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How Useful is it to Understand Belfast as a Global City?

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25. *Divided memory: The reification of ethnicity in post-conflict Vukovar*, B. Baillie, 2012.
26. *How useful is it to understand Belfast as a global city?* P. Rea, 2012.

Editorial note

This paper results from the second-year undergraduate teaching module *City Life: Divisions and Diversity* which was convened by Dr. Martina McKnight and Dr. Milena Komarova at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, in the Spring semester of 2011/2012 academic year. The module draws on the Conflict in Cities research and uses Belfast as a principle case study to sociologically investigate key dimensions of life in contemporary cities, probing their multiple meanings and the many ways in which they are contested and shared.

Biographical note

Philip Rea is currently a third year undergraduate student at the SSPSW, Queen's University. His essay, *How Useful is to Understand Belfast as Global City?*, was originally submitted as a final assignment for the *City Life* undergraduate teaching module. The essay was awarded First Place in the 2012 *Undergraduate Awards* international competition for third level students in the category 'Social Sciences'.

How useful is it to understand Belfast as a Global City?

Philip Rea

Abstract. The globalisation paradigm has emerged within contemporary social thought as the preferred framework of many urban theorists. This essay discusses the relative usefulness of understanding Belfast as a 'global' city and argues that the dominance of 'Troubles talk' and discourses of 'neutral' space and post-Good Friday Agreement stability have often been explored at the expense of such an understanding. Focusing on a few select examples, most notably the ambitious 'Titanic Quarter' development in the city's docklands, the essay attempts to reposition Belfast within a wider global context by examining how a globalised economy, culture and polity are manifest in the city. In doing so however, it is acknowledged that a wholly global theory cannot hope to fully consider the complex nature of urban life. By drawing attention to those investigating the local and every-day, the essay concludes that a single theoretical lens can offer only a partial understanding. Future research regarding Belfast, it is suggested, should also remain mindful of the seemingly mundane 'practices' of the city and the subjective experience of individuals, in order to offer the most comprehensive and nuanced understanding possible.

Key Words: Belfast; Globalisation; Titanic Quarter; Urban Theory; Neo-liberalism

Introduction

The recent history of Belfast is one characterised by deep ethno-religious conflict, segregation and territoriality. Disagreement over the sovereignty of the state in Northern Ireland has made the national a domineering force of political discourse, to such a degree that the global is often overlooked by those wishing to understand the vast changes that the city is undergoing. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 however, discourse surrounding the city has shifted dramatically as it attempts to emerge from the insular stranglehold of 'the Troubles' into a new age where talk of 'regeneration', 'reconciliation' and 'neutrality' dominate (Gaffikin and Rafferty, 2008). What Belfast may be

'emerging' into however, is a world drastically different to the one that existed at the beginning of protracted violence in the late 1960s. Outside of the unique circumstances by which Northern Ireland's contested status commands primacy, the significance of nation states in contemporary society is widely debated. The most extreme accounts have claimed that the world is undergoing a process of 'globalisation' that is domineering, devouring, and almost tyrannical in its power to transform localised economic, political and cultural institutions.

While arguments over the extent and indeed existence of such processes are far from universal, the importance of the city as a locus for myriad global practices is an area of rare agreement amongst commentators (Eade, 1997; Jayne, 2000; Short, 2006). Belfast may pale in comparison to those defined as major 'World Cities' by the criteria of Friedman (1986) or Sassen (2001) for example, nevertheless this essay argues that understanding the city as 'global' is an underdeveloped yet highly significant and worthwhile course of inquiry. Despite making such a claim however '...it is not possible (or desirable) to construct one prescribed way to approach the city' (Bell and Haddour, 2000: 1). Ultimately, Belfast is also home to individuals with their own subjectivities and to communities with their own struggles. David Ley's (2004) critique of the 'global city hypothesis' identifies some systematic flaws in a wholly global approach, most notably 'the underdevelopment of human agency and everyday life' (ibid: 151). The limitations of a global consideration of Belfast are also discussed, and the potential for alternative understandings garnered through the lens of the everyday and the local considered. Firstly however, in order to contextualise what follows, a brief outline of the theoretical framework concerning globalisation is offered.

