Irish Republican counterpublics and media activism since the Troubles

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Abstract

In the early years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the IRA was aware of its subaltern status and how its campaign of violence saw it marginalized from the mainstream political public sphere. It embraced this status and, using activist media materials and techniques, it built a highly functioning counterpublic within which to express its political positions and in which to negotiate future strategy. Initially utilizing activist newspapers, it drew on a rich heritage of publishing associated with Republicanism dating back to the 1790s. However, the counterpublic surrounding these publications could often be said to be quite small and difficult to break out of, thus in later years, Republicanism would expand its repertoire to embrace muralism and street art which brought it to wider international attention. Murals also created physical manifestations of the Republican counterpublic, establishing geographic parameters on spaces that had only previously been metaphysical or virtual.

Introduction

Throughout their history Irish Republican groups have fought marginalization and censorship by the state partly through the creation and circulation of forms of activist media. From the earliest period of Republican resistance, the United Irishmen in the final years of the 18th C and their newspaper the *Northern Star*, to George Gavan Duffy, James Stephens' and John Mitchel's *The Nation* in the 1840s, to the prolific publishing of Arthur Griffith and James

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Connolly in the early 20thC, forms of countercultural media production have been utilized to successfully spread the message. In doing so, these newspapers, pamphlets, books, and other printed materials played a huge role in the building, development and fostering of highly functioning Republican spheres, spaces in which the political direction of the movement at any given time could be negotiated, debated, and steered. It is in the production of these materials, as well as in the production of more modern forms of media activism such as the painting of murals, that Republicans circumvented official marginalization and criminalization. In murals Republicans not only embrace(d) their countercultural and subaltern positions but celebrated them and set them within the context of other global liberationist struggles (Rolston 1992; Crowley 2011). Marginalized from the mainstream political public sphere and denied equality of access to it through official or unofficial forms of censorship, Sinn Féin and the IRA built highly active networks in which to develop its platforms. In this sense historically, and certainly since partition and the establishment of the Free State, Republicanism in all its' shades has recognized and embraced the countercultural and counterpublic position in which it found itself. This chapter argues that the period since the early 1970s and the split between the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA, Republicanism, across its various factions and sects, has been in the vanguard of developing a highly functioning internal activist media infrastructure that successfully communicated its current and future directions to multiple publics: its internal audience(s), opponents and wider public. Sinn Féin and the IRA, under the control of Gerry Adams and his inner circle, was most effective and saw the ideological necessity of building an activist media strategy and infrastructure that simultaneously embraced and resisted the countercultural and subaltern position that it found itself in. Often using limited resources and embracing the basic principles of then contemporary revolutionary movements and *samizdat* or countercultural forms of media production, and utilizing both the media and its own built

environment, Sinn Féin embraced its subaltern position, critiqued it, and developed repertoires of media activism that can be seen as effective forms of resistance.

This chapter argues that there are two key periods in the development of Irish Republican countercultural and counterpublic activism: firstly, the early to mid-1970s when the Sinn Féin and the IRA embraced the lessons of the febrile Cold War and counterculture period to develop the foundations of its activist media milieu with deep influences from the global counterculture and equality movements. These forms of activism recognized, celebrated, and utilized the countercultural, counterpublic status. As the fortunes of the movement became transformed by the outplaying of the Good Friday Agreement and political growth of Sinn Féin, it focused less on its subaltern status and that role would become occupied by the range of parties and groups which can be described as dissenting from the establishment Republicanism of Sinn Féin.

Secondly, a later wave of Republican media activism, muralism and community art evolved to much more purposely recapture and rebrand the physical environments in which Irish Republican communities existed. Firstly, to other them as culturally different to non-Republican areas, as insurrectionary spaces where counter-discourses could be curated and enshrined through distinctly Irish cultural enterprises. Politically, this media activism initially aimed to legitimize Sinn Féin and the IRA's hegemony during the 70s and 80s in areas such as West Belfast. Yet as the conflict progressed through key events such as the Hunger Strike of 1981, one can discern an evolution in this media activism being used to convey messages *beyond* the Republican sphere, to an increasingly attentive international audience. In the post-conflict era, muralism evidences a commitment to Sinn Féin's catch-all strategy of legitimizing historic violence as a utilitarian necessity, whilst consolidating its image as an internationally recognized, leftist political party worthy of institutional power. However, from the 2000s onward, these media spaces have also played host to an eclectic array of dissenting,

marginalized Republican organisations who vie for status in the Republican sphere, challenge Sinn Féin's legitimacy and undermine its commitment to the Good Friday Agreement.

