1 The Conflict as a Set of Problems
Seamus Dunn

INTRODUCTION

On 1 September 1994, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) declared a ‘complete cessation of military operations’. As I write this in September 1994 the equivalent loyalist paramilitary groupings are considering their position. All the current evidence however suggests that, after 25 years of violence, the sounds of guns and bombs are about to disappear from the streets of Northern Ireland. The overall impact of this change in economic and social terms is not easy to predict, but the effect of a cease-fire on the conflict – in its widest sense – requires careful analysis. To begin with, it is a defining characteristic of all internal conflicts that they are never completely solved. The cease-fire suggests that one facet has been, for the moment, resolved and it is probable that this will be followed by the emergence of new democratic structures and institutional forms.

The purpose of this book is to illustrate that the end end of violence and the accompanying political accommodations are only the first steps in a long-term process of social reconstruction. Clearly these developments are a necessary and deeply significant part of any process of normalisation but they are not enough in themselves. The range of the problems that contribute to the conflict is very large and complex, and political accommodations, although they are a very good start, will not deal with all the issues. The book therefore examines a wide spread of social and political themes and provides detailed support for the general view that such ‘internal’ conflicts are varied, intricate and multi-dimensional and so are unresponsive to simple dogmatisms. Much of the book’s contents results from the researches carried out at the Centre for the Study of Conflict in the University of Ulster during the past 17 years.

It has become almost a cliché to say that conflicts arising from inter-group – or inter-ethnic, or inter-community, or internal – disputes now represent the most striking and salient examples, all
round the world, of modern brutality and violence, if not actual war. In many of these quarrels the initial sources of the mutual antagonisms are of great age, and the determination of the causes of recent outbreaks a matter of dispute. For example, the many violent conflicts in Eastern Europe filling the pages of newspapers in the early 1990s reflect long-standing fears, separations and hostilities and did not just emerge suddenly, without a past. Their persistence and virulence suggest that they will not be transformed by any simple remedy.

The origins of these disputes are usually connected with one or more of a set of fundamental forms of human association (and therefore separateness) such as religion, politics, race, ethnicity and culture. Such associations and divisions are of great power and significance because they relate to the ways in which people identify themselves and their individual places in the world. The determination to remain distinctive and separate leads to drawing of boundaries or building of walls, to marking out territories and to a physical and emotional distancing from others. One consequence of this process is called nationalism.

In Northern Ireland (although, as we are coming to realise, not uniquely in Northern Ireland) all these issues are available and part of the discourse. For a time it seemed as if the conflict here was distinctive in its atavism, a throwback to earlier European times. For this reason, among others, it attracted and continues to attract a remarkable amount of both academic and popular attention. (In the final chapter of this book we refer to the extraordinary range of existing literature, academic work and research that the conflict has stimulated.) The conflicts in Eastern Europe, along with the emergence of a higher profile for inter-group conflict generally, have combined to place some emphasis on the question of the extent to which the Northern Ireland conflict is unique and different. It is relatively easy to find common features with Israel, Sri Lanka, even with Bosnia. But the substance of these commonalities, their congruence and their powers of explanation are less clear. The urge to find common features, however, is strong and is motivated by two instincts. The first is that experiences in other places may be helpful in Northern Ireland in generating positive developments. The second arises from an attempt to examine all conflicts in search of general features that can be clarified and analysed. Certainly the longevity of the conflict here, and the quantity of research and writing about it, have the potential to provide insights into and understandings of conflict generally, and to counter a tendency towards quick answers and simple remedies.