

REBUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS: EXPLORING SOCIO-ECONOMIC JUSTICE WITHIN NORTHERN IRELAND'S RECONCILIATION EFFORTS

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Economic inequality played a divisive role in the nearly 40-year conflict in Northern Ireland. Rooted in English colonial rule, Protestants historically maintained economic and political control over Northern Ireland, often leaving Catholics underrepresented, less skilled, and living in disproportionately poorer areas (Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp. 150-157). In 1998, the Belfast Agreement (BA) brought a formal end to the conflict¹. Yet, post-conflict reconciliation between the Protestants/Unionists and Catholics/Loyalists was only starting. Nearly 21 years since the BA was signed, this essay seeks to analyze one aspect of Northern Ireland's reconciliation efforts to discern its success in building sustainable peace within the region. Through the use of content and quantitative data analysis, this paper explores whether distributive reparations were implemented within Northern Ireland's post-conflict reconciliation efforts and, if so, how they have contributed to its success.

¹ This agreement facilitated a multi-party agreement to in Northern Ireland's political parties and an international agreement between the United Kingdom and Irish governments.

Reconciliation and Socio-Economic Justice

This paper seeks to understand if Northern Ireland's reconciliation efforts involved the use of distributive reparations and, if they have indeed been used, explore their value in contributing to the maintenance of peace in its post-conflict society. In order to investigate these questions, we must first analyze post-conflict reconciliation efforts in Northern Ireland. It must be noted that reconciliation is an imprecise concept, as it can be ascribed to various meanings and implications by different individuals and within different situations of conflict. For the purposes of this essay, reconciliation will be defined and evaluated as a societal process through which sustainable peace is sought-after through the construction of institutions to alleviate, recognize, and provide reparations for past injustices (Theissen, 2004, p. 12). Crucial to this process is the element of promoting justice. Arising from a need to more specifically study and implement justice during a society's shift toward reconciliation, transitional justice arose as a conceptual process through which a society attempts to develop and implement mechanisms and procedures to acknowledge past abuses, ensure accountability, and achieve reconciliation (UNSG, 2010, p. 7). Transitional justice mechanisms, such as international criminal tribunals, have been used to achieve retributive justice and have sought to institute justice through truth commissions and mediation, a crucial form of post-conflict social learning and social psychological intergroup reconciliation (Aiken, 2010; Nadler et al., (2008). Yet, transitional justice can facilitate broader types of justice to encompass those who have been socially and economically marginalized through the repressive regimes often found within conflicts, and indeed it must if it is to truly accomplish its objective of achieving sustainable peace and equity in a post-conflict society (Muvingi, 2009, p. 165).

Socio-economic justice acknowledges that conflicts are often fueled by deeply rooted inequalities and seeks to correct them. By utilizing financial or other material reparations for past violations, socioeconomic justice fosters distributive justice, finding the best ways to allocate the goods of a developing post-conflict society (Laplante, 2013, p. 77). This form of justice addresses the imbedded material and structural inequalities within a post-conflict society, a legacy of previously dominant

political systems or identities. Dismantling these structures and rebuilding them for a more equal post-conflict society has proven to be a crucial step, not only in preventing recurrent conflict, but also in advancing social learning and reconciliation (Aiken, 2014, pp. 54-55; Muvingi, 2009, p. 166; Laplante, 2008, p. 336). Studies have shown that, without socio-economic material and structural changes, antagonistic intergroup identifications that reinforce dominant and unequal systems intensify and psychological improvements toward reconciliation can be hindered (Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003; Cairns and Darby, 1998). Recognizing the crucial role of socio-economic justice in fostering reconciliation and sustainable peace, transitional justice scholars have included it as a component within their theoretical processes of successful transitional justice (see Figure 1) (Laplante, 2013; Grodsky, 2009; Aiken, 2010). Transitional justice literature argues that achieving sustainable peace in post-conflict societies not only requires the cessation of physical violence, but also positive obligations from its political powers to ensure its economic and political reconstruction favors those who have been disenfranchised and economically excluded (Galtung, 1969; Muvingi, 2009, p. 166).

