'Say Nothing' Has a Lot to Say About Frozen Conflicts and Radicalization

I recently had the pleasure of binge-reading the book, Say Nothing, Patrick Radden Keefe's beautifully written and gripping account of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

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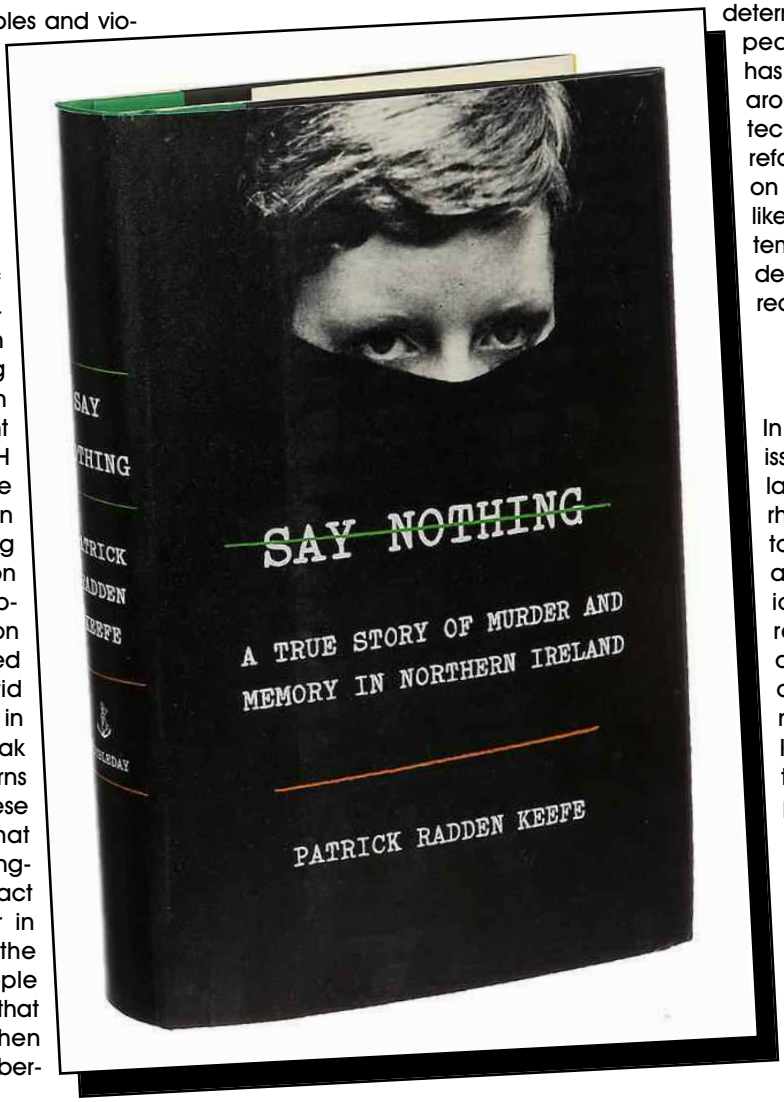
As a work of narrative non-fiction sourced with 65 pages of citations and notes, he provides a lucid history of the violent conflict, and lingering peaceful conflict, by framing the work around a "true crime" storyline, weaving the disappearance of mother of ten Jean McConville in 1972 to the broader escalation and evolution of the conflict. Even more importantly, in his explanation of the search for the individual(s) who disappeared her, and who gave the orders to do so, he skillfully reveals the compromises and witting and unwitting fictions that can become part of a peace process and the key players in associated political maneuverings.

Liberal/Democratic Peace

My marginalia throughout is riddled with notes that serve as a reminder of the many similarities and lessons one can draw between the Troubles and violent conflicts and their "resolution" elsewhere, including, of most interest to me, the Western Balkans. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement came during what might be regarded as a peak of liberal democratic international intervention and peacebuilding enterprises, following on the Dayton Agreement that ended the war in BiH in 1995, preceding the 1999 NATO airstrikes in Serbia aimed at creating a pathway for resolution of the longstanding suppression and oppression in Kosovo, and followed by the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement in Macedonia. As I speak with students and interns who were born after these moments – after that moment - I am increasingly reminded of the impact that 9/11 and the war in Iraq have had on the minds of young people today who don't realize that there was a time when there was hope that liberal/democratic peace theory was not only believed but supported in practice (albeit imperfectly), or when the Responsibility to Protect was even able to be conceived (and sadly, promptly ignored). However, it also leaves me thinking about the ramifications of long-term unresolved, frozen conflicts, on present and future generations.

While Keefe's book raises many issues and themes familiar to people engaged in conflict resolution and associated peacebuilding – the impact of segregated education, the role of history and founding myths, tit-for-tat violence and escalation, the search for the missing, political deal making and compromises – I couldn't help but focus on the theme of radicalization processes that can both bind an individual to a cause, and in some cases lead them to commit violence in the name of that cause.

Over the past several years, we have seen a marked increase in interest in the issues of radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism, and, among donors, an interest in preventing and countering these phenomena in the Western Balkans (a sector now commonly referred to as P/CVE by the multitude of donors trying to engage). While this was initially prodded by the social media-fuelled rise of ISIS, there is slow and often reluctant appreciation of the rise of violent far-right radicalization, and the interplay between these extremisms. I argued in 2015 and 2017 that the structural drivers of extremism and violent extremism in the region mirror the broader sources of conflict over the past three decades, and therefore don't require new projects and approaches but a recommitment to the determined conflict resolution and peacebuilding approach that has fallen by the wayside since around 2006; for a shift from technical checklists of shallow reform to deeper engagement on the hearts and minds issues like education and political systems that promote rather than deter moderation and, in time, reconciliation.



