Politics essays - northern ireland ethnic conflict

Northern Ireland and Other Cases of Ethnic Conflict

Is the notionof a deeply divided society the right template for comparing Northern Irelandwith other cases of ethnic conflict?

Outline:

The central argument of thispaper revolves around the native-setter discourse of ethnic conflicts. Obviously, no conflict, ethnic or other, can happen in a vacuum and without areason. Keeping this in mind, this paper presents the basic reasons for whichmajor ethnic conflicts have been taking place around the world today. Itpresents a brief background to the ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland, mainlyto understand that this is a case of a deeply divided society, for this isnecessary to form the basis of the thesis topic. The next component of thispaper is a presentation of the core background to some other leading ethnicconflicts around the world. The conflicts taken up in this section are SouthAfrica, Israel/Palestine and Sri Lanka. This is done with the intention ofunderscoring the essential nature of these conflicts -while being ethnic innature, all these have happened out of a deeply divided society brought aboutby these ethnic aspects. More importantly, a brief explanation of the otherconflicts taken up for this study is provided in view of the fact that this ismeant to be a comparative paper, in which these are used as the frame ofreference. The section on the background to these other conflicts is brief andis not a historical, blow-by-blow account, as it is meant to just enable anunderstanding of the roots of the ethnic nature of these conflicts. Then, thispaper traverses into another of its central arguments -the element of territoryin these conflicts. Since it is

implied in this thesis statement that a)Northern Ireland's is an ethnic conflict, and b) that other cases of ethnicconflict are a product of a deeply divided society, this paper does not explorea popular perspective on this conflict, which is whether the conflict inNorthern Ireland can be classified as an ethnic one. In the concluding part, itsums up its understanding of the paper It avoids reference to some commonlyused interpretations of ethnic conflicts.

Part II:

Limitation of this study:

One area ofincompleteness of this study is that while there are several ethnic conflictsraging on in the world at this point of time, this paper, due to the paucity ofspace allotted to it, makes a comparison of only a select list of these to theconflict in Northern Ireland. An inclusion of some of the other leading ethnicconflicts, such as those of the Basque region of Spain, Corsica, East Timor, Cyprus and some in Africa to name a few, would have made this paper morecomprehensive.

Part III:

Key words:

Ethnic conflict, society, natives, settler, commonality, land, catholic, protestant, whites, blacks, slavery, Jews, Arabs, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Israel, Palestine, Sri Lanka, persecution, Diaspora, homeland, Holy Land, Sinhalese, Tamil.

Part IV:

General discussion:

The ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland:

A reading of thehistory of Northern Ireland points to the clear fact that it is indeed a casethat can be fitted into the template of a deeply divided society: the conflictdates to almost five centuries, to the reign of Henry VIII. This Tudormonarch's newfound zeal, the result of his break from Rome, was to make himtarget his neighbour, whose catholic nature he viewed as a challenge to Englishexpansionism. It was basically a sectarian conflict, in that the Englishmonarchs, led by Henry VIII and later reinforced by Edward VI and Elizabeth I, tried to supplant the existing catholic religion with its brand ofChristianity, the protestant one. Naturally, the essentially Gaelic population resentedthese efforts at forced Anglicanism. When these original inhabitants refused tobe forcefully converted to the new religion, the English persecuted them byoutlawing some of their cherished religious practices, and alienated them bydeveloping a condescending attitude towards the followers of the scurrilouslytermed ' popery'. (Finnegan, 1983, pp. 9, 10)The depths of this division took a turn for the worse following a policy offorced ' plantation', or augmentation of the population of the settlers bysuccessive English monarchs. The most notable example of this attempt to changethe ethno-demographic character of the province was the attempt of James I, king of both the English and the Scots, to settle in about 150, 000 protestantPresbyterians from Scotland in Ulster in Northern Ireland. This was a directeffort at undermining the local catholic population -the language and religiousaffiliation of the new settlers were markedly different from those of thenatives. In the later part of that century, Oliver Cromwell, too, enforced

thispolicy by rewarding these settlers with grants of vast areas of land inNorthern Ireland. The crux of the problem could be crystallised into theefforts of the native catholic population to get the Protestants out of theircountry, and the recalcitrance of the settlers to stay on. (Morris-Hale, 1997, p. 95) Thus, inthis sense, it qualifies as a problem of a deeply divided society.

The next sectionexplores the similarity in the nature of this problem with some other cases ofethnic conflict in different regions of the world.

