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Ethnic Segregation, Moral Panics and Social Class: A Comparative Study of the Experiences and Perspectives of Working Class and Middle Class Children in Belfast

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This paper begins by describing the moral panics that have tended to emerge sporadically in Northern Ireland over the last few years with regard to young people’s involvement in sectarian violence in Belfast. Within this, while these young people have been cast in the traditional role of folk devils, the paper will show how younger children also tend to be explicitly identified and named in an ambiguous way through such moral panics; playing a deviant role as participators, and sometimes instigators, of sectarian violence but also carrying the symbolic responsibility of representing Belfast’s future. It will be shown that it is because of this ambiguous position that it is adults rather than the children themselves that tend to be held responsible for their actions; either as rioters using the children as political pawns or as parents guilty of neglect. With this as a starting point the paper then explores the perspectives and experiences of two groups of 10-11 year old children living in Belfast and the impact of these moral panics on them. One group of children, living in affluent middle class areas were found to be appropriating and re-working these broader moral panics into more general discourses of derision that tended to pathologize working class children and communities more generally. For the other group of children, living in economically deprived areas with high levels of sectarian tensions and violence, their experiences of such violence and their participation in it are discussed. It will be shown that for these children, the broader moral panics that exist tend to have the effect of reinforcing the processes that tend to segregate and exclude them.

Introduction

Since the first paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and the subsequent peace process, Belfast is now a city that is attempting to reconstruct itself as a peaceful, open and inclusive place. Today, when traveling around central Belfast it is difficult not to be struck by the significant levels of investment and reconstruction that have taken place. The 25 years of armed conflict in the region had taken its toll on the city centre. Because of the bombings and violence, relatively few of the big ‘high street’ names chose to invest in the city and there were only a handful of hotels. By the evenings, the city centre became a desolate place which, in the constant shadow of fear created by sectarian violence, was felt by many to be unsafe. The nightlife, as it was, tended to be located around the main university area.

However, much has changed over the past decade. Gone are the army patrols that used to be a staple part of the backdrop to life in the city and, in their place, there has been significant investment with major new public venues and shopping malls springing up across the city as well as a host of new, large hotels

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including the Hilton, Radisson SAS and Holiday Inn. With the rejuvenation of local politics witnessed through the devolution of power back to a locally-elected administration and the sight of erstwhile sworn enemies working together in local government, there is definitely an air of optimism for the future in Belfast and across Northern Ireland more generally.

However, 25 years of armed conflict have left a huge legacy in the region, and in Belfast in particular. During this period – that has euphemistically been termed ‘the troubles’ – over 3,600 people were killed and well over 40,000 injured as a direct result of the conflict (Morrissey and Smyth, 2002). It is not surprising to find, therefore, that even with the armed conflict all but over, there remains significant levels of ethnic segregation and mistrust. Moreover, certain local neighborhoods, particularly in Belfast, acquired a particular notoriety and continue to generate moral panics at times in relation to simmering sectarian tensions and violence that threaten the newly reconstructed vision of Belfast as a peaceful, inclusive and cosmopolitan place.

Within this, however, it is interesting to note the position of children in such moral panics. Children ‘as young as 10’ are frequently reported as participating in, and sometimes instigating, stone-throwing and other violent incidents at interface areas. It is this positioning of children as folk devils, and the impact of such moral panics on their experiences of exclusion, that provides the focus for this paper. The paper begins by providing a little more background on the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland and how this has come to inform and shape the geographic landscape of Belfast. The paper then sets out the nature of the moral panic that exists in relation to certain neighbourhoods in Belfast and the ambiguous position of children as folk devils within this. With this as a context, the paper then explores how 10-11 year old children living in Belfast come to read and interpret these moral panics. In focusing on the perspectives of two groups of children – one from affluent middle class areas in Belfast and the other from economically deprived areas with histories of sectarian tensions and violence – the paper demonstrates the very different ways in which children engage with these moral panics. The paper concludes by examining how these moral panics tend to exacerbate the ethnic segregation and exclusion of those children that provide their focus.

Belfast – Ethnic Segregation and Violence

It is impossible to provide a meaningful overview of the historical context to Northern Ireland and the city of Belfast in particular in a short paper like this. For those interested, good accessible accounts are available elsewhere (see, for example: Whyte, 1991; Darby, 1995; Ruane and Todd, 1996). While the state of Northern Ireland was only created relatively recently in the early 1920s, the history of these divisions can be traced back some 800 years and originate from Britain’s colonisation of Ireland. Much of this history has been about British attempts to conquer and control the island of Ireland and the various battles and conflicts between British colonial forces and the indigenous Irish population. While Britain was able to gain control over the majority of the island through these years, the north-eastern corner of the island remained elusive and continued to represent the last remaining stronghold for some of the indigenous Irish clans.

