tanks project for the same reasons as the Loughgall group, the members of HURT claimed that they were the 'forgotten victims', neglected by the rest of society and by the state (Hall 2001b). The group expressed resentment towards the state's lack of financial and emotional support. This, they argued, was all the more hurtful given that their relatives had died serving that very state.

Victims groups not only represent then different types of victims in relation to their roles in the conflict, they are increasingly representing single-identities and therefore often form separate Catholic/Nationalist/Republican or Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist groups.

Conclusion

Definitions of the term 'victim' are politically contested in Northern Ireland and the parameters are subject to constant revision. These debates and competing interests go some way in explaining the challenges facing policymakers and practitioners in the victims' arena. 'Peace' in Northern Ireland has offered the space not only to reflect and renegotiate the past but to challenge hierarchical or traditional interpretations of victimhood.

Note

See the 'glossary' for definitions of the terms that are used in the victims' debate in Northern Ireland.

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