Afterword

Social Movements, Long-term Processes, and Ethnic Division in Northern Ireland

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Introduction: Social Movement Theory and Research on Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society. The divisions, however, are socially and spatially uneven and their intensity varies over time with individuals swaying from relatively liberal and permeable views to deeper polarization and back again. John Whyte (1991) documented this for the 1960s and 1970s and it is still the case today (Ruane 2017). Even at the height of communal polarization the division was never complete: there were individuals and subgroups who ignored it and seemed immune from antagonism, and local areas where mixing continued in the midst of violence.

The basis of division is also diverse. It has ethnic, national, religious, and colonial dimensions and its logic is not reducible to any one of these. It is not 'an ethnic conflict' or 'a colonial conflict', and still less a 'religious conflict', *tout court*. On the contrary, division persists and polarizes not because of one foundational element but because of the entwining of different cleavages in a context of power and inequality. As we have long argued, there are historically deep structures of power and inequality within the British-Irish archipelago, embedded in institutions and routinized practices in Northern Ireland which themselves embody overlapping and intersecting cultural differences, and which in turn produce and reproduce communities as emergent entities with richly layered repertoires of opposition (Ruane and Todd 1996, 2004, 2015). The communities are composite products of successive conjunctural confrontations during this long historical process. Contesting subgroups within each community may emphasize religion or nationality or colonialism, according to their particular ideological standpoint or interest, and each reproduces conflict between communities in the process of asserting their interests within them. Others – keeping themselves detached from conflict for the most part – retain links with those more directly involved by family, schooling, and neighbourhood which allows for future communal mobilization. If the emergent communities-in-conflict might be conceived as 'ethnic' communities, they are not ones defined by descent or

by a common and continuous culture. They are rather constituted from the whole family of overlapping dimensions of difference, and the meanings and identities associated with division are themselves multiple and contested,.

There are structurally based tendencies for the culturally diverse dimensions of difference to converge in a continuity of division. But not all is structure or culture. There is also strategic action by individuals, political parties, economic and political elites, and groups of different size and level of organization. Some of this takes place in and through established institutions where – more often than not – it acts as a mechanism of structural and cultural reproduction. But there is also collective strategic action that brings pressure on the established institutions. The latter is the domain of social movements and it is this aspect of Northern Irish society and the Northern Irish conflict that engages the attention of Bosi, De Fazio, and their associates.

Starting from a view of ethnicity as an emergent property of social practice, Bosi and De Fazio draw on existing social movement theory and develop it in new ways. They engage at once with the contingency of movement choices and the unpredictability of movement outcomes, on the one hand, and with the underdetermining but nonetheless causally important structural conditions, on the other. These latter make some directions of collective mobilization more likely than others, and that shape the interactions between competing and conflicting social movements. These may generate new identities, interrelations and conflicts, reproduce existing ones, or renew older ones.

A range of scholars have highlighted the relational, temporal, and spatial situation of social movements, which are themselves rooted in longer-lasting relations. Movements emerge and gain momentum in conjunctures where longer-term processes and unexpected events intersect, giving opportunities for change (Della Porta 2013; Bosi, Giugni, and Uba 2016; Bosi, Ó Dochartaigh, and Pisoiu 2015). Unlike the atheoretical event-oriented approach of many historians, or the party-system and actor-oriented approaches of many political scientists, or the synchronic structuralism of much sociology, social movement theorists concentrate in a fine-tuned manner on the ways in which actors from outside the mainstream political parties mobilize populations into powerful groups with the capacity to re-shape the political arena.

One of the key contributions of social movement theory to the study of ethnicity lies in its theory-mediated approach to understanding the making, unmaking, and remaking of ethnic divisions. It can explore the deeper context of resources and opportunities that lead ethnic mobilizations in unanticipated directions (see, for example, Hoewer 2015; Bosi and

Davis, forthcoming). As such social movement theory has a key contribution to make to the task of situating successive critical junctures within a longer-term historical account of how 'ethnic' divisions emerge and become long-lasting, get unmade and remade. That said, many social movement studies focus on short-term, event-oriented processes, framed by middle-term institutional resources and take the deeper level structural processes as givens (Beissinger 2002).

The Northern Ireland case requires scholars to go beyond events and the middle-term to look also at the changing structural circumstances that condition the emergence and outcomes of social movements. In what follows we look at how social movement theory adds to our knowledge of Northern Ireland, where it could give still more insights, and where it might benefit from further broadening and contextualization. In conclusion, we suggest areas and questions where social movement studies might fruitfully focus its research.