Theoretical Approaches to Socio-economic Justice in Northern Ireland

Socio-economic justice is a difficult concept to measure, as its process is multifaceted, extensible, and can be perceived differently within each community. Still, answering the question as to how transitional justice can better address material and structural inequality within post-conflict societies, one prominent theory has emerged: using distributive reparations as a means of attaining justice. The theory of distributive justice argues that providing individual financial reparations is inadequate, as it hinders systemic change by allowing structural inequalities to endure without restoring an equitable balance needed for sustainable peace (Andrieu, 2010, p. 96; Muvingi, 2009, p. 180). Distributive reparations envision a broader version of reparations that provides collective redress, extending beyond those who experienced physical violence, in the form of redistributing the goods of society, prioritizing previously subjugated groups who have experienced socioeconomic and political disadvantage under repression regimes (Andrieu,

2010, p. 96).

While distributive justice can bridge the systemic fiscal inequalities that may exist after a conflict, it has been argued that any form of financial reparations can contribute to the erasure of moral guilt by perpetrators, as well as a demeaning commodification of the memory of an individual (Roman and Choi). Indeed, reparative justice to victims of a conflict risks becoming a form of 'hush money' with which a government can claim justice has been enforced. Yet, these individual reparations must be paired with efforts to reform the institutions and provide collective reparations that facilitate socio-economic equality (Andrieu, 2010, p. 96). Further, financial and material reparations have significant power in launching political and economic structural reform within a post-conflict society, as it has been empirically found that satisfaction with financial compensation is a powerful predictor of a positive outcome of sociopolitical redress and of internal feelings of rehabilitation (David and Choi, 2005). Supporters of this theory suggest distributive reparations can be operationalized in the form of state policies, allowing citizens of a post-conflict state to participate in this distribution, via leveraging the power of the state and its related entities such as civil society organizations (Muyingi, 2009, pp. 101-103).

Methodology

This analysis first explores if distributive reparations were implemented within Northern Ireland's post-conflict reconciliation efforts. Using content analysis, this essay examines government reports and acts of parliament relating to the formal end of the Northern Ireland Conflict, to infer whether the formal structures of post-conflict Northern Ireland utilized forms of distributive reparations as a means of bringing about peace. As the subject of distributive reparations is an understudied topic, with limited empirical research to support its theoretical claims, this analysis will utilize prominent factors of distributive justice in assessing the conditions that will be considered to constitute distributive reparations (Aiken, 2014, pp. 55-56; Mani, 2008, p. 256; Miller, 2008, p. 267). These conditions will be investigated through legislation and policy initiatives within 8 years of the BA. The temporal limitations of this research were chosen to better examine the organizational

behaviors of Northern Ireland's political structures leading up to and closely following the BA. The analyzed reports and policies were deductively chosen from the above theoretical literature and can be viewed in Figure 2. Within these conditions, specific words were chosen as a tool for assessing the presence of each condition and their contextual use was reviewed to ensure its semantic validity in identifying each condition (See Figure 3). This method was chosen as it best allowed for a socio-cognitive examination of the political structures and policies of Northern Ireland's peace process.

Second, this analysis explored how these distributive reparations may have contributed to the success of Northern Ireland's reconciliation efforts. Once again, there exists little quantitative or qualitative data from which to measure the impact of said reparations.² Thus, this study utilizes responses from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILTS) and related research to assess individual opinions on potential impacts of distributive reparations. The NILTS results used for analysis were chosen on the basis of its relation to the previously mentioned conditions. It should be noted that the NILTS is temporally limited to data from 1998 onward and does not gather consecutive annual data for most of the survey questions. As a result, much of the data analyzed cannot be used to analyze public opinions over a long span of time.

Results

The content analysis revealed an abundance of textual identifiers for the chosen conditions, especially with the words "equality," "equal opportunity," and "justice," which were most often used in the context of implementing new governmental structures tasked with engendering equality. For example, the Northern Ireland Bill included much rhetoric regarding facilitating equality through the creation of the Equality Commission, which was tasked with promoting equality of opportunity, regardless of a person's social status (1998). Additionally, the BA stated its commitment to ensure that its mandates would be committed to the principles of equality, civil and political rights, social and cultural rights, equal treatment, and freedom from discrimination (1998). Indicators chosen to signal an intention to ameliorate previous political domination were also prevalent within this content analysis. The rhetoric surrounding devolution, such as that

² The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, established in 1998, is an annual survey of the general public in Northern Ireland of their opinions on a variety of social policy issues.

used in the BA, highlighted the conditions of political redistribution in an attempt to equally represent nationalist and unionist communities (Aiken, 2010, p. 174). This was supplemented by the language used in policies for police reform, which implemented positive discrimination in order to appoint more Catholics into the police force, who had historically been underrepresented within the policing sector, as well as the creation of an independent police misconduct and discrimination Ombudsman (Aiken, 2010, p. 174; Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, 1998). The content analysis demonstrated that state policies, at least textually, met the conditions constituting the implementation of distributive reparations within its reconciliation efforts.

