At first sight it would appear that in Northern Ireland sectarianism is the principal problem and the major determining factor in the evolving course of events. Intra-class conflict within the working class is rife. Normal horizontal class cleavages are subordinated to the vertical sectarian divide that cuts a swathe of suspicion and hatred through the middle of society. Despite appearances, however, the basic contradictions that establish the parameters of the developing situation are not based on sectarianism. The two main contradictions underlying the conflict in Northern Ireland are firstly the fact that Ulster is a unique type of colonial situation, and secondly the nature of the evolving social formations in the Province, at a time when the anachronistic paternalist style of capitalism that still exists there is at last being forced to come to terms with the monopolistic managerial style of capitalism that is dominant in the rest of the United Kingdom and Western Europe. On this basis it can be seen that sectarianism is a manifestation of the underlying contradictions, and, while important, its presence and its ramifications can be explained in terms of these basic contradictions.

THE SECTARIAN DIVIDE

The importance of sectarianism as a crucial feature of the Northern Ireland situation must not be underestimated. The Province is split down the middle, with two communities opposing each other on either side of a vertical sectarian divide. The lines that are drawn are associated with religion, and each community identifies with a religious grouping, either Protestant, that is Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Paisleyite, or Catholic. But co-existent with a religious identity is a national identity, and a consciousness of a certain political role. There is a joke, common in Belfast and now hoary with re-telling, that concerns a newly arrived Moslem. “Are you a Protestant or Catholic?” he is asked. “I am a Moslem,” he replies. “Ah sure, but are ye a Protestant Moslem or a Catholic Moslem?” The question points not only to the overriding preoccupation of the population of Northern Ireland, but also to the fact that the terms Protestant and Catholic do not simply connote a religious identity. The Moslem is not being asked his religious affiliation but his political alignment.

To be Protestant is to be a member of the ruling class, even if a working class member, identified through a variety of symbols such as the sash, the pipe-band, the Orange Lodge, and, before its demise, Stormont, with the position that “Ulster” is an integral part of the United Kingdom, that all Catholics are rebels bent on overthrowing the established order and that the relatively privileged position of the Protestant community has been earned and must be defended. The advantages gained in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne must be safeguarded at all times. It is the unique achievement of the Unionist movement, founded in 1886, to organise resistance to the Home Rule plans of Gladstone, to have welded together landlords, industrial bourgeoisie, petit-bourgeoisie and working class into one bloc with a common consciousness and political stance. As Peter Gibbon notes: “The integration of the Protestant working class into this ultra-reactionary bloc is the specific miracle of Unionism.” (1)

To be Catholic is to identify with the ideal of a United Ireland. It is to feel that the “Six Counties” are an integral part of an Irish nation, to regard the Tri-colour rather than the Union Jack as one’s flag, and to feel a greater sense of identification with the Irish Republic than with the government at Westminster. It is moreover to feel acutely the injustice of being a deprived minority in a Protestant state that, for the 50 or so years since partition, has
actively discriminated against Catholics, and to see relief from this situation only in the overthrow of that state. A sure measure of the degree of discrimination in job opportunities, housing and the like is the fact that, despite the higher birth-rate of the Catholic population, they still only represent one-third of the population of Northern Ireland, the same proportion as in 1921. Emigration has done well by Unionism, but not without incentives.

Obviously not all Protestants and Catholics would fit the above characterisations. They are characterisations of communities rather than individuals. What is clear, however, is that a great divide runs through Northern Ireland, bifurcating it into two distinct communities. Catholics and Protestants live in separate areas in the Province and in the major urban area, Belfast. There was some mixing prior to 1969, but one effect of the ‘troubles’ has been to polarise the communities with regard to housing. Catholics in Belfast have moved from mixed areas into Catholic ‘ghetto’ areas within the city such as the Falls Road, Andersontown and Ballymurphy. They fear a Protestant backlash such as occurred in 1969 when Catholics in a mixed area in Divis Street were burned out.

