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The invention of “shared space” in Northern Ireland. From contact theory to controlling the distribution of social housing residents

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Abstract

This article retraces the process adopted by the Northern Ireland government since the end of the Troubles in 1998 to achieve reconciliation by imposing “shared space” as a public policy intended to produce a “social mix”. While this goal is generally legitimised by neighbourhood effect theory, a model uniformly applied as a top-down policy in Western Europe, “shared space” is the product of a distinct theoretical construct rooted in contact theory. This construct emerged from an encounter between academics engaged in the field of peace and conflict studies and civil servants in the administrative field. This article looks at the social factors that led to this distinctive theoretical perspective on the now transnational “social mix” policy, while showing the symbolic and material effects of the uses of contact theory. It argues that this theory is used to legitimise a plan for shared housing schemes in the social rented sector, where the distribution of social housing residents is controlled and their behaviours moralised.

Keywords: social mix, contact theory, inequality, social housing, Northern Ireland

Résumé

Cet article propose de retracer comment, depuis la fin des conflits en 1998 en Irlande du Nord, le gouvernement local a imposé, pour atteindre la réconciliation, la catégorie d'action publique d'« espace partagé » au nom de la « mixité ». Si cette dernière est

généralement légitimée par la théorie des effets de quartier, appliquée de façon homogène et descendante en Europe de l'Ouest, l'« espace partagé » est le fruit d'une construction théorique singulière autour de la théorie du contact. Cette construction est le résultat d'une rencontre entre des chercheur-se-s engagé-e-s dans le champ académique des études sur les conflits et la paix et des fonctionnaires venant du champ administratif. Cet article s'intéresse aux logiques sociales qui ont amené à cette théorisation singulière de la catégorie de « mixité », aujourd'hui transnationale, tout en montrant les effets symboliques et matériels des usages de la théorie du contact. Celle-ci sert à légitimer un projet de résidences « partagées » dans le logement social focalisé sur le contrôle de la répartition des résident-e-s et sur la moralisation de leurs comportements.

Mots-clés : mixité sociale, théorie du contact, inégalité, logement social, Irlande du Nord

Introduction

The pursuit of “social mix” has become a dominant public policy discourse in Western Europe (Rose et al., 2013). The assumption behind these policies is the same, regardless of the context: spatial proximity between social groups and individuals is presented by the authorities as an “antidote” to social distance (Galster and Friedrichs, 2015, p. 3). This assumption is legitimised in social science theory by so-called neighbourhood effects (Cheshire, 2012; Rose et al., 2013), which classifies the spatial concentration of poverty as an explanatory factor for social exclusion. The corollary is that the presence of middle-class populations, which are deemed to serve as models, has a beneficial effect on access to employment and education (among other things) in disadvantaged groups. Since the 1990s, a veritable academic “industry” has grown up around neighbourhood effects (Galster and Friedrichs, 2015, p. 3). Numerous studies have either purported to provide empirical support for this theory (e.g., Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001) or conversely challenged its lack of empirical evidence (e.g., Manley, van Ham and Doherty, 2012). Other researchers have questioned the assumptions behind the theory, arguing that they ignore the structural causes of inequalities (e.g., Slater, 2013). According to these critics, its success in public policies, notably based on top-down promotion by consultants, can be explained by the roll-out of neoliberalisation, as described by Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002).

Following on from studies conducted in France (Tissot, 2005; 2007), we show that “social mixing” is not solely legitimised by a uniform, top-down theoretical framework based around neighbourhood effects. We retrace the theoretical

construction of the “social mix” as a public policy in a particular context, that of Northern Ireland. Colonial in origin, the Troubles that began in 1968 mainly consisted of a conflict between the army, British unionist paramilitaries (mostly “Protestant”) and Irish nationalist paramilitaries (mostly “Catholic”). Since the 1998 peace agreement, the Executive Office that heads the devolved Northern Ireland government has introduced multiple “good relations” policies to foster reconciliation. It treats segregation as a public problem and has developed the concept of “shared space”, characterised in terms of “social mixing”, as a public policy. Whereas in other parts of the United Kingdom, the aim of “social mix” policies is primarily to promote the movement of middle-class residents into working-class areas (Colomb, 2006), the Executive Office seeks to engineer spaces that will contain a mix of residents it categorises as “Protestant” or “Catholic” (categories that it defines as objectively real and adversarial groups). “Shared space” is a concept that forms part of what Rogers Brubaker (2006)¹ calls “groupism”, i.e., the reification of “Catholics” and “Protestants” as substantively different groups with specific behaviours that in this case are perceived as inimical to reconciliation (Herrault and Murtagh, 2019). The Executive Office’s action is founded on the ostensibly attractive idea that increasing contact between these two groups will foster “mutual understanding”.