Globalisation

The globalisation paradigm represents a keenly contested and fragmented area of contemporary social thought. Although there are many interpretations of what the term means and its appropriate application, some highly generalised trends are observable from a cursory glance at existing literature. Short and Kim (1999: 3) for example, suggest:

Economy, culture and polity are being transformed, reshaped, and reworked to produce a more global world and a heightened global consciousness.

Advocates of this notion often focus on a post-industrial, neo-liberal economy as the primary indicator of global interdependence. Deregulated finance and trade systems are said

to transcend national boundaries as 'the fate of whole metropolitan regions [become] more closely attached to the fate of successful capital accumulation' (Harvey, 2000: 12). Even those extolling the dominance of the capitalist economic system however concede that this is "but one of several" (Sassen, 2007: 3) interpretations of globalisation. Indigenous cultures too have failed to escape the unyielding grasp of global connectedness, and debates exist over the extent of cultural de-territorialisation and homogenisation (Short and Kim, 1999). Political institutions also have had to undergo significant change to adapt to such forces, and an international 'World-system' has even been claimed. In his famous rebuttal of evolutionary models of global development, Wallerstein (2004) rejected the notion that the economic, social and political spheres of human endeavour are autonomous, and instead proposed a complex global system that is interconnected yet receptive to 'cyclical rhythms and secular trends' (So, 1990: 195). The shackling of economy and politics is evident in the rise of transnational confederations such as the European Union, and the political dominance of the world's largest economies, notably in the form of the G-20 and the G8.

Despite such weighty global discourse, the pervasiveness of the nation-state has engendered comment on its continuing relevance as a site of restructuring. As Sassen (2007: 1) illuminates:

...the global... simultaneously transcends the exclusive framing of national states, yet partly inhabits, and gets constituted inside, the national.

With this in mind a discussion is now offered of how some of the global forces theorised and described above can be framed and evidenced within the principal case-study of Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The Global Competitor

A prominent area of sociological enquiry on a global scale is the increased degree of competitiveness between cities of the world (Hall and Hubbard, 1996; Jayne, 2000; Short, 2006). Links can be drawn from this competitiveness to Manuel Castells' notion of the 'information city' (Clark in Bridge and Watson, 2003: 151) as innovative communication technologies increase the flexibility of industry to position and network itself across the globe. Short (2006: 112) summarises the basic proposition thus:

...global cities no longer have a monopoly of command and control functions... and all cities compete for the benefits of the post-industrial economy.

Understanding Belfast as a global 'competitor' can provide valuable insights into some of the socio-economic changes that have taken place in the city in recent years. The proclamation of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board that 2012 represents, 'Our Time, Our Place', for example, signifies an ambition to jettison the less attractive aspects of the country's, and by extension, Belfast's troubled past, and 'confidently put Northern Ireland on the global tourism map'(Northern Ireland Tourist Board, 2012). Although this slogan refers specifically to tourism, plans for extensive city regeneration, including a £20million investment to turn the Waterfront centre into an 'international convention venue' (BBC News, 2012) indicate an on-going commitment to urbanisation and the promotion of Belfast as an attractive location for global business. As O'Dowd and Komarova (2009: 3) comment:

There has been a visible transformation in the urban fabric of Belfast from a city physically scarred by decades of violent conflict to a consumerist city characterised by renovated retail, office and recreational space in the city centre and along the waterfront.

As alluded to in the above quote, such efforts can be seen to have increased significance as part of an attempt to 'reposition the city as a neutral, modernising place that has left its parochial sectarianism behind' (Murtagh, 2008: 1). The importance of foreign direct investment (FDI) to contemporary cities is noted by Sassen (2001), and the rhetoric of the Northern Ireland Executive links such regeneration schemes to the securing of FDI for the city, 'providing strong stimulus to [local] economic growth' (Department of Enterprise and Trade, 2008). Perhaps the most prominent and internationally attractive development currently being undertaken in Belfast is that which is on-going in the 'Titanic Quarter', and as such the essay will now turn attention towards this area.

Belfast's 'Titanification'

In 'Living the Global City', John Eade (1997) focuses on the redevelopment of London's Docklands to argue how an 'imaginative and reflexive' (ibid: 129) investigation of a specific case can illuminate some of the 'diverse global processes which are occurring throughout the world' (ibid: 11). He suggests that a new identity has been constructed in the area, counterpoised to the working-class character and shipbuilding heritage that had previously dominated. This reconstruction of place is directly related to a wider global context:

The changed environment can be used to establish a global identity for the area so that investors across the world can be encouraged to buy property here (1997: 137).

