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SC2012 – Race, Ethnicity, Migration and Nationalism

16 April 2015

Britain in Northern Ireland

The Troubles in Northern Ireland, stretching from the 1960s to the late 1990s, were three violent decades characterized by sectarianism, bigotry and hostility. This time of social turmoil came about as the result of years of catalytic circumstances both in Ireland and abroad. Britain was a large contributor to the animosity at the center of the conflict and, by extension, the cause of the divide that exists between citizens of Ireland today. The British involvement in The Troubles wedged a gap between Protestants and Catholics through centuries old colonialism, discrimination in the form of ethnic classism and the establishment of physical barriers between the communities. The lasting effects of this British intervention on the notions of race, ethnicity and nationalism in Northern Ireland are observable still in the modern day.

Sectarianism is a term used to describe a set of attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and religious guidelines which “bring about destructive conflict between two or more rival groups (Liechty, 11)”. In the case of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the two groups between whom sectarian tensions arose were the Roman Catholics and the Protestants; the nationalists and unionists respectively. The nationalist population favored an independent Ireland, separate from the United Kingdom, whereas the unionists protested this change.

The conflict between these two parties was largely fueled by this divide in political position, rather than opposing theology or religious practice. Therefore, church affiliation is a common sign of one’s political, economic and social classification within the Northern Irish

population (Mitchell, 182). In fact, as anthropologist Anthony D. Buckley suggests, though the labels of Catholic, Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist each carry an inherently religious connotation, it is useful to view these terms simply as ethnic tags when speaking in the context of the Northern Irish Troubles (23). The groups, though customarily similar in appearance, have nearly entirely unassociated cultures and traditions. These ethnic undertones, while not on the main stage of the Troubles, severely exacerbated the issue.

Britain's role in the alienation of Irish Catholics and Protestants from one another began centuries prior to the severe outbreak of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. The tensions between these two populations are rooted in the 1600s, brought on by the forceful relocation of the predominately Catholic Irish citizens by British colonialists. These immigrants established garrison towns in eastern Ulster, seized property from the natives and left very little space for the former inhabitants of the land. They brought with them an entirely foreign "English-speaking, Protestant, individualistic, agricultural and artisan" culture that clashed with the "Gaelic-speaking, Catholic, clan-based, chiefly pastoral Ulster society (Mitchell, 181)." The Protestant settlers were dominant in both the political and economic spheres, while Irish Catholics were excluded and largely dispossessed. This oppression led to the development of two fundamentally and culturally dissimilar groups, and consequently the beginnings of friction between the two.

Over the course of the following two centuries, British Protestant settlers established a flourishing industrial economy within Ireland, which relied upon British funding and imports (Ford and McCafferty, 5). This further inflated the standard of living for Ireland's Protestant population, affording them landownership, skilled jobs and higher voting status than their Catholic counterparts. Conversely, the Catholic minority were subjected to absentee landowners,

lower wages and gerrymandering of boundaries in favor of the Protestant voters (Cochrane, 9). This maltreatment culminated in the 1960s with what we now know as the Troubles. While the ensuing violence was largely a Northern Irish problem, the British unreservedly inserted themselves into the conflict.

The time at which British intervention began to have the most obvious effect on the Troubles was in 1969, with the introduction of the British Army to the political and judicial landscape (Jenkins et al, 15). By this time, the divide between the combatant groups had grown deep and clearly observable in the economic, residential, employment and educational realms. Catholics had grown tired of the oppressive tactics used by the biased, majority protestant police force and government, and the situation was spiraling (Ford and McCafferty, 22). The Irish Catholic population initially welcomed what they viewed as an unbiased defense force, only to watch as these British infantrymen contributed largely to the violence on both sides.

In a second attempt to curb the growing tensions, Britain suspended Belfast's Stormont Parliament in 1972, assuming full responsibility for their future proceedings (Jenkins et al, 15). While this action—in the same way as the introduction of the British Army—was intended to reduce unease in Northern Ireland, it was a counterproductive measure. By wresting control of the law enforcement and government of a country in turmoil, Britain effectively placed itself in the role of the Chief Oppressor of the Catholic population.

This poorly regulated justice system, similar to that experienced by racial minorities in the United States at the time, has had permanent effects on the young Catholic and Protestant mindset. The youth in Northern Ireland today often “project feelings of either apathy or hostility toward political proceedings;” a deep distrust of the government has tainted young peoples’

sense of nationality (Muldoon, 465). In fact, young people in Northern Ireland are less likely to cast votes in general elections than youth in other European countries, falling 10% below the average. In 2012, according to the 2013 Ireland Country Report, 44% of young people who were old enough to vote in political elections, aged 18-25, failed to do so (European Commission, 11). This lack of concern for national affairs exemplifies the disjointed sense of nationalism among today's Northern Irish youth.

