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The Maintenance of Republican Ideology and Tactics in the Discourses of IRA Former Prisoners

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Abstract

The debate concerning ideology and ideological shifts during peace-building in Northern Ireland has generally failed to account for the attitudes and opinions of former combatants concerning the nature and meaning of discursively constructed identities and political strategies. This invisibility is peculiar in that debates concerning ideological shifts have been driven by academic analysis or by those former combatants who maintain that the Irish peace process is paralleled by core ideological abandonment. The material presented within this article indicates that former Provisional Irish Republican prisoners do not view the peace process as involving ideological ditching but instead that their commitment to republican discourse remains complete.

Keywords: *Northern Ireland, peacebuilding, peace process, Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners, Republican ideology*

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THE MAINTENANCE OF REPUBLICAN IDEOLOGY AND TACTICS IN THE DISCOURSES OF IRA FORMER PRISONERS

Peter Shirlow, Jonathan Tonge and James W. McAuley

Abstract

The debate concerning ideology and ideological shifts during peace-building in Northern Ireland has generally failed to account for the attitudes and opinions of former combatants concerning the nature and meaning of discursively constructed identities and political strategies. This invisibility is peculiar in that debates concerning ideological shifts have been driven by academic analysis or by those former combatants who maintain that the Irish peace process is paralleled by core ideological abandonment. The material presented within this article indicates that former Provisional Irish Republican prisoners do not view the peace process as involving ideological ditching but instead that their commitment to republican discourse remains complete.

Introduction

This article examines the attitudes of former Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners regarding the transition from violence and the role they have played and continue to play in republican activism.¹ The findings within this article indicate that these former prisoners do not view the peace process as involving ideological disbandment. Instead republican ideology remains centred upon the reproduction of established discursive conflicts, as promoted via non-militaristic means. It would appear that what IRA former prisoners mean by the peace process is articulated around the promotion of republican values and a discourse guided by the eventual achievement of republican goals. It is also understood that this and other republican beliefs have both presented and secured republican unity and allowed the leadership and the grassroots to refute accusations of “sell-out”, a feature that has historically dogged Irish republican movements.

Unsurprisingly, among those interviewed² there is no sense that critiques of violent republicanism are correct in arguing that the IRA were terrorist-inspired and lacked ideological coherence (Alonso, 2001) or that republican coherence and discursive value has been abandoned in favour of the acquisition of political power (McInyre, 1995). There is some acknowledgement of a “management” of change and the shaping of

contemporary republicanism by the policies of the British state and the “complexities of this relationship between movement and community” (Bean, 2007, p. 13). The acceptance that there have been tactical shifts is couched in the presentation of a wider understanding of republican mobilisation. This acknowledges a tactical awareness, whether that has involved the use of violence, promoting the Irish language or serving in government within a partitioned Ireland, that was understood as an on-going reality throughout the conflict (Smith, 1995). Moreover, there is no denial among IRA former prisoners of the complexities of emerging out of armed conflict, but this is paralleled by an apparent sense of having maintained ideological congruity and transitions that are primarily strategic. Indeed, former IRA prisoners argue that it is not the structure of republican discourse that has changed but the presentation of ideology and the pinpointing of successful strategies that will achieve key goals (Adams, 1989, 1995; Maillot, 2005).

There has been a critique by other republican prisoners that contends that the peace process has been framed via a ditching of core republican principles. This contrary position suggests that the peace process is based upon elitist managerialism of former combatants has removed internal dissenters and censored any debates concerning the disjuncture of republican discourse (O’Bradaigh, 1996; Maloney, 2003; Patterson, 1989). We do not accept or deny the merits of these criticisms but instead argue that there is an equally valid requirement to understand those who generally reject such a perspective. Evidently, there is an insufficient knowledge, beyond leadership level, concerning the attitudes and opinions of the bulk of former republican prisoners.³

This paper further indicates how former IRA prisoners claim that they have not “abandoned” the ideological compass which “legitimised” violence and that the present nature of community and political activism is structured around a sense of republican authenticity. We address the construction, interpretation and meaning of discourse among republican activists by highlighting four key dimensions: (i) the interpretation and construction of legitimacy, (ii) the reasons for deciding to join a paramilitary organisation, (iii) imprisonment and the development of ideological beliefs, and (iv) the delivery of republican ideology in the post-conflict environment. It emerges that, for republicans, the manner through which resistance is articulated and, more importantly, practiced has shifted out of violence due to an internal re-consideration of normative rules needed to promote republican discourse (Graham and Shirlow, 2003; Tonge, 2005).