The ethnic conflict in South Africa: Like itscounterpart in Northern Ireland, the ethnic conflict in South Africa, too, isdeeply rooted in the divisions of society. The origins of the ethnic conflictof this country can be traced to 1717, when the number of slaves who had beenemployed by the Dutch East India Company, the VOC in local parlance, was a mere2000. That year, the company's directors in Amsterdam asked the localadministrative council of Cape if slavery was required for the company foreconomic reasons. Only one of the council members wanted an abolition ofslavery. From here, the increase in the number of slaves working for thesettlers was dramatic -in 75 years, the number of black slaves had growntwelve-fold. This system was to get perpetrated with greater crudity andoppressiveness in the later decades and centuries: By the mid-1700s the colonyhad over 650 slave owners, but more than half owned six or fewer slaves. Yetslave owning was widespread enough to promote a dependency on slave laborrather than the development of intensive settlement and agriculture. This dependencylasted into the nineteenth century and encouraged a mentality among Whitesettlers that certain work and occupations were " beneath" them. (Beck, 2000, pp. 28,

29) This wasto not only leave a seemingly unbridgeable gap in society between the nativesand the settlers who came to be called Boers, it was also the forerunner to theinstitution of apartheid, (Pomeroy, 1986, p. 4)an abhorrent practice which came to define standards of human cruelty andoppression. This again is a clear case of a deeply divided society.

Israeli -Palestine conflict: One of the most violentconflicts of the 20 [th] century, the one between Israel and Palestine, is a premier example of a conflict of ethnicity and nationality being a resultof a deeply divided society.

Israel was bornin such circumstances that its *raison d'etre* was detested by its Arabneighbours. The Jews, who had been persecuted for centuries by the Christianmasses of Europe in possibly every conceivable manner from being blamed fornatural disasters to being degraded publicly for belonging to that religion tobeing tortured in gas chambers, had finally reached such a precarious stage oftheir existence by the time World War II ended, that they were left with noalternative to carving out a homeland for themselves. The formation of aseparate Jewish nation, they believed, was the only guarantee of their verysurvival. That homeland had to be the biblical land of Israel, or none else, given the primacy of this nation to their history and culture; unfortunatelyfor them, this was now Palestine, into which Arabs had been ossified for a full13 centuries, ever since the birth of their own religion, Islam. Thedeclaration of Israeli independence on May 14, 1948, was the culmination of anearly 19-century old cherished dream of a motherland, and achieved after a lotof bickering in the United Nations. In this declaration, they made clear that forthe Jews to become a cohesive nation for the first time in their history out ofthe reassembly of their people from their Diaspora, there was

only onepossibility: the existence of the new immigrants at the exclusion of the nativepopulation! The following words in the declaration sums up the belligerentJewish attitude, overlooking the fact that the Holy Land was in Arab possessionfor all these centuries:

WE, THE MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL, REPRESENTING THE JEWISH PEOPLE INPALESTINE AND THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT OF THE WORLD, MET TOGETHER IN SOLEMNASSEMBLY TODAY, THE DAY OF THE TERMINATION OF THE BRITISH MANDATE FORPALESTINE, AND BY VIRTUE OF THE NATURAL AND HISTORIC RIGHT OF THE JEWISH PEOPLEAND OF THE RESOLUTION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE UNITED NATIONS, HEREBYPROCLAIM THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE JEWISH STATE IN PALESTINE, TO BE CALLEDISRAEL. (Dunner, 1950, pp 3-18 and 87-94)

Naturally, this was at direct loggerheads with the native population, which saw this as anintrusion into their very existence. A strange situation had developed, bywhich two nationalities were trying to compete for existence and survival onthe same piece of land to the mutual exclusion of each other. The result ofthis was the inculcation of deep-seated animosities, which continue to thisday.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka: The Sri Lankan orCeylonese ethnic conflict dates to the early part of the previous century. Itwas fed and exacerbated by a threat perception felt by the land-owning andeconomically well ensconced, western-educated, mostly Sinhalese native elite onaccount of the assertiveness of the plantation workers of Indian originfollowing the departure of the colonial power, Britain. As explained by Perera(1998),

