'"We're getting the victory we fought for" we were told': retrospective subjectivities in oral histories of Irish republicanism

by Jack Hepworth

Abstract: This article draws upon twenty-two life-history interviews with Irish republican ex-combatants. Present-day republican fragmentation shapes retrospective subjective analysis. Oral histories today represent and reinforce imaginary binaries in the republican past, tapping into the politics of place and class as part of a broader discourse around the distribution of power within republicanism. Following linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of heteroglossia, these oral histories navigated republican leaders' monological representations of republicanism and polyphonic micro-dynamics through the heterogeneous movement. Interrogating how interviews represented what Alessandro Portelli termed 'the past in the present', this article examines representations of milieux and power dynamics in oral histories which variously collapse and complicate the internal dynamics of Irish republicanism.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; conflict; memory; retrospective subjectivities; heteroglossia

Introduction

When loyalist counter-demonstrators and members of the Ulster Special Constabulary violently suppressed civil rights protests in 1969, riots ensued and Home Secretary James Callaghan deployed the British Army in Northern Ireland. Amid the chaos, Irish republican militants reorganised – constituted chiefly in the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) – and, aspiring to a united Ireland, fought the British presence. Through the following three

decades, thousands of republicans mobilised through guerrilla warfare and a broader political campaign. In the subsequent conflict, more than 3,500 people were killed, the majority of whom were civilians.

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 between the British and Irish governments, and most political parties in Northern Ireland, was an epochal moment in the so-called peace process. The Agreement stipulated that Northern Ireland's constitutional status could change only with the consent of the majority. The major republican party, Sinn Féin, signed the Agreement, and Sinn Féin's military wing, the IRA, announced an end to its armed campaign in July 2005.

However, Irish republicanism is a heterogeneous political tradition. Scholars such as Rogelio Alonso, Robert W White, Lorenzo Bosi, Graham Spencer, John F Morrison and Theresa O'Keeffe have investigated post-1969 Irish republicanism using oral histories.[1] Examining mobilisation in the IRA until 1972, Lorenzo Bosi asked set questions in structured interviews with twenty-five ex-combatants. This method furnished Bosi with data conducive to a multi-faceted analysis of trajectories in this period. Including, inter alia, activists' age, occupation, residence and networks at mobilisation, Bosi's dataset compared pathways to and through mobilisation.[2] Rogelio Alonso's *The IRA and Armed Struggle* (2007) also focused primarily on activists' initial mobilisation and motivation. Alonso perceived homogenising tendencies in republican collective memory, since his interviewees justified the IRA campaign similarly.[3]

While Alonso demonstrated broad unity among republican narratives of mobilisation in 1969, the present article stems from a doctoral research project which analysed historical divisions

within Irish republicanism after mobilisation. The project conducted oral history interviews alongside archival research across more than thirty series of activist publications and fifteen local newspapers. This article reflects on how such research – navigating ethical, legal and methodological challenges – illustrates the salience of contemporary republican politics in shaping retrospective subjective analysis among ex-combatants.

Work by Robert W White, Laurence McKeown, Niall Gilmartin, Dieter Reinisch, Marisa McGlinchey and ex-prisoners' group Fáilte Cluain Eois has demonstrated republicanism's mosaic quality. White's pioneering work illuminated the dynamism of complex republican trajectories. In 1984 and 1985, White interviewed sixty-three republicans, of whom he re-interviewed thirty-one in 1995. In a third series of interviews in 2007, White revisited seventeen of the original interviewees. His findings destabilised simplistic binaries in analysis of the republican movement, and explored how individuals navigated organisational schisms.[4]

Alongside White's longitudinal analysis, recent work has diversified to explore experience at the margins of republicanism. Laurence McKeown's *Out of Time* (2001) elucidated clannish tendencies among republican prisoners and highlighted differentiated interactions with the movement's hierarchy and education programmes.[5] In 2015, ex-prisoners from Counties Cavan, Fermanagh and Monaghan published an anthology of excerpts from life-history interviews with ex-combatants and their families.[6] Drawing upon twenty-five oral history interviews, Niall Gilmartin argued that grassroots Provisional women's experiences of mobilisation and radical activism heightened feminist consciousness, outflanking the movement's official position on women's rights.[7] Dieter Reinisch's exemplary work on republican prison communities has included an extensive range of interviews with members

of fringe organisations Republican Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan.[8] Marisa McGlinchey's recent book *Unfinished Business* (2019) has blazed a trail, engaging more than ninety interviews with 'dissident' republicans opposed to the peace process.[9]

Whereas oral history scholarship has explored memories of the key moments of fracture in republicanism, this article analyses specifically how oral histories represent intra-movement dynamics. Furthermore, cognisant that oral testimonies frequently represent straightforward binaries in distribution of power within the republican movement, this article posits a multi-faceted explanation of retrospective republican subjectivities along two primary axes: perceptions of intra-republican power dynamics and the cultural significance of place and class. Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of heteroglossia serves as a useful optic for contrasting centrifugal and centripetal tendencies in republican memory: Bakhtin perceived lines of discourse simultaneously navigating a 'unitary language' and 'social and historical heteroglossia', in a struggle between a movement's narratives and projections of unity, and manifold tendencies and views through the organisation's strata.[10] These collisions reflect intra-movement tensions and provide a conceptual framework for understanding dynamic processes within republican memory.

