

PRÁTICAS DA HISTÓRIA

JOURNAL ON THEORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY,
AND USES OF THE PAST

Nº 13 - 2021



“They Never Went Looking for War”: Three Understandings of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement

Cillian McGrattan

Práticas da História, n.º 13 (2021): 55-85

www.praticasdahistoria.pt

Cillian McGrattan

**“They Never Went Looking for War”:
Three Understandings of the Northern Ireland
Civil Rights Movement**

This article argues that it is possible to distinguish between a narrative understanding that frames the *historical* outbreak of the Northern Irish conflict in either structuralist or agential terms. Both of these discursive starting points are fraught with political implications: the former suggests that in the absence of (continuing) fundamental transformation(s) some of the causes of the conflict remain – and may return; the latter suggests that conflict through the proxy of History is overdetermined and that the focus on abstract narratives obscures the choices and omissions that allowed the violence to persist for so long. The article is interested less in the historical verifiability of the structuralist or agential claims than in how those problematics are reflected in the secondary literature. As such, I map two versions of the structuralist narrative – a stronger and a weaker case – and describe an alternative, agential perspective. The paper concludes with an outline of how attention to personal histories and memoirs may provide new ways of incorporating (and troubling) both approaches. Keywords: Northern Ireland Conflict; Structuralist History; Agential History; Historical Narratives.

**“Eles nunca procuraram a guerra”: Três entendimentos do
movimento pelos direitos civis da Irlanda do Norte**

Este artigo argumenta que é possível distinguir entre narrativas *históricas* que situam a eclosão do conflito na Irlanda do Norte em termos das suas estruturas ou dos seus agentes. Ambas os discursos têm implicações políticas profundas: o primeiro aponta que na ausência (continuada) de mudanças de fundo algumas das causas do conflito permanecem – e podem ressurgir; o segundo sugere que o conflito visto através do olhar da História é sobredeterminado e que o foco em narrativas abstratas obscurece as escolhas e omissões que possibilitaram que a violência persistisse durante tanto tempo. Este artigo toma com objeto não a probidade histórica destes dois argumentos, mas sim a forma como estes se refletem na literatura secundária. Neste sentido, o artigo analisa duas versões da narrativa estruturalista – uma mais forte e outra mais matizada – e descreve uma alternativa, centrada na perspectiva dos agentes. Como conclusão, é traçado um esboço da maneira como as histórias e memórias pessoais podem contribuir para integrar (e problematizar) estas duas perspectivas. Palavras-chave: Conflito na Irlanda do Norte; História Estrutural; Agential History; Narrativas Históricas.

“They Never Went Looking for War”: Three Understandings of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement

Cillian McGrattan*

One of the first public speaking commitments as the new Northern Ireland leader of Sinn Féin, Michelle O’Neill, was an event in February 2017 to commemorate four IRA men who had been shot in an SAS ambush 25 years previously. “These were four ordinary young men who faced extraordinary challenges”, claimed O’Neill. ‘They responded in defence of their community and also of their country. They never went looking for war but it came to them’.¹ Of course, republicans’ prosecution of an armed campaign that saw them responsible for 60 percent of the 3,600 conflict-related murders in Northern Ireland between 1966 and 1998, raises serious questions about the *casus belli* being one of community self-defence.² However, taken at face value, O’Neill’s assertions point to an appreciation of the Troubles as almost inevitable. The

* Cillian McGrattan (cp.mcgrattan@ulster.ac.uk). School of Applied Social and Policy Science/ Institute for Research in Social Sciences, Ulster University, BT15 1ED, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Original article: 14-12-2020. Revised version: 7-11-2021. Accepted: 9-11-2021.

1 Peter Murtagh, “Michelle O’Neill speaks her mind at tribute to slain IRA gunmen”, *Irish Times*, 18 February 2017. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/michelle-oneill-speaks-her-mind-at-tribute-to-slain-ira-gunmen-1.2979675>.

2 See David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999). The claim that the Provisional IRA’s (PIRA) campaign was defensive fails to reflect the organization’s tendency to kill Catholics (being responsible for 402 Catholic deaths); nor does it reflect the blatantly sectarian nature of its activities that saw it kill 832 Protestant ‘civilians, according to McKittrick et al, *Lost Lives*, 1484. For a lucid and scathing appraisal of republicans’ resort to just war theory, see Timothy Shanahan, *The Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Morality of Terrorism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

idea that the Troubles were not the result of republicans’ prosecution of a ‘war’ but were determined by a series of historical factors and processes is worthy of study and reflection. Although it is a narrative from which republicans derive polemical clout, the structuralist mode of thought that underpins the historical account resonates beyond the political discourse of republicanism in Ireland. The aim of this article is to explore the intersections between the polemics relating to the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict and the extrapolations of those origins within strands of the secondary academic (and journalistic) literatures.

Although identity politics have, arguably, begun to move from being simply and fundamentally linked to responses to the question of being for or against the partition of the island of Ireland,³ the past remains intensely politically salient within Northern Ireland. In other words, while everyday life can be navigated without direct regard to the ethno-religious division between nationalist-Catholic-Irish and unionist-Protestant-British,⁴ political discourse often circles around historic grievances. The week of the 30th November to the 6th December 2020 (during which a draft of this article was written), for instance, was dominated by debates over inquiries into historic killings and the leaking of secret talks about “legacy issues” involving the British and Irish governments and former paramilitaries at the residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Brexit and differing responses to the Covid-19 crisis have worked to heighten identity debates: Irish nationalists have tended to be overwhelmingly opposed to Brexit and veer towards se-

3 See, for instance, Kevin McNicholl, Clifford Stevenson, and John Garry, “How the ‘Northern Irish’ National Identity is Understood and Used by Young People and Politicians”, *Political Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2018): 487-505. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12523>

4 Irish nationalists, who tend to be overwhelmingly Catholic, aim to end the partition of the island of Ireland; they espouse an “Irish” identity. Sinn Féin is the main nationalist party – traditionally, termed ‘republican’ denoting a willingness to engage in physical force to end partition, Sinn Féin has been closely linked to the PIRA; the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) are the second largest party; so-called “constitutional nationalists”, they have maintained that reunification can only happen through democratic means. Ulster unionists, who tend to be overwhelmingly Protestant, wish to main the constitutional link with the rest of the United Kingdom. The Democratic Unionist Party is the main political party of unionism. The two blocs are relatively evenly split at present (with unionism being historically more numerous) and the balance of power is held by a non-aligned middle. See Aaron Edwards and Cillian McGrattan, *The Northern Ireland Conflict: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2012).

vere scepticism of the response by the Boris Johnson government to the Covid-19 crisis.

The article suggests that the differing approaches to the origins of the conflict are analytically distinct. I would aver that those approaches are not inextricably tied to Ireland's main political ideologies – Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism – but, instead, remain somewhat fluid. Typically, the differing approaches are mined for points of political utility rather than in any systematic or methodological rigorous way. Although the differing approaches can be mapped onto that broad and everyday nationalist or unionist ideological worldview, the relationship is not exact (or even necessarily clear and logical). This is because those ideological families of nationalism and unionism are themselves far from monolithic. The article focuses on narratives relating to the origins. This is because the problematization of those years – according to structural or agential logics – inevitably involves assumptions about identity politics and value claims in the present as well as prospective “solutions” for the future. Although there is a focus on Irish nationalist narratives, because of the very fluidity of nationalist and unionist ideological thought, it is not my intention to “join-up” structural or agential tropes to those ideologies.