Broadening Theoretical Perspectives

Recent work by social movement theorists like Della Porta, Bosi, De Fazio, and their colleagues represents an opening out of social movement studies to a broader relational, historical, and, indeed, structural context that converges with a historico-structural approach (see, in particular,Bosi, Ó Dochartaigh, and Pisoiu 2015; Della Porta 2013). Implicitly, if not explicitly, this work rests on a social ontology of practice: in Marx's terms, humans 'make their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing'. Historically situated practice over time produces its own constraints – institutions, power structures, routinized habitus – which take on a path-dependent quality conditioning future practice in ways that are very hard to undo. From within this broad tradition, social movement theorists have emphasized the creative potential of collaborative agency, structuralists the constraints on it, and historical sociologists the path-dependent character of the processes involved. This is a division of labour where each can learn from the other.

From this perspective, the units of analysis – societies, conflicts, parties, movements, classes, ethnic groups – are complex entities constituted by intersecting global, regional, and local processes, whose properties vary with the precise timing and sequencing of the intersections. Rather than comparison that generalizes across abstractly conceived variables, or schematic ideal types as in the Weberian tradition, this approach reconstructs

complex contextualized unities out of simpler elements and identifies their specific dynamic. Comparison comes in – as McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow argue (2001) – by showing the differential impact of the same mechanisms and processes in different sequences and combinations.

For the study of ethnicity, this means a multi-level and multi-temporal approach. The very concept of ethnicity is an umbrella one encompassing a family of diverse phenomena (Ruane and Todd 2004). If short-term mobilization and framing highlights one set of divisions over others, middle term institution-building generates a set of routine practices and distinctions that makes some framings more plausible than others (Brubaker et al. 2006), while longer-term structural divisions and power imbalances are the context of successive rounds of state- and institution-building. If sometimes the result is radical discontinuity in the groups that come into conflict, in the Irish case the result has more often been continuity and persistence.

Bosi and De Fazio, and the authors they have brought together, correctly point out that the coherence and crystallization of ethnic groups in conflict is in part a product of successful social movements. They also show how these social movements build on and challenge embedded structural divisions, often with unanticipated consequences. They show the value of studying social movements in a deeply divided society like Northern Ireland. As the editors point out, it is a rich case for social movement theory that shows characteristics, trajectories, and patterns that are not so evident in more peaceful societies.

One of these patterns is the tendency of social movements in divided societies to generate continuity as well as change. As is well recognized in the literature, social movements may generate new alliances, aims, and identities through mechanisms of brokerage, object-shift, and framing, and bring change in institutions, power resources,power relations, and networks (McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow 2001). But a new social movement may also be mobilized to confirm old alliances, aims, and identities and to prevent or reverse change in institutions and power relations. Even where it seeks change it may do so in a way that reinforces existing patterns and reproduces old divisions. The mechanisms by which longer-term patterns are reproduced in new contexts are far from adequately understood. The Northern Ireland case allows us to explore the social and cultural mechanisms which seem to 'lock in' division even in new contexts (Wright 1996; Ruane 2012). These mechanisms are of significance not just for deeply divided societies but also for the study of social change more generally, and the ways in which continuities are unintentionally reproduced (on institutional change, see

Streeck and Thelen 2005; on identity change, see Rumelili and Todd 2017; on conflict, see Ruane and Todd 2015).

This means looking more closely at the relationship between movements/politicians/publics in an effort to explain why some movements did and others did not gain support, why some metamorphosed to different aims and frames in mid-movement, and why the outcomes differed from the intent. This fruitful research agenda could only be increased by contextualizing the social movements in longer-term processes, including slow-moving demographic and power changes and showing how earlier movements at critical junctures in the past shaped these processes and redefined their direction.

Contingency, Creativity and Continuity

Bosi and De Fazio rightly point out that the ethnonational conflict and violence in Northern Ireland that characterized the period from 1969 to 1998 was far from determined by underlying structural conditions. And yet, it was far from contingent. This is an old conflict and a recurring one. Its conditions were put in place by conquest and the imposition and enforcement of inequality and maintained and sequentially reproduced despite continuing resistance. Settlement patterns, institutional structures, communication networks, class structures, and family structures underlay the persistence of division and made conflict likely to re-emerge in the future. The geopolitical context reproduced these conditions: division was a key mechanism through which Britain controlled Ireland.

