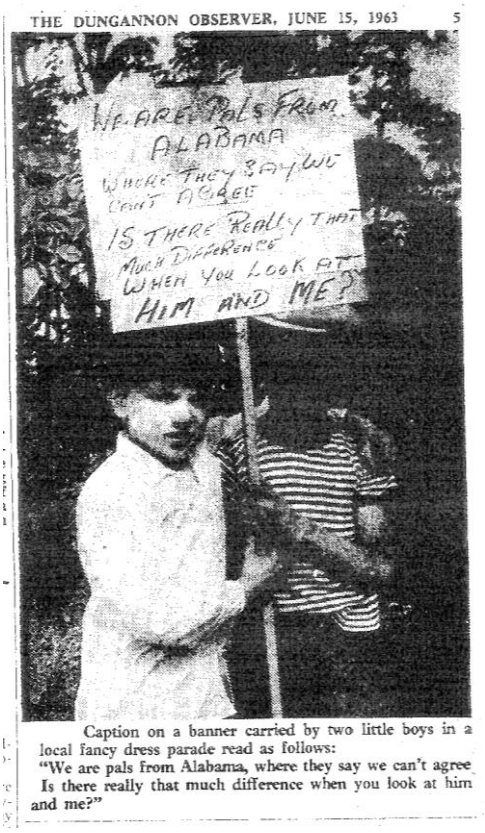
Deconstructing the Sectarian Epic: The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement and the World Beyond Irish Shores, 1963-1969


THE DUNGANNON OBSERVER, JUNE 15, 1963 5

Caption on a banner carried by two little boys in a local fancy dress parade read as follows:
"We are pals from Alabama, where they say we can't agree
Is there really that much difference when you look at him and me?"

Michel Jacques Gagné
B.A., B.Ed.: McGill University
M.A.: Concordia University

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1. HISTORY THROUGH SECTARIAN GLASSES

Historical accounts of Northern Ireland during the sixties are numerous, though brief, and are usually embedded within broader works of a general nature.[1] In contrast with the wealth of published texts on the subject of the Troubles—that is, the long civil war that afflicted the region from late 1969 until 1998—there exist but few works which target the Northern Ireland civil rights movement specifically and in much detail.[2] There is also a tendency to weave the two periods into a single theme: that of sectarian violence.[3] Interestingly enough, the only three historical works to delve seriously into the history of this movement were not written by members of the Irish historical profession.[4]

Furthermore, an overwhelming amount of what makes up the 'civil rights literature'[5] tends to present twentieth century Northern Ireland as a sort of hermetically-sealed society, strangely unaffected by international trends and ideas. In the age of Cold War, decolonization and mass media, this is indeed a strange way to conceive history. The primary record, however, consisting of newspaper reports, letters, interviews and memoirs, reveals that the Northern Ireland civil rights movement was spurred on to a significant extent by the tumultuous international context of the sixties. We should therefore ask ourselves why the secondary literature makes so little mention of this.

Recent works on contemporary Northern Ireland have overwhelmingly taken the form of 'sectarian epics'; that is, studies which focus almost exclusively on the long-lasting and geographically-limited scope of sectarian violence. "As a consequence," write Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern, "the reality of class, gender and other axes of social division [have been] underplayed in the context of a highly politicised ethnic separation."[6] This is certainly true of the civil rights literature, which has been written in large part during the seventies, eighties and nineties against the backdrop of a bitter civil war by authors trying to make sense of the violence raging outside their door. The overpowering influence of contemporary political events has tended to give rise to historical models which focused almost exclusively on constitutional matters and on sectarian violence. Most chroniclers of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement have lent insufficient attention to other dimensions of Northern Ireland society, namely the impact of foreign events and ideologies on local affairs. The usual result is a nebulous

explanation of how the movement spontaneously appeared on the scene, almost by magic, in the summer of 1968. The following quote by Jonathan Moore, is especially glaring:

> From the early 1960s onwards, increasing sections of the Catholic community realised that this political obsession with partition was achieving nothing for the minority community. There was now a demand, particularly from within the emerging Catholic middle classes, for full participation within the Northern state. As a result of this attitudinal change, there developed civil rights organisations which focused on the widespread discrimination against the Catholic minority.[7]

This sudden "attitudinal change" reported by Moore, from traditional nationalism to "full participation within the Northern state" actually raises more questions about the underlying causes of the civil rights movement than it answers. It is also a simplistic and rather dubious extrapolation of what the primary literature actually tells us.

While sources like this one altogether ignore the world beyond Irish shores, other accounts do throw a passing wink at one or several events occurring in the wider world—the American civil rights movement, for instance—but such references are for the most part infuriatingly brief and presented as a sort of parenthesis that in no way alters the rest of a bipolar and highly politicised narrative.[8]

The general picture that emerges then from a survey of the secondary literature is that of Northern Ireland as a sort of bubble, a society that is so deeply consumed by its own peculiar past that it is only marginally affected, if at all, by exterior forces. While no one can deny that the problem of sectarianism and the constitutional future of Northern Ireland have played a central role in the province's political and social affairs since its inception in 1920, it is wrong to assume that all phenomena, political, social and economic, occurring in Northern Ireland can be reduced to fit neatly into the unidimensional debate over partition.

An obvious example of this form of history writing, which I term the 'sectarian epic', can be found in Tim Pat Coogan's *The Troubles* (1996), in which aspects of the civil rights movement are arbitrarily engineered to fit the author's traditional nationalist convictions. Coogan describes civil rights agitation in Northern Ireland as an offspring of Daniel O'Connell's nineteenth century Catholic Association.[9] Strangely enough, there is not a single civil rights leader who left behind any evidence of having O'Connell on their

mind at any time during the civil rights campaign. Coogan goes on to depict the movement as yet another outburst of revolutionary nationalism in defiance of "800 years of British oppression"—a Homeric tale that features Henry II, Strongbow, Brian Boru, and the Vikings![10] Ironically enough, one of the few historical Irish figures for whom civil rights activists would express open admiration was a radical Marxist by the name of James Connolly, an atypical revolutionary who had fallen into obscurity, neglected by the very pen of traditional nationalist authors such as Coogan.

A Unionist variation on the 'sectarian epic' is found in the writings of Steve Bruce, who calls the civil rights marches of the sixties "old-fashioned nationalism" and "deliberate exercises in coat-trailing."[11] To prove his point, Bruce must ignore the complex matrix of ideologies that made up the civil rights movement, and the fact that its most influential leaders were staunch advocates of moderation, expressing little desire to use the civil rights platform as a vehicle for Irish nationalism.[12] While Bruce does concede that the civil rights movement was "heavily influenced by the black civil rights campaigns and the student anti-war movement in the United States and major European capitals,"[13] this assertion is stated in passing—a mere parenthesis—and it bears no weight on the rest of his politically-motivated text.

There are, of course, a number of authors who study Northern Ireland society using an economic model of class conflict.[14] These accounts present the sectarian problem as a byproduct of capitalist economics. A useful alternative to the habitual sectarian-driven literature, this 'Marxist' approach, though less partisan, nonetheless concentrates its efforts on explaining the roots of sectarianism, and spends little time exploring the forces of gender politics, popular culture, generational divides, or international influence. In the case of the civil rights movement, this has led to a somewhat skewed perspective of the movement's nature and origins.

Chroniclers of the civil rights movement have thus too often let their political passions and experience of the Troubles filter through into their treatment of the civil rights campaigns of the pre-Troubles years. This has given rise to historical narratives which are simplistic, laced with a number of anachronisms, and which portray the Northern Ireland of the sixties as a self-contained universe, not much unlike the dystopian island

paradise we find in William Gouldings' *The Lord of the Flies*: an insulated little world ruled by stubborn children, torn asunder by a never-ending tribal conflict.

