

EVALUATION OF THE ESRC CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE LARGE GRANT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction

The report presents the findings from the evaluation of the Conflict in Cities Large Grant carried out on behalf of the ESRC.

The Conflict in Cities and the Contested State Large Grant was an exploratory multidisciplinary research project which examined politically divided cities as 'key sites' in ethno-national conflicts over the state and national identities, cultures and territorial borders. The ESRC funded Large Grant was split between three institutions: Cambridge University, Exeter University and Queen's University Belfast, and led by a multi-disciplinary team of senior researchers combining the academic disciplines of Architecture, Urban Studies, Politics, Geography and Sociology. The Grant was funded for just over five years and ran from 2007 to 2013 with a funding total of just over £2,500,000.

The Conflict in Cities project comprised a multi-disciplinary research team, which explored separate but related urban and national conflict issues through an internationally comparative and thematic framework of analysis. Its task was to enhance multidisciplinary research and this fitted very well with the ESRC's research agenda; therefore it should be viewed as representing an experimental example of how multidisciplinary research might yield results that have a significant impact on a number of fields concerned with the study of ethno-national conflict.

The core research focused on the two very different deeply divided cities of Belfast and Jerusalem - one firmly embedded in the West and one central to the politics and international relations of the Middle East. These two cities are central to the ethno-national conflicts over the states and territories that they form a part of and both are at different stages of those conflicts, as are their so-called internationally sponsored peace processes - efforts by third party states to regulate and resolve those conflicts.

Three co-investigators (Co-Is) based in Exeter and Queen's led the Grant under the guidance of one Principle Investigator (PI) who was situated in Cambridge University and, with larger research clusters working on the divided cities under enquiry, conducted their research in Belfast and Jerusalem. The Grant entailed a supplementary and complementary set of research projects. These focused on other deeply divided cities in contested states in Europe and the Middle East, and included Nicosia, Mostar, Berlin, Beirut and Kirkuk. Seven PhD students worked on these cities, extending the range of contested cities under examination and instances of progress (or lack of progress) toward resolving the ethno-national conflicts that they remain party to.

2. Objectives

The primary objective of the Conflict in Cities project was to examine how cities divided between communities experiencing protracted ethno-national conflict may ameliorate or exacerbate that conflict at the state level. Ethnic, religious and national struggles rage in many urban settings, apparently fed by and central to larger state systems and affiliations. Cities may be

targeted, yet, as complex, diverse and dense entities, they also generate conflict. The project set out to analyse 'how divided cities in Europe and the Middle East' are shaped by 'ethnic, religious and national conflicts, and conversely, how such cities may absorb, resist and potentially play a role in transforming the territorial conflicts, which pervade and surround them.' The two main cities under investigation were Belfast (the European case study) and Jerusalem (the Middle Eastern case study).

The investigators set out to further academic understandings of the nature and dynamics of conflicts over state identity and territoriality insofar as they are manifested in divided cities, and, conversely, to understand how cities and everyday urban life are used (and abused) in the regulation or containment of these wider national conflicts, and to explore their potential uses for achieving the self-sustaining moderation, constructive channelling or resolution of conflict.

The project set out to question whether conflict is part of the urban condition and, if so, how our current understanding of it may be enhanced by re-examining national conflicts at different levels through a new multi-disciplinary framework. The investigators started from the premise that, if we understand cities as centres of human culture that, at one and the same time, embody some form of structured unity and varying aspects of diversity, conflict would appear to be inherent. It is unclear then why in some cities these conflicts erupt, sometimes beyond control, often for extended periods of time. And while it would be naïve to attribute such phenomena only to the larger struggles of the contested state, cities divided by national, religious or ethnic conflicts are regularly determined in some way by the state(s) in which they are located.

The grant's objective was to advance our understanding of the ways in which these heavily contested and divided places may be viable as cities for all inhabitants, how urban structures and institutions may bolster cities to withstand state struggles, how their negative aspects may be better recognised and their positive qualities improved, and, ultimately, to what extent they may be transformed to be more effective and equitable sites for human settlement and coexistence. Thus, the aim of the research was not so much to identify ways in which conflict is removed or resolved as to more realistically identify ways in which it is confronted and absorbed.

