

**Discussion Points: Tom Fraser, Introduction to the Issues
Carl Milofsky, May 2014**

Fraser's main point on this tape is that Northern Ireland is a "contested society". Since this is just an introductory part to his tape, he says this in a summarizing sort of way, but the point is that the contest is not going to be solved and it is not going to go away.

What does he mean by this and what is significant about the concept of "contested society"?

On the surface, Fraser's observation seems simplistic and obvious. One important aspect of his point is that the contestation is not likely to go away. Visitors to N.I. (like us Americans) tend to approach the conflict as something that is unnecessary, that can be solved, and that we can think up remedies to alleviate. One bit of background to Fraser's observation is that people have been trying to resolve the conflict for a long time, in many ways, and those efforts have not had much success. The contestation in Northern Ireland is likely to be present a long time into the future.

A deeper reality about Northern Ireland that one recognizes as one spends more time in the country is that in 2003 when this recording was made, nearly everyone had had many personal experiences of conflict with other groups (both within one's own sectarian group and with the opposite sectarian group). People are often able to move beyond these events and live in a way that allows them to partner with people from other groups, but the memory of destructive events does not easily go away. Just as experiences of racial oppression are burned into the consciousness of Blacks in America, experiences of intergroup violence and conflict and of great destruction is part of the consciousness and ongoing process of interaction among many people in Northern Ireland. So when Fraser is saying Northern Ireland is a "contested society" he both means that contest is likely to continue and that the experience of living in a contested world is simply part of the reality that governs every day life for many people in the society.

1. At the beginning of the lecture Fraser makes the geographic point that England and Ireland are both islands and close neighbors with each other. Britain is larger and more powerful and engaged in geopolitics with Europe. In that context the smaller, poorer, weaker island of Ireland has had incredible strategic importance beginning in the 1200s at least to the end of the cold war in 1990. This has meant that Britain absolutely had to control Ireland in the strategic sense, in a sense that it would impose absolute power to maintain control. From the Irish standpoint, the island's strategic importance was less important but what did come across is that the British were not much interest in actual life on the island of Ireland, and the Irish for their parts were historically openly hostile to the British.

Why might this reality be important for understanding the Protestant/Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland?

This is a subtle question with layers that new students will not get for quite awhile. The blunt reality point is that Britain to some extent takes the perspective of being an occupying army, situated on Northern Irish soil to carry out British purposes. There's more to it than that because Northern Irish Protestants are an important part of the internal political life of Great Britain as

British citizens. But the occupying army aspect is significantly behind the mentality of Bloody Sunday, an event where British paratroopers shot open housing marchers in Derry. This tends to be understood as the beginning point of the armed Catholic rebellion led by the IRA and the opposition in that rebellion is usually thought to be Protestants (who “the Protestants “ are is a bit vague). What is forgotten is that the British military played a significant role in instigating conflict and they continued to play a role throughout the history of the conflict. The British presence was not exactly a colonial presence in the way we usually understand that term—a rich country exploiting the resources and dominating the social life of a subordinate country. In a sense the British simply have not been that interested in what the people of Ireland are about or what goes on in the society. Northern Ireland and Ireland generally are necessary nuisances. But this is a provocative orientation from the standpoint of the Irish and throughout history has led to surprising kinds (from an American standpoint) of hostile Irish actions (like flirting with a Nazi alliance during World War II).

2. Fraser spends 20 minutes in the next section of tape explaining the origins and nature of Irish nationalism.

Why is nationalism important, in Fraser’s view, and why does it remain valid and important today?

Fraser gives us three bases of Irish nationalism that come across as fairly obvious, even though he does a nice job of putting the elements of religion, economic difference, and culture in a rich context. Any one of these elements might be seen as losing their significance as time goes by—he talks about the secularism of Europe, the importance of religious identity at the end of the 19th Century, and the possibility that actual religious participation is not so important today, for example. But the way the three elements work together to create a sense of nationalism creates a whole that seems to be greater than individual parts. Still, we could ask if Irish nationalism continues to have relevance and significance in 2003—and some testimony on our tapes (from Eamonn McCann, for example) suggests it is a less important factor in the Troubles than it is made out by many to be. It is important to understand Fraser’s argument to then understand how one might critique his idea.