Members of each community can identify members of the other by name and, it is claimed, by accent. Protestants and Catholics go to different schools, colleges, sports clubs, social clubs and frequently different places of work. The only un segregated institution is Queen’s University, but, on the one hand it provides only for an elite group, and on the other opinions even there are polarising as tension mounts. Segregation is incredibly thorough. Inter-marriage is rare and where it occurs it is often followed by emigration. In Belfast today it is physically dangerous to ‘walk out’ with a member of the other community. It was found by research teams from Queen’s University Medical School that there is a statistically significant difference between the blood groups of the two communities.

The result of all this segregation and division is suspicion and animosity. Thus one does not find a unified and class-conscious working class, as one would expect in the most underdeveloped area of the United Kingdom with an ailing economy and the highest unemployment rate in the country. Instead there is a working class divided on sectarian lines, indulging in intra-class conflict of the most vicious kind. Most of the political murders, the bombing of pubs and small shops occurs within working class areas. The basic sectarian division cuts across working class alliances and splits the class into seemingly irreconcilable camps. It is a situation that has led some theorists of conflict resolution, such as Richard Rose, (2) to posit a classic polar situation which is not susceptible to being resolved by any compromise position. Conflict and polar division are inevitable. To see the situation in such static terms is, however, mistaken. Such a view does not take account of the underlying contradictions that will continue to dictate change.

THE COLONIAL DIMENSION

Northern Ireland cannot be understood unless it is seen as a colonial situation where the pressures of evolving social formations are intensifying the contradictions associated with colonialism. The view, promoted by Unionist politicians, that the troubles in the Province are an internal problem for the United Kingdom, is a misrepresentation of the facts. The fact is that Belfast is an Irish city in an area of Ireland artificially established as a separate statelet which is dominated by a settler community. It is a settler community that has been there for so long that the identity of its members as settlers is no longer apparent either to themselves or to others. The Manichean division between settler and native has been subsumed into religious categories. As Conor Cruise O’Brien notes:

‘Basically, religious affiliation was -- and is -- socially, economically, and politically significant, for it distinguishes, with very few exceptions, the natives and their children from the seventeenth-century settlers and their children.’ (3)

To state that the fundamental problem in Northern Ireland is colonialism is not, however, to suggest that the solution is a United Ireland. In the present context of events such a suggestion would be both facile and utopian. But once Northern Ireland is seen in the light of a colonial situation a clearer and more cogent analysis becomes possible, and many aspects of the conflict there, such as sectarianism,
become explicable. However it is necessary in the first instance to understand the nature of colonialism in Northern Ireland. Ireland as a whole has been subjected to various types of colonial rule since the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169 made Henry II Lord of Ireland and established the Pale. Over the centuries however different types of colonial rule evolved in the North and the South of the island. The colonial presence in the South was largely confined to an elite class of Anglo-Irish landlords, to the establishment of the Church and to English administrators. Ireland was cynically and ruthlessly exploited. (4) It provided a source of cheap labor, rents and a market for British goods. The position of the colonial power with regard to the native Irish was, in the South, similar to Britain's position with respect to other settler-free colonies, such as Uganda or Ghana (Gold Coast). When the time came when it was expedient to pull out Westminster was able to make the appropriate decisions and dismantle the political structure of colonialism. As too with other colonies exploitation continued, after nominal political independence had been achieved, through the agencies of international monopoly capitalism and the process of neo-colonialism. The Republic of Ireland today is still heavily dependent on British capital; it is an important market for British goods; and, through a unique relationship with the United Kingdom, Irish labor is freely available to British industry.

Colonialism in Northern Ireland proceeded along different lines because of the existence of a settler class; settlers who were encouraged to take up land and make their homes in Ulster. James I instigated the first Plantations in 1607-9, specifically because Ulster was the most rebellious province. Twenty or so Plantation towns were set up, and 100,000 Scots and 20,000 English were paid to settle. Later more settlers, Scots in the main, moved into the area. The victory of William of Orange over James II, and the Catholic Irish who had supported him, at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 apparently confirmed the title of the settler Protestants to the land that had been taken from the native Gaels. Protestant ascendancy in Ireland as a whole was established for the time being, and the foundation stone of a future Northern Protestant state was laid. (5)