The role of contingency in what happened in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s has been well brought out by many of the authors in this volume in this and previous works. But 'pure' contingency is rare. If conflict and division have been underdetermined by structure, agency and contingency have operated within structural constraints. For example, Ó Dochartaigh and Bosi (2010) point to one of the ways in which the famous People's Democracy march in January 1969 served to crystallize community division for reasons that might seem contingent: the marchers slept overnight in the Catholic and republican villages of Toome and Bellaghy, rather than the Protestant and unionist villages of Castledawson and Knockloughrim. The decision was made because of already existing division: widespread, if uneven, local Protestant anger at the march meant it might be dangerous for the marchers to sleep in Protestant areas. Its outcome was massively to reinforce division so that it came to characterize the social movement itself: it cemented Catholic networks and friendships, increased the young marchers' openness

to republican repertoires, and precluded local Protestant empathy with the students when they were later ambushed at Burntollet Bridge.

This volume takes the interplay of structure and contingency farther. It begins with a wide-ranging theoretical article by Bosi and De Fazio, which brings social movement theory in a direction that recognizes structural conditions while emphasizing their less-than-determining character and the need to look at the relational processes put in motion by contingent choices. This gives a full role to agency, and the creativity by which social movements can produce new processes and unexpected distinctions, while also recognizing the constraints on this creativity. A key issue is how, despite underdetermination by structure, the old divisions re-emerged. If 'contingency' is part of an explanation, the points at which there were alternative paths have to be highlighted and why these were not taken up explained.

Ó Dochartaigh (in this volume) is particularly relevant here. He emphasizes the bottom-up processes by which inequality is politicized. But he also emphasizes the continuity of themes within civil rights and anti-state movements over a quarter century. Enduring patterns of horizontal inequality, power, and state organization (particularly of the security forces) meant that successive anti-state social movements – though framed differently and with different activists and leaders – regenerated old demands and relations. Whether framed in civil rights or republican terms, whether peaceful or militarist, whether gathering together supporters on universalist, ethnic or republican grounds, and despite the often creative sequential reframing of the movements, the unintended consequence of challenge was continuity.

The balance of continuity and discontinuity – as Maney (in this volume) reminds us – is not simply a function of the Irish context. International processes intersect with civil rights mobilization and counter-mobilization, providing models and authoritative framing in the international media. These framing processes, themselves developed in a wider conflictual context, find partial parallels and homologies in Northern Ireland and define and strengthen those parallels: they partially create the conditions (the change from a civil rights movement framed as universalistic and open to one linked to republicanism and framed as particularist and violent) that they describe.

The process and outcomes of the civil rights mobilization were affected not just by the civil rights movement or the media, nor even by loyalist counter-mobilization, but by the political choices made by unionist and British governments. These choices were structurally circumscribed and, to a degree, overdetermined. They provided the opportunity structure for the movements and the incentives for activists to focus their attention on the

unionist regime rather than simply its policies, and later to refocus attention on the British state rather than simply on the unionist regime. Turner and De Fazio's chapter on unionist Minister for Home Affairs William Craig shows that his actions need to be seen in a much broader context. Turner and De Fazio show that the actions appear irrational and, indeed, formed by 'ideological and emotional' responses. Yet, their chapter also suggests another hypothesis, that his actions may take on a more rational aspect if fully contextualized within unionism. Was Craig intuitively attempting to mobilize a wider swathe of unionist support behind the government and avoid the splits in unionism that followed – a policy that failed but was far from irrational? And was there any unionist governmental response that could have reconciled the demands of the civil rights campaign and the unionist imperative of saving the unionist-dominated state? Bosi and De Fazio (in this volume) imply there was such an option, even it is difficult to articulate how it might have worked out.

Agency and Constraints on Agency

The articles describe the multiple and intersecting social movements within Northern Ireland in the last half century. The contest between the opposing frames put forward by the different social movements becomes more and more striking and compelling as one reads through the book. Peace People, socialists, LGBT activists gave alternative cognitive schema for understanding Northern Ireland, as did the civil rights movement itself. So, too, did movements which worked from the traditional divisions. Republican prisoners worked collectively and tirelessly to get their story across to the wider public and to control public reception of it: to reframe state control as brutal repression, the modern prison system as equivalent to Calcutta, and the prisoners as fragile and suffering humans (O'Hearn, in this volume). Their local audience was Catholic and nationalist, but their methods were general. O'Hearn's account highlights the contrast between their innovative strategy and the rather traditional images they disseminated (their 'Don't Let My Daddy Die' poster was widely distributed during the hunger strikes). Republican feminists were attempting simultaneously to mobilize the wider (Catholic and nationalist) society for the republican project while mobilizing republicans on feminist lines and highlighting issues – LGBT – that potentially would allow later broadening beyond the traditional support base (O'Keefe, in this volume). All of this republican activity was highly creative.