Republicans, alternative media, and subaltern counterpublics

Emerging out of the work of the Italian neo-Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who was a significant influence on the Irish Republican movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the term subaltern refers to both the proletariat as well as a wider sense of economically and politically subjugated groups or "marginalized members of society […] closely linked with postcolonial analysis" (Green 2011: 387). Subaltern groups, through their marginalisation, struggle to influence the political public sphere and are forced to adopt a range of communicative strategies that allow them to become more visible, despite marginalisation by governments, and social and economic elites such as the mainstream media. Activist media, as utilized by Irish Republican groups under examination in this chapter, in both the pre-digital period and the current contemporary forms of online political activism, emerges out of a set of political communication practices that analysts describe as being 'the latest incarnation of a long historical line of oppositional, radical, underground, or anarchist media' (Lievrouw 2011: 17). Chris Atton describes activist and radical media from a classic Marxist perspective, as,

> alternative media may be considered as offering radical, anti-capitalist relations of production often coupled to projects of ideological disturbance and rupture. The Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony is discernible through a range of radical media projects. (2002: 8)

Couldry groups together the forms of counter-hegemonic media in which we might situate Irish Republican groups, 'alternative media, community media, radical media, citizens' media' (2015: 62). Ultimately, the subaltern position of those doing forms of activist and alternative media is in direct correspondence to their position with the wider motions of the public sphere,

Recent investigations into the centrality of alternative and activist media forms produced and circulated by Irish Republicans emerges out of Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/ 1989) which provides a longitudinal explication of the emergence of politically engaged publics from the early modern age and the role that modern mass media have played in their development from the birth of the printing press in the 17thC to the telecommunications age of the 20thC. The endurance of Habermas's often heavily critiqued theory within communications studies, sociology and political communication, lies in the spatial metaphor at its heart that captures the interactions between private citizens, the media that they consume, and the political economy of their immediate societies. Newspapers, pamphlets, and novels, become centrally implicated in the formation of public opinions and the discussion of it. The classic bourgeois public sphere of Habermas's conception is a dialogical zone in which these negotiations take place, in which the sphere simultaneously facilitates discussion, circulates it and evaluates it. Habermas notes that 'the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public' (27), 'people engaged in rational critical public debate brought to bear on absolutist rule' (106). Nancy Fraser (1992: 11) notes that the public sphere was, 'a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. […] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state.' Central to the development of the public sphere was 'the appearance of a political journal and its survival was equivalent to involvement in the struggle over a range of freedom to be granted to public opinion' (Habermas: 184). A similar application of the public sphere with direct reference to Irish Republicanism can be seen in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) where public consumption of literature and news becomes central in the generation of national identity and nationhood in nascent post-colonial nations.

The emergence Irish Republicanism can be charted to the exact time that Habermas sees the development of public spheres in modern society: the tumultuous 18th C, when contests over civic virtues, beliefs and needs was radically transforming European and North American society. The journals, newspapers, and pamphlets of the United Irishmen, for instance, were central to the laying down of ideological and cultural foundations of Irish Republicanism that were still being felt and giving political sustenance in the 1970s and 1980s. Ideological praxis or writing to offer a position in the face of governmental and legal suppression goes to the heart of Irish Republican writing and publication across three centuries. It was recognition of the subaltern political status that feeds the contestation that one sees in Irish Republican writing in the 1790s, 1840s, 1860s, early 20th Century and in the post-1969 period.

Habermas's ultimate contention is that the public sphere became corrupted by the symbiotic needs of political parties and liberal, free market capitalism and that the public, far from being active and autonomous participants in the public sphere, become re-feudalized by the spectacle of the mass media and contemporary politics which is contested by a narrow and largely closed elite class. What springs up in opposition to this are the multitude of competing voices or overlapping oppositional political publics contesting the re-feudalization or subaltern position that they find themselves in.

Emerging from Habermas, a number of writers identify the marginalized groups that have coalesced and used activist and alternative media to contest their subaltern status. Fraser identifies how women and other marginalized groups have become identified in the dialogical zone that is the public sphere having previously been concealed by their subaltern status, identifying them as 'counterpublics' or subaltern counterpublics. She noted that these counterpublics, which run coincidentally with the official public sphere, are 'where members

of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1992: 123). Manuel Castells, a scholar primarily associated with the transformation of the public sphere specifically in the digital and networked age, sees subaltern groups possessing counterpower as having the 'capacity […] to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society' (2007: 258). However, and this has direct application to the Irish Republican sphere and its myriad contesting groups and parties, it must be noted that counterpublics are no more egalitarian and equitable than the official political public sphere that has marginalized those that have been excluded. Subaltern counterpublics can become dominated by their own dominant participants, in the way that Sinn Féin has been accused of in recent years by those dissenting from its establishment Republican line (McIntyre 2008). Fraser contends that subaltern counterpublics are most important because participation in them facilitates the development of group identity by individuals and groups marginalized from the official public sphere and dialogical participation within them.