In the North of Ireland a colonial situation developed that is analagous to that of Algeria or Rhodesia. The differences between Northern Ireland, as it was established by the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, and other settler-colonial situations are firstly, by virtue of a convenient partition that left three of the historic counties of Ulster outside Northern Ireland, the settler population outnumbered the native population in a ratio of two to one. (6) (Although it must be noted that by 1920 the Protestant settler community made up a substantial proportion of Ireland's total population, about 25% in fact. The same is true today.) Secondly centuries passed before the British Government had any doubts about supporting the settlers in the North, by which time they were so firmly entrenched that they could virtually dictate their own terms. Sir Edward Carson declared in 1912: 'We must be prepared -- and time is precious -- in these things -- the morning Home Rule passes, ourselves to become responsible for the Protestant province of Ulster.' (7) There was a lot of support among officers in the British army for the Loyalist cause, and rumors that they would not lead their men against the Protestants. Moreover in July 1914 'Ulster Protestants had a stock of more than 40,000 rifles, with ammunition and men organised ready to use them.' (8) The 1914-18 war intervened, but in 1920 the same pressures forced the British government to accede to the demands of Protestant Unionism and to partition Ireland.

COLONIALISM AND IDEOLOGY

Once the Protestant community is seen as a settler group then many aspects of sectarianism become explicable. Common to all settler groups is a natural cohesiveness that unites varied classes in a common attitude towards the natives. What is true for the Boers or the White Rhodesians is true for the Protestants of Northern Ireland. Their attitude towards the Catholics is inevitably hostile as a result of a defensive mentality in a colonial situation. The defensive or laager mentality of the Pro-
testant community must be seen in the light of the fact that until the partition they did not form a majority in control of a Protestant state, but a minority, if a substantial one, in Ireland as a whole. Behind every Protestant Ulsterman's majoritarian claims today lurks an uneasy awareness of this minority position.

There is also a need felt by a settler community to find a justification for its existence and its history. This justification usually finds expression as a racial rationale that belittles the status and capability of the despised native. Sectarianism for the Protestants of Northern Ireland is racialism in clerical garb. As Russel Stetler remarks: 'If the setting were Algiers, rather than Belfast, the differences of skin color would lead us to identify racism as the core of the problem. But in the Irish setting, religious affiliation, rather than skin color, has marked the social identities of the two groups, colonisers and colonised.' (9) It is a racialism that has produced stereotypes that closely resemble racial stereotypes elsewhere. The Catholics are seen as shiftless, worthless and incompetent; they are drunkards; they are irresponsible and lazy. Professor Thomas Wilson, a modern Ulster economist, openly proclaimed that Catholics 'were made to feel inferior and to make matters worse they often were inferior, if only in those personal qualities that make for success in competitive economic life.' (10) It is again redolent of a colonial situation that whereas sectarianism for Protestants is manifested as slurs on the personal capabilities of the Catholics, the latter reserve their chief hate for the institutions of colonial rule, and are less concerned with attacks on Protestants as such. It is Stormont, the Orange Order, the Union Jack, and other concrete symbols of the colonial situation that are vilified by the Catholic community. There are direct parallels with many African situations, where the Europeans attack the Africans as human beings, coining various abusive epithets with which to describe them, while the Africans are more concerned with attacking the institutions of colonial rule. In Northern Ireland we find this familiar pattern of a racial rationale confronting a nationalist ideology.

There is then a natural propensity to sectarianism in Northern Ireland given the nature of the colonial situation. One needs to add that this propensity was deliberately fostered first by the British ruling class, and later by the Ulster ruling class, for their own purposes. In the first instance sectarianism was encouraged by the British administration at Dublin Castle in order to fragment the radical movement that arose in the wake of the French revolution. The United Irishmen, a society that went from strength to strength in the 1790's, numbered among its leaders many prominent middle-class Protestants from Belfast, men such as Wolfe Tone and Henry Joy MacCracken. The Orange Order arose at this time in order to protect the Protestant ascendency, and thus the Crown and the established order, from the radical movement. As E. P. Thompson notes with respect to the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798: 'In the years before and after '98, the Dissenters of Ulster, the most industrialised province, were not the most loyal but the most "Jacobinical" of the Irish; while it was only after the repression of the rebellion that the antagonism between "Orangemen" and "Papists" was deliberately fostered by the Castle, as a means of maintaining power.' (11)

