**From the long war to the long peace:**

**Northern Ireland a generation after the Good Friday Agreement**

**Colin Coulter & Peter Shirlow (editors)**

**Rationale**

Over the last quarter century, Northern Ireland has come to be regarded as an exemplar of how societies that have suffered sustained periods of civil conflict can leave their violent pasts behind. In particular, the centrepiece of the Northern Irish peace process – the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – has been hailed frequently as a model for other regions with sharp ethno-national divisions seeking to build stable forms of consociational government. The praise that has been directed towards Northern Ireland has in many respects been entirely warranted. In the two decades since the Belfast Agreement was signed, those shootings and bombings that were once everyday occurrences have become increasingly rare. An entire generation of young people has grown up in Northern Ireland with little or no first hand experience of the political violence with which the region was once synonymous. There remain of course dissident voices within both principal ethno-national communities that harbour paramilitary ambitions. These forces appear to lack the capacity or support, however, to threaten a return to the dark days when the Troubles were at their height.

While the Northern Irish peace process has essentially marked the end of the military campaigns that once raged in the region, the ethno-national enmities that fuelled the conflict have continued to bedevil the political life of the six counties. One of the principal concerns voiced when the Good Friday Agreement was signed was that its provisions would condemn Northern Ireland to the sclerosis of a deeply sectarian mode of politics. Over time that particular misgiving has come to appear more and more prescient. The political pact struck in May 2007 between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party was widely hailed as an historic breakthrough, one that conjoined erstwhile foes previously dismissed as ‘extremists’. The optimism that existed on that unlikely day when the beaming pair of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness were unveiled as coalition partners before the global media has long since dissipated. Over the last decade, a series of disputes over issues such as flags, parades and how to deal with the past has set the two principal parties of government at odds with one another. These tensions have required the Good Friday Agreement to be re-negotiated on two separate occasions in the last three years and threaten to derail the peace process entirely. In January 2017, the deputy First Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly – the late Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin - announced that he would no longer serve in the executive, sparking its collapse and requiring fresh elections to be held a mere ten months after the previous round. While the implosion of the Stormont institutions was prompted ostensibly by a controversial green energy scheme, its origins are rather more likely to lie in ethno-national concerns that are the more traditional fare of Northern Irish political life. The depth of the animosity and distrust between the former coalition partners mean that there may be no return of devolved government in the region for the foreseeable future. As the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement comes into view, it is entirely likely then that the power sharing institutions often claimed as its principal achievement will remain in cold storage.

This special edition seeks to examine the complex nature of Northern Irish society a generation into its much vaunted peace process. The essays gathered here will offer the reader a sense of the recent historical context that is necessary to grasp the specificities of the region’s social and political formation (Coulter & Shirlow). At the same time, they will seek to locate that which is particular to Northern Ireland within a broader, comparative setting. Several of the contributions will, for instance, consider how the ethnic and national fault lines long associated with the region now have echoes in the rest of the United Kingdom (Bean), how the mass displacement that heralded the onset of the Troubles might lend insights into contemporary refugee crises elsewhere (Browne) and how the experiences of the perpetrators and victims of violence in the six counties might offer lessons for other processes of conflict transformation (Shirlow). A further concern of the collection is to explore how the unfolding of the peace process has impacted on the distribution of power and wealth within Northern Irish society. Several of the essays suggest that the era of relative political stability has served little to enhance the prospects of women (Pierson, Gilmartin) or of those working class communities that bore the brunt of the conflict (Coulter). This impression of cultural and political stasis is, however, contested by some of the other contributions to the collection. In these essays, Northern Ireland emerges as a place that has changed radically, one that is home to a new generation of youngsters with rather different values and ambitions than their predecessors (Hayward), that has been altered by the ‘new communities’ forged by migrants to the region (Gilligan), and that faces an unanticipated but profound series of political challenges that will come in the wake of the ‘Brexit’ referendum (O’Brennan).

In 1999, Capital & Class published a collection of essays to mark the advent of the Good Friday Agreement. As the twentieth anniversary of that historical peace deal approaches, this would appear an opportune moment to reflect on what has changed and what has not in the two decades since that special edition of the journal. It is anticipated that this successor collection of articles by a series of established and emerging scholars will offer the readers of Capital & Class a critical and comprehensive account of contemporary Northern Ireland, a region that while no longer at war does not even now quite feel at peace with itself.

**Editors**

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Peter Shirlow holds the Blair Chair in Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of more than 100 academic publications, including *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* (Manchester University Press, 2012) which was listed as one of the Times Literary Supplement’s Books of the Year. 0151 794 3075, [P.Shirlow@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:P.Shirlow@liverpool.ac.uk).