Despite shifts in their approach to politics and community activism, former IRA prisoners understand activism and ultimately the peace process as a route to Irish unification. Moreover, their attitude towards the “other”, mainly unionist and loyalist, remains based upon negative stereotyping and a mode of engagement centred on utilising inter-community contact as a means to persuade those who are pro-union of their ideological “folly” and the “incoherence” of unionism.

Discourse and Republican Legitimacy

Analyzing Republican Discourse

Discourse constructs social relations, through language, written and spoken texts, thus constituting the objects and subjects of the social world. Republican ideals are understood as the outcome of discursively fabricated classifications of belonging (Burton and Carlen, 1979) and republican involvement in the peace process remains guided by the inspiration and idea of a united Ireland. Such a process of discursive representation reminds us that all forms of loyalty-driven discourse are based upon different imaginings of community, practice and ideological delivery. Furthermore, the allegories and mythic representation of discourse in a divided society are unproblematic to those who hold particular and exclusive renditions of identity and power. That is to say that the contemporary peace process is not to be understood as the outcome of ideological rejection but of manoeuvre, resource competition and conflict via non-violent means. Republicans and their opponents remain tied to alternative notions of power relations and the maintenance of resistance towards an objectified other (English, 2003, 2006; Munck, 1992).

Republican discourse, as understood by our respondents, has evolved through identity-securing strategies and the raising of republican consciousness. The use of violence is understood by way of the stages of revolt, political development and commemoration. The promotion of the Irish language and culture and the development of links with a sympathetic diaspora are viewed as additional stages in the development of identity politics. Thus the shift in tactics has been linked to the move from “powerlessness” due to asymmetrical relations, to the governance and delivery of power through political “achievement” within an equality driven political landscape. Linked to this overall shift from “powerlessness” is an interpretation advanced by Stedman-Jones (1983) that identity and political expression is tied to discursive aspects of linguistic expression that do not

easily map themselves onto homogenous interpretations of political movements, but instead there is a need to appreciate how:

Language disrupts any simple notion of the determination of consciousness by social being because it is itself part of social being. We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest itself. (1983, pp. 21-22, cited in Shirlow and McGovern, 1997)

Discourse within this analysis is studied via the medium of interests that are produced and reproduced via realities such as violent conflict, perceptions of conflict, perceived “successes” of that conflict and the capacity to express ideas and deliver actions that are influenced by fluid social, cultural and economic relationships that emerge during or parallel to conflict. The perception that a discourse will remain static and unwavering undermines the impact of such fluidity and also reduces conflict to an interpretation of violence and harm as opposed to understanding how other forces condition and explain transformation out of armed conflict. Acknowledging that armed action and the discourses attached to it are temporal and conditioned by the reproduction of society at various scales, especially in conflictual arenas such as Northern Ireland, is of importance. This results in a displacement of interest with the roots and dimensions of conflict and in so doing permits a concern with how conflict itself fashions the cognition and understanding of interests centred upon knowledge, experience and experimentation with tactics and discursive strategies (Foucault, 1972, 1973, 1979).

The use of violence by former IRA prisoners is understood as having required a language during and after the cessation of armed conflict that is defined via a chain of equivalence which encloses a particular perception of established and re-produced justification. This generally remains as a self-referential and self-sustained notion of legitimacy. Thus the discourse attached to studying the past may lead to an adoption of a language of peace but the discourse of that language remains viewed as avowedly republican and thus “legitimate”.

Crucially, discourse is concerned with the variable “discursive formations” which permit specific assertions and remarks to be made while others are excluded. A discursive formation is “a set of rules”; that is to say the code by which objects, subject positions and strategies are moulded, forged and created. As Foucault (1973) argued discourse is not simply

concerned with written or spoken words but with the articulatory social practice of language, meaning and interpretation. As noted by Foucault:

These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of vocabulary, but the ordering of objects. “Words and things is the entirely serious title of a problem; it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not- no longer-treating discourse as groups of signs...but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.” (1972, p. 49, cited in Shirlow and McGovern, 1998)

Discourses of Legitimacy in Republicanism

The material obtained from extensive interviewing of former IRA prisoners provides an understanding of involvement in conflict and the delivery of a peace process and their influence over that process as understood by them. It grounds experience, legitimacy and the mobilisation of long-serving interpretations of history and conflict and the merging of these around ideas of developing and sustaining conflict transformation (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). With regard to overall senses of legitimacy, it was found that former republican prisoners view the conflict as a reaction to state “oppression”. Attitudes towards the peace process do not relate directly to academic determinations of conflict and peace building as they remain grounded in much closer experiences of conflict. The interpretation of moving out of violence is not understood as a process of ideological “ditching” or the emergence of a “mutual stalemate” (Zartman, 2003) but of the development of tactics and the impact of conflict upon opening up means to promote republican discourse (Hazelkorn and Patterson, 1995).

