

VICTIMS, SURVIVORS, AND THE RECONCILIATION PARADIGM

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Abstract

Most scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding and transitional justice tend to work under what I refer to as the reconciliation paradigm. This paradigm accepts the contention that difficult pasts can and should be mediated in order to enable a peaceful and just co-existence. Yet critical scholars of transition regimes point out that reconciliation can be instrumentalised by powerful actors invested in 'drawing a line' under contentious pasts. Others argue that reconciliatory discourses minimise transitional legal and institutional inadequacies.

This paper calls attention to the ways in which the reconciliation paradigm can impose a dominant temporality on victims and survivors. This imposition takes the form of widespread social and political expectations and pressures to 'move on' or reconcile to the post-conflict status quo. In this context, the reconciliation paradigm is viewed with deep scepticism by many victim and survivor communities in Northern Ireland. Many understand the paradigm as domesticating and depoliticising; an entreaty to abandon the types of political struggles that upset or inconvenience transitional governance. This paper ultimately reminds scholars and practitioners that, for reconciliation to be salvaged, it must not be allowed to become an instrument of 'closing the books' on the past.

KEYWORDS: *Reconciliation; temporality; Northern Ireland; transitional justice.*

Reconciliation 'is' dead

In 2019, the hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en Nation rejected the construction of the multi-billion dollar Coastal GasLink pipeline through their traditional land in northern British Columbia (Canada). When the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau refused to cease construction of the pipeline, much of Canada was gripped by a series of Indigenous-led 'land protection' actions, including blockades, encampments, and occupations. Land protection was a tactic that proved highly disruptive to the Canadian government and Canadian economy, as protestors occupied not only sections of the proposed pipeline route, but a series of other crucial transport infrastructure points throughout Canada. Many of the banners unveiled at these occupations carried a stark and provocative slogan, one that quickly became the semi-official slogan of land protectors inspired by the Wet'suwet'en struggle: 'Reconciliation is dead.'¹

The slogan particularly refers to the Canadian official Truth and Reconciliation process,

1. The most well-known of these occupations was the Unist-ot'en Camp along the proposed pipeline route. See <https://unistoten.camp/reconciliationisdead/>.

active from 2008–2015, which was established to document and acknowledge the lasting harm of the Canadian Indian Residential School system. However, for many Indigenous Canadians, the government's continuing recourse to force to extract resources from indigenous land reveals that the reconciliation process was little more than an exercise in liberal public relations by successive Canadian governments (Talaga 2020). Scholars allege that the concept of reconciliation has been similarly abused in a variety of other post-conflict and post-colonial contexts (Short 2008; Wilson 2001) including Northern Ireland (McGrattan 2016; Robinson 2020). While Canada's conceptual framework of 'reconciliation' is not coterminous with Northern Ireland, this paper argues that 'reconciliation is dead' carries with it a stark warning for other societies struggling to deal with the legacies of historical violence.

Following Damien Short (2005), I argue that both scholarly and practice-based understandings of transitional justice and peacebuilding are underwritten by the 'reconciliation paradigm,' or a widespread acceptance that the memory, commemoration, and operationalisation of violent, colonial, oppressive, and/or unjust pasts must be mediated to produce a future predicated on tolerance, liberal values and co-existence. Here, the multiple meanings of the word 'reconciliation' come into play. On one hand, 'to reconcile' can mean 'to restore (a person) to friendly relations with oneself or another.' This is traditionally how reconciliation has been thought of in transitional justice and related disciplines, especially in those disciplines inflected with Christian origins (e.g. Lederach 1999; 1997). But 'to reconcile' can also mean 'to bring (a person) into a state of acquiescence with, acceptance or, or submission to a thing, situation, etc.'² For many survivors of historical violence, oppression, or injustice, such as the Wet'suwet'en and other Indigenous peoples (see Corntassel and Holder 1998; Short 2012) the second definition of reconciliation has overtaken the first. The reconciliatory paradigm risks becoming an engine of imposed forgetting, depoliticisation, and political domestication; a demand that survivors of political violence 'acquiesce or submit to' the post-conflict *status quo*.