This trend in Irish historiography is, unfortunately, not limited to the civil rights literature. Much Irish historiography tends to be highly politicized, argues D. George Boyce, and the Irish past is all too often engineered to reflect a mythical dualist tragedy, "in which 'Taig' met 'Prod' yet again […] a kind of Irish predestiny that linked past and present, and that saw the only valid theme in Irish history as the struggle, the long, enduring struggle, between Ireland and England."[15] Although, "historians cannot ignore the historical dimension of the Ulster Troubles," he tells us, "they must also be aware of the danger of writing history teleologically."[16]

It is unfortunate that so few have sought to depict this period of Irish history as a product of its own times; that is, as a fertile ground for the international forces that were also transforming numerous other parts of the word—an increasingly interconnected world.

Let us now consider a few ways in which the world beyond Irish shores impacted Ulster's tense political landscape, and particularly the growth and fragmentation of the civil rights movement, during the years 1963-69.

2. THE HISTORICAL RECORD: CIVIL RIGHT AND THE WORLD BEYOND

In May 1963, a group of Catholic housewives from the town of Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, launched Northern Ireland's first direct-action civil rights protest. This 'Homeless Citizens League' (HCL) accused the Unionist-controlled Dungannon municipal council of discrimination in its allocation of public housing. After weeks of ineffectual pressures and picketing, thirty-seven families squatted illegally in a row of council houses slated for demolition. This initiative forced the provincial government, then led by a new and seemingly liberal Unionist, Captain Terence O'Neill, to intervene and force the local Dungannon council to provide accommodations for the squatters.

The 1963 Dungannon housing protest marked the beginning of a period during which Northern Ireland Catholics shifted their glance away from traditional sources of nationalist inspiration (such as historical heroes, Catholic practice, the injustices of past

centuries, or the government of the Irish Republic) towards elements of the contemporary non-Irish world. To wit, the Fairmount Park Squatters of Dungannon did not chant against partition, complain about Cromwell or the Famine, or heap abuses upon the Protestant faith; their focus was on the American 'negro' and the social conditions which poor Irish Catholics seemed to have in common with them as a result of their difference. In 1963, Alabama and Mississippi experienced their own hot long summer of civil rights marches, freedom rides, and lunch-counter sit-ins. On 28 August 1963, in the midst of the Dungannon housing protest, Martin Luther King Jr. uttered his internationally televised 'I Have a Dream' speech.[17] Consequently, the Northern Ireland protestors used expressions such as "Racial Discrimination in Alabama Hits Dungannon,"[18] "Ship us to Little Rock,"[19] "Pals from Alabama,"[20] and "White Negroes,"[21] to uphold their cause. The 'white negro' rhetoric soon became a recurring theme in the Northern Ireland press, and would be used by all shades of civil rights supporters.[22] A number of newspaper articles and editorials supporting the housing protest also used arguments and expressions borrowed from the American civil rights example. The American civil rights movement thus set the trend for future demonstrations in Northern Ireland over housing allocation, voting irregularities, and police brutality. Comparisons between Northern Catholics and African-Americans became the norm, and expressions such as 'civil rights,' 'discrimination,' and 'segregation' were used freely alongside direct-action tactics inspired by the American model. In January 1964,for instance, homeless Derry Catholics launched an illegal squat protest at the Springtown prefabs, a former U.S. military base slated for demolition. The *Derry Journal* proclaimed: "Derry's Little Rock Asks for Fair Play."[23]

But black America was not the only source of inspiration for Northern Ireland's civil rights protestors. The living conditions of African blacks in racially segregated countries such as South Africa and Rhodesia—and later, Biafra—captured the imagination of Northern Ireland's civil rights proponents. The notion of 'apartheid' was popularized by the newsletters of the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ), a pamphleteering society that evolved out of the Dungannon housing protest.[24] The CSJ freely compared the social standing of Northern Ireland Catholics to that of South African Blacks, and concluded that their respective positions differed only in a matter of degrees. Apartheid was not just

an African phenomena, they proposed, but one that was in every way Northern Irish as well.[25]