The later years of the period under examination is one in which dissenting and dissident organisations, groups and voices emerge as counterweights to the direction of Sinn Féin's 'establishment' Republicanism (McKearney 2011). This often chaotic and fragmented space, occupied by a multiplicity of competing and antagonistic voices echoes the work on activist and marginalized public spheres by Todd Gitlin and Michael Warner. Gitlin notes that is impossible to discuss a single unitary public sphere and it is more appropriate to see the world as having numerous public 'sphericules', overlapping and divergent spaces in which dialogue is constant. Gitlin (1998: 176) asks, 'does it not look like the public sphere, in falling, has shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury?' In the 1970s, the Irish Republican sphere

was ordered with only two main strands of competing ideology[2]. However, since 1986, and more specifically since 1997 and concurrent to the development of the Internet and social media, Republicanism's historic penchant for schism has seen it shatter mercurially, like Gitlin's public sphericules. The murals in Republican areas discussed later in this chapter are a means of exploring the reconfiguration of the Irish Republican sphericule(s), the range of competing voices and their respective ideological positions.

These positions only become revealed when they become visible and emerge from the private sphere of activists into the public sphere. Michael Warner contends that counterpublics, marginalized by social, political, economic, or cultural exclusion are concealed from wider public recognition and therefore may only become acknowledged when they make themselves visible through their activist activities. These publics therefore became visible by virtue of their writing, and repertoires of political action. Warner asserts that this is a 'social space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself' (2002: 50). In this space where discourse happens publicly, perhaps, through activist publications, it exists simply because the act of political activism and production of alternative and activist materials. In this sense Warner contends that they are autotelic, that they have a purpose in, and not apart from, themselves, because, although they may previously exist in and of themselves, they only become publicly acknowledged after the act of participation, 'by virtue of being addressed' (66). Warner contends that 'counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion.' (63) The participation of multifarious, interlinking, and often divergent forms of Irish Republican dissenters in alternative media and political activism at the start of

[2] Although Irish Republicanism has a justified reputation for schisms and splits, the early 1970s saw only two main competing strands of ideology, the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA. The latter split with the Officials in 1969/ 1970. The contemporary period has become more chaotic with multiple new dissident Republican organisations appearing at regular intervals since 1998 making little lasting impact on the Republican sphere.

the 21stC, gave these groups a sense of their own identity and places them simultaneously in the official public sphere and their own subaltern Republican counterpublic. It was in the act of writing or producing of materials that they made sense of themselves, the parameters of their ideological positions and aspirations and how they contested power in all its various forms (Hoey 2018).

Republican counterpublic media activism (1): The Press Centre and *AP/RN*

When Sinn Féin opened an office for *Republican News* on the Falls Road in Belfast in the early 1970s it was the first time that they had had premises in the community since the 1964 Westminster election. The office which would become the much-vaunted Press Centre (Curtis 1984) , also became a de facto welfare centre – it was there for instance where they began the welfare work for the families of prisoners after the mother of Kieran Nugent, the first 'blanketman', asked for him to be found after she had lost contact with him in the jail system. The opening of the premises was a means of claiming part of the landscape of Belfast, and the materials that were produced from the office were dedicated to revolutionizing the area and reclaiming it for the movement.

For Gerry Adams, Danny Morrison, Tom Hartley, Jim Gibney, Richard McAuley and the others who were central to the Belfast cadre that would mould the development and direction of the IRA and Sinn Féin in the 1970s and beyond, a revolutionary newspaper and activist media infrastructure was central to their political and military strategies. The movement had two newspapers, the Dublin-based *An Phoblacht* and *Republican News* which was produced in Belfast by many of those already named. The papers, which in many ways represented two factions of the movement would eventually merge in 1978. The centrality of a newspaper to the movement was such that the editorship of *An Phoblacht* and *Republican News* (*AP/RN*) was important enough to become the subject of a power struggle over the editorship in 1975-

1978 led by Adams in a battle that would see Morrison become editor. There were myriad reasons for the commitment to developing a newspaper and activist media infrastructure relating to the central conceits of this chapter. For the first instance, Adams in his cohort of colleagues understood the revolutionary potential of a paper to develop the imagined community of Republicanism at a time when the movement was at its lowest point in terms of public and political support. They saw that any attempt at winning people over the so-called armed struggle required persuasion and that a newspaper and activist media materials would simultaneously give the movement an opportunity to evaluate the cogency of its own strategies and messages. As former *AP/ RN* office manager Tom Hartley would argue some years later, 'Language is the battleground of ideas where we translate the concepts and ideas inside our heads.' (Hoey 2018: 90)