The British response to this was to instigate a strategy of plantationism, encouraging significant numbers of (mainly Protestant) people from Scotland and England to live in this region and thus to take control of the land. When Ireland gained independence in the early 1920s, this presence of a large number of people concentrated in the north-eastern corner of the island and who remained vociferously loyal to ‘the crown’ presented a problem that was addressed by annexing off this north-eastern corner to create what is now known as Northern Ireland and that remained part of the UK while the rest of the island became the Irish Free State. The historical conflicts between those who were loyal to the crown and whose aspirations were for the continued union of Ireland with Britain (and who tended to be Protestants) and those who were nationalists and aspired for a united and independent Ireland (and who tended to be Catholics) were now institutionalised in the Northern Ireland state itself.

Moreover, with Protestants constituting the clear majority and being in control of the local administration and police force, claims of widespread discrimination against the Catholic minority were

soon being voiced (Hennessey, 1997). Such tensions eventually erupted into widespread violence towards the end of the 1960s that saw the deployment of British troops onto the streets of Northern Ireland. However, while the troops were initially regarded as an independent force, they were soon seen by the Catholic population as being partisan and there to uphold the privileges of the Protestant majority. Widespread street violence soon turned into armed conflict as paramilitary groups on both sides of the ethnic divide began to organize.

The early 1970s were a particularly violent period in Northern Ireland with 479 people killed directly as a result of the conflict in 1972 alone and between 250 and 300 deaths per annum for the following few years. Much of the violence at this time was indiscriminant including bombs being detonated in towns and city centers with little or no warning. It was also very territorial in its nature with a significant number of ‘doorstep killings’ taking place where victims were often shot dead at point-blank range when simply answering their front door (Fay *et al.*, 1999) and it was also relatively common in certain areas for individuals to be viciously attacked or shot while walking home because of their perceived religious identity.

Not surprisingly, given the levels of fear that existed locally during this period, significant population shifts occurred with families and at times whole communities either moving to neighborhoods where they felt safe and/or being terrorized and forced to move out of particular areas by others. Smyth (1998: 15) for example has estimated that during 1969-1972 alone, between 8,000 and 15,000 families were forced to leave their homes and live elsewhere due to the conflict. Moreover, Boal (1999) has identified an underlying ‘ratchet effect’ in relation to these populations shifts whereby levels of segregation have tended to increase at times of intense violence but then never returning to their previous levels during times of relative peace.

Overall, while this period of conflict has all but ended with the paramilitary ceasefires of the mid-1990s, the cumulative effects of the violence has left its legacy in Northern Ireland. The 2001 UK Census for example reveals that a quarter of all wards (25 per cent) in Northern Ireland have a population that is at least 90 per cent Catholic or Protestant and, beyond this, well over half of all wards in Northern Ireland (58 per cent) have a population that is at least 75 per cent Catholic or Protestant. Such patterns of segregation are particularly evident in Belfast. As illustrated by Figure 1, over half of all wards (local neighbourhoods) in Belfast – 57 per cent – consist of populations that are more than 90 per cent Catholic or Protestant.

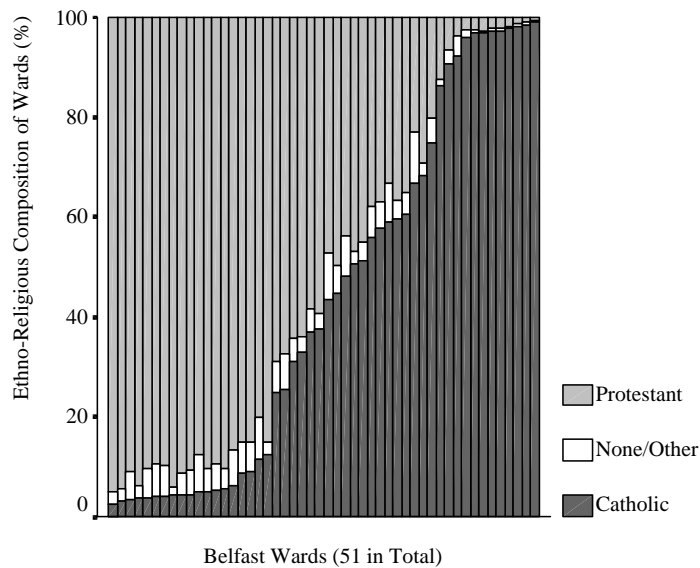


Figure 1: Ethnic Composition of Wards in Belfast

While patterns of segregation can be found in middle class (Smyth, 1998) and rural areas (Murtagh, 2003), the highest levels of segregation are to be found in the urban, economically deprived areas of Belfast and

Derry/Londonderry where the violence has also been most intense (Fay *et al.*, 1999; Morrissey and Smyth, 2002; Smyth and Hamilton, 2003). In relation to Belfast, and as illustrated by Figure 2, there are a number of ‘peacelines’ running through these areas where high, reinforced walls have been built to keep neighbouring communities apart. Many of these areas are also clearly marked out politically as either Catholic or Protestant by the existence of such things as: painted kerbstones (red, white and blue to signify Protestant/British neighbourhoods and green, white and orange to signify Catholic/Irish neighbourhoods); the flying of the respective national flags; and painted wall murals and graffiti carrying explicit political (and sometimes sectarian) messages. One such example of this is provided in Figure 3 that shows a not untypical residential area in a strongly loyalist neighbourhood in Belfast.