This short paper will first examine the theoretical roots of the reconciliatory paradigm before moving to a specific, if cursory, treatment of how the paradigm arrived in and has been applied to Northern Ireland's post-conflict space. Drawing on several years of work with victims and survivors of political violence in Northern Ireland, I argue that reconciliation in Northern Ireland is increasingly becoming a cynical cover for political-institutional failings and a purposefully ambiguous signifier. I conclude by reflecting on whether the promise of reconciliation can be salvaged from the more instrumental and depoliticising aspects of the reconciliation paradigm.

2. Both definitions taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, Online.

Memory and the reconciliation paradigm

The roots of the reconciliation paradigm are diverse, with many different theoretical, philosophical, and spiritual starting-points, however, the paradigm coalesces and turns on a specific form of *temporality*, namely, that the 'past' should be mediated, harnessed, or 'worked-through' in order to better serve the future. While few argue that the violent or harmful past should be collectively forgotten (but see Reiff 2016), philosophers as diverse as Ernst Renan, Friedrich Nietzsche, Desmond Tutu, and Paul Ricoeur have all argued that the possibilities of different collective futures depend on selectively forgetting of aspects of a difficult past. In the reconciliation paradigm, the past can be reimagined in order to become 'usable' (Olick 2007). Ricoeur (2004), for example, argues those aspects of the past that stand for justice and presage the possibility of narrative hospitality and productive encounter should be retained and championed, those that do not, selectively transcended.

This futurity is a near constant throughout modern philosophies of reconciliation. Rigby (2001, 12) asserts that '[reconciliation] refers to the future,' and is 'the preparedness of people to anticipate a shared future.' For Bar-Tal (2009, 363), reconciliation is the evolution of a new 'social repertoire' 'that can serve as a basis for a culture of peace.' For still others, reconciliation consists of 'transforming the relations between rival sides, from hostility and resentment, to friendly and harmonious relations' (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004, 72). Major debates and criticisms exist within the reconciliation paradigm, including should reconciliation be thought of as a process or an outcome (Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004), whether or not reconciliation depends on widespread cultural, relational and attitudinal change in a given society (Humphrey 2012), and the role and alleged necessity of 'forgiveness' within the reconciliatory paradigm (Hamber 2007). However, there is little internal debate within the paradigm over the necessity of 'mediating' a 'usable past,' what Graham Dawson terms 'reparative memory' (2007) or what John Brewer (2010) refers to as 're-remembering for the future.' As Rigney argues, transitional justice and peace studies have accepted as virtually axiomatic the belief that 'the mediated production of common memory narratives can and should be "engineered" (orchestrated, managed) in order to become productive of a peaceful and just co-existence' (2012, 251–2). Even more agonistic and radical perspectives remain deeply wedded to reconciliation's potential emancipatory futurity (e.g. Schaap 2005).

Thus, while the dominant view within transitional justice is that reconciliation (and forgiveness) cannot be imposed on a subject or on a subject population, reconciliation does privilege futurist temporalities and usable pasts. The reconciliation paradigm hinges on a specific type of *chrononormativity*, the imposition of a default or a proper means of temporal progression (Freeman 2010). Temporalities of transition tend to demand a 'clean break' with the past, the temporal separation of a past characterised by violence, colonialism, or authoritarianism, and an idealised tolerant, liberal, reconciled future (Robinson 2020; 2018). For survivors who see the wounds of the past as still radically present and unresolved, or those who do not accept official and often-

artificially delineated temporal periods for grief and mourning, the chrononormativity of the reconciliation paradigm projects them into spaces of 'permanent liminality,' where they are forever 'out-of-step with' or 'backwards' in terms of the dominant temporalities of transition (Murphy and McDowell 2019; Mueller-Hirth 2017).

Much in Northern Ireland has been made of the so-called hierarchy of victims' debate, or the argument that some victims of violence, due generally to their own actions or because they were members of paramilitary organisations, are not [as] deserving of being politically recognised or afforded social resources as victims (see Hearty 2016; Jankowitz 2018). But what the preceding criticism suggests is that the reconciliation paradigm creates a different, *temporal*, hierarchy of victim. At the top of the hierarchy are those victims who have grieved for an appropriate amount of time and *reconciled themselves* to the post-conflict order, whether through forgiveness or an acceptance of a societal pressure to 'move on.' The 'dominant linear temporality of peace processes and transitional justice' (Mueller-Hirth 2017, 187) constructs and imposes a set of social expectations that produces a different, much less-studied hierarchy of victims. Those victims and survivors unable or unwilling to conform to internalised social expectations are rendered anachronistic, out of place in a society determinedly moving towards the 'future' (Robinson 2020). Additionally, the dominant temporality of the reconciliation paradigm conditions and shapes the boundaries of what types of justice it is possible to expect and what appeals to justice are seen as 'reasonable.' The durations of extended campaigns, lengthy court procedures, protracted forensic [re-] examinations, all of these *longue durée* processes are deeply inconvenient to the accelerationist impulses hardwired into the reconciliatory paradigm. Survivors for whom the search for justice is predicated on the *longue durée* will especially experience intense social pressure to 'move on' and 'leave the past behind,' even to the extent of being labelled "peace spoilers" (Rios Oyola 2018).

