The Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement: the chimera of change and the spectre of sectarianism

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Chapter thirteen

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement: the chimera of change and the spectre of sectarianism

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Claire Mansour
Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès

Abstract: Following the fiftieth anniversary of the Derry march of 5 October 1968 ––both Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party have been presenting a revised version of the history of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement exaggerating the role played by Republicans to fit in their own Manichean narratives. Former participants to the movement have on the contrary insisted that their cause was a genuinely non-sectarian attempt to bring change to Northern Ireland. They were trying to break away from the Orange and Green protest traditions to create a new, inclusive movement in order to obtain the same rights as other British citizens. Thanks to semi-structured interviews carried out with former members of various Civil Rights groups in October 2019, this chapter will shed light on their efforts to overcome the sectarian divide and bring about change through moderate demands. It will also endeavour to put the movement back into the context of the international uprisings of the 1960s by studying instances of cross-national diffusion of protest tactics and ideas which enabled activists to construct a different image for their movement, by summoning the respectable aura of the non-violent American Civil Rights movement or reinventing the radical slogans from the student protests in the United States and France. In their recollections, most activists depict thrilling times which contrast with the traditional narratives of the period, usually seen in the gloomy shadow of the Troubles. Thus, taking into account the international dimension of the context can be a way to counterbalance the narrow focus of the partisan versions presented by Sinn Fein and the DUP.

Keywords: Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement, People's Democracy, Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), Cross-national diffusion, 1960s, Protest, Sectarianism

THE Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement emerged in the late 1960s, when, frustrated by the failure of conventional methods, activists decided to take their demands to the street. They were calling for the end of a number of discriminatory practices in elections and political representation, in housing and employment, as well as fairer policing. Most participants felt convinced that Northern Irish society needed to change, to become more equal, but their attempts were met by the reluctance to compromise of the opponents to their movement. In that respect, Civil Rights activists were chasing a chimera, hoping that they could transform Northern Irish society, in spite of the stark opposition to any change to the status quo from a section of the Protestant-Unionist community. As the changes they sought to achieve kept on eluding them, their methods grew more radical, their opponents more implacable, sharpening the historical politico-religious divide and raising again the spectre of sectarian violence. The tension between the idealistic aspirations for change of the participants in the movement and the tendency to depict the period of Civil Rights agitation in a negative light because it was directly followed by the eruption of three decades of conflict known euphemistically as the Troubles will be the focus of this chapter.

The role and the motives of Civil Rights activists have given rise to different interpretations from commentators on both sides. The two main parties in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein, are both trying to impose their visions of the movement in order to further their own ends. The recent commemorations of the fiftieth anniversaries of a number of landmarks in the history of the movement in 2018 and 2019 have crystalised the main controversial issues. On the one hand, the DUP maintains that the leading organisation of the movement, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), had been formed and controlled by Republicans and Communists, and was, in short, nothing more than a front for the IRA, in line with what the founder of the party, Ian Paisley, who was possibly the most outspoken opponent to the movement, was already saying at the time. This version implies that the Civil Rights movement had a secret agenda and that its real purpose was to achieve Irish reunification.

On the other hand, Sinn Fein asserts that they had themselves played a crucial role in the Civil Rights movement, that they had been instrumental in the creation of the NICRA and have always been fighting for the rights of the people. Their goal is to legitimise their current position by presenting their fight as a continuous struggle, thwarted at every turn by hard-line Unionists who implacably rejected any concession. In the words of Sinn Fein's National Chairperson, Declan Kearney: "the civil and democratic rights legacy of the Civil Rights movement today remains unfinished business in the North. Fifty years on sections of political

