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Intractable to Transformed: How National Level Peace Processes Shape Urban Level Violence.

In his 1996 work, *Modernity at Large* Arjun Appadurai proclaimed the "implosion of global and national conflicts into the urban world". Over a decade later, the broader discourses of international security, development, and urban studies, have all further advanced the conception of the city as an increasingly important lens through which to view the formation, articulation, and impact of national and supranational processes (e.g. Gugler, 2004, Davis, 2004, Bollens, 2006). Indeed, focusing on cities has produced many useful insights into the workings of global networks and transnational institutions. However, when followed to its logical conclusion this theoretical emancipation of the "global city" from its larger State structure, alongside a the international community's re-framing of cities as the new epicenters of violence, internal insurgency, and civil unrest (Esser, 2009), in fact forecasts a alarming new power dynamic wherein the State may actually be seen as "hostage to the city" (Davis, 2004 p. 356.) This perceived reordering of scalar influence is particularly relevant to the study of violent conflict. Is the city really eclipsing the State in its relevance to conflict formation, articulation, and mitigation? While there is no doubt that urban centers often play host to the most palpable and brutal manifestations of intergroup conflict, can policy that frames intergroup violence as a phenomena shaped in, and thus best addressed through, cities ever hope to effectively mitigate conflict?

Focusing on the case study of Belfast, Northern Ireland, this essay aims to address the problematic nature of this emerging City-State conceptualization when applied to policy formulation regarding "conflict cities"[1] in particular. I start by reviewing the larger debate on conflict and the urban realm, as well as the role that urban governance and policy can play within the context of regional and national conflicts, before examining the transformative effects of the 1998 "Good Friday" agreement and subsequent cessation of official insurgency in Northern Ireland on urban-level violence in Belfast. Ultimately, I argue that policy discourse must not turn its back on addressing the role that national level processes of conflict resolution and political reconciliation play in altering and re-shaping urban violence, especially in fragile or post-conflict states. Though Denis Rodgers has previously pointed to this living-on of violence after formal peace accords have been signed in the South American context (2007, p.2), his focus on the changing *geography* of conflict relies on the movement of conflict from the rural to the urban rather than the transformation of existing urban conflicts themselves. It is my argument that as intrastate conflict and ethno-nationalist fissures continue to

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[1] While much of the literature on 'Conflict Cities' lacks a concise and agreed definition for the term itself, for the purposes of this essay 'Conflict City' will be defined as any city characterized by significant levels of violent intergroup conflict.

pervade the post-Cold War and post-Colonial global condition, successful efforts to mitigate conflicts over urban spaces will be those that effectively account for the unique process of 'implosion' through which the Global/National becomes embedded within the city, directly influencing the character and form of urban violence. Urban violence within post-conflict settings, however disorganized and local, must be understood as a symptom of a long pattern of interaction between structural/political conflict and local level elaboration[2].

Violence, Conflict, and the City:

As Daniel Esser (2009) outlines in his recent essay, we are currently observing an increasing tendency to equate urban level conflict, and urbanization more generally with prospects of macro level instability as well as lagging 'development' outcomes. This 'securitization' of development, however misguided it may be, has brought with it the conflation of urban violence, conflict prevention, economic growth, and development in the eyes of key international institutions such as the United Nations (UN). Indeed, UN publications, such as "Long-Term Conflict Prevention and Industrial Development" repeatedly tie development efforts to conflict prevention, and vise-versa, citing that; "more than any other groundbreaking initiative in recent years, [conflict prevention] inspires the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)" (Bredel, 2003, p. xix). These concerns are only exacerbated by the new rhetoric of "slum wars" (Rodgers) and "urban social time bombs" (Anna Tibaijuka (2006) cited in Esser (2009, p. 4).

While major questions exist as to whether urban level development and conflict ought to be seen as causally linked to macro level instability in the first place, nowhere is this ontology more evident then when discussing outcomes in post-conflict cities and states. Scott Bollens (2006, p. 67) sums up this assumption, positing that cities within post-conflict settings are;

> "[…] Not receptacles dependent for change upon larger political and constitutional reconfigurations. Rather, they may be critical spatial, economic, and physiological contributors to national ethnic stability and reconciliation".

