Violence, space and memory in the new Northern Ireland

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Violence in Belfast in September and December 2012 bears witness to the collision of the 'old' and the 'new'. As Northern Ireland embarks upon a decade of centenaries, the question arises: who hosts memory - and how?

Sparked in the embers of a year where culture, histories and memory in Northern Ireland have been subjected to political mobilisation and violence, a growing mass have begun to question what next for a society which continues to choke under the burden of its past. In the space of twelve weeks Belfast witnessed a series of violent confrontations involving Republican and Loyalist communities and the police.

Each of the events was triggered by decisions taken in relation to celebration, commemoration and expressions of identity. In September 2012, the somewhat unprecedented levels of violence had been ignited by a commemorative parade [13] along a contested route in North Belfast. Then in December, rioting was prompted by a democratic vote, which restricted the number of days in which the Union flag [14] could be flown from city hall. Almost instantly the fault lines, which continue to exist fourteen years after The Agreement, were evident for all to see.

The ensuing riots resulted in widespread destruction, fear and threat to human life. The spaces or rather 'hotspots' where the violence took place collided with the politicisation of memory and history through which violence was choreographed and executed with purposeful intent. As for the coldspots, or spaces of neutrality, where memory and tradition is celebrated and commemorated in non-violent ways, memory is no less contested or cherished. Rather, the salves which appear to be resilient against spoiler violence have failed to translate into each and every context and are largely resigned to geographies which have been predisposed to the conflict from 1969. Across Northern Ireland, memories and histories remain fundamentally important and their expression often serves to make plain the ethnic contestations within sections of this deeply divided society.

Revisiting the ‘old’, defying the ‘new’

As Northern Ireland embarks upon a ‘Decade of Centenaries’ [15] in which it will mark the contested histories that have contributed to its birth such as the Ulster Covenant 1912 [16] the Easter Rising 1916 [17] and the birth of the state in 1921, it faces monumental challenges. A century on, Northern
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Ireland remains very much an expression of the by-products of such seismic histories despite a comprehensive peace and political process alongside the economic, social and political imperatives to move forward. But reflecting upon how our society accounted for its often-ferocious history, one must determine whether we are cloaked in these histories, which define identities, which in turn determine how we see and engage with the ‘other’.

September and December 2012 witnessed the collision of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Belfast. In the shadows of the buoyant tourism attraction of the Titanic, segregated communities in September 2012 engaged in bitter violence, which bore a deep financial, security and societal cost. Only recently the PSNI indicated that the cost of violent disputes surrounding the celebration and commemoration of specific historical events from a security perspective was £7.4 million in 2012 [18], which included £6.1 million for policing commemorative parades and subsequent disturbances in 5 months between April and August. Furthermore, the highly publicised rioting in North Belfast following a parade resulted in the injury of over 45 police officers [19], with another 15 injured [20] after rioting because of the change in flag policy. The wider macroeconomic costs, including lost tourism revenue, and reduction in potential inward investment have never been precisely calculated.

How the violent outworking of commemoration and celebration is defined and understood will shape the responses, both immediate and long-term. While commentary about rioting experienced elsewhere in the UK, particularly in 2011, was dominated by the terms [21] ‘moral decay’ and ‘emerging underclasses’, the social unrest in Northern Ireland continues to be localised, wedded to particular spaces, and often framed within a ‘tribal’ or ‘sectarian’ context. Applying an antidote in these contexts requires an understanding of the individuals and their motivations as well as characteristics of place and its relationship to the past. In the absence of a thorough understanding of what hosts, breeds and drives violence, the potential for continued violence is omnipresent.

Engaging the ‘hosts’ of memory

Underpinning the division of ‘place’ are conflicting and divisive interpretations of the past. Historically republican and loyalist communities have celebrated ‘against’ each other, creating cultural worlds which can be perceived as single identity and sectarian in nature (11th July Bonfires, 12th July Parades, Easter Sunday parades). The reality is that neither community has a collective shared memory, which they can host and celebrate together in the present. However, out of the almost 4000 parades that take place annually within these communities, under a dozen have the potential for violence [22].

In order to understand the tipping point, it is important to not only examine the specificity of place but to also analyse the ‘hosts of memory’, that is those who facilitate, organise and co-ordinate memory and celebrate it within each community. As we have seen, the manipulation of commemoration and exploitation of the environment in which it takes place facilitates choreographed violence and disorder. The cult of memory in Northern Ireland is at its most pronounced during the long summers of parading, but will clearly blanket the next decade, with the annual events becoming caught up with the centenary celebrations. The public in Northern Ireland will barely be able to escape their ‘duty to remember’ in yearly, monthly and weekly performances of memory over the next decade.

Nowhere is Foster’s ‘industry of commemoration’ [23] more evident than in these hotspots where those tasked with narrating past, present and future remain unchecked. What is the benefit for ‘memory hosts’ in continued violence? In what history is violence legitimate? How can a narrative of violence as illegitimate be woven into these communities who eulogise past loyalist and republican paramilitaries? For now, these questions go unanswered, but what goes unchecked is the fact that memory is made and re-made in Northern Ireland, harnessed for political purposes and agendas. In a vacuum of either responsible or responsive political leadership the opportunity for positive progress is unlikely.

Sideboxes

Related stories: Purposeful inquiry: detoxing the poisoned chalice [24]
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Depoliticising victims in Northern Ireland [26]

Country or region: Northern Ireland
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[17] http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/irishhistorylive/IrishHistoryResources/ArticlesandLectures/TheEasterRising/
[23] http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=kSYN6by5nFQC&amp;printsec=frontcover&amp;source=gb&amp;v=onepage&amp;q&amp;f=false
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