Northern Ireland: The Possibility of "Rememory" in Post-Conflict Belfast

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Abstract:

Following the Good Friday Agreements of 1998, the troubled Belfast, Northern Ireland, began its peace building process in order to stifle residual tensions between Unionist and Republican groups. Despite these efforts, ex-paramilitaries are still involved in local and state politics and paramilitary images are still present throughout the city. In addition, there have been small outbreaks of violence in the decade and a half after the agreements.

In an attempt to create a more positive atmosphere, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) unveiled a Re-imaging Communities Project, which seeks to create works of public art that celebrate culture rather than conflict. Even still, can re-imaging a city re-image people? This question will be explored using personal interviews, the physicality of the city, and recent projects advocated by the Belfast City Council.

After a tumultuous 29-year conflict, Belfast, Northern Ireland is currently in its peace building process as they try to overcome their contentious history. This project began as an examination of walls. During the conflict, defensive barriers were constructed between Protestant and Catholic communities in order to prevent violence. Since the end of the conflict in 1998, the number of defensive barriers has nearly doubled, as walls became a typical response to residual violence. However, what became more fascinating during the course of this project is the content painted on the walls. During The Troubles, the walls became a way for communities to vent their frustrations. In the post-conflict period, they have become an opportunity for Belfast to re-image Catholic and Protestant identities.

As such, the project took a new focus during the eight weeks of fieldwork. The re-imaging efforts were studied and evaluated, with particular attention paid to the distinction between images altered following the Troubles and those that still remain from the conflict period. In addition to studying physical, visible mediums, consideration was also given to

the city council's efforts to reimage events and ideas, such as the historic Orange Parades. The question, therefore, became: do re-imaging walls and parades re-image people?

Prepared for Peace?

Looming above the Shore Road are two balaclava-clad men armed with AK-47s. They are painted on the side of the Mount Vernon Community Centre, their weapons pointed down a steep hill towards those viewing the artwork. Above them reads: "Prepared for Peace. Ready for War."

Although one may wonder the degree to which the city is prepared for peace more than it is ready for war, some sectors of the Belfast government are in the process of removing these terror-driven murals. In August of 2014, two Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF—a Unionist paramilitary group) murals on the Shore Road were repainted as part of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) re-imaging program. The program attempts to replace paramilitary propaganda with positive, uplifting images of Protestant and Catholic culture with the intention of remedying post-conflict tensions in Belfast[1]. However, images are just physical and underlying this physicality within the city are stirred emotions that cannot be quelled with paint.

Clarification of terminology

The Troubles (1969-1998) is incorrectly thought of as a religious conflict. Rather, it was a political conflict between the Republican Nationalists who wanted the six Ulster counties, which are located on the northeastern tip of the island, to unite with the Republic of Ireland, and the Loyalists/Unionists who wanted to remain as a part of the United Kingdom[2]. However, these groups exploited their religion as a way to appeal to their communities. Most Republican Nationalists were Catholics; most Loyalists/Unionists were Protestant. However, it is wrong to assume that every Catholic was a Republican or every Protestant was a Unionist. While this stereotype is true in some instances, many of those interviewed as part of this research had strong religious convictions but no political association with either group. To complicate this even further, some Protestants sympathized with the Republican cause and vice versa. In an attempt to avoid such confusion, the terms "Protestant" and "Catholic" will be avoided to emphasize the political motivations of The Troubles. If these terms are used, it is in reference only to a person's religious beliefs and not their political ones.

Additionally, there are nuanced differences between a Nationalist and

a Republican, as well as between a Loyalist and a Unionist. A Republican believes that the six Ulster provinces must be united with the Republic of Ireland; a Nationalist is more ideologically driven, and believes that the Celtic people should be free from British rule, thus including Scotland. A Unionist is someone who defends Northern Ireland's political ties to the United Kingdom. A Loyalist protects the sanctity of the British crown and wants Scotland and Wales to stay with the UK. Many people would identity as a Nationalist-Republican or a Loyalist-Unionist, but not always. These distinctions are important to remember, as some are more attracted to the ideology rather than the political repercussions.

It is also worth clarifying that The Troubles was different in various areas of Northern Ireland. In Derry/Londonderry, for example, the conflict was exclusively between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Free Derry and the British army, with little involvement of the Loyalist paramilitary groups[3]. The Troubles in Belfast was a conflict between several warring interests, namely the IRA, the British army, and various Protestant paramilitaries. The Belfast conflict will be the focus of this research.