Focusing more closely on the role of the city within a conflict or post conflict setting, it is important to first note that conflict and contestation are not unique to extreme cases of urban sectarianism and civil wars. That said, while all cities are characterized by some level of "contestation", in certain cities suffering from extreme polarization as well as a lack of commonly accepted political frameworks for dispute resolution, such as Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Belfast, Baghdad, Sarajevo, New Delhi, and Nicosia, the concept of the "contested city" takes on far more urgent meaning (Bollens, 1999). It is in these cities that efforts to reduce urban violence and conflict are clearly critical to the establishment of viable paths to peace. In order to move beyond alarmist attitudes

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[2] This framing borrows from Archers "morphogenetic" approach, which views political phenomena as an "endless cycles of the structural conditioning/social interaction/ structural elaboration" (1985, p. 61).

towards urban development and perceived 'urban' threat to economic and social progress a bifurcation is thus necessary when discussing cities with high levels of violence associated with illicit economies, extreme deprivation and exclusion and those "conflict cities" characterized by distinguishable groups competing for control over the city as a hub of national and increasingly international influence[3].

Belfast: Urban Conflict and National Reconciliation

Belfast, Northern Ireland, a city that last year marked the 10-year anniversary of the official cessation of violence associated with the "Troubles" that plagued the country for over forty years. Rooted in intertwined nationalist (Irish/British) and Religious (Catholic/Protestant) conflicts, the fighting in Northern Ireland resulted in 3,169 deaths, 38,680 injured and over 10,000 bombings in a 25 year period between 1969 and 1994 (Bollens, 1999). Though the situation in Northern Ireland can certainly be characterized as a national level conflict, the vast majority of these violent clashes in fact took place within the Belfast Urban Area (BUA) (Boal, 1995). In many ways it is hard to find a case study that embodies so many different characteristics of large-scale urban conflict. In its physical form, Belfast bears the scars of its intergroup conflict in the form of at least 27 'peace walls', fences and other physical barriers marking the boundaries between Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist communities ("A policy agenda for the interface," 2004). Despite considerable violence in other cities throughout Northern Ireland, the fact that only ten other of such physical divides exist in the country stands as a stark reminder of the capitals unique position within the larger conflict. This type of sectioning off of the city is also made evident visually through the use of the sectarian murals to demark space, creating an urban environment fully saturated with ethnic-national symbolism and sectarian division. In addition, this fracturing of the city only exacerbated an already grim economic condition in the city, where the decline of core manufacturing industries produced some of the highest unemployment rates in the United Kingdom (Gaffikin, unpub.).

As a conflict over sovereignty, politically speaking the conflict in Northern Ireland is simultaneously national and international. It is impossible to overlook the critical role played by not only the British government in Westminster, but also that of the Republic of Ireland, as well as the United States in influencing events on the ground (Reilly, 2009, 75). This fact situates Belfast and Northern Ireland in a unique standing with regard to traditional 'Governance Analysis' of urban conflict, which depicts urban violence as a symptom of the larger erosion of the state, where national level institutions are no longer attractive as 'spoils of war'" (Rodgers, 2007, 2). In this instance, while a more in depth study of the workings of and opinions towards the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as its relationship to Westminster is beyond the scope of this essay, it will suffice to say that repeated suspension of local governance and devolved nature of the parliament's power must be seen call into question its relevance to the national

[3] While this bifurcation is likely inexact and in certain contexts not mutually exclusive, it will assist in narrowing the scope of analysis for the purpose of this essay.

conflict[4]. That said, it is important to note that all groups involved in violent conflict have in some way or another bought into the political project in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the form of its political wing, Sinn Fein, and Unionist interests through the Ulster Unionist Party.

Intractable to Transformed:

Long viewed as an intractable conflict, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (also know as the Belfast Agreement) and its establishment of the above-mentioned Northern Irish Assembly brought with it a nearly full end to open hostilities in Northern Ireland. Paired with a remarkable economic upswing powered largely by its proximity to the European Unions fastest growing economy in the Republic of Ireland, the past decade has been an uncharacteristically optimistic one for Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, both qualitative and quantitative data suggest that the conflict itself has not been ended, but rather transformed. During the height of violence in Belfast, from 1969 – 1980, the violence in Belfast was characterized by targeted, organized, and highly lethal attacks by paramilitary groups. While levels of violence declined overall in the early to mid 1990s, the targeted nature of attracts remained a defining feature. As Frank Gaffikin points out in a forthcoming book, this tend changed significantly in the aftermath of the Belfast Agreement. As the following table show, utilizing data from 1990-2003, though fatality rates declined significantly, security related injuries have not slowed, and in some instances they have grown post-peace agreement.