It was also contested within the movements, and particularly within republicanism. The 'dissidents' – later framed as those who left the republican fold – were on their own account those who were at the centre of republicanism and held to its core views (White and Demirel-Pegg, in this volume). The chapters by O'Hearn, O'Keefe, and White and Demirel-Pegg show how those struggling within the republican movement used a whole range of social movement mechanisms both for the struggle within the republican organization and support base, and in addressing a wider public. This is a paradigmatic case of within-movement contest and change.

The trajectory of unionist mobilization was very different. It had mobilized a great swathe of the Northern Protestant population at the start of the twentieth century. The great Unionist defining moment was over by 1921, and its institutionalization in Northern Ireland was well under way. The unionist political leadership came out for each year's ritual celebrations, but it was primarily loyalists – in the Orange Order and the hard-line working-class organizations – who participated in the parades and kept the engine of unionist mobilization ticking over. The engine was upgraded after 1968 in response to the civil rights movement, the IRA's campaign, and the attempt by the British government to establish power-sharing. Their mobilization was framed within the achieved unionist order, and intended to confirm and harden it against subversion: as Campbell (in this volume) notes, they appealed to the past, not just to the Ulster Covenant of 1912 but also to the seventeenth-century defence of the Protestant Crown and to the (working-class) Apprentice Boys of Derry who shut the gates against the Catholic King James (Buckley and Kenny 1995). This was a tradition that they repeated as much as remade: there was no loyalist feminist movement to challenge loyalism's internal structure, nor did loyalist prisoners remake loyalism on the outside. The young men who joined loyalist paramilitary organizations did so because their inherited belief systems and cognitive schema were challenged by events and by the intensity and persistence of republican violence (Ferguson and McAuley, in this volume). Some of them later challenged these ideas. But there was and is less dissent, less of a ferment of ideas, in loyalism than in republicanism or nationalism. As a movement defending a given power structure, albeit from a position of class assertion, there was less room for such debate.

In previous work, McAuley (2016), like Campbell (in this volume), points out the processes and habits that led working-class Protestants and loyalists to accept their tradition: solidarity, community, history, culture, and conflict. He is right that these were weighty motivations. But there were other options: those offered by the communists and trades unionists, Labour

and Alliance Party supporters, and the range of religious and cultural and cross-community activists who lived and organized in these local areas (Munck and Rolston 1987; Smithey 2011; Smithey, in this volume). Though these groups always provided a counterpoint to the different strands of loyalism, they never seriously challenged it.

That pattern seems to be continuing. Working-class loyalists, teenagers, as well as those with experience of past conflict, recently remobilized in a loyalist protest against restrictions on the flying of the British flag from Belfast city hall (Nolan et al. 2014). The explanation needs to go beyond simply working-class loyalism. Rather, the explanation goes back to that earlier critical juncture at the start of the twentieth century where unionism was crystallized as the dominant force in the north-east of Ireland and organized itself politically to ensure its own solidarity and survival. At its core was a class contract between the unionist elite and the Protestant working class, which integrated the latter into the state and gave them a role in public policy. The new political order diminishes that role. The flags crisis marked loyalist insistence on maintaining the contract, and the unwillingnessof the Unionist Party elites fully to break it (Nolan et al. 2014; Tonge et al. 2014).

This volume shows in fascinating detail the differential patterning of social movements in Northern Ireland. The articles take us closer to the goal of explaining the diverse logics of mobilization and of success in this. If they do not all explicitly problematize the differentiation of choices, the uneven success, and the asymmetrical demands and organization of the movements, they give us much of the material we need to do so.

Bosi, De Fazio, and their contributors have focused on the agency of social movements and of the politicians they address. A further step – although this may push social movement theory to its limits – is to analyse the agency of the public who receive the competing social movement claims. It is here that what is often called 'ethnicity' (what we would see as a patterned concatenation of highly varying values, beliefs, solidarities, dispositions, and interests) weights public choices. In some cases, as in loyalist neighbourhoods, the weighting seems strong, persistent, and continuous, although this is occasionally disrupted (see Smithey, in this volume; Smithey 2011). The dynamic here is one of political as well as intellectual interest.