**Contributors**

(This proposal has its origins in a research workshop held in Maynooth. All of those below have confirmed in writing that they will contribute. The special edition would be launched at an international conference in the University of Liverpool).

Kevin Bean, Lecturer, Institute of Irish Studies, the University of Liverpool.

Brendan Browne, Assistant Professor, Centre for Conflict Resolution, Trinity College Dublin.

Chris Gilligan, Senior Lecturer, School of Media, Culture and Society, the University of the West of Scotland.

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**Timetable**

The special edition will be complete within 12 months of an agreement to publish:

Months 1-6: Completion of first drafts of articles

Months 7-8: Initial reviews

Months 9-10: Second drafts of articles

Months 11-12: Second round of reviews and final revisions

***Abstracts***

All ten essays will be approximately 7, 500 words in length and hence the total collection will amount to approximately 75, 000 words.

**From the long war to the long peace**

**Colin Coulter & Peter Shirlow**

In this introductory essay, we will provide some of the historical context for the more focused contributions that follow. The article will trace the torturous political course that Northern Ireland has followed in the two decades since the advent of the Good Friday Agreement. The initial attempts to introduce power-sharing in the region were scuppered by ever more bitter arguments centred on the decommissioning of paramilitary arsenals. The long running disputes over ‘guns and government’ would see the Northern Ireland assembly suspended three times and would lead to even greater polarisation between the two principal ethno-national blocs in the region. In this increasingly fractious political environment, those more radical voices previously dismissed as ‘extremists’ would come to be the principal forces within their respective communities. Negotiations convened in St Andrews in 2006 would see the first of several revisions of the Belfast Agreement and prepare the ground for the most unlikely of government partners. The Stormont coalition between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party was heralded as an historic breakthrough indicative of a new political maturity in Northern Ireland. The partnership, however, would inevitably be tested by a predictable range of contentious issues including flags, parades and dealing with the legacies of Northern Ireland’s violent recent past. These disputes would lead to further revisions of the Good Friday Agreement and ultimately to the latest and perhaps most significant collapse in the Stormont institutions. In setting out this narrative detail, we hope to provide the reader unfamiliar with this particular setting some of the historical context in which to understand the nature of a society that in some respects has moved on from its troubled past and in certain others seems to remain caught in its gravitational pull.

**Portent or relic? Northern Ireland redux**

**Kevin Bean**

Accounts of the Northern Irish peace process often presume that the region is innately ‘different’. In this essay, I set out to challenge the often exceptionalist readings of the course Northern Ireland has taken since the Good Friday Agreement. Rather than viewing the region as ‘a place apart’ it would be more accurate to regard it as emblematic of a rather wider contemporary moment in Western politics and society, one characterized by a series of concurrent and related economic, political and cultural crises. In this climate of uncertainty, both technocratic elites and insurgent politicians seek to re-engage and re-mobilize their disenchanted citizens through the re-invention of the nation using the new essentialist frameworks of identity politics. This paper will explain how and why these wider political and social contradictions are clearly present in Northern Ireland. The region’s political class, whether badged orange or green, find themselves, in Peter Mair’s words, ‘ruling the void’. In spite of a politics structured around intense communal conflict, Northern Ireland’s political class face a growing disenchantment from their electorates. As the dominant political projects of nationalism, unionism and republicanism are revealed to be more and more threadbare, this ideological exhaustion is reflected in the hollowing out of party support and an increasingly tired electoral politics. The paper will conclude by considering the implications of Northern Ireland’s experience for other societies facing similar challenges of conflict and division, and whether – to recall a distinction drawn by Tom Nairn in a previous moment of political flux - the region should be considered less a ‘relic’ of the past and more a ‘portent’ of a distinctly baleful political future.

**From 1969 to 2016: Relocating historical narratives of displacement during the “troubles” through the European migrant crisis.**

**Brendan Browne**

One of the major consequences of war and violent inter-community conflict is that of the mass-displacement of civilians. The onset of the Northern Irish conflict was marked by what was at the time the largest involuntary movement of population in Europe since the end of the Second World War. In 2016, the legacy of this displacement remains pronounced with segregation and division a feature of the ‘post-conflict’ landscape. Despite the far reaching consequences of displacement during the troubles there has been remarkably little consideration of the long term impact of displacement on those affected, with the need for restitution for those who had suffered absent from the literature on dealing with the past. It can be argued that as a result, those who were displaced will remain hidden or forgotten victims. In 2016, in response to the growing refugee crisis emanating from the Syrian conflict, European countries, including Ireland north and south, were asked to open their borders and provide sanctuary for civilians displaced as a result of the violence. The crisis has in turn sharpened the potential for those interested in legacy issues surrounding the Troubles to begin to reflect more critically on the issue of historical displacement during the Northern Irish conflict. This article will, through reference to the response to the Syrian refugee crisis, critique why the issue of restitution for displaced people during the Troubles has not found prominence in the voluminous literature dealing with the region’s past.