Finally, it is important to understand some of the paramilitary groups. The IRA is the major Republican group, and has gone through several phases. When referenced to in this paper, it is in regards to the provisional IRA, often called "Provies" by locals. The major difference between the PIRA and the first generation IRA is the organization's tie to the Nationalist party, Sinn Fein. However, it is not correct to assume that all Sinn Fein activity is the same as IRA activity—even if some of the names are the same between the two.

There are then various Unionist/Loyalist paramilitaries: The Ulster Defense Association (UDA), Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF). While not officially tied to political parties in the same way as the IRA, there is still a predominant UDA influence in the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP); however, it is not acknowledged openly. In addition, the Unionist paramilitaries were significantly more territorial than the IRA—a Loyalist interviewed as part of this project lived in the Tiger's Bay neighborhood of North Belfast, which is UDA controlled. He refused to travel to East Belfast, which is predominantly UVF controlled, because of crimes he had committed against other Protestants in the past.

Historical Context

To fully understand the present day situation of Belfast, Northern

Ireland, the long-standing history of the region deserves to be explained, but it is difficult to pinpoint an appropriate place to start. One man interviewed as part of this research—a retired British officer from rural Northern Ireland—said, “The only time there was a united Ireland was under British rule.”[4] Although provocative and insensitive, there is some truth in his statement, as even before the arrival of Cromwell and the start of the Ulster Plantation in the 1500s, Ireland was divided by warring kingdoms. However, for the purpose of this paper, the historical background will start with the 20th century, as it is the most relevant to the project.

Following the Easter Rising of 1916 and the subsequent War for Irish Independence, the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 separated the six Unionist majority counties of Ulster from the rest of the island[5]. This led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which protected Unionists’ interests in Northern Ireland by allowing them to opt out of the impending Irish free state; this right was exercised when the Republic of Ireland was formed in December of 1922. Northern Ireland was given its own parliament and devolved government as part of the UK, although Nationalists maintained that the Unionist majority in the region was a result of gerrymandering by the British government and believed that they were illegally separating the island[6].

Leftover from the Irish Civil War, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) continued to maintain a presence in Ulster. Threatened by the growing Catholic population, Unionist leaders enacted the Special Powers Act of 1922, which gave Protestant families preferential access to housing, jobs, and education[7]. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Nationalists organized a peaceful movement in Northern Ireland. Due to the violent history of the IRA and the growing influence of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), these protests turned into riots. The British Army intervened in August of 1969 to bring order to the region, and The Troubles— a dispute that the army and Belfast predicted would dissipate after a month— began[8]. The Troubles lasted for 29 years, and resulted in over 50,000 causalities. Over 1,000 of those deaths were of civilians.

The first ceasefires were in 1994, yet the Good Friday Agreements of 1998 are often credited with ending the Troubles. The conditions of the agreement called for a release of all political prisoners—even if they were serving a life sentence for murder. It further called for the dissemination of all paramilitary groups. In addition, the Royal Ulster Constabulary changed to the politically neutral name of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Finally, the Good Friday Acts created power-sharing agreements

within the local and state governments to ensure equal representation of both Nationalist and Unionist interests[9]. This last clause is still under scrutiny from Loyalist/Unionist leaders, as they insist that this is an avenue by which Nationalists can unify Ireland. Despite the end to the conflict, there have still been flash points of sectarian violence, often caused by residual fear.[10]

Finally, there are a few other events worth noting for this research. William of Orange, born in the Netherlands, took over the British monarchy after overthrowing the Catholic King James II during the Glorious Revolution of 1688. There has not been a Catholic monarch in Britain since James II. In 1690, James II attempted to regain his power in the Battle of the Boyne, which took place in Ireland (about an hour north of Dublin); however, King William III won. This solidified Protestant rule in Britain and resulted in the 1701 Act of Settlement, which has prevented Catholic rule since its passing. This battle is celebrated in Northern Ireland with the Orange Parades every July 12th. Bonfire Night, on July 11th, celebrates King William III's arrival in Ireland, as bonfires were lit on the coast to guide his ships. King William III is often called "King Billy" by both Protestants and Catholics—Protestants usually with a tone of familiarity, while used rather sardonically by Catholics.

Finally, although not addressed directly in this paper, it is important to keep in mind the Ulster Plantation. Scottish Presbyterians moved to modern-day Northern Ireland and started cultivating plantations, and established serfdom in Ireland by buying Irish landowners' farms and requiring them to pay rent to live on their land. This not only sparked the tensions between the Protestants and Catholics, but also established the Protestant population—called the Ulster Scots—and created the six Ulster counties on the northeastern tip of Ireland (Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone).

