

## The Post-Truth Past and the Inverted Present

There is genuine frustration in what might be called ‘Middle Ulster’ – a term of art which includes not only Unionists but also those Nationalists not seduced by Sinn Fein mantras – about the present condition of moral inversion: where terrorists have become victims; where those who enforced the law are now held to be criminals; where those who refused to support violence are held to be in debt to those who did; and where dealing with the past has come to mean underwriting a narrative of subversion. How do we explain how this situation developed?

It is tempting to think of this as being peculiar to our own time and distinctive of the warped present here. Of course, Northern Ireland’s case has its own appalling character but the syndrome has a universal character and it has a history.

Appalled by not only the excesses of the French revolutionaries but also by the complicity of German academics and poets in romanticising and/or ignoring their effect, Hegel described the condition as ‘a kind of slovenly sociability between sentimentality and badness’.

Slovenly sentimentality involves what we today would call virtue-signalling – or to use a more loaded term, fellow travelling - from a broad spectrum who emphasise peace, goodwill and harmony. Those who take this position are often well-meaning and decent but the defining characteristic is the wish to be *untroubled* about the present (and this includes many in UK Government). A loaded term would be that they share a disposition to appease.

Badness comprises SF/IRA (and Loyalist paramilitaries by default) and involves a deeply-layered strategy to continue the ‘war’ by other means. The claims of the ‘bad’ are contradictory but so far they have been able to pursue that agenda with reasonable success. That is because the sea in which they swim is no longer that of terrorist sympathy alone. They have also now the sea of slovenly sentimentality.

There is a contradiction in this slovenly sociability between sentimentality and badness and yet it consolidates, rather than undermining, the agenda. It is this.

On the one hand, adjusting political culture in the interests of peace (the appeal to the ‘sentimental’ wish to end the Troubles) has become the insistence that notions of right and justice should not apply. This substitution involves setting aside the rule of law and subordinating it entirely to the demands of politics (something which came out at the Downey trial).

Individuals responsible for violence can displace personal accountability, representing murder as part of the generalised ‘human tragedy’ of the Troubles (for which everyone was responsible). It was not choice or agency but conditions which made violence inevitable/necessary and you can’t attribute responsibility to terrorists alone since there are no clean hands in Northern Ireland’s history. Rights activists, community workers, journalists and academics nod their heads in agreement – such that the slovenly sociability between sentimentality and badness enables terrorists and their political advocates to dance away from the past.

On the other hand, if everyone was indeed caught up in a situation which explains everything, only some - ex-prisoners - have been held to account for their actions. It is now time for others to pay their dues. Those others are 'state actors'. At the end of this vista may not be the gallows (as Edmund Burke also reflected on the consequence sentimentality and badness in the French Revolution) but it certainly means more inquests; more police ombudsman reports; more criminal case review referrals; and more Article 2 cases at the European Court of Human Rights. The object is to redeem history by setting the balance to rights – in this case to exonerate terror and to condemn the police and army.

This split-mind syndrome is a relationship between a disposition to 'overcome the past' (let's move on) and the need to 'come to terms with the past' (let's go back). In short, Republicans and Loyalists want at one and the same time for people to move on (but only onto their ground) and to go back (in order to attribute blame and punish others).

Generally, the term for this is 're-writing history'. But there is another crucial aspect. It is that the institutions of law and administration – upon which any decent society depends for its measure of right – appear to be working against what most people think of as being just. This takes a number of forms.

First is the inversion of accountability. Recently, the onus for rehabilitation has become focused on others acquiescing in perpetrators' storytelling rather than perpetrators reflecting on how they could have chosen alternative ways of acting. It also involves a slovenly sentimental adjustment to language – 'ex-combatants'; 'no hierarchy of victims' (except when it suits us); and so on.

Second is the related inversion of memory. Almost 15 years ago Labour MP John McDonnell argued that 'without the armed struggle of the IRA over the past 30 years' the Belfast Agreement 'would not have acknowledged the legitimacy of the aspirations of many Irish people for a united Ireland. And without that acknowledgement we would have no peace process'. That was seen then as absurd: a wrong-headed reading of history and a morally perverse way to achieve that specific end. But this has now become a 'post-truth' political fact.