The Ulster ruling class had its own particular reasons for fostering the sectarian divide. On the one hand it was useful in preventing the evolution of a working class unity that might threaten their class rule, on the other hand, and more importantly, sectarianism was the mortar that held together the various blocks of the Unionist alliance. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century it was clear that the enthusiasm of Britain for remaining in Ireland was very much on the wane. The first Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1886. Unionism was the response of Protestant Ulster to this situation and, as was seen, successfully welded together all classes in defence of a Protestant state tied to the United Kingdom. Obviously the Ulster ruling class needed the Protestant working class to provide the mass basis for the armed rising that was threatened by Carson in 1912. In like manner working class support has been necessary for the threat of a 'Protestant backlash,' that has been less than delicately hinted at by successive leaders of Northern Ireland, to retain its credibility. Thus,
as long as the Ulster ruling class saw its future within the United Kingdom, it had a vested interest in encouraging sectarianism and in emphasising the real threat posed by Catholics. For instance, in 1933, during the depression, Sir Basil Brooke (later Viscount Brookeborough), a future Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, endorsed the Ulster Protestant League's campaign against the employment of Catholics, remarking: 'Many in the audience employ Catholics, but I have not one about my place. Catholics are out to destroy Ulster with all their might and power. They want to nullify the Protestant vote, take all they can out of Ulster and then see it go to hell.' (13)

Moreover if the Protestants are seen as 'home' workers whose prosperity depends, they are led to believe, on the continued subjugation of the colonised, the Catholics, then a further base of support for sectarianism is established. The situation is a common one. Workers in Britain were not concerned about the plight of the workers in the colonies in the days of Empire, no more than they are concerned today about the fate of the Third World. It is a common feature of imperialism that workers in the metropolitan countries are lulled into a right-wing consciousness with respect to the colonies or today the Third World, by the dominant capitalist ideology which convinces them that the benefits they enjoy depend on the continued exploitation of other parts of the world. Imperialism, as Lenin remarked, 'makes it economically possible to bribe the upper strata of the proletariat, and thereby fosters, gives shape to, and strengthens opportunism.' (14)

The Northern Ireland situation can be seen in this light. Protestant workers have always enjoyed better land-tenure, better job and better housing opportunities than Catholics, these advantages being most frequently enjoyed through personal contacts in the local Orange Lodge. Thus a basis for antagonism between Catholic and Protestant is this division between 'home' and 'colonial' workers, and the conviction of the Protestants that their prosperity, such as it is, depends on the continued dominance of the Protestant ascendancy. It is an attitude that has, as seen, been fostered by the ruling class. The difference from other colonial situations is that in Northern Ireland Protestant and Catholic live side by side, and are nominally equal citizens of the same state.

From the above account it can be seen that sectarianism is a product of the class relationships of a unique colonial situation. It means that Protestant workers suffer from a false consciousness that makes them see the Catholics as their main enemy, and drives them into an alliance with the Protestant landowner class and Protestant bourgeoisie. At the same time the Catholic working class also possesses a false consciousness. It is not class-consciousness, but a form of nationalism interlarded with religiosity and romantic idealism; a United Ireland is seen as providing the solution to all the problems that bedevil the Catholic community, including bad housing and unemployment. No less than the Protestant false consciousness it mistakes the real enemy and abandons itself to the myths of a heritage of nationalism. This Catholic false consciousness results in a facile analysis that sees the situation in Northern Ireland as the product of crude British imperialism. It is an analysis that leads to the notion that the presence of British troops and continued unity with Britain are the chief, if not only, problems. A United Ireland becomes the universal panacea. Indeed at its most simplistic this analysis suggests that once the British presence is removed the Protestants will recognise their essential Irish identity and live at peace and amity with their Catholic neighbors. Such simple-minded nationalism ignores two essential points. Firstly the British ruling class does not, any longer, have any great interest in upholding the Protestant ascendancy, and secondly the real problem remains the Protestant community, which remains irredentist and highly unlikely to be reconciled to any notion of an Irish state dominated by a Catholic majority.

