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FORTNIGHT

culture arts politics

Bombs that Make No Noise in Northern Ireland

Kenneth Bush¹

One evening in August 1991, I was preparing for a meeting the next morning in Bryson House on Bedford Street. In the early morning hours, I heard what many in Belfast would have heard before: the ominous thud and rumble of an explosion somewhere in the city. Stepping out into the cool night air, I scanned the sky, listening for the unlit helicopters that would offer clues about the location of the blast site. Not long afterwards, there was a second explosion.

In those days, the bombings, the murders, and the shootings made a lot of noise. They sent political sound waves through the minds of people, through the local and international media, through public discourse, and through the day-to-day lives of ordinary people. More than 16,000 bombs shrapnelled the lives of long-suffering -- and pugnaciously resilient -- children, women, and men of Northern Ireland and the border region. When you further consider the countless "non-viable devices," defused bombs, and hoaxes, the total number of bomb-related events ripples upwards like a departures/arrivals board in an old train station.

Twenty years later, the bombs in Northern Ireland don't sound the same. Indeed, they don't seem to make much of a noise at all. Not even in the places where they once had such useful concussive resonance -- within the media, university, and policy-making circles. But perhaps, it is just my advancing years. Maybe I don't hear as well as I used to. So, I decided to test my political hearing by polling those with a longer-term perspective than mine, regarding this unscientific observation about bombs that make no noise. Not surprisingly, a range of hypotheses tumbled out of these conversations. While these are discussed below, the obvious point needs stating: bombers just have to "get lucky" once to create an Omagh-style atrocity. But, if this was to happen, the current question of silence would be no less perplexing.

The Petrol Hypothesis: that the very mention of such things may generate/ exacerbate tensions between still-divided communities, leading to an exceptionally loud silence -- the kind of silence that smells like gasoline, and that may combust with one lit word-match. However, this hypothesis was quickly dismissed as Jurassic. It *may* have been plausible (and testable) once upon a time in the tentative and tenuous early stages of a post-Agreement world. But from the vantage point of the present, the hypothesis is less than plausible.

The Deafness Hypothesis: that, after all these years of intimate violence, no one wants to hear it any more, resulting in a self-induced deafness. This was a phenomenon studied during the dirty wars of Latin America -- a time of authoritarianism, systemic human rights abuses, and terror. At first, the deafness was convenient as a means of self-preservation. Then it became a habit. Then it became part of the culture of fear. But Northern Ireland today, is not a time of terror. It is advertized by Stormont, White Hall, and the White House

as a post-conflict success story with lessons to be dispensed to delegations from warm war zones around the world. If there is deafness here, its causes must be different from those in Latin America. It may be however, that this is less a case of deafness, than **the inconvenient story hypothesis**, where those stories that do not fit into the official meta-narrative of reconciliation and integration are muted or ignored – whether it is post-Apartheid South Africa or post-colonial policies concerning indigenous peoples.

The Dehumanization Hypothesis: that protracted exposure to political violence has had a dehumanizing societal impact. Consequently, no one much cares about anyone else's suffering anymore. The most cynical among those with whom I spoke added, "except if the suffering can be commodified and marketed for project funding." This hypothesis raises two uncomfortable observations. The first is a historical comparison. In the bad old days, reaction in Britain was not especially vociferous if another bomb went off in Northern Ireland, provided it did not result in the or injury of British security forces (This, of course, eventually led the bombers to re-sight the geographical targets of their terror campaign). In the same way, in the good new days of the present, as one ex-policeman put it, "someone in Bangor doesn't care if a bomb goes off in Derry or Armagh." Has Britain's disregard of suffering in Northern Ireland been internalized and indigenized in this "post-conflict" world?

The second observation concerns the danger of commodifying suffering that comes with the influx of post-conflict monies – or indeed, post-disaster monies more generally as was evident following the tsunami of December 2004. It is mind-boggling to consider that Northern Ireland has received more peace and reconstruction funds *per capita*, than all of Europe under the Marshall Plan for post-WWII reconstruction. One of the consequences of these funds has been the creation of a "Victims Sector" where the orientation of purpose-built, professional, victims organizations may be more heavily weighted towards fund-raising and grant-writing than their (now-labeled) 'clients.' Putting the lie to this gross assertion would require independent and systematic evaluation of these, and all, donor-funded initiatives. However, with logic-defying chutzpah, evaluation funds for such initiatives funded under the PEACE III programme have been cut in these "times of austerity" with the argument that the use of funds for evaluation would not constitute "value for money."

The Hyper-Compartmentalization Hypothesis: that Northern Ireland has become so compartmentalized that a bomb blowing up out of ear shot, doesn't send a ripple across a cappuccino somewhere else in Northern Ireland. Even the discovery of a pipe bomb in the playground on the other side of town doesn't make much noise. Life has become modern: modular and insular. A globalised consumerist culture exercises more influence on daily lives than the atavistic divisions of the past.

The Acceptable Levels of Violence Hypothesis (or "Scale") Hypotheses: that the current level of violence is nowhere near what it was in the dark days of The Troubles, and therefore does not bludgeon its way into public consciousness. The phrase, "acceptable level of violence," originated in, and characterized, the sentiment of some British politicians during the Troubles. (It is attributed to Home Secretary for Northern Ireland, Reginald Maudling). However, the same sentiment may still hold true today -- only at an internalized societal level within NI.

The raw volume of murder and destruction in Northern Ireland is low – not that this in any way diminishes the human devastation to the lives of those ravaged by the violence of today. But while the bombs of today are high on the irritation and inconvenience scale (something familiar to motorists on Belfast's Westlink, and Newry's A1), they are low on the

carnage scale. As to why this is so, according to one community-based colleague, “the general view is that the “ ‘unreconstructed’ lack the gear, the organisation, the international connections, the leadership, and the popular support to do too much damage.” Most importantly, such actions do not provoke paramilitary responses from across the sectarian divides. However, within and across all communities, they do elicit the uniform response of revulsion. The sectarian fault lines that might once have been disturbed by such attacks do not erupt in seismic destruction. If this is so, then this hypothesis may have as much to do with fundamental changes in societal attitudes as with tolerance levels.

Listening to Noiselessness

How do you explain something that did not happen; a reaction that did not occur? If indeed, bombs are being muted, then what has changed in Northern Ireland today that accounts for this noiselessness? Is that change permanent? Should it be welcomed? Such are the questions riddling our understanding of this particular phenomenon.

What if, tomorrow, the “unreconstructed” succeeded in detonating “a spectacular,” causing wide-spread carnage? Would the arguments here be consigned conveniently to the dust bin? Possibly. But, noiseless bombs should force us to look critically at ourselves. And, when I repositioned myself onto that shiny academic perch, high above the smell and dust of the post-blast detrius, I would have to ask: was the phenomenon of noiseless bombs related to the subsequent, unignorable, atrocity? Perhaps the present is precisely the time to examine and address these bombs that make no noise – before the situation tilts precipitously from the smugness side, to the panic side, of the political continuum.

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