Unionism continue to oppose the development of a rights-based society."[1] Declan Kearney refers to the "North" as do most Sinn Fein spokespeople, meaning "the North of Ireland" as if the island comprised only one single state, and to "unfinished business" insinuating that the demands the Civil Rights movement was agitating for, have still not been achieved, due to the sheer hostility of hard-line Unionists. In fact, by 1973, the activists' original grievances had mostly been addressed by successive Unionist governments, under the pressure of Westminster. The five-point reform programme introduced by Terence O'Neill in November 1968 brought in significant changes but still fell short of the leading 'one man, one vote' demand by leaving the rate-payers' franchise untouched, and there was no guarantee that the issue of policing would be resolved.[2] Universal suffrage in local elections would be granted a few months later, in April 1969 and came into effect for the first time in May 1973.[3] As for the maintenance of law and order, the local police forces would be reformed in October 1969 and the repressive arsenal of the Special Powers Act would be repealed with the imposition of direct rule from London in 1973.[4] Therefore, the "civil and democratic rights" that Kearney alluded to are meant to depict more recent issues like same-sex marriage, abortion and the Irish language as part and parcel of the same movement for equality. The point is to portray the DUP as a reactionary party, resolutely opposed to any degree of change, to present Sinn Féin, by contrast as modern and progressive. To a certain extent, Sinn Féin and the DUP agree on some elements. They both tend to exaggerate the role played by Republicans within the Civil Rights movement – albeit for different reasons. Their interpretation of the movement is also restricted by their rigidly-polarised vision of Northern Irish society, trying to make it fit in their Orange versus Green narratives.

Former participants to the movement tell, on the contrary, a very different story. Thanks to qualitative semi-structured interviews carried out with former members of various Civil Rights groups in Belfast and Derry in October 2019, supplemented by references to existing literature and archival material, this paper will show that the Civil Rights movement was on the contrary a genuine attempt to transcend the politico-religious divide in the hope to effect change and needs to be placed within the wider international context of the late 1960s. It will also be demonstrated that the divisive collective memory of the movement springs from a form

1. Declan Kearney, "Declan Kearney: My factual reference to the role of republicans in civil rights movement was misrepresented", *The Irish News*, 21 February 2018 (https://www.irishnews.com/news/2018/02/21/news/declan-kearney-the-days-of-second-class-citizenship-are-over-in-the-north--1260110, last accessed on 5 September).
2. Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland at the Crossroads: Ulster Unionism in the O'Neill Years*, 1960-9, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 166.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
4. Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, p. 292-3; James Loughlin, *The Ulster Question since 1945*, London, Macmillan, 1998, p. 80.

of hindsight bias, caused by the haunting spectre of sectarian conflict and the dark shadow of the tragic events of the Troubles, cast retrospectively.

A non-sectarian movement for change

The Civil Rights movement split Northern Ireland along a new line: on the one hand, those who wanted change, who wanted Northern Ireland to become a fairer, more equal society where all citizens would have the same rights as on the British mainland, and on the other, those who rejected it, who wanted to preserve Protestant-Unionist domination over the Catholic-Nationalist minority – people belonging to that category tended to be mainly hard-line Unionists and Loyalists, and became the main opponents to the Civil Rights movement.

Environmental factors bridging the politico-religious divide

The 1960s were a period of change in Northern Ireland. The reforms of the post-war Labour government of Clement Attlee had been, for the most part, applied to Northern Ireland and had led to a rise in living standards and mass access to higher education, widening the gap with the Republic of Ireland. The concrete benefits of the British Welfare State contributed to changing the attitude of the Catholic-Nationalist community on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, by convincing them that they were better off than their neighbours South of the border.[5] Cross-community relations were also improving, partly thanks to the impulse given by religious leaders who embraced the rising ecumenical movement, like Pope John XXIII and the Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey. This closer cooperation between churches took the form of joint religious celebrations and activities, thereby encouraging tolerance and increased interactions between communities.[6] The arrival to power of new reformist premiers like Sean Lemass – who became Taoiseach in 1959 and wanted to break away with anti-English nationalism and economic isolation, together with Terrence O'Neill – who became Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in 1963 and tried to dissociate himself from the anti-Catholicism often associated with the Ulster Unionist Party, also fostered a new spirit of reconciliation and collaboration between North and South, as well as

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5.   Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1992, p. 587.
6.   Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1990, p. 18-20.

between Catholics and Protestants. They both met in Belfast in 1965, for the first official encounter since the partition of Ireland in 1921.[7]

The younger generation of activists involved in the Civil Rights movement had grown up amid these changes. More and more young people were going to university, and the proportion of Catholic students increased rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s.[8] Because primary and secondary education was, and still is, mostly segregated by religion, going to university allowed students to meet and interact with people from different backgrounds, particularly people from outside their religious community, which was often a first. For instance, Fergus Woods, who came from the Catholic-Nationalist area of West Belfast and who would become very active within the radical Civil Rights organisation based at Queen's University Belfast – the People's Democracy, exemplifies this trend:

> Essentially you were one tribe or the other. In my life, until I went to university, at 17, I lived in an area which was only Catholic, I went to a Catholic school, I didn't know anyone from another religion. I was enclosed in that community until I went to university and started to meet different types of people, and broadened up a bit.[9]