It is noteworthy that in the vanguard of Catholic militancy is not the Official IRA which holds to a Marxist line. They declared a truce in early 1972 in the belief that further bomb outrages would lead, not to socialism, but to a sectarian civil war. It is the Provisional IRA, which split with the Officials in 1969, that makes the running in terms of bombings and confrontations with the British army and the Protestants. And the 'Provos,' as they are known, are
hardly the bearers of an advanced ideology. They seek a nationalist’s dream, a United Ireland, which for many of them would come complete with the paraphernalia of entrenched Catholicism and other aspects of the Republic’s political and social systems that mark it out as a backward state. In essence the Provisional IRA is a species of Green Fascism lamentably called to life by the Orange Fascism of the Protestants.

NORTHERN IRELAND AND CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

Northern Ireland then is beset by all the contradictions that attend a colonial situation, where the settlers receive support and supply from the metropolitan country. But the situation is further complicated by the fact that another basic contradiction exists. Capitalism in Northern Ireland has for a long time been out of step with the evolving capitalism of Western Europe. It has remained an old-style paternalist type of capitalist social formation with a landowner class governing with the acquiescence of the industrial bourgeoisie. Anders Boserup, in a recent essay, has pointed to the contradictions involved here:

'The underlying contradiction which manifests itself in the ongoing struggles is that which opposes two incompatible social systems: the Orange system which may be conceived of as a paternalist or “clientist” version of capitalist social formation, and twentieth-century managerial capitalism.' (15)

Boserup perhaps does not ascribe enough importance to the contradictions inherent in the colonial situation, but he is correct in pointing to the pressures created by an antiquated capitalist system having to come to terms with the managerial monopoly capitalism of the rest of Europe. This contradiction, accentuating the contradictions created by the unique colonial conditions inevitably brought change. Given the pressures created by the underlying contradictions the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960’s was bound to trigger off an explosive course of events. Moreover after years of entrenched Protestant rule, after generations spanning the centuries in which the false consciousness of both communities had had time to mature, it was equally inevitable that once change occurred the lines of the old conflict between Catholic nationalism and Protestant Unionism would again be drawn. The expectations of one side in an era of change in Northern Ireland are automatically diametrically opposed to the expectations of the other.

However the developing pattern of events has effected some changes in the nature of class interaction, changes that reflect the underlying contradictions. Firstly there has been intra-class conflict within the Protestant ruling class. For years the landowner class have held sway with the acquiescence of the industrial bourgeoisie. The Prime Ministers of Northern Ireland, Craig, Brooke, O’Neill, Chichester-Clark, all were products of Ulster’s landowner elite. The downfall of Chichester-Clark’s government and the accession of Brian Faulkner to the Prime-Ministership in 1970 marked the seizing of the reins of power by the industrial bourgeoisie, who were dissatisfied with the course of events. It is now true to say that the ruling class in Northern Ireland, led by the industrial bourgeoisie, simply want an end to the conflict. They are pragmatically willing to contemplate any measure, including the reunification of Ireland, if that is the way to re-establish their profit margins and once again make the area safe for foreign and home investors. As Boserup notes, ‘in Ulster today big business is on the side of reform and moderation and, ultimately, of reunification.’ (16) It is a position that British capital would happily endorse, for there is no profit in Northern Ireland. Indeed the economy of Northern Ireland subsists on grants from the British exchequer. British capital would be very pleased to be free of a political and financial embarrassment, while still, of course, being able to reap whatever benefit there is to be had from the North of Ireland as it already does from the South. It is precisely this point that Catholic nationalism fails to understand.

It is equally true that the ruling class in the Republic of Ireland has no interest in promoting Catholic nationalism. The IRA may be partially tolerated as a sop to sections of the electorate, and to the Cerberus of Ireland’s revolutionary heritage, but Irish reunification is not a serious policy of either of the two main parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael. The indigenous
Irish capitalist class is chiefly interested in consolidating the economic gains it is making as Ireland modernises, and in getting the best possible deal from the new membership of the Common Market. The Irish electorate, beguiled by the new prosperity that is suddenly apparent in the Republic, is only nominally in support of the Catholics in the North. The election this year of Liam Cosgrove and Fine Gael in place of Jack Lynch and Fianna Fail was a vote for law and order, and in the last month or so the Irish army has become much stricter in its dealings with suspected members of the IRA.