Figure 2: A ‘Peaceline’ in Belfast



Figure 3: A ‘Loyalist’ Area in Belfast

Sectarian Violence, Moral Panics and Children

There is, then, a contrast and ongoing struggle between the ‘old’ Belfast that is rooted in the past, insular-looking and riven by segregation and sectarianism and the emerging ‘new’ Belfast that represents the future and is outward-looking, inclusive and cosmopolitan. It is this new vision of Belfast that is currently being promoted at every opportunity by business and political leaders in the hope of attracting further inward investment. It is clearly also a vision of Belfast, and of Northern Ireland more broadly, that most people in the region have invested in, to one extent or another, and that represents the hope of ensuring that the emergence out of violence and the transition into a new, vibrant and ‘normal’ society is a permanent one.

However, 25 years of armed conflict have left their scars across the city of Belfast in the guise of peace lines, highly segregated spaces and ongoing fears and anxieties. Alongside the underlying – and now often unsaid – levels of sectarian prejudice that remain across the city, the creation of small, ethnically segregated ghettos has left areas where rival communities still live ‘cheek by jowel’ and where sporadic episodes of sectarian violence occur. This is particularly true of north Belfast that has witnessed the highest and most intense levels of sectarian conflict over the years and now represents an ethnic patchwork of communities living uneasily side-by-side. Along the many interface areas that exist, stone-throwing and other types of bating and confrontation between young people from neighboring communities continues to take place.

Such continuing levels of sectarian violence present themselves as a major threat to the positioning of the new Belfast and it is this that provides the basis for the generation, sporadically, of moral panics in a very similar vein to that originally reported by Cohen (1980). As epitomized in the news article below, deviant youth have become the ‘folk devils’, coming to stand for all that is (or was) bad about Belfast and their deviance, in turn, provides the basis for calls for more, and harsher, police measures:

'Robust' attacks response pledged

Sectarian violence in north Belfast will be met by a "very robust" response from the security forces, NIO minister Shaun Woodward has said.

Mr Woodward was speaking after a night of violence in which homes and police officers were attacked with petrol bombs and other missiles.

"The police are doing their very best, there are arrests that are being made.

"But let's be clear about this, there also has to be a response from the community as well," Mr Woodward said.

"I've read reports of youngsters under the age of 10, some maybe as young as six, involved in some of the violence over last weekend. It requires all of us to be involved in this."

Petrol bombs and other missiles were thrown at police during Wednesday night's disturbances. The home of a couple aged in their 70s was one of



Petrol bomb attacks have taken place over several nights

a number of houses in Alliance Avenue also targeted by petrol bombers.

The man was taken to hospital suffering shock after four devices were thrown.

Rival gangs of youths clashed in the Twaddle, Cranbrook and Ardoyne areas but there were no reports of any injuries.

Police said up to 30 youths threw paint, golf balls and a smaller number of petrol bombs at officers in the Brompton and Cranbrook areas. [...]

[Source: BBC News Website, August 25, 2005]

What is interesting in this news piece, however, and what represents an underlying theme to a significant portion of news coverage of similar events is the reference to younger children. This is evident, for example, in the following more recent news article that appeared in the provincial newspaper, *Belfast Telegraph*, reporting another episode of violence in north Belfast. As can be seen, not only are '10 year olds' named explicitly once more as perpetrators of violence but also – through the pronouncements of the Judge – that violence is located firmly with the old Belfast and the past:

Grow up, judge tells rioters

Seven men from north Belfast who admitted their role in a riot which broke out as a result of children as young as 10 throwing stones have escaped being sent to jail.

Six of the accused are from the loyalist Tiger's Bay area of the city, while the seventh man is from the nationalist New Lodge.

The six men from Tiger's Bay - who were branded "dinosaurs" and told to "grow up" by Judge Piers Grant - were each handed community service orders whilst sentencing of the seventh

man was deferred for six months.

Belfast Crown Court heard the disturbance broke out at a sectarian interface on North Queen Street on August 13 last year following a parade to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Bobby Sands and the Hunger Strikers.

A crowd of up to 70 people became involved in the riot after children from the New Lodge began throwing stones.

The factions clashed at the junction of Duncairn Gardens and the incident was captured on CCTV.

[Source: Belfast Telegraph, May 24, 2007]

The nature of the threat posed by children and youths in these areas goes much further than just the perpetuation of sectarian divisions but present a threat to the very structure of society. This has been evident, for example, in the reporting of attacks experienced by emergency services who have entered these areas. As the following article illustrates:

Firefighters Targeted in Attacks

Firefighters were attacked five times across Northern Ireland on Sunday night, the Fire Brigade has said.

One officer was hit by a stone and a fire engine was damaged in the attacks in Belfast, Lurgan and Newtownards.

Fire officer Graham Crossett said attacks on crews are making their job very difficult. "Fortunately we had only minor damage and no injuries on these occasions, but the potential is always there for serious damage," he said.

Meanwhile, it is hoped that a campaign targeting children will help cut the number of hoax 999 calls in Northern Ireland over the Easter holiday.