A recent example of the articulation of politics through a historical understanding is the differing perspectives within the broad spectrum of constitutional nationalism – that ideological community that aspires to a peaceful and democratic reunification of Ireland, which tends to encompass mainstream political parties, the Catholic Church and the Catholic middle-class, and which espouses an Irish cultural outlook⁵ – towards the commemoration of the establishment of Northern Ireland in 1921. Whereas the Catholic Church's hierarchy viewed the occasion as an opportunity for ecumenism and religious reconciliation, the middle-class Northern Irish nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the President of Ireland Michael D. Hig-

⁵ See Jennifer Todd's seminal article, “Northern Irish Nationalist Political Culture”, *Irish Political Studies* 5, no.1 (1990), 31-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907189008406472>.

gins refused to attend key centenary events, which included religious services. Indeed, the head of the Catholic Church openly criticized his fellow leaders, expressing his “disappointment” at their stance.⁶ Despite such discontinuities and disagreements, I suggest that nonetheless it is possible to discern and map a core Irish nationalist view of the origins of the conflict and the civil rights movement. Fundamentally, this view veers towards the epistemologically structuralist and proceeds from the understanding that the (recent) conflict was a product of deep-rooted *Irish* historical conditions particularly related to the history of colonization. The conflict that marred the latter decades of the twentieth century was, then, fundamentally a cyclical outworking of those pressures – specifically, the mass mobilization of Northern Irish nationalist opinion around the issue of civil rights, which precipitated a downward spiral of ethno-religious conflict.⁷

In contrast to the nationalist approach, the core Ulster unionist view tends to emphasize individual agency. The fact that very few people were actually involved in the paramilitary campaigns of either of the main groups of perpetrators, republican or loyalist, is a key trope. The origins of the conflict, then, are viewed less in regard to *longue durée* structural forces than with respect to the decisions by individuals or small groups of individuals who collaborated and conspired towards tit-for-tat violence which escalated in the early 1970s into a war of attrition involving terror groups and state forces.

The emphasis on agency tends to be critical of appeals to history or the type of *argumentum ad antiquitatem* that implies an explosion of ethnic conflict was inevitable given the contradictions of partition – specifically, the imposition of a unionist-dominated government in the

6 Archbishop Eamon Martin stated that “If we could accept that people on this island approach their belonging from very different perspectives — that was key to the [1998] Good Friday Agreement: that we would recognise legitimate aspirations on the island and that to me is something that we’re better not to run away from, but to face”, Ralph Hewitt, “SDLP goal ‘at odds with celebration of partition’”, *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 January 2021, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/the-centenary/sdlp-goal-at-odds-with-celebration-of-partition-39973945.html>.

7 See Liam Kennedy, *Who Was Responsible for the Troubles? The Northern Ireland Conflict* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020) for a recent overview of these debates.

north of Ireland. An example of this repudiation can be seen in the riposte by the journalist Sam McBride in the unionist daily, the *Belfast Newsletter*, to claims by the loyalist paramilitary Billy Hutchinson that his involvement in paramilitarism was simply “what you need[ed] to do ... People talk about choice; not everybody has a choice”⁸. For his part, Hutchinson was gaoled for 15 years for killing two Catholics on their way to work in 1974; he went on to play a major role in establishing the Progressive Unionist Party, which aimed at giving a voice to the previously marginalized Protestant working class. McBride, however, questioned Hutchinson’s justifications with regard to that key element of individual choice:

surely his argument is undermined by the fact that most of those with whom he grew up, with the same fear of the IRA as him, and who in some cases saw their relatives killed by republicans, chose to go a different route?⁹

The analytical distinction underpinning McBride’s response relates to the placement or production of emphasis: the understanding that paramilitary violence was a product of deeply rooted historical trends precipitates the rejoinder of an understanding that violence was a product of individual choice (and omission).

“Hegemonic Control”: The Structuralist Narrative

The anomalies within the nationalist-structuralist argument were apparent to historically minded journalists in the late 1960s and early 1970s such as Henry Kelly (see below). But the key *political* or polemical point remains that the lack of historical verifiability is almost

8 Freya McClements, ‘Billy Hutchinson: “I justify everything I did in the Troubles. To stay sane, I have to”’, *Irish Times*, 21 November 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/billy-hutchinson-i-justify-everything-i-did-in-the-troubles-to-stay-sane-i-have-to-1.4414609>.

9 Sam McBride, ‘Inside the self-deception of an unrepentant killer needs to stay sane – but at what price?’, *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 December 2020: 16.

academic, because the real importance of the structuralist view of historical determinism is indeed imaginative in that it supports a moral framework of rectitude – for if, nationalists are right about the past, then, so the logic goes, their predictions ought to be taken seriously. This nationalist understanding borrows from a structuralist logic that understands the civil rights movement as a hinge on which the history of the Northern Irish state turned – seemingly opening the door to the downwards slide into ethno-nationalist contention and killing that reproduced itself across three and a half decades. It is structuralist for two reasons that give way to weak and strong versions of the narrative about the civil rights movement and the conflict:

The “strong” version is structuralist in its import because it suggests that the five decades of unionist rule had built up such a reservoir of pent-up alienation and sense of injustice among the minority nationalist population that the civil rights movement was unable to contain and which subsequently was added to by the misguided strategies of the British army. In short, the strong version of the approach is “strong” insofar as it (a) locates specific historical trends – in terms of periodization or institutional structures (for instance, the establishment of the unionist-dominated Northern Irish state in 1921) – and, (b) identifies specific historical events and interventions.

The “weak” version assumes that behind the façade of civility that constitutes everyday life in Northern Ireland, there is a dark side to the region – truly a place apart from liberal democratic norms in which ethnic hatred is never far from the surface of quotidian normality. Northern Irish politics, then is the traumatic vision of Irish history in miniature with violence and bloodshed being the recurring outworkings of deep-rooted, historically situated but almost primordial fears, obsessions and suspicions. The weak version of the approach is “weak”

insofar as it privileges primordial or *longue durée* forces and postulates recurring or even quotidian conflict and trauma.

i. The “Stronger” Structuralist Argument

The periodization of the stronger version of the narrative about the civil rights and the Troubles begins with the establishment of Stormont and the accession of the Ulster Unionist Party as the dominant political force in the state in the 1920s. The journalist Susan McKay conflates the party with unionists/unionism in general, thereby arguably reinforcing a sectarian dimension to the narrative: “The unionist majority in Northern Ireland ruthlessly ensured that nationalists would have no power. The first prime minister, James Craig, boasted that he ruled a ‘Protestant parliament and a Protestant state’”.¹⁰ Substantiating her account with quotations from poets such as John Hewitt and Seamus Heaney, McKay goes on to describe how ‘Catholics were largely excluded from the North’s big industries and from all but the lowest ranks of the civil service. They were denied houses and many lived in overcrowded slums’. The result of this system of exclusions, she explains, was that ‘Minority resentment simmered’. Repeating the point that lies at the core of the strong version of the structuralist narrative, McKay cites Hewitt’s assertion that “1969 ... the fever was high and raging’ and ‘the cloud of infection’ was hanging over Northern Ireland. Unionist [sic] reforms ... were too little, too late ... Nationalists took to the streets to protest”.¹¹ The lesson, as such, of this narrative is that the civil rights movement was suppressed and that the subsequent violence was, if not excusable, then at least understandable and explicable given the obduracy and oppressive nature of unionists. Thus, by the early

¹⁰ Susan McKay, *Bear in Mind These Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008): 19.