Before 1968, the only university in Northern Ireland was located in Belfast, leading students from across the province to leave their hometown. Young people were also becoming increasingly mobile, frequently going to England to find a summer job, thereby broadening their horizon and enabling them to mingle with individuals who did not define themselves in Orange or Green terms. Many future participants and leaders of the Civil Rights movement also crossed the Irish Sea to take part in the big demonstrations organised to protest against nuclear weapons and the war in Vietnam, which had both respectively become the focus of mass movements on the British mainland. These movements provided some of the future Civil Rights activists and organisers with a first experience of collective action, but also with a different protest culture, very distinct from the local Orange and Green traditions.

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7. Loughlin, *op. cit.*, p. 27, 31.
8. Although there are no official denominational statistics available for these decades, articles in the student newspaper of Queen's University in Belfast estimate that the proportion of Catholic students had increased by 29% between 1946 and 1956, and amounted to 24% of the undergraduates in 1959. "Increase in Catholic Students at Queen's", *The Gown*, 7 December 1956, p. 4; "Agnostic Poll 1 in 8", *The Gown*, 20 November 1959, p. 1.
9. Interview with Fergus Woods, 29 October 2019, Belfast.

An inclusive movement framed in moral terms

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the protests against the Vietnam War were pacifist movements framing their demands in moral terms that had a universal appeal. Both Eamonn McCann, who had grown up in the Catholic-Nationalist Bogside area of Derry and would become one of the radical leaders of the Civil Rights movement, and Erskine Holmes, who came from a Protestant-Unionist background and would become a member of the executive of the NICRA, took part in the CND Aldermaston to London march in the early 1960s, then became the chairmen of the CND group at Queen's University.[10] As in Britain, where one of the figureheads of the movement was an Anglican priest – Canon of Saint Paul Cathedral John Collins, the Belfast branch of CND was first chaired by a Presbyterian minister – Reverend Alex Watson.[11] Despite its relatively small scale, the movement still managed to gather cross-community support, a salient feature that the Civil Rights movement would later retain.[12] To do so, the activists expressed their grievances in terms of universal values like fairness, justice, equality, and, more importantly, they did not question the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Erskine Holmes described their approach: "what we wanted to do was to eliminate any differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom on citizens' rights, on the franchise, on the allocation of housing, on jobs, and so on and so forth. […] Full British rights, full British citizenship was the basic demand."[13]

The Civil Rights movement innovated by trying to be as inclusive as possible and to break away with traditional Northern Irish politics. It was a very broad church, and likewise, its two main organisations, the NICRA and the People's Democracy, gathered people from all sorts of backgrounds: Republicans, Nationalists, trade-unionists, Labour, Communists, unorthodox Marxists, Unionists, and a lot of apolitical people. Fergus Woods, who was a member of the executive committee of the People's Democracy (PD), recounted why he joined the movement: "Starting the PD, one of the reasons I became enthusiastic about it and I wanted to become involved in it was because I saw it as being non-sectarian, non-political – as in neither Unionist or Nationalist, I wouldn't have got involved in a very extreme party in one sense or another."[14]

10. Interview with Eamonn McCann, 28 October 2019, Derry; interview with Erskine Holmes, 30 October 2019, Belfast.
11. "The Campaign in Northern Ireland", *Peace News*, 22 May 1958, p. 2.
12. Interview with Eamonn McCann, *op. cit.*; interview with Erskine Holmes, *op. cit.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Interview with Fergus Woods, *op. cit.*.

The movement against the Vietnam War, which emerged in the wake of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the mid-1960s, also drew from both sides of the politico-religious divide. Paul Arthur, who was raised in the Bogside, and became one of the main thinkers behind the People's Democracy, recalled his first memory of collective action:

> My first overtly political action was when I was in my final year at high school, when I was involved in a protest march from the Guildhall in Derry to the Waterside, where there was a US naval communication space. We were protesting against Vietnam and protesting against American foreign policy generally.[15]