Although the identification of segregation as a public problem and “shared space” as the solution are presented as objective choices, they preclude other ways of thinking about and handling reconciliation. “Shared space” is the product of a particular selection of theories, starting with contact theory, an idea that originates in social psychology. However, drawing on the analysis developed by Sylvie Tissot (2005),² we show here that the construction of “shared space” cannot be explained simply through the application of a theory. It is the outcome of an encounter between agents from two fields, academic researchers and civil servants and our study identifies the social conditions that led to this encounter. In the first section, we show how it was facilitated by a similar stance relative to an interpretative framework that understands reconciliation as arising from actions pertaining to individual behaviours. In the second section, we explain that this encounter, which took place with the creation of the journal *Shared Space* and the establishment of a ministerial group charged with designing the “shared” housing policy in the social rented sector, reflects significantly distinct interests in a context of structural transformations in research and in the

1. In this article, we draw on Brubaker’s constructivist approach to ethnicity (2006). This approach challenges the categorisations applied to groups and individuals and the supposedly specific behaviours attributed to them. This approach prompts us to describe the way in which they are reified and associated with behaviours which, according to the institutions studied, are inimical to reconciliation.

2. We borrow the term “encounter” and the associated analysis from Tissot (2005). Her work reconstructs the encounter between sociologists and civil servants which led to the construction of the “*quartiers sensibles*” (“sensitive areas”) as a public problem in France.

production of social housing. This movement prompted us to look at the uses of contact theory to legitimise controls over the distribution of social housing tenants. Demonstrating how this process differs from the top-down application of neighbourhood effect theory in other contexts, this article thus focuses on elucidating the social factors behind a particular theorisation of the now transnational “social mix” policy.

Our study is based on a body of materials relating to stances (position takings) in both the academic and administrative fields (as defined by Pierre Bourdieu). We collected scientific articles by researchers on contact theory in Northern Ireland, official reports, urban planning studies and research reports produced or commissioned by three local institutions that employ “shared space” as a policy: the Executive Office, the Department for Communities (a devolved department reporting to the Executive Office) and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). We then objectified these discourses by reconstructing the space of their producers’ social positions. This task was carried out through 31 semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2016 and March 2018 with civil servants, officials in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and housing associations, as well as with researchers.³

The application of a homologous interpretative framework in the academic and administrative fields.

“Mutual understanding” and “contact” as a solution

In the late 1980s, a homologous stance on the need to promote “mixing” could be observed in the administrative and academic fields. The British government under direct rule, then the Northern Irish government after devolution in 1998,⁴ introduced reconciliation policies that were concurrent with the production of academic studies employing contact theory. These policies were the outcome of two factors: local conditions marked by initial ceasefires in the early 1990s followed by the peace agreement of 1998, and an international context that favoured a liberal vision of reconciliation promoted by the United Nations and the European Union (Braniff and Byrne, 2014). Deploying a moral rhetoric around the concepts of “mutual understanding”, “good relations” and “dialogue”, these policies developed following

3. We decided to anonymise the people interviewed by alluding solely to their jobs. While most of them are public figures, we made this decision for reasons of visibility. The interviewees did not choose to be identified in our work on online search engines.