Methodology

Ethical guidelines and the imperative of informed consent shaped the project. The university and the project's funding body expressed initial concerns, unsurprisingly designating the research 'high risk' given the Boston College debacle of 2011. Boston College's 'Belfast project' had interviewed former republican and loyalist prisoners, promising participants safe closure of interviews until they either consented to its release, or died. These promises were

not sound: in 2013, seeking access to the recordings, the Police Service of Northern Ireland served Boston College a subpoena.[11] Ensuing legal issues remain unresolved.

For this project, conversations before the interview foreshadowed the project information sheet's detail of the nature of the project. Interviews would explore participants' perceptions of 'shifts and discussions within republicanism throughout the conflict':

> You will be asked questions about how you arrived at your republican position and how your political ideas changed throughout the period. The interviews are not concerned with specific activism or incidents; they are concerned with your perception of the past.

This project followed best practice in light of General Data Protection Regulation and in line with Oral History Society advice, briefing interviewees against referring to living former comrades during recorded interviews.[12] This was legally sensible, although potentially damaging to rapport at the outset: for some interviewees, orienting their past and present political positions in relation to intra-republican debate and dissension needed to be framed in terms of other prominent republican activists. The project information sheet advised interviewees that although participating incurred 'no immediate risk', there was a 'minor risk that you may feel an emotional response to the process of reminiscing. In such an event, you may stop the interview at any time'.

Participants were shown the recording agreement before the interview, but only later invited to assign copyright to the project. These protocols established informed consent and reassured participants. Happily, and contrary to James Allison King's fears in 2014, several

participants contrasted the Boston College saga with this project's approach.[13] Interview recordings and metadata were deposited securely with Newcastle University Oral History Unit, and interviewees could determine an anonymous designation in any published work stemming from the research.

Questions were not designed for historical reconstruction or fact-checking. As Alessandro Portelli has argued, oral testimonies are 'not simply repositories of facts' but 'constructed stories' narrating radical identity, connecting memory, story and projection.[14] This project drew upon earlier oral histories of activism exploring collective biography and rendering itineraries among networks. In her work on Italian radicals, Luisa Passerini noted memory's 'insistence on creating a history of itself, which is much less and perhaps somewhat more than a social history'.[15] This project's findings suggest the analytical value of this approach. The oral histories recorded for this project were richest when read as multi-layered insights into constructed, curated representations of the self.

For much of the past twenty years, interviewees in republican historiography have usually comprised a select group, characterised chiefly by their endorsement of Sinn Féin's current commitment to constitutional politics. Kevin Bean and Mark Hayes's edited collection *Republican Voices* (2001) was a rare exception: all six interviewees had left, and become critics of, the Provisional movement. However, notable discussions of religion's interaction with republicanism aside, *Republican Voices* focused chiefly on mobilisation, rather than political processes and the movement's internal dynamics *after* mobilisation.[16]

Challenges recruiting interviewees inevitably fashioned the sample, illuminating republican fragmentation today. Sinn Féin offices across the north are generally receptive to interview

requests, and their representatives are evidently well practised. Ex-prisoners' organisations that endorse Sinn Féin's constitutional strategy today are especially accommodating towards interview requests. For example, the umbrella group Coiste na n-Iarchimí readily suggests interviewees to researchers who approach by telephone or email. Ex-combatants unaligned with Sinn Féin's present position are harder to access, relying on gatekeepers' personal networks and the few republican organisations 'independent' of party politics today. Members of the Ex-Prisoners Outreach Programme (Ex-POP) in Derry City were extremely helpful, suggesting friends who might wish to participate.

The project traversed the delicate security situation in Northern Ireland amid reported 'dissident' republican reorganisation. Between January 2014 and December 2018, 833 people were arrested in Northern Ireland under the Terrorism Act (2000). In the year ending in March 2017, MI5 directed twenty-two per cent of its operational and investigative resources into combating 'Northern Ireland-related terrorism'.[17] The imperative of designing ethical, legally sound research projects, with the support of academic institutions, has never been more vital. Oral historians must prioritise clarity and specificity about the purpose of the research and the anticipated parameters of the interview in pre-interview communications and the information sheet.