The failure of successive Unionist leaders to cope with a situation where terror and violence have continued to escalate has also given rise to inter-class conflict within the Protestant Unionist alliance. Since 1969 the Protestant working class has become increasingly dissatisfied with the abilities of their leaders. With the proroguement of Stormont and the imposition of direct rule from Westminster in early 1972, followed by the concessions granted by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, a sense of betrayal became evident. Speaking of the Protestant riots Boserup comments:

'But the eruptions of the Protestant poor and their resistance to all reforms must also be understood in the context of the social and moral isolation which had befallen these people. More than a deliberate move to pressurise the authorities, the Protestant riots were the reaction of despair of people who had been let down and rejected by everyone and can find sympathy and identification nowhere. Their Government, the Republic, Britain and her Army, the BBC and the press, all betrayed them and all rejected them.' (18)

The result of this disillusionment has been that the Protestant working class have turned their backs on the Unionist leaders and have formed their own organisation. The Vanguard movement, the Orange Cross, the Ulster Defence Association, the Loyalist Association of Workers (LAW), are all essentially working class, and all have sprung to prominence since the passing of Stormont. These working class organisations are, of course, still in thrall to a false consciousness, they are still sectarian, but it is a consciousness that also partakes of a certain bitterness towards the erstwhile leaders.

The point must also be made that in terms of working class militancy and Trade Unionism, the Protestant workers are the most advanced in Ireland. Although a false consciousness has prevented them from forming a class alliance with Catholic workers, and has made them supportive of the ruling class, nevertheless, somewhat incongruously, they have a history of strong Trade Unionism. This has meant that while no mass-based Social Democratic or Communist movement exists in Belfast, making it, as Boserup points out, unique among the industrial regions of Europe, nonetheless there has been Union militancy and strikes. Belfast shipbuilding workers, who are antagonistic to the employment of Catholics on the one hand, were, on the other, in the forefront of the struggle for the eight-hour day in Britain. This genuine consciousness, its reformism apposite to the present stage of capitalism in Ireland, holds out hope that new and meaningful class configurations could evolve with the fragmentation of the old Unionist alliance.

One effort, stemming from Protestant working class efforts to re-evaluate its relationships with the Catholic community, has been an analysis put forward by a group called the Workers' Association, which held its first Annual General Meeting in Belfast on 27th May 1972. One of its pamphlets is entitled 'Why a Divided Working Class?' The Workers' Association takes a stand against Catholic nationalism, calling it 'the Catholic nationalist Anschluss,' but stands for minority rights for Catholic workers in a Northern state within the United Kingdom. While opposing Catholic nationalism therefore the group is equally opposed to discrimination in employment, housing and the like. The core its doctrine is its 'Two Nations' theory, that calls for the recognition of an Ulster Protestant nation which will remain in the United Kingdom, standing alongside the Irish Catholic nation. At the same time the Association stands for the 'full recognition and accordance of the democratic rights of the Catholic minority in the Northern Ireland/U.K. state, and of the Protestant minority in the Southern Ireland state.' (19) 'The Workers' Association,' declares a member of its Belfast branch, 'maintains
unshackled the interest of Protestant and Catholic proletariat in the struggle for a democratic settlement of the national conflict, based on the recognition of the two nations in Ireland. (20) Alan Carr, a member of the Coleraine branch, further notes that ‘Northern Ireland possesses all the necessary ingredients for the development of a working class political movement, but that this potential has not been realised because the conflict between the two nations in Ireland (and between the working classes of those two nations) has not yet been resolved.’ (21) There are clear indications in all this that here is a nascent class-consciousness, struggling to develop, and trying to come to terms with the false consciousness and the sectarian divide.

It would be foolish to place too much faith in the Workers’ Association. It is not a numerically significant body compared to the more sectarian Ulster Defence Association or the Vanguard movement of William Craig. (Craig has drawn 15,000 plus to his rallies, while the UDA has marched 10,000 men through the streets of Belfast). However the attempt to engender a new consciousness that the Workers’ Association represents is indicative of the changing face of the class struggle in the Province, and must be welcomed. Whatever configurations of class struggle become the pattern of the future it is apparent that the old Unionist alliance has been broken.