3. Methodology

The project's multi-disciplinary methodologies were innovative and experimental thus, in designing its comparative approach; the investigators did not impose a rigid or narrow framework from the outset. The comparative approach was designed to allow the differences and similarities in cities experiencing protracted ethnic-conflict to emerge through a loose framework that combined two fields that are not normally connected: urban studies and ethnic conflict studies. This was achieved by employing mixed disciplinary methods and empirical field research in each city.

The project did not contain a set of testable hypotheses and there was no consensual methodological approach at the heart of the project or in its different comparative strands. Conversely, it had a set of evolving hypothetical objectives which were intentionally broad and flexible, thus the focus of the research evolved, developed and grew during the course of the project and there was much room for manoeuvre, experimentation and methodological innovation. It is clear at the end of the Grant that the idea of and focus on proving 'a hypothesis' became less important to the investigators as the project developed and took shape.

The experimental nature of the research stemmed from other inherent conditions that were evident from the start of the project. Firstly, very little research or research models existed

concerning comparative urban conditions in cities that experience extreme levels of conflict, thus the work required an open ended approach in order to establish new frameworks within which the research could be conducted. Second, the cities studied are volatile and the research methods had to be sufficiently diverse and resilient in order for the investigators to react to abrupt change and unexpected events that were characteristic of, and fundamental to, the ongoing research. Thirdly, methodologies in Architecture (as the lead discipline in the project) frequently respond to the 'found' conditions of a physical site that constitute it as a 'situation', i.e., in a city. This is inherently different to a scientific method that describes the research constraints in advance and endeavours to exclude all extenuating factors in order to sufficiently isolate the case to be studied.

The investigators were cognisant from the outset of the need to learn from each other's methodologies, while not abandoning their own ways of working. The objective in this respect was to become influenced by each other and to influence each other. The investigators did not change their own methods. They learnt from each other, opening up new methodological possibilities, and this fed into and influenced the approaches taken by the PhD students, post-doctoral researchers and research associates.

The range of methods employed can and should be viewed as a key strength, intrinsic to the Project. The comparative dimensions to the research required a broad conceptual rubric for them to bring together an array of disciplinary approaches, methods and fieldwork experiments, while maximising the multi-disciplinary nature of the project and the experience of its participants. However, this undoubtedly made it harder for the investigators to contain, control and manage the project.

The research on Belfast and Jerusalem was organised through a modular framework containing nine modules in total. This allowed for a degree of flexibility in using different disciplinary approaches and methodologies as appropriate to each city and theme. These modules overlapped and some had clear cross-cutting points of reference, logically so, as they were designed to correspond with each other thematically and some of them comparatively.

The modular structure facilitated genuine collaborative work as opposed to individual research projects. The research outputs were enriched by this framework and this comes across vividly in the publications, as researchers are using different lenses and readings, altering and broadening the way they work and the way they approached their research. It also served as a framework which prevented the project from breaking up over time.

The modular approach was designed to place emphasis on the 'spatial' and 'physical' aspects of conflict in cities and acted as a focal point in meetings, workshops, conferences and online. The cultural, symbolic and ideological aspects, underdeveloped in the academic literature, were approached through the modules, for example, the symbolism of the contestation of public space, therein providing a theoretical level which was clearly interdisciplinary.

4. Findings

The research team were able to demonstrate, through an extensive set of publications, that conflict at the national level is not merely a crisis taking place over cities but, rather, that there is a conflict being played out in divided cities themselves and this cannot be detached from the national conflict.

The project shows clearly that divided cities in contested states should be viewed as crucibles of conflict at the national level; that cities experiencing protracted ethno-national conflict act as platforms for the articulation of nationalist ideologies, with communities expressing their identities in those cities and across their urban landscapes.

The project's most innovative contribution and academic impact in analysing state conflicts in divided societies is in examining cities as theatres of conflict using urban/architectural methodologies. Prior to the Conflict in Cities projects (starting in 2002) very little academic research had been conducted on ethno-national conflict through the lens of cities; scholars primarily viewed national conflict in terms of state conflicts.

The Grant provided evidence that shows that conflict being played out at a national level manifests itself in cities within the state, and that there is often in fact a conflict being played out in these divided cities themselves which cannot entirely be detached from the national level conflict.