¹¹ McKay, *Bear in Mind*, 20. Hewitt’s poem was written in August–September 1969 (see Stephen Rowley, “‘This is my home and country. Later on/Perhaps I’ll find this nation my own’”: Nationalism, regionalism and parallelism in the poetry of John Hewitt’, *Études Irlandaises* 26, no. 1, (2001):63. <https://doi.org/10.3406/irlan.2001.1555>); but, it is a mistake to extrapolate too much from Hewitt’s reflections: Sean Farren, for instance, quotes the *Irish Times* from January 1970, ‘it should now be possible to knit again this scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, those broken limbs into one body’; Sean Farren, *The SDLP: The Struggle for Agreement in Northern Ireland, 1970-2000* (Dublin: The Fourcourts Press, 2010): 21.

1970s “The alienation of Northern nationalists was intensifying. Unionism had rejected reform and met protest with force. The British army [introduced to the Province in 1969] had proved brutal in its defence”.¹²

A more nuanced (and, arguably, balanced) account of the civil rights period is offered by the journalists David McKittrick and David McVea in their introductory history of the conflict. Largely reading the period through the constraints faced and choices made by Terence O’Neill, the Northern Ireland prime minister between 1963 and 1969, McKittrick and McVea demonstrate that the elision of unionism with unionist politicians is so reductive as to be obscuring of historical context. Noting, for instance, O’Neill’s vision of a modernized Northern Ireland that would move closer to the political economy of Great Britain and his symbolic interventions, such as visiting Catholic schools, McKittrick and McVea suggest that “he presented himself not just as open to change but as an enthusiastic advocate of reform”.¹³ The issue seemed to be primarily one of character, McKittrick and McVea suggest: “it is striking to note how much emphasis was placed on what was seen as O’Neill’s unfortunate personality and his lack of personal and man-management skills. The clear implication is that a Unionist leader with greater talent might have enjoyed greater success”. Unable to navigate the pressures being put on him by an invigorated nationalist political culture, successive UK prime ministers, his own backbenchers and supporters and the emerging figure of Ian Paisley, O’Neill’s tenure represents, in this narrative, something of a missed opportunity. Despite the credit afforded to these constraints, the civil rights movement continues to be a hinge on which the history of Northern Ireland turned: Thus, the 5 October march in Derry by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which was forcibly stopped by the police, “seemed to show that the state could not cope with even peaceful protest”.¹⁴

¹² McKay, *Bear in Mind*, 25

¹³ David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 27.

¹⁴ McKittrick and McVea, *Making Sense*, 51.

One of the first-published versions of this stronger structuralist narrative was the 1969 Report by a commission chaired by Lord Cameron into “Disturbances in Northern Ireland”¹⁵. The “Cameron Report” emphasized how complaints of discrimination against non-unionists and Catholics had gained traction during the 1960s in areas related to local government. By the end of the decade there had coalesced a “growing and powerful sense of resentment and frustration among the Catholic population at failure to achieve either acceptance on the part of the Government of any need to investigate these complaints or to provide and enforce a remedy for them”.¹⁶ The Cameron Report concluded with the warning that in the ethnically divided society of Northern Ireland, that sense of frustration among Catholics and suspicions and fears among Protestants provided opportunities for extremists and demagogues to destabilize the political landscape:

that there have been and are at work within Northern Ireland persons whose immediate and deliberate intention is to prepare, plan and provoke violence, reckless of the consequences to persons or property. Their purpose is not to secure peace by way of reform and within the bounds of the constitution, but to subvert and destroy the constitutional structure of the state. At the same time, there are others who by their appeal to sectarian prejudices and bigotry have assisted to inflame passions and keep alive ancient hatreds that have readily led to the unleashing of lawless and uncontrolled violence.¹⁷

In highlighting the primordial endurance of divisive identities, the Cameron Commission provided an outline of what would become known

15 Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, “Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland” (Belfast: HMSO, 1969), <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmso/cameron.htm>.

16 “Disturbances in Northern Ireland”, paragraph 229 (4).

17 “Disturbances in Northern Ireland”, paragraph 235.

within the secondary literature of political science as the ethnic conflict model. There, the added emphasis on identity politics (British/Unionist/Protestant versus Irish/Nationalist/Catholic) provides an answer as to why the clash between the Northern state and the civil rights movement spiralled so quickly from civil unrest to terror and bloodshed. The narrative, then, takes up the notion of a build-up of pressures and a polarization of inter-communal relations (Catholic frustration and Protestant weariness) to suggest that the clashes between civil rights marchers and state forces turned a constitutional mobilization into a nationalist one. By the time that the British army had arrived to restore order on the streets of Northern Ireland in the summer of 1969, the province was lurching away from civil rights protests towards an older style of politics that centred on zero-sum, inter-community contention.

This understanding is perhaps most articulately and persuasively put forward in the influential analytical history of the Northern Irish conflict by the political scientists Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry. They argue that the outbreak of sectarian violence in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the result of the fracturing of what they call unionist “hegemonic control”.¹⁸ The methodological point of departure, such as it is, seems to be purported motivations – an almost rational choice allocation of options based on ethno-nationalist bloc identity.¹⁹ McGarry and O’Leary’s idea of “hegemonic control” speaks to their argument that the Northern Irish state was a “textbook illustration” of the Tocquevillian prediction that democracy is compatible with and can tend towards the “tyranny of the majority”.²⁰ Whereas the Marxian notion of hegemony, drawing from the interventions of the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, speaks to a subtle and almost subterranean or indirect form of manipulation or agenda setting by political elites, the McGarry and O’Leary version speaks to direct and blatant supremacy. Thus, they point to unionist control over the “effective means of coercion and law-enforce-

18 Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993).

19 See Cillian McGrattan, *Northern Ireland, 1968-2008: The Politics of Entrenchment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 36.

20 O’Leary and McGarry, *Politics*, 111.

ment”, the political process and law-making, together with territorial domination.²¹ The idea here is that discrimination was obvious and unmissable. McGarry and O’Leary explain that that was so because it did not need to be otherwise and also that that very obviousness worked to uphold unionist ascendancy. As such, discrimination, in McGarry and O’Leary’s structuralist reading, underlined the point that democratic and territorial control were entwined and mutually reinforcing.