**Caught between Apologia and Humiliation: The Treatment of Former Paramilitary Prisoners in Northern Ireland**

**Peter Shirlow**

In common with processes of conflict transformation elsewhere, the Northern Irish peace process has seen the military conflict morph into a series of enduring debates over ideological, cultural and political legitimacy. At the heart of these disputes has been the figure of the victim. As Miers has noted, “the concept ‘victim’ is essentially contested, involving the social construction of particular persons and the harms that they sustain in a process (often replayed and repeated) of claim.” The contested nature of victimhood is no more apparent than in the context of contemporary Northern Ireland. From the beginning, the Northern Irish peace process has been dogged by disputes over which forms and incidents of political violence should be remembered, compensated, condemned and even venerated. There have been systematic attempts to demonise certain moments from the region’s violent past and those who were responsible for them. These strategies of humiliation have been countered with forms of apologia that often cast the agents of violence as themselves the victims of certain contexts of structural injustice. The inability to deal with the past has meant that Northern Irish public life continues to fall rather short of the communicative reciprocity that Habermas most famously has identified as the hallmark and wellspring of a healthy polity. It has also ensured that those were previously agents of political violence in Northern Ireland have been denied full rights of citizenship not least in the field of employment. In this essay, I will provide a critical examination of the competing narratives of humiliation and apologia that have framed the debate on victimhood and will illustrate how the inability of the peace process to deal successfully with the past has affected those who were prisoners during the conflict.

**Peace and security for women? Addressing gender (in)security in Northern Ireland 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement**

**Claire Pierson**

Normative conceptions of peace and security provide a useful yet narrow framework for understanding and assessing the success of peace agreements and transitions from conflict. This article attempts a deeper, gendered examination of peace and security utilising a feminist framework and unique empirical evidence from key stakeholders in the women’s sector in Northern Ireland. The article illustrates how these narrow assessments are highly gendered and, consequently, render invisible and irrelevant the range and continuity of insecurities for women in seemingly ‘post-conflict’ societies. I conclude that these invisible, gendered insecurities are not simply marginal aspects of peace and security but are in fact integral to reimagining and achieving sustainable and holistic conflict transformation.

**Whatever happened to the peace dividend? Neoliberalism, austerity and the politics of class in Northern Ireland**

**Colin Coulter**

From the outset, the principal architects of the Northern Irish peace process insisted that political stability would herald an era of prosperity in the region. On the eve of the crucial referendum on the Good Friday Agreement, for instance, the then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair made the case that an endorsement of the deal would lead to a wave of foreign direct investment promising jobs to those deprived communities that suffered most during the Troubles. Almost two decades later, however, there is little sign of that much vaunted ‘peace dividend’. Those working class communities in Northern Ireland that were at the centre of the conflict continue to suffer relatively high levels of unemployment and dependence on state benefits. The already dim prospect that the peace process might usher in an era of economic prosperity has receded further of course with the onset of the global recession and the advent of the era of austerity. While the very specific and fragile political circumstances that obtain in Northern Ireland have ensured that the introduction of the UK government’s welfare ‘reforms’ has been staggered, the likelihood is that this new disciplinary region will exist in full in the region by 2020. This prospect will perhaps begin to ask searching questions of the priorities and allegiances that have traditionally defined Northern Irish political life. In the near future, there is the very real prospect that the region will be governed by a coalition of parties from ‘both communities’ that will oversee the erosion of state welfare at the same time as it slashes the rate of tax for multinational corporations. The impact of this strategy will inevitably be felt most gravely in those working class communities that were promised most but in fact have gained least from the Northern Irish peace process and that are, in ethno-national terms, moving ever closer towards ‘equality of misery’. This very specific conjuncture might perhaps be read as one conducive to the emergence of class allegiances long since suppressed by the imperative of ethnic affiliation.

**Gender Equality, the Good Friday Agreement and the Perpetual Postponement of a Genuine Peace: Critical Reflections on Women’s Lives in Contemporary Northern Ireland**

**Niall Gilmartin**

The Good Friday Agreement was widely hailed for its unambiguous commitment to gender equality and women’s full and meaningful participation within the ‘new’ Northern Irish dispensation. While there have been advances in women’s employment and education, these might be seen, however, as anomalies within the broader gender narrative of the peace process. Drawing upon feminist International Relations theory, this article critically examines the reality of women’s lives in Northern Ireland 20 years on from the historic peace accord. The issues covered will include women’s formal political representation, community activism, reproductive rights and increasing levels of gender violence in the region. It will be argued that while the Good Friday Agreement undoubtedly provided the potential for a new era of gender relations in Northern Irish society, its commitment to gender equality and women’s rights remained largely rhetorical, and in practice failed to fulfil expectations. While fully cognisant of the important differences between women, it is contested that the consistent privileging of masculinity and consolidation of male power are commonalities that remain uninterrupted despite the passage of twenty years. In order to achieve a genuine peace based on equality, security and justice, Northern Irish society requires not only a transformation in its ethno-religious relations, but a rigorous overhaul of its prevailing gender order.