The above findings were illustrated through the useful new concept of 'frontier urbanism' and the inherent contestedness of the urban frontier. Thus the project explains and illustrates through comparative case study analysis exactly how frontiers exist not only in the peripheries of urban spaces but also at their centre amid proximate antagonistic communities in day to day life.

The Grant made a significant contribution to the research field by reinforcing the significance of analysing the intersection of religion, urbanism, and violence. In doing so it provided the scholarly and practitioner communities with a wealth of new insights into how ethnicity, urban space and functionality, nationalism, and everyday urban life intersect in cities where communities in conflict are compelled to coexist.

One of the Grant's key successes was the development of what has become a sub-discipline in urban studies. It also advanced the scope and range of comparative politics, expanding and strengthening this field in terms of methodological approach and focus. It reaffirms what may be considered conventional wisdom in comparative politics; the differences in international comparative case study analysis are often at least as surprising and instructive as the similarities. The detail in the Jerusalem-Belfast comparison is particularly instructive as it shows just how complex this sort of comparative analysis is and what exactly the limitations to it are.

Through deep and impactful normative and empirical research, the Grant illustrated clearly that deeply divided cities do not flourish, providing many examples of shared space in cities, and emphasising just how important everyday life and customary practices are in regulating and exacerbating divisions between communities locked into conflict, showing that people do have an effect and that conflict regulation is not simply policy driven at the state level.

5. Conclusions

The Grant had a visible impact on a number of academic fields and was successful in bringing together the fields of Architecture, Politics, Sociology, Human Geography and Urban Studies through a complex and innovative multidisciplinary framework. It produced a very large and varied number of outputs: seven books; one special issue of *Space and Polity*; thirty-two peer reviewed articles; twenty-five book chapters; eleven briefing papers; eighteen working papers; in addition to a wide range of web reports, media coverage, and other publications.

The project illustrated how the processes of planning and design can bring new dimensions to the understanding of divided cities by looking at hard cases of ethno-national conflict through divided cities.

Some of the key publications were path-breaking and transformative in terms of their methodologies, multidisciplinary nature, academic impact, and comparative analysis, and in how they have been integrated within a coherent project having clear goals and narratives, while others were less so.

The project is not over as cities continue to exist as places where scholars can and should think about the big issues that confront those concerned with conflicts over the nature of the state. It impacted broadly on how we may think about and understand divided cities in contested states in the future. As such it paves the way for future research of this nature on these two regions and in other regions. In this sense, the project very much represents a beginning rather than an end as it represents a template for future multi-disciplinary studies of this nature.

6. Recommendations

For future Grants of this nature one person should be responsible for focusing on the project's legacy in terms of developing materials, initiating a book series and undertaking a systematic attempt to engage with scholars working on similar projects.

An impact strategy should be written into any future Grant of this nature from the outset. *It should be noted here that the impact agenda changed considerably during the course of the Grant; impact became increasingly important after the first year of the project.*

A future project of this nature should contain clear 'pathways to impact', with someone appointed at the outset to act as an 'impact champion'. Putting money towards hiring a knowledge broker who could make connections with very specific audiences and partners, as clearly delineated pathways to impact, would be a logical component to this. This should not be an investigator, but someone with specific non-academic experience and expertise in non-academic knowledge transfer and policy impact.

Extra funding could be built into the Grant to provide an Impact Champion to act on behalf of the investigators - engaging with the media, synthesising and distributing key research findings, and formally tying external partners into the project's public engagement activities.

Expectations regarding the impact that multidisciplinary research of this nature may have on government policy makers in places like Jerusalem should be set in full awareness of the difficult political environment in which research is being conducted.

The Conflict in Cities project is ongoing as are its impacts. It may be quite some time before these impacts - academic and not academic - are fully realised and quantifiable. Follow on enabling grants, starting at the end of a major project, and set up to allow the research team to continue disseminating the project's findings and furthering its impacts, would be very useful. This would help maximise academic and non-academic impact in the short-to-medium term at the end of a grant. An additional resource, such as the Impact Acceleration Accounts may prove beneficial in maximising the on-going impacts and potential impacts of the Grant. The PI should pursue this as an option.