Still, perhaps the most lasting result of Britain's involvement in Northern Ireland is the tangible division between the most thoroughly Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods: The peace walls. In 1935—years before the time period of the Troubles—the British Army constructed the first physical barricade to partisan violence. This took the form of a sturdy, tall fence running through Sailortown, Belfast. The line was drawn in an attempt to curb rioting on both sides of the conflict, an issue which had flared up considerably in the months prior to the construction of the barrier (Byrne, 43). While the fence was originally intended to be a temporary measure, it inspired both unionist and nationalist groups to fortify defensive structures in a bid to protect their communities; These makeshift blockades consisted of unsightly burnt furniture, cars, vans and assorted debris.

When the British took control of security in Ireland—as mentioned above, with the introduction of the British Army in 1969—these rough barriers were removed and replaced with “peace walls.” These corrugated metal fences with barbed wire trimming were, again, meant to separate the nationalists and unionists of Belfast only temporarily. However, over the years, the initial batch of barricades only grew.

Today, the number of peace walls in and around Northern Ireland's major cities stands at a staggering count of 80 (Byrne, 43). As time progressed in the fenced-in neighborhoods, the sense of ethnic separation between those on opposite sides of the wall grew to be an embedded component of everyday life. The walls have become permanent fixtures throughout the city, as have the cages that one so often finds shielding the yards of the houses closest to the borderline. These inherently British creations are an enduring reminder of the differences that exist between the Protestant and Catholic populations of Northern Ireland; they inadvertently impose a negative influence on every new generation's perception of the opposite sect, fostering the same antipathy that provoked the Troubles so many years ago.

This deep ethnic divide is perpetuated not only by the walls, but through the daily lives of the Irish citizens. Within Belfast, Nationalist Catholic and Unionist Protestant groups lead generally unassociated lives; though they are, more or less, indistinguishable by outward appearance, the idea that they can be considered two separate races and ethnicities is not without support. For instance, though the Integrated Education Movement has been working against this phenomenon, as of 2014 only "6.9% of primary and post-primary pupils attend integrated schools (Borooah and Knox, 197)." This separation, along with the low levels of intermarriage between the two groups, suggests that each side views itself as being fundamentally different from the other. Since ethnicity is a socially constructed concept, it goes to follow that the groups identify as ethnically dissimilar as well.

Ultimately, the decades of the Troubles in Northern Ireland were unpleasant and devastating for a large portion of the country's population. For years preceding the initial outbreak of sectarian violence, the Catholic people were hegemonized and mistreated by the powerful Protestant majority, a trend which began with Britain's colonization in the 17th century.

After thirty years of interference and dominance by Britain; blood and heartbreak; hostility and animosity; the Northern Irish have finally entered a predominantly peaceful period. Though the perceived notion of an inherently untrustworthy counterpart still exists among each of the conflicting parties, Catholics and Protestants have largely learned to coexist in the absence of violence. One can only hope that this peace will last, and eventually spread to even the most resentful neighborhoods. Perhaps, one day, both sides will come together to knock down the physical and allegorical walls built by the war-torn Northern Irish of the past.

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Reflection

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Dr. Hammer

ENGL105 Writer's Portfolio

5 August 2015

A Critical Reflection: Expository Essay

Summary

In this expository essay, I examined the depth of Britain's involvement in the late 20th century Troubles in Northern Ireland. The earliest point of influence I brought to light was the British colonization of Northern Ireland in the 17th century, which established Protestant citizens as superior to followers of Catholicism. Next, I explored the distinction between Catholics and Protestants as two separate classes of society in the centuries following British colonization. My final point detailed the physical barriers that Britain introduced to Northern Ireland, including a majority Protestant Army and walls intended to keep the two conflicting groups divided, for safety reasons. I closed the paper with a hopeful, emotional appeal, calling for the destruction of the divisive walls—both literal and figurative—present in modern Northern Ireland.

Analysis

My assessment of the British intervention in Northern Ireland contained both strengths and weaknesses. The strong points of the essay involved focus, use of sources and construction of the thesis. In retrospect, areas for improvement included clarity, language, organization and substantiation of claims.