This evocation of the activist media strategy as a battlefield went to the core of the movement's subaltern status and the counterpublic that it built in the 1970s and 1980s and how they dovetailed with coinciding liberation struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. The members of Adams' West Belfast kitchen cabinet were self-conscious children of 1960s counterculture with a determinedly Irish background. Morrison had been a pirate radio enthusiast prior to the start of the Troubles and maintained an interest in the music and culture of the late 1960s and 1970s throughout his life. Hartley would note that their activism was inspired by Algerian writers like Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, and Civil Rights-era African American activists but the influence of fleadh cheoils[3] and other Irish language and cultural events was just as important (Hoey 2018). O'Ruairc noted in a series of four articles for the dissenting Republican magazine *The Blanket* in February 2002 that *AP/RN* had been used throughout the 1970s and

[3] Fleadh cheoils are Irish traditional music festivals that take place in towns across Ireland. Hartley noted that they were an influence on him and others around them because they gave access to Irish music and culture than they had previously been exposed to.

1980s to explain the global liberation struggles Sinn Féin saw as analogous to its own: Tanzania, South Africa, Yugoslavia and the Arab world. Richard McAuley wrote about the influence of Frantz Fanon and Algeria in *AP/RN* in 1980 (O'Ruairc 2002a), while Danny Morrison was involved in a series of articles addressing guerrilla warfare struggles in China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Nicaragua and how they might influence their own campaign (O'Ruairc 2002b).

This combination of the local and the global was also central to their commitment to activist media that articulated their countercultural and counterpublic positions. The papers and other materials produced by Belfast Republicans not only aimed to mobilize support for the movement but did so by simultaneously emphasizing the notion of community and community resistance. At a time when Hartley noted there had been 'a cottage industry' of hundreds of freesheets circulating in Republican communities informing them of events such as the Falls Curfew of 1970, *Republican News* was pitched as a community voice which embraced and articulated the countercultural influences and radical roots of the movement's strategy (Hoey 2018). Bean, invoking the influence of Gramsci in IRA thinking in the 1970s, noted, ''community' was not simply a product of the collective imagination: resistance communities were battlefields between the state and anti-state insurgency, between a dominant hegemony and an emerging counter-hegemony' (2007: 54).

Gerry Adams wrote a series of columns for *Republican News* during his internment in Long Kesh in 1975 which captured the essence of this counterpublic resistance community that he and his colleagues perceived as the foundation of the Republican struggle. Many of the columns were folksy stories of escape plans, joke telling and illegal alcohol brewing that were taking place in the jail and would go on to form the basis of the later book *Cage 11*. (Adams 2014).

However, several capture the essence of the esoteric forms of his strand of Republican thinking at the time and which would go on to dominate the movement after his release. One column in particular, 'Active Abstentionism' from August 1975, is striking in how it borrows from the separatist and countercultural instincts of African American radicals such as the Black Panthers as well as the language of anti-colonial struggles avowed by Fanon and Memmi. Adams effectively calls for a radically functioning subaltern space, a decentralized quasi foster state and counterpublic defined by its ideological impulse to resist.

> we have housing committees, local residents' committees, prisoners aid committees, local policing, playschools, parish committees and credit unions. We have sporting, cultural, and Gaelic language organisations busy at grassroots level, people's taxis and co-operative schemes progressing and enlarging. All people organisations, all carrying out necessary functions, all for the welfare of the people, all divorced or easily divorced from the Brit administration, all abstaining or eager to abstain if there was an alternative. And where is that alternative?? All around us friends! In each and every area, to some degree, people are governing and helping themselves. And the Republican movement has the structure and the blueprint to make local government outside the British system not alone feasible but necessary. (Adams 1975)

In conveying these sentiments, the newspaper and media activism becomes not just tangential or incidental to the countercultural and counterpublic struggle but is a central site in which the resistance takes place. Adams would later note of the Republican newspaper that 'the importance of Republican politics leading to a structured approach can be found in the production and availability of Republican literature'. (Adams 1986: 163)

The Republican movement's local structure and the function of all forms of activism away from the armed struggle was thus predicated upon on what Bean describes as 'defining the

community' and 'shaping the terrain' (2007: 10) and the terrain in this instance was not just the topographical but also the personal and the metaphorical. He describes the topographical emerging out of the tradition of *dinnseanchas*, which in the Irish language tradition 'endows a place with a particular mythological meaning', analogous to the French conception of *habitus* or the German *heimat*. (53) The physical locale as a site of resistance was to be revered, elevated, and celebrated. Republican activist materials were thus also not simply about attempting to culturally develop an imagined community united in resistance, but, and with echoes for the murals under discussion in later sections of this chapter, they were also designed to reclaim and occupy the physical environment of Republican communities on both large and very small scales. They become affective and effective forms of resistance in and of themselves. Hartley noted that among the first materials that they produced at the office on the Falls Rd were the *Freedom 74!* posters which were intended as a retaliation to British army notices pasted on lampposts. (Hoey 2018) Other materials produced at this time were aimed at bringing the Republican struggle into the homes of people in Republican areas and compounding the messages that were being seen on the streets and on gable walls, while also raising funds. The newspapers, books and pamphlets were joined by calendars and candles and other materials which are clearly counter-hegemonic in their intent, countercultural attempts at contesting power in their own way. The most marginalized Republican public – the prison community – would have its voice through *AP/ RN* and during the Hunger Strikes, the paper was an effective mouthpiece for those in jail in the face of censorship by the British and Irish governments. After the Hunger Strikes, the jail counterpublic got its own magazines, initially with the public publication of the internal publication, *Irish Bheag*, and then with *An Glór Gafa*.