**The Power of 'Neither': What is the significance of non-political affiliation in Northern Ireland?**

**Katy Hayward**

Successive attitudinal surveys in Northern Ireland have identified a burgeoning proportion of the population who define their political identities as being *neither* one of the two major political affiliations on which the consociational model of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement is founded. At the same time, there is a steady growth in the number of voters who abstain from casting their votes in European, national or local elections. Preliminary results from the 2015 Electoral Survey indicate that non-voters were least likely to identify with political affiliations, parties, and religious groupings. They were also more likely to be younger and to have liberal viewpoints on issues of public debate. However, it remains unclear whether respondents are identifying as 'Neither' one group or the other as an expression of profound disaffection/disillusion with the current democratic field or whether it is a statement of strong, positive alternative to the restricted binary model of political identity in post-conflict Northern Ireland.

This paper has three dimensions. First, it will present findings from analysis of the Northern Ireland Life and Times attitudinal surveys to present a typical profile of the 'Neither' respondent. Second, it will survey literature from comparable regions to assess whether the 'Neither' category is part of a wider trend reflecting political disillusion (or discontent) in modern European democracy. Finally, it will consider the implications of this cohort for the future of the institutions, political stability and the health of democracy in the region. Twenty years on, is it time to recognise forms of political engagement, identity and affiliation that bear little resemblance to those reified in the Agreement itself?

**Northern Ireland and the (colour)blind-spot in British anti-racism**

**Chris Gilligan**

The general consensus across the social sciences is that 'race' is a social construct. One of the implications of this recognition of the contextual and historically varied nature of 'race' has been drawn out by scholars who talk about racisms (plural) rather than racism (singular). The contextual and historically varied nature of racisms in the UK is acknowledged in, for example, Barker's use of the term 'new racism', Sivanandan's use of the term 'xeno-racism' and the broader concern with Islamophobia as a more recently salient from of racism. This recognition of varied forms of racism, however, has not been accompanied by any significant attempt to revisit the understanding of racism that dominated thinking on the issue in the post-war period. In particular, there has been little attempt to examine sectarianism in Northern Ireland for what light it might shed on our understanding of racism in the UK (as opposed to Britain). This paper argues that the extension of Race Relations legislation to NI in 1998 and the growth of immigration into NI have made the region more like the rest of the UK, but in ways that try to maintain the distinction between racism and sectarianism (or only treat them as part of the same framework when talking in terms of hate crime or good relations). On the other hand, racism in the rest of the UK is increasingly looking like sectarianism in Northern Ireland - related to religion (Islam), political violence (jihadism), segregation (community cohesion). The paper explores the ways in which sectarianism in Northern Ireland was excluded from discussions about racism in Britain in the past, and the implications this has for anti-racism in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK today.

**All is changed, changed utterly: Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the wake of Brexit**

**John O’Brennan**

The ‘Brexit’ referendum did not just change the political landscape of the United Kingdom. Almost overnight, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland were faced with very significant constitutional and policy challenges which threatened to alter the political architecture of both polities in myriad ways. For the Republic of Ireland, the Brexit vote heralded an unwelcome EU constitutional negotiation which threatened to undermine the country’s position within the Council of Ministers and simultaneously disrupt important industries dependent on trade with Britain. For Northern Ireland (which voted by a small majority to remain in the EU) the main issue was the potential unravelling of the Good Friday Agreement. In particular, Brexit challenges the integrity of both the political institutions and constitutional arrangements put in place to underpin the GFA. On both sides of what will become the EU’s land border with the UK, concerns include: the implications of a ‘Hard Brexit’ for the Common Travel Area and for the special status of British and Irish citizens in each other’s countries, including the right of people born in Northern Ireland to Irish (and therefore EU) citizenship; the potential physical ‘re-bordering’ arising from a possible refusal of the EU to concede something like ‘special status’ to Northern Ireland in the negotiations as well as the the disruption to trade on both sides of the border. This paper analyses the impact of Brexit on the island of Ireland through a dual frame: a *North-South* frame which assesses the impact on relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic, including the institutional structures and constitutional framework established by the GFA; and an *East-West* frame which examines both the relationship between London and Dublin and the Republic of Ireland’s relationship with the European Union.