The structuralist understanding, however, is ultimately teleological because the key thing that it seeks to explain is the eruption of the civil rights movement and the rapid breakdown of unionist domination in the form of London assuming direct control of the Province in March 1972. The loss of a half-century of near-totalizing dominance by Ulster unionism within around three-and-a-half years is the key historical question for McGarry and O’Leary and the structuralist approach to Northern Irish history more generally. Indeed, the point was clearly made in a paper by O’Leary and Paul Arthur where they suggested that “[e]xamining the structure, genesis, and maintenance of the system which developed in Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1972, and enquiring why it broke down, are imperative if we are to understand the current conflict and the solutions offered”.²² For O’Leary, the structuralist emphasis on stasis and ubiquity is not logically contradicted by sudden collapse, as he explains in a recent treatment: “The breakdown of hegemonic control in Northern Ireland exemplifies Tocqueville’s thesis that, when a bad government seeks to reform itself, it is in its greatest danger”.²³ Methodologically, then, the teleology consists of taking a historical problem – the abrupt failure of an ostensibly solid system – and reading backwards from that occurrence. The blatant contradiction of the long-term dom-

21 O’Leary and McGarry, *Politics*, 110.

22 Brendan O’Leary and Paul Arthur, “Introduction: Northern Ireland as the Site of State- and Nation-Building Failures,” in *The Future of Northern Ireland*, ed. John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990): 9.

23 Brendan O’Leary, *A Treatise of Northern Ireland*, Vol. II, *Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). The Tocqueville explanation is a favourite of O’Leary: for instance, he and Arthur argue in almost identical terms three decades earlier that “[t]he breakdown of hegemonic control in Northern Ireland exemplifies Tocqueville’s thesis that when a bad government seeks to reform itself it is in its greatest danger”, O’Leary and Arthur, “Introduction”, 33.

inance of unionist politics and culture versus its apparent shallowness is explained away by referencing a key thinker. Whether it be Gramsci or Tocqueville, little attempt is made at contextualizing or exploring the relevance of the original work through a deep reading or using it to elucidate a historical development. Instead, that work is mined for its utility to concepts such as discrimination or dominance.

A similar tendency can be found in the development of work on collusion between British state security forces and loyalist paramilitaries in targeting Catholics and nationalists during the conflict. The notion that the Northern state was a democratic abomination where corrupt majority rule was upheld only through force underpins much of what would become the transitional justice approach to Northern Ireland.²⁴ Here, the essentially criminological approach places the focus squarely on the state. Thus, as the transitional justice scholar Fionnuala Ní Áolain claims: “The unionist state sought to protect itself by all means, and its agents were called upon to provide the hard-line military response. For the minority community this response could not be distinguished from the sectarian violence being directed at it” by loyalist terrorists. In this narrative understanding, “the civil rights movement was characterised as a direct threat”, by the “short-sighted and catastrophic’ unionist government, ‘to the legitimacy of the state itself”. Again, the approach seems to begin with a problem and work backwards with regards to structural elements:

Due to the inability of the majority of unionists to embrace reform, the seeds of violent civil disorder were sown.

²⁴ The transitional justice approach is, arguably, structurally biased as regards its application to Northern Ireland, having been developed as a response to situations where state legitimacy has broken down (such as in the Latin American transitions from authoritarianism to democracy) and the state itself has been the major perpetrator of historic grievances and crimes. The approach overturns ‘traditional’ conceptions of evidence-based due process to focus on testimony, thereby highlighting story-telling and “truth recovery” as a means of reconciling society to violent pasts. See Cillian McGrattan, “‘Order out of Chaos’: The Politics of Transitional Justice’, *Politics*, 29, no. 3 (2009): 154-172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2009.01352.x>. For a more recent exploration of the issues, see Cillian McGrattan, “‘The Possibilities are Endless’: Republican Strategy to Deal with the Past in Northern Ireland’, in *Legacy: What to do about the Past in Northern Ireland*, ed. Jeffrey Dudgeon, Belfast: Belfast Press, 2018), 52-64.

The pendulum swung from constitutional reform to violent backlash. State responses to the civil rights marches varied from deeming them illegal, breaking them up by force, or not preventing sectarian violence by militant loyalists being directed at peaceful protesters. An escalation of violence seemed inevitable.²⁵

The constitutional and political implications of this type of narrative are unmissable: If the Northern Ireland state was so corrupt then the unionist view of the conflict as an unjustified, unwarranted and illegitimate attack by republicans is also fundamentally misguided or even dishonest. In this type of approach an ethical problem – of sorts – becomes almost fundamental because the analysis asserts a systemic corruption upon which partition and the Union was built and on which it continues: “lethal force ... is not an isolated aspect of state practice ... It is an integral part of the state’s evolving policy of conflict management”.²⁶ (Collusion, then, between UK state forces and loyalist terrorists is intrinsic to the perpetuation of the Union.) The narrative approach intersects with McGarry and O’Leary, who point out that the monopoly of force across the policy spectrum is at the core of the Northern Ireland “question”; the illegitimacy and incompetence of the Northern Ireland state in deploying force against the civil rights movement hastened its end but was merely replaced by the illegitimacy and incompetence of successive British governments.

ii. The “Weaker” Structuralist Argument

It is at this point that the stronger version of the structuralist narrative begins to overlap with the weaker version. Although both forms share a focus on the Northern state and an emphasis on the challenge presented to it by the civil rights movement, the weaker version foregrounds

²⁵ Fionmuala Ní Áolain, *The Politics of Force: Conflict Management and State Violence in Northern Ireland* (Belfast; Blackstaff, 2000), 23.

²⁶ Áolain, *The Politics of Force*, back cover.

long term processes of identity and colonialism in place of ostensibly problematic sectarian ideology. In other words, instead of ideas and beliefs acting as the beginning and end of analysis, in the weaker version of the structuralist narrative, historical processes play the determinative role. As alluded to above, while this version is more thoroughly structural, based as it is on the identification and mapping of *longue durée* and/or inter-state developments, the outworkings, ramifications or lessons drawn are residual and span a spectrum from radical overhauling or throwing off of ethno-national identity-based differences and constitutional frameworks to managing the imparities associated with those differences out of existence.

Although the work of the solicitor and former member of People’s Democracy (a student-based organization linked to the civil rights movement) Michael Farrell provides a key source for the McGarry/O’Leary text, I suggest that Farrell’s seminal book, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*,²⁷ is analytically distinguishable from their ethno-centrism. Certainly, overlaps in methods exist – Farrell was writing before the availability of substantial tranches of state papers, and, like McGarry and O’Leary, his work is based on secondary sources such as white papers or political speeches (gleaned mainly from Hansard). Farrell’s book does not simply dwell on identity or ideological antagonism. Instead, he tries to frame the history of the Northern Irish state with reference to colonialism. This is evident right from the beginning of his text:

By the end of the eighteenth century ... some of the descendants of the settlers were beginning to chafe under control from London. A thriving commercial and industrial class was developing in Ireland, especially in the North where the better terms on which the settlers held their land enabled them to accumulate some capital, and where the linen industry was taking root.²⁸

²⁷ Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

²⁸ Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, 13.