4. The establishment of a Northern Irish government in 1998 did not entirely put an end to direct rule. Indeed, it was re-established between 2002 and 2007.

the establishment in 1987 of a public body, the Central Community Relations Unit (one of the goals of which was to support civil society organisations that promoted “intercommunity” contacts). They then came to dominate after the peace agreement, with the definition of three strategies by the Executive Office: *A Shared Future* in 2005; *Cohesion, Sharing, and Integration* in 2010; then *Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC)* in 2013 (Knox and Quirk, 2016). These policies promoted the values of a liberal society, in the political sense of that term (Hughes, 2017; Richmond and Mac Ginty, 2015). Focused on individuals’ capacity for understanding in encounters with the other “community”, they drew on the liberal idea that individuals have the capacity for autonomous action and that providing a better environment would contribute to this autonomisation. These policies were in sharp contrast with those established at the beginning of the Troubles, between 1969 and 1974, which focused on “community development” and poverty reduction (Etchart, 2016), in particular by helping neighbourhood organisations to establish adult education programmes and cooperatives (ibid.). In 1974, in the context of armed conflict and reinforced security measures, the British government began to suspect neighbourhood organisations of links with paramilitary action and suspended these policies.

At the same time as these liberal reconciliation policies were being put into practice, a similar interpretative framework was emerging in research units. Set up in 1993 with financial and technical backing from the United Nations University, the University of Ulster’s International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) became the spearhead of research on reconciliation. Its opening was followed by that of the Institute for Conflict Research, an independent research institute, and of the Centre for Identity and Intergroup Relations at Queen’s University Belfast, a structure consisting of seven psychologists. In 2016, the same university opened the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, another research centre with nine researchers. Institutions (local councils, the Executive Office and its departments, and the European Union through its funding programme for pro-peace projects [PEACE]) supported these centres and initiated research programmes. The latter were a great success with the researchers who joined them, at a time marked by growing competition for funding and by project-based research (Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007).

In these units, researchers adopted the contact theory developed by the psychologist Gordon W. Allport (1954) in relation to racial prejudice in the United States, which he proposed should be tackled by changing individual behaviour rather than directly addressing structures of discrimination (Hughes, 2017). His observations led him to the view that contacts between individuals would reduce prejudice, but only

provided that specific conditions were met in such contacts, such as the establishment of equal status between the protagonists, common goals and institutional support. In the 1960s, researchers created the interdisciplinary academic field of peace and conflict studies, including the subfield of peace psychology, in which contact theory is extensively used (Christie and Montiel, 2013). In Northern Ireland, this theory took root in the 1990s with the creation of peace research centres as the academic field spread across the international arena.⁵ The career of one psychology teacher and researcher at Ulster University between 1984 and 2012 illustrates this process. Having started his career working on the effects of violence and conflict on children, he began to use contact theory when he joined the INCORE centre in 1993 and found himself taking part in more international conferences. Being one of the first to apply this theory to Northern Ireland, this researcher quickly achieved academic recognition by importing it into the country. He increased his scientific capital through the publication of 21 articles employing this theory in international scientific journals. In 2003, he even became president of Division 48 of the *American Psychological Association*, the section dedicated to the study of peace, conflict and violence, and obtained substantial research grants through collaboration with US researchers.

The political appropriation of an interpretation of conflict focused on individual behavioural change

The research programmes and the internationalisation of the academic field led to the publication of numerous scientific articles employing contact theory, lending credence to the idea that Northern Irish conflicts could be analysed at the level of the individual. Between 2004 and 2017, 153 articles drawing on the example of Northern Ireland were published in scientific journals.⁶ Their main focus is the effect of contact in three specific contexts: in friendships, in schools and in the residential domain. For their surveys, the researchers essentially employed questionnaires to find out if there is a correlation, or even a causal effect, between the number of contacts and individual attitudes that they perceive as positive. They assume that respondents can be categorised uniformly as either "Catholic" or "Protestant", that a respondent cannot

5. Yves Gingras (2002) explains that the scientific field becomes internationalised with the increase in the circulation of researchers and research papers, but above all with phenomena such as the collectivisation of research, linguistic uniformity, the internationalisation of funding sources and the delocalisation of the means of knowledge production.