Within the language of these policies, however, there existed shortcomings. Distributive justice theory posits that the state has the most power to dismantle and reorganize societal structures to address casual roots of socio-economic inequality, an approach the BA and its subsequent proposals lacked. Though the BA included justice-oriented terminology and practical mechanisms to foster a more equal community, it was largely silent in speaking to its negative obligations of addressing past injustices. This was exemplified through its exclusion of formal transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth commissions, in its reconciliation framework, relying instead on voluntary and charity sectors through a decentralized and fragmentary approach (Aiken, 2010, 175). For example, while the BA held the potential of instituting state-run programs to assist in the desegregation of schools, ensuring that an equal opportunity of high educational attainment could be met within both communities, the state instead encouraged integrated education through parental and charity initiatives and devolved educational policy to local politicians (Hansson et al., 2013, p. 3). Still, for the purposes of this study, the implemented measures surrounding the BA will be considered adequate examples of distributive reparations.

How, then, did these reparations contribute to the success of Northern Ireland's reconciliation efforts? To explore this question, we turn to public responses provided by the NILTS. Responses spanning from 1999 to 2006 illustrate that a majority of both Catholic and Protestant communities consistently agreed it was the government's responsibility to provide equal employment opportunities and reduce income

inequality, suggesting that Northern Ireland's post-conflict society indeed looked to the state to implement a form of distributive justice (NILTS, 1998-2006). Responses show that there were small improvements to perceptions of equal treatment during the employment of the state's distributive reparations. From 1999 to 2001, Catholics shifted from believing that Protestants were treated better by the police, by 57%, to believing that they were treated equally, by 55% (NILTS, 1998-2001). Four years after 1999, although the majority of Catholics continued to believe that Protestants were treated better, that percentage dropped by 17%, and in 2013 42% of polled Catholics reported that they were treated better than they were five years previous (NILTS, 1998-2003, 2013).

Interestingly, responses to the perception of equal opportunity within the context a devolved government showed evidence to support the idea that Catholics felt empowered by the political distributive reparations. When asked in 1999 and 2000 what the devolved government would do for Northern Ireland, Catholics consistently agreed that it would bring more economic prosperity, aid in securing peace and increase living standards, while Protestants mostly remained neutral or in disagreement with what the devolved government would bring. Although there were no supplemental responses to this question about the reasoning behind each response, it could be inferred that the more hopeful outlook from Catholics came from having equal representation within the new structural and political system, which was historically absent. With a decade of retrospection, both Catholics and Protestants reported that, overall, the BA was a good thing for Northern Ireland, although Catholic respondents stated this was so at a higher percentage (NILTS, 1998-2008).

These responses, commenting on Northern Ireland's post-conflict policies such as the BA and new policing principles, revealed an increase in positive perceptions of equal treatment and equal opportunity. However, while these responses were collected during and after the state's implementation of distributive reparations, there is not enough evidence to make correlative statements. Additionally, this data does not highlight how, if at all, these reparations directly relate to the process of reconciliation. While this question lies outside of the scope of this essay, other scholars have empirically provided support for this link. For example, Dr. Nevin Aiken's research found that victims of the Northern Ireland conflict saw the

reduction in structural and material inequalities to be a crucial component to the advancement of intergroup reconciliation. His research found that this form of distributive justice contributed to a minimum baseline upon which other reconciliatory activities could be built (Aiken, 2010, 174). Other research has also revealed that perceptions of inequality prove to be a strong arbiter between intergroup contact, showing that those with a perceived lower status have higher levels of anxiety and are unlikely to pursue meaningful engagement (Tausch et al., 2007). Together with the findings of the present study, research suggests that the distributive reparations employed within Northern Ireland's peace process have positively contributed to sustained peace and post-conflict reconciliation within its society.

Research Limitations

These findings are limited in providing conclusive evidence of distributive reparations both within the Northern Ireland context and within the field of transitional justice. In addition to the small amount of empirical data to sustain a more clearly defined relationship between individual reconciliation and distributive reparations, the data that is available does not sufficiently relate to the topics of study. Further, this essay's exploration of distributive justice explored only two areas in which evidence of distributive justice was found, omitting other mechanisms such as community efforts that may have contributed to distributive reparation efforts within the peace process. Future research would ideally explore a more encompassing view that the role of distributive justice plays within the peace process.