This description of the route of the march in Derry going through the predominantly Protestant-Unionist Waterside area shows that the demonstrations against the Vietnam War broke away with the Nationalist and Unionist protest traditions and their sectarian division of the territory. In many places in Northern Ireland, and first and foremost in Derry – a city with a Catholic majority controlled by a Protestant minority, marching outside one's community would have been perceived as coat-trailing. The Civil Rights movement would also borrow from these early attempts to march through the city, regardless of politico-religious boundaries. On 5 October 1968, the NICRA organised a march into the city centre of Derry, which had been planned to start from the Waterside area, precisely to prove its non-sectarian character. In fact, this decision resulted in getting the demonstration banned by the authorities, blocked off by the police, before it degenerated into a scuffle which was violently repressed. One RTE television cameraman captured the shocking images which would contribute to get mass support for the Civil Rights movement. Paul Arthur, who experienced the events first hand, explained how frustrated the organisers and the participants were with the restrictions imposed on their legitimate use of public space:

> There was real anger about that. And there was real anger about the fact that, because we had said that we were non-sectarian, we deliberately wanted to walk from the Waterside to try and demonstrate that Derry did not belong to a particular political class or a particular religious outfit.[16]

But despite the efforts of the activists to transcend old political divisions and to rally in the name of universal moral principles, a particular section of the population did not get on board with it: hard-line Unionists and Loyalists, who perceived this movement for change as a real threat to the status quo. Eileen Weir, who had grown up in the Protestant-Unionist

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15. Interview with Paul Arthur, 30 October 2019, Belfast.
16. *Ibid*.

Shankill area of Belfast, joined the paramilitary Ulster Defence Association in her teenage years before becoming a Civil Rights activist though her involvement with the trade unions, explained: "I was thirteen when the Civil Rights movement started […], but you would have heard adults talking about Civil Rights and everything else. And then it was perceived to be a Republican thing. So people from my community didn't get involved."[17]

The strategy used by Civil Rights organisers to avoid precisely this type of suspicious reaction and sectarian association had been to cast their local protest tradition aside, and to turn to foreign sources of inspiration.

Transnational diffusion: change inspired from abroad

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement can be seen as an example of the transnational diffusion of protest. This process, which has been theorised by sociologists Doug McAdam and Dieter Rucht,[18] happens when a group of activists decides to adopt the tactics and ideology of another group of activists in a different country, because they perceive some similarities between their respective situations and identify with them. The adopters will then adapt the elements borrowed from the transmitters to suit their own particular purposes. In the case of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement, activists looked mainly towards the American Civil Rights Movement, the international New Left and the French May of 1968.

The model of the American Civil Rights Movement

The movement of Martin Luther King, famous for its non-violent ethos and its strong focus on equality, was regarded by protesters as an example to be followed. This explains why they borrowed some aspects of its ideology and tactics. They adopted the frames[19] of the American movement, choosing deliberately to express their demands in terms of "Civil Rights", to describe the inferior status of the Catholic minority with the phrase "second-class citizens", or even, in some cases, to refer to them as

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17. Interview with Eileen Weir, 30 October 2019, Belfast.
18. Doug McAdam & Dieter Rucht, "The Cross-National Diffusion of Movement Ideas", *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science*, DXXVIII(1), July 1993 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/1047791), p. 59.
19. Collective action frames are ideological elements which reflect how protesters perceive and interpret their situations, identify problems that they seek to remedy and try to mobilise support. For more detail, see Robert D. Benford & David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 2000 (doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611), p. 615.

"White Negroes".[20] They also sang the anthem of the American movement, "We Shall Overcome" and started organising long marches linking different cities, modelled on the one that was organised in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama to protest against racial discrimination, and had led directly to the passing of Civil Rights legislation. This particular tactic, which consisted in walking across the country over a few days to gather support despite the anticipated hostility of the opponents of the movement, was most notably used by the radical elements who were the driving force behind the People's Democracy in the first days of January 1969, when they led a group of about 80 marchers from Belfast to Derry.[21] Vincent McCormack, who participated in the Belfast to Derry march and was involved in its organisation, explained why they consciously chose to follow in the footsteps of Black Americans:

> I think we chose the model because so much of the Montgomery march was about discrimination, and all discrimination may have its own aspect, but it's called discrimination because it excludes people. It's the same. […] We felt that we could recognise our own situation in the situation of Black people in the United States.[22]