Throughout the essay, my focus did not waver; each piece of information I presented was in support of the thesis. I collected a comprehensive list of instances in which Britain impacted the conflict in Northern Ireland and left out unnecessary details of the conflict itself. In addition to the effective use of information, I diligently cited the sources from which I gathered facts. The citation of sources is vital in a research-based informational piece, as this provides the reader with an avenue to further his or her understanding of the topic.

I showed another area of strength in the opening paragraph, through the thesis statement. While the thesis had a small margin for improvement, it is clear and concise. I indicated the major ideas that I intended to cover in a three-prong format. By using this format, I provided the reader a guide to the remainder of the essay. The thesis is the backbone of a scholarly paper, and its presentation can affect the quality of work in the same magnitude that organization, focus and correctness can.

A minor issue within my thesis was my allusion to a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, which presupposed that the reader was aware of the unrest that existed between these parties in the late 20th century. Though I expounded upon this issue in the next paragraph, it may have been useful to bring the religious divide to the attention of the reader prior to the thesis, explaining that this difference was at the heart of the Troubles.

While the thesis had the potential to propel this essay naturally forward, the strength of my structural organization fluctuated throughout the piece. For example, the third paragraph lacked flow. It shifted from one line of thought directly to the next, with no transition to guide the reader's comprehension. I mentioned that religious affiliation was telling of a Northern Irish citizen's political views, then deemed it useful to view religious and political labels as ethnic tags instead. In this way, I failed to place adequate emphasis on the latter idea, a notion that may have

proved useful in other areas of the essay. The concluding sentence of the paragraph further undermined the importance of the ethnic distinction between Catholics and Protestants, asserting that ethnic undertones were not on the main stage of the troubles. This assertion contradicted my later textual support for the thesis, in which cultural differences, specifically, deepened the divide in Northern Ireland.

In fact, a bulk of the remaining organizational set-up of this essay is flawed. Subsequent to the description of the British Army's role in Northern Ireland, I jumped to the subject of the British Parliamentary takeover in 1972. Immediately following this paragraph, my line of discussion shifted to 2013 voting statistics for Irish youth. While this forward progression may have been permissible with the addition of a few transition sentences, the problem worsened in the paragraph following the voting data. With great emphasis, I described the Belfast Peace Walls introduced by the British—the first of which was established prior to the introduction of the British Army to Northern Ireland. The presenting of facts in chronological order would have improved the instances of choppy, illogical flow. The progression of these details should have begun with the establishment of the Peace Walls, culminating in modern day statistics.

In addition to structural flaws, improvements could be made in the area of language. Despite the fact that the thesis outlined the three main focus areas of the essay, I did not repeat the wording of the thesis at any point. Where I highlighted ethnic classism in Northern Ireland, the term “classism” was not used. Similarly, I failed to make a clear transition from the discussion of ethnic classism into that of physical barriers erected by the British. Through repetition of key phrases, textual support for the thesis would have been more clear-cut and recognizable, aiding in the reader's comprehension of the main themes.

Another issue relating to language was my frequent use of passive voice. Multiple times throughout this essay, I did not specify the agent responsible for the action of the sentence. Instead, I assigned responsibility to an indirect object, making this object the new subject of the sentence. To remedy this, instead of writing, “The line was drawn,” I could have specified that, “British forces drew the line.” The latter option places responsibility for the repercussions of drawing the line upon British forces, rather than the line itself; this is called active voice. While passive voice has a place in various genres of writing, such as in scientific research reports, expository prose favors the use of active voice.

While detailing the facts collected during research, I made numerous unsubstantiated claims. For instance, following facts regarding the introduction of the British Army to Northern Ireland, I asserted that British infantrymen directly contributed to the violence of the conflict. I then moved on from the subject, offering no evidence or instance of injustice on the part of British soldiers in Northern Ireland. A few well-placed examples would have strengthened the logic behind the claim. I repeated this mistake in the following paragraph, where I referred to the poorly regulated British Stormont Parliament. To support the claim of poor regulation within the Parliamentary regime, I should have presented evidence of this lack of control.

When I initially submitted the expository essay, I viewed it as a strong example of my writing abilities. Upon thorough retrospective examination, however, my essay contained far more flaw than I previously recognized. While I excelled in the areas of focus, source citation and thesis structure, my writing lacked clarity of language and logical structure. These overlooked mistakes demonstrate the importance of peer review and critical analysis of one’s writing. If I had taken the approach of viewing my writing from an objective perspective, I might have been able to improve the quality of the final product vastly.

