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URBAN DEVELOPMENT FLANKED BY RELIGION AND POLITICS: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BELFAST HISTORY*

Nowadays, Belfast is one of the cities in Europe where the articulations between religion, nationalism, neoliberalism and globalisation are more evident. Physical and social boundaries have been created by the divisions between these tendencies shaping the city's dual character, especially since the 1970's. National and religious identification mediated the socio-spatial organisation of the city and determined its development dynamics. In this paper, I describe how ethno-religious identification materialised in the existence of the "peace lines" has fixed a bipolar logic of differentiation – i.e. a spatialisation of the distinction between "us" and "them"– across the city. However, this differentiation implies the city residents are continuously position in relation to a broader community: the existence of the other, which is to say, they are permanently confronted to the multiple cities that compose the city of Belfast.

If there is a place in Europe where the distinction between the urban and the rural has been actively confronted until very recently that is Ireland. No matter Dublin and Belfast played major roles as urban hubs since the beginning of the 20th century, Ireland traditionally has portrayed itself, as has been portrayed by others, as an eminent rural territory. Not surprisingly, in the city of Belfast cars and horse carriages coexisted in the streets until well advance the 1960's. This prosaic example shows how Belfast grew and developed out of a confronting condition: while struggling to become a modern city, it was until very recently still described as a peasants' city (Kelly, 2003).

Deep rooted ethno-national and ethno-religious divisions have underpinned the rural-urban divide. The "image of rusticity and youthful innocence (coupled with a devout Catholicism) was a metaphor for the [Irish] nation. In part at least, this emphasis on rural imaginary is associated with an opposition to an urban colonizer, England. To a considerable extent, urban areas in Ireland tended to be seen as those places most 'contaminated' by foreign influence. Thus, a true or 'real' Ireland was seen as a rural one, and a western one, the part of the country seen to be least influenced by the English" (Storey, 2001: 90). In spite of this Belfast – even if torn by a double sense of belonging: between the Kingdom and the Republic - was the largest city in Ireland, only to be replaced by Dublin when it became the capital of the independent Republic after the 1920 partition. Beyond, or maybe precisely due to its divided condition, Belfast was until well advanced the 1950's, the second largest city of the United Kingdom, after London (Boal & Royle, 2007).

The process of industrialisation initiated in the 19th century fostered segregation within the city, although the roots of the divisions can be traced back to the foundations of the city. According to Boal (2002), by the 16th century Belfast was a colonial city inhabited mainly by protestant settlers, from English and Scottish origin. Outside the medieval city walls, native Irish people professing a Catholic confession were settled. The city grew slowly until the 18th century, with no more than 5% of Catholic population. Yet, during the 19th century Belfast experienced a rapid growth based on its industrial development. Thus, by benefiting from the British imperial networks, the city specialised in the production of linen manufacture, shipbuilding and engineering. "The labour force needed for the industrial city was drawn mainly from the rural hinterland. A fundamental consequence of this was that