Last year the Fire Brigade alone received over 700 hoax 999 calls over the Easter period, a 20% increase on the previous year.

The campaign aims to deter children between 9 and 14 years of age who are the key group for making hoax calls.

All the emergency services are taking part in the initiative.

[Source: BBC News Website, March 21, 2005]

Of course, the ultimate threat from such violence is when it directly undermines efforts to construct and promote the new Belfast. As the following article highlights:

Belfast bus tour suspended after sectarian incidents

An open-decked bus tour on Belfast's Falls Road has been suspended following a number of sectarian incidents.

The tour normally takes tourists on a historical trip around the area.

This week, however, people on a bus privately hired by a Protestant college threw bottles at

republican memorials and shouted sectarian abuse at passers by.

In apparent retaliation, missiles were thrown at a bus yesterday, terrifying Spanish, American and Australian tourists.

[Source: Belfast Telegraph, November 2, 2007]

It can be seen from the above news coverage that younger children would appear to occupy a contradictory role in relation to these moral panics. While their reported engagement in the violence clearly plays a symbolic role in representing the threat of the old Belfast beginning to reassert itself and undermine the new, re-imagined city, it would be wrong to see them simply as cast as folk devils in the sense Cohen (1980) originally outlined. In particular, they are not just the 'deviant other' that represents all that is wrong with society. Rather, the significance of their position – as children – is that they also represent the future. It is precisely for this reason that the potential contamination of the future by the past – as represented by children's involvement in sectarian violence – is so powerful a construction. It is for this reason that the main burden of responsibility for their participation in deviant behaviour is placed on the adults involved who are either seen to be purposely using children as pawns in their own sectarian

battles or, as parents, who are denigrated for their negligence. As part of another news report, for example, a local councilor was reported as saying:

"Those carrying out these attacks are young kids whose parents seem to be abdicating their parental responsibility. We know they seem to start around 2pm to 3pm and are over by five when they leave by bus. Why aren't their parents asking; 'Where were you during that time?'"

Councillor Helen Quigley said today that parents must shoulder responsibility.

She added: "The question that must be asked is what are these young people doing there? Do their parents know, and why not if they don't?"

"There seemed to be a lot of young girls involved in the fights which is disturbing."

[Source: Belfast Telegraph, September 19, 2005]

In the study of moral panics such as those described above, one of the things that tends to be relatively neglected – especially when those panics are about children – is how the subjects of the moral panics actually tend to read and make sense of them. The remainder of this paper will draw upon data from a qualitative study of 10-11 year old children in Belfast in an attempt to begin to explore how the types of moral panics described above come to inform the experiences and perspectives of the children themselves (see Connolly and Neill, 2001; Connolly and Healy, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). In doing this it is clear that social class can play a key role in mediating these experiences and perspectives. It is for this reason that two brief case studies have been chosen involving children from affluent, middle class areas of Belfast and children living in those 'ethnic ghettos' whose participation in the stone-throwing and sporadic violence places them at the centre of the moral panics described above.

Middle Class Children

Middle class children's relationship with Belfast as a city tends to reflect their economic and social position and the privileges, opportunities and diversity of experiences that this brings. As outlined in detail elsewhere (see Connolly and Healy, 2004a), the middle class children in this study tended to have little conception of neighborhood or emotional attachment to a particular locality. Rather, and insofar as they had any sense of place, their 'neighborhood' was simply the city of Belfast itself. Their social activities tended to be located in a number of places across Belfast and their sense of the whole of Belfast as being their neighborhood was gained through the regular journeys they made in their parents' cars from school to after-school clubs to musical, drama and dance activities to sporting activities to the homes of friends and relatives. Indeed for many, Belfast was simply a staging post with their future aspirations often lying elsewhere. Many of these themes of privilege and opportunity and the lack of significance given to locality or neighborhood (even at the broader level of the city of Belfast) are captured in the following discussion where the boys were considering their futures:

Brian: I want to be a vet

Mark: Do you...I used to want to be a vet

Sean: I want to be a Psychiatrist

[...]

Mark: If I wasn't into sport I think I'd be a designer

Sean: Or a games tester that would be cool [*laughter*]

Mark: Or design games

Brian: Or if I don't become a vet I would like to be a food critic because you get free food
[*laughter*]

Mark: Oh no we'd have to read about you in the paper, reviewing somewhere like a chocolate
factory [*laughter*]

Sean: It would be 'Brian says'

[...]

Brian: I know I just jump onto the sofa when I get home...Do you know if I study to be a vet will take seven years which means I will have been at school for 21 years [...] I won't be out of college until I'm 25

[...]

Interviewer: What University would you like to go to Brian, do you think you'll stay in Northern Ireland?

Brian: Well I have to leave because no Univerity here does Vetinary Science so I'll go to either UCD in Dublin or Cork

[...]

Mark: I'll probably go to England or maybe Edinburgh University

Sean: Yes so out of the 21 hundred Universities in England which one will you pick?

Mark: Erm....

