<u>**Calling the Shots: Northern Irish Youth and Sectarian Violence since 2004**</u>

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IS 615: Children and War

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03/15/2010

<u>1. Introduction:</u>

Walking home on a Sunday morning from a local pizza parlor in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, three Catholic teenagers were set upon by a gang of Protestant youths ("Sectarian Divide" 18). While two of the three friends escaped, the third, a 15-year old named Michael McIlveen, was beaten severely with baseball bats ("Sectarian Divide" 18). He died of his injuries in the hospital the following morning ("Sectarian Divide" 18).

This incident, reminiscent of the sectarian violence prevalent during Northern Ireland's historic bout with 'The Troubles', occurred in 2006, nearly eight years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed in Belfast officially declaring peace in the region ("Sectarian Divide" 18). Sectarian violence involving Northern Irish youth is perhaps less commonplace than during the Troubles. Nevertheless, as Michael McIlveen unwillingly demonstrates, the failure to address sectarianism in the youth context can be just as fatal.

Moreover, incidents such as McIlveen's beating, although no longer commonplace, are again on the rise ("Security Situation" 2). This year, nearly twelve years since the Peace Agreement was signed, Northern Ireland has witnessed an alarming upsurge in sectarian activity, much of it either initiated or aided by youth involvement ("Security Situation" 3). Periods of non-violence following peace agreements on average have a lifespan of only five years fifteen years ("Impasse" 13). Many are cautioning that this recent increase in youth violence in Northern Ireland could mean the end to the region's fragile peace, stating that "the apparent willingness of

some of our young people to embrace violence indicates that we have much to do to overcome sectarianism and segregation" (Young 14).

2. Statement of the Problem Under Consideration:

Muldoon's article published in 2004, "Children of the Troubles: The Impact of Political Violence in Northern Ireland" presents a review of academic literature addressing the issue of the impact of sectarian conflict upon young people in Northern Ireland. In this article, Muldoon first contextualizes her review within the dominant academic paradigm emphasizing that experiencing politically-motivated violence carries a significant risk to children's healthy development (454). Further, Muldoon rightly asserts that the in-group/out-group identities serving as the basis for sectarian attitudes are formed during childhood. (454). As all children in Northern Ireland in the years following the cease-fire have grown up in a divided society prone to episodic sectarian violence, in preventing conflict, it is important to study not only the developmental impact that such experiences have upon youth, but also youth's understanding of their own sociopolitical identities within a sectarian context.

My goal throughout the course of this paper is to examine youth's experiences with and understandings of sectarian violence in the years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 2008. In particular, I wish to focus upon the period following publication of Muldoon's article in 2004, and limit my analysis to current episodes of sectarian violence and their implications for youth and for the peace process as a whole. Rather than simply concentrating upon the psychopathological aspects of youth development in the realm of violent political conflict, I intend to produce a holistic interpretation of the ways in which Northern Ireland youth have navigated the space of sectarian violence in their schools and communities, both by their

involvement and opposition to ethno-religious polarization. By comparing these results with Muldoon's 2004 article, I hope to demonstrate to what degree progress is being made to end sectarian violence implicating the youngest members of Northern Irish society.

3. The Troubles, An Historical Perspective:

No comprehensive review of youth violence in Northern Ireland since the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement in 1998 can begin without at least a basic understanding of the grievances associated with it's centuries-long conflict. The period of heightened sectarian violence from 1969 to 1998 euphemistically dubbed "The Troubles" had its roots most decisively in the Ulster Plantation of 1609 (Muldoon 458). Since the 12th century invasion by King Henry the II, England had been endeavoring to establish its rule over Ireland, and encouraged Protestant settlers to establish a presence in the yet unconquered northernmost 'Ulster' province (Muldoon 458). Tensions mounted between the native Irish Catholics and the Protestant settlers, who identified themselves along different cultural, religious, and territorial divides (Muldoon 458). The Catholics believed that their land and independence had been stolen from them, while Protestants felt under constant siege by their neighbors (Muldoon 458).