6. We posted the following search query on Web of science (22 October 2018) : "TS=(Intergroup contact OR contact hypothesis OR intergroup contact theory) AND TS=(Belfast OR Northern Ireland OR Londonderry OR Derry) ". So it is not just articles published by researchers belonging to Northern Irish universities, nor just researchers using only Northern Ireland as their case study. Literature reviews were also included in the results of our search. The number of articles shows the extent to which this theoretical framework is used in the analysis of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

be simultaneously “Catholic” and “Protestant”, and exclude from their analysis respondents who claim to be neither one nor the other. One of the first studies to achieve academic success, attracting almost 294 citations,⁷ is revealing. Entitled “Effects of Direct and Indirect Cross-Group Friendships on Judgments of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland” and published in 2004 by four researchers, this article reports on a survey about the effects of direct and indirect friendships.⁸ After being required to identify themselves as “Catholic” or “Protestant” (respondents who answered “other” were excluded from the analysis), each person had to place a cross on a so-called “feeling thermometer” ranging from “extremely unfavourable” to “extremely favourable” in order to mark his or her position with respect to what the authors call the “outgroup”. The authors then established a correlation between each respondent’s answers and the number of friends they had in the “outgroup” (direct friendship) and the number of friends who had friends in the “outgroup” (indirect friendship). According to this article, there is a correlation between (direct or indirect) contacts and lower levels of prejudice. In the view of the authors, there may even be a causal effect (other studies on Northern Ireland, for their part, state that there is definite causality), but this would require further study. By focusing on this single supposedly causal effect between contacts and positive attitudes, contact theory quickly became operational in research. Researchers were able to explain their results solely through the prism of individuals, by linking them with a binary and reifying ethnic categorisation. They exclude the possibility that conflicts might be explained through the prism of other social categories, such as class or gender, and by other levels, such as social structures, all of which makes their work easy to use in practice.

The Executive Office drew upon contact theory in its 2005 strategy, *A Shared Future*. The reason for this political appropriation was the belief held both by the researchers who applied this theory and by the Executive Office that segregation was a public problem. In the T:BUC policy, the Executive Office’s main argument cited the census, which supposedly demonstrated the existence of “barriers” between “Catholics” and “Protestants”⁹ who, in its view, tend to choose to live in areas that correspond to their “identity”, thereby creating a split housing stock.¹⁰ In these strategies, the Executive Office, like the researchers who used contact theory, presented segregation as a form of moral failure. This argument overlaps with an argument specific to the Executive Office, which is that segregation is also an

7. According to Web of Science’s metrics, site consulted on 22 October 2018.

8. Paolini Stefania, Hewstone Miles, Cairns Ed, Voci Alberto, “Effects of Direct and Indirect Cross-Group Friendships on Judgments of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland: The Mediating Role of an Anxiety-Reduction Mechanism”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 30, n° 6, 2004, p. 770-786.

9. Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Together: Building a United Community*, 2013, p. 53.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

economic failure. Among other things, the Office claimed that it created problems in managing the housing stock and conveyed a negative image to investors. In a report commissioned in 2007 by the Executive Office, named *Research into the Financial Cost of the Northern Ireland Divide*, the firm Deloitte concluded that segregation was the cause of an annual £1.5 billion loss of GDP and ran counter to apparent economic rationality.

To tackle this segregation, the researchers and the Executive Office concurred that what was needed was to change individual behaviours by increasing the number of contacts between people. Increasing contacts would alter residential choices by “tackling the barriers that prevent individuals from opting to live in a shared housing area”¹¹. The main measures contained in T:BUC are significant: shared playgrounds between Protestant and Catholic schools, residential mixing, demolition of peace lines. The researchers and the Executive Office assume that conflict can be explained by the concentration of individuals categorised as “Catholic” or as “Protestant”, a concentration that would ipso facto elicit negative attitudes. This view implies that an individual’s direct environment explains their prejudices, i.e., that they are unable to hold a positive attitude because of the people around them. As with neighbourhood effect theory (Slater, 2013), the researchers and the Executive Office attributed responsibility for the conflicts to the individuals themselves. They ruled out the idea that segregation can facilitate forms of self-defence or mutual help. They also ruled out the idea that structural inequalities might be one of the causes of segregation, despite the fact that 16 of the 20 most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland are occupied by people who mostly described themselves in the census as “Catholic” (Knox, 2016). Contact theory and “good relations” policies have sparked controversies in Northern Ireland’s academic field. Political science researchers criticise policies that establish a symmetry between a group defined as “Protestant” and another as “Catholic”, ignoring the possibility that the Troubles were a product of historical relations of domination maintained by the British state in Ireland (see, for example, McVeigh, 2002). For their part, researchers in urban studies have shown the importance of spatial inequalities whether ethnic or class-based. According to them, segregation cannot be explained by lack of contact alone. It is the outcome of discriminatory policies directed at (actual or perceived) “Catholic” applicants for social housing before the introduction of government housing in 1971, of population displacements caused by violence (in Belfast, between 1969 and 1973, 60,000 people had to leave their homes, often under pressure) and, more recently, by gentrification (see, for example, Murtagh, 2011; 2016). However, for political reasons, the local government does not draw upon these studies. It demonstrates a certain lack of interest in such research,

