

## Understanding Terrorism. What can the Arts and Social Science learn from each other?



**James Hughes** discusses his research on the conflict in Northern Ireland between 1969 – 2005 as well as the advice he provided to the Director of a play, titled *'Everything Between Us'*, which deals with the legacy of the conflict and received its London premiere in April 2017.

The question of what constitutes terrorism is an ongoing puzzle in social science. The conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969-98 is one of the cases that has generated much theorising and much empirical evidence about this question. It is paradoxical that the Conservative government recently advocated an expansive redefinition of what constitutes “violent extremism” and terrorism in the wake of the terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, and yet now it seeks to break the deadlock of a hung parliament by forming a parliamentary alliance with the **Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland** – a party which has long established ties with Loyalist terrorists going back to its foundation in 1971, and even set up its own terrorist organisation **Ulster Resistance** in the Aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.

In a **recent working paper** with Anar Ahmadov we examined the 3,702 fatalities in the Northern Ireland conflict between 1969 and 2005 and analysed the roles of different armed groups in the killings. Given that attacks on innocent civilians are generally accepted as the key defining feature of terrorism, we were looking in particular for patterns of “civilian victimisation”. We found a significant variation in civilian victimisation between different armed blocs and time periods, with Republican paramilitaries responsible for the largest number of casualties overall (including combatants and civilian non-combatants), but that Loyalist paramilitaries were responsible for the largest number of civilian casualties, and the overwhelming majority of those were randomly targeted innocent catholic civilians. State forces were responsible for fewer civilian killings compared with the Loyalist and Republican armed blocs, but their violence was also concentrated on catholics, and they were more likely than Loyalist paramilitaries to target combatants.

In November 2016 I was approached by Matthew Schmolle and Neil Bull, the producer and director respectively of the English premiere of the play titled “**Everything Between Us**” that was in development for a run at the Finborough Theatre (in late April-May 2017). The play was written by a Northern Irish playwright, David Ireland, who had grown up in a hard-line Loyalist estate in East Belfast (and a DUP heartland). The play explores the relationship between two sisters from a Loyalist family, whose father was a leading member of the main **Loyalist terrorist group, the UDA/UFF**, and who had been assassinated by the **IRA**. The play reveals the trauma, psychosis and dysfunction that was wrought on the family by the experience of conflict.

When first run in Ireland and the USA in 2010, the play had been controversial for its comically cynical treatment of hard hitting themes and language about Loyalist paramilitarism, sectarianism, racism, the impact of violence on family and a certain nihilism on the prospects for reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

I was approached because of my expertise on the conflict. I was asked to meet with the director to advise him about the key issues of the conflict. The director wanted me to assist him in contextualising the play, and to understand the sub-text of Loyalist paramilitary violence. I explained to him that though some social scientists like to talk of “evidence-based policy”, in the case of understanding terrorism this is simply a meaningless buzzterm.

To effectively analyse any problem one needs to know its causes. If it is a problem involving human factors then one needs to understand motivations and behaviour. The broad social science of terrorism offers many theories and suppositions, none of which are based on rigorous evidence and many of which are simply based on no evidence at all. The main frames are that terrorists are “mad”, are criminally-minded (the latest version of this old meme is the “gangster-jihadi”), or are driven by material rewards. These are demonising frames that divert from equally plausible theories that view terrorists as being highly motivated, ideologically driven, and altruists for their particular cause. What empirical evidence we have suggests that terrorists are much more likely to fall within the latter category than in any of the former ones. **Ideological fanaticism combined with indiscriminate targeting is what makes terrorism so dangerous and repulsive.** One of the obstacles to such an evidence-based policy is that efforts to properly understand causes, behaviour, and motivations are often derided by governments, parties, the media, and even within academia, as treacherous sympathising with the terrorists, and providing “excuses”.

In our meetings I emphasised to the director some of the contradictions in how different types of violence in Northern Ireland had often been portrayed in politics, the media, and the Arts, and often misrepresented. I also suggested that while **religious sectarian** ideology was certainly the key motivating factor in Loyalist terrorism, it is also important to understand the indiscriminate and brutal nature of that violence. Both elements would be critical for understanding the dysfunctional familial relationship explored in the play.

Most Catholics murdered during the conflict, were killed in extremely brutal ways by the main Loyalist paramilitary group, the UDA (using its moniker, the UFF). They were often kidnapped, tortured and murdered in Loyalist drinking clubs. We now know from various **UK government commissioned reports** that British government security agents in the main counterterrorist RUC Special Branch and Military intelligence colluded with Loyalist terrorists, including in **murder**. In fact, the UK only added the UDA to its proscribed list of terrorist organisations in 1992, long after the peak of its murder campaign in the 1970s.

To help him contextualise and get a sense of the brutality of the Loyalist murders I suggested to the director that he use **Lost Lives**, a book that details every fatality in the Northern Ireland conflict. During rehearsals, the director later informed me, the book would be opened randomly and details of killings would be read out.

The play received **very positive reviews** when it ran in late April 2017, most rightly lauding the excellent direction and performances. Most also remarked upon the effective combining of family drama with political analysis of the long shadow cast by Northern Ireland's past. It is a shadow that the current occupant of 10 Downing Street seems oblivious to.

*Image credit: Miss Copenhagen*



*James Hughes is Professor of Comparative Politics, Convenor of the **MSc Conflict Studies**, and Director of the **Conflict Research Group**.*

---

*Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the **LSE Department of Government**, nor of the London School of Economics.*

---

June 20th, 2017 | [Conflict](#), [Featured](#), [Research](#), [Staff](#) | [0 Comments](#)

---

u