"You are Now Entering Loyalist Sandy Row"

New efforts by the Belfast City Council attempt to recover from this contentious and violent history through re-imaging efforts. In early 2014, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) unveiled their new project, "Building Peace Through the Arts: Re-imaging Communities."[11] The project attempts to combat racism by funding projects which engage both Nationalist and Unionist border communities in the creation of public works and art that are meant to be positive and uplifting in nature. Before this, smaller projects were still taking place: The Ulster Freedom Fighter (UFF) controlled area of Sandy Row, in south Belfast, once had a mural to mark the

entrance to the community. However, in 2012, the paramilitary mural was replaced with a commemoration to King William of Orange, whose actions preserved Protestant occupation of Ireland in 1690.[12] The text, “You are now entering loyalist Sandy Row. Heartland of South Belfast” was replaced with, “King Billy’s on the Wall. Welcome to Sandy Row”.

Figure 1: Old mural. Used with permission.

Figure 2: New mural. Personal photograph. July 2, 2014.

Despite the attempt to create a welcoming environment in this former UFF stronghold, Sandy Row has yet to fully forget its paramilitary association. Coming into the area from the south side, up Donegall Road by the International Youth Hostel and Royal Bar, the scene resembles a Hollywood-worthy fraternity party. At 10pm on July 11th, the crowds were still gathered on the street, pouring from the bars and the neighborhood “chippy” (fish and chips stand). A woman was mopping spilt beer off her orange top, laughing with her friends, her head rolling back against the brick wall. Another two women were in a drunken contest: one wore a headband, with red, white, and blue glitter bobbles on top, hanging lopsided like a

cockroach's antennas. They were both trying to snatch the headband off the other. Already, the air smelled like gasoline and smoke, and in the distance, a smaller fire burnt in the backyard of a neighborhood church. Several more twenty-something year olds were milling about, drinking and laughing.

Electronic music blasted from a speaker, and a group of young men were singing various songs that were drowned out by the speaker. Later, the speaker would be turned down, and the crowd joined the men in singing their three-word song: "F—k the Pope."

The bonfire in the Sandy Row community was approximately 50 feet high.. The Belfast Telegraph reported that it was 36 feet high in early July, but it had grown since then[13]. The bonfire was decorated with Irish tri-color flags, as well as Sinn Fein election posters. Irish tri-colored national flags had "IRA" spray painted on them; they decorated the first tier of pallets. An Irish flag wove, almost piteously, on a pole at the top of the pyre. Boys, all sporting the same pseudo-skinhead haircut, tended the bonfire by preparing what looked like a crude version of kindling. The crowd continued to sing, but the thick accents combined with the copious consumption of alcohol blurred the lyrics.

Figure 3: Personal photograph. July 11, 2014. Sandy Row bonfire before lighting. "KAT" means "Kill all Taigs," with "taigs" being a racial slur for Catholics

Around a quarter until midnight, the crowd started pooling into the fenced area around the bonfire, but the boys formed a barrier, warning people not to cross. There were no police or firemen supervising, just the teenage boys. The crowd started singing and chanting again, the music on the speaker growing louder with nightclub favorites. It was almost difficult, as an outsider, not to get caught up in the euphoria for a moment. The boys were so proud of what they had created, and mothers kissed their sons' cheeks, dads tapping their shoulders in approval. Sandy Row was a small, underdeveloped community that rested in the shadows of the city centre. Could it be that this was all they had? It was not unlike a warning from a Unionist ex-prisoner-turned-community-leader: "They're living a low, poor quality of life... When you're living in a life like that, you're resentful. When you see your first opportunity you get to take that out on somebody, you'll do it... And that's what you're trying to keep, that fragile peace together."

The fragile peace was evident once the fires started. The pallets caught quickly, and what looked like Molotov Cocktails were thrown to catch the flags on fire. It was compelling, then, when the Irish flags failed to catch. The crowd became frustrated, and more fire sailed through the air. The Irish flags, however, tainted by (the words) "IRA," never caught flame, at least not in the way the crowd wanted. The edges would fold up and crinkle when a flame came close, but it stayed; destroyed, maybe, but never catching fire. This was not the case for the tri-color waving at the top: when it burst into flame, the young boys— the oldest of whom was born in 1997[14]— chanted a UFF theme, followed by "F—k the Pope's" reprise, "F—k the Pope and the IRA."

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The family-friendly image of King Billy on the wall, smiling as he welcomes visitors into the area, stood in juxtaposition to these young men as they waved their shirts above their heads, parading down the streets, beginning another chorus of the song nicknamed "FTP." Mothers cheered their sons as they continued to sing, and some older men sported UFF imagery on their shirts. Others waved British flags and some still attempted to burn more tri-colors in the street. King Billy on the wall still smiled. The image of the armed wooly-faces was no longer visible, but it was there, every time the boys started another chorus, and with every flag that was burned. Maybe it was no longer written on the wall, but it was clear: You were now entering Loyalist Sandy Row.