In Northern Ireland however, these reconciliatory expectations are paradoxically imposed on victims and survivors in spite of the fact that the consociational structure of the Irish Peace Process institutionally 'discourages' political reconciliation and incentivises division at the macro-level (see Graham & Nash 2006; Ní Aoláin and Brown 2015). In this context, mobilising the reconciliation paradigm can be seen as a means of distracting from legal-institutional failings and shifting the blame for failing to realise 'a shared future' onto the backs of anachronistic and allegedly recalcitrant victims and survivors (for example, Brewer 2010; Graham 2014). This is the allegation levelled by Alejandro Castillejo-Cuellar (2014) in his study of the reconciliation paradigm in South Africa and Colombia. He argues that 'discourses of "national unity and reconciliation" that compel a society to "look to the future," to "turn the page," to "leave the past behind," and to "forgive and reconcile,"' are actually techniques designed to elide transitional legalism's 'structural inability' to reckon with the root causes of violence. By promising citizens a 'new future,' the reconciliation paradigm elides persistent structural violence and entrenched inequality in the present. It is no small wonder in this context

that politically active victims and survivors who believe that they and their memories of historical injury have been sacrificed on the altars of these 'new futures' might declaim the death of reconciliation.

Reconciliation in 'post' conflict Northern Ireland

While the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement contained next to nothing pertaining to 'dealing with the past,' the reconciliation paradigm undergirded every subsequent independent Commission's Report and the strictures of every major social development initiative (McGrattan 2013; Robinson 2018). The Eames-Bradley Report (2009, 24) has perhaps the clearest expression of the temporality of the reconciliation paradigm: 'The past should be dealt with in a manner which enables society to become more defined by its desire for true and lasting reconciliation rather than by division and mistrust, seeking to promote a shared and reconcile future for all.' The scholars Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly first attempted to flesh out a working definition of reconciliation in 2004. Their definition comes in the form a 5-stranded equal typology. They explicitly state that no strand is more or less important than another; indeed Hamber and Kelly's is one of the only attempts at defining reconciliation where reckoning with the past is not explicitly or implicitly subordinated to the imperative of building a new future. This should not be surprising considering Hamber's prior critical work of the futurity of reconciliation in South Africa (Hamber and Wilson, 2002). However, while initial policy documents such as a *A Shared Future* (2005) did adopt slightly more-complex iterations of 'reconciliation,' they privileged Hamber and Kelly's third strand, building positive relationships, and jettisoned an equal focus on past violence. *A Shared Future* was superseded by *Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC)* in 2013 where a definition of reconciliation is never attempted and left purposefully ambiguous throughout. In T:BUC and the aborted Haass/O'Sullivan proposals, also from 2013, reconciliation is treated as little more than an airy aspiration.

The increasing emptiness of reconciliation as a signifier has allowed it to be harnessed to political agendas deeply invested in 'drawing a line' underneath the Northern Irish Troubles. Consider first David Cameron's well-publicised apology after the unveiling of the Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry in Derry/Londonderry on 15 June 2010. After proclaiming that 'openness and frankness about the past, however painful, they do not make us weaker, they make us stronger.' Cameron closed his speech by arguing that the report necessitated that '[Northern Ireland] come together to close this painful chapter on Northern Ireland's troubled past. That is not to say we should ever forget or dismiss the past, but we must also move on.'³ Cameron's instrumentalisation of the reconciliatory paradigm attempts to sever the painful past from the idealised 'new future', in the process it attempts to cast those who objected to any of the report's findings, or the lack of prosecutions, or those who might resist future attempts at

3. Full text available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/10322295>. Accessed 24 June 2020.

amnesty for the paratroopers, as anachronistic, as excluded from the new future inaugurated by the report. Continuing to campaign for justice or politicise Bloody Sunday falls afoul of the sharp proclamation of a new future. Indeed the recent proposals laid out by current Secretary of State Brandon Lewis, that many have argued eviscerate even the limited legacy proposals in the Stormont House Agreement, have been justified by claiming 'swift, final examinations' and 'ending vexatious claims against veterans' are tantamount to promoting "reconciliation" (Lewis 2020).

