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If it isn't this, What is it?

Decommissioning and Trickster Tales in the Peace Process in Northern Ireland 1998-2003

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Breaking news from Northern Ireland, "Pipe Bombs relinquished by a Loyalist paramilitary group not considered Decommissioning" (*Irish Times* 2/20/03) and "Polls reveal support for the Agreement still strong" (*Irish Times* 2/20/03) reflects the paradox of a peace process with strong support in public opinion held hostage by an issue which has no consistent name. And, not surprisingly, no one seems to agree on exactly what it is. *Decommission, disarm, put beyond use, out of commission, and most recently acts of completion* all have been used sometimes interchangeably; at other times the terms are inflected suggestive of particular meanings. In November, 1998, just seven months after the signing of The Belfast Agreement and an affirmation of the Agreement by public referenda in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, below a large profile photograph of a very reflective Gerry Adams, in *The Irish Times*, this caption appears "Mr. Gerry Adams likes to say that the armaments are 'out of commission'. Mr. Adams, is one of the principle negotiators of The Agreement, and as President of Sinn Fein, the main political connection between the peace process and the Republican paramilitaries who are considered to have the largest and most sophisticated cache of arms. The caption continued in the generally optimistic tone characteristic of media coverage in the months following the passage of The Agreement: "The clever men and women from the ministries in Dublin and London could no doubt work out a definition of decommissioning which both sides could in theory sign on to without loss of face" (de Breadun, *Irish Times*, Nov. 11, 1998). Mr. de Breadun, the Northern Ireland editor for the *Irish Times* from 1997-2000 in an epilogue to his very detailed account of the peace process, *The Far Side of Revenge*, adds, "As I write efforts are underway to lance the decommissioning boil, once and for all." (de Breadun 2001, 363). Judging by his metaphor for decommissioning, Mr. de Breadun's tone toward this issue has clearly changed from 1998-2001. In the index to his book about the Peace Process, there are almost four times as many references to decommissioning as there are to the Agreement. And for others who have tracked this issue (see the Cain project), this seems to be a reliable representation. Though decommissioning once seemed no more daunting than issues of nationality and devolved government, it now seems to suggest the Trickster at work in its ability to deflect the Peace Process and threaten the Agreement. If the issue of decommissioning is recognized for the Trickster it seems to be, and as one deriving from the original narratives of Northern Ireland, then paradoxically its performance may strengthen the process and the Agreement..

The Agreement is a unique narrative particularly as the product of a political process. Owing much of its multi-strand, open-ended structure to modernist narrative

Trickster's Way Vol 2

its language is “indebted to post colonial theory, to recent forms of Irish criticism” (Kiberd 2000, 628). The Agreement is a cultural narrative, one that in its relatively short existence has constructed new realities and deconstructed old ones that only a short time ago would have been thought unimaginable. It has for instance, redefined the concept of cultural identity enabling the people of Northern Ireland to declare themselves both British and Irish rather than either /or. The Agreement models the kind of society it seeks to generate and reflect and has in many ways already transcended the old narratives representing “two powerful cultures in constant contention in Ireland after 1600” (Kiberd 2000, xiii). In Northern Ireland, the dominant narrative since the 1600s has been that of the Protestant Unionists. The Agreement does not seek to reconcile the cultural narratives in contention, the largely Catholic Nationalist and Protestant Unionist. The organizing metaphor of The Agreement as ‘strands’ provides cultural and political space for each of them. The structure of The Agreement as it is written avoids win-lose polarities. And, in the processes laid out for its implementation, it also avoids linearity toward end points specifying closures which might subvert what is seen as an ongoing process. However, early in the peace process, which ultimately led to The Agreement, the decommissioning issue so inscribed itself that the newly implemented Northern Ireland Assembly and shared Executive of Northern Ireland has been suspended repeatedly. A number of other highly significant elements of The Agreement have been implemented such as the reorganization and highly controversial renaming of the police force, what had been The Royal Ulster Constabulary, to The Police Force of Northern Ireland. However, the devolved government that returned the administration of Northern Ireland to Belfast after having been more or less constantly administered from Westminster since the 1970s is, once again at this writing, Spring 2003, in suspension because seemingly having been derailed by the decommissioning issue. Known by its various names, and taking various shapes, *decommissioning*, is widely regarded as the trickster in the peace process in Northern Ireland-- and it may be *whatever it is*. The issue carries enormous political and emotional weight. And there is certainly political capital in keeping some ambiguity in the issue even as a means of buying time. Given the inadequacy of the political narrative to either explain or cope with its intransigence, the explanation is more likely to be found in the cultural narrative. But it is the assertion of this analysis that the narratives feeding the trickster-like element called decommissioning that may indeed be the real tricksters. Neither the ‘clever folks’ from the ministries who put pen to paper nor anyone else have yet discovered agreeable language to describe this elusive element. But why it continues to play the trickster in the peace process may owe as much or more to competing cultural narratives and their linguistic protocols than to pragmatic political processes. Although the material existence of arms is problematic whatever their disposition, in the present stage of Northern Ireland's Peace Process given the enormously transformative changes already implemented by The Agreement, the political will and public support demonstrated for its continued implementation, it would seem feasible to find a means of coping with this name changing, shape changing element.