Like previous and contemporary forms of Irish republicanism the most significant condition for mobilisation is to be found in the agency of activists (Bean, 2007). Within republicanism the base has been attached to creative cultural mediums and organisational structures that sought to define collective identity (Shirlow and McGovern, 1998). The IRA deployed the language of community to not only instil nationalist “unity” but to also establish hegemony within the nationalist community. The building of such hegemony has been partly achieved through recent electoral politics, with Sinn Féin emerging as the dominant voice of Northern nationalism (McAlister, 2004; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). The use of violence

evidently undermined Sinn Féin's capacity to become politically transcendent. Tonge (2006, p. 141) shows that:

By 1988, however, the political arm of the republican movement in Belfast was beginning to publicly question the utility of an armed struggle which undermined their political appeal to a local electorate anxious to see improvements in job opportunities and local services.

Ultimately, the re-mobilisation of Irish republicanism in the late 1960s, and its restructuring in the 1970s, saw a series of actions and long-term strategy developments that fermented the nature of constitutionalism as now articulated and practiced. The discursive shifts that have taken place within this particular version of republicanism have been set against the background of building the republican movement. Controlling, and then shifting, ideological capacity and meaning within the republican movement is understood as being centred upon a constant fusion of styles and strategic and tactical experimentation (Bean, 2007). Smyth (2005) has also argued that the capacity to move from a military to political position was generally unproblematic as the "empty signifiers" of "justice" and "democracy" were essentially:

multiple interpretations and capable of being integrated into disparate discourses. The absence of justice or democracy can be used to justify a reformist strategy, but equally both can be integrated into a justification for armed struggle. (Smyth, 2005, p. 144)

Smyth's (2005) argument is crucial in that it highlights the fluidity within republicanism as a political discourse within itself. Thus the gaze and interpretation of republicanism has been overwhelmingly linked to the interpretation of violence and the mobilisation of armed conflict as opposed to understanding the various strands and opinions that produced republican discourse. The positioning of republicanism as merely violent generally obscured the extent and nature of internal ideological awareness and tactical shift. It also reminds us that the conflict was also shaped by state policy, the opening up of dialogue with Sinn Féin (primarily by John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party), the desire to build wider cognition of republican ideas, and the failure to build republicanism as a movement due to collective armed activism.

Reaction and Republicanism: Reasons for Joining Up

Joining the IRA was in many instances centred upon “events more than anything else” and the violence that emanated from an identifiable “other”. As noted by a female respondent, “a million things happened” and the sense of societal and political deterioration in the early stage of the conflict was a paramount cause of mobilisation. Many of those imprisoned in the early 1970s saw themselves as reacting to loyalist and state violence, unionist hegemony and state indifference towards aggrieved Catholic communities. The sense of “hitting back” as a mode of becoming involved and then adopting a more defined republican discourse was commonplace. For some respondents the sense of being part of a violated community was important:

Well, like most people at the time it wasn't an ideological thing it was more a gut reaction to something that was happening at the time. (Male respondent 1, West Belfast)

This sense of community violation was also advanced through an appreciation of personal experience and the need for collective engagement. As noted:

It was because of what was happening all around us at the time. We were kids. Bombay Street was getting burnt down. Before that it was student riots, student protests. There was always trouble down around the Falls anyway. There were parades even then. I remember the Divis Street riots, not really understanding them but I knew it was sort of us and them. 1969 was the central year when everything changed. I watched the streets being burnt down around us ... Back to school after the holidays, I heard all the personal stories of kids who had been run out of their homes with the house on fire. Everybody was joining the Fianna [the youth wing of the IRA] that seemed to be some sort of way of reacting against it, or doing something against something that you felt you were powerless against. It gave you some sort of strength. (Male respondent 2, West Belfast)

Whereas some respondents were drawn to, or cultivated into organisations, others came from families steeped in republican traditions. Even among those who did not come from such backgrounds, or in which such backgrounds were hidden, the sense of their being a notional republicanism was evident:

My older brother was in the Fianna and he had been from when he was fairly young. But I didn't really notice until around 1969 that he seemed to be doing sort of secrecy stuff. New republicans in the area, old republicans in the area - I knew that

there was a, had an idea that there was an IRA. Every now and again their name would come up. But I had no real republican family ties. But I had republican records in the house, I heard songs at parties. (Male respondent 3, County Derry)

This capacity to locate republican family histories was important in that it established a sense of ideological lineage that was brought to the fore by the collapse of social relationships in the 1960s and 1970s. The primacy of 1966 (virtually invisible in academic analysis until recently) as the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising was also attached to senses of consciousness-raising and a need for republican re-mobilisation. In essence several factors influenced the discursive journey of republicanism; ideological mobilisation through the use of commemoration, socialisation and the goal of Irish unity; situational violence and the response to state and loyalist activity; structural factors conditioned by “second-class” citizenship and the demands for equality of recognition and anti-discrimination legislation. The fusion of these was constantly understood by the respondents as being the basis on which to utilise violence.

Although accepting that the motivation of early republican activists was reactive to the conditions and experiences of societal breakdown, in the early 1970s, it was constantly stated that those who engaged in violence at that time had a developed sense of economic, cultural and social injustice and an appreciation of a need to adopt a more wide-ranging republican ideology. Furthermore, it was postulated that any lack of ideological cohesion and discursive knowledge amongst IRA activists, during this time, was slowly and deliberately replaced by developed explanations and strategies that did more than merely react to violent events. However, it should be stressed that early violent reaction was neither merely inflexible nor obdurate but fashioned by senses of injustice and both vague and established notions of a republican heritage and discourse.

Imprisonment and Discursive Fine Tuning

Education and Debate; The Long Kesh experience

Virtually all respondents spoke of being inspired by prison debates within and between paramilitary groups. These debates provided an ideological vocabulary of what “people already felt and knew was wrong”. Furthermore such debates did not challenge the efficacy of violence, or promote a sense that armed conflict was to be dispensed with due to a

stalemate with loyalists or the British State. Within the prison arena republicans challenged dominant representations of them and also nurtured identities of resistance against prison authority (Corcoran, 2006; McKeown, 2001). Ironically, the republican challenge to British state authority and the associated process of their criminalisation opened up spaces of dialogue with the prison authorities that encouraged negotiating skills that would eventually be used in peace-building strategies.

For republicans ideological manoeuvring and future political approaches were influenced by the prisoners as well as by significant debates that were led by a wider republican community and influenced and supported from a much broader Irish nationalist alliance (Clarke, 1987). However, irrespective of the impact of former prisoners upon future discursively designed tactics and re-orientation, the organic nature of debate and dialogue within and even at times between republicans and loyalists was significant in bolstering alternative and future practices. It is noteworthy that former prisoners viewed themselves as the “IRA beyond bars, and not as a group that were removed from wider activities”.

Imprisonment also influenced a process that one respondent identified as a time to “learn a lot of things”. This sense of learning and a commitment to acquiring and developing a republican discourse was understood as a process of learning in developing a republican logic:

Long Kesh imprisonment in those days: we did read Irish history and we did get to political lectures, we did learn more about everything. It was your first chance to read books on communism, books on revolution, Che Guevara, Connolly. All the things that you wouldn't have read when you were a teenager and probably wouldn't have read. But in Long Kesh, all these books were being passed around. Everybody's talking about them, everybody's debating them. So you naturally want to be informed about it. You want to understand it. We did a lot of things in Long Kesh. It wasn't just political education, it was military education. But there was also lots of sports and lots of ordinary reading and just messing about. So they were all forming some form of political understanding of what was happening (Male respondent 4, West Belfast).

Debates among republicans within prison aided the shifting of IRA tactics as they morphed more fully into politics, community activism and cultural expressionism. Central to these debates was how the IRA could create the ideas and actions that would lead to the abandonment of violence, but only when such a tactical disjuncture could uphold an activist driven and

congruous republican discourse. Challenging an established *modus operandi* attached to violence was accompanied by maintaining a narrative of oppression and resistance along with a new repertoire of inclusion, and a future preference for the memorialisation of armed conflict as opposed to violent engagement (Shirlow and McGovern, 1998; McGovern, 2000). The nature of such debates was attached not only to moving out of armed conflict, but also discussing how to produce an alternative nationalist political culture within which the IRA would no longer be required to act as a armed bulwark against the British Army or armed loyalists, but would instead become agents of change through influencing alternative platforms and arenas.