Sean: Somewhere near the sea so then I could go scuba diving

Mark: Yeah cool

Sean: Sure you can leave school when you're 16?

Interviewer: That's right

Brian: But that's so stupid because you won't really get a good job or anything because you don't have any qualifications

[...]

Mark: I'd like to experience traveling the whole world

For these children, the moral panics that emerge sporadically regarding sectarian violence in their own city would seem to just represent background noise to be ignored:

Interviewer: What about stuff about Northern Ireland – do you ever listen to news about Northern Ireland?

Jemma: Depends what it's about

Interviewer: What do you mean Jemma?

Jemma: It's usually about violence and stuff, so ...

[...]

Interviewer: So what do you do then?

Jemma: Turn it over because it's always about violence and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Does that upset you?

Jemma: No – it's just I'm fed up with hearing it.

For other children, while they are clearly aware of the news coverage of the violence, they have little understanding of what is actually going on as illustrated in the following:

Philip: I don't know what it was but I heard something about a riot in north Belfast

Interviewer: Did anybody else hear about that? Michael did you?

Michael: I just heard that people had started fighting them and throwing petrol bombs.

Interviewer: Did you see anything or was this something that you heard?

Philip: I heard about it on the news.

Interviewer: Who started it have you any idea? Thomas do you know anymore about it?

Thomas: It might have been a sectarian something

Interviewer: Do you know what that means 'sectarian'? Have you talked about it?

Thomas: It has something to do with Northern Ireland's two groups. Like Rangers and Celtic.

Interviewer: When you say sectarian what else would it cover

Thomas: I don't know I've only heard it at the football matches

For most of these children, the main effect of these moral panics is simply to construct particular (working class) areas as 'bad' and to be avoided as one boy illustrates in the following comments:

Richard: My Mum keeps locking the doors of the car any time we are in a bad area. I think she's worried because one time she got her handbag stolen – this guy was pretending to sell newspapers and he opened the car door and said: "Do you want to buy a newspaper?" and snatched her bag and ran away.

In general, little attempt is made by these children to distinguish between the activity of general criminals or paramilitary groups or even, within this, between different paramilitary organizations. Rather, the children simply tend to label particular areas as 'bad' and to associate them with all types of violent and criminal behavior. This is also evident in the following discussion where one of the children (Luke) is talking about the shop his mother owns in an interface area:

Luke: My mum owns a shop there, it's dangerous

Interviewer: Why?

Luke: No matter what they have it's ruined. She got a big new shutter put on and they burnt a hole in it and they were poking big poles through it

[others laugh]

[...]

Luke: Yeah, it's crazy...red, white and blue and UVF everywhere

Interviewer: So why do people up here not do that?

[...]

Luke: Well I think people up here all more politer than further on down and that's what makes the difference

Interviewer: When you say 'more politer' what do you mean?

Steve: Like better/

Luke: /Like more sensible/

Steve: /We know how to look after things

The way in which these moral panics come to pick out and bestow notoriety on certain neighborhoods is also evident in the following discussion where the boys had mentioned the Shankill Road (a notorious Protestant/loyalist area in west Belfast):

Interviewer: So is the Shankill Road a Protestant area?

John: Yeah

Interviewer: So would you have any friends from there?

All: NO!

Rod: [*very definitely*] No!

Interviewer: Why not?

Rod: I just don't go down there

John: I try and avoid those kinds of areas. The nearest I would go to there is when I go to the Leisure Centre/

For these children, they feel completely disassociated with the violence and the ethnic divisions that underpin these. In this sense, while they nominally accept that they are Catholic or Protestant, these labels have little explicit meaning to them as the following boys state:

Gerry: It's all a waste of time really

Interviewer: What is?

Gerry: All this talk about religion

Luke: I know...I mean who cares really/

Gerry: /I know it doesn't really have anything to do with us

These are also sentiments shared by the following boys who also, and as can be seen, reproduce some of the discourses associated with the moral panics outlined earlier, especially in relation to the culpability of parents:

Neil: You see people fighting say Protestants fighting against Catholics it's just a different way of praising. It doesn't really make much difference, you know we are all just a different religion. Just because someone has a different religion doesn't mean that you can't be friends with them.

Interviewer: Yeah Neil

Lawrence: Some of the parents are bringing up some of the children to like hate say ...Protestants are being brought up to hate the Catholic. So sometimes it's the parents fault maybe.

Interviewer: Do you think there is anything you can do about that?

Lawrence: The parents could go to like counselling and stop them being aggressive because people have a different religion

Underpinning these constructions of certain areas within Belfast as 'bad' is an explicit and derisive discourse that both constructs these areas as working class and also positions all that is working class as the cultural other. This is certainly an undercurrent in the following discussion where the boys are discussing the Shankill Road area of Belfast:

Luke: It's dangerous

Interviewer: Why?

Luke: No matter what they have it's ruined.

[others laugh]

Steve: It's crazy ... [they've painted] red, white and blue and UVF everywhere

[all talk at once]

Interviewer: So why do people up here not do that?

Steve: Well maybe we will do that during the summer!

Interviewer: Would you do that?