These perceived similarities between the condition of Black people in the Deep South and that of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland enabled the activists to identify with their source of inspiration, drawing an analogy between racial and religious discrimination which would also serve as propaganda for their cause. The main reason why the Northern Irish Civil Rights organisers wanted to draw a parallel with the movement of Martin Luther King was to distinguish themselves from the local Orange and Green protest traditions, in order to emphasise the peaceful and non-sectarian nature of the movement, to involve both Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist communities. "[…] we were thinking of Selma-Montgomery, and we believed, and I genuinely believed, that it was to demonstrate our non-sectarian bona fide", recalled Paul Arthur, one of the main organisers of the Long March – as it would come to be known. "We were actually quite pathetic, calling on Protestant protesters to come and join us because we were marching in their behalf. It was patronising, but it was very very innocent."[23]

This attempt to forge an alliance between students and workers and to unite the working class to transcend the politico-religious divide was the cornerstone of the strategy pursued by the left-wingers within the

20. This particular phrase came from a 1968 speech made by Fionnbarra ÓDochartaigh. Fionnbarra ÓDochartaigh, *Ulster's White Negroes: from Civil Rights to Insurrection*, Edinburgh, AK, 1994, p. xvii.
21. Paul Arthur, *The People's Democracy, 1968-1973*, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1974, p. 39.
22. Interview with Vincent McCormack, 28 October 2019, Derry.
23. Interview with Paul Arthur, *op. cit.*

People's Democracy. Vincent McCormack's testimony concurred: "[…] we were trying to actually get away from the Nationalist model, towards a more Socialist model, and therefore concentrate on issues relating to equality."[24] In that respect, other significant influences were the events of the French May and the intellectual current of the New Left.

People's Democracy as a New Left organisation

The People's Democracy played a crucial role within the Civil Rights movement by giving it a more dynamic and radical impulse, spurring on the more moderate Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. It was formed at Queen's University as a reaction to the violent repression of the march of 5 October in Derry. Paul Arthur, a recent graduate at the time, described the feeling of moral outrage among the students who had witnessed the events first hand, or seen them subsequently on television, and decided to take action:

> Because of what happened in Derry, we came back to Belfast and we organised a march from the university to the city centre – again to demonstrate our non-sectarian bona fide, and we were amazed at the numbers who came along, at the McMordie Hall, and it was then just a young generation of students, who, for the most part, had been apolitical, and who decided that it wasn't right, what they had seen. […] And we set out, then we were stopped and had to come back to Queen's, that's when we established the People's Democracy.[25]

The fact that this march to protest against the events in Derry was in turn rerouted and then forced to come to a halt by the police to avoid a clash with Loyalist counterdemonstrators only reinforced the protesters' sense of injustice. They chose to create an organisation that would reflect their rejection of the Northern Irish political scene, founded on the core egalitarian principles of the New Left. The New Left was an international ideological current that had emerged as an alternative to Soviet-style Communism and Social Democracy in the late 1950s. Its ideas influenced students across the globe, providing the ideological background for the Free Speech Movement of 1964 at the University of Berkeley, California, and the Movement of 22 March at Nanterre University, West of Paris.[26] Both would become key sources of inspiration for the young members of the People's Democracy. From the onset, they established their

24.   Interview with Vincent McCormack, *op. cit.*
25.   Interview with Paul Arthur, *op. cit.*
26.   Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North American, 1956-1976*, Oxford, Oxford U.P, 2007, p. 60-65, 102-104.

organisation on the principle of participatory democracy and endowed it with an open, non-hierarchical structure. It had no individual leader but a committee called the "Faceless Committee" made up of ten members with no previous political affiliations, like Bernadette Devlin – an unknown psychology student who would become one of the rising stars of the movement and would be elected to Westminster the following year. Paul Arthur recalled: "We came up with this name of People's Democracy, this notion of Faceless Committee, and this sort of permanent thinking – which we had taken from Paris – when we would talk all day and all night, and everyone would have their speak."[27] All decisions were taken collectively at meetings where anybody could attend, participate and vote, which meant that debates often carried on late into the night. For its first year of existence, which was arguably its most influential phase, it had no fixed membership. Eamonn McCann, who was also involved in the group, explained:

> To be a member of the People's Democracy, all you had to do was to turn up at the meetings. And you're a member. There was no entry, there was no register, the organisation never had a bank account, an address, never had a secretary. So I took part in a lot of activities based on this. […] Such was the democracy in People's Democracy that at every stage they had a vote to do the next stuff, at every stage![28]

To illustrate this statement, Eamonn McCann remembered one particular march to the Belfast City Hall which had been outlawed and blocked off by the police, leading the protesters to stage a sit-down in the street and decide what to do next. The chair organising the discussion, a young lecturer called Cyril Toman, went as far as asking the policemen surrounding them to take part in the vote.[29]