With regard to imprisonment there are several process and attitudinal shifts that are of significance. The impact of imprisonment provided ideological coherence and a recognition that purist ideological explanations needed to be internally reviewed. As noted by a respondent imprisoned in the 1970s and 1980s:

I don't know how well I would have articulated my views before I went to jail. I think jail was brilliant in terms of giving me the time to sit down and read and clarify my thoughts. I think all my thoughts were there, I had all the reasons and all that type of stuff. But I may not have had the clearer articulation of why and the times, dates, figures and trends and all that type of stuff - I might not have been clear on that. Jail gave me the time and the opportunity to clarify my own head. To have it in me. There have been times when - like the hunger strikes and things - you'll be living in the moment, you'll be just living - I mean events would have been right and wrong for you, or things happening would have been right and wrong. You would have been just almost dealing with them in the here and now, where going to jail and going through that type of thing - you can read history properly ... It definitely gave me - I mean, one thing the jail did for me, it gave me this idea of being analytical and being critical. Not just to take something at face value on the moment, where I may have when I was a teenager or when I was in the middle of it. (Male respondent 2, County Derry)

Ideological Capacity-Building

The promotion of a non-violent republicanism was influenced by evident identity tapping and/or formation that defined a counter-hegemonic

project that was located in the capacity to weld together disparate forms of Irish nationalism. What emerged was predominantly class-based in terms of the republican electorate, but the glue that held together an emergent consciousness was linked to republican versions of land, folklore, oppression and ultimate delivery from British authority. It is arguable that the push towards ideological coherence within the prisons was required given that detainees needed a cultural and political vocabulary that was unifying and shared.

What is important to note is that the operationalisation of republican history and ideological coherence was achieved and mechanisms were found, such as awareness-raising, that created a culture of debate and dialogue that transformed the capacity for the emergence of collective action. The terrain of consciousness was crucial with regard to defining what was required in order to facilitate armed action and then ironically the displacement of that. Inadvertently, this layering of consciousness eventually established and upheld the rationale for non-violent political developments. Within the prison context republicans built a micro-society of ideological identification and dialogue.

A resistance discourse was dedicated to a series of platforms, which began with violence, was increasingly paralleled by political protest and consciousness-raising and eventually upheld the practice of constitutional politics. Republicanism shifted from a desire to seize control to a strategy of advancing and mobilising along an eclectic populist front. As stated by a republican former prisoner:

There was no master plan. We didn't start out with a plan. We did things in tandem as we went along. We (prisoners) raised our ideas and then that of the community. We discussed the need for peace and then took it to our people. We moved from an old arrogant position that we were the leaders and the people would be led. We started to provide ideas and ways forwards and realised that if we removed that elitist crap about ourselves being right and others duped that people would listen to us. Eventually we realised that people wanted the violence stopped and we were now so close to them in so many ways, like through Sinn Féin and pressure groups, that we had to listen and then respond.⁴

Building the Political Dimension

The building of politics by Sinn Féin and the shifts that political activism encouraged, also points to a need to understand the issue of scale. The building of community and the raising of consciousness within that process could never establish a nationalist community within which there was a majoritarian fervour for armed struggle. The rhetoric of the 1970s and early 1980s, which presented the republican people as willing to become armed ambassadors of republican philosophy and a more significant guerrilla movement was unachievable and misplaced. In developing the idea of the republican “people” the republican movement came, by the mid 1980s, closer to developing a form of hegemony within highly segregated Catholic low income communities (Shirlow, 2006; Tonge, 2006). Republicans had completed the foundations of loyalty to them but had no apparent conventional political structure to erect. Therefore, the capacity to reform social welfare conditions, influence regeneration and housing strategies, and ultimately represent the electorate remained missing due to republicanism having insignificant influence over state agencies and institutions. The Hearts and Minds⁵ strategy undertaken by the British State and the use of public funding to support non-republican groups in Catholic communities furthered the nature of republican dislocation.

The capacity and recognition that republicans had established political corroboration and that a popular electoral mandate was to be enlarged, furthered the identification of prisoners, not merely in the historical sense of having suffered but as those who had part-framed and supported the creation of a form of republicanism that was increasingly relevant. The emergence of community cohesion between the IRA and the nationalist community came during the Hunger Strikes 1980-81 when the death of prisoners was to verify the extent of prisoners’ devotion to the cause. This devotion was translated into political support for IRA prisoners, who stood in elections North and South of the border, from those strongly opposed to the physical force tradition.

