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*Divided Cities/Contested States*

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**Reflections on a Belfast Bus Tour**

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### **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 investigate sociologically key dimensions of life in contemporary cities, probing their multiple meanings and the many ways in which they are contested and shared.

### **Biographical note**

Paula Gourley is currently a third year undergraduate student at the SSPSW, Queen's University. Her essay, *Reflections on a Belfast Bus Tour*, was originally submitted as an assignment for the *City Life* undergraduate teaching module. The paper draws attention to the distinction between the lived experiences of the city and its 'imaging' through guided tour narratives.

# Reflections on a Belfast Bus Tour

Paula Gourley

## Abstract

This reflexive essay considers how the continuity and change which are manifested in Belfast's built environment in the present day were narrated during a guided bus tour of Belfast that I undertook as a part of my studies at Queen's University, in February 2012. I suggest that while undoubtedly Belfast is changing for the better, many negative aspects remain, or are exacerbated, in the 'post conflict' city. Yet, I argue that what was presented by the tour guide was a skewed image of the city which did not take into account the everyday lived experiences of its inhabitants and offered a sanitised version of political, class and ethno-national divisions.

**Key words:** Belfast, narratives, reflexive

According to Boal (2002), Belfast has been classified in different historical epochs as the; 'colonial city', 'immigrant-industrial city' and 'ethno-national city'. Yet, while there is no single definition of a city, 'post-conflict' Belfast nevertheless plays a crucial role in the imaginative potency of Northern Ireland as a catalyst for any possible comprehensive, 'multi-voiced and multi-ethnic development of Northern Irish society' (Pelaschiar, 2000:117). Drawing on a 'version' of Belfast presented in a bus tour of the city in February 2012 I explore how Belfast is perceived and how continuity and change, manifest in the built environment of the city, was narrated during the tour. Specifically, I discuss how the idea of Belfast as a 'normal city' is indicative of a growing trend towards a more humorous and positive interpretation of the city (Schwerter, 2007). However, I use the issues of segregation, regeneration and symbolism to highlight how this 'version of Belfast' offers an inauthentic, sanitized account of the city's past and present divisions (Wang, 1999). I explore how such narratives present an overly optimistic view of a possible shared future in a 'normal city', whereby economic regeneration is epitomized as the catalyst for shared and/or neutral space and equity for its residents (Smyth and McKnight, 2010). I will attempt to illustrate the complexities of Belfast's social divisions and how ethno-nationality also intersects with gender and class (Smyth, 2009) and

question how state policies and urban planning, which are relying on a newly transformed city centre to ameliorate the divisions of the past and the present, are misplaced.

The tour guide initially placed Belfast in historical context by detailing the Ulster Plantation in the 1600s and then revealing how Belfast had been an important industrial centre. He detailed how both North and West Belfast had weaving mills and these areas were predominately Catholic. He then touched on divisions by discussing how Catholics were kept out of heavy industry jobs such as Harland and Wolff and Sirocco Works. Nevertheless, he tempered this negative aspect of divisions in Belfast (which was to become a recurring feature of his narrative) by detailing how the Royal Victoria Hospital was the first hospital in the world to have air conditioning provided by Sirocco Works.

As the tour drove into Divis Street our guide suggested that this was where the troubles started in 1969. I was introduced to my first political wall mural and a peace wall which had a fence added to the top of it. The guide professed 'this side is one hundred percent Catholic and the other side is one hundred percent Protestant'. This is itself an exaggeration which I felt does not reveal the everyday lived experience of many people who, myself included, live in mixed marriages within these areas. Nevertheless, I was struck by the fact that the wall murals represent 'the most politically expressive identifier of sectarian space' (Bollens, 2000:207). Being on this bus tour provided me with a different view of the Belfast I expected to see, and indeed drive through on a daily basis.

The tour then proceeded to the 'international wall' mural on the Falls Road which depicts resistance to oppression by a cross community project and depictions of Guantanamo Bay and Brendan Nugent who was a forerunner to the 1981 hunger strikers. While the 1981 hunger strikers were mentioned we were unable to stop at the Memorial Garden dedicated to these men due to the positioning of a traffic island by the Department of Regional Development which effectively prevents bus tours from stopping at this site. This made me question the issue of power and who had made this decision and in the interest of whom it had been made. The guide also attempted, unsuccessfully, to bring in some humour by suggesting that if we wanted to get off at the international wall mural our flak jackets were under our seats. I felt quite dismayed at this 'othering' of the working class people of the Falls Road by the guide and how it illustrated that 'post-

conflict' Belfast still has many divisions even if these are more subtle than might be expected in a city predominately defined by ethno-national divisions.