Parallels can easily be drawn to the development currently reshaping the site of the former Harland and Wolff docks. The decline of Belfast's industrial base and subsequent rise of the service industry is well documented by Hart (2006) and can be noted as part of a wider global trend (Sassen, 2001; Short, 2006). In 2000, the shipbuilding site known as Queen's Island was renamed 'Titanic Quarter' and ambitious plans were initiated to transform the area into a glitzy, post-modern, and de-sectarianised space, featuring:

...over 7,500 apartments, 900,000 sq. m. of business, education, office and research and development floor space together with hotels, restaurants, cafes, bars and other leisure uses. (Titanic Quarter Website, 2012).

The kind of space-use envisioned for the area has decidedly global connotations and it is already home to Northern Ireland's burgeoning film industry, producing international television shows and movies for Hollywood studios. In addition, international banking group 'CITI' enjoy a large presence within the site, from which they service markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. It is apparent then that a very different vision of Belfast is being postulated here to the ethno-culturally divided communities of the North and West, where territorial appropriations of space and opposing collective identities can be said to foster a direct challenge to the 'neutral space' rhetoric of those involved in regeneration projects (Mitchell and Kelly, 2010). Despite the claim of the Titanic Quarter website that it is 'firmly rooted in the history and character of Belfast', the neo-liberal exclusivity of the area suggests a place that has been firmly 'normalised' in line with other attractive European cities.

While a proposed overall investment of £7billion for the development signifies an obvious economic imperative, Short and Kim (1999: 90) highlight the cultural impact of regeneration projects and their ties to city promotion. The wholesale reimagining of an area is offered by Stevenson (2003: 113) as part of a wider-spread consideration of the 'configurations of meanings, feelings and expectations which are involved in the perception of the city'. The supposed importance of Belfast's Titanic legacy to the regeneration, as exemplified in the 'Signature Project' museum that now sits at its heart, has extended beyond the boundaries of the redevelopment area and can be seen in a broader 'Titanification' of the city, (Tayto's Titanic crisps included). The global appeal of the Titanic as a brand is evident in the worldwide re-releasing of James Cameron's 1997 dramatisation of the disaster (only

toppled in 2009 as the highest grossing movie of all time) to coincide with its centenary. Despite being heralded as a site for job-creation, questions have been raised over the commodification of the Titanic legacy, and the legitimacy of the 'sanitised' and 'unauthentic' result (Murtagh, 2008: 9). Neill's (2006: 8) comment that 'the new Titanic town will be launched in the shallowest of water' appears to reflect the sentiment of many of Belfast's inhabitants, and links into a wider debate regarding the global homogenisation and commercialisation of culture.

A City of Global Culture

The question of the cultural effect of globalisation is framed within a multiplicity of complex sociological debates. Theories of mass culture and mass society have highlighted the effect of industrialisation and urbanisation on the breakdown of community, and the isolation and anomic nature of social relations in the city (Strinati, 1995). Simmel's (1950) treatment of 'the Metropolis' considered the blasé response of urban people to society and the importance of commercialism in:

...irreparably (hollowing) out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability (Simmel, quoted in Karp et al, 1991: 23).

It is argued that mass society processes lead individuals to become susceptible to what McDonald (1998) argues is a homogenised and debased 'mass culture', that in opposition to 'folk' or 'high' culture, reflects the lowest-common-denominator virtue of consumption. As the capitalist economy becomes increasingly global by nature, so too it would follow does culture. Mass-consumerism and unprecedented levels of global travel and migration have connected previously isolated, nationally-bound cultures in fascinating ways. A post Good-Friday-Agreement economic resurgence and increased openness to the world, in terms of both business and tourism opportunities, have produced compelling arguments for the influence of cultural globalisation in Belfast. The proliferation of multiple globally recognised brands and franchises throughout the city centre and beyond, exemplified by McDonald's restaurants and the Apple Store (both of which can be found in another recent development, 'Victoria Square') are testament to the pervasiveness of global consumerism. The hosting of the MTV European music awards in November 2011 was widely heralded as an opportunity to showcase Belfast on a global stage, but also makes lucid the importance of 'mass' culture and of the idea of 'spectacle' for global city competitiveness and its eager adoption by Belfast's marketeers.