This forging of such a (previously unachievable) alliance indicated that the mobilisation of shared nationalist suffering created political dividends that violence could not fashion. In the longer term republican prisoners enjoyed a status linked not only to their incarceration but also as part of a broader movement that gained major concessions from the British state. The emotional power and resonance of these sub-groups (prisoners, advice workers, elected representatives, community workers) within republicanism was based upon their contribution both in the past and in the present regarding wider political mobilisation.

The military-political containment of paramilitaries from the late 1970s also increased the pressure on the movement to “thicken and re-direct the battlefield”. Near continual successes in elections toughened these demands and pointed towards new possibilities in community activism and wider understandings of politics. Such a proposition was more compelling to prisoners, given that the Sinn Féin was composed of former prisoners. A sense of mutual reinforcement was created between the imprisoned and the “politicos”. A key component in the role of devotion to the republican leadership was the nature and level of trust invested in them. Trust was not an imagined concept for the prisoner community but based upon a personal and shared experience. Moreover, the unfolding political developments of the 1990s and the Belfast Agreement, in particular, created international kudos for the republican movement. The release of prisoners also provided state recognition that the imprisoned were effectively political in their orientation. The issue of trust was thus fulfilled and republican former prisoners could locate political positives in the contribution that they had made.

Republicanism’s ‘Coming of Age’

For republican respondents developing ideas became a conscientious by-product of years of study and analysis within which the key emphasis was placed upon how “struggle” encompassed various forms of inequality beyond that which had emerged from British colonialism and the enactment of unionist hegemony. Resistance in a post-conflict situation was understood as being undertaken through multi-faceted and non-violent mediums. In particular, inequality and oppression in whatever form were to be challenged through the agenda of equality building, which ultimately was somewhat of a distance from the use of armed conflict to end the “colonial” domination that “caused” social inequity (McGovern, 2000). Republicans appeared heavily devoted to the idea that they were emerging unbroken and that the experience of prison is one of ensuring that “attempts by our captors to criminalise us and our struggle” had failed (Mac Giolla Ghunna, 1997, p. 2).

Republican prisoners espoused a mixture of pride in their resistance whilst recognising that their struggle had raised consciousness within the republican movement and facilitated a more sophisticated capacity to critique societal shifts. Articles and summaries of imprisonment, undertaken by former prisoners, consciously presents struggle as having being forged within a comparative international frame that included the historical tenets of Gramsci and the art of meaningful intellectual analysis and action as

articulated, for example, by the Palestinian academic Edward Said and the executed Nigerian environmentalist, Ken Saro Wiwa. The role of these international thinkers was linked to the identification of an internal republican intellectualism that had included “among their ranks a high proportion of writers, poets, musicians and artists, many of whom endured imprisonment and used those years to further their cultural activities” (Mac Giolla Ghunna, 1997, p. 3-4). The self-presentation of an articulate movement was one of political repositioning and the coming of age of contemporary republicanism.

Republican ideological faith was to remain centred upon the achievement of a united Ireland. But the use of new vocabularies of inclusion, a less hostile and atavistic attitude towards the British state (who were, identified as persuaders for a united Ireland)⁶ and the notion that there were a range of mediums through which to achieve political power meant that the goal of unification was being articulated via new tactics. So much so that ten years after the Belfast Agreement Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin, was able to claim at the special Ard Fheis on Policing (28th January, 2007), that the role played by those who purchased *An Phoblacht* (a republican weekly newspaper) had been as important as those who had “picked up the gun”. Adams (2007, p. 1) during the same speech stated that:

Republicanism should never be about elitism or dogma or militarism. Republicanism always has to be about citizenship and people's rights and equality. We are about making republicanism relevant to people in their daily lives.

Working with the “Other”

The shared journey upon which so many republican prisoners and Sinn Féin representatives could map their lives also meant that there was no compunction to analyse the reality that they conducting their various affairs as partly dictated by the British state and global forces beyond their control. In essence the republican movement and the IRA in particular maintained a disciplined leadership that could rationalise a re-positioning of activism. Discipline and the capacity of former prisoners to locate a community that recognised their “sacrifices” helped to pave the way for a smooth transition of republican practice. This transition was furthered by many republican former prisoners undertaking community-based employment within which the struggle, through civic as distinct from militaristic strategies, could be undertaken and in so doing maintain community status and republican congruity.