11. Ibid., p. 75.

which would oblige it to think in terms of structural change (Herrault, 2020). This lack of interest is also explained by the relatively autonomous mode of scientific production typical of researchers in urban studies, who are not overtly prescriptive in their conclusions, unlike the proponents of contact theory (ibid.).

Researchers as “critical friends”

The symbolic interest in the spatialisation of contact theory

These parallels in the stances taken around the idea that reconciliation requires a change in individual behaviour facilitated an encounter between academics and institutions in quest of legitimacy. In the early 2000s, this encounter was organised by an arm’s-length body of the Executive Office responsible for reconciliation, the Community Relations Council (CRC), instigated by the man who headed it between 2002 and 2012. His career reflects connections with both the academic and administrative fields. In 2002, when he accepted the post of director in the hope of turning his research to practical use, he gave up his post as a political science researcher at Ulster University, obtained after his doctorate in 1987. This aspiration notably had roots in familial disposition. Between 1980 and 1994, his father was the director of Corrymeela, the biggest Christian centre for the promotion of reconciliation. Founded in 1965, this centre described itself as a place of dialogue for the resolution of conflict, an idea now adopted by the Executive Office (Hughes, 2017). In the mid-1990s, Corrymeela’s discussion workshops attracted almost 8000 people a year, mainly school groups and victims of the Troubles (ibid.).

Moving to the administrative field offered a way for the director of the CRC, at the head of a team of 15 people, to accumulate social capital. Although he had published few scientific articles before arriving at the CRC, as its director, he was recognised as one of the main theoreticians and professionals of reconciliation. This recognition came, in particular, in 2004, when he created the journal *Shared Space*, which established itself in the local landscape through an average circulation of 1000 copies. Between 2005 and 2017, the CRC published 18 issues of the journal containing more than 100 articles written mainly by psychologists and political scientists.¹² Through this journal, the director sought to endow “shared space” with both scientific and practical legitimacy (interview, December 2017). The authors published in the journal gradually increased the generality of its content by alternating between the analytical and prescriptive registers. The first issue of the journal provides

12. Since they are not listed in Web of Science, these articles are not included in the 153 mentioned above.

an illustration: three of the journal's five articles conclude by setting out political orientations.

Shared Space helped to exacerbate perceptions of segregation as a problem by spatialising lack of contact. In the very first issue, a researcher published an article entitled "Belfast: Strategies for a Shared City".¹³ Setting a disquieting linguistic tone, he claimed that only a few spaces could be considered as "shared",¹⁴ that segregation "negates the chance of creating a sense of civic unity",¹⁵ while proposing (among other things) the demolition of peace lines. Whereas during the Troubles, these walls were presented by the government as a source of protection for the populations (Dawson, 1984), this researcher, like the CRC's director, proposed a different interpretation. In an interview in December 2017, the director described the conflicts as being caused by a problem of spatial organisation which, in his view, prevented contact. He advocated the introduction of "quotas" to alter the organisation of residential space, in his view the only way to ensure continuous contact.

Two professors of urban planning from Queen's University Belfast then sparked great symbolic interest by expanding on the issue of spatialisation through reports commissioned from them in 2008 by Belfast City Council and the CRC. Since their evaluation achieved a certain success, in 2011 they obtained a further grant of £500,000 awarded by the PEACE programme. In their reports, they argue that segregation structures space. Having mapped the residential concentration of individuals categorised as "Catholic" or as "Protestant", the two researchers noted with regret that Belfast has a "spatial form in a city whose sectarian signature is a predominantly Catholic/Nationalist West and a predominantly Protestant/Unionist East".¹⁶ They deplored the fact that the city was entirely structured by ethnic relations: "Roads, car parks, blighted land, gates, fences, buffer buildings and other bulwarks all contribute to sustaining an ethnically and socially divided city".¹⁷ This spatial register reflects a tendency in Western Europe to spatialise public problems, with the result that concentrations of social groups are interpreted without reference to structural mechanisms (Tissot and Poupeau, 2005). The report's authors assume that spatial segregation would be automatically self-reproducing, and ignore the structural factors that led to this state of segregation. They look at spatial divisions not to show segregationist processes as a consequence of inequalities and discriminations, but to define "sectarian geographies" and "ethnic spaces" that are supposedly "prone to