This calls attention to the practical implications of Michael Frisch's 'shared authority' in oral histories of radical movements. Informing participants before an interview what they should not mention, and warning that any such allusions would compel the researcher to notify the authorities, sits uneasily with establishing rapport. Expressing legal caveats as clearly as possible, and allowing time for conversation 'off record' with participants, can help balance legally sound research with suitable understanding between interviewee and interviewer.

Gatekeepers have crucial roles in advancing understanding of the dynamics of radical movements. Researchers surrender a degree of power when they entrust recruitment to gatekeepers, and there are several pitfalls. First, it must be borne in mind that gatekeepers often have their own agenda, and will suggest interviewees who they perceive to be like-minded. Second, in ceding control over the process, it is to be expected that sometimes interviews will fall through, understandings will be lost in the chain of communication, and time and energy be wasted. This is a price worth paying. Without gatekeepers, researchers are likely to hear only the most publicly accessible strand of complex movements.

Of the twenty-two interviewees, sixteen had been members of the Provisional republican movement (Sinn Féin and/or the IRA). Of these sixteen, seven were no longer active members of Sinn Féin. These seven ranged from strident critics of their former comrades, to others who had simply ceased activism. Another six interviewees were former members of fringe republican groups, namely the Official Republican Movement, Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

Among the participants, ten had previously given interviews for comparable projects. Accordingly, some interviewees demonstrated greater familiarity with the protocol, and often presented a more ‘organised’, or even ‘performed’, narrative than others. These patterns recalled commonplace differences among interviewees. Analysing interviews with older homeless men, Graham Smith and Paula Nicolson noted varying degrees of sociability, ‘sense of self/identity’ and ‘biographical reflexivity’.[18]

The sample comprised eighteen men and four women. There are several reasons for this imbalance. Men lead the majority of ex-prisoners' groups. Gatekeepers in Belfast suggested contacting ex-prisoners' group Tar Anall, citing women among its senior members and its reputation for support work among female ex-combatants. However, several approaches to Tar Anall yielded no response. A group of female ex-prisoners, Voices, was active until the early 2010s, producing *In the Footsteps of Anne: Stories of Republican Women Ex-Prisoners*. However, Voices now appears moribund. Additionally, six female Sinn Féin elected representatives either declined or did not respond to interview requests.

Cultural significance of place and class

Thematic reading of the interviews reinforced how interviewees framed their subjectivities and their perceived relationships with the wider movement in terms of place, class and intra-movement networks, which emerged as vital explanatory forces for republicanism's dynamic heterogeneity. Interviewees framed multi-layered republican identities, which spoke to the movement's variegation. Some identified as international anti-imperialists, or leftist revolutionaries; others emphasised the particular national context as Irish republicans. These affinities sometimes overlapped with distinctly local inflections, reflecting a specific configuration of class and place, such as South Derry Erps (IRSP-INLA members) or Ballymurphy Provos. How republicans spatialised their struggle reflected the broader entanglement of their politics, strategy and tactics.

Mobilisation was often connected to a particular place, usually connoting the locality's class relations and republican history. A former Official republican internee recalled his area of west Belfast in August 1969:

> The defence committees were just made up of each street, even if you weren't on the frontline. So every street had a defence committee elected. So that was young *and* old, it was a mentality. People wonder why a community rises, but the whole community had been kept down.[19]

[figure 1 near here: Clonard Martyrs republican memorial gardens, Bombay Street, Belfast]

As a teenager in north Belfast in 1971, Patrick Magee thought the British Army 'seemed to have declared war':

> The area I was living in then was called Carrick Hill, it was called Unity Flats in those days. It was saturation point. There was an Army sangar and there was only three or four hundred residences in the whole of that estate. There was an Army sangar on top of the library, there was always two foot patrols, there were two Army barracks and a police barracks within half a mile, so there was a heavy presence.[20]

Magee's testimony demonstrated the place consciousness attached to these housing estates, with their subsequent history of republican militancy. As social movement theorist Mary Bernstein noted, when activist identity is connected to place, it assumes empowering potential for that constituency and frames future activism.[21]

Oral histories often accentuated the mobilising agency of a particular place's republican tradition. Conor Murphy evoked the south Armagh village of Camlough in terms of its republican history and networks of collective memory:

> Camlough would have been considered a republican area. In south Armagh, even before the current Troubles, there would have been a link back to the War of Independence and the fourth northern division of the IRA. The place had a sense of its own place in Irish history, in the War of Independence, had a sense of being left behind by the Free State … there was more of a communal response. […] I knew [IRA hunger striker] Raymond McCreesh, he was from the same village as me, he lived just, you know, one hundred yards away from where I live. I was only about twelve or thirteen when he went to jail but I knew him from around the village, knew who was involved with republicanism, and so yeah it had a bad impact on us. It politicised a whole generation around us.[22]

