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EXPLAINING NORTHERN IRELAND: A BRIEF STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction

Northern Ireland (NI) has occupied a considerable army of social scientists in the last fifteen years. The range, richness and poverty of their work cannot be explored in a brief article. What follows is a deliberately simple and critical guide to some of the explanations habitually invoked. The survey is brief, selective and doubtless highly misleading. There is no attempt to survey the extensive histories of NI before or after direct rule, nor any survey of armies or parties in Ireland whether legal, illegal or paralegal, nor any evaluation of solutions. The introductory bibliography attached should be of assistance. Explanations should be distinguished by their capacity to account for the origins of the current conflict and their ability to account for the persistence of the political violence, and readers should make such an evaluation of the ideas surveyed.

Four features of pre-twentieth century Irish history of relevance to explaining contemporary NI are not disputed by serious commentators. First, Ireland was a British colony, conquered albeit sloppily by successive waves of Norman and English monarchs. The Anglo-Saxons, despite going on hunting expeditions against the Irish, did not exterminate the natives. Nevertheless, forced Anglicisation in language, law and religion occurred fitfully. Second, the Protestant Reformation, completely successful in the British mainland, was not successful in large parts of Ireland where the Gaelic Catholic peasantry resisted Anglicisation. In the bulk of Ireland an Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocracy ruled a Gaelic Catholic peasantry, dispossessed after the Cromwellian and Williamite settlements. Eighteenth century Ireland was characterised by religious apartheid, although there was no pretence about development being equal, merely separate. Third, the most successful colonial plantation in Ireland was in the North and North East where non-aristocratic Scots Presbyterians and Protestants were settled in the seventeenth century. In Ulster religious and agrarian land conflicts overlapped, leading to intra-class struggles amongst the peasantry, whereas in the rest of Ireland agrarian class war and religious/ethnic struggle were identical. Fourth, the spatial development of industrial capitalism proceeded unevenly, and reinforced existing religious cleavages. Belfast and the Lagan valley industrialised first and extensively, and in the nineteenth century Irish urban working class was largest in NI. Dual labour markets, in which Protestants had a superior position, developed early in Belfast (Budge and O'Leary, 1973), and in addition to other contrasts with the largely agrarian and Catholic South, help account for the successful mobilisation of the Protestant working class

against the Irish Home Rule Movement. Partition of Ireland in 1920-22, after the war of national liberation, was accordingly not simply the product of imperial conspiracies. It corresponded, albeit roughly, to existing cultural, economic and political cleavages.

Explanatory Approaches

Exogenous explanations situate NI in the network of Anglo-Irish state relations and/or imperialism. 'Solutions' require international transformations. Endogenous explanations analyse Northern Ireland as largely autonomous of exogenous influences. 'Solutions' may employ exogenous instruments but the 'problems' are endogenous.

a. *Exogenous Explanations*

1. Nationalists who seek Irish 'reunification' explain NI as the product of one exogenous variable: British imperialism. Nationalists argue that Ireland is one nation. The border between NI and the Republic is 'artificial', marking the last outposts of British imperial rule. Protestants were and are duped into accepting British citizenship because of deliberate discrimination. British imperialism past and present is the villain: 'divide and rule' was the maxim that underwrote the Empire, and the division of Ireland met the felt requirements of Imperial security after World War I. Regular insurrection by Catholics has been the inevitable response to the denial of Irish self-determination.

Such argument fails to account for the depth of Unionist/Protestant hostility to a united Ireland. Irish nationalists either have to see the Protestant population as colonial settlers - in which case they deny them common nationality - or as duped by the proceeds of material and institutional discrimination (Farrell, 1976), but the scale of such discrimination does not seem to have been sufficient to buy so much loyalty. Why did the Protestants sell their nationality so cheaply? The experience of Irish independence has not fulfilled the Protestant expectation that 'Home Rule meant Rome Rule', but it has regularly appeared that way in a Republic whose Constitution vests sovereignty in the Holy Ghost. Most importantly, imperialism is an unsatisfactory explanation of the role of the British state, and applying the notion of self-determination, if its philosophical complexities can be superseded, presupposes that there is one unitary Irish self.

