***The Politics of Trauma and Peace-Building: Lessons from Northern Ireland.***

Cillian McGrattan. Oxon: Routledge Press, 2016. Pp. 160. GBP£95 hardback.


Whilst reading this book and preparing this review, the political situation in Northern Ireland underwent a series of dramatic upheavals following the fall of the power-sharing administration and the resignation of Martin McGuinness in January. Most recently in March 2017, power-sharing talks once again broke down after an announcement from Sinn Féin that the party would not be nominating Michelle O'Neill for the post of deputy first minister. The viable options seem to be either another round of elections, which would take place just weeks after the previous electoral contest in March; or the imposition of direct rule on Northern Ireland from Westminster.

Whilst McGrattan's book was written before these events unfolded, it highlights the ongoing need to examine peace-building strategies critically, as well as the structures and social processes influencing them. The book therefore comes at an opportune time, providing an in-depth and valuable exploration of the ways in which politicians are facing difficulties in legislating and managing the past in societies transitioning from violence to what McGrattan describes as "an uneasy peace" (10).

McGrattan is currently a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Ulster, and part of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences within the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy. He has written extensively on the politics of conflict in Northern Ireland, and this book is evidently drawing on a wealth of knowledge. The work reflects a clear desire to stimulate more thought and discussion about the ways in which democratizing processes take into account the politics of trauma, and the voices of survivors.

Throughout this comprehensive and carefully crafted work, McGrattan repeatedly emphasizes the contribution he hopes to make, giving the book a clear sense of purpose. In the introduction, he highlights the limited engagement made by political science and/or peace-building research with the concepts and politics of trauma, in comparison to contributions made by those working in the fields of history and cultural studies, for example. With this work, McGrattan seeks to "initiate a debate around what going beyond aesthetic or proceduralist concerns might mean; the book aims to shift focus from representation towards reception; and it tries to illustrate these concerns by specific reference to the Northern Irish traditions" (1). McGrattan argues for a more substantive approach to the questions of peace-building, which takes seriously the experiences of victims and survivors.

The book begins by defining what is meant by the politics of trauma, asking us what it means to respond to trauma at a political level. McGrattan is careful to emphasise that by examining trauma through this political lens, he does not wish to devalue the sense of powerlessness that is so often a feature of the "legacy of terror upon individuals" (13). Rather, by positioning trauma in this political sphere, he raises questions of power, agency, society and perspective. This approach allows for the construction of trauma and victimhood as societal issues, rather than simply personal ones, and places society's responsibility for individual victims of trauma firmly at the centre of democratic processes.

The following chapters critically engage with various approaches to peace-building and transitional justice and the implications the politics of trauma has for these topics,

constructing a complex picture of the field and the inherent problems faced by those involved at every level. McGrattan draws extensively on the work of Rancière, particularly his ideas around the 'partition of the sensible' to frame his critiques of transitional justice.

A consistent strength of this book is McGrattan's insistence on thoroughly interrogating words and concepts that are too often uncritically used in the discourse around peace-building. For example, whilst he argues that the notion of community is essential for democracy, the fragile and fluid meaning of community can work against this – "'community' has become a catch-all term, virtually synonymous with 'peace' and 'society'. It has, as such, become utterly divested of meaning" (67). This unreflective approach to community and communitarian thinking is, McGrattan demonstrates, at best unhelpful and at worst can actively contribute to the (re)marginalisation of those who have been worst affected by political violence.

The idea of community and the fluidity of its meaning is a recurrent theme in writing on Northern Irish politics, highlighted in a recent article by Matthew Engel: "in Portadown [a town in county Armagh] the word 'community' is laden with ambiguity. The most prominent charity shop is called "Portadown Cares … for our community". That means what it would mean anywhere else. But in normal conversation the phrase "our community" is not necessarily an inclusive one. It means ours, as opposed to anyone else's."[1]

It is clear then, that careful consideration of the meanings of terms like this form an important part of the work on this subject. This attention to detail is evident throughout the work and McGrattan's writing insists that the reader pay close attention, avoiding generalisations and making for a robust analysis.

McGrattan repeatedly highlights the need for a victim/survivor-focused approach to peace-building, and notably, he constantly engages with the risk of remarginalising or re-silencing those who have suffered from political violence and terror. This reflects his desire throughout the book to "unpick some of the assumptions surrounding the (undoubted) need to build robust, stable and transparent institutions in societies transitioning from violence to peace" (152) – he is constantly questioning the broad approaches taken, complicating the existing narratives around peace-building and transitional justice and asking us to fully examine the way in which we approach this topic, looking not only at how ideas and arguments are constructed, but also, crucially, how they are received. He writes that one of the key conclusions of the book is that "working by reference to the experience of trauma and victimhood, or speaking *through-but-not-for* that experience, ought to lie at the core of any response to the issue of dealing with divided polities and the legacies of violent histories" (6). This emphasis on the voices of victims/survivors gives the book a sense of genuine empathy and a desire to work towards political solutions for those living in societies still dealing with the transition from violence to peace.

The book covers a significant swathe of theoretical literature, and there are times the sheer range of ideas raised can feel overwhelming. Whilst McGrattan grounds his ideas

[1] Engel, Matthew. 2017. "Northern Ireland: An Uncertain Peace". *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jan/21/northern-ireland-an-uncertain-peace - [accessed 20/3/17]

in the Northern Irish context, particularly in the final few chapters, it might have been interesting to have also engaged with more experiential literature, particularly that which promoted the voices of victims/survivors, reflecting on their writing on the politics of trauma.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on trauma and peace-building, asking incisive questions and positing considered answers, as well as recognising that there are parts of the debate which could be seen as "ultimately unsolvable" (151). Considering recent political events in Northern Ireland, McGrattan's detailed and measured approach to peace-building and trauma is greatly needed. The work will be of interest to those wishing to broaden their understanding of peace-building and the political dimensions of trauma, as well as those working in the fields of transitional justice, ethnic and nationalism studies.

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