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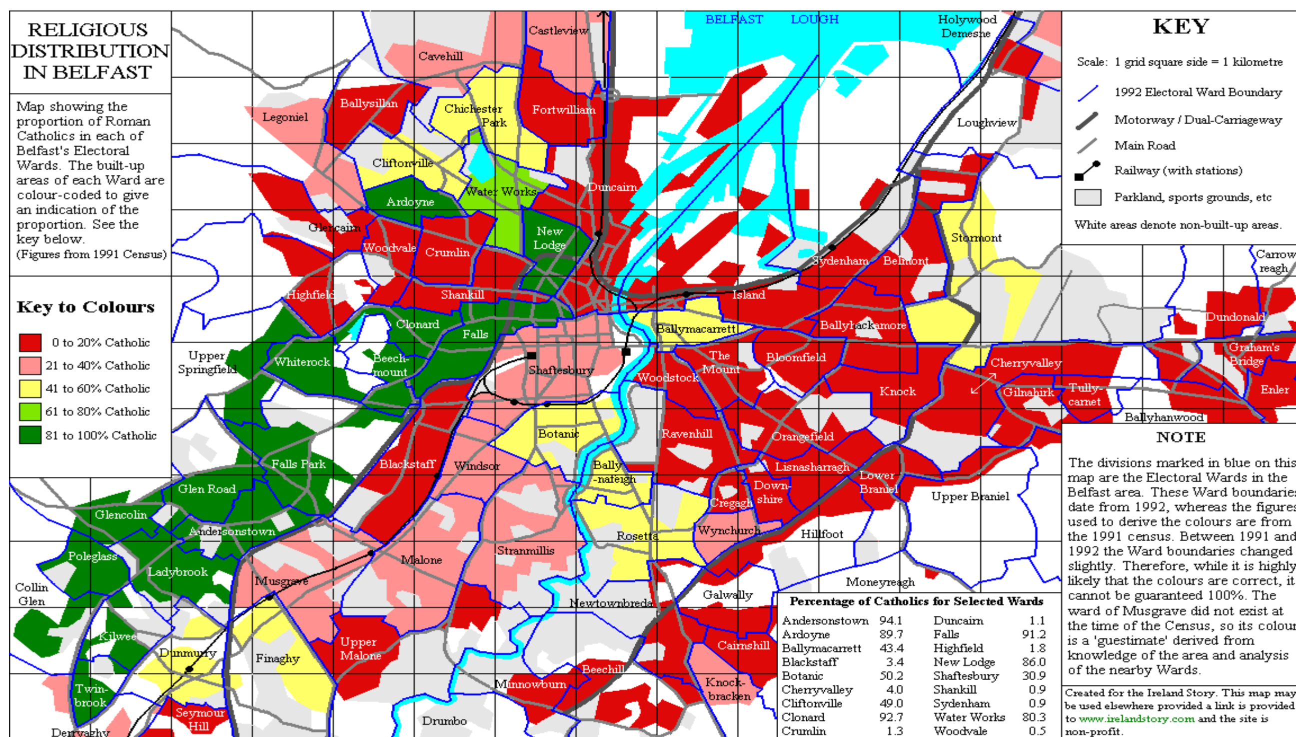
the proportion of Catholics in Belfast rose rapidly, so that by 1840 one third of the inhabitants were recorded as being of that persuasion. Catholics (i.e. native Irish) were no longer outside the walls but resided in large numbers within the greatly expanded town." (Boal, 2002: 688)

In spite of the shade of rusticity the ethno-religious conflicts transpired to the city, it was rather the urbanisation process what confronted the city with its dual character: the flow of rural-urban migration and the global connection inherited from its imperial dependence. Both conditions underpinned the socio-economic and political development of the city, as they foster the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics that exploded with the rise of the Troubles during the late 1960's, imprinting in the city fabric with national, religious and socio-economic patterns segregation.

After the British partition of Ireland in 1920, Belfast became a bastion for Protestants, unionist of the British Ireland. Even if counting with at least a third of the population of the city, Catholic Irish population remained marginalised, especially in terms of their access to the public-administration corps of the city and their mobility within the labour market. During the 1960's, it became evident the character urban modernisation was based on a "sectarian discrimination and unionist monopoly of power. As the 'Troubles' escalated from the late 1960's, Catholic became more concentrated in overcrowded enclaves within the city, while Protestants remained in the new suburbs and growth centres, leaving behind residual 'loyalist' working class communities especially in the west and north of Belfast committed to defending their territory" (URL: www.conflictincities.org/Belfast.html).

Socio-political justifications of the conflicts were translated in the confrontation between tradition and modernization in the city, both represented by two sided of religious and national affiliations. As it is shown in the image below, during the second half of the 20th century Belfast developed as a mosaic of districts predominantly defined in terms political and religious loyalties, establishing a sectarian divide on the urban fabric (Jarman, 1997), with the consequent fixation of patterns of socioeconomic segregation – and the unfortunate partial support of State on the dominant group.