Sinn Féin has similarly taken advantage of the malleability of reconciliation to politically instrumentalise the concept, as, to lesser extents, have other major political parties in Ireland and Britain (Bean 2007; McGrattan 2016). Taking their cue from *A Shared Future's* heavy reliance on the relational strand of Hamber and Kelly's typology, Sinn Féin has promoted a version of reconciliation that at least superficially seems to echo Paul Ricoeur's. In their semi-official reconciliation document (Sinn Féin 2015), they argue that reconciliation is enabled through mutual recognition of political narratives of the conflict. This recognition comes through 'uncomfortable conversations' between the two supposed ethno-political blocs in Northern Ireland. The document frames these conversations as bravely begun by Republicans and not reciprocated by Unionists (Hedges 2016). More importantly, it uses the framework of mutual recognition to assert that reconciliation necessarily entails recognition of a narrative that presents Republican violence as a justifiable campaign against a colonial occupier. Refusal to recognise and acknowledge the viability of this framing in turn becomes a refusal to reconcile. Those who suffered or were killed by republican violence in turn become anachronistic, out-of-step with the promise of a reconciled future.

That the reconciliation paradigm has been instrumentalised by political actors largely uninterested in revisiting their own culpability in past violence should not be surprising. Rather, we as scholars and peace practitioners need to understand that the dominant linear temporality and idealised futurity hard-wired into the reconciliation paradigm paves the way for these sorts of instrumentalisations. Widespread societal expectations heaped on victims and survivors to 'move on' or 'come to terms' with the past are implicit demands to 'reconcile to' the often unjust post-conflict status quo.

Building peace in the reconciliation paradigm

Critics of the reconciliation paradigm do not reject the aspiration to live in a peaceful, just, and tolerant society. Rather, they seek to highlight the discrepancies, and especially the temporal discrepancies, between what politicised victims often campaign for and the horizons of political possibility within transitional societies (Robinson 2018; Mueller-Hirth 2017). Rather, this short interrogation of the reconciliation paradigm is an appeal to scholars and peace practitioners to recognise, acknowledge, and reflect on the dominant futurity woven through appeals to reconciliation in Northern Ireland. When we internalise this futurity, we often, consciously or not, shift the alleged social duty to

reconcile onto the backs of victims and survivors, who are often the most vulnerable in a given post-conflict or transitional society.

In my recent work with the Peace IV funded Glenree Legacy of Violence Project (LOV), I had the opportunity to query how politicised victims and survivors viewed reconciliatory appeals in Northern Ireland. What I discovered consistently is that many victims and survivors do not reject reconciliation out of hand, rather they reject a socially imposed obligation to reconcile with those people and institutions responsible for inflicting violence on them, an obligation they perceive as not merely coming from former-perpetrators but woven throughout official and unofficial legacy processes and interventions. As one survivor put it to me during the LOV project:

‘Generally speaking, we’re nearly convinced as a [victim and survivors] group, we’re nearly convinced that we’re part of the problem. No. We’re not part of the problem!... They say our loved ones were the problem, well they weren’t! But we’ve been battered that long with the same story... You know, we’re happy enough to move on, but it can’t always be us, us, us.’

What we as scholars and practitioners need to remember is that demanding that the violent, painful, and traumatic past be kept alive in the present is not a failure to reconcile, it is also a powerful political corrective to a post-conflict or post-colonial status quo often eager to selectively forget its culpability in a violent past through the imposition of accelerationist temporal frameworks. If the reconciliation paradigm is to remain a credible means of advancing our shared goals to live in peaceful, tolerant, and just societies, the burden or duty of reconciliation must shift away from victims and survivors and onto the people and institutions most responsible for the infliction of harm and violence. If not, it may be that reconciliation will die, it will cease to be a credible means of promoting healthy relationships and communities and become a mere rhetorical device bluntly wielded by the instruments of power seeking to insulate themselves from any further consequences of past wrongdoing.

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