The guide then went on to elaborate again how old mills in Clonard had been converted into apartments and workplaces tempering the negative aspects of Belfast's conflict and history with a positive narrative. He explained how 'Bombay Street' was the street in which the first houses were burnt to the ground at the start of 'The Troubles'. While the names of the streets such as 'Bombay Street' and 'Kashmir Road' reflect an association with the British Empire the fact that the Gaelic language is also present on the street signs symbolises the divisions of the past and the present. The guide glossed over these blatant divisions and suggested that the presence of Saint Clare's Primary School in the area (which is now built right up to a peace wall) would have been unimaginable in the past and this provides hope for the future.

At this point in the tour I was surprised how little I felt was revealed of the true lived experience of the 'Belfast' I grew up in. As the tour continued to Lanark Way and the Cupar Street 'peace wall' I expected that at this point I would get to hear some powerful narratives of the divisions in Belfast both past and present. As Bollens (2000:209) rightly highlights, peace-lines are not the cause of the problems in Belfast but a reflection of the underlying political and religious conflict and these barriers symbolically separate Catholics and Protestants and create significant problems for urban policy makers and the adjacent neighbourhoods. Despite this, the guide presented only a brief history of how the polarity between Protestants and Catholics did not exist before 1969 then continued with his, by now, expected positive rendition of how Belfast had previously led the world in ship building, manufacturing, weaving, printing and tobacco. Nevertheless, as a resident of Belfast what I consider to be 'authentic' depends on my 'previous personal knowledge' and is assessed 'in relation to that which is personally significant' (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999:602). Considering this, the tourguide presented me with a version of Belfast, aimed not at a resident who has personal knowledge, but at the tourist who is seeking 'inauthentic experience' (McCannell, 1973).

The tour continued along the Oldpark Road and we stopped at a small park to get a view of Ardoyne, described by the guide as a 'Catholic island surrounded by Protestants'. He detailed how Ardoyne is a working class area and it was very interesting

to see the houses laid out in rows from this vantage point. Indeed, I found this view very depressing as it brought home how poor, dilapidated and deprived the area is. Despite having relatives who live in this area, I was shocked to discover I had been living in a 'residential bubble' (Mitchell, 2010) and had never really noticed the depth of poverty and deprivation until this point. While the guide did touch on divisions and conflict in this area, (referring to the conflict around the Holy Cross Girls School in 2002), he nevertheless seemed keen to divulge that the former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese's mother, had come from this area. Indeed, throughout the whole tour I found if the guide had to say something remotely negative he had a famous name to throw into the mix at the end, such as Frank Carson, George Best, James Galway and Samuel Beckett, to name but a few, to temper this negativity. Also he was keen to point out that in Ardoyne in the past, people did not have alarm clocks and a person known as a 'knocker upper' and horns from the factories woke people up. To me this illustrated the old community spirit which existed in the area which contests a perceived rural-urban dichotomy and Wirth's (1938) claim that relationships between people in the city are 'secondary' (gesellschaft) in contrast with the 'primary' (gemeinschaft) rural relationships (Stevenson, 2003). Indeed having moved my own family out of Belfast and into the countryside for a period of three years I can personally attest to the rural-urban dichotomy in that I could not wait to get back to what in my experience are intimate, enduring and community relationships in the city. Nevertheless, I remain aware that in Belfast City community building can also have a negative aspect when 'others' are excluded.

The tour then continued to City Side Retail Park which is part of an interface dividing Catholic New Lodge from Protestant Tiger's Bay and according to Mitchell (2010) illustrates a typical way in which developers attempt to fill the spaces ripped open by conflict in the city. The tour guide detailed how this development was previously the site of the old Gallagher's Tobacco Factory but did not divulge how this area was known locally as a 'sectarian murder-ground' (Bollens, 2000). Yet, despite its construction to promote 'shared space', according to Mitchell (2010) both Protestant and Catholic consumers contest the strategy and norm of shared space, by using the 'neutral space' to preserve or maintain patterns of activity by entering and exiting this site using different gates . In effect, this 'neutral space' is used for consumption in different ways and divisions are still clearly visible. While the tour guide did acknowledge that such

developments can destroy communities and cause divisions his next line, 'we are moving into Sailor Town and Frank Carson a famous Belfast comic was brought up here' again glossed over the divisions still existing in 'post-conflict' Belfast.