Republican counterpublic media activism (2): Muralism and the counterpublic public space

From the perspective of the burgeoning Republican counterpublic of the 1960s and 70s, the militarized built environment of the Troubles was complicit in the struggle to legitimate British hegemony in Northern Ireland. Just as the broadcasting ban marginalized Republicans from the mediated spaces of opinion formation (Miller 1994), the ramparts and observation posts that were fixed across West Belfast, for instance, formed part of the effort to establish what Lefebvre (1992) termed a dominated space - one which sought to quell resistance through (threat of) force. From this perspective, Republicanism's politico-cultural (re)appropriation of such public spaces provides another plane on which its effusion as a counterpublic can be appreciated. To illustrate, Fraser's assertion that counterpublics have a 'dual character' functioning '[o]n the one hand… as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment' and 'on the other… as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (1992: 124) speaks to much of the rationale which underpinned West Belfast's transformation from a militarized space of the colonizer to the ideological heartland of the Republican movement. Whereas during the conflict the area played host to 'strategically placed barracks, designed like fortresses to withstand grenade or rocket attack...[and] heavily armed RUC and army patrols' (Gaffikin and Morrissey 1990: 105) pitted against the subaltern Republican resistance of the IRA, in the contemporary period Irish culture and Republicanism have been pushed to the fore. This is particularly true of the Falls Road which hosts an array of community organisation centres, Irish and Republican cultural amenities (Culturlánn, the Connolly Centre) and tourist attractions (murals, museums, memorial gardens) along its course, all of which shape the area's emerging identity as Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter/ Ceathrú Gaeltachta. Similarly, the annual Féile an Phobail festival (founded by members of Sinn Féin in 1988) has ritualized the Falls

Road's status as the 'great urban citadel' (Gaffikin and Morrissey 1990: 105) of Irish Republicanism and the locus of Irish culture in the North.

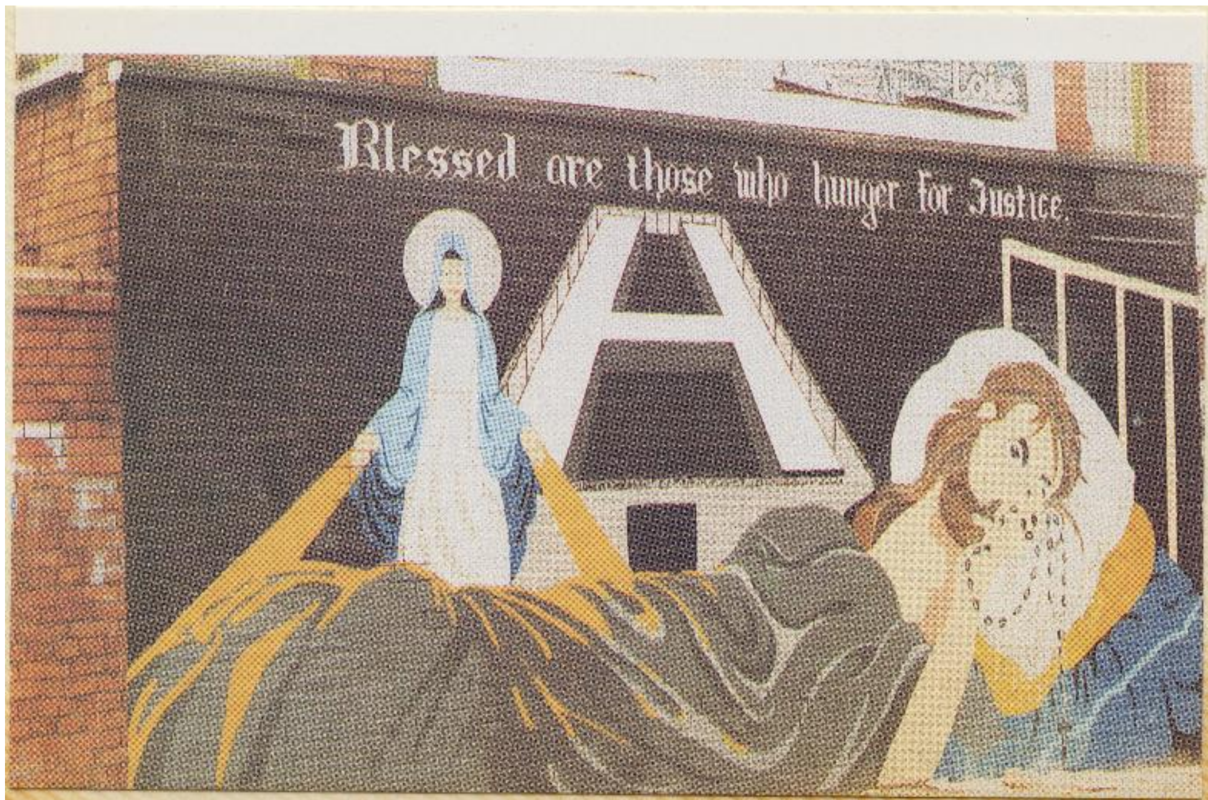
Such counter-hegemonic re-workings of space (and the cultural rituals and institutions enshrined to consecrate this space as discretely Republican) in West Belfast then form part of a wider process of interpellation of its people into a Republican counterpublic wherein alternative practices of justice (Morrissey and Pease 1982) and distinctly Gaelic cultural enterprises (Kachuk 1993, 1994) can be legitimated and a discrete 'imagined community' of national identity can be fostered (Anderson, 1983). Thus, the strategic (re)appropriation of its built environment embodies Republicanism's efforts to invert the power structure of colonialism, propagate its alternative discourses to external audiences and, more broadly, establish a counterpublic space of its own where Republicans could 'come together to define goals and to carry out the unglamorous work of movement-building and organizing' (Mironova 2017). In this regard, Republicanism's practice of political muralism provides an illustrative case study that captures its evolution as a counter public.