Counter-Culture: The Orange Parades

If walls can be re-imaged, can practices be changed, too? For Belfast City Council, there is an attempt to re-format the historically contentious July 12th parades into something less controversial and more family-friendly. Indeed, the week before the parade, the Belfast city centre is decorated with white banners that read "Orange Fest" in bright orange font. While not under the jurisdiction of the arts council, the revamping of the Orange Parades image is an example of re-imaging projects that were happening around the city before the ACNI initiative.

The Good Friday Agreements led to a new organization: The Parades Commission, which was formed to examine the risks of parades and attempt to circumvent any violence, which is likely to occur. Additionally, the changing demographics brought about new challenges for the parade routes, and in the summer of 2014, the Ardoyne district was supervised closely. Ardoyne Avenue is historically Protestant; however in the last ten years, the demographic has switched from being primarily Protestant to Catholic, as shop owners have taken over business along the road. In an attempt to prevent tension, the Parades Commission decided to end the parade route on Ardoyne Avenue where the first Catholic business started. For Protestants in this area of North Belfast, the decision was seen as an attack on Protestant culture. "We've been marching those routes since 1690," one man interviewed for the project said, "It's just a few shops. Can't they deal with it for that?"[15]Coincidentally, the argument on the Catholic side was the same. "It's only a wee stretch of road," said one Sinn Fein politician, "I don't see why it's such an issue."[16]

Even without changing routes, there's the idea of attempting to de-paramilitarize the parades. Performers are discouraged from playing of UVF or UFF anthems in front of Catholic churches. This was later taken to another extreme: the bands are not allowed to play at all in Catholic areas, but instead can march to a single drumbeat. The state sponsored support of the parades is still troubling; the event commemorates an event whose outcome cemented Britain's Protestant identity. Even though the state may try to turn it into a "festival," it cannot dilute the cultural and political history that is so engrained in the minds of the Ulster-Irish population.

The Republican community response has varied from organized riots to political manipulation. However, the Catholic community, without as much guidance from political leadership, has started to do something interesting. Although in previous years, Catholics have attempted to stop this display

of Protestant identity through participation in organized riots, they have recently changed tactics by creating a counter-culture on the Orange Parade day, thus re-defining what July 12th means for them. In West Belfast, a small grassroots movement has started to grow for what is called "Rebel Fest." Led mostly by musicians in their mid-to-late twenties, bars in Belfast are swarmed by local Catholic residents who avoid the parades (as routes are not allowed to cut through Clonard and Falls—the two major Catholic neighborhoods in West Belfast) by listening to traditional Irish music and various renditions of U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday."

Younger, bolder members of the Catholic neighborhood go a step further: on Bonfire Night, they hang out by the interface between Protestant Shankill and Catholic Clonard, and dance to the techno music being pumped from the speakers on the other side of the wall.[17] For these residents, it was a unique type of participation. By refusing to engage in hatred towards it, and by participating on just a superficial level, they were reducing the contentious event to just another day, with some loud music and extra smoke in the air.

Could this be a new category of re-imaging? While there is not an organized effort by the state—nor would there be, as again, it would be engaging in sectarian politics—it represents how communities are capable of healing and recovering in a post-conflict situation. Interestingly, the Catholic community has proven to have a more positive outlook on the future. The most recent survey showed that 46% of Catholics believed that relations between the two communities would be better in five years, as compared to 30% of Protestants. Further, Protestants were more likely to believe relations would be worse instead of better.[18] This disconnect, in which Catholics generally see a more positive future, could explain the community re-definition of an event that has been seeped in sectarian history for centuries.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that a reason for the continued focus on the Protestant community is partially apologetic—Loyalist leadership, under pressure to end the conflict while also getting support from the Protestant community, argued that the signing of The Good Friday Agreements would these sectarian political parties keeping the city divided to ensure election votes? While this theory is discussed, such research is difficult to conduct without putting one's safety in jeopardy and few residents are willing to speak out on such an issue.