This positivity continued with the theme of regeneration when the tour continued to Laganside<sup>1</sup> and presented Belfast as a 'normal city' (Neill, 2005). This area, the guide explained, is home to the Odyssey, Waterfront Concert Hall, W5 and the Obel building which is the tallest building in Ireland. While urban planning according to Neill (2006:109) has been at the forefront of official efforts to project an image of Belfast as a 'normal city', nevertheless, divisions remain. Also the development of Laganside seems to be moving the city centre east so that areas marginalised by conflict are in danger of further marginalisation as the city reinvents itself in 'normality' 'and the Falls and the Shankill become mural galleries where tourists can walk through a potted history of the Troubles' (Carden, 2011:8). Indeed Belfast's hopes for the future seem pinned to the legacy of the Belfast-built 'Titanic'. No longer is 'Belfast Buzzing' but 2012: 'our time, our place' and 'Titanic reasons to visit Belfast' ([www.ni2012.com](http://www.ni2012.com)) are marketing strategies reimagining the pariah city at an international level into the 'post-conflict' city (Neill 2006:109). The tour guide detailed how this signature Titanic building portrays the bow of two ships from every angle and is visually stunning. He went on to provide a narrative on how the shipyard where the Titanic was built had consisted of mainly Protestant workers. These Protestant workers had then helped their relatives to get jobs instead of Catholic workers. However, this version provided was still quite a sanitised view of this aspect of sectarianism and division in Belfast.

The tour progressed to Stormont Estate, home to our politicians and Parliament Buildings where policy is agreed, but both policy and politicians were hardly given air space in the tour guide's narrative. Equally, women were absent from his version of Belfast. Yet, as Smyth (2009) argues, women's distinct roles are vital to collective continuity and the tensions between gender and class "rais[ing] questions about how these may intersect with territoriality" (Smyth, 2009:14).

The tour continued to the Short Strand where the divisions between two opposing communities were tempered by the guide's gushing portrayal of St. Georges Market as one of the biggest and voted one of the best in the United Kingdom. This area now

known as 'Market Quarter' is part of a city centre characterized as a site of neutral and/or shared space. Nevertheless, the neutrality of the city centre in relation to ethno-nationality is not fixed, and tensions can become significant during times "when communal festivals are being celebrated, or parades or football matches are in progress" (Smyth and McKnight, 2010). The guide explained how there used to be a ring of steel around the city centre and it closed at six thirty at night. Then he revealed that nowadays in cosmopolitan Belfast there are numerous bars, restaurants and tourist attractions and the second most common language is Chinese followed by Mandarin and then Polish. Nevertheless, as O'Dowd and Komarova (2009:10) succinctly express 'Consumerist Belfast' exists alongside 'Troubles Belfast' where segregated working-class residential communities have not benefited from the new developments.

In summary, my experience of the bus tour was influenced by my age, gender, class, ethnicity and experiences of growing up in Belfast through the 'Troubles'. Having lived in west Belfast, I consider this part of the city as the place of my home and family. These primary relationships and the everyday life of working, studying and caring for family have shaped how I experience Belfast and how I feel about it. As such, the city's ethno-national divisions, its supposed image of normality or it being seen as an attractive tourist destination do not play a direct role in my experiences. From this point of view, the skewed image of the city created by the bus tour did not reflect the myriad everyday life practices and political, cultural and social developments that make the city what it is, especially as it neglected aspects of social divisions such as those by gender and glossed over political, class and ethno-national divisions.

While I do not consider Belfast to be a city entirely defined by conflict, my optimism for the future is curtailed by the fact that access to resources and opportunities are not readily available to the 'have nots' (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). While undoubtedly Belfast is changing, many negative aspects remain or are exacerbated in the 'post-conflict' situation. Perhaps only urban policy developed using a sociological imagination (Mills, 2000[1959]) with cross-community collaboration will enable social change which can benefit everyone as Belfast needs reimagined, not superficially reimaged (Neill, et al., 1995:72).

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<sup>i</sup> A large regeneration initiative encompassing a series of developments along the river Lagan, spanning a period of nearly twenty years since the late 1980s.