There is an important difference in that republican involvement in community work post-1998 not only strengthened republican activism, but also created a more seamless transition into civic society and thus removed a political vacuum that may have caused indifference to peace building initiatives. The more general trend amongst loyalists to return to more normal sites of employment did much to undermine the capacity of loyalism to cope with the tensions caused by the emergence of a post-ceasefire environment. In essence republicans emerged into a Northern Ireland within which their electoral fortunes and the influence over republican territory was ever-present and within which a narrative of sacrifice placed them within their communities with both status and influence. Republican former prisoners were now tied into a wider international arena within which their political influence was welcomed and partly-accommodated.

Comparing Republican and Loyalist Former Prisoners

There are a series of difference and also some similarities with regard to understanding how the micro-history of incarceration affected republicans and loyalists. Both sets of prisoners were influenced by internal debates although the numbers involved were greater amongst republicans. Each set of prisoners largely conformed to their respective leaderships inside and outside of jail. Many more republicans understood prison as a site of resistance against British and Irish state hegemony, whereas for pro-state volunteers such activism was undermined by the dimension of being essentially pro-British. One of the more significant differences was that many republican prisoners understood that “struggle” would continue in a post-imprisonment environment and that the vocabulary and skills needed to perpetuate republicanism required knowledge of how to pursue a non-violent conflict. In contrast, most loyalists thought of the conflict as having ended once they had been released or after the IRA had called a ceasefire, and as a result of this their struggle was to be represented by unionist political parties. For those who were to uptake a role in conflict transformation the emergence from prison had been framed by the experience of debate and dialogue within prison and the capacity to locate that knowledge within a landscape of post-conflict change.

In general, republicans retain an overtly hostile attitude towards loyalists which was juxtaposed by cordial personal relationships on a host of inter-community engagements. IRA respondents, as they did in the 1970s, still dismissed loyalism as sectarian, non-progressive, non-socialist, non-autonomous and criminal. As noted by a respondent “loyalism is misguided,

poorly led, self-seeking".⁷ Loyalists as the following quote observes remain understood as dupes of British state practice:

The development in loyalism now has more to do with British strategy rather than internal development. (Male respondent 4, West Belfast)

Furthermore, loyalism is seen as community centric and ultimately reactionary:

Because they are interested in their community, they are interested in basic rights for their people. Their problem is that they don't really want it for other people and they resent the others in society having it. So they'll be reactionary whether it be to immigrants, blacks ... nationalists, republicans. (Male respondent 5, West Belfast)

The Reasoning behind Community Activity

Despite this, most former IRA prisoners have determined a shared role to play in undermining the return of violence which is tied to their sense of status and legitimacy, and a collective belief that the peace process is insufficient regarding the capacity to quell sectarian violence, delivers social justice and challenging their shared experience of criminalisation. For IRA respondents, intra-community activity is understood as a tactic structured around persuading those contacted of the rationale of a united Ireland whereas Loyalists and Irish National Liberation Army respondents view such engagement as developing shared working class experiences and values.

Former prisoners have also been involved in creating alternative community narratives which link themselves into a post-ceasefire process. This has also involved challenging the mythic status of violence and in so doing diverting youth attention away from paramilitaries and sectarian violence. From this perspective, former IRA prisoners involved in community work and restorative justice programmes seek to reduce tensions and/or promote reconciliation. There is a sense of the need to create an intersection between agency and structure via the shift from a military to negotiator role.

Quasi-states also exist with regard to the political influence over territory. The broad swathes of Northern Ireland that return Sinn Féin representatives in places such as West Belfast and East Tyrone are effectively micro-states that are centred upon renditions of group loyalty and distinctive cultural interpretations of republicanism (Rolston, 1989; Ryan, 1995). Within such places the plethora of festivals and drama events held,

numerous wall murals, a growing community capital, various Irish language sites, republican advice centres and former prisoner group offices testifies to an overall strategy that has engendered a highly politicised form of spatial expansion and cultural cohesion during the conflict. The capacity to create and maintain republican solidarity both in terms of influencing place and gaining significant political and cultural power lies in this particular movement's highly centralised leadership structures.

Such leadership structures, that have fashioned and framed republican transition, were heavily influenced by resistance strategies developed within the prison environment. The imprisonment of republicans between the early 1970s and 1998 and the impact of that imprisonment was historically unique in that militant republicanism could not be defeated. This contrasts to the internment of IRA prisoners during the Second World War and post-civil war periods when the forerunner of the present republican movement emerged into near political vacuums.