Cross-cutting Alternatives

There were – and are – alternatives to the varieties of unionism and nationalism. Northern Ireland was always awash with social movements, incipient

social movements, and attempted movements of all sorts, each proposing its own cognitive schema for understanding Northern Ireland and its place in the world. Some of these intermittently gained very significant public support, most importantly the Peace People of the 1970s (Smithey, in this volume). There has also been a wide range of socialist movements, some cross-community organizations (the Alliance Party), and more recently ecological and LGBT mobilization (Nagle, in this volume). There were other movements again: Christian and post-Christian networks; the campaigns for equal citizenship, to save Ulster from sodomy, for abortion rights; organizations led by Protestant dissenters or by non-violent and non-provisional republicans; peace organizations like Corrymeela; community education projects like Conway Mill that took a quasi-movement form; music enthusiasts – punks – who thought of themselves as forming networks alternative to the main division; one-time activists partially retired but ready to join new movements (see Mitchell and Ganiel 2011; Finlay 2011).

Nagle and Smithey remind us, in their respective chapters, of the scope and potential of these movements, their significant public support, and their successes in organizing. Yet, not only did they fail to displace the varieties of unionism and nationalism, the most ambitious of them – the Peace People – collapsed. Smithey explains the failure: a too ambitious peace philosophy framed at a global level that failed to connect with wider public interests and expectations. His previous work (Smithey 2011) might suggest a further explanation: the lack of (publicly funded) arenas and locales and ritual practices where this movement might have flourished and gained more support. Timing was important: there were fewer opportunities for change in the 1970s than in the late 1980s and 1990s after the Anglo-Irish Agreement had opened British-Irish relations and the new equality legislation began to take effect.

Smithey and Nagle give us important information about the activists in these movements. But we know relatively little about the people who at least temporarily showed interest in and support for them, even if they later fell away. Were they past unionist or nationalist voters or the politically unaligned? Were they ex-civilrighters, or one-time Ulster Workers' Council strikers? Were they new generations wanting something different? Were they stay-at-homes or garden centre enthusiasts, previously unmobilized, who came out briefly to show their support? Or were they the individuals – of every politics and none – who routinely attended political meetings through the Troubles and always spoke up? Did those unionists and nationalists who privatized out of disappointment, loss of hope of change, come back again with a different vision, or did they, when they came back to vote or to march, simply return to the positions of the past? How did the support base

of these alternative movements differ and did it affect the outcome? Why did the intermittent support for some of these movements subsequently fall away, and could it have been held onto? Here the new-generation social movement theory exemplified in this volume has much to contribute, not least in showing how the networks formed at one stage of mobilization helped or hindered new and alternative movements.

Beyond Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory, as this volume illustrates, can contribute much to the analysis of Northern Ireland and other divided societies. It also has greater potential: to address issues in general social theory in and through its deeper exploration of particular social movements.

It is a truism that periods of social crisis offer unique insights into the social world because for a brief moment the veil that obscures its operation is pulled aside. The study of social movements offers a strikingly similar potential. Social movements involve a deliberate, collective attempt to challenge the status quo, to which those who uphold it respond with varying degrees of resistance. The manner in which each goes about this can be a major source of insight into the workings of the social and political order, the functioning of its institutions, the resources and mechanisms of power and the interests it serves, the norms, values and aspirations of the powerful and the powerless, the values and attitudes of the wider populations.

Social movement theorists typically engage with their subject matter at close quarters and often in microscopic detail. They look at what change is sought and why; who the activists are and what their background is; the choices they make and why they make them; why they pursue this goal rather than that one, and why in this way rather than another; how they attempt to recruit support and on what they base their appeal; the responses of the power-holders and the methods they use; why some movements succeed, or succeed for a time, while others fail, absolutely or by losing their radical potential; how much movements achieve and what they do not achieved.

Very often social movement theorists do not go much beyond the empirical details of the case they study, its immediate societal contextualization, and its similarities or dissimilarities with other cases. This is a lost opportunity. The insights gained from the study of social movements are directly relevant to the workings of the social at the highest level of generality: the forms of social life, how power operates and when and why it may cease to be effective, the different layers of the historical, the manner in which they

intersect and converge in the present, the formation and interplay of interest and identities, the role of structure and contingency in social life, the role of actors in history, and whether they are determining or determined.