Although Farrell also speaks to the notion that the build-up of Catholic frustration precipitated violence,²⁹ he places the responses to the civil rights movement within the context of colonialism and displays a more detailed and nuanced awareness of the intra-movement and intra-bloc dynamics in play within the anti-unionist or civil rights movements and Catholic community. For instance, although McGarry and O’Leary admit to an ‘extensive range of opinions and divisions within the civil-rights movement’,³⁰ they also underestimate the conservatism of the Catholic middle class along with its size relative to the mass movement that they claim it “spearheaded”.³¹ Likewise, Farrell points to class differences within the Unionist Party as being instrumental in policy articulation and political manoeuvring among the leadership (specifically, O’Neill’s supporters within the “landed gentry, the modernising businessmen, the media and the professional middle class” and Brian Faulkner’s backers in the “Protestant working class, farmers and petty-bourgeoisie”).

The McGarry/O’Leary treatment of Ulster unionism, on the other hand, tends towards the monolithic and monochrome, attempting as they do to shoehorn their hegemonic domination thesis into fractious ground-level politics. So, rather than class interests, related to colonial legacies, being the driving force behind intra-bloc unionist discussions, the focus within the McGarry/O’Leary approach is on the relationship between Unionist premiers and successive British governments. More specifically, Unionist Party leaders are depicted as distinct from their supporters with the objective being the reproduction of power and sta-

29 For instance: “Speaking at a Connolly Association rally in London in June 1967, Gerry Fitt [a nationalist Member of Parliament] warned dramatically that continued frustration in the North would lead to violence again. He spoke much truer than he realised”, Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, 245.

30 O’Leary and McGarry, *Politics*, 168.

31 O’Leary and McGarry, *Politics*, 158; see McGrattan, *Northern Ireland*, 36. As Bew et al point out, “The truth is not ... that a newly radicalised Catholic middle class dropped from the sky (or at least from post-Butler secondary and higher education). While growing in numbers, the middle class actually remained quite remarkable more for its conservative than its radical qualities. The situation was rather one in which the social basis, the political space and impetus and the opportunity of apparent success for a middle-class reform movement all coincided”; Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, *Northern Ireland, 1921-2001: Political Forces and Social Classes* (London: Serif, 2002), 146.

tus that is troubled by anti-unionists or unionist grassroots – internal unionist debates are, in the McGarry/O’Leary approach, represented with regard to the maintenance of domination, thus: “The British government reacted positively to being told backwoods Ulster Protestants were the problem rather than the British state”.³² In short, in comparison to the Farrell antecedent, McGarry and O’Leary’s analytical basis – the prioritization of ethno-national identity politics – seems under-determined. Instead of a simplistic resort to hegemonic control, Farrell’s conclusions speak to paradoxes: By the early 1970s, he asserts, the

basic contradiction of the Northern state was now out in the open. The Catholics, with new self-confidence, would no longer tolerate second-class citizenship and discrimination; the Unionist grass roots, kept loyal for nearly fifty years by anti-Catholic propaganda and Protestant privilege, would tolerate no concessions and every escalation of minority agitation only made them more intransigent. No change of personalities could resolve the contradiction...³³

For Farrell, therefore, the paradox at the heart of the Northern state was one of colonial legacy: The power disparity between Catholics and Protestants had deep roots and the civil rights movement’s emergence derailed that historical trajectory by positing a new way of conceiving citizenship: namely, one that valorized civic contribution above ethnic belonging. Apart from a couple of cultural studies texts that use post-colonial theory to subvert Irish nationalist understandings,³⁴ the concept of post/colonialism has had little analytic purchase outside of self-referential critiques that tend to prioritize a strong structural-

³² O’Leary and McGarry, *Politics*, 172.

³³ Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, 257.

³⁴ Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001)

ist approach.³⁵ Instead, it has taken up by academics, commentators and artists associated with the Field Day group (of playwrights, poets and postcolonial theorists) to question Ulster unionist ideology and affiliations.³⁶ Indeed, as the economic and social historian Liam Kennedy concludes: “The attempt to equate life in contemporary Ireland, colonial heritage or not, with such conditions [as in the Third World] is not only misconceived. It is to trivialise the suffering of hundreds of millions of the world’s peoples”.³⁷

In an influential and avowedly structuralist survey (and approach), Jennifer Todd and Joseph Ruane argue that the identity and political conflicts that characterize much of Irish history were the “effect” of the core communal division rather than its cause. Thus, the attribution of contention to “competing concepts of nationhood” works to misconstrue causality and compounds the effort of ethno-religious politicians to cultivate separate communal identities by reproducing those categories within analyses – tending to ignore, for instance, the pivotal role that Protestants have played in physical force republicanism or the extent to which Catholics have (in)directly supported the Union.³⁸ For Ruane and Todd, ethno-national identity is a process of continual construction and negotiation – nationalist and unionist ideologies, for example, tend to be articulated according to a movable hierarchy of tropes and ideas, with some given primacy over others depending on audience and situation. However, the intersection of these identities with power structures – with political, economic and cultural capital in effect – foster and reproduce division and inequality across time. As such, although the nationalist and unionist communities are construct-

35 Cillian McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

36 For an in-depth treatment of the ideological stances underpinning postcolonialist writings in relation to Irish history, see Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

37 Liam Kennedy, “Modern Ireland: Post-Colonial Society or Post-Colonial Pretensions?”, in *Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Belfast: The Institute for Irish Studies, 1996), 181.

38 Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 29.

ed at the level of actual social organisation, relations and practices, as well as in public consciousness ... [they] are very real phenomena”.³⁹ The civil rights movement is represented within this approach as a subversive and destabilizing event. This was emblemized by the civil rights movements’ tactic of holding mass rallies and marches:

Northern Ireland’s geography was deeply sectarianised and the [civil rights] march had long been a Protestant weapon for asserting control over the public sphere. Civil rights marches which traversed Protestant territory, or indeed any territory not seen as exclusively Catholic, were perceived as a direct challenge. This flouting of the North’s sectarian geography and Protestant dominance in the public sphere provoked loyalists and created communal flashpoints.⁴⁰

The specific tactics of the civil rights movement, for Ruane and Todd, served to highlight the limits of Unionist authority and the pro-roguing of Stormont in 1972 marked “the end of the alliance between the British state and Northern Irish Protestants on which [the devolved] experiment had been based”. “The alliance”, continue Ruane and Todd, “had become unsustainable: Protestants were no longer capable of orderly and effective administration in Northern Ireland and the British government could no longer afford to back them”.⁴¹ Although Ruane and Todd conflate Protestants with the Unionist Party in a way which their more fluid (and de-reifying) approach to power relations and identity is supposed to circumvent. The conclusion is clear enough: The civil rights movement ushered into existence a new dynamic of inter-state relations that was hitherto ignored by the British government.

Although he does not deal specifically with the civil rights movement, the notion that the British state’s entrance into Northern Irish

³⁹ Ruane and Todd, *The Dynamics*, 9.

⁴⁰ Ruane and Todd, *The Dynamics*, 127.