There is some strange, albeit terrible, logic in this: the Protestant community was comfortable. The Special Powers Act of 1922 meant that Catholics could not compete in Protestant job markets, thus giving Protestants greater financial security. The repeal of those acts opened the floodgates, so to speak, thus saturating the economy with new competition. In addition, the inclusion in the EU and the introduction of a new monetary system across Europe, continued to shake the economic situation in the UK at the same time as the Good Friday Agreements. Furthermore, the market collapse in 2008 meant prosperity in Northern Ireland was stalled again. Now there is a disconnect between reality and perception: the global economic downturn is the reason for the lack of long-term investment in post-conflict neighborhoods, not the new power-sharing government. However, Protestants who remember a more comfortable existence during The Troubles see the peace agreements as the root of the issue; and considering the 19.7% attainment rate by Protestant males, they do not necessarily have the proper education to move into a position in which they can change their situation.[19]

The intention of the arts council's re-imaging program is sound. Erasing paramilitary images prevents future generations from romanticizing a violent history, but it cannot replace economic investment in long-term prosperity. Yet even this is difficult. As a woman from the Housing Executive stated, "Paramilitaries are stitched into the everyday life of Belfast. They haven't gone away."[20] Martin McGuinness, the first deputy minister of Northern Ireland, was a senior IRA leader. Many of the political parties are led by ex-combatants— Billy Hutchinson, former member of the UVF and co-founder of the Young Citizen Volunteers (the youth wing of the UVF), is the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP); Gerry Adams has been the president of Sinn Fein since 1988, but was arrested in 2014 for the 1972 murder of a Protestant woman[21]; and most community leaders are ex-prisoners. Even though Northern Ireland poured £4.6 million into the Sandy Row community and tried to repaint the paramilitary image away, neither money nor paint could water down the paramilitary presence, which historically deters investors.[22] In addition, there is something more sinister at the root of this that requires further research: To what degree are these sectarian political parties keeping the city divided to ensure election votes? While this theory is discussed, such research is difficult to conduct without putting one's safety in jeopardy and few residents are willing to speak out on such an issue.

Nevertheless, the re-imaging project is an attempt to overcome these sectarian tensions, and for that, it is difficult to criticize the program.

However, it is only one aspect of a much larger problem. These new images are part of the story but do not completely erase it, as Belfast is just one generation past its conflict. Even still, the re-imaging projects are a valuable first step to ensure that the next generation will not be surrounded with the images that shaped their parents' beliefs. More important, the alternative festivals taking place within Catholic West Belfast shows an even more encouraging picture for Northern Ireland: that people are capable of healing. That people can re-image themselves.

Author's Bio:

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[1]“Two Murals Removed in Mount Vernon”, UTV, January 15, 2014.

[2]Richard Jenkins, Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations (Sage Publications: 1997), 120-121.

[3]Thomas Hennessey, Northern Ireland: The Origins of The Troubles (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan Ltd: 2005), 252.

[4]Loyalist/Unionist male 2, interview by author, June 19, 2014

[5]David McKittrick, Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland (Chicago, Indiana: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 4.

[6]Ibid, 5

[7]Ibid, 3

[8]The exact start date of the conflict is often left for debate; some historians state that the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1968 in Derry/Londonderry was the start date; others will argue that it began with the army intervention in Belfast.

[9]Great Britain, The Good Friday Agreement (Belfast, UK: 1998), 22.

[10]McKittrick, 23.

[11]Arts Council Northern Ireland, Ambitions for the Arts: A Five Year Strategic Plan for the Arts in Northern Ireland 2013-2018 (Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK: 2013), 3.

[12]Julian O’Neill, “Sandy Row Loyalist Mural to be Replaced with William of Orange Painting”, BBC Northern Ireland, June 1, 2012.

[13]Rebecca Black, “Loyalists Urged Not to Burn Pope Effigies on Eleventh Night Bonfires.” The Belfast Telegraph. July 2, 2014.

[14]Loyalist/Unionist male, interview by author, July 11, 2014

[15]Ibid.

[16]Sinn Fein politician, interview by author, June 6, 2014.

[17]Although not discussed in detail in this paper, Belfast neighborhoods are divided by physical walls. The first "peace wall" was constructed in the neighborhood mentioned—Shankill and Falls/Clonard. During the day, gates are left open to allow traffic to pass, however they close at night. This is why the young people mentioned stayed on their side of the interface; they couldn't join the celebration, nor would it have been wise for them to do so.

[18]Community Relations, Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2013.

[19]Tara Mills, "NI Education: Poorest Protestant Boys Underachieving." BBC Northern Ireland. April 3, 2014.

[20]Public sector employee, interview by author, June 13, 2014

[21]Henry McDonald, "Jean McConville timeline: How a 1972 Murder Returned to Haunt Gerry Adams." The Guardian. May 3, 2014.

[22]"£4.6 Regeneration Boost for Belfast's Sandy Row Area." The Belfast Telegraph. December 14, 2012.