Political murals have provided an evolving stage upon which Republicanism has varyingly enacted its subaltern resistance during the conflict, and legitimized alternative power structures, whilst more recently offering a platform for new dissenting voices to emerge from the margins of the Republican sphere. Accordingly, the evolution of Republican muralism in Belfast is charted hereafter muralism from the perspective of its 'counterpublicness'. As cultural artefacts, murals have a rich history in Northern Ireland, particularly in the Unionist community (Rolston 1992). Within the Republican activist repertoire, however, they are comparably more novel (Lisle 2006), having been institutionalized as 'an established, if not entirely legitimate political practice' (Jarman 1998: 1) at the outset of the Troubles (Nolan 2004; Lisle 2006). In

this time, murals fulfilled external functions of the Republican counterpublic as it battled the realities of censorship and a strategy of criminalisation that was pursued by the state (Hayes 2012). Exclusion by the mainstream media drove the nascent Republican counterpublic to utilize alternative media forms, ensuring that the movement's dissenting messages which would otherwise be absent from mainstream media coverage could be broadcast to external publics without the need of mediation.

Murals' ability to broadcast messages to external audiences became particularly expedient as the conflict escalated, and Republicanism began to attract more international media coverage due to non-violent resistance tactics that developed alongside the armed campaign. For example, more substantive murals began to emerge during the blanket and no wash protests as a means of voicing support for both in a broadly unsympathetic public sphere (Nolan 2004). Murals of this era provided a Saatchi and Saatchi-inspired ease of message consumption to transient audiences which passed through West Belfast (Somerville and Purcell 2011) as well as the eyes of an increasingly attentive international press (Curtis 1984). In this sense, murals have been theorized as offering a window for external parties to observe, albeit from a distance, the grievances, and arguments of the Republican community (Rolston 2003). Such an external functionality was further evident in the muralism that emerged during the 1981 hunger-strike which represented Republicans as self-sacrificial martyrs, defying an oppressive and draconian regime, a characterization which counteracted the negative images of Republicans as militaristic bogeymen that had been established by the UK and Irish media (Ivory 2007, Miller 1994). Thus, from their earliest incarnation, Republican political murals sought to undermine dominant narratives which conditioned Republicanism's perception in the societal public sphere, by constructing alternative narratives, imageries, myths and frames through which the

ongoing conflict could be interpreted, and which could percolate into public deliberation via alternative channels of communication.



(Hunger Strike Murals, West Belfast. Source: Claremont College: Murals of Northern Ireland database)

Internally, murals aimed to mark out in-group territory in a time when sectarian residential boundaries began to harden in response to the growing conflict (Boal 1996). Beyond ensuring the fixity of boundaries between Loyalist/ Republican public space, murals' realization on the gable ends of houses ensured that Republican spaces could now be flanked by iconography and messages that strove to cultivate a psycho-spatially insurrectionary zone, which undermined British legitimacy. Much of the muralism in this era was also aimed at legitimizing the PIRA as representatives and defenders of the community and warned against the dangers of undermining this status. Implicit in this effort were the integration of a long-standing tradition

of Republican memorialisation which had been enshrined in funeral and commemoration practices over throughout the 20th century (Hoey 2013).

