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Weapons as Weapons: Another Northern Ireland Impasse

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Abstract. This article explores the psychology of weapons possession in the context of political conflict in Northern Ireland.

An international consensus has formed that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) is the current culprit in impeding the Northern Ireland peace process and resolution of political conflict between unionists/loyalists and nationalists/republicans. If only the IRA would variously begin to turn in their weapons, destroy them, or otherwise put them beyond use at some acceptable rate, then peace and political conflict resolution would more closely be at hand with some sense of finality. Putting aside the observation that the finality of peace and conflict resolution is foreign to human politics, one might well challenge the consensus of IRA culpability.

First, the focus on IRA weapons implicitly suggests that other participants in the conflict either have no weapons or possess weapons that are of less threat to endangering peace and conflict resolution. Yet, virtually all participants in the conflict possess weapons or have easy access to them. And all weapons can pose significant threat. Moreover, concluding that the IRA--representing a minority grouping of the total Northern Ireland population--should obviously be the "fall guy" in a conflict with other political entities representing larger population groupings is less an obvious result of impeccable logic and reason.

Second, putting weapons beyond use in a world of weapons does not necessarily have any bearing on the military or paramilitary threat of any political entity. In fact, a sense of righteousness that one can find in attributions by First World political authorities of the IRA's alleged rigidity, stubbornness, homicidality, and the like seems ironic, if not perverse, in the context of governmental and proprietary interests--related to these same authorities--being involved in weapons trafficking in conflicts worldwide.

Third, the possession of weapons need not be an impediment to peace and conflict resolution. For example, one can argue that political adversaries may feel more confident in choosing strategies and tactics beyond the military and paramilitary if these same adversaries can retain lethal means. This premise has been the psychological foundation of nuclear deterrence in all its various forms--e.g., massive retaliation, mutually assured destruction, parity, and sufficiency.

Fourth, one can make a strong case that as salient political, social, cultural, and economic disparities attenuate, weapons employment becomes less of a rational and even irrational option. Here, weapons are conceived of not as an issue in themselves but as an index of issue management. Focusing on weapons as a primary issue can lead to the festering, exacerbation, and even creation of other issues that generate rationales for weapons employment. And this focus can sully the waters of accurate perception of the status of the pertinent issues.

Fifth, weapons possession and access to weapons may well have become a significant part of the individual and group identities of conflict participants. These identities, in turn, have developed as part

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of the psychology of the ongoing political conflict--as an adaptation or maladaptation depending on the political psychology of actors and observers. Attempts to focus on the removal of weapons may be viewed as serious threats to individual and group selves and may precipitate extreme violence--fueled by the terror of ego disintegration--not prevent it.

Sixth, psychological research suggests that illegal gun availability has a much higher linkage with violent crime and gun crime than legal availability. Thus, attempts to criminalize or otherwise render weapons possession illicit may be associate with an increase in violence not a decrease.

In conclusion, one might assert that weapons may be used as weapons to impede peace and political conflict resolution--not through their use but through demands for giving them up. (See Benson, J.F. (1995). The secret war in dis-United Kingdom: Psychological aspects of the Ulster conflict. *Group Analysis*, 28, 47-62; Cairns, E., & Darby, J. (1998). The conflict in Northern Ireland: Causes, consequences, and controls. *American Psychologist*, 53, 754-760; Coleman, G. (July 8, 2001). Arms and Irish society. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Grove, A.K., & Carter, N.A. (1999). Not all blarney is cast in stone: International cultural conflict in Northern Ireland. *Political Psychology*, 20, 725-765; Higgins, K., & McElrath, K. (2000). The trouble with peace: The cease-fires and their impact on drug use among youth in Northern Ireland. *Youth and Society*, 32, 29-59; Leach, C.W., & Williams, W. R. (1999). Group identity and conflicting expectations of the future in Northern Ireland. *Political Psychology*, 20, 875-896; Stolzenberg, L., & D'Alession, S.J. (2000). Gun availability and violent crime: New evidence from the National Incident-Based Reporting System. *Social Forces*, 78, 1461-1482; Thompson, J.L. (1989). Deprivation and political violence in Northern Ireland 1922-1985: A time-series analysis. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 33, 676-699.) (Keywords: IRA, Northern Ireland, Weapons.)