Emulated by the events of the French May, the People's Democracy adopted the tactic of the occupation. On 24 October 1968 – which was both symbolically United Nations Day in what had been declared International Human Rights Year and the day when a Human Rights Bill was to be discussed in Stormont – the young protesters occupied the main hallway of the Northern Ireland Parliament for several hours, trying to gather support for the bill after the House had refused to consider it.[30] Paul Arthur, who along with Bernadette Devlin was one of the leading organisers of that action, explained that the French model had been a real source of influence for them, but unlike the Movement of 22 March which was originally centred around student issues, and then widened its focus during the May Days, the People's Democracy immediately agitated for societal

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27. Interview with Paul Arthur, *op. cit.*
28. Interview with Eamonn McCann, *op. cit.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. Interview with Paul Arthur, *op. cit.*; Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey, *The Price of My Soul*, London, Pan, 1972, p. 108-109.

demands.[31] They were demonstrating not so much as students, but as citizens, seeking to change the whole structure of Northern Irish society, and, for a very brief moment, they would get the opportunity to challenge the authority of the state and bring their ideals to life.

Brushing off the shadow of the Troubles

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Paradoxically, the march of 5 October 1968 in Derry is both the moment when the Civil Rights movement gained mass support while being also usually pinpointed as the start of the Troubles. For that particular reason, the most common account given of the years 1968-69 is generally one of escalating tensions and spiralling violence, ultimately leading to armed conflict. While this is undoubtedly true, it should not obscure the fact that these two years were a time of hope for Civil Rights activists in Northern Ireland. They felt that change was possible, within reach, and this is why some of them seem to have a positive outlook on the period, describing the events and the atmosphere surrounding them in relatively carefree, festive terms that have more in common with the late 1960s in other countries than with the gloom usually associated to the Troubles.

Free Derry

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The so-called "no-go" areas of Derry and, to a lesser extent Belfast, illustrate this point perfectly. The expression "no-go" area, is seen from the point of view of the authorities, but to the activists, these enclaves were known as Free Derry and Free Belfast. On 4 January 1969, the final day of the Long March from Belfast to Derry, protesters were ambushed and brutally assaulted by Loyalists with the connivance of the police at Burntollet Bridge, just before they reached their destination, and again, as they crossed the Waterside area of the town.[32] As the news of the attack spread, more clashes ensued between the police and Catholic-Nationalist youths from the Bogside. During the night, a cohort of police forces ran amok in the Bogside, brutalising its inhabitants and damaging property. As an act of self-defence, the people of the area erected barricades to protect themselves from another onslaught.[33] What shows through the testimonies of those who experienced that episode is the initial fear caused by the violent

31.   Interview with Paul Arthur, *op. cit.*
32.   For a detailed account of the Long March, see Bowes Egan & Vincent McCormack, *Burntollet*, London, LRS, 1969.
33.   Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, London, Pluto, 1980, p. 251; Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles*, Newbridge, Irish Academic Press, 2018, p. 212.

attack of the security forces, followed by a heady sense of empowerment for managing to keep them out of the Bogside. Vincent McCormack, who took part both in the march and in the ensuing Free Derry experiment, recalled:

> As a result of police actions and police collusion with Loyalists, people were very very fearful, for their lives and safety, which is why the barricades went up. Everyone helped in their own way. […] [The atmosphere] was one of liberation. We were demonstrating and we could control our futures and get organised, so that there was a sense of freedom.[34]

The area inside the barricades encompassing the Catholic-Nationalist districts of the Bogside, Brandywell and lower Creggan was proclaimed "Free Derry" – a name that originated from a famous graffiti painted on a gable wall that said "You are now entering Free Derry". With hindsight, it is easy to interpret that name as a Republican slogan, since "Free Derry" could refer to liberation from Unionist or British rule. But its original meaning was actually a reference to American students protesting to defend their right to freedom of opinion and expression. Eamonn McCann came up with the idea and told a local teenager to paint the message. He explained:

> The slogan was taken directly from a sign which was outside Berkeley college at the University of Berkeley, California, where a few years earlier, there was the Berkeley Free Speech movement, with Mario Savio. There was a little sign outside as the students were occupying the university, […], and they had a cardboard that said "You are now entering Free Berkeley". And we saw that and thought "That's cool!" So in January 1969, when the police had been driven out of the Bogside – the first time it ever happened – with barricades around it, "You are now entering Free Derry". In a funny way, without thinking about it, student occupations in California, and the Civil Rights movement here in Derry, all that distance away, were the same thing, with the same slogan, one echoed the other.[35]