Connected to place consciousness, class politics emerge as a key factor in republican heterogeneity. The language of place was bound with subjective experience of class. Gerry Foster narrated his pathway to the INLA with reference to his credentials as a young person embedded and known in his particular working-class, republican area of west Belfast:

> In 1982 I joined the INLA as opposed to the IRA for no great political ideology if you know what I mean, but because at that time the INLA in Andersonstown, where I lived, were a lot more active. You seen them on the streets every day, armed, getting stuck into the British army and the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary]. […] Even as a child I knew who all the IRA were in the local community, as every kid did. Even when they wore a mask, you knew who they were. […] Because it was a very settled community, everybody did know everybody. It wouldn't have mattered where I was

> in the upper Andersonstown area or Lenadoon, if people saw me they'd have knew my face, would have recognised you as a local kid.[23]

Patrick Magee intertwined the experience of poverty and British occupation in his description of the Belfast to which he returned aged twenty years old in 1971. Magee connected economic subjugation with political autodidacticism and militant republican resurgence. The nascent IRA was

> completely working class. You could nearly say that the organisation was confined to the poorest districts in the town. I mean, there were some fringe areas with guys with a bit better education and their houses were a bit better and that, but those areas were few and far between in all honesty, maybe the Antrim Road and Andersonstown to a certain extent. Most of them were those small tenements, like the Lower Falls, Markets, very poor areas. What actually really struck me, when I came back here, was how smart most of the people were. I think it's because there was so little scope for upward mobility. All that intelligence was bottled up in the districts, so therefore there was leadership in most districts where it was needed. We didn't need somebody else to supply leadership for us. One thing I can definitely say, and it counters this view that people have, that the IRA was some parasitical organisation; it was the people of the district who kept the organisation going. […] Very, very smart kids, and you were always aware of this network of support around you: the houses you could use, the people could give you advice or information, people who would look after your weapons.[24]

These place identifications connoted class relations and ethnonational distinction. Interviewees represented places as zones of communal solidarity, based on shared experience of second-class citizenship and onslaught from state actors. Séanna Walsh described the Belfast republican enclave Short Strand as a densely populated site of heavy industry and hardship, with a powerful local and national identity:

> We had a sense of ourselves, a sense of a people apart in terms of the state and our resistance to the northern state. But a very strong sense of community.

Walsh presented shared experiences of class informing a similarly unified response to British occupation:

> There was an emergency on our streets. We were young kids on the street. War came to my town, war came to my streets. The British army occupied my streets, so as far as I was concerned I had a responsibility to resist that occupation.[25]

[Figure 2: Map of Belfast – near here]

Similarly, Raymond McCartney introduced himself through spatial identification with his home city. He narrated Derry's particular political configurations, which alienated working-class Catholics from its institutions:

> I was born in 1954, and grew up in Derry. I suppose my earliest memory is that Derry was a place where you always got a sense, because the corporation was run by the unionist party and yet Derry was an overwhelmingly nationalist city, there was always

> a sense that you lived in a place that wasn't quite normal. There was always that sort of sense that something was wrong. […] You picked up on the sense of injustice around the northern state.[26]

Discussions of class politics took more explicit forms in prison, with the opportunity for extensive education and debate about strategy and politics. Some networks studied socialism extensively, while others regarded it as a distraction from republicanism's central national objective. A former IRA education officer in Long Kesh, Tommy McKearney, described how networks formed around perspectives on pedagogy and politics in the movement:

> Whether it was politically wise of me or not, what I said we should take was a very simple, hard-line Marxist-Leninist position, which did not receive approval. My rationale was, to me, the idea of the professional revolutionary, the transformation of society, where the working class are in charge of the means of production, distribution, you know the jargon, that's what we're talking about if we're going to make an appeal south of the border. […] I said that Marxism-Leninism was a clear position they could understand, and it was a position, well, I was there anyway! But as I say, my run, or my period, as the education officer for the prison came to an end, when word was 'no, that's a bridge too far'. So that happened probably reasonably early '82, '83, I can't remember, but I still had a circle, because there was discussions within the prison.[27]

Across friendship, kinship, spatial connections and organisational identities, intra-republican networks were salient features of activist experience. Peadar Lagan recalled joining the INLA in south Derry in the early 1990s:

> I knew a few Provisionals in our area and some of them would have been left-leaning, but not as much as the INLA, but you ran with whoever you were friendly with. That's basically what it was down to, a lot of it. I was fairly clued up, but it was because I was friendly with this guy, swung me to the INLA at that particular time.[28]