Devotion to a Cause

In a 2019 book project on the issue in Serbia, the authors similarly argue that tit for tat violent rhetoric and actions can lead to reciprocal radicalization and spiraling conflict dynamics. Say Nothing is another reminder that radicalization and the violent actions that can be associated with it are not new.

Keefe writes, "I saw an opportunity to tell a story about how people become radicalized in their uncompromising devotion to a cause, and about how individuals – and a whole society – make sense of political violence once they have passed through the crucible and finally have time to reflect" (340). Leading to this point, the

binding threads of the experience of some of the main protagonists in the book, primarily Brendan Hughes and the sisters Dolours and Marion Price, allow Keefe to aptly illustrate the rationale – yes, rationale – behind their radicalization and engagement with the IRA as militant volunteers. (He also describes the often schizophrenic role of Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams, but that would require a blog in and of itself.)

In setting the scene for the book he describes how generations of history and family/community based engagement in and retelling of history created fertile soil for grievance and frustration. (Dolours Price openly described her childhood as "indoctrination" (15)). Attacks on peaceful protesters – including by planned instigators – at times had the result of turning people to violent means, as individuals came to believe that any other approach against the enemy had been "naïve" (40).

Non-Negotiable

While he notes that "a cult of martyrdom can be a dangerous thing," (12), he also notes the appeal that involvement in a struggle (perceived to be) greater than oneself can hold, often using the word "romantic" to describe certain IRA volunteers.

"It was an invigorating solidarity," with funerals providing a "pageantry of death and nationalism" (39).

"For all the horror unfolding around them, there was a sense of adventure for Dolours [Price] and her comrades, a fantasy that they were dashing outlaws in a society in which all order had broken down" (48).

Writing of the perpetrators of the first major IRA bombings in London in 1973, Keefe writes, "But on account of their youth, perhaps, or the almost hallucinatory fever of their own righteousness, Price and her compatriots seemed eerily detached from the gravity and potential consequences of the mission they were about the undertake" (121). As the violence escalated, the acts of terror perpetrated by the IRA took on greater dimensions, including debates on whether killing civilians – intentionally or unintentionally – could be justified. The role of the diaspora in radicalization is also addressed: "The romantic idyll of a revolutionary movement is easier to sustain when there is no danger that one's own family members might get blown to pieces on a trip to the grocery store" (210).

None of this is unique to Northern Ireland.

And while peace was welcomed by many, he also lays bare the mixed emotions that a peace based on compromise can elicit from those most committed to the cause, in belief and in action.

Black and white thinking leads to "for us or against us" views that are non-negotiable. "This kind of absolutism formed the marrow of republican mythology: the notion that any acceptance or incremental change was tantamount to betrayal" (232). Keefe explains the moral injury soldiers/fighters deal with as they come to terms with what they have done during wartime. (IRA volunteers considered themselves to be soldiers, whether or not others viewed them as terrorists.) As the armed struggle was ended without achievement of the desired result, delivering an imperfect seeming stalemate, one volunteer reflected that, "she believed that she had been robbed of any ethical justification for her own conduct" (253-254).

I am in particular fascinated by the link between radicalization and an individual or group's search for meaning, purpose and belonging, themes that have come up time and again in my research on the issue in the Western Balkans, and which are woven throughout Keefe's prose. Dolours Price noted, "I would like to think that what I did was to illustrate to the world the ability of any regular human being to push themselves to the limits and beyond, physically and mentally, because of some deeply felt belief" (255). And at times that included violence against property and person – acts that perpetrators sometimes would come to regret, or at least ponder and question. At her funeral a speaker illustrated the difficulty a true believer can have in terms of commitment to an ideal. "If Dolours had a big fault, it was perhaps that she lived out too urgently the ideals to which so many others also purported to be dedicated….. She was a liberator but never managed to liberate herself from those ideas (322).

Reading this book just days after the murder of hundreds in Sri Lanka, and not long after the massacre in Christchurch, it is clear that radicalization, political violence and terrorism will remain on our collective radar screen and shape domestic and foreign policies, for better or for worse. One is reminded of the time it takes to address the structural drivers of radicalization and of violence – a process that can never be definitively "completed" but which requires constant grassroots work and policies targeted at abating – rather than abetting – the political and group polarization that are at the heart of reciprocal radicalization. It also serves as a reminder of the impact unresolved frozen conflicts can play in creating an environment in which identities are based on lore and myth passed on generation to generation.

For the People

Such drivers will never be addressed through counter-terror and police/security support measures, but only through governance systems that allow for real development after the violent conflict, including comprehensive and committed education policies in support of true conflict transformation, and honest reckonings with the complexity of history. The signing of a peace agreement - Good Friday in Northern Ireland, Dayton in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Taif in Lebanon, etc. - does not mean that peace is suddenly "done." The efficacy and accountability of established systems and structures must continually develop to work for the people and ensure the potential of a sustained and resilient peace.

As in this current moment many look with trepidation at the potential impact of a hard Brexit on Northern Ireland, through a new, darker lens following the death of journalist Lyra McKee, it is important to remember that no country can ever consider itself immune from these dynamics (the upcoming European Parliament elections offer an opportunity to reject the politics of polarization), and that we also know what measures can reduce a society's vulnerabilities to the self-defeating spiral of reciprocal radicalization.