13. Russell David, "Belfast: Strategies for a Shared City", *Shared Space*, n° 1, 2005.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

16. Planning for Spatial Reconciliation, *Making Space for Each Other: Civic Place-Making in a Divided Society*, 2016, p. 80.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

mutual mistrust” and to “tribal references”.¹⁸ To an alarming degree, they equate lack of contact with hostility by placing the responsibility on “single-identity communities” that have “tended to become very insular and self-reliant”.¹⁹ By distancing themselves from the inequalities identified in urban studies research as being at the root of segregation, these researchers produced a framework of perception that institutions can easily draw on to argue that the priority is to create “shared spaces”.

Looking to academics to conceive and legitimise an ethnic threshold

While the involvement of the CRC and its director may explain the symbolic interest in research founded on contact theory, a ministerial group also reveals the strong conceptual interest that civil servants took in these studies.

The Department for Communities and the NIHE, which is responsible for almost 86,000 social housing units (Frey, 2018), designed one of the Executive Office’s flagship policy: the construction of “shared” housing schemes. A housing scheme is defined as a group of apartment buildings and/or individual houses comprising an average of 50 social housing units. To qualify as “shared”, a scheme had to house no more than 70% of people who answered “Catholic” or “Protestant” when applying to NIHE to join the social housing waiting list. In 2013, the Executive Office launched the construction of 10 “shared” housing schemes, then in 2016 decided to extend the policy, requiring that 200 of the approximately 1000 social housing units built each year were now to be “shared”.

This policy was part of a reform of social housing that transformed NIHE’s position in the field of power. Having developed a public system founded on the mass construction of social housing in order to reduce inequalities, the British government pulled out of social housing in the 1980s. This led to a sharp residualisation of the social housing stock in the UK (Pearce and Vine, 2014) and particularly in Northern Ireland, where more than 122,000 social housing units were privatised between 1979 and 2018²⁰ (the total housing stock is 790,328 dwellings).²¹ In parallel, the number of new social housing units built fell from around 10,000 a year at the beginning of the 1980s to an average of only 1028 a year between 2011 and 2018 (Murtagh, 2016). The state withdrew further from the sector in 1998. Relying on a belief in productive competition, the British government stripped the NIHE of its homebuilding role, which

18. Ibid., p. 89.

19. Ibid., p. 57.

20. Department for Communities, *Classification of Registered Housing Associations in Northern Ireland: Consultation Two – The Future of the House Sales Schemes*, 2018.

21. The figures on housing come from the 2018 report, *Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2017-2018*, published by the Department for Communities.

was transferred exclusively to housing associations, which now manage 37,000 social housing units (Frey, 2018).

Having lost the power to build homes, the NIHE lighted upon “good relations” as a new sphere of influence (Herrault, 2020). In 2005, it created the Community Cohesion Unit, a team of some 20 people, which promotes activities between “communities” within its estates. The NIHE found this a particularly fertile furrow to plough in that in this way it was able to maintain control of the strategic and management responsibilities that it still holds. Tasked with allocating all the social housing units, it saw “good relations” as a means of fulfilling a dual British government objective: tackling the segregation identified as a public problem since the 2001 Cattle report (abandoning the previously dominant idea that ethnic concentration and “integration” were compatible), and reducing inoccupancy (Sala Pala, 2013; Finney et al., 2019). According to the NIHE, the ethnic divide in the social housing stock is a source of behaviours that are inimical to reconciliation and restrict applicants’ rental choices, and therefore contribute to growing numbers of vacant homes.²² In the year 2017-2018, the NIHE claimed that it had to rehouse 425 families because of intimidation by paramilitaries.²³ It argued that certain applicants would not choose particular areas for fear of being intimidated over their cohabitation with the other “community”.