Conclusion

From the evidence presented above there has been no abandoning of a historical past and in many ways the beliefs regarding the "other" are sustained despite the development of inter-group activity. Legitimacy and interpretations of the past have not shifted in order to sustain the peace process, but instead conflict transformation has been assembled around locating shared concerns and promoting the efficacy of ideologies of community activism as opposed to violence. Political resistance is now articulated around non-violent means and the capacity to shift out of violence is based upon discourses of republican loyalty.

Activism, whether it is militaristic or political/community-based, is not interpreted within a temporal frame of past and present, but is understood as being influenced by a seamless political philosophy that mobilises strategies best suited to the advancement of republican discourse. Disengagement from armed struggle has, it is argued, neither altered values nor rejected or abandoned key principles, but instead the contemporary variant of republicanism is part of a discursive journey that has partly developed out of republican historicisation of armed conflict and imprisonment. Moreover, armed conflict, it is postulated, delivered the peace process, in that, as far as IRA former prisoners are concerned, it undermined British authority, provided negotiating strength and the capacity to deliver republican discourse via mediums such as community activism and political mobilisation.

Having been imprisoned provides legitimacy in itself, and this is now invoked to provide community-led strategies of transformation. Transformation is not about ideological decline or a separation from past motivations but instead the promotion of republican ideas within an environment they believe was altered by successful military interventions. Respondents view violence as the logical response to the denial of their respective rights, a situation that places them at odds within unionism in particular. Ironically, the use of violence has removed the need for violence and the Belfast Agreement, which they view in selective ways according to what “their side” had achieved, has created recourse to a *modus operandi* that seeks the same ideological commitments and goals through non-violent activity. Former IRA prisoners continually expressed the idea that violence was an option among other developing tactics and techniques and they invariably understand violence as being conditioned by the fluidity of circumstances.

The central logic through which republicanism is now practiced is centred upon a redefinition of the Easter Rising inspired notion that republicans were the embodiment of the Irish state. This long-established rendition was evidently insular, as indicated in the past by political abstentionism from Dáil Éireann and Stormont (the respective political chambers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) and via the simplistic notion that the removal of the “British” through armed resistance was achievable. Republicanism is now far removed from the irredentism of an ideology framed in an Irish society that was yet to be influenced by the welfare state, partition, the rise of conspicuous consumption, the emergence of the Celtic Tiger and the realities of thirty odd years of conflict in Ireland. By holding ministerial posts in the Northern Ireland Assembly and through political advances in the Republic of Ireland and the capacity to be part of a future Irish government Sinn Féin can now present themselves as state partners.

However, this does not mean that working with loyalists and unionists is infused with eagerness but instead republicans co-operate as part of the process of what they identify as building a united Ireland. Recognition of harm caused to undeserving victims is located but such an interpretation is either paralleled/secondary to the harm endured to ones own community. There is some sense of a need to stretch beyond exclusivist constructions of harm and to locate voices beyond political legitimacy. However, such a perspective is linked to a sense that violence was justifiable. In sum, the use of violence was not rejected via moral concerns but instead conditioned by a sense that it had bolstered negotiating positions, as evidenced by the huge

Canary Wharf and Manchester bombings, during the temporary fracture of the IRA ceasefire in 1996). The discursive frame which has emerged among former IRA prisoners suggests that their legitimacy had been proven as opposed to defeated.

Endnotes

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¹ We here discuss the version of republicanism attached to the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin.

² 87 former IRA prisoners were interviewed or took part in focus groups.

³ There are obviously dissenting voices located around the Continuity and Real IRAs and their political associates. Also there may be dissenting voices that have not been public or accounted for, but in general it would appear that the majority of former prisoners have kept connections with former prisoner groups.

⁴ This quote is not from the project funded by Leverhulme but comes from work undertaken by the lead author.

⁵ This mid-1980s strategy was based upon British State funding within deprived communities in Northern Ireland. The aim being to fund non-republican/non-loyalist community groups so as to make them more relevant than those operating along the axis of politics and military action.

⁶ Adams made this point in Sinn Féin's 1992 policy document, *Towards a Lasting Peace*. It was rejected by Tony Blair who dropped Labour's unity by consent policy upon becoming party leader and dismissed the prospect of a united Ireland 'in our lifetimes' upon becoming Prime Minister (see Tonge, 2002).

⁷ Adams in *Towards a Lasting Peace* (1995 p. 95) argued that "you cannot be a socialist and a loyalist".

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