Steve: Well if they're doing all that/

Luke: /I know ... well I think people up here are all more politer than [over there] and that's what makes the difference

Interviewer: When you say 'more politer' what do you mean?

Steve: Like better/

Luke: /Like more sensible/

Steve: /We know how to look after things

However, this discourse of derision soon comes to pathologize all of the working class people living in those areas as illustrated in the following discussion where the girls are talking about children they had met from a school in north Belfast – Aston Primary School (pseudonym) – as part of an inter-school links project:

Gerry: Every time I've been out with Aston there has been something that happened, like one of them pushed and slapped me the last time

Interviewer: Really?

Gerry: Yeah, and they kept stealing my hat on the bus

Interviewer: Did you get chatting with any of them?

John: No you wouldn't, because ... they just act tough and ...you'd just end up backing down

Interviewer: Why do you think they act tough?

John: It's just the way they be/

Gerry: It's to make them look cool

John: Yeah ... and they wear all these necklaces and big rings, golden ones and all/

Gerry: Yeah rings!

John: The only rings that I would like are the ones in Fresh Garbage [*an alternative clothes shop in the centre of Belfast*]

Gerry: The only I've saw and I liked was it was silver and it had a wee tiny eyeball on it

The way in which these children have constructed themselves as above the violence and sectarian divisions and thus as essentially different from the people who engage in this, as outlined earlier, is clearly evident in the above discussion. The tendency to pathologise the children from Aston Primary School as rough and criminal is also evident in the following discussion among another group of children who were also talking about some of the children from Aston:

Marie: There was one [girl] called Linda, she was very nice.

Suzanne: Marie you always find nice people! ...on the first day I got stuck with this boy, you know for partners and he was like/

Marie: /*[using really broad Belfast accent]* And they're all called things like 'Blackie, Punchie, Speedie' *[laughter]* Aren't they?

Suzanne: *[same accent]* Jimbo! *[laughter]* And the way they talked *[laughter]* And then there was this wee boy who wore a hood with a hat on top of it!

Marie: Oh yeah *[laughter]*. Maybe he put the hat on to keep his hood up! *[laughter]*.

Working Class Children and 'Sectarian Ghettos'

While living in the same city, and often only a few miles apart, the social realities of many working class children living in ethnically segregated areas in north Belfast are worlds apart from the middle class children described above. For these children, it is not surprising to find that they have a very clear sense of locality and emotional attachment to the particular neighborhoods they live in. For many, this identification with their immediate locality is not a simple lifestyle choice but the internalization and taken-for-granted acceptance of the realities of living in an ethnically segregated area. In such circumstances, being explicitly aware of the boundaries of your own area is essential for personal safety. As the following girls explain:

Interviewer: Christine can you finish what you were saying about why you never go over to [the neighbouring loyalist estate]?

Christine: Cos you'd get beaten up!

Interviewer: Why?

Christine: Cos we're Catholics! *[said as if this was self-evident]*.

Interviewer: How do the people there know that, how do they know you're not from there?

Christine: I know, that's what I always say/

Anne Marie: /I know but you're walking from that there direction.

Interviewer: And even if you were alone, would you get into bother?

Anne Marie: Probably ... yes. My brother got beaten up by Orangies by goin over.

Interviewer: Was he on his own?

Anne Marie: *[Nods]*.

Interviewer: And if someone from there came over here would they get beaten up?

All: Yeah *[Christine laughs]*.

The sense of danger that some of the children felt when they did venture out of their local area is also illustrated by the same two girls in comments made later in the interview:

Anne Marie: See I used to always go down the town and I went in til [*names a Loyalist area*], me and our Orla, and because it was quicker than goin around. We cut through this here wee alley thing and we were walking down the street and this wee fella said you's better go cos they're gonna beat you up for no reason and we had to run and hide in the alley and all. And they all just run past us chasing somebody [*else*]!

Christine: Frig!

Moreover, for some of the children interviewed, their experience was one of feeling under siege. As two of the boys explained, there was a constant fear of attack – a fear exacerbated by the lack of trust in the 'peelers' (local police) who are commonly believed by many within their local Catholic community to be a partisan, Protestant force:

Declan: They just come down and shoot you through the windies [*windows*].

Thomas: It's easier for them to get guns so it is.

Declan: Prods⁷ always make the guns so they do. Nearly all the Orange people make the guns [...] because the peelers are Protestants and all peelers are like Orange people and all Protestants make their guns.

This level of anxiety was also found among the boys as illustrated in the following discussion among some Catholic boys who recounted a story of when they were driven up the notoriously Protestant and loyalist Shankill Road:

Michael: We drove past [the Shankill Road] with [the youth club] going to Mallusk. We were driving past the Shankill and Pat had a flattened tyre and we had to get out and fix it.

Interviewer: Were you not worried?