In the early years of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement, the CSJ, led by Conn and Pat McCluskey, attempted to pressure the Unionist government through the media, the courts, and every available political channel, not only in Northern Ireland but also in Britain. While they did make a number of allies in nationalist and socialist circles, they failed to convince the Unionist government of Terence O'Neill that legal and political reforms were necessary. Their calls fell on deaf ears in London as well, where successive British governments avoided dealing with the issue of discrimination in Ulster, fearing to upset the delicate political balance that seemed to reign there (and the Unionist MPs whose support in Westminster was desperately needed). By 1967, the McCluskeys and a number of civil-rights-minded politicians in the Northern Irish opposition, namely Austin Currie, Gerry Fitt, and Paddy Devlin, became more open to joining forces with elements on the fringe of the local political scene—namely communists and republicans—in order to forge a broader popular consensus for civil rights.

The Irish Republican Army and the Communist Party of Ireland had relatively small followings at this time, and both were seeking to gain greater visibility among the Northern Irish working class. They both saw sectarianism as a major cause of poverty and unemployment in the province. Both believed the nationalist-unionist dichotomy kept the working class divided, competing for precarious jobs and sub-standard incomes, while foreign capitalists with the help of their Unionist minions reaped immense profits thanks to the exploitation of cheap resources and a politically divided labour force.

The republican movement had utterly failed to kindle a war of liberation during the years 1957-62, and as a result it was left low on resources and bitterly divided. Under the new leadership of Cathal Goulding, a budding Marxist and a proponent of grass-roots activism, the IRA dumped arms and pursued a path to politicization throughout much of the sixties. Though this revolutionary organization and its affiliates, namely Sinn Féin and the Wolfe Tone Societies, did not discard the revolutionary rhetoric that was their idiom, Goulding and his closest advisors were in fact bent on pulling the movement closer to a popular and resolutely socialist position. Taking an active role in a broad campaign for civil rights, they believed, would allow the republicans to gradually achieve

what armed insurrection by a small band of soldiers could not: the full independence, political *and* economic, of both parts of Ireland from the clutches of a predatory capitalist world system. As Goulding stated in 1967:

> We today have been forced by circumstances to add new dimensions to our struggle for freedom, we have had to re-examine our goals in the light of today's conditions and have concluded that an attack mounted on a broad front, across cultural, economic and political fronts, promises the best hope of success in the future. […] Historically the ending of partition has been the sole aim of our movement, since 1922, and this has been our mistake. For imperialism has many forms not least the cultural and economic take-over of underdeveloped countries such as ours. […] The army guarded a frontier while the imperialists quietly entered by another and laid claim to Ireland.[26]

A few years later, Goulding would add: "We believed that the struggle for civil rights would become a struggle for class rights, that all Irish workers would become dissenters."[27] For this reason, the new IRA leadership was willing to put aside its military aims and embark upon the civil rights bandwagon,[28] even though few in the movement's grass roots were particularly keen to endorse this new vocation.[29]

Though small, the Communist Party of Ireland had a solid base within Belfast industrial circles. Its support base was largely Protestant and its membership included a large proportion of women, including Betty Sinclair, a leading civil rights advocate. Sinclair and her fellow communists, who were outspoken opponents of sectarianism and its link to poverty and unemployment, aspired to reforms that could realign the Northern Irish political spectrum along an economic, not a confessional, axis. While the Irish border was not their priority, they were nonetheless republican in outlook, believing Northern Ireland to be the artificial creation of capitalist imperialism. Northern Communists were, like the new republican leadership, vehemently opposed to American economic imperialism and any expansion of the European common market that might include the UK or the Irish Republic. As Sinclair later wrote:

> Workers from Spain, Portugal, Turkey, North Africa, etc. join in with their Italian brothers and sisters [in seeking work abroad] in a lifetime of emigration and deprivation. Is this the future that the Irish workers want? […] In the capitalist world today there are over 60 million persons without work […] Unemployment is rampant in Africa, South America, and the Middle and Far East due to neo-colonialist policies of the imperialist nations. […] The United States has been

> waging war since the 1950s against the people of the Far East and has 500 military bases ringed around the world, including one in Derry. [30]

The combination of these two revolutionary forces—let us call them Red Republicans—was to become a pillar of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement. Red republicans made several comparisons in their speeches and writings between the Unionists of Ulster and right-wing regimes around the world, such as Franco's Spain, Salazzar's Portugal, the United States of Senator McCarthy's day, the right-wing junta that dislodged Papandreou in Greece, and, later, the CIA-sponsored coup against Salvator Allende in Chile.[31] Revolutionaries by nature but cautious reformers in spirit, Red Republicans such as Goulding and Sinclair entered the arena of mainstream politics by lending their support to the civil rights cause, and by bringing about the creation of the movement's new flagship: the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA).

NICRA was a broad-based public relations body formed in 1967 that comprised a cross-section of anti-Unionist elements, most of whom held leftist convictions. Republicans and communists both played a large part in the day to day administration of NICRA. But, despite Unionist fears of a joint IRA-Bolshevik revolution, red republicans proved surprisingly moderate in their methods. In fact, it was with great reluctance that NICRA leaders such as Sinclair and the republican-socialist Fred Heatley accepted to endorse the transition to mass protest.

It was in the summer of 1968 that the civil rights campaign truly became a *mass* movement. In June, a young Catholic politician named Austin Currie—a constitutional nationalist and a fan of the American civil rights cause—joined an illegal squat in Caledon, Co. Tyrone, capturing significant media coverage for the cause of housing discrimination. Subsequently interviewed by the media, Currie declared:

> The situation in Northern Ireland is the same as that in the southern states of the USA or that in South Africa, the sole difference being that discrimination in Northern Ireland is based on religion rather than colour.[32]

In the weeks that followed, Currie pressured the leaders of the Campaign for Social Justice and Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association to launch, together, a joint march for civil rights modeled after those of the American Deep South. Speaking at the rally

which followed the march, National Democratic Party leader Joe McCann, echoing Currie's previous affirmation, declared:

> We of the minority might be excused if we feel a bond of fellowship with the negro community in the American South, with the victims of apartheid in South Africa or the deprived peoples of Mr. Ian Smith's Rhodesia. […] One has the feeling that if the Northern Ireland cabinet were transferred to Rhodesia, or Cape Town, or Alabama they would feel quite at home. […] Are we so different, or yet again so inferior, to the coloured peoples that we do not attract the attention or concern from this liberal-minded British government? […] Is the philosophy 'No Catholics need apply' so different from that of 'No coloureds need apply'?[33]

The 24 August march from Coalisland to Dungannon was widely attended by over 4000 marchers. Despite a small skirmish between civil rights protestors and loyalist agitators (led by the loyalist cleric Ian Paisley), and despite the fact that the recent invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union had unfortunately drawn much of the media's attention elsewhere, the march was considered a resounding success. Believing that civil rights reforms would follow if only they could capture the mass media's—and the wider world's—undivided attention, the leaders of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement began looking for new opportunities to bring greater visibility to their cause. Mass protest, it seemed, was the way forward.

However, this was 1968 and not 1963. The global stage was not the same as that of the first Dungannon housing protest. The peaceful civil rights movement in America had by now given way to riots, Black Power radicalism, counterculture, and a militant anti-war movement. Vietnam was in the throws of an ugly civil war in which the United States was looking less and less like a beacon of democracy and more and more like a ruthless aggressor. A war-induced famine killed off thousands in Biafra. Soviet tanks rolled through the streets of Prague. Nuclear proliferation and American imperialism gave rise to the so-called 'New Left' ideology, a vaguely-defined revolutionary fervor that stirred despondent socialists worldwide to revolt, roused more by existential angst than any concrete political ideology. Parisian students had taken to the streets in May to protest against the Gaullist regime; the ill-fated experiment turned to violence. Chicago saw its Democratic National Convention torn apart by a violent clash between student protestors and a ruthless police force executing the orders of Mayor Richard Daley, a

leading Irish-American politician. Similar clashes erupted in Rome, Tokyo, Berlin… Protest was everywhere, or so it seemed.

The younger generations in Northern Ireland were not left untouched by the turbulent events of the late sixties and the global proliferation of New Left militancy. Michael Farrell and Ciaran McKeown, two of the younger leading figures of the civil rights campaign, later explained:

> Television made the world a global village so that the new music, new styles and new ideas spread like wildfire. […] But television also brought home the injustices of the world: the Sharpeville massacre by South African police in 1960; the tortures inflicted by the French army during the Algerian war of independence; the horrors of Vietnam. And we grew up under the shadow of the atomic bomb.[34]

> 1968 was *the* year of student militancy: in May students had a genuine role in the 'revolution' that weakened de Gaulle in France; they were visible, vocal and brave in Dubcek's Czechoslovakia; in Germany, the Baader-Meinhof impulse was alive. In Northern Ireland […] the determined thoughtfulness of the foregoing years was giving way to increasingly dogmatic militancy. […] In the world outside our little student world, the situation also seemed to be one of disintegration: Martin Luther King was shot dead in April, Bobby Kennedy in June; in May came the strange event in France which the media presented as a 'revolution', flattering the contemporary militancy, and suggesting that 'The System' was about to be destroyed, with no indication of what might follow. In August the Russians rolled into Prague and crushed the Dubcek liberalisation process in Czechoslovakia. […] Tragedy on a terrible scale loomed in Biafra and Bangladesh.[35]

On the 5 October 1968, a smaller march was held in the city of Derry. It was with great reluctance that the NICRA leadership endorsed this protest, which had been planned by a band of local radicals—a consortium of New Left Marxists and independent-minded Republicans. Galvanized by the injustices they had seen perpetrated not only at home but also in Czechoslovakia, Paris, Biafra and Vietnam, the Derry marchers took to the streets, in defiance of a government ban, intending to expose the Unionists and the police as tools of an international fascist conspiracy. In keeping with the heterogeneous nature of New Left rhetoric, they carried placards reading, "South Africa – Rhodesia – Ulster – [three swastikas]", "We Shall Overcome Someday", "Smash Capitalism" and "Class Not Creed".[36]

Before the march could even get under way, a police barricade was set up at both ends of the crowd and the march turned into a violent clash between the police and demonstrators. Local youths joined the fray and the skirmish turned to chaos. A large number of unarmed protestors, including Gerry Fitt, a pro-civil rights Member of Parliament, were violently beaten by the police. The altercation set off a whirlwind of support *and* condemnation for civil rights across the province. Tempers flared. Angry students took to the streets.

In the wake of the Derry march, two new civil rights organizations were born: the Derry Citizens Action Committee (DCAC) and the People's Democracy (PD). Neither expressed the desire to join forces with NICRA, which was deemed too leftist by the first and not enough by the second.

The DCAC, led by John Hume and Ivan Cooper, was in large part a fruit of the local Catholic middle class (though Cooper himself was a Protestant and a Labour party candidate). The DCAC mobilized tens of thousands of supporters and took to the streets of Derry on numerous occasions during the following weeks. Its rallies were widely attended and well-disciplined events that made good use of the symbols of international human rights, and from which emotionalism, nationalist outbursts, and all other forms of improvisation were proscribed.

In early December, Prime Minister O'Neill sacked his minister of Home Affairs, Bill Craig, who was deemed responsible for the 5 October police attack and who had now become a liability in keeping the peace. O'Neill also promised to enact a reform package to address civil rights grievances, and appeared on live television to call for moderation on all sides. The DCAC leaders proclaimed a moratorium on future marches and looked forward to moving the civil rights campaign into Parliament, where they believed it was most likely to achieve permanent results. With the rising threat of urban violence (many loyalists had been discovered smuggling blunt weapons to a civil rights rally in Armagh), all other civil rights bodies—save one—agreed to suspend future marches and wait for O'Neill to make good on his promises.

Before the moderates could celebrate this victory, their achievements were overshadowed by the rambunctious youths of the People's Democracy movement, a loose confederation of Queen's University students and recent graduates, influenced by the

ideologies of Black Power, national liberation, and the radical socialist tenets of the international New Left movement. The PD protesters pursued a combative and provocative agenda, deliberately similar to that of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the United Sates.[37] Chanting "Sieg Heil, RUC, SS, RUC,"[38] the PD radicals saw themselves as members of a world-wide crusade against a rising fascist new world order. In the weeks that followed the 5 October March, while the DCAC was imposing its own version of moderate protest on the streets of Derry, The PD launched a number of militant marches, rallies, and sit-down strikes throughout the city of Belfast, promoting nonviolence, all the while inciting police aggression as a way to expose the fascist nature of Ulster unionism.

The point of no return was reached in January 1969 when, in defiance of the moratorium on future marches pronounced by the movement's more moderate factions, leaders of the People's Democracy organized a 'long march' from Belfast to Derry, mimicking the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery march in Alabama, USA.

> We in the Young Socialists/People's Democracy identified particularly with the younger, more radical Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who like us were in regular conflict with the older, more cautious leaders of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But King and SNCC chairman John Lewis had marched together from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama in 1965, and the violence of the racist state troopers who blocked that march had caused such outrage across the US that President Lyndon Johnson had been forced to push through the Voting Rights Act. The march to Derry was modelled on the Selma-Montgomery march and we hoped it would have a similar effect.[39]

Like its American archetype, the Belfast-to-Derry march did see its share of violence. The PD marchers were ambushed by anti-civil rights thugs at Burntollet Bridge, a few hours out of Derry. The attackers inflicted serious injuries on a number of the marchers. It was later revealed that a number of off-duty police officers had taken part in the attack.

In the wake of the Burntollet incident, sectarian tensions mounted at an exponential speed. Rioting soon broke out in Derry, Armagh and Newry, and Prime Minister O'Neill, with a potential cabinet revolt on his hands, found himself unable to deliver a reform package without unleashing further civil unrest. He ordered a snap election in February in the hope of consolidating his support among moderate Catholics and

Protestants, a move that did not work out in his favour: though his party did win the election—to no one's surprise—many Unionist candidates had run and won on an anti-civil rights ticket. Furthermore, a number of Unionists threatened to break away and form a more militant party. Most Catholics continued to boycott the Unionist Party and voted instead for a number of civil rights candidates, even some of a radical Marxist slant.

In April, loyalist paramilitaries launched a bombing campaign disguised as an IRA initiative. The province had become, quite literally, a powder keg. O'Neill was blamed by Unionists for being too soft, and by civil rights supporters for being uncompromising. He resigned later that month.

In the late spring of 1969, the divide between civil rights supporters—mostly Catholic and nationalist—and supporters of the Unionist government—mostly Protestant and loyalist—inched its way closer to the traditional sectarian divide. Most Protestants and many Catholics abandoned the movement, which no longer represented the moderate progressive ideals they espoused. Despite the efforts of the remaining civil rights leadership to keep the movement inclusive and apolitical, the clash at Burntollet and the rise of urban violence had polarized public opinion to such a point that peaceful reforms could not be enacted without a major clash erupting.

The death knell of civil rights was rung loudly in August when a riot broke out during the annual loyalist Apprentice Boys' parade around the Derry city walls. It took little more than a few tossed pennies to instigate a clash between loyalists and Catholic residents of the despondent Bogside neighborhood. Militant proponents of civil-rights, such as PD members Eamonn McCann and Bernadette Devlin (recently elected to the British Parliament), took part in the violence. The Bogsiders were unrelenting, and the much-hated police was overwhelmed. Within a matter of days, the Army was mobilized by the London government, who had given up hope that the Unionists would ever solve the crisis on their own. The presence of British soldiers, however, would utterly transform the nature of the conflict to the detriment of all civil rights supporters, even the most radical, in favour of the militant republican grass-roots.

Bogside residents welcomed the arrival of troops, if only for a short while. The indiscriminate use of force and the use of internment—almost solely applied to

Catholics—gave increased legitimacy to the claims of many militant republicans (most of whom had kept their distances from the civil rights venture) that Unionist discrimination was only going to end through the barrel of a gun. They spurned the idea that civil rights could be won by peaceful means, and they repudiated the official republican leadership and its Marxist pipe-dream of uniting the working class. The real culprit, they maintained, was not a racist upper class or an international capitalist conspiracy, but the age-old British thirst for empire. With the failure to achieve civil rights reforms and with British soldiers now posted all across the province, the militant republican cause captured a surge of new adherents.

Determined to impose order on the province, civil authorities made use of excessive force. British soldiers, pro-Unionist policemen and loyalist mobs made numerous raids—some called them 'pogroms'—into Catholic neighbourhoods. 'Defense associations' were soon formed, and a few months later, the Provisional IRA, the new voice of militant republicanism, was born of a massive exodus from the official IRA ranks.

Constitutional nationalists also abandoned the unruly movement; many of them threw their weight into the arena of parliamentary politics, far less anarchic than politics in the streets, to form the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The New Left, as it did in so many other parts of the world, soon disintegrated. Some of them, like Bernadette Devlin and Michael Farrell, moved closer to the Republican position. The Marxist old guard, on the other hand, became all but irrelevant in this new political landscape. By the winter of 1969-70, the civil rights movement was but a shred of its former self, like a voice in the wilderness, straining to be heard above the din of gunfire and bombs.

3. CONCLUSION

Although sectarianism did play a large role in Northern Ireland politics during the 1960s, a closer examination of the writings and speeches of Northern Ireland's civil rights activists reveals that their movement was a deliberate attempt to break with the past and embrace symbols and themes which were not traditionally Irish in the ethnic or religious sense. A growing number of Northern Ireland residents had thus begun, as early as 1963, to turn their backs on sectarian definitions of Irishness and to forge a new, more

inclusive identity. In doing so, leaders of the civil rights movement adopted the 'foreign' concepts of racial harmony, human rights, decolonization, national liberation, and radical democratic socialism in their quest to end sectarian discrimination. Of course, there were few in the Unionist camp who shared these concerns, nor did a significant portion of dedicated republicans, whose worldviews and political interests were deeply rooted in the traditional sectarian dichotomy. The fear of the other proved too overwhelming for these two communities to embrace the pluralistic and leftist visions of the civil rights leadership.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to understand the role international events played in bringing the civil rights movement to life. The world that came to Northern Ireland in the sixties was a complex patchwork of ideologies that further exacerbated the generational and ideological divisions which already existed in the statelet. For a large number of Northern Ireland Catholics and a few Protestants, foreign events challenged and transformed their understanding of the nature of unionism, of sectarianism, and of discrimination in the province. By joining in what seemed to them a world-wide movement against right-wing tyranny, the civil rights protestors of Northern Ireland believed that social justice could be achieved through a democratic transformation of the state from a reactionary Unionist regime to a more socialist, democratic, and pluralistic system. The secondary issue of the border would resolve itself naturally and peacefully, many hoped