2. Green Marxists bolster traditional nationalist explanations by invoking the categories of Marxist political economy to account for the interests of British imperialism. Partition is seen as an imperialist conspiracy, a response to colonial rebellion. NI Protestants, like the colons of Algeria and Rhodesian white settlers are colonialists, evident in their treatment and stereotypes of Irish Catholics. (Bell, 1976) A Protestant labour aristocracy reaping the benefits of differential discrimination is predisposed to reactionary pro-imperialist politics. The Northern Ireland problem is one of 'uncompleted national revolution'. The 'statelet' is unreformable (Farrell, 1976), demonstrated by the fact that direct rule since 1972 has reproduced sectarian relations rather than reformed them. (O'Dowd et al, 1980) The completion of national revolution is a precondition of working class unity and socialist advance throughout the British Isles. The Green Marxist attributes to the British ruling class fears of an Irish Cuba, and sees British intervention in that light.

The legacies of imperialism, in all senses, are still present in Irish political culture. But the consequences of past imperialism should be

distinguished from the question of contemporary imperialism. Nobody, let alone fractions of capital, recognises Northern Ireland as a good source of surplus value. It is a 'lame duck' region, which is why it has not been privatised! It is poor Marxism to compare contemporary industrialised, or deindustrialised NI with classical colonialism. The Irish 'land question' was actually 'solved' in classical 'bourgeois revolution' terms before the partition of Ireland. Parliamentary politics, albeit of a typically impure kind, has existed North and South for a long period. NI Catholics, unlike Algerian Arabs or Zimbabwean blacks, had formal equal citizenship although Protestants were more equal than others . . . An historical anomaly for the labour aristocracy thesis is that the Protestants who derived most benefit from differential discrimination, were those most inclined to a labourist political ideology - progressive at least by Irish standards. Protestant ideology which recognises Catholics as human equals, albeit misguided and duped equals, is not a simple colonialist mentality. (Harris, 1972; O'Donnell, 1977) 'Kith and Kin' imperialist ideology amongst the British dominant class is, despite the Falklands, not as strong as it was, and given the British public's attitudes towards NI it is difficult to believe that populist imperialism motivates British policymakers.

Military security as the rationale of British policy provides more solid argument. Irish neutrality has never been welcome to the British state, whether during World War II (Fisk, 1983) or the Falklands. However, NI's geopolitical strategic significance in the nuclear age is not immense, unless like James Prior one publicly entertains the notion that Gerry Adams has the potential to become an Irish Castro. Is it terror of an Irish Cuba which motivates British policy? If so, it is paranoia. The notion that after British withdrawal the Provisional IRA would emerge triumphant throughout Ireland is a fantasy. The Provisionals would be castrated (before they could be castrated) by indigenous Unionist forces in the event of British withdrawal, whilst a nervous Irish government watched with grim content the extinction of its sworn enemies. The British retain sovereignty over NI for a variety of reasons, including their declared reasons (keeping the 'peace'), and the poverty of Green Marxism consists chiefly in its failure to provide any rationale for any rigorously defined British imperialism. NI is the worst region in Western Europe on most indicators. It is a police statelet. British policymakers are arrogant and ignorant in equal measure. However, none of these truths means that colonialism or imperialism explains contemporary NI.

3. Unionist ideology also explains the conflict through an exogenous variable. In its more paranoid manifestation candidates for foreign villainy include the Papacy, Moscow and, more sensibly, the Foreign Office. In the reasoned Unionist case irredentist Irish nationalism, propagated by the major Irish political parties, continually inflames NI Catholics. The nationalism of the 'enemy within' is considered artificial, capable of an easy death were it not for the irredentism of the Irish Republic's elites. Unionists are not wrong to consider the Republic's politicians opportunist, but the virulent nationalism of the Catholic minority owes more to their experience of NI than to the manipulation of external elites.

4. Orange Marxism is such fun that if it had not been brought into existence by the British and Irish Communist Organisation (BICO) it would have had to be invented. It also provides an amusing species of exogenous explanation in addition to an endogenous Two Nations theory. Following Marx's hymns to imperialism's progressive role in promoting the forces of production, Orange Marxists deduce that Protestant workers are more progressive than Catholic peasants. Ireland is two nations - although they normally fail to recognise that if this is the case, the border was badly drawn. Orange