The republican movement constituted a mosaic of place identifications and micro-dynamics of struggle. Place informed power dynamics in republican prison communities. In Long Kesh between 1985 and 1998, Don Browne noticed

> a power difference, maybe, in the sense that Belfast [prisoners] always ran the jail, and one of the reasons for that was that the communication could be sent out in the morning, sent to Belfast, the IRA could communicate back in the afternoon, the quickest post in the world! But then people started complaining, why are you not letting country men, Derry men, south Derry men do this? […] So Derry, for example, and south Derry and Tyrone were all very clannish, because we were considered countrymen. […] Belfast being the big city it was, it didn't need to worry about anybody outside of it, a different attitude.[29]

There was also a generational dimension to these networks. Provisionals born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, who mobilised from the mid-1970s, perceived a generational difference between the Provisionals' founding leadership and the subsequent leadership around Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness from the early 1980s. Born in Derry in 1975, Eamonn MacDermott remembered Billy McKee and his founding PIRA colleagues as 'a Catholic movement'. By contrast, MacDermott remembered his milieu as emphatically 'not a

Catholic movement. We didn't see ourselves as fighting for "Catholic Ireland"'.[30] For Conor Murphy, born in south Armagh in 1963, 'the older brigade, the mature republicans … had more of a Catholic outlook'. A younger cadre 'superseded' the original leadership. The new leaders and their supporters incorporated practising Catholics, 'but Catholic thinking didn't dominate'.[31] These perceptions of particular religious consciousness in a different generation of republicanism reflect Karl Mannheim's conception of 'political generations' who experienced and interpreted sociohistorical processes similarly.[32]

Representations of intra-republican power dynamics

Retrospective subjectivities are also organised around how the individual and their milieu perceives themselves in relation to historical and contemporary power dynamics within republicanism. Removed from the particular qualities of each individual testimony, interviewees crystallised two broad positions, intimately connected to the politics of Northern Ireland today: republicans who endorse Sinn Féin's constitutional strategy for Irish unity today and republicans who had either left the dominant Provisional republican movement or never been in it. These two groups of interviewees were wide ranging, but they represented republican internal dynamics and history distinctly.

Interviewees who repudiated Sinn Féin's constitutionalism juxtaposed past militancy with seeming compromise today. For these republicans, recalling the past evoked anguish. In these narratives, the Provisionals' strategic changes since the 1990s betrayed the sacrifices of the past. Alessandro Portelli's concept of 'uchronic dreams' suffused the rhetoric of 'what was it all for?' and 'was the struggle worth it?' These idealised futures, reflecting on a 'motif of history that could have gone differently', were commonplace in militants' life stories.[33]

How republicans remember strategic reorientation in the 1980s and 1990s reflects these distinctions in collective memory. So-called 'dissident' republicans who accuse Sinn Féin of 'selling out' trace to the early 1980s numerous processes they repudiate today. A former IRA prisoner, Nuala Perry worked in Sinn Féin's fledgling Housing Department when she was released in 1982. Sinn Féin launched this department at an early stage of its political and electoral development, after seven IRA prisoners cumulatively won 64,985 votes in elections across Ireland in 1981: the party was broadening its base beyond the IRA's armed struggle. Today, Perry is a founding member of socialist-republican party Saoradh and a prominent critic of Sinn Féin. She reflects on the Housing Department as 'an election stunt to get the people on our side' before the general election of 1983, when party president Gerry Adams won West Belfast:

> People were coming in [to Sinn Féin's Housing Department] with their problems – I mean, I was still a member of the IRA – but people were coming in and talking to you about problems with their housing. We were saying, 'yes, we'll do this, we'll do that'. But to me it was being filed under, 'let's pretend', and 'we don't want anything to do with that'. And I found that a very difficult thing to do.[34]

Perry finally broke with the Provisionals in the late 1990s, and now reflects critically, accentuating misgivings she had about strategic changes in the 1980s.

Another veteran who left the movement in the 1990s, Francie McGuigan, similarly remembers the Provisionals' 'new departures' as the product of a manipulative, excessively powerful leadership. In November 1986, Sinn Féin's annual conference (*ard fheis*) debated

abandoning the time-honoured republican tradition of abstentionism from Dublin's Leinster House, hitherto regarded as a 'partition parliament' and a breach with the historical legitimacy of the 'true' all-Ireland Dáil of 1919. Ultimately, by a two-thirds majority, party delegates at the *ard fheis* of 1986 voted to drop abstentionism. Remembering the *ard fheis* of 1986, McGuigan perceived an authoritarian tendency in the Provisional leadership: 'Most of the people in Belfast, and I assume in other parts, were ordered which way to vote'.[35]