After a bloody civil war, Britain sought to find a compromise between the two groups by partitioning the island into two territories (Muldoon 458). Thus, six of the nine original counties in the Ulster province became Northern Ireland, and remained under British rule, while the rest were granted independence and became the Republic of Ireland (Muldoon 458). Catholics in Northern Ireland, who comprised nearly 35% of the population, were virtually denied political representation and discriminated against primarily in housing and education (Muldoon 458-459). Moreover, police forces were comprised almost entirely of Protestants and the British military

maintained a strong presence in the country (Muldoon 459). Paramilitary groups like the

Provisional Irish Republican Army (Catholic, Nationalist), as well as the Ulster Volunteer Force

and Ulster Defense Association (Protestant, Loyalist) sought to establish their own idea of justice

in the wake of Catholic demands for greater civil rights (Muldoon 459). The result was nearly

three decades of assassinations, shootings, and bombings that left 3,000 dead and 30,000 injured

while scarring the lives of all those who grew up in the region (Muldoon 457).

4. The Troubles' Impact on Youth up to 2004:

While the Northern Ireland conflict has been largely described in terms of a struggle

between opposing religious factions, our historical overview demonstrates that religion is not the

sole determinant in discriminating between Catholics and Protestants in the region. Their

grievances are based on a shared history of victimhood in the realm of social, political and

cultural determination. As such, it is important to consider the impact of sectarian conflict among

youth in Northern Ireland within this broader frame of reference which encompasses

sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of the Troubles.

Muldoon's article provides an excellent overview of scholarly literature prior to 2004

discussing the impact of the Troubles upon the everyday lives of youth in Northern Ireland. The

author asserts that the severity and longevity of the consequences of growing up in this divided

society have long been debated, and that most recently these children's capacity for resilience

has again been questioned (Muldoon 461). Resilience, defined by Masten, Best and Garmezy as

"the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or

threatening circumstances" is most often contrasted with the concept of risk in analyzing

children's experiences of conflict (Howard 1). In Northern Ireland, Muldoon suggests, children

are most likely at risk of developing externalized behaviors in response to their chaotic environment.

However, prior to 2004, there is little evidence of externalized behaviors among Northern Irish youth (Muldoon 461). Some researchers have demonstrated increased levels of antisocial behavior, behavioral maladjustment, and psychoticism among schoolchildren, yet truancy and delinquency are as yet, unassociated with the conflict (Muldoon 461). Drug use among adolescents has increased since the Troubles however, perhaps due to lapses in pressure from churches, security forces and paramilitaries for youth to remain drug free (Muldoon 461). Nevertheless, the most prevalent effects of the conflict can be observed in the marginalization and deprivation of young people of diverse backgrounds.

Conflict experiences in Northern Ireland remain inherently inequitable. Youth in situations of socioeconomic distress, and in particular boys and ethnic minorities have had greater exposure to sectarian conflict (Muldoon 462). Ostracized from social and legal protective mechanisms, these youth feel the weight of sectarian conflict most heavily, and often view violence as the only viable solution to inequality and oppression (Muldoon 462). As issues of social justice and equity are the essence of sectarian conflict in the region, these youth relate to identities which shape their environment in terms of sectarian divides and violence (Muldoon 462).

These identities are central to both the experience of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland and the perpetuation of the conflict itself (Muldoon 462). Cassidy and Trew's study demonstrates, however that student, family and friend identities are beginning to overtake sectarian identities in terms of salience among young people (Muldoon 463). Nevertheless,

McAuley's work with loyalist youth suggests that young Protestants feel threatened by efforts towards achieving a 'New Northern Ireland' and alienated from a peace process drafted in essentially exclusionist terms (Muldoon 463). Perceived distance from political institutions and processes is not merely a Protestant phenomenon, however. Whyte and Schermbrucker report a lapse in political engagement and increasing feelings of distance from political institutions among youth across cultures in Northern Ireland (Muldoon 463).