Nonetheless, the “shared” housing policy remains controversial, and has encountered opposition from non-governmental organisations working on housing rights (Murtagh and O’Neill, 2017; Herrault, 2020),²⁴ which took the view that imposing the 70% threshold might maintain inequalities. Indeed, the NIHE awards points based on the criterion of housing need to applicants placed on spatialised waiting lists (each housing applicant can choose two preferred areas).²⁵ According to these organisations, applicants who describe themselves as “Catholic” in applications for social housing represent more than 70% of priority applicants in certain areas as classified by need, in circumstances where the NIHE is unable to satisfy all the applications for social housing and where ethnic inequalities persist. In 2013-2014, an applicant who identified himself or herself as “Protestant” when signing up for social housing waited an average of nine months for a home, whereas an applicant who identified himself or herself as “Catholic” waited 15 months, and an applicant who answered “other” waited

22. NIHE, *The Housing Executive’s Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020*, 2015.

23. Belfast Telegraph, *2,000 Households Forced out of their Homes—Paramilitaries Blamed for 73% of Cases*, 2019.

24. See, for example, the organisation Participation and the Practice of Rights and its 2013 report entitled *Equality can’t wait*.

25. When allocating homes, the NIHE classifies applications using a points system, based firstly on the urgency of the need and on the condition of the applicant’s current accommodation.

13 months.²⁶ However, the NIHE does not apply ethnic criteria in order to maintain the threshold when allocating homes in a “shared” housing scheme, which would be against the law. The NIHE bypasses complaints from the non-governmental organisations by arguing that it always allocates homes on the basis of need. Nonetheless, it has developed other strategies to maintain the 70% threshold, in particular by changing the area boundaries of the waiting lists (Herrault, 2020). Like other social landlords in the United Kingdom (Sala Pala, 2013), the NIHE has gradually moved away with these strategies from a policy solely focused on meeting housing need, though this approach had helped to end the ethnic discrimination which, before the establishment of the NIHE in 1971, structured access to social housing (Murtagh, 2016).

To legitimise the threshold, in 2013 the Executive Office set up a ministerial group consisting of three civil servants from the Department for Communities, two from the NIHE and one employee from the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations. A distinctive feature of this group was that the Department civil servants invited a researcher in urban planning and another in political science to participate in an “advisory” capacity. One reason for this desire to include researchers was the recent engagement of civil servants in the policy of “good relations”. The background of one of the members of this group is revealing. Having worked for 17 years on security issues at the Department for Communities, in the early 2000s, he joined the section responsible for neighbourhood renewal in West Belfast, then became responsible for the delivery of “shared” housing, at a time when, under the reconciliation process, the aim was no longer to support protective measures but to reduce segregation. As part of his training, he obtained a degree in community development from the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, linked with INCORE. Having been taught there by specialists in peace and conflict studies, he adopted their viewpoints and explained that he saw the role of the researchers in the ministerial group as to be “critical friends” (interview, October 2016).

The two guest researchers approved a study on the “shared” housing policy, stating that it contained no “gaps” with respect to research on segregation in Northern Ireland. This scientific imprimatur gave the civil servants the green light to legitimise the main criteria for the creation of “shared” housing schemes. To justify the 70% threshold, they applied contact theory, as well as the tipping point model, a theory propounded by the economist Thomas Schelling. In the study, they relied on a system of ethnic categorisation and on the idea of negative representations being attached

26. Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, *Statement on Key Inequalities in Housing and Communities in Northern Ireland*, 2017.

to the concentration of individuals thus categorised. They argued that a satisfied agent, classified as “Catholic” or as “Protestant”, is an agent surrounded by at least 30% of individuals belonging to the same category as himself or herself. With the 70% threshold, individuals would not feel isolated and would not leave. This theory gave scientific legitimacy to a political norm, establishing the “right” proportions of social housing residents. In France, “social mix” policies are also underpinned by a similar idea, a so-called level of acceptance (Belmessous, 2013; Bourgeois, 2013), and the use of such a threshold has been applied to ethnic minorities to justify the need for them to be distributed spatially in order to avoid creating social problems (de Rudder, 1979). This approach has had the effect of naturalising racism on the assumption that there exists an alterity between minorities and the rest of the population, while ignoring relations of domination (ibid., p. 22). In Northern Ireland, the use of the threshold is not confined to ethnic minorities. It applies to both the dominant ethnic category and the dominated categories. This threshold is primarily used to shine the spotlight on the behaviour of individuals who, according to the civil servants’ study, are the cause of their own “self-segregation” because of their negative attitudes and residential choices, a view that precludes an interpretative framework based on ethnic inequalities and the shortage of social housing.