The figures of this map are based on the census data of 1991. URL: www.irlandstory.com

Two-thirds of Belfast citizens were estimated to live in segregated streets in the 1960's, a figure that rises to four-fifths in the 1980's (Patterson, 2004). This map illustrates clearly, base on the 1991 Census data, how the majority of Protestant neighbourhoods (those coloured in red and pink) were

dominant in the eastern side of River Lagan, while Catholics areas (those in strong and light green) remained concentrated on the west sides. The North-West area, with high percentage of Catholics and Protestants, was indeed the area where the Troubles concentrated. In the last decade the figures have altered mainly due to the improvements in socioeconomic condition of the Catholic sectors, which by now have expanded through across the southern skirts of the city. Indeed, figures based on the most recent census data of 2001 show that the distribution according to religious affiliation in the urban area has varied, mainly due to an increase of the Catholic population to 42% of the population, that has implied their residential expansion, mainly throughout the south skirts of the city (Census data, 2001 URL: http://www.nisranew.nisra.gov.uk/census/).

Violence in the city though has not been experienced uniformly across its landscape, the majority of the violent acts and riots have concentrated on its north-west districts, namely those with high concentration of Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods (Carter, 2003). Since 1969, what is now known as "peace lines" or "peace walls" were erected across the city, at points were the highly segregated Catholic and Protestant neighbours' stroke against each other. More than twenty wall-blocks have been built since then in order to control religious, ethnic and nationalist violence. Even if they were built as provisional measures of conflict resolution, they became fixed in the city fabric, defining the urban condition of its residents, concretely torn and shaped by the presence of two distinctive sides in one city-space: whereas religious identification operates as symbolic borders, the walls make this borders concrete enabling people to identify with their correspondent side.

Belfast 2000, peace lines and ethno-national segregation distribution (Boal 2002)

The erection of the brick or metal "peace lines" (signaled by thick black lines in the left image) followed the concentration of the riots pattern, hence they have been built mainly on the north-west areas of the River Lagan, this means fragmenting and disarticulating peoples' mobility especially in the quarters with Catholic prevalence, to avoid their confrontation with their rival factions. Though the gates are normally opened at several points to facilitate the circulation of emergency services, it is often referred how urban facilities, public services and amenities are avoided by one or the other groups, when they are located in the "others" sector: painting of kerbstones helps to indicate the zoning of each district (i.e. in red, blue and white for those with loyalist support).

In spite of the political success of the peace agreements, the IRA ceasefire and apparent freedom enjoyed by each side since 1998, the temporary lines have remained in place and social segregation and intolerance between both sides, special among residents of working class districts, has increased (Patterson, 2004). The concrete walls have fixed a bipolar logic of differentiation – i.e. a spatial distinction of "us" v/s "them" – across the city.

Paradoxically, social segregation has been the cost of peace, and a divisive device – i.e. the peace walls – are one of the resources to provide the glue that holds the national imaginary of being Irish or British together. The murals and graffiti depicted in several of these walls provide a version of each ethno-national narrative, the collective past each side claims to belong: While in Protestant Belfast the walls murals speak about the long history of a British defence over the Ulster area and military sacrifice of the defenders, murals in Catholic districts stress a less univocal memorialisation of past events, notoriously those occurred from 1969 on, stressing their identity and victimhood in their struggle for national liberation (Morris, 2005). Each group claims a status of victim in the recent history of the city; hence each one claim a vulnerability that deserves outsiders support and comprehension, especially regarding violent acts that are justified by the presence of a "victimizing other" (Carter, 2003).

"In practice the terms 'Protestant' 'unionist' and 'loyalist' are used in some discourses almost interchangeably, as are 'Catholic' and 'nationalist'. But, that is not to say the common use of these terms is without strategy" (Bryan, 2000:15). Ethnic, religious and political identification interchanges according to the situations and the territory in which they are proclaimed. All these different forms of communal identification evidence the multiple layers of individual identification and multifaceted sense of membership coming together from the sense of belonging to one single urban space, Belfast. By the end of the 1960's, the modernisation and urban development of city was confronted by the alliance of two politico-religious narratives claiming their rights over the city. What the time of the Troubles revealed, with its particular ethno-national and ethno-religious character, was a question that has been part of urban development all across: who has rights over the city and what are the right the city entitles it residents with.

Why urban segregation became harder after the "peace lines" and in spite of the peace agreements? The consequence is not surprising if one considers that the durability of the walls reduced and randomized the points and alternatives to establish cordial relationships amid individuals of both sides, a kind of contacts and the experiences of open urban spaces might offered. In this sense, the city leaders dealt with urban violence and conflicts provoked by socio-economic and political segregation adopting a dual strategy: confrontation and containment. By maintaining the walls in place policy-makers use the urban fabric to send a clear message over which parts of the city belong to whom, reassuring residents of their belonging and keeping effective confronting differences with the other side.