Specifically, education constitutes a public domain where sectarian divides are understood all the more distinctly. Yet, although schooling remains largely segregated in Northern Ireland, children studied by McLernon, Cairns, Hewstone and Smith who were bereaved, or suffered physical injury or verbal abuse associated with the Troubles demonstrated high forgiveness scores (Muldoon 463). Muldoon suggests that this evidence provides substantial reason to hope in the achievement of true reconciliation in Northern Ireland's future.

5. Sectarian Violence since Muldoon's 2004 Review:

While Muldoon's "Children of the Troubles: The Impact of Political Violence in Northern Ireland" presents many promising new developments towards reconciling the country's history of sectarian violence with its present peace, it is important to note that the review was published at at time when sectarian violence was at its lowest in recent memory ("Recorded Crime" 3). According to the Police Service Northern Ireland's annual statistical reports, crime during this period had decreased significantly, by 7.7%, and was at its lowest level in six years ("Recorded Crime 2004" 3). Rates of violent crime, burglary, theft, criminal damage (including bombings), fraud, forgery and offenses against the state (including terrorist activities) also all markedly decreased at the population level ("Recorded Crime 2004" 3). Given a context in which sectarian

conflict appeared to be on the downturn, Muldoon's article may reflect a spirit of optimism prevalent during this period.

Six years since Muldoon's review was published, sectarian violence among youth is far from a thing of the past. Consulting the Police Service Northern Ireland's annual statistics again, I found a significant increase in overall crime rates, including violent crime, burglary, theft, and criminal damage over the past year ("Recorded Crime 2008" 3). While these may simple correlate to Northern Ireland's present economic slump, the figures relating to offenses against the state, and in particular, sectarian conflict are much more telling. The number of offenses committed against the state rose to 275 in the past year, a 24.3% increase, with crimes under anti-terrorism legislation rising 2.9%, petrol bombing offenses rising 12.3%, and assaults on police rising 13.2% ("Recorded Crime 2008" 3). Specifically, the number of shootings, casualties from paramilitary attacks, and paramilitary style assaults all significantly increased, even as the number of bombing incidents doubled ("Security Situation" 3). Far from an anomaly, these figures represent a trend towards a resurgence of sectarian conflict that has been mounting in the years following publication of Muldoon's article.

Since 2004, extensive rioting, school vandalism, assaults and gang clashes related to sectarian activity have all been reported and highly publicized in the Irish media. The majority of Northern Irish residents have responded by urging swift action to quell sectarian conflict and condemning reprisals, while remaining optimistic that relations between Catholics and Protestants are on the up and up (Moriarty 12). Nevertheless, recent surveys suggest that nearly 30% of the population had 'a lot' of sympathy for republican violence, with 29% having 'a lot' of sympathy for loyalist violence. Political consultant Robin Wilson asserted that "the survey

results highlight a a lack of consensus on issues that are central to the functioning of a peaceful democracy - such as opposition to political violence, the right to protest, and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty" (Moriarty 12). This has given many Northern Irish residents reason for concern that the peace process in the region may be on the verge of collapse if sectarian violence is not addressed succinctly and efforts made towards integration and cultural understanding (Young 14).

6. Youth Involvement in Sectarian Conflict since 2004:

What is perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that many of these incidents have been perpetrated by youth, some as young as ten years old ("Children Urged" 10). Singer's book raised concern over the fact that since the signing of the peace agreement, dissident republican paramilitary, the 'Real IRA.' has been recruiting boys between the ages of 14-16 in order to expand its recruiting base and compete with rival paramilitaries (Singer 117-118). Yet, much of the disorder occurring since 1998, though rooted in sectarianism, has been perpetrated by youth unaffiliated with paramilitary forces (Smyth 1).