Implied and stated, the presence of originary narratives in the construction of ideas of decommissioning and responses to them points to the continued power of these narratives as collective memory and as active constructors of group identity in Northern Ireland. What are these narratives, these stories, and to what do they owe their formidable power in the present? Originary narratives for the Nationalists of

Northern Ireland, focus on two themes: separation and loss. The separation motif is 'pre-historic' and spatial citing the separation of this land of Ireland from the continental land mass, an Ice Age event. It is reported that... in political-education classes conducted by imprisoned Republican paramilitaries in the late 1970s, the current political schisms of Northern Ireland were traced to this... geological division." (Feldman 1991, 17) This separation event out of time is generative of all that follow, and like comparable theological narratives not subject to appeal. Events in historical time follow from this event and repeat the separation motif with consequent loss. Repeated colonization beginning in the 1100s point to what, in the conversational discourse of many, are the events of just yesterday, the 1600s. These are the narratives of cultural loss that 'metamorphize as history' (Feldman 1991, 18). They are the ready stories of loss put out in many forms for the traveler and the scholar alike, lamenting the loss of Gaelic society and with that the loss of the language, of Gaelic associated with British colonization. Loss of the language despite the social science data which may or may not support its relevance to contemporary events, and would seem remote from what is seen as the real politic of an issue like *decommissioning*, is very real and very powerful for some who are negotiating this issue. And it is equally potent for many who support them like Irish Americans whose metamorphosis of Irish history may be some generations removed from those living on the island. One event distilled my experiential understanding of the very intimate and powerful connection between the narrative linking the 'loss of language' with the continuation of efforts to recover that loss. Gerry Adams spoke at a small university in the rather unlikely geographical venue of South Texas. The audience was the largest I had ever seen at such an event and the atmosphere in the auditorium as highly charged as the violent thunderstorm visible in the windows behind the speaker. Questions and comments from the audience, often in halting Gaelic, clearly made with great effort and emotion made to a speaker for whom English is 'first' if not 'native' language—this is the power of cultural narrative.

What is the significance of decommissioning to the cultural narrative and how is it being signified? First, and perhaps foremost, the narratives must be kept open. And this is the territory of the trickster—keeping the narrative open. Closure almost certainly invites conflict because in this narrative the recovery of loss must be seen to be ongoing. It is considered by some as 'war' signified by 'No Surrender' where that view still prevails. However, in the view of a prominent Irish writer and critic from Northern Ireland, The Agreement provides a means of 'giving something up now in order to get something back in the future' (Seamus Deane 1998 Interview 28 April). Decommissioning in the Peace Process in Northern Ireland is a narrative in and of itself and control or at least the appearance of controlling that narrative is imperative. One of the most significant events in the decommissioning narrative is noteworthy in relation to the narrative of world events. This occurred in October 2001, a little over a month after 9/11. On 18 October Unionist ministers resigned from the Northern Ireland Executive citing lack of movement on the decommissioning issue. On 23 October the following appeared in *The New York Times*, "Sinn Fein, for First Time Asks IRA to Break with History and Begin Disarming" and on the same day in *The Irish Times*, "IRA Announced a Process to Put its Arms Beyond Use". On 24 March 2003 just days after U.S. and British movement into Iraq, an article in the *The Irish Times* reports "... Efforts to agree on a package of measures to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly... would only come into effect once the IRA and other

Trickster's Way Vol 2

paramilitaries have carried out “acts of completion” to the satisfaction of the Independent International Decommissioning Board.’ Another metamorphosis, at least in representation, “acts of completion” suggests a metamorphosis in the narrative—but pluralizing act(s) does not point to the specificity of closure.

That this one shape-changing issue so dominates the Peace Process in Northern Ireland suggests the Trickster at work. But the presence of the Trickster does not surprise anyone who knows the literary, folkloric or historical narratives of Ireland. Trickster figures are pervasive throughout Ireland and the Irish have been represented in British literature and popular culture as Tricksters at least since Shakespeare. And it is in Shakespeare’s time, with the colonization of Ireland by the British, that the Irish may have seen the survival of their cultural narratives as dependent on a tricksterish ability to change shape. Perhaps the greatest of all shape changers in Irish literature is Cuchulain, the mythological hero of what is known as the Ulster cycle, a reference to the setting of Cuchulain’s Tales. Cuchulain, the Trickster, the hero of Gaelic literature, so essential to Nationalist narrative is also celebrated by Ulster’s Loyalist paramilitaries as, “protector of the province.” (Kiberd x)

Decommissioning?

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