The Good Friday agreements of 1998 have set an institutional arrangement for formal peace in the city, though peace has not implied social integration. The higher in the socioeconomic strata residents are, the less conflictive religious affiliation becomes and the more clear the need of exchange and negotiation between the two opposite ideological sides become, for the sake of the city and individual development. What hides behind the walls then is rather a progressively strong socio-economic stratification rather than a sole ethno-religious struggle.

The gentrification of the city centre, especially alongside the city's waterfront, is a clear example on how territorial claims have progressively been made in terms of class rather than ethnic or religious claims. The highly commercialized city-centre is cordoned from the north-west conflictive districts of the city by the Westlinks, a highway with only six crossing points, easily controlled by security forces (Bryan, 2003). The highway, together with the entertainment and recreational character given to the river banks evokes how the late modernisation character of the city breaks with traditional conflictive characterizations proposing a version of a more sophisticated, where difference and social mixtures are held under control. The national and religious loyalties that defined the city up to the 1990's have shift to class and socio-economic distinctions.

The solidity of the "peace lines" and late gentrification developments strategies carried out to made of Belfast alike a standard "cosmopolitan city", like the Westlink highway, show how political and economic decisions impose over the city fabric a "strategic control of movement from one area of the

city to another thus allows government forces to control any violence within its locality. This is certainly a major reason why only certain sections of the city regularly experience communal violence" (Carter, 2003: 267). Walls, in form of concrete blocks or highways, define the points and conditions of access the residents of Belfast have. In spite of characterisations of the city based on its ethno-religious conflicts, there are basic forms of socioeconomic inequalities that underpin these forms of segmentation, in turn holding the city as a unity.

As the murals in the walls show, people, events and places can be put not only into the service of national building narrative, but also into service of an urban narrative. The presence of the "peace walls" in Belfast translates the dual character that permeates life in contemporary cities: the search for opportunities, but of increasingly insecure access; the demand for public protection in spite of the isolation and surveillance costs it might bring; the need for personal and collective certainties, but under the permanent threat and fear the presence of others imposes.

Bryan (2000) described how ethno-religious identification in Belfast positions its residents continuously in relation to a broader community, though this is also operating on highly personal bases. Thus, another double feature eminently urban, has underpinned the city development, namely a permanent negotiation between individual choices and collective forms of belonging. As result of this, one can state that Belfast has been constantly shaped by a number of dualities in permanent tension: rural/urban, imperial/native, Catholic/Protestant, Nationalist/Unionist. There is no single tradition that could explain the development of the city by itself; in this sense the "peace lines" reflect clearly how it is precisely the unity of opposites what is characteristic of the city, cut across by class distinctions that transcend the bipolar definition of its members.

Images of fragmentation and connection in current Belfast: left, a wall along Cepar Way in West Belfast (photo: http://flickr.com/photos/85295004@N00/60403820); right, an opening on the wall (photo: http://www.conflictincities.org/Belfast.html).

The time of Troubles burst on streets conflicts in 1969 supported by mass civil rights struggle demanding equal rights for Catholics in the city, mainly in terms of housing, jobs and voting rights. In spite of the peace agreement signed in 1998 the barriers to social inclusion remain structuring the city, institutionalising sectarianism in the form of a democratic "power-sharing game" between Loyalists and Republicans, maintaining impoverished living standards for Protestants and Catholics in North-Western districts of the city, while modern and globally integrated districts flourishes along the river banks. Sadly, it seems democratization and pacification implied the agreement of pursuing a neo-liberal agenda based on privatisation and public-private partnerships, rather than tackling demands of social inclusion and urban integration.

At the beginning of the 20th century Robert Frost wrote "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to be offence". In view of the recent political and socio-economic changes in Belfast, but the permanence of the "peace lines" in structuring the city-fabric, it is still pertinent to ask what do the residents of Belfast, under their Catholic or Protestant masks, are walling in and from what is that they have been walled out.

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