⁴¹ Ruane and Todd, *The Dynamics*, 131.

political developments was a critical juncture also underpins the work of the former republican prisoner and long-term critic of Sinn Féin, Anthony McIntyre. For example, McIntyre argues that it was ‘British state strategy rather than republican tradition’ that helped shape modern Provisional republicanism. “[T]he dynamics of Provisional Irish republicanism’, he goes on to suggest, ‘are to be *primarily* found in the post-1969 relationship between large elements of the nationalist working class and the British state”. Interestingly, the civil rights movement is almost incidental to this narrative: It was the injustice of partition, McIntyre asserts, that was instrumental in creating the set of grievances that republicans were responding to – their response, structured and shaped by British counter-strategies.⁴²

McIntyre’s structuralism is haunted by the failure and collapse of the republican project – particularly in its iteration in the main Sinn Féin and IRA strand of “Provisional” republicanism (named after the 1916 Provisional government of the Easter Rising), a Northern Irish-led movement, which proved to be much more sectarian and brutal than the Marxian “Official” republicanism, which had a mainly Southern Irish leadership⁴³. McIntyre defines the “essence” of that Provisional republican project as

a conjectural phenomenon of largely urban insurrectionary politics that expresses the marginalisation of many nationalists within the North of Ireland. This is distinct from primarily expressing a cultural-cum-political sense of enforced separation from the twenty-six counties not under British administration.⁴⁴

42 Anthony McIntyre, “Modern Irish republicanism and the Belfast agreement: Chickens coming home to roost, or turkeys celebrating Christmas?”, in *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*, ed. Rick Wilford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 209.

43 For histories of the republican movement see, for example, Rogelio Alonso, *The IRA and Armed Struggle* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin, 2007) or Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: A Political History of the IRA* (London: Serif, 1997).

44 McIntyre, “Modern Irish republicanism”, 233.

Locating this major strand of the republican movement in what he sees as a “British”-dominated Northern Irish state, McIntyre’s approach tends towards a very superficial level regarding the Irish nationalist trope of viewing Ulster unionists as Irish people who are mystified as to their “real” political interests by the continued colonial presence of the British state in Ireland; only when that presence is removed, the argument goes, will unionists be forced to recognize their ‘true’ Irishness.

This, in itself, is somewhat circular, but the tautology runs deeper because it is not just the “British” presence that is keeping unionists from admitting their Irishness, it is that presence that is determinative of Irish nationalism and republicanism also. This can be explained by way of reference to the McGarry/O’Leary approach – for whereas they begin with the problem of the collapse of an apparently hegemonic political-cultural-institutional unionism between 1968 and 1972, McIntyre’s traumatic problem is the defeat of Provisional republicanism in the 1990s. As with McGarry and O’Leary who import a helpful form of words (via Tocqueville), McIntyre explains the acquiescence of Sinn Féin and the IRA in the peace process as being about bringing republicans “in” but “excluding republicanism”.⁴⁵ The origins of the conflict are then the same as the origins of the peace process: A form of Irish republicanism that is structured by the British state. Even more problematically than McGarry and O’Leary, this type of narrative is not disprovable: The premise works as the explanation. But, as with McGarry and O’Leary, it is only one narrational explanation – and, arguably, in McIntyre’s case, not a very good one at that because it effaces the realities of both (a) a mass and peaceful and democratic civil rights movement that had achieved most of its aims by the time republicans initiated their ‘war’ against what they saw as “the Brits”; and (b) the fact that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland disavowed paramilitary terror throughout the conflict. Indeed, this latter point is made by O’Leary in an article arguing that the republican project eventually had to accede to the democratic and peaceful will of constitutional Irish nationalism.⁴⁶

45 McIntyre, “Modern Irish republicanism”, 217.

46 Brendan O’Leary, “Mission Accomplished? Looking Back at the IRA”, *Field Day Review* 1 (2005): 217-46.

“How Stormont Fell”: An Agential Approach

While undoubtedly the British army made strategic mistakes and committed atrocities – particularly in the early years of the conflict – the structuralist narrative tends to miss the quotidian decision-making and policy articulation of Irish nationalism, in both its constitutional and physical force forms, North and South of the border. One of the first accounts of the breakdown of the Northern state, *How Stormont Fell*, was by the *Irish Times* journalist Henry Kelly. Although his thesis chimes with the Tocquevillian notes of McGarry/O’Leary (“It was searching for fresh answers – and finding them temporarily – that brought Stormont down”⁴⁷), his close reading of the period restores a degree of agency that differentiates it from the stronger and weaker structuralist narratives surveyed above. Indeed, in comparison to many of the texts discussed up until now, Kelly appears as a remarkably acute observer of aspects of Northern nationalist politics. The relationship between the physical force tradition and the more moderate, conservative, “constitutional nationalism” of the Social Democratic and Labour Party for Kelly was a sliding scale. Where individual nationalists found themselves on that spectrum was a matter of contingency, choice and emphasis:

Basically most Catholics in Northern Ireland want a united Ireland in some shape or form some day. The IRA wants the same only quicker. For many Catholics then the dilemma is that they disagree with the IRA only on tactics and since these tactics are the same type as those employed by the British Army the idea of attacking them outright or in public becomes less compulsive.⁴⁸

Kelly’s allusion to the dilemma of many Catholics speaks to the colloquialism of “sneaking regard” – namely, a kind of doublethink involving empathy with physical force republicanism that exists along-

⁴⁷ Henry Kelly, *How Stormont Fell* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), v.

⁴⁸ Kelly, *How Stormont*, 102.

side a lack of overt support and even, paradoxically, perhaps, public condemnation of republican actions. Kelly goes on to explain that that ideological (and moral) crosscurrent gives way to a slipperiness of language and speech:

The SDLP ... has “always condemned” violence in politics. But it has rarely meant what it says to the letter. When Gerry Fitt [the then SDLP leader] rules out the prospect of the IRA being included in peace negotiations all he is really saying is that the IRA has done its part of the job and the politicians who are, according to themselves, cleverer men, should be allowed to get on with the rest of it. Implicitly he recognises the part played by violence to bring him and his political colleagues so far along the road ... the politicians on the Catholic side ritually condemned violence knowing that they had a genuine need for its continuance if their political views were to carry weight. In essence violence and more polite forms of activity are complimentary in politics.⁴⁹

For Kelly, the contradiction involved in this style of politics unravelled in the summer of 1971. In an effort to increase Catholic participation in government, the then Unionist Prime Minister, Brian Faulkner, offered committee seats to the SDLP, which the latter had accepted in June. However, following the shootings of two Catholics in Derry in July, the SDLP’s deputy leader, John Hume, issued a demand for an inquiry to “prove that they [the army] are telling lies about these deaths”.⁵⁰ For Kelly, there was an inevitability about Hume’s demand and the SDLP reaction to withdraw from Stormont when it was not met: “pressures on the SDLP from many sides were great ... in Derry where there had been peace there was no war. The SDLP would represent no-one if they did

⁴⁹ Kelly, *How Stormont*, 102-03.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Kelly, *How Stormont*, 46.

not try and win back the political initiative from the IRA”.⁵¹ In effect, the SDLP’s withdrawal signalled an end to the reformist character of the civil rights movement. As Kelly points out, the SDLP represented a strand of conservative nationalism that was “cleverer generally than their fathers”, that was more strategic and less reactive than the old Nationalist Party, and that had been willing to try to forestall the slippage of political expression from parliamentary, democratic and constitutional methods towards street politics and violence. The flip side of this was, he argued, that the replacing of the old style of abstentionism and clientelism that characterized nationalist politics by the middle-class SDLP had changed the context of the relationship of non-Unionists, anti-Unionist and Catholics generally to Stormont. In other words, that change meant that “Stormont was in real trouble if the Catholics and their representatives decided to leave it ... From the day the SDLP left Stormont [16 July 1971] the whole future of the parliament, the government, and the entire system, was in serious and escalating doubt”.⁵²

The decision to leave Stormont can be read as offering a presentiment of the gradual “greening” of SDLP policy in the 1970s under the increasing influence of Hume. As he himself would later remark, the removal of Stormont was a logical extension of the (nationalist) aim of destruction of the status quo that, in effect, represented the radicalization of the civil rights’ goal of specific reforms:

Stormont had no real part to play in resolving our problem since it was based on majority rule and on what I call the Afrikaner mindset ... Unionism was about holding all power in their own hands ... It was becoming quite clear that Stormont itself was not going to bring about any change. Therefore, a necessary part of the strategy was to try to bring it down and have it replaced – that was the thinking behind the withdrawal.⁵³

⁵¹ Kelly, *How Stormont*, 49.