One of the most disturbing effects of the 2017 General Election is that the slovenly sociability between sentimentality and badness is now at the heart of a potential party of UK government. The appalling subtext is this: slovenly, virtue signalling, sentimentality fellow travels with badness and the post-truth 'fact' for many young people is: 'to make an omelette it is necessary to break a few eggs'. To which George Orwell's response to such Newspeak is appropriate: 'Yes, but where's the omelette?' Where indeed? This is exactly the world view Hegel raged against in his own time.

Third is the exclusion of the majority. The Haass Report confidently proclaimed: 'What happened in the past cannot be changed'. The concern which many people have – and not just unionists - is that what is happening is exactly the past changing. In one of the best books on the mentality of IRA terrorism, *The IRA and Armed Struggle*, the Spanish academic Rogelio Alonso had an intimation that slovenly sociability between sentimentality and badness would write the majority out of history. 'What place', he asked, 'will be occupied in history by those who, with immense civic and human virtue, have resisted using violence, in spite of having the same grievances as those who resorted to terror?'

He thought it essential to delegitimise both republican and loyalist violence. This was the virtuous task of the times for it 'is a debt contracted by history'. Implicit too is the view that, unless the historical debt is properly discharged, the past could well repeat itself. Unfortunately, 'the past' now seems to be understood only as a dialogue between armed republicanism (sentimentally glossed) and the British state (which colluded against rights, virtue, law and justice).

Henry Patterson once argued that the book *Lost Lives* is sufficient testimony against such a comprehensive re-writing of history. Can we be so sure any longer? For all its moral self-righteousness, Alliance now seems to have become the 'slovenly sentimentality' party. Equally, the SDLP doesn't seem to mind that even John Hume is being written out of history. All that is necessary for slovenly sentimentality to triumph is the dissemination of something more allusive and ill-defined than simple justification of terror. It is, rather, the explicit use (or avoidance) of certain words - in the idea of human tragedy rather than human agency; in the power of suggestion rather than interrogation. One example reveals the collusion of the slovenly (journalism in this case) and the bad.

When the Radio 4 Today Programme covered the Report of the Smithwick Tribunal, the BBC's Northern Ireland correspondent presented a summary of the findings on the murder of Superintendents Breen and Buchanan. James Naughtie interjected: 'All part of the Dirty War, of course' to which the reporter responded: 'Yes'. That exchange represents unreflective collusion and all the more dangerous for its historical implications. The Dirty War thesis assumes that 'one side was as bad as the other', that one shouldn't make ethical judgements and everyone knows how it was - even the 'dogs in the street'.

There is no necessary intent to deceive, merely the seduction of the assumed 'pattern' or 'theme' in history which stands in for serious historical understanding. However innocent or inadvertent that example may seem, it implies a narrative about Northern Ireland's history suggesting equivalence and justification - equivalence between the acts of terrorists and security forces, justification for the IRA's campaign.

Fifth, is institutional inversion. That it is the BBC - especially BBC NI - which disseminates that sort of narrative feeds widespread public disquiet about the role of institutions and their effect. It feeds a pervasive sense that institutional structures (from BBC to courts) are delivering for terrorists and not for victims; or, to put that otherwise, that institutional priorities have become unethically skewed by slovenly sentimentality in favour of the bad and against the good.

One of the objectives of terrorism during the Troubles was to alienate nationalist opinion from public institutions. The post-Troubles objective is to alienate Middle Ulster from public institutions with the assistance of the slovenly sentimentality of many of those same institutions.

What can be done?

What is essential is mobilisation against and confrontation with this slovenly sociability between sentimentality and badness. It needs to be challenged consistently, coherently and intelligently.

It requires an active civil society engagement - to re-occupy the public realm - and not just a political one. It requires changing the language of public discourse. It will be uncomfortable and difficult. But it is essential.