Thus, murals furnished internal audiences with alternative discourses to engender resistive action whilst simultaneously legitimating this contemporary resistance by drawing an affective, conceptual linkage to historic Republican interventions – effectively positioning the Sinn Féin and the IRA as the palingenesis of the Republicanism of 1916 and the legitimate torchbearers in the quest for Irish freedom. As such, murals contributed to the emergence of the Sinn Féin and the IRA's self-conception as a reiteration of the Republican traditions of 1798 and 1916 (McKearney 2011). Significantly, murals provided an uncensored stage upon which the sacrifices of previous Republican interventions could be linked to the sacrifices of contemporary IRA volunteers, affording a sense of cohesion and political legitimacy that was largely omitted from mainstream media coverage (Miller 1994; McLaughlin and Baker 2010). This lack of censor is perhaps best evidenced in the proliferation of prisoner release demands that began to abound in Republican muralism from the 1980s onward (Nolan 2004). Also enshrined in Republican muralism in this era were militaristic images of silhouetted volunteers (Goulding and McCroy 2020), intertwined with distinctly Gaelic cultural codes and language features, textual practices which essentially conflates Irishness with Republican resistance.

(Touts Beware Mural, West Belfast. Source: Claremont College: Murals of Northern Ireland database)

During the conflict, then, murals provided spatial and textual means through which a mobilizing 'counterpublicness' could cohere and be inculcated among the local community. Reflecting Fraser's conception of subaltern counterpublics, internally murals established identity boundaries within the counterpublic, maintaining relationships between those that share in the common identity and making visible the 'expectations, rewards, and punishments' associated with the group and its culture (Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1990: 215). Far from being reactionary instalments produced by this in-group, murals were typically produced by designated artists on the proviso that they would toe the line of the establishment Republican movement. As such, externally, murals were propagandistic insofar as they aimed to destabilize dominant narratives that had been constructed by the non-Republican political establishment in the official public sphere and which were distributed by a partisan and hostile media system.

Post-Conflict Republican Muralism

The long road to peace in Northern Ireland was in no small part abetted by the gradual de-marginalisation of the Republican movement, initially with the lifting of the broadcasting bans, and furthered by increased dialogue on both sides (Sparre 2001). In this context, muralism's expediency as a counterpublic communication practice became less relevant to the movement. Yet far from edging toward obsolescence, muralism became increasingly institutionalized as part of post-conflict Republicanism's political and cultural identity. Indeed, muralism can be seen to embody much of the strategic transformations and existential challenges that beset the movement in this era, specifically the challenges it faced in externally selling itself as a viable partner in the consociational peace arrangements, whilst internally selling its 'new mode' as a victory and advancement of the Republican cause (McIntyre 1995: 2008). Indeed, these two communicative aims speak to the broader catch-all strategy adopted by Sinn Féin in the post-conflict era (Whiting 2016). Both of these, as well as the emergence of Republican internal resistance from dissident or dissenting actors, can be appraised.

After the Troubles, one can note continuations and adaptations of strategic functions set in motion during the conflict. For instance, post-conflict muralism continued the strategic aim of legitimizing political actors. One notable means through which this aim was pursued was through expressions of international solidarity which echoed with those of *AP/RN* in the 1970s-80s, where murals (and the movement in general) communicated solidarity with marginalized political movements from around the globe, which Republicans shared some affinity and wished to construct some link with on the global political stage (Arar 2017). For instance, expressions of solidarity with South African, Cuban and Palestinian resistance movements have become banal features of Republican muralism in the post-conflict era (Rolston 2009).

Whilst this theme is rife within Republican muralism, it is perhaps best captured by the muralism of the International Wall along the Falls Road. Here expressions of international solidarity have become sublimated into the broader aim of using political tourism impelled by the spectre of the Troubles to disseminate sanitized narratives of the past, the conflict and Republicanism, all of which aim to legitimate Sinn Féin's elite status. Importantly, in these murals, violence is historicized, the future is politicized (Goulding and McCroy 2020), and they aim to propagate a reactionary narrative of Republican activity which justifies its past violence as a necessary pre-requisite to attaining civil rights and political representation. It also feeds into the narrative of the construction of West Belfast as being a highly functioning, 'breathing' counterpublic sphere in and of itself with both topographical and metaphorical presence.

