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Civil Rights

Carl Milofsky

Bucknell University, milofsky@bucknell.edu

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Civil Rights Panel, Analytic Comments

This panel is moderated by Eamonn Deane and includes Ivan Cooper, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, and Eamonn McCann. It is a dynamic, fast moving tape that is exciting to watch.

The major assertion of this panel is that the Troubles really produced no new effect and it was directed at no coherent objectives. Most of its goals could have been carried out with governance arrangements that were in place in 1973. This places the focus on a notion that the Troubles were socially constructed, both in the sense that what they were evolved as a drama with its own logic (rather than as the playing out of objective interests) and in the sense that events involved the playing out of class dynamics dominated by economic and government elites. People on the panel are self-consciously socialist and Marxist so the interpretation they offer is an interpretation of the Troubles from that perspective. What they offer is very effective.

The first 30 minutes of the tape are given over to Ivan Cooper telling his own personal history in terms of how he as a Protestant came to be a leader of the civil rights movement. The first ten minutes or so tell how he grew up in a working class Protestant family in a small town outside of Derry. The kids in his town liked to play rugby but he liked soccer and the only place to play was in the Catholic neighborhoods of Derry, so as a 12 year old he started spending a lot of time in the Bogside, staying with a family that took care of him and let him stay over. It was immediately clear to him that poverty was extreme in the Bogside and different from what he lived with. He also became childhood friends with Eamonn McCann and other people who later became leaders of the civil rights movement so it was easy and natural for him to be committed to and part of that group.

In the next 20 minutes of the tape Cooper gives a detailed history of the four years of the civil rights movement in Derry that led up to Bloody Sunday in 1972. This history is very helpful both in terms of giving the sequence of events and also conveying a sense that the movement was significantly diverse in terms of sectarian makeup and of social class. This parallels another reality, which was that residential areas were significantly integrated at that time with about 30% of Cityside neighborhoods made up of Protestants. It was the events of the troubles that created a swift and thorough segregation of the population.

At about the 30-minute mark he gives the microphone over to Bernadette who gives her personal history for about 10 minutes and then she hands the speakership over to McCann. It is striking that Bernadette is somewhat reluctant to talk about events and things she did and instead she conveys personal reflections about how she came to find herself in the middle of social movement events, how her self-consciousness as a political actor developed, and how she is perhaps a little embarrassed by her role at the same time that she clearly is proud of the political focus and very much treasures the relationships she built, especially with the two men on the panel.

At 39:20 McCann picks up on her philosophical thread but with less personal reluctance, talking about how perspectives differ between groups and also how one's perspective on events thirty years ago change because of the prism created by the history of events.

Beginning at about 45:00, McCann enters into a very important argument that the Good Friday Agreement and the power sharing government do not represent anything new compared to what was available in 1973 and thus to say that the agreement was the product of armed struggle just is not true. It raises the question, which had also been raised by Bernadette, of what the struggle was for and what had been accomplished. In their perspective there had been very little accomplished.

McCann gives a perspective that the Troubles rose out of the fabric of interactions between authorities and the masses of people. Specific events like Bloody Sunday made people angry that British troops had come into their neighborhood and shot their friends and neighbors. People also had experiences of being stopped by police and British Army and being abused and insulted. He says that these experiences caused people to get angry and to join the IRA. They took up the ideology of Irish Republicanism after they joined rather than before. But even when they were in the IRA, they did not believe in Republicanism very much.

This explanation is necessary to understand why with the Belfast Agreement people so easily accepted a governance structure that did not involve unifying the North with the Republic. There is a puzzle to be explained about why after all of the fighting and killing people were not angry at the agreement. McCann says the reason is that IRA members did not really believe in Republicanism in the first place.

He states an overall position on peace processes around the world that they have much more to do with the masses of people than with political leaders. Political leaders are easy for journalists and academics to study so accounts of peace give them lots of credit. But in reality the dynamics come out of the masses of people, people who never get their names in newspapers. This perspective echoes the views of other observers of peace processes like diplomat Harold Saunders.