SOCIALISM AND THE FUTURE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

To suggest that there is any likelihood of socialism being established in Northern Ireland — or a United Ireland — in the near future is to indulge in pure fancy. The present struggle is bogged down in the familiar pattern of sectarian hatred and Orange and Green nationalism. The absence of a genuine class-consciousness, and the predominance of false consciousness, precludes any possibility of socialism in the immediate future. Unless one adheres to the view that socialism is a Phoenix that springs from social conflagration, then one must see it as a long-term goal only. In the short term, as Anders Boserup has suggested, the best possible option is to find some way that will enable the two communities to disengage from the present conflict. If a way can be found where Ireland as a whole, whatever the political boundaries, can be drawn into the capitalist system of Western Europe with the two working class groups so disengaged, then there would be a maturation of class consciousness within each group. The absence of sectarian conflict would remove the spur to the growth of false consciousness and the pressures generated by the changing social formations would encourage the growth of class-consciousness. It is assumed, of course, that the capitalist ruling classes in Britain and Ireland no longer have any interest, for the reasons set out above, in promoting either sectarianism or nationalism. Given such developments then a time would come when the false consciousness of both communities would be replaced by a genuine class-consciousness and class alliances between Catholics and Protestants would be possible. Such a notion, at this point in time, seems overly optimistic, but it is the only realistic path towards socialism, and groups such as the Workers’ Association show that the possibility of moving away from the narrow confines of a false consciousness does exist.

The pattern of evolving social formations is a fact, it is the disengagement of the two communities from the present conflict that remains to be accomplished. The ugly problem that also remains however is that any disengagement is liable to be subsequent to a bitter and bloody confrontation. The present situation does not hold out much hope of avoiding such a confrontation. The British government would seem to be trying to follow a similar pattern of decolonisation where extreme parties are in competition over what they regard as a fundamental issue. First you find, or create, a moderate, centre party, then you hand over power and retreat hastily during the contrived period of calm. When the country again gets out of hand you then lament the inability of the natives to handle their own affairs. One possible candidate for the centre party role in Northern Ireland is the Alliance party. This is a party that has been in existence for some time; it is non-sectarian and claims wide support. However there has been no election since its formation to test that support, and it is chiefly run by members of the middle class, many of them intellectuals, many
of them Catholics. In an electoral situation, where opinion would tend to follow sectarian lines, then the party probably would not command the support it imagines. Nevertheless, given the latest British plans for a new Assembly for Northern Ireland to replace Stormont, elected on the basis of proportional representation, they might find themselves, together with the Northern Ireland Labour Party, holding enough seats to act as a buffer between Protestant parties such as the Unionists and the Vanguard Unionists, and the Catholic Social Democratic and Labour Party. The results of the local elections, due to be held at the end of May, will tell us something about party strengths.

British policy seems to be to keep Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, for the time being at least, to appease the Protestants, while making concessions to the Catholics, in an attempt to quell nationalist fervor. In the event Britain has antagonised both sides. The object of the British government is, as it always has been, to paper over the cracks in Northern Ireland's crumbling political and social structure, with a constitution or whatever is necessary, and then to pull the troops out and declare a return to normality and a successful conclusion to the whole operation. Ultimately the Protestants are correct in their suspicion that Britain desires the reunification of Ireland and the shedding of the problem of Ulster. To any student of British colonialism this comes as no surprise.

It is difficult to be sanguine about the prospects for avoiding a continuing series of violent conflicts in Northern Ireland. Whatever happens with regard to the new Assembly, the border issue still remains and after four years of an undeclared civil war the strength of feeling in the Province is great, and unlikely to abate following a partial solution that strives to satisfy all and will probably satisfy none. The tragedy of Northern Ireland seems to demand a violent denouement. One can only be sanguine at all on the basis, as argued in this paper, that the capitalist classes in Britain and Ireland no longer have any interest in fostering the false consciousness of sectarianism or that of nationalism, and on the basis of the fact that the old alliances have broken down, promoting a search for new attitudes in the working class. Thus there is a chance for the maturation of a working class consciousness in Northern Ireland; the possibility of a cessation of intra-class conflict at least exists. But whether that possibility will be realised without additional violence is a vexed and terrible question.