Liam: Yeah I was geeking [*hiding from*] them like! Sitting in the car like that there [*pretends to hide*]. Do you know Tommy lives up [near us]? [...] Well him and his daddy were down and he had a mate and he was blocked [*drunk*] and they were in the back and they were in the Shankill and they had a busted tyre and this man walked past said: "Do you need help there?" and he said "aye!" So he said to him, "Could you get me a new tyre" or something. "No I can't do that, but I can try to get you a couple of wheels like" so they pushed him down onto the Shankill Road and I don't know about where he told us anyway, the man that was blocked waked up and said where are we now and our Tommy said we were at the Shankill Road and the Shankills pushed us down and he didn't believe us and all.

Part of this increased sense of threat is undoubtedly due to the fact that many of the children, by this age, have direct experience of participating in clashes with children from the other side. Indeed, stone-throwing and sporadic violence had become a routine and taken-for-granted part of life for some of the children and thus was embedding itself in their habitus. This is illustrated in the following discussion where, because of the ritualised nature of incidents such as the one being discussed, they also tend to provide a source of humour and a wealth of stories to tell:

Shauna: There's Orangies up there [*at the field*] ...see the Orangies, there was a big riot and they had bricks and daggers/

Debbie: /The Peelers and all came [...] Didn't the peelers chase us and not chase them uns [*the Protestants*]?

Shauna: Aye [*angrily*]. The Peelers drove up and/

Debbie: /And we didn't even start it.

Interviewer: Did they start it?

Debbie: Yeah and the Peelers had the cheek to chase us and not them uns.

Shauna: The Peelers came up and went WHAA! [*shouts*] like, and we had built a wee road so they couldn't past, so they couldn't chase us and the broke it... cos/

Debbie: /They had the cheek to chase us and not them uns

Interviewer: Does this happen often?

Debbie: Most of the time.

[...]

Shauna: I didn't go up, I'll tell you why, cos I was too scared of getting killed.

Debbie: You do be afraid/

Shauna: /I just stand back and watch them going [*shouting*] "Go On! Go On!". See one time we went up and they all hid behind trees, all the Catholics hid behind trees and all, and here's me [*shouts very loudly*] 'Peelers!' and they all came running out and there wasn't even any Peelers or nothing! All you could see was all these wee white tops and Celtic tops all running from everywhere.

This greater sense of threat and of the importance of territory could also explain the more indepth and detailed knowledge that the children were also able to demonstrate in relation to local paramilitary organisations in their areas. The Protestant children showed an awareness of the diversity of opinion and groups within Loyalist paramilitarism. Many were familiar with the divisions within these groups and the history of the Loyalist feud that reached a head towards the end of the fieldwork (i.e. the summer of 2000). In the following conversation, Robert and Martin (both Protestant) discuss one of the incidents they had witnessed personally on the Shankill Road during the Loyalist feud:

Robert: And then the UVF started shooting in the air, and everybody ran and it was mad, and they were in the Bar blocked the way off and [...] we got as far as there [the chip shop] and some woman gave us a lift up and see five days after that I was still scared.

[...]

Martin: ... and then when it all started [the feud] we didn't go down again [to the Shankill Road] for about two months, that was the next time you saw us down the Road.

Many of the Protestant children spent a significant amount of time discussing the Loyalist feud and demonstrated some awareness and understanding of its history and nature. In the following, Elaine and Gillian (both Protestant) discuss the implications and complexity of being aligned to one group or the other.

Elaine: Miss, know the way when all the fighting was on the UDA was fighting with the UVF [...]. And do you know what I think would be smart, just going altogether Miss.

Interviewer: Why do you think that?

Gillian: Know who I hate? Johnny Adair and Michael Stone, I hate them uns.

[...]

Elaine: Somebody says they're Johnny Adair's cousin ... who is it?

Gillian: Sonia

Elaine: Sonia! But Sonia likes the UVF!

Later in the same conversation Gillian tells us how she would like a UVF mural on the side wall of her house:

Interviewer: And what would it [*the mural*] be of?

Gillian: Probably people with a gun, know like my daddy's picture/

Elaine: /Her next-door neighbour is in the UDA too!

[...]

Interviewer: How do you know they're in the UDA?

Gillian: Cos ... they have the flag and all in their house and know Mack, he's never out of their house [...]

Elaine: So if you get that UVF thing there and about 10 UDA people walk past your house and all that fighting starts again you'd get thrown out of your house.

Gillian: I wouldn't/

Elaine: /People told me you were getting thrown out of your house.

As illustrated in this last discussion, the presence of paramilitary organisations in their respective local areas was a fact of life for many of these children. It was a normal and take-for-granted part of their social worlds and formed part of their worldview or habitus. For some of the children, this led to them developing a strong identification with particular paramilitary groups. This was especially the case for the boys who spent a significant amount of time discussing the presence and activities of local paramilitaries in their area. As can be seen in the following discussion that took place between James, Paul and Thomas (all Catholics), they were also attempting to gain status by claiming knowledge of individual IRA men in the area:

Thomas: The Provies [*i.e. Provisional IRA*] give out these wee lists of people in the park who are like are smoking and drinking, know like teenagers and that. Something about telling their mummies and all, the Provies like to stop you from sniffing [glue] and all, if they see you sniffing and all. It's a wee bit bad on the some ways and a wee bit good on others.

Paul: I like some of the things they do.