'Dissidents' treat temporality in particular ways, perceiving the roots of Sinn Féin's constitutionalism several decades ago. These narratives locate in the movement's 1980s leadership around Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness both inordinate power and influence, and a premeditated determination to break fundamental republican principles. With hindsight, republicans outside Sinn Féin today represent themselves as having been oblivious to perceived Machiavellian schemes at the time. Perry now reflects on the *ard fheis* debate of November 1986 with heightened interest:

> You see, most of us, ordinary [IRA] volunteers on the streets, we couldn't have told you, we didn't care less about what was going on at the *ard fheis* in '86. When I look back on it, it was profound. […] I felt then that the ones who walked [Republican Sinn Féin] were wrong. I thought, 'they're splitting the republican movement, we should be trying to revamp and regain momentum and we have split'. Now I know the people who split, split for all the right reasons! We were too naïve to see that what was being played out at that point was basically a game of very bad brinkmanship. The people who walked had their eye on the ball. They knew where it was all going. It was a strange, strange time.[36]

Francie McGuigan remembers being told that the cessation of 1994 was ‘an opportunity for peace – that was the way you were supposed to look at it. “We’re getting the victory we fought for”, we were told’.[37] In this schema, 1969 features as a totemic moment, before the latest phase of struggle. This bleeds into a pessimistic representation of the Provisional IRA’s campaign as a doomed pursuit, based on a false premise and undermined by leadership deception. Kevin Hannaway suggests Sinn Féin’s ‘capitulation’ has rendered decades of struggle futile:

> I believed in ’69 that freedom was a stepping stone away, as we all did. […] When you put it all together, what was it all for? [The current position] is a betrayal of this one thousand years of occupation.

For these ‘dissidents’, Sinn Féin has abandoned republicanism. Francie McGuigan stressed the essential unity of republicanism, quoting approvingly former IRA Northern Command Adjutant Jimmy Steele’s oration at a republican re-interment in July 1969: ‘As far as I’m concerned, there’s only one ism, and that’s republicanism’. This position chimed with McGuigan’s point that republicanism is an essential phenomenon from which deviation is schismatic and renders itself irrelevant. That McGuigan cited Steele’s speech, which is widely remembered as a threshold moment of fissure anticipating the republican split of late 1969 and early 1970, is also striking. McGuigan remembered Steele ‘lacerated’ the previous republican leadership under Cathal Goulding, which through the 1960s had advanced a leftist agenda and proposed republican agitation in civil rights organisations, and allegedly downgraded the IRA. The legitimising rhetoric of past republican splits maintains its currency.

Whereas Sinn Féin's opponents today denounce the Provisionals' strategic changes, those who remain in the movement narrate a process of piecemeal experimentation since the 1980s enhancing the prospects of Irish unity. Sinn Féin adherents today depict gradual tactical shifts supported by the vast majority in a movement in which power was considerably decentralised. Conor Murphy is a former IRA prisoner who became a Sinn Féin councillor in 1989 and remains a senior party representative today. Murphy delineates the republican struggle since the 1980s in terms of emerging opportunities for mass mobilisation, flourishing from the grassroots and pervading a unified movement:

> Quite a lot of people, apart from the thinkers at the top of the movement, quite a lot of ordinary volunteers when they hadn't been through the prison system where there was a sort of form of internal education, hadn't probably delved [into politics] too much, it was more an instinctive, you know, nationalist reaction rather than a thought-through political, 'we want to change the nature of the state and here's what we want to put in its place'. But as the political [struggle] started to develop, probably around the time of the hunger strikes, and a realisation that you could mobilise people, and you could mobilise that as part, as a parallel, if you like, to the armed struggle, then the thinking started a lot 'if we do mobilise people, if we can create political change, what sort of society do we want?'[38]

Republicans who remain with Sinn Féin emphasise the pragmatic character of strategic shifts, representing them as mere tactical departures. An IRA prisoner between 1977 and 1994 and later a long-serving elected Sinn Féin representative in his native Derry City, Raymond McCartney recalled the party's growing involvement in elections from the early 1980s as a sequence of contingent decisions. In this version of events, the leadership had no grand plan

to abandon armed struggle and espouse exclusively constitutional means. Rather, the movement holistically advocated tactical experimentation:

> With Bobby [Sands]'s success in 1981 and the election of the two [IRA] TDs [Teachta Dála: member of Dáil Éireann], they were seen as successes. […] I remember the first Assembly election in 1982: the story was Sinn Féin. […] People then ask other questions, because what's the success for? Why get elected? You get elected to represent people. The discussion around the politics of it then came.[39]

Narratives supportive of Sinn Féin's constitutional turn emphasise the processual quality of the movement's strategic changes. These testimonies represent the Provisionals as the authors of strategic adaptation on their own terms, gradually corroding the British government. Veteran ex-prisoner and present-day Sinn Féin councillor Séanna Walsh described the period between his return to prison in the late 1980s and the IRA ceasefire of 1994 as imperative alterations, advancing republican objectives in the long run:

> I saw we would not be able to defeat the British militarily. We did not have the personnel, and we did not have the materiel. 1989: the British general in charge of the north said 'we cannot defeat the IRA'. They're saying, 'we cannot win this war'. Then you had Peter Brooke['s Whitbread speech].[40] Job done folks, now let's bring this war to an end.