3. Towards the end of the first part of his lecture (before the break), Fraser begins to develop the story of Protestant identity by focusing on important events from the 1600s and 1700s. The key events are the monarchy of Catholic King James II of England, the way the rebellion against him was fought in Northern Ireland with the Siege of Derry and the Battle of the Boyne as key events, and the ascension of King William of Orange (a Protestant) to the English throne.

Symbols, symbolism, and ritual enactments are core to Protestant identity in Northern Ireland. Given Fraser’s account, why might that be the case and what does he say about how the symbolism of Protestant culture is expressed?

It is easy to concentrate on the two key events of the Siege of Derry and the Battle of the Boyne as origin points of big, provocative fraternal movements in Northern Ireland, the Apprentice Boys and the Orange Order. At this stage we have not provided enough information about these organizations and what they do, but their marching, banners, and murals created by other sectarian groups (Protestant paramilitaries and certain Catholic groups) are core elements of what we might call a “theatrical culture” (in the sense that society is significantly a matter of set

design—not so much theatrical in the sense of enacting roles as in theater). It is important to pick up and assimilate the story of how Protestant society was formed in Northern Ireland and how powerful were the key military events.

The other thing that is very important in Fraser is the way he uses geopolitical events to explain what is going on within Ireland and Northern Ireland. This is somewhat idiosyncratic to Fraser since his research specialty was international diplomacy (although by training he was a historian). But his sense of British strategic vulnerability and Britain's callous manipulation of the Irish land mass leads to an aspect of this story that runs counter to the way Americans (the main audience for this tape) look at and think about Ireland, England, the Irish migration and the world in general.

Americans tend not to think about the intense hostility the Irish have towards the English. We tend to think the conflict in Northern Ireland is mainly about religion and ethnicity. It is hard to appreciate the immediacy of the threats to English security that occurred in the immediate area of Derry. The Spanish Armada was a huge sea battle, where, if England had lost, would have made Spain the dominant power in the world and, conversely, by England winning made England dominant. That battle happened off the north coast of Donegal perhaps 50 miles from Derry. Loch Swilley, the fjord 10 miles west of Derry is in the Republic of Ireland and during World War II there was major concern that Irish complicity with the Nazis would make it an avenue of access to Ireland and then the west coast of England. You still can see large gun emplacement on the shores of the Loch. Then it is continually a surprise to realize that the American naval fleet was headquartered in Derry during World War II, and barracks left over from the American presence end up playing an important role in the Civil Rights and open housing movements.

Americans also have trouble recognizing and assimilating the meaning of the Irish immigration to America that occurred in the wake of the Potato Famine of the mid 1800s. Where Irish immigrants are one stage in a sea of immigration from different groups in America and part of the political drama of ethnic competition in the U.S., in Ireland the emigration is still today felt as a profound and personal loss. People will still tell you today exactly where their relatives departed from in Ireland and I have visited family graveyards with Northern Irish friends in the U.S. Irish people left behind corresponded with their relatives, tracked their movements, and continue to feel that they really belong in Ireland even if they are not there (and have not been there for generations). Perhaps this is a product of living in a small society (where about half of the population was lost over the span of one decade in the mid 1800s) or perhaps it has to do with the psychological dynamics of being left (jilted). It is an important part of the sense of embattlement one encounters in Northern Ireland, especially among the Protestants.

Discussion Points: Tom Fraser, Introduction to the Issues, Part II

Notes by Carl Milofsky, July 2014

In the second part (after the break) of the "Introduction to the Troubles" lecture featuring historian Tom Fraser, this tape explores the widening disagreements and growing tensions that existed between Protestants and Catholics between 1916 and 1969. Fraser's intention in presenting three major factors that widened the gap between the two sectarian groups is to clearly convey why conditions were ripe for conflict to explode into The Troubles and the period of revolution that lasted from 1969 to 1999.