Such understandings of culture have however been challenged as representing an elitist and essentialist viewpoint that is inattentive to the diverse ways in which culture is reproduced and consumed. According to Ritzer and Ryan (in Campbell et al, 2004), globalisation of culture includes not only uni-directional, hegemonic global forces, but also incorporates various instances of multi-directional phenomena that produce a 'fusion of the global and the local, resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas' (ibid: 42). In this analysis, the latter process is referred to as 'glocalisation.' The struggle to find a unified national identity amongst Belfast's populace might be seen as a stumbling block to the adaptability of local culture to de-territorialised global encroachments, but examples may still be found. While the metropolitan feel of the city centre and café culture of the gentrified areas of South Belfast arguably attempt to recreate an atmosphere of European 'chic', the Ulster fry remains a staple offering of any self-respecting breakfast menu. As we have seen in the use of the Titanic motif to extol the virtues and 'authentic' nautical heritage of Belfast's most prominent development site, creating unique 'hybrid' identities is an important part of city promotion. Carden (2011: 5), notes that this 'localised difference... packaged as a commoditised leisure experience', has been extended across the city, through the process of 'quartering'. Carden further elaborates, with more than a hint of whimsy, that Belfast is currently divided into no less than seven 'quarters', each with a distinctive theme.

Further global considerations and the 'everyday life' approach

Identifying every global influence and process that Belfast has engaged with is a task far beyond the ambition of this essay, and several notable examples remain unexplored. The role of the USA in mediating the conditions of the Good Friday Agreement and its continuing interest in Northern Irish politics for example signifies a broadening of the scope of political engagements at Stormont, as does the visit in April 2012 of Chinese State Councillor Madame Liu Yandong. The role of global neo-liberalism in replicating social difference along economic lines is also manifest, to such a degree that Murtagh (2008: 4) has claimed a 'twin speed city' scenario, whereby 'those without resources are increasingly corralled in 'sink' estates'. When considering the efforts of what Neill (2006: 5) calls 'urban beauticians' to create a new, post-modern Belfast, it may be argued that the 'ugliest' areas of the city have been left behind.

Despite the (hopefully) convincing examples offered above, non-global considerations of Belfast are also imperative to a fully realised understanding of the city.

Many argue that the local is of much more salience and Ley (2004: 152) criticises 'globe talk' as a 'master discourse' which has proved both highly influential and problematic in the researching of cities. The exclusion of centrally planned economies and large cities in the developing world are obvious points of denigration, as is the dismissal of state economic regulatory powers. More importantly for Belfast however, Ley also notes an oversight in focusing almost exclusively on global forces of capital accumulation, at the expense of local public sector activity and employment. Based on December 2009 statistics, the public sector in Northern Ireland accounted for 32.3% of all employee jobs (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2010). This fact highlights the importance of the public sector as both employer and in the provision of services and welfare. In a city that boasts the highest household incomes in the country, but also twelve of its twenty most deprived wards (NI Executive, 2012), the importance of state-administrated welfare in sustaining those who are less fortunate is clear.

Human agency is also of primary concern for Ley. The binary considerations of a 'dynamic... open... cosmopolitan' global and a 'communitarian, authentic, closed' local, are criticised as unsuitable for encapsulating the lived experience of individuals (ibid: 155). Several studies have drawn upon a range of theoretical frameworks to examine everyday life in Belfast, from De Certeau's notion of the seemingly banal as 'tactical' urban resistance (Mitchell and Kelly, 2010) to the gendered and classed reproduction of social division through the interplay of symbolic capital in the 'field' of the city centre (Smyth and McKnight 2010). By acknowledging the subjective experiences of individual people and the seemingly trivial nature of everyday practices, such work highlights the dynamic and multifarious character of urban life and acts as a pertinent reminder of what is often overlooked in the abstraction of global discourse.

Conclusion

It is clear then that the term 'global' does not encapsulate everything that Belfast was, is or desires to be. Cities are not entirely dis-embedded from national context and are interpreted by individuals in innumerable different ways. However, through the regeneration and 'Titanification' of the city for example, Belfast has engaged with and contributed to the complex and multifaceted discourse of 'globalisation'. As this essay has demonstrated, a 'global' consideration of Belfast provides valuable insight into many of the vast changes that the city is currently undergoing and as such, represents a critically important lens through which we can add to our understanding of the city.

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