Some paramilitaries even appear to be aware of the social ramifications of recruiting children. Ulster Young Militants have released a statement assuring that they do not recruit anyone under the age of 16 (Smyth). Yet it was a 17 year old boy - a member of the Real IRA - who in 2009 shot two soldiers in their early twenties and a policeman in the first killing of a police force member since the Belfast Agreement ("Rally Condemns" 8). Nevertheless, the majority of the violent behavior now being committed in Northern Ireland has been instigated by loosely organized groups from the same community, rather than formal gangs or paramilitaries (Smyth 1).

As guns are tightly controlled by the rival paramilitary forces, these youth are forced operate utilize blast bombs, and carry knives or other weapons (Smyth 1). Their weapons are crude, and their collective cause is ambiguous at best (Smyth 1). While espousing 'Loyalist' or 'Republican' monikers, they remain politically disengaged, as opposed to their pre-1998 counterparts who idealized their struggle in overt sociopolitical tones (Smyth 1). Facing the fear of discrimination by the police and indifference among politicians, these youngsters have taken to policing their own territory, tending to focus their efforts on self-defense against outsiders (Smyth 1). Research conducted by Leonard in 2006 reinforces this assertion, as North Belfast children described restricting their movement to locales controlled by individuals of their own sect, drawing sectarian graffiti demarcating boundaries between the two communities, and even engaging in sectarian conflict in liminal spaces where these boundaries remained ambiguous (1).

These youth's efforts to reinforce sectarian territory have culminated in sporadic riots since the time Muldoon's article was published. Despite an obvious lack of weaponry, these youth were active participants in rioting that constituted "some of the worst violence Northern Ireland has seen in a number of years" ("Children Urged" 16). Children as young as ten years old were involved, exemplified by footage taken of a 14-year old boy coolly throwing a petrol bomb at a nearby Range Rover amidst the chaos ("Rioting Children" 16). Interestingly, participation in the riots was fueled by text and video messages ("Children Urged" 16). One constable remarked, " You would think they were at Euro Disney rather than a riot. They are recording it on their phones and passing it on to others through those social networking sites" ("Children Urged" 16). This incident presents 21st century complications for the maintenance of order in so-called

'interface zones' as youth used social networking tools in order to spur one another on to commit violent acts.

   While it's true that in some areas of Northern Ireland, sectarian violence has decreased even since 2004, in neighborhoods where interface violence has decreased, youth-led riots have been readily instigated. A study conducted by Hansonn in 2005 found that in interface areas where violence had decreased, youth expressed a desire for rioting and general mayhem in order to escape the boredom and apathy that surrounded their everyday lives (1). In a desperate endeavor to shed the realities of a life lacking in opportunities and the limitations of a separate peace, these youth have run rampant, virtually holding cities neighborhoods in the process. As one reporter questioned, "Why are we allowing children and young teenagers to call all the shots in Northern Ireland?" ("Rioting Children" 16).

7. Sectarian Violence Since 2004, The Racial Dimension:

   While Muldoon's article mentions the compounded experiences of sectarian violence for ethnic minorities, it does not address youth attitudes towards immigrants and how the experience of sectarianism has primed youth already involved in anomic violent behavior to address these other 'outsiders' within their communities. Since publication of Muldoon's article in 2004, there has been a marked upsurge in racially-motivated attacks in Northern Ireland. During the 2009 riots, more than 100 Romanians were forced to seek refuge on church grounds in Belfast under threat by gunmen (McGinty 16). Several of these incidents have been perpetrated by youth, namely the aforementioned riots in 2009, during which youngsters scrawled, "No sympathy for foreigners, get out of our Queen's country before our bonfire night (July 11) and parade day (July 12). Other than that your building will be blown up ..." ("Rioting Children" 16).