Yet, such progressive messaging has not been ubiquitous in Republican muralism of this era. In the immediate aftermath of the GFA one can note the perpetuation of overtly militaristic imagery in political communication (see the Molotov iconography in the Ógra Shinn Féin recruitment mural below) as well as murals which sought to sell the transition to the 'new mode' as an evolution or victory of Republicanism (see the Short Strand Mural below). Yet as the Republican counterpublic became increasingly integrated into the political fabric of the new consociational state in the post-conflict era, it also began to play host to an emerging array of dissenting or dissident voices. Emerging forms of social and alternative online media were central in fostering critical debate within the Republican sphere in this era (Hoey 2018). However, muralism also provides a stage upon which the emergence of Republican-internal dissent can be appraised.

(Short Strand Mural, East Belfast. Source: Claremont College: Northern Ireland Murals Database)

(ÓSF Recruitment Mural, West Belfast. Source: Claremont College: Northern Ireland Murals Database)

One can identify the fruition of muralism that sought to criticize Sinn Féin's internal hegemonic position and post-conflict actions. Despite the dominance and impact of Sinn Féin within the Republican counterpublic accounting for much of its success and cogency after the Troubles, dissident parties initially made known their dissatisfaction at perceived reformist concessions to Republican tenets through murals that called for political status for Real IRA prisoners (Rolston 2003). This effort by the 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM) marked the first in a growing trend of muralism devised by competing dissident groups. The capacity for muralism to be exploited by side-lined groups in the post-conflict political milieu of Republicanism was best typified by the muralism of the political party éirigí from 2009 to 2012, which provided hard-line critiques of such concessions and offered a puritanical Republican narrative to political events (Moloney 2008). Similarly, the political graffiti and muralism of the pressure group Republican Network for Unity (RNU) also engenders the same critiques of establishment Republicanism. Importantly, both regularly featured links or messages that direct audiences to other textual forms utilized by these groups, typically websites and social media. Whilst it has yet to garner any political mandate, dissident Republicanism and its muralism has been linked to the continuation of a conflict-like political consciousness in Belfast's Republican enclaves and can be seen to inculcate a scepticism of establishment Republicanism in dissident communities that is not present in areas such as the Falls Road (Goulding and McCroy 2020).

Thus, murals have documented the dynamism of Republicanism as it transformed from a revolutionary, guerrilla movement into a legitimate consociational partner in peacetime. As textual counterpublic sites, they functioned as external and internal means of inculcating resistance to British rule during the conflict, whilst latterly they have demonstrated the capacity

to propagate messages that criticize the internal Sinn Féin hegemony within Republicanism's counter public sphericule(s).

Conclusion

The lessons learned from these two eras of activism tell us that Republican political success was conceived and negotiated in its cultural spheres. As Sinn Féin transitioned away from being the marginalized political wing of the IRA into the dominant partner and embracing a political strategy that rejected an armed campaign, so too did the imaginings and discourse in its sphere. Concomitantly, as Sinn Féin has made the transition to constitutional politics abandoning some of the key tenets of revolutionary Republicanism, dissenting republicans have used the counterpublic to reiterate historic 'republicanisms', as Gerry Adams described them (1986). The online and mediated public and counterpublic spheres have therefore been fruitful spaces in which to get a granular sense of the seismic dynamics in Irish Republican politics and this has also been played out in the built environment of Republican areas. Sinn Féin's transition from the Republican subaltern counterpublic to being an important player in the mainstream political public sphere happened in many ways due to the political and communicative lessons it learned in the countercultural space. As a result, it has become known for its adept and innovative political communication strategies and pioneering use of technology. This fed its' electoral success, and the party is now a central player in the official public sphere in the states on both sides of the Irish border.

For dissenting and dissident groups, the Internet and digital shift has offered myriad opportunities to make their case for the abandonment of the true values of Republicanism and the rewriting of history they accuse Sinn Féin of. At the time of writing, Sinn Féin's polling numbers in Ireland see it on a trajectory to be the largest party in both the Stormont Assembly

and the Dáil at the next elections. Whether it achieves power is irrelevant to this chapter, rather in pursuing this goal it will continue to develop deeper roots in the official public sphere and rely ever further on established political communications strategies to reach more mainstream voters. As it relies on newer media to maintain its internal status, we are also likely to see more resistance emerge within the margins of the counterpublic space. Republican dissidents Saoradh, for instance, had built quite a high presence on social media despite low levels of membership, before their links to the murder of the journalist Lyra McKee in 2019 saw them face the kind of marginalization that Sinn Féin and the IRA did in the 1970s. It also was involved in street art around its Junior McDaid House headquarters in Derry, echoing wider republican muralism practices. The relatively low barriers of entry required for contemporary political participation online - technical aptitude and the financial cost of accessing the net are within the reach of most who use the net - means that the Irish republican counterpublic will remain a counter-hegemonic zone contested by those centrifugally pushed to the margins by Sinn Féin's deeper integration into the state and official public sphere.

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