

Resisting Division: Activism and Environmental Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

Niamh Small
Nsmall05@qub.ac.uk



Introduction

Northern Ireland as a deeply divided society where ethnicity has 'permeative propensities' (Nagle 2017).

Co-option of groups into ethnic blocs.

Growing presence of social movement groups non-aligned with Orange versus Green.

Uniting under a common environmental cause, highlights what is shared between those on opposite sides of the ethnic divide.

Campaign groups present an alternative to binary structure rather than another victim of it.





Division in Northern Ireland

Despite 'post conflict' status, region remains highly segregated.

Non-ethnic parties remain institutionally constrained.

Challenge of defining global green responsibilities but within the cultural context of Northern Ireland.

Keeping sight of Northern Ireland's 'special needs' (Stephens 1990).

Co-option

Dynamic demographic shifts in Northern Ireland- including rise of the 'middle ground'.

Nonaligned groups authenticity questioned.

Deep entrenchment of sectarianism and the fracturing of society along these lines is challenging for nonaligned groups.

Co-option into ethnic blocs is common but unwelcome by environmental activists.



Co-option

“I think we need to be really careful about this, I don’t know how, but environmentalism is starting to get coined a little bit of like a Catholic/ Irish thing, and that I guess it is because the DUP, it is a reflection of politics, and that will go into the community, DUP doesn’t show support or there are a lot of climate deniers or creationists so that transcends into the community that support them, and then they are like oh the likes of Sinn Fein are trying to create an anti-fracking bill, the SDLP have all their environmental stances so that must mean that if you care about the environment you are Catholic/ Irish and I think that is a really big danger starting to happen because that means the issue becomes part of the same old same old, but the problem is that it is so not the case, it is a shared issue”.

Interview Participant #3

Co-option

Groups defying co-option by communicating environmental issues as facing all human kind, regardless of communal background.

Successful examples of this can be found in the campaigns surrounding sites of environmental harm such as the illegal super dump at Mobuoy and the Sperrin mountains which are facing prospective extractivist mining occurring.



Sectarianizing of Environmental issues

Sectarianizing of environmental issues is a persistent challenge for activist groups.

Historically social movements in NI tended to “press for an enlarged share of public goods to be distributed among co-ethnics” (Nagle 2017)

Hard to compete with prevalent sectarian rhetoric whipped up by those committing environmental harm.



Sectarianizing:

“The business first mentality and there is a lot of sectarianizing any kind of environmental conflicts, so, if an opposed site is in a predominantly Protestant area they will make it, the DUP for example will step in and make it a sectarian issue, and if its in a predominantly Catholic area vice versa with Sinn Fein etc. Radio silence from each party when it doesn’t apply to their lot. After lot of back and forth and at the end of the day the only winner is the developer or planner or business owner who has gotten away with murder while the politician's squabble. There is an attempt to stop communities coming together in order to fight what our common battles are, we’re told to trust our politicians, but at this stage, what do they do to have our trust?”

Interview Participant #12

Sectarianizing of Environmental issues



No development of 'catch all policies', reliance upon 'catch within' policies that work to maximize votes inside the ethnic grouping.

'Ethnic strongmen' (Nagle 2016) electorally successful, less incentive for ethnic cooperation.

Combat this dysfunctional system, groups have come together and amalgamated in interests and actions.

Example of the Gathering who work to represent that 'nature knows no borders' and to preserve the Rights of nature.

Cross border and cross community cooperation forces politicians to pay attention as it is affecting 'their own'.





Protest and Public demonstrations

Strong physical manifestations of public anger and frustrations on the streets.

Northern Ireland public space provides the terrain upon which ethno national conflicts materialized and are sustained.

Public space becomes contested and embroiled in ethnic debates of legitimacy and territory.

Protest:

“As far as actions go, we are aware of the backdrop, because North of Ireland is no stranger to direct action like you know non violent and violent. So we are kind of weary not to be lumped in necessarily with some groups who have engaged in direct action. More recently direct action has been primarily from a loyalist side, between what was going on at Easter (2021) and then even the flag protests. And then historically direct action always conjures up painful memories of the Civil Rights marches and Bloody Sunday which was a really seminal thing for our country. We haven’t done anything too spicy over here as far as blocking roads of anything like that, most of what we have done has been theatrics and even then when we had marches it has been approved by the parades commission and well stewarded”.

Interview Participant #8



Protest and Public demonstrations

Given historical legacy of direct action, activists groups have to delicately negotiate this terrain.

Extinction Rebellion NI employ other forms of protest- such as theatre, music, art. 100 mile canoe journey following the river Bann highlighting environmental issues such as bio diversity loss.

Successful protest/ demonstrations have occurred, however engrained social history and trauma can affect how they are received.

Conclusion

Environmental activism an example of how non-sectarian/ non-partisan movements operate in deeply divided societies.

Act as important generators of inclusive politics that are open to a wide range of citizens-contrasting exclusive binary politics.

May not have 'clear' peacebuilding outcomes like policy change, these groups provide the capacity for network building and modes of association that do not rely on shared communal backgrounds or identity.



Conclusion:

“ People asking me what I am annoys the life out of me. I once told someone I was an atheist- which I am- and they turned around and said, awkward but are you a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist. A Catholic atheist are you having a laugh. And I think that’s why I am drawn to environmentalism because in the grand scale of our planetary emergency, who cares if I am a Catholic or a Protestant, or even an atheist. The issues at hand are much greater than this, and that’s what I find so refreshing about it in Northern Ireland, although we’re small it is so heartening to see people coming together in so many different ways and putting a bit of their heart and soul not working for a better world.”

Interview Participant #14