Historians go to great length to stress the infinite openness of events in history before they happen. Social theorists write of changes over time as if the particular and the contingent hardly matter: everything seems already inscribed in abstract social forms which presuppose and predetermine the outcome. Though they rarely do so, social movement theorists are uniquely positioned to break down this dichotomy, not least because this is also the enterprise that social activists are engaged in, whether consciously or unconsciously. Activists, too, make decisions on what was possible before and what is possible now, what goals it is reasonable to pursue, who can usefully be appealed to and on what grounds, what layers of the social to try to tap into, whether they are working with or against the 'grain of history', whether this is a unique historical juncture that can be intervened in, what reference to make to the past and how to interrelate it with the present. They are buffeted and frustrated by hostile events they did not anticipate, and are quick to exploit unanticipated opportunities, knowing that the goals they pursue must have deeper roots than what is provided simply by contingent events. By reflecting on their actions and outcomes, social movement theorists are in an excellent position to engage in the more general debates.

In this context the Northern Ireland case – and the island of Ireland more generally – is of exceptional interest, not simply because for more than two centuries change has repeatedly been driven by processes of social and political and cultural mobilization, but because of the complexities and ambiguities of its history. Its divisions are complex composites rather than unitary phenomena, both emergent and long-lasting, persistent and always in process of being unmade and remade, both underdetermined and, from another angle, overdetermined, and open to tracking in temporal sequences that are simultaneously long, middle, and short term. In this context, the detailed study of particular social movements always involves taking a stance on more general historical and wider theoretical issues.

The Northern Ireland civil rights movement and the nationalist mobilizations that followed invite such reflections on the longer historical process and its general theoretical implications. As this volume shows, the civil rights movement offers immense scope for social movement analysis. It also invites further questioning as to its timing, form, and outcome. That particular movement – and Protestant responses to it – can be fitted into a long history of Catholic pressure group politics and Protestant responses that goes back to the eighteenth century. Was the civil rights movement something truly new,

or simply the old in new guise? The question, raised by the actors themselves, is theoretically relevant. Successive mobilizations are related to shifts in the balance of Catholic-Protestant demographic and economic power (Ruane and Todd 1996), but the interrelation of these structural conditions with particular events and contingent decisions demands theoretical attention. Was a challenge inevitable and only the particular form contingent? This might explain why a rights-based Catholic mobilization did not emerge in (say) the 1920s and 1930s when aggrieved minorities all over Europe were protesting and claiming rights, and instead emerged in the 1960s, able then to take the example of the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the United States. But even this may imply too much determinism. If some challenge became likely in the post-war period, might it have been neutralized by political reform? This raises the further question of why egalitarian reformist unionism was so weak. The questions are alluded to but not fully addressed by Bosi, De Fazio, and the other contributors.

Then there is the question of why the civil rights movement was so quickly followed by non-violent nationalist and violent republican mobilizations. Were these extensions of the earlier movement, or distinct and separate movements that opportunistically exploited the crisis created by the civil rights movement and the unionist response to it? Are these entirely separate strands – a reasonable conclusion given the tendency of the adherents of each to denounce the other – or are they interwoven strands with the same structural basis? Or – more plausibly again – would a more differentiated structural approach which points to the intersection of class, religious, and other cleavages allow us to show the overlapping basis of these movements?

The point of asking these questions is to highlight issues of theoretical significance which need to be addressed explicitly rather than embedded in implicit assumptions. To answer them requires judgement on the relative weight of different structurally based tendencies, probabilities, and degrees of chance. It requires an engagement with fundamental questions about the history of the island of Ireland – not least its history of conquest, colonization, and religious wars – and the social and political structures and communal divisions that emerged as a result of it. This means locating social movements in their wider geo-political context and the role of the British and more recently Irish states in manipulating opportunities and incentives.

The role of the colonial dimension in the British-Irish relationship is far from simple. Has it generated a 'grain of history' that has stubbornly asserted itself, despite all attempts to block it or circumvent its effects? Or is this simply nationalist ideology? Any argument framed in terms of the 'grain of history' needs to show the mechanisms through which it operates. Here

the detailed analyses of social movement scholars are of great relevance. Equally, to highlight the more general questions is to encourage social movement research to move beyond simple assumptions about the 'ethnic' agents mobilized or mobilizing, and to problematize the processes by which continuities are reproduced. As the new generation of social movement scholars explores such movements in their context and spatio-temporal relations, they encounter basic questions of social theory and of the application of theoretical concepts to 'actual societies' including what – if anything – it means to talk in terms of 'Irish society' or 'Northern Irish society'. The strength of social movement research comes from its detailed knowledge of particular cases and particular processes. It is time for social movement theorists to bring this knowledge to bear on wider questions.

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