Sinn Féin veterans' testimonies accentuate their agency in the movement's evolution, and present themselves on the right side of history. For example, Raymond McCartney reflects on the debate on Leinster House abstentionism in 1986: 'My view was that abstentionism

doesn't work in a state where the majority of people recognise that parliament'.[41] Similarly, Séanna Walsh stressed the continuity between the IRA's guerrilla warfare and different forms of political contestation: 'Whatever the Brits put up, we'd knock it down'.[42] These formulations elide internal disagreement and present a unified movement sustained internally by shared purpose and focus.

Contrary to bifurcated representations in many contemporary republican testimonies, not all republicans today straightforwardly conform to a binary of contented Sinn Féin supporters on the one hand, or aggrieved dissenters on the other. In a few instances, individuals who no longer identified primarily as republican activists were more detached from the present. In these testimonies, the emphasis was more pronouncedly upon historical events. Where contemporary politics entered these conversations, there was often a sense of ambivalence about the future of republicanism. For example, Don Browne resigned from the INLA in the late 1980s, and identifies as a 'republican, but not a practising republican'. Today, he recognises republican disunity and the contentiousness of the past. Yet Browne is largely unconcerned about the future of republicanism:

> Eventually now the IRA I believe and Sinn Féin will go into Westminster, the next step. And it's okay – the handshakes are done with the Queen. But a lot of guys are not accepting that. So we have a lot of guys here joining this organisation who say, 'we want to be here just to be part of a republican family, but not to be doing the politics'.

A former Armagh prisoner ceased republican activism on her release from prison in the late 1970s. Today, she notes divisions within republicanism, but remains aloof from such arguments, lest she be seen to be siding with one faction or another in the community.

Loaded discourse and internal heteroglossia pervaded these oral histories. Formulations including 'community', 'defence', 'politics' and 'the movement' carried contested subject values in intra-movement discussion. 'Politics' was loaded with historical connotations of recrudescent compromise and reformism, yet the grassroots connoted broadening support and a mass revolutionary movement. This laden language recalled Bakhtin's conception of utterances embedded in contestation between a centralising leadership and a polyphonic mass movement.

Republicans who have left the Provisional movement reinforce these historical dichotomies between militancy and 'politics'. This bifurcation had underpinned the split in the republican movement in 1969 and 1970, for example. A former Provisional imprisoned in the Republic of Ireland in 2018 for alleged republican activity, Kevin Hannaway,

> never came into the republican movement to be a politician; it was about Irish freedom, which is a God-given right, and no country has the right to be in another man's country. […] As far as I was concerned, it was black and white to me. It wasn't the political thing, it was to get them out and sort the country out after that.[43]

A former IRA prisoner now unaffiliated, Albert Allen asserts that he never joined the political wing of the Provisional movement: 'I never would have liked to become a Sinn Féin councillor, which I had every opportunity to do'.[44]

These pejorative formulations hold 'politics' to undermine the sacrifices of armed struggle, echoing historical connotations of reformism with what Bakhtin termed 'contextual overtones'.[45] 'Politics' signified that which was not militant. The term was a metonym for the compromises which had undermined republicans in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 and the eleven-month IRA ceasefire beginning in February 1975, and which threatened to do so again. Francie McGuigan remembered Cathal Goulding's leadership in the 1960s

> downgrading the military side of the IRA […] trying to turn it into a purely political organisation. […] The result is, the older generation sort of moved away, the likes of [Billy] McKee and a lot of people like that […] anybody who disagreed with this Marxism.