although the land mass left behind by the colonizers was nowhere nearwhat it was when it was first occupied, the post-colonial rulers of Ceylonused their new authority to restructure certain aspects of the society andspace of Ceylon. Crucially, the postcolonial regime viewed Ceylon as theirspace, and did not readily accept all colonial subjects as nationals. To beginwith, the Sinhalese elite were not ready to accept the plantation workers ofsouthern Indian origin, classifying them as " Indian Tamils" andreaffirmed that they were a foreign population[w]ithin two years, the UnitedNational Party government of 1948 deprived the plantation workers of southernIndian origin of both their citizenship and voting rights. They had alreadyparticipated in the socialist-led struggles for independence in the 1940s andtheir voting pattern had helped many socialist candidates win in the 1947elections. If anti-colonial struggles had brought these plantation workers intoCeylonese politics and the " national" space, the post-colonial statedenied these. As the planters had attempted, the post-colonial rulers of Ceylonalso resorted to apartheid… (Perera, 1998, pp. 102, 103)Further proof of the deep division of the society along ethnic lines is thefact that the Tamils have been living in Sri Lanka for ages, and have been in amajority in at least four northern districts. It is these four districts thatthe Tamils claim as their ' traditional homeland', the Tamil ' Ealam', for thereason that there was hardly a presence of the Sinhalese in these areas tillindependence. (Kearney & Miller, 1987, pp. 91-94)

Someresearchers, such as Mitchell (2000), have taken the view that while theseconflicts taken up for this study (with the exception of Sri Lanka) areessentially ethnic, what marks these out that is the fact that it has a

strongsub-element of native-settler conflict. Elaborating, he theorises that this isa case in which, animosities and attitudes have hardened since the settler hasstayed back, and has sought to coexist with the native population. This, according to Mitchell, is as strong a common factor as is the element of ethnicityin the cases he takes up. This is different from cases such as Australia, America, Canada and New Zealand, in which the natives were all but extirpated. This aspect of the native-settler coexistence, no matter how tumultuous it mayhave been, is the main commonality among these conflicts. All cases of ethnicconflict in which the settlers have stayed back have an indispensable element-land issues. In most cases, land has been pivotal to the affairs of the ethnicconflict, because the natives have been relegated to inferior lands. Anotherfeeling that has run through the colonisers is the feeling of superiority tothe natives, irrespective of whether the settlers belonged to the same race asthe natives or not. This is the feeling that the Irish war of independencefailed to correct. (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 1 and 2)In all the cases of ethnic conflict taken up here, the settlers have arrivedwith the aim of betterment, with varying degrees. It is natural that the boneof contention had to be land, since it was natural resources that were themeans for a betterment of life. This is the basis for which dispute overterritory has been an integral part of these conflicts.

Conclusion: In all these societies taken for thisstudy, the extent of deep divisions in society can be gauged from the fact thatirrespective of the point of time of the country's history at which theseconflicts have started, these conflicts have come to be the defining moments ofthese nations -the ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland may not be as old as thecountry itself, but nearly

five centuries have failed to erase these divisions. In the case of South Africa, apartheid and ethnic conflict have been presentalmost from the time the white minority came to dominate the country; as forIsrael, the warring parties have had to contend with ethnic conflict quiteliterally from day one of the birth and existence of a Jewish nation. In SriLanka, the feeling of ' them and us' has been persisting from the time theTamils settled there, and it took the spark of the departure of the coloniststo ignite it and make it a full-scale conflagration.

These conflictshave different sub-dimensions that mark them out from each other. For instance, if the conflicts in Northern Ireland and Israel are essentially predicatedalong nationalist and religious lines, that in South Africa is centred roundthe colour of the skin, while the conflict in Sri Lanka is ethno-linguistic incharacter. Yet, the overriding common factor has been the deep divisionsbetween the natives and the settlers. Whatever the nature of these elements ofconflict, these have at best been sub-components of the conflict, whose maintheme is undoubtedly the deep divisions in society. It is exactly thesedivisions that have not only caused the conflict in the first place, they havenurtured and sustained them.

In fact, so deepare the divisions of the mind that even as late as 1994, when the officialobituary was written for apartheid in South Africa, emotionally far too manywhites, even liberal whites, still regard(ed) themselves as superior to blacksand far too many of them only accepted the changes that came in 1994 becausethey could see no alternative rather than because they actively believed in anon-racial society. (Arnold, 2000, p. 11)It can be said without much fear of contradiction that the same attitude couldpossibly be prevailing

in the other societies taken up here. In sum, it can befittingly argued that the notion of a deeply divided society is the basis onwhich all ethnic conflicts of this study have taken place; there is little inNorthern Ireland to suggest any great departure from this norm.

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