Table 1 Security Related Deaths

	Police	Police Reserve	Army	UDR/RIR*	Civilian	Totals
1990-94	20	10	23	22	326	401
Yearly Average	**4**	**2**	**5**	**4**	**65**	**80**
1995-98	5	1	3	0	92	101
Yearly Average	**1**	**0**	**1**	**0**	**23**	**25**
1999-2003	0	0	0	0	66	66
Yearly Average	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**13**	**13**

Source: Gaffikin, Frank: Calculated from data on www.psni.police.uk

*Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR) Royal Irish Regiment (RIR)

[4] Only fully operational in its current form since 1999, the assembly has been suspended four times; in 2000, twice in 2001, and once again in 2002.

Table 2 Security Related Injuries					
	Police	**Army**	**UDR/RIR**	**Civilian**	**Totals**
1990-94	818	955	131	2679	4583
Yearly Average	**164**	**191**	**26**	**536**	**917**
1995-98	1621	267	38	3319	5245
Yearly Average	**405**	**67**	**10**	**830**	**1311**
1999-2003	2305	139	68	3113	5625
Yearly Average	**461**	**28**	**14**	**623**	**1125**
Source: Gaffikin, Frank: Calculated from data on www.psni.police.uk					

While violence towards certain groups has declined, both attacks on police and civilians display a concerning upward trajectory. Anecdotal evidence is no more comforting, as according to 2004 community survey carried out by the Belfast Interface Project:

> "Over 60% of all respondents felt that violence against their area from the "other" community had increased since 1994 with only 13 per cent feeling that it had decreased" ("A policy agenda for the interface" 2004 P. 11)

Here it can be interpreted that the political space created by the Belfast Agreement, and the subsequent disarmament of the significant paramilitary groups lead to increasingly disorganized and opportunistic violence (Gaffikin, unpub.).

This overall shift in violence type has worrying implications for urban governance in Belfast, where the vast majority of these attacks continue to take place. Certainly the departure of organized and to some degree recognized paramilitary groups (no doubt a positive outcome in and of itself) and the fact that the changing nature of violence is increasingly manifest in "low level" violence amongst citizens makes the creation of a productive dialogue amongst perpetrators more challenging. Of most concern is that, in the wake of a successful national peace process, this violence be depoliticized and treated solely as an urban problem of poverty, exclusion and insecurity. Just as Charles Tilly (1985) advances in his seminal work, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime", there seems a reality that the coercive and divisive role of the paramilitary and re-1998 political structure severely ingrained the evolution of separate 'nations' within Northern Ireland, and in Belfast in particular. The sudden withdrawal of such actors via a national level political process has acute implications for local level outcomes, leaving the maintenance or destruction of those national identities in the hands of civilian citizens. Ultimately, it is hard to characterize any peace process as unproductive, and it is important to be clear that the progress in Northern Ireland is not only positive overall, but

extremely impressive given the historical conditions. The lingering concern is simply that the process may be facilitating violence at the local level that is, by Harvey's standards, destructive rather than creative (Harvey, 2003, p. 939).

Looking Beyond Belfast:

The experience of Belfast within Northern Ireland's simultaneous nationalist and religious conflict, and particularity the ways in which national level progress has not necessarily brought with it local level security, is critically relevant an increasing number of countries engulfed by civil unrest throughout the world. In Bagdad roadblocks and barricaded neighborhoods bear a striking resemblance to the British authority imposed Peace Walls in Belfast, while cities such as Guatemala City have shared the experience increasing and disorganized urban level violence in their post-peace accord era (Reilly, p. 38). Much as in Belfast, the political space created by reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina has produced increased the segregation of neighborhoods and political allegiances. While urban planning and governance must play a lead role in addressing division and conflict at the community level, it has become all too common to divorce these conflicts from the national level politics that shape them. In Belfast, as in cities more generally, urban violence ought not be addressed simply as an end in and of itself, but rather a symptom of a long pattern of interaction between structural/political conflict and local level elaboration. Just as Belfast is lauded as a model for the peaceful resolution of urban and national conflict, so should it serve as a warning to other "conflict cities" that political resolution and the official cessation of armed conflict does not inherently end violence, but rather re-shapes its manifestation.

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