**POSTSCRIPT**

Since the above article was written two important events have occurred in Northern Ireland, the local councils elections of May 31st and the election of representatives to the new Northern Ireland Assembly at the end of June. Generally speaking the results of these elections support the conclusions drawn above. The splits within the old Unionist bloc were only too apparent. In the local elections eight different strains of unionism competed for the Protestant vote. In the Assembly election Brian Faulkner's Official Unionists, as they are now called, did not secure enough seats to re-establish their former hold on government. Faulkner's party won 26 seats in the 78-seat Assembly, while unofficial (independent) Unionists won 6 seats and the loyalist coalition of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists and William Craig's Vanguard Unionists won 17 seats.

The main Catholic party, Gerry Fitt's Social Democratic and Labour Party, won 19 seats, and is interested in a power-sharing arrangement with the Protestant parties, on the lines suggested by the British government in their White Paper of October 1972, which contained the original proposals for the Assembly. However the Paisley/Craig faction are opposed to any such notion, as they are opposed to the original White Paper. Meanwhile the Provisional IRA boycotted the Assembly election and advised Catholic voters to spoil their ballot papers. Predictably the performance of the moderate parties, the Alliance party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party (an extension of the British Labour Party), did not live up to their own expectations. The NILP won only a single seat in the new Assembly, while the Alliance party won 8, insufficient for the party even to influence events in any coalition situation.

It does not augur well for peace in Northern Ireland that no adequate basis for a
workable government has emerged from the election. The British government, in the person of William Whitelaw, is anxiously trying to get the two main pro-White Paper parties, the Official Unionists and the SDLP, to work out a new basis for government in the Province. But with the Paisley/Craig coalition strongly represented in the Assembly, and unwilling to cooperate with either the British government or the Catholic parties in any scheme of power-sharing, and with the Provisional IRA unwilling to accept the Assembly, only a very fragile kind of rule will be established at best.

Meanwhile the level of violence in Northern Ireland continues to escalate. A new Protestant terrorist organisation, the Ulster Freedom Fighters, has emerged, joining the Ulster Volunteer Force and extreme elements in the Ulster Defence Association in a campaign of bombing and assassination. The savage methods of this new force have prompted the Provisional IRA to announce that they will no longer give advance warning of bomb attacks. For their own part the Provisional IRA have announced that they will continue their campaign of violence until Britain is ready to negotiate on their terms.

One is forced gloomily to conclude that the possibility of a disengagement of the opposing working class forces in Northern Ireland from their fruitless and bloody conflict without a major, violent confrontation seems as remote as ever.

FOOTNOTES

4. It is noteworthy that the population of Ireland at the first census in 1821 was 6,081,000 people. In 1921 the population was 4,228,000 people, a telling commentary, surely, on the 'benevolence' of the colonial regime.
5. It is perhaps difficult for Australians to understand the immediacy of history for the people of Northern Ireland. For an Ulster Protestant the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne is still the most important date in the year. "King Billy" rides on triumphal arches every year as the Protestants reaffirm their victory over Pappac and the Catholics.
6. There are approximately one million Protestants and half a million Catholics.
7. Quoted in Rose, op. cit., p. 86.
8. Ibid., p. 87.
10. Quoted in Rose, op. cit., p. 84.
12. The willingness of the Protestants to fight to remain British, or rather to resist decolonisation, has been manifest throughout the twentieth century. Just as Algerian colonists terrorised French cities with plastic explosive to remain French, so now Protestants waving Union Jacks attack British troops on the streets of Belfast. Just as Rhodesian Whites faced with the threat of decolonisation declared UDI, so now we find William Craig of the Ulster Vanguard movement proposing a UDI for Ulster.
13. Quoted in Rose, op. cit., p. 95.
16. Ibid., p. 179.
17. For example the freeing of Catholic internees from the Long Kesh internment camp.
22. The referendum held by Britain in Northern Ireland to determine people's views on the border issue was about as pointless and misleading as a referendum can be. 99% of those voting elected to remain within the United Kingdom, but the Catholic community abstained.