James: I like Brian/

Paul: /Aye I like Brian Smyth.

James: Brian Smyth's all right.

Paul: I like Connor.

James: Who's he?

Thomas: Black hair.

Paul: Aye he thinks he's dead important.

For these children, therefore, their local neighborhood represented the boundaries of their social worlds and tended to set the limits for their future aspirations as can be seen in the following discussion. Whereas the middle class children listed a diverse range of professional occupations they aspired to, and also spoke freely and naturally about their plans to travel in order to study at universities in Ireland, England and Scotland, this is clearly lacking in the boys' discussion below. As can be seen, their future aspirations are grounded in and constrained by their local neighborhood:

Declan: I'd like to be a footballer or sell cars.

[...]

Thomas: I'd like to be a security man or something - my daddy is a security man.

Interviewer: Does he like it?

Thomas: Yeah

Declan: [...] I'd like to be a joiner as well.

Thomas: I'd love to be a bouncer, my brother's a bouncer.

Paul: You're too small and all for it.

Interviewer: You don't know he could end up being six foot something.

Thomas: My brother's 6 foot 3.

Paul: See my uncle he's 6 foot 10 or something.

Thomas: You said he was 6 foot 3!

Paul: No. this is my other uncle he lives in England and he's a bouncer - he's built so he is.

Conclusions

In some senses, the moral panics over the sporadic outbreaks of sectarian violence in Belfast would seem to follow the same general formula outlined originally by Cohen (1980: 9):

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes less visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.

In this present case, the continuing sporadic outbreaks of sectarian violence in Belfast have come to be defined as a 'threat to societal values and interests' in the sense of potentially maintaining the grip of Belfast's sectarian past on a city that is desperate to move into a new, open and cosmopolitan future. As previously, it is the activities of deviant youth that represents the core folk devil and thus the focus for newspaper editors, politicians and judges to 'pronounce their diagnoses and solutions'. The solution, in large part, would appear to be high levels of surveillance and control – not just punitively in terms of the type of 'robust response' called for by the Northern Ireland Minister but also socially in relation to the myriad of 'community relations' programs for young people that have been attempted over the years.

Within this, the ambivalent positioning of children is interesting given that they are clearly identified as part of the problem and yet not cast as folk devils in the same way as their older counterparts. To understand this we need to understand the interplay between the political project that is attempting to envisage and create a new Belfast with the wider discourses on childhood that tend to construct children as future becomings rather than present beings (Prout and James, 1997). In this sense, the children represent Belfast's future and thus while their present activities may be deplorable, it is with them that the future success of Belfast lies. While the involvement of children in sectarian violence is symbolically very powerful – representing the ultimate threat to attempts to free Belfast once and for all from its old, sectarian past – it is not the children themselves who are to blame but the adults; whether in the guise of sectarian Neanderthals bent on continuing their sectarian poison through the next generations or the criminal neglect of parents.

In focusing on the perspectives of 10-11 children themselves and how they have come to read and reproduce these moral panics the paper has also taken this broader analysis of the playing out of moral panics in the media further in two key respects. First, and through the accounts of the middle class children, it is interesting to note how the moral panics in the media have then been appropriated, re-worked and reproduced by the children to pathologize whole neighborhoods and communities. In this case it has been shown how the children tended to link the moral panics over sectarian violence with broader derisive discourses based on stereotypical constructions of working class communities and lifestyles. Assuming that this is not just restricted to 10-11 year old children but represents a wider tendency then it raises important questions concerning the role of moral panics in Northern Ireland in not only perpetuating the notoriety of particular neighborhoods but significantly adding to the alienation and segregation of the communities living in there.

Second, and when considering the experiences and perspectives of some of the children living in those areas, it is difficult to answer the question of how they have come to read and interpret these moral panics. Given their actual experiences of sectarian violence and the very real fears and anxieties they carry with them, it is not clear whether they actually count as moral panics for these particular children. Their lives

do seem, to varying degrees, to continue to be structured by ethnic segregation and sectarianism. Of course, what makes these wider media discourses moral panics is the fact that small and isolated acts of violence tend to take on a significance far beyond their actual incidence and whole communities of children and young people come to be constructed as deviant and a threat to society whereas it is only a minority within each community actually engaging in these acts of violence.

However, and as demonstrated above, this should not be used as a reason to ignore the fact that children in particular communities continue to live under the shadow of sectarian tensions and violence. Moreover, and as seen, it is through their experiences of this that some tend to have very limited aspirations in relation to education and future careers; with the boundaries of their neighborhood representing the horizons for their imagined futures. Clearly the moral panics described in this paper can only exacerbate this not only by constructing these communities as the Other and thus contributing further to their alienation and exclusion as argued above, but also by impacting more directly on the children themselves. In this sense, while there is a reality to the threat they feel from neighboring communities, the moral panics that circulate sporadically can only exacerbate this fear and anxiety further. The extent to which fears and anxieties then become motivations for further confrontations at interface areas then, ironically, the moral panics described in this paper can only act to further perpetuate the type of sectarian violence that they so vehemently decry.

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