The Free Speech Movement was a protest against the restrictions on political activities on campus that took place in 1964, when students involved in the American Civil Rights movement used civil disobedience to defy the ban.[36] To the young radical activists of the People's Democracy and other local left-wing groups like the Young Socialists and the Derry Labour Party, the barricades of Free Derry were a sign of their belonging

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34.   Interview with Vincent McCormack, *op. cit.*
35.   Interview with Eamonn McCann, *op. cit.*
36.   Horn, *op. cit.*, p. 60-65.

to the global wave of protest that swept many parts of the world in the late 1960s and the concrete realisation of the New Left ideals of worker-student alliances, autonomy and self-organisation. This can be seen in this description of the atmosphere given at the time, in January 1969, by Paul Campbell, a student actively involved in the People's Democracy who helped with the organising of Free Derry:

> Behind the barricades the embryo of a new society developed – a society distinguished from the rest of the world by the camaraderie and interdependence that was necessary for the co-ordinated running of Free Derry. […] Such features were manifest in the willingness of each man to take his time on the barricades, by the co-operation of the people in feeding the people, by the communal cigarette packets, and by the setting up of a Free Derry Radio as an expression of the community's unity of action.[37]

The utopian dimension of this account, portraying Free Derry as a revolutionary commune, with a number of alternative institutions designed to make the community self-reliant, concurs with the memories of Eamonn McCann, Paul Arthur and Vincent McCormack. For instance, a "people's militia" was created to man the barricades and defend the area. Its recruits were given free cigarettes to lay the emphasis on the spirit of solidarity, because in the words of McCann "everybody smoked" at the time.[38] The young left-wingers also produced their own daily alternative newspaper, *The Barricades Bulletin*, to inform the people of the area of what was happening and to try to get their support. The articles were written, edited and printed in a flat in the Bogside, and it was then distributed from door to door by local children.[39] Another alternative means of communication was the creation of Radio Free Derry, thanks to a radio transmitter smuggled in by members of the People's Democracy and taken to the top of a block of flats. On the waves of their pirate station, the protesters broadcast political messages about the Civil Rights movement, made the case for civil disobedience and played a mix of folk and pop music. Music played a key role at the time, and the young left-wingers sought to use it to get support for their ideas by organising a festival – the "Freedom *Fleadh*" (festival in Irish) – which took place behind the barricades in August 1969. They managed to attract famous Irish folk bands like The Dubliners and Tommy Makem, from the Clancy Brothers, as well as local bands from Derry. The motto of the festival was "Derry Merry, Derry Free" and it was written in large block letters on a banner hung between two trees. The organisers had also arranged to provide free toffee apples and donkey rides for children by borrowing two donkeys from

37. "Derry squat-in goes on", *Peace News*, 17 January 1969, p. 2.
38. Interview with Eamonn McCann, *op. cit.*
39. Interviews with Paul Arthur, Vincent McCormack and Eamonn McCann, *op. cit.*

a neighbouring farm. Eamonn McCann, who was the leading organiser of the Free Derry *Fleadh*, recalled:

> So we had all this going on, it was terrific. We had balloons! Oh, jumping up and down and all that stuff! That was part of that atmosphere of fun, enjoyment, of celebration. In the midst of all the CS gas, and violence and fear, there was also this celebration of freedom! And also of achievement! [...] A sense of achievement for yourself and for the community. [...] It was, I remember very well, I remember the feeling of it, holding our heads up high.[40]

If the initial Free Derry experiment lasted only for six days in January 1969, the barricades went up again briefly in April, and in August of the same year after two days of intense rioting following the annual Loyalist parade of the Apprentice Boys.[41] Riots then spread to the rest of Northern Ireland, and violent clashes in Belfast gave birth to the enclave of Free Belfast in the Falls and Ardoyne areas.[42]

Free Belfast

While Free Belfast shared some of the characteristics of Free Derry, like the creation the pirate station Radio Free Belfast, an underground publication called *Citizen Press* and the taking over of the policing and defence of the area by local groups of residents, the atmosphere seemed to have been more tensed.[43] This could be explained by the fact that the Free areas of Belfast were directly adjacent to working-class Protestant-Unionist districts, Shankill, Woodvale and Crumlin – causing considerable friction.[44] Nonetheless, some People's Democracy members were involved in the running of the enclave. For instance, Fergus Woods, who helped presenting and overseeing Radio Free Belfast, explained:

