

JUSTICE IN TRANSITION: COMMUNITY RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Routledge, 191 pp excl appendix and references

ISBN: 97804156277726

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It feels like that we live in a world where nations, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals are often divided by conflict. At the time of writing this review it is possible to consider such examples as Egypt and Syria, or the incorporation of immigrant and migrant populations within Europe. The consequences of these conflicts often result in demands upon the judicial frameworks and organisations of the state, yet it also appears that active reconciliation between people and communities has an equally important role in ensuring sustainable transitions to more peaceful and just existences. Northern Ireland is one such community engaged in the transition from division to more peaceful harmony and order. Eriksson's skilfully crafted adaptation of her PhD thesis into a monogram provides the reader with an immensely stimulating exploration of the challenges of establishing such cohesive justice within communities that have lived with years of inherently divisive violence and mistrust. This book, through the synthesis of complex and diverse (quantitative and qualitative) methodological data provides a well-structured and accessible analysis of this distinct topic and society. It is an exploitation of community group based developments in informal social justice, and given the Northern Irish context (not unlike other communities like South Africa or Bosnia) this involves the active engagement of dominant and influential paramilitary organisations. In doing so Eriksson establishes three core thematic considerations: an initial investigation of the current debates and developments with regards to restorative justice; how they might be seen in application within a Northern Ireland context; how this then represents an example of where informal and formal justice frameworks meet.

For those, like me for whom Northern Ireland is 'of the news' rather than regularly lived experiences, this book opens up a rich and insightful window. Additionally, and really usefully for the reader, the book is accompanied by two key summative appendices that outline the different paramilitary groups, key governmental documents and principal timeline events within recent Northern Irish history. Eriksson starts though, in chapters one and two, with an overview of some of the current theoretical considerations about restorative justice. She articulates how these are still very much debates in development rather than firmly established and agreed perspectives. From this, and it seems important to me, she then highlights in chapter three how communities like Northern Ireland, have a history of informal justice that often act as predecessor to the establishment of community restorative justice projects. In addition to centuries old traditions, there is here a detailed analysis of the more recent 'punishment violence' that filled some voids of state policing, and how it differed between Ireland's nationalist and loyalist communities.

Eriksson then offers us some of the detail of her embedded ethnographic investigation, with chapters four, five and six highlighting some of the specific examples of community restorative justice interventions within Northern Ireland and their paramilitary context. Eriksson maintains the separation of her account between the two communities, nationalist and loyalist, as she argues not only did they give rise to distinct projects but also arose out of very distinct contexts. She starts with the establishment at the turn of the twentieth century of Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) in the nationalist community and Northern Ireland Alternatives (Alternatives) within the loyalist community. Eriksson highlights how some of these beginnings evolved out of a pragmatic need to legitimise the existing informal practices within the wider changing political peace process. What then follows is some very detailed examples of how the projects practice, with lots of specific case exemplars, and the role of individuals and styles of leadership in shaping the nature of the interventions.

In concluding, chapters seven and eight illustrate how CRJI and Alternatives have acted as a 'conduit' between the community and the police of Northern Ireland, and as such how informal and formal justice frameworks meet to establish more hopeful futures. Eriksson describes how the bridge building of partnerships is done both from below and within the community; and above and into the community by the state. The account is of how the legitimisation of the pre-existing projects into formally accredited interventions of the state helps contribute to the establishment of the transitory cement of post-conflict societies. The book concludes with Eriksson's reflections on the key learning of the community and her journey and, the lessons that might be learnt from the Northern Ireland context and applied to the continuing debate on the nature of restorative justice and its application in other societies.

This book is a lovely read, in which Eriksson shows us real glimpses of the hope within these processes, and the essential role of individuals and the warmth of humanity, thus the changes are dependent on those made by individuals not just organisations and communities. That is not to say that she avoids all the difficulties and challenges, far from it; if this book offers anything, then it affirms the role that time plays within the restorative justice process. The establishment and transition of informal punishment justice to accepted integrated elements within post-conflict justice is illustrated as a slow evolutionary change processes, much as it is for victims of injustice to find reconciliation through engagement with rather than estrangement from those who offend against them. This book, and importantly for this journal's readership offers and maintains a strong criminological focus, as such its appeal is not only for the academic and student, but for those actively working with individuals and communities in conflict resolution, peace-making and administering systems of justice.