Conor Murphy recalled how prisoners discussed electoral interventions in the early 1980s:

> There always was a sense, when you got down to the theory of revolution – Irish revolutions had failed in the past in that the military people had fought to whatever the negotiations, small number of people done the negotiations, then a political class came in and took over the solution.[46]

These terms' subject values elaborate Ronald J Grele's evocation of loaded conceptions in life histories. Grele argued that interviews unpacking subjective notions of 'community', for example, opened 'a much broader cultural vision and cognitive structure'.[47]

Conclusion

Assessing the epistemological values of these oral histories recalls Erin Jessee's insightful reflections on her fieldwork in Rwanda and Bosnia-Hercegovina. Jessee reviewed her thesis as

> not a strong example of oral history. I spoke on behalf of my informants, rather than with my informants, and wrote about them in such general terms that the humanising and democratising potential of oral history was completely obliterated in the process.[48]

Jessee's candid critique warned against generalising across oral histories, and directed attention instead towards the nuances, contradictions and the particular in interviews. Interviews for this project were similarly suffused with the 'liveness' of ongoing political contestation. As Celia Hughes noted after her interviews with 1968 activists, life histories help us 'to understand something of the political and emotional imprint that years of intensive activity left on individuals'.[49]

Oral histories represented retrospective subjectivities negotiating contemporary republican fragmentation. These accounts illuminated the complex nexus of class, place and power dynamics in republicanism. Place identities were prominent in life histories. Explicitly, these identities connected to a republican tradition in a given area. Implicitly, they connoted particular class relations. Shared experiences of class and place were intrinsically linked, embedding local networks and providing optics through which events are understood and mobilisation reformulated.

Most testimonies recorded for this project reflected on 1969 as a threshold moment in republican struggle, and narrated the conflict's escalation through subsequent years including internment's introduction in August 1971 and Bloody Sunday in January 1972. These patterns across interviews highlighted place and class identifications. Interviewees invoked class to connote conjunctural moments in republican mobilisation, such as the Battle of the Bogside in Derry in July 1969, loyalist attacks on west Belfast's Catholic enclaves in August 1969, or the Falls Road curfew in July 1970.

This project explored how life histories elucidated the internal dynamics of radical groups. As Robert W White demonstrated, life-history interviews chart the interaction between micro-experience and wider networks to, and through, mobilisation.[50] Interviewees described collective memory and cultural significance of place in ways which archival sources do not. Activist publications and press reports generally represented the organisational mouthpieces of ostensibly disciplined, centralised republican groups. Oral histories of contentious politics complicate understandings of radical movements' internal 'heteroglossia', as Mikhail Bakhtin described colliding centripetal and centrifugal forces.

The contextual dynamics of Northern Ireland's politics today profoundly pervade these oral histories. As Michael Frisch argued, oral histories bear the palimpsest of experience becoming memory, and memory being curated in particular ways, connected to the contemporary social context.[51] Interviews highlighted micro-experiences of class, place and networks as explanatory forces for republican heterogeneity. They also crystallised two broad groups: on the one hand, pro-Sinn Féin analyses; on the other, so-called 'dissenting' and 'dissident' republicans who lament the present constitutional settlement. These two trajectories represented republican variation differently.

The project found striking differences in how activists treat the internal dynamics of republicanism. Republicans who support Sinn Féin's exclusively constitutional pathway today marginalise inter-republican dissent, representing republicanism as an enduringly unified tradition which has remained true to its vital historical roots. They narrate decades of gradual tactical experimentation yielding an historic opportunity for Irish unity today.

By contrast, interviewees disillusioned with the outcome of the republican struggle accentuate divisions within a hierarchically stratified republican movement, describing power disparities and stressing the alterity of those who advocated these strategic changes. In their more extreme iterations, these narratives collapse historical time and argue that former Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams and his supporters determined the peace process settlement as early as 1981.

When Sinn Féin members historicise republican struggle, they narrate sequential piecemeal tactical shifts as necessary adaptations towards the telos of Irish unity. Conversely, critics tend to collapse historical time, starkly juxtaposing the perceived revolutionary possibilities of the past – as per Alessandro Portelli's 'uchronic moment' – and the compromise, normalisation and social decay they repudiate in the present.

These oral histories speak to wider scholarship about the dissonance, dilemmas and transformations inherent in how activists historicise their memories and trajectories. Differentiated republican testimonies reflect retrospective subjectivities which map on to Bakhtin's schema of monoglot projections of unity in contestation with the heteroglossia of complex movements. With contemporary positions drawing upon particular representations

of place, class, and power dynamics within the movement past and present, these oral histories complement the recent work of Dieter Reinisch and Marisa McGlinchey. Where Reinisch and McGlinchey explicated oral testimonies narrating ideas of historical legitimacy and retrospectives on moments of fracture within republicanism, this article delineates patterns in republican retrospective subjectivities linked intrinsically to republican fragmentation today with respect to two primary explanatory axes: the politics of place and class, and historical and contemporary imaginaries of power distribution within the republican movement. They also connect to ongoing political contestation today.

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NOTES

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40 During a speech in London in November 1990, Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Brooke declared that the British government had 'no selfish, strategic, or economic interest' in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin received an advanced copy of the speech. For some republicans, the 'Whitbread speech' is remembered as a shift in British policy and, concomitantly, in republican strategy.

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