While certainly neither maturely or eloquently verbalized, these threats should not be taken lightly after considering that last year alone there were 771 racist crimes committed in Northern Ireland (McGinty 16). Currently, the number of racially-motivated incidents remains behind the number of sectarian attacks (McGinty 16). Nevertheless, as right-wing, anti-Islamist group the English Defense League has now joined up with the Ulster Defense Association, these instances are sure to be magnified in the near future (Goldby 19). Further, these recent incidents suggest a shift from sectarian violence founded in political idealism to violence based on in-group/out-group characteristics.

8. Sectarian Violence since 2004, Comparative Implications for Youth:

While Muldoon's article claims that internalized behaviors among youth such as depression can not be generalized at the population level, recent findings suggest that both internalized and externalized mental health concerns are on the rise in the wake of mounting tensions since 2004. A comparative study of Israeli and Northern Irish youth conducted in 2009 found that the huge increase in community violence since the signing of the peace agreement has resulted in a rise in anti-social behavior, and abnormal behavioral and emotional difficulties ("Study Compares" 22). Further, a study initiated by Tomlinson in 2007 concluded that registered suicide rates in Northern Ireland are on a sharply rising curve (438). Suicides among young men aged 15-24 doubled, while the total number rose to 291 in 2006 (Tomlinson 438). These results all point toward an increase in mental health issues correlated with an upsurge in sectarian violence.

Concurring with Muldoon's spirit of optimism however, the implications of the increase in sectarian violence since 2004 have not been entirely destructive. Rather, in voicing opposition

to sectarianism, Northern Irish youth have been able to navigate the challenging divide between apathy and complicity with sectarian violence, and have become politically engaged as a result of their efforts. More than fifty youth stormed the Parliament at Stormont in June of 2009, meeting with the Minister and Deputy First Minister to address interface violence ("Teens Push" 4). In this instance we see that the recent increase in sectarian violence has actually provided the opportunity for young people to get involved in the political process.

9. Conclusion:

Nevertheless, youth involvement in sectarian conflict since 2004 has shown a marked increase since 2004. As demonstrated, youth perpetration of sectarian violence since the signing of the peace agreement remains largely outside of the confines of established paramilitary groups. Yet, rioting and anomic violence associated with protection of sectarian territory can prove just as deadly when coupled with the prolific use of crude bombing devices. Furthermore, this sectarian violence in the aim of preserving territorial boundaries now has a racial dimension, and can be assisted through prevalent social networking technology. Finally, while increased youth perpetration of sectarian conflict has recently been demonstrated to result in both internalized and externalized behavioral problems, youths' utilization of political engagement as a means to achieve peace provides hope for reconciliation and highlights an opportunity for resourcefulness presented by sectarian violence.

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This exploitation of sectarian violence is disturbingly present in Unquiet Graves. Weir repeats the claim that British military intelligence tried to manipulate loyalists into shooting up a Catholic primary school outside the small village of Belleeks. Was the aim to kill primary school children? Weir is adamant: "Children, teachers, yes, yes." I asked Murray if he faced criticism over the making of Unquiet Graves. "Of course you have people saying you shouldn't be making these films, it's only dragging up the past, but I don't look at it that way," Murray explains. "We need to listen to each Violence erupts in Northern Ireland as journalist killed during riots. Armed police at the scene of unrest. PA. Belfast Journalist Lyra McKee was killed during the riots. Police Service of Northern Ireland said that McKee was allegedly shot while reporting on clashes with dissident republican rioters. EPA. Violence erupts in Northern Ireland as journalist killed during riots. Since the 12th Century constant revolts challenged the often brutal British rule of Ireland, climaxing in the 1916 Easter Uprising in Dublin. It sparked a chain of events leading to civil war and partition of the island. The six counties of Northern Ireland chose to remain within the UK. Loyalist paramilitary groups responded with a campaign of sectarian violence against the Catholic community. As the situation worsened, Northern Ireland's parliament was suspended and direct rule imposed from London. Violence on all sides. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s paramilitary groups waged violent campaigns to pursue their goals. He was found shot dead in April 2006. Want to know more? Have we missed anything out?