⁵² Kelly, *How Stormont*, 50.

⁵³ Hume, interview with author, 14 June 2002.

The SDLP's decision entailed that it would not return to parliament for anything less than it had been promised in June 1971; and by September of that same year, it had begun to develop detailed plans on how to capitalize on that position. For example, a number of internal policy position papers (housed in the SDLP's archive at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland) began to set out guiding principles for full power-sharing and a cross-border, institutionalized and executive “Irish dimension”. These suggested that the party ought no longer to accept a unionist “right to veto”; that any development or proposal that “ignored the inter-dependence of the two parts of Ireland would be meaningless”; that any new settlement be “underwritten by the international community”; and that Stormont be replaced by a new governing commission or “Council of State”.⁵⁴ Rather than being simply a reaction to the Provisional republican campaign, the SDLP sought to bring nationalist opinion around to a coherent policy agenda and political strategy based on a Council of Ireland (the “Irish dimension”) and the replacing of Stormont with a proportional system of executive power-sharing. While that policy direction may have been copper fastened by the introduction of internment without trial in August 1971 and subsequent hardening of Catholic opinion, party papers reveal that the SDLP quickly ascertained the possibilities inherent in the abstentionist decision and it sought to accumulate political capital as rapidly as possible. Furthermore, the SDLP's shift in gears meant that it had begun to radicalize its position from July 1971. Undoubtedly, the party would have been aware of the complaints by the Southern Irish nationalist daily, the *Irish Press*, that it had been reduced to being no more than a ‘watch-dog’ in the devolved parliament.⁵⁵

This new and more radical vision chimed with thinking in Irish governmental circles where the SDLP was viewed as a vehicle to deepen and broaden Dublin's influence in Northern Ireland and, secondly,

54 See McGrattan, *Northern Ireland*, 42. See also Sarah Campbell, “New Nationalism? The SDLP and the Creation of a Socialist Labour Party in Northern Ireland, 1969-75”, *Irish Historical Studies* 38, no. 151 (2013): 422-438. [tps://doi.org/10.1017/S0021121400001577](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021121400001577).

55 McGrattan, *Northern Ireland*, 39-40.

to try to constrain republican violence by offering Catholics an almost tangible recognition of their aspirations. Whereas Irish government policy towards Northern Ireland had traditionally been an amalgam of ad hoc conciliation and irredentism, the SDLP's assertive middle-class nationalism gave it an ally. Thus, in August the Taoiseach Jack Lynch positioned himself alongside the SDLP's civil disobedience response to internment, informing the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath that: "In the event of the continuation of existing policies attempting military solutions, I intend to support the policy of passive resistance now being pursued by the non-Unionist population".⁵⁶

The SDLP's attitude in the summer of 1971 was instrumental in moving a style of politics where dialogue, negotiation and compromise were the means and ends of progress to one based on zero-sum calculations and/or the accumulation of concessions. The agential narrative, then, emphasizes the decisions by Irish nationalists that led to a deterioration of community relations and spiralling violence in 1970 and 1971. The contemporary account by Henry Kelly illustrates this thematic: drawing on structuralist, ideologically inspired interpretations of the sweep of Irish history, nationalists made a series of decisions that were instrumental in tipping the conflict towards further polarization and radicalization. The inevitability, such as it was, did not occur because of structuralist conditions, instead, it resided in the discursive landscape of Irish nationalist politics. The polemical working up of those decisions and those calculations form the basis of what I have identified as the stronger and weaker versions of subsequent historiography.

Discussion

McIntyre was interviewed for the journalist Malachi O'Doherty's latest volume of memoirs, which covers the years 1971 to 1972.⁵⁷ McIntyre went on to become a sniper for the IRA and served 18 years in gaol

⁵⁶ Cited in McGrattan, *Northern Ireland*, 43.

⁵⁷ Malachi O'Doherty, *The Year of Chaos: Northern Ireland on the Brink of Civil War, 1971-72* (London: Atlantic Books, 2021).

for murder;⁵⁸ he describes his induction into the republican movement less in structural terms than a series of (mis)steps such as joining the youth wing of the Official IRA. McIntyre gilds this decision with a subtle misdirection, comparing an anti-state movement with the police: ‘I suppose it was as natural for me to join a group like that as it was for somebody from the unionist community to join the police’. In the process, the self-exculpation effaces the inherent sectarian violence that he opted for and would go on to prosecute. McIntyre mitigates that latent brutality in almost facetious terms, concluding that the organizing of riots and the securing of bomb-making components were relatively mundane – despite his being only 14 at the time: “We were busy fools. A lot of it was meetings but it was a life I liked and I thought I was doing the right thing”.⁵⁹

Although to date there has been very little research published on why individuals eschewed violence,⁶⁰ in some ways O’Doherty’s career has been an attempt to make sense of this. Certainly, this is related to how he framed his most recent book – namely, why did Northern Ireland not sink into civil war? But it also lies at the centre of his autobiographical writing. Growing up in nationalist Belfast, O’Doherty personally knew who became paramilitaries and his work as a journalist took him into close contact with other individuals who were involved in violence. He offers little sympathy for what I have termed the structuralist reading of Irish history, criticizing the ‘tendency to explain all violence in Northern Ireland as if it emerges simply from the unstable mix of inter-communal chemistry, without anyone actually being responsible. That is as simplistic and shallow an explanation as

58 Malachi O’Doherty, “Police must be allowed to follow the evidence ... but our understanding of Troubles will be poorer due to scuppering of Boston College project”, *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 October 2018. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/malachi-odoherty-police-must-be-allowed-to-follow-the-evidence-but-our-understanding-of-troubles-will-be-poorer-due-to-scuppering-of-boston-college-project-37451723.html>.