Defining “good” behaviour in social housing

The civil servants on the ministerial group established another criterion: all the residents of “shared” housing schemes have to sign a “good neighbour” charter enjoining them to respect all cultures and not to display unionist or nationalist flags. They are also encouraged to participate in “good relations” activities, such as communal breakfasts. The civil servants justified this rule by reference to a report, *Exploring New Residents’ Experiences of Contact in Mixed Areas of Belfast*, funded by a £ CRC 10,000 grant and written by a senior lecturer in psychology from Queen’s University and by a doctoral candidate working under his supervision. With this report, the CRC sought to show the need for the 70% threshold in the allocation of social housing. For the two researchers, working with the CRC was an opportunity to conduct a survey, subsequently published in the prestigious *British Journal of Social Psychology*, while at the same time meeting the British government’s requirement to produce “credible statements” about the “economic and/or societal returns” from their work (Chubb and Watermeyer, 2017, p. 3).

In their report, the two researchers proposed practical instruments that the institutions responsible for the “shared” housing policy could easily adopt. They explained that, while “mixed areas” improve “intercommunity relations”, this

observation could not be extended to recently settled residents who had arrived from a "single-identity area".²⁷ When these new-movers received help from established residents, they would adopt an "ethos of sharing". According to these researchers, without that help, their experience of arrival in these areas might equally turn out positive or negative. In consequence, they proposed ready-made tools, such as a welcome pack, which would contain information on neighbourly norms, in order to help recently arrived residents to experience "intergroup mixing".²⁸ The report constituted a veritable symbolic and conceptual resource. The doctoral candidate explained that the CRC raised its profile by disseminating it to Members of the Legislative Assembly, directors of housing associations and journalists (interview, October 2017). The three civil servants from the Department for Communities then took up the ideas in the report to develop a doctrine, established in an 18-page document called *Brief for the Delivery of Shared Housing*, addressed to housing associations.²⁹ This doctrine sets out the steps housing associations should follow to monitor the distribution of social housing residents (to meet the 70% threshold) and to moralise behaviours (by establishing a programme of "good relations" activities and a "good neighbour" charter linked with funding allocated by the Department for Communities).

Conclusion

By retracing the theoretical construction of "shared space", this article seeks to highlight the cognitive and social conditions of its emergence. In a context marked by a colonialist conflict, "shared space" is legitimised by specific knowledges. While studies on neighbourhood effects focus on access to jobs or education, those on contact theory emphasise prejudice modification. However, both these theories share a belief in changes that occur at the level of individual behaviours. In a system that essentially generates schemas of perception and action, studies in contact theory were adopted following a specific encounter, the outcome of distinct interests of professionals engaged in two different fields. This encounter contributed to the production of practical solutions to problems conceived in a particular way. It runs counter to the idea that researchers who become involved in practice would remain above the fray. On the contrary, as demonstrated by work in urban sociology (Lepetit and Topalov, 2001; Tissot, 2005; 2007), the involvement of researchers and their theories has both symbolic and material effects. The work such researchers do serves

27. Stevenson Clifford, Sagherian Dickey Thia, *Exploring New Residents' Experiences of Contact in Mixed Areas of Belfast*, School of Psychology, QUB, Community Relations Council, 2015, p. 90

28. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

29. Department for Communities, *Brief for the Delivery of Shared Housing—version 4.0*, 2019.

to legitimise and conceptualise action. They simultaneously possess a social position that confers authority and the capacity to contribute symbolic and theoretical resources that are decisive in the conception and discursive legitimisation of action. It is on the basis of these symbolic resources that civil servants were able to begin implementing a “shared” housing policy in which social psychology and the development of activities between “communities” are combined with social engineering and the setting of an ethnic threshold in the allocation of social housing. Against a background of residualisation and privatisation in social housing, contact theory was thus used to legitimise a policy that has partially overridden the previous objective—focused on reducing social inequalities in access to housing—which has been central to the NIHE since its creation in 1971.

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