There are also limitations and criticisms within the theoretical study of distributive justice. One critique acknowledges that by placing the state at the helm of distributive justice, its efforts will largely be funded by taxes from citizens who may have been historically underrepresented by that same state, effectively disconnecting distributive efforts from an assessment of the reparations needed to undo a community's collective damages (Laplante, 2013, p. 78). Additionally, asking the state, or even transitional justice mechanisms, to affect societal change on such a fundamental level has been argued to be unrealistic and too reliant on fragile post-conflict structures (Aiken, 2014, p. 56). There then emerges the question of how distributed reparations should be

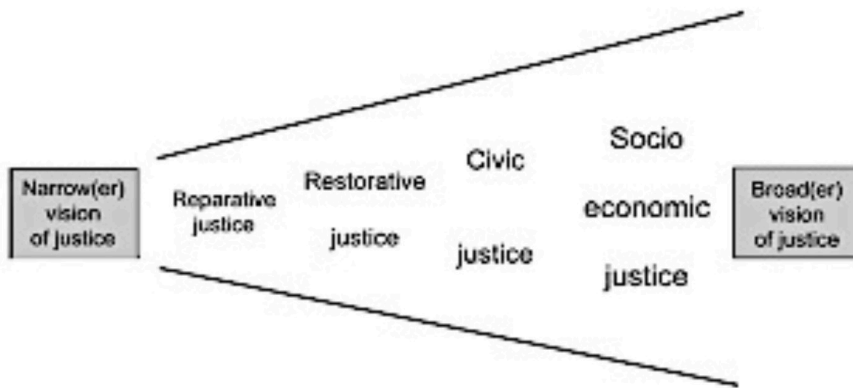
allocated across society. What entity is to discern who should be given reparations and to what extent? Finally, there has not yet been enough conclusive research to prove that distributive reparations directly increase victims' perspective of justice (Muviungi, 2009). Still, distributive justice has been shown to act as a vital catalyst within transitional justice efforts and is the sole theory that seeks to eradicate root causes of violence, aiding in efforts of sustainable peace and socio-economic equality.

Conclusions

The findings of this research indicate that efforts to distribute reparations within peace processes can positively affect reconciliation efforts in post-conflict societies, showing that financial reparations, socio-economic status, and material and structural inequalities matter to successful transitional justice processes. From this research, future reconciliation efforts and policies should acknowledge that, for reconciliation to achieve sustainable peace, efforts must be made to fundamentally restructure and distribute societal goods and power, so as to address inequalities that often lie at the heart of all conflicts. This necessitates that post-conflict societies must introspectively scrutinize themselves and their structures, actively looking for the ways in which it diminishes socio-economic equality and equal opportunity to its citizens. Furthermore, distributive justice efforts must actively and equally involve all groups within its society, so as to avoid pervasive power structures from maintaining historic forms of socio-economic oppression. This is not an easy task and one that is still largely uninstructed. Yet, successful transitional justice cannot afford to disregard its distributional obligations, nor its structural inequalities, as they are crucial to securing justice within a post-conflict society and ensuring a more equal and peaceful future.

Appendix

Figure 1. Laplante's Reparation Justice Continuum



(Laplante, 2013, p. 68)

Figure 2.

Government Reports and Policies Included in Content Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partnership for Equality: The Government's Proposals for Future Legislation and Policies on Employment Equality in Northern Ireland (1990)• Religious and Political Discrimination and Equality of Opportunity in Northern Ireland (1990)• Belfast Agreement (1998)• Principles for Policing in Northern Ireland (1998)• The Northern Ireland Bill (1998)• Northern Ireland Police Act (1998)• Fair Employment and Treatment Order (1998)• Safeguard Legislation (1999)• St. Andrews Agreement (2006)• St. Andrews Bill (2007)

(Laplante, 2013, p. 68)

Figure 3: Content Analysis Conditions

Condition	Word Identification	Instances of Word
Policy exhibits structural reform through the removal or addition of instruments to address legacies of past abuses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restore • Compensation • Justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 97 • 9 • 107
Policy shows intention to ameliorate the political domination of the previous group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devolve • Structure • Institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 84 • 26 • 70
Policies must be systematic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement • Create • Initiate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 77 • 19 • 39
Policies seek to institutionally foster equal economic opportunity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equality • Equity • Equal Opportunity • Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 195 • 1 • 328 • 54
Policies make efforts to redistribute resources, striving for economic liberalization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socio-economic • Allocation • Distribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 • 10 • 6

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