59 O’Doherty, *The Year*, 22 and 23.

60 For an exception, see Rogelio Alonso, “Why Did so Few Become Terrorists: A Comparative Study of Northern Ireland and the Basque Country”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1905631>. Relatedly, see Stephen Hopkins’ work on auto/biographical literature, which touches on these problems, for instance, his *The Politics of Memoir and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

pure conspiracy theory'. Despite this, he argued, "it felt close enough, for many, to the truth of what they had experienced".⁶¹

His latest book, arguably, closes the circle between the fickleness and contrivance of memory and the catastrophic historical events that shaped that experiential truth. As such, he suggests that British mismanagement of the early years of the conflict was a product of, in particular, officialdom's misunderstanding of "the dilute Britishness of Northern Irish Catholics".⁶² Yet, in some ways this too gives way to a certain structuralism. Agency is certainly key in his close reading of the archival material available in the state papers; but the question of from where misunderstandings arose and why they persisted remains unresolved. Although O'Doherty engages carefully with Henry Kelly's book, he tends to downplay Kelly's emphasis on the reactions by moderate nationalists during these years. Given the focus on collective actors – the British and Irish governments, republican paramilitaries, the British army – O'Doherty does not always criticize sources such as McIntyre, whose own intellectual trajectory seems in part to be a way of narrating his own culpability into historical structures.

Conclusion:

The work of Kelly and O'Doherty bookends the primarily journalistic-driven work in ascribing agency to the historical decisions and omissions that precipitated thirty-plus years of sectarian bloodshed in Northern Ireland. This article has explored some of the historiographical and political science literature in-between those books and has sought to map narrational tropes according to the emphasis placed on longer-term trends and individual decisions and omissions. I have largely abstained from offering an appraisal of the merits of these readings and the types of questioning of individual decision-makers and those who tried to live ordinary lives in the un-normal daily circumstances

61 Malachi O'Doherty, *The Trouble with Guns: Republican Strategy and the Provisional IRA* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1998), 43.

62 O'Doherty, *The Year*, 238.

of the conflict while rejecting the violence that was going on around them are areas outside the remit of this article. It has sought therefore to provide a map to understanding how those types of analyses may be founded. Beyond that initial rudimentary map, the challenge becomes what types of stories are used to make sense of the past when that experiential “truth”, to which O’Doherty alludes, fades from living memory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alonso, Rogelio. "Why Did so Few Become Terrorists: A Comparative Study of Northern Ireland and the Basque Country", *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1905631>.
- . *The IRA and Armed Struggle* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).
- Bew, Paul; Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, *Northern Ireland, 1921-2001: Political Forces and Social Classes*. London: Serif, 2002.
- Campbell, Sarah. "New Nationalism? The SDLP and the Creation of a Socialist Labour Party in Northern Ireland, 1969-75". *Irish Historical Studies*, 38, no. 151 (2013): 422-438. [tps://doi.org/10.1017/S0021121400001577](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021121400001577).
- Edwards, Aaron and Cillian McGrattan. *The Northern Ireland Conflict: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2012.
- Farrell, Michael. *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*. London: Pluto Press, 1976.
- Farren, Sean. *The SDLP: The Struggle for Agreement in Northern Ireland, 1970-2000*. Dublin: The Fourcourts Press, 2010.
- Graham, Colin. *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001.
- Her Majesty's Stationery Office. "Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland". Belfast: HMSO, 1969. <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmso/cameron.htm>.
- Hewitt, Ralph. "SDLP goal 'at odds with celebration of partition'", *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 January 2021, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/the-centenary/sdlp-goal-at-odds-with-celebration-of-partition-39973945.html>.
- Hopkins, Stephen. *The Politics of Memoir and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.
- Howe, Stephen. *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Kelly, Henry. *How Stormont Fell*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972.
- Kennedy, Liam. "Modern Ireland: Post-Colonial Society or Post-Colonial Pretensions?". In *Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland*. Belfast: The Institute for Irish Studies, 1996.
- . *Who Was Responsible for the Troubles? The Northern Ireland Conflict*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020.
- Maloney, Ed. *A Secret History of the IRA*. London: Penguin, 2007.
- McBride, Sam. "Inside the self-deception of an unrepentant killer needs to stay sane – but at what price?" *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 December 2020: 16.
- McClements, Freya. "Billy Hutchinson: 'I justify everything I did in the Troubles. To stay sane, I have to'", *Irish Times*, 21 November 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/billy-hutchinson-i-justify-everything-i-did-in-the-troubles-to-stay-sane-i-have-to-1.4414609>.
- McGrattan, Cillian. "'Order out of Chaos': The Politics of Transitional Justice". *Politics*, 29, no.3: (2009) 154-172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2009.01352.x>.
- . "'The Possibilities are Endless': Republican Strategy to Deal with the Past in Northern Ireland". In *Legacy: What to do about the Past in Northern Ireland*, edited by Jeffrey Dudgeon, 52-64. Belfast: Belfast Press, 2018.
- . *Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- . *Northern Ireland, 1968-2008: The Politics of Entrenchment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

McIntyre, Anthony. “Modern Irish republicanism and the Belfast agreement: Chickens coming home to roost, or turkeys celebrating Christmas?” In *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*, edited by Rick Wilford. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

McKittrick, David and David McVea. *Making Sense of the Troubles*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

McKittrick, David, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton. *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999.

McNicholl, Kevin, Clifford Stevenson, and John Garry. “How the ‘Northern Irish’ National Identity is Understood and Used by Young People and Politicians”. *Political Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2018): 487-505. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12523>

Murtagh, Peter. “Michelle O’Neill speaks her mind at tribute to slain IRA gunmen”, *Irish Times*, 18 February 2017. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/michelle-oneill-speaks-her-mind-at-tribute-to-slain-ira-gunmen-1.2979675>.

Ní Áolain, Fionnuala. *The Politics of Force: Conflict Management and State Violence in Northern Ireland*. Belfast; Blackstaff, 2000.

O’Doherty, Malachi. “Police must be allowed to follow the evidence ... but our understanding of Troubles will be poorer due to scuppering of Boston College project”, *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 October 2018. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/malachi-odoherty-police-must-be-allowed-to-follow-the-evidence-but-our-understanding-of-troubles-will-be-poorer-due-to-scuppering-of-boston-college-project-37451723.html>

———. *The Trouble with Guns: Republican Strategy and the Provisional IRA*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1998.

———. *The Year of Chaos: Northern Ireland on the Brink of Civil War, 1971-72*. London: Atlantic Books, 2021.

O’Leary Brendan, and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*. London: The Athlone Press, 1993.

O’Leary, Brendan, and Paul Arthur. “Introduction: Northern Ireland as the Site of State- and Nation-Building Failures”. In *The Future of Northern Ireland*, edited by John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

O’Leary, Brendan. “Mission Accomplished? Looking Back at the IRA”, *Field Day Review* 1 (2005): 217-46.

———. *A Treatise of Northern Ireland*. Volume II, *Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Patterson, Henry. *The Politics of Illusion: A Political History of the IRA*. London: Serif, 1997.

Rowley, Stephen. “‘This is my home and country. Later on/Perhaps I’ll find this nation my own’. Nationalism, regionalism and parallelism in the poetry of John Hewitt”, *Etudes Irlandaises* 26 no. 1, (2001):63. <https://doi.org/10.3406/irlan.2001.1555>).

Ruane, Joseph, and Jennifer Todd. *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Shanahan, Timothy. *The Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Morality of Terrorism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

Todd, Jennifer. “Northern Irish Nationalist Political Culture”. *Irish Political Studies*, 5, no.1 (1990): 31-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907189008406472>.

Referência para citação:

McGrattan, Cillian. “‘They Never Went Looking for War’: Three Understandings of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement”. *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, n.º 13 (2021): 55-85.