This tape begins by detailing two parallel but entirely distinct sources of identity for the Catholics and the Protestants. The Irish rebellion of 1910, the Easter Rising in 1916, and the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 define both the emotional and the political terms of Irish Catholic nationalism. Formation of the Irish Free State also was the point at which Northern Ireland was formed as six counties remained part of Great Britain. Parallel to the Irish rebellion was the importance of World War I for the Protestants. While Catholics generally rejected service in the British army, joining and fighting were important statements of loyalty to the Crown for Protestants.

The Battle of the Somme was a particularly important event, where more than 3000 Northern Irish soldiers died. This became another iconic event for Protestants and is the origin point of one of the major paramilitaries, the Ulster Volunteer Force (or UVF). The feelings of patriotism and loyalty to the British armed forces among the Protestants made Irish neutrality in both World Wars another source of anger on the part of Protestants towards Catholics. Since Britain felt vulnerable to attack from the west, the unwillingness of Ireland to be a security partner created severe hostility at the level of the two state governments. Irish neutrality in World War II eventually caused problems with Americans, who otherwise give strong support to the Irish. Once it became clear that Germany was engaged in genocide it seemed immoral to both Britain and America for a country to remain neutral. However, Ireland argued that Britain was actually occupying Irish territory, which Germany never did. The test of Irish independence was its freedom to be not involved in Britain's war.

After World War I, the Great Depression created hardship for all but since Protestants tended to hire Protestants and Catholics hired Catholics it created different economic pressures for the two groups. Since Protestants controlled more jobs economic inequality was increased and segregation between the groups became more pronounced. This created special hardship and hostility among Catholics. Meanwhile, the creation of the British welfare state meant Northern Irish residents generally gained many public benefits denied to Catholics living in the Republic of Ireland. While Catholics in Northern Ireland also enjoyed these benefits it widened the feeling that the two sectarian groups were living in separate societies. For Catholics who wanted a unified Ireland, the growing gap in national identities between the U.K. and Ireland made the possibility of unification more remote.

Finally, the political system in Northern Ireland became a Protestant government, since 2/3 of the residents were Protestant and they could dominate government. The Protestants were comfortable in their position of dominance and never felt an inclination to give Catholics representation in government. While this dominance on the national level came from the

numerical superiority of Protestants, a serious source of Catholic anger was that in Derry Protestants were in control of the local government because voting and political representation were rigged by a system of gerrymandering that kept the Protestants in control.

These events together are somewhat indistinct as particular causes of division Fraser documents reasons for a widening gulf between Protestants and Catholics. This collection of historical events led to growing opposition to government in the late 1960s as economic inequality and political domination of government and the administration of government services became a target of resistance and rebellion in the form of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. This led to increasingly confrontational protest events ending in police violence and the gradual emergence of a revolutionary movement which became widespread in the 1970s.

Discussion Questions

1. At about 21:00 Fraser tells us that disruptiveness was breaking out that was a consequence of the 55 years of tensions that he described in today's talk. Why were tensions between Catholics and Protestants so intense in 1969?
2. In the first two parts of this lecture, Fraser had emphasized historical events and the symbolism they relate to in terms of Protestant and Catholic identity today. More of those events are recounted in this tape with the events of 1916. Why are symbols related to ethnic identity such an important part of the conflicts that were part of the Troubles?

To outsiders, the importance of the symbols that support sectarian division are hard to value and hard to understand. Taken as a whole, Fraser's lecture explains the symbols that are significant for each group and he makes an argument for why observers of The Troubles should take this symbolism seriously. The task of this question is to present in a careful and detailed way the argument that Fraser gives us through the entirety of this lecture.

3. While Catholics and Protestants in 1910 were quite opposed to each other, Fraser's argument is that events of the Twentieth Century sharpened the divide between the two sectarian groups and made opposition between them sharper and more conflictual. What were the sources of that division in Fraser's view.
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