> Belfast was always different from Derry because there was very much more of a sectarian thing going on in Belfast. [...] Radio Free Belfast, the barricades, it was a bit of an adventure for me too, and it was exciting as well, you know, you were going down to do your shift and then you would come out through the barricades. [...] I remember feeling very comfortable, very much welcomed. People generally felt

40. Interview with Eamonn McCann, *op. cit.*
41. Paul Arthur, *The People's Democracy, op. cit.*, p. 51, 58, 67.
42. *Ibid*, p. 67-68; Michael Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
43. Interviews with Paul Arthur and Fergus Woods, *op. cit.*; Arthur, *The People's Democracy, op. cit.*, p. 67-69.
44. David McKittrick & David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, London, Penguin, 2001, p. 54-55.

> that – even though I wasn't a student at the time – these students are nice people and they're helping us, I had that definite impression. […] It was a good time really. It was more kind of joyful and bonding, there was no talk of violence, or taking on revenge on anybody. But it was one of the first times I saw a gun, a person armed with a gun.[45]

If Free Derry and Free Belfast embodied the concrete realisation of key New Left ideals, they paradoxically also contributed to the polarisation of the situation along sectarian lines. Some of the men in charge of the protection of the Free areas were Republicans, like Seán Keenan in Derry, or Jim Sullivan and Liam MacMillen in Belfast.[46] The escalation of violence would then drive individual Republicans to be increasingly concerned with the defence of the Free areas, and lead to a revival of the IRA.[47] The paramilitary organisation, who had, thus far, been dormant after the failure of its 1956-62 campaign, started remobilising to take over its self-assigned role: the defence of the Catholic-Nationalist community.[48] By August 1971, when the barricades went up again as a response to the introduction of internment without trial, armed men from both wings of the IRA – the Official and the Provisional[49] – were openly patrolling the Free areas.[50] The resurgence of the IRA convinced many Protestant-Unionists that the Civil Rights movement had been a Republican ploy to press for a united Ireland and that the protesters' demands of equal rights for all British citizens had been disingenuous.[51] As the situation degenerated into armed conflict, the dark shadow of the Troubles fell onto Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

The Civil Rights movement was an attempt to achieve moderate demands to change Northern Ireland into a fairer, more equal society, as part of the United Kingdom. It involved people from various backgrounds and strands of opinion. It drew on the previous movements of the early sixties, like those against nuclear weapons and the war in Vietnam, which had gained mass support on the British mainland and had also involved activists from both sides of the politico-religious divide in Northern Ireland,

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45. Interview with Fergus Woods, *op. cit.*
46. Interviews with Paul Arthur and Fergus Woods, *op. cit.*
47. Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *op. cit.*, p. 37, 162.
48. David McKittrick and David McVea, *op. cit.*, p. 59-60.
49. In December 1969, the IRA split into two rival factions, the 'Red' or Official IRA which was characterised by its Marxist views, and the 'Green' or Provisional IRA, who advocated a more traditional and Conservative Republican approach. McKittrick & McVea, *op. cit.*, p. 59-60.
50. Ó Dochartaigh, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

as well as other movements taking place abroad, like the American Civil Rights movement, the Free Speech Movement or the protests of the French May. Northern Irish activists did so in a conscious effort to try to build an inclusive, peaceful, non-sectarian movement, that would break away with the Orange and Green traditions. The "no-go" or "Free" areas of Belfast and Derry embodied the ideals of autonomy and self-help characteristic of the international New Left, as well as drawing from the homegrown Republican tradition, which they would ultimately contribute in reviving. Therefore, the international context of the late 1960s needs to be taken into account to shed light on the history of Northern Ireland and question the partisan narratives depicted by both Sinn Fein and the DUP.

Without falling into the trap of looking back with rose-tinted glasses, the testimonies of the participants to the Civil Rights movement give both colour and complexity to the general view of the period as the start of the Troubles. They show that the sense of empowerment, liberation and joy that characterised the late 1960s in various countries did not elude Northern Ireland.

Claire Mansour is a lecturer in British and Irish studies at the University of Toulouse Jean-Jaurès. Her research focuses mainly on the diffusion of social movements in the long sixties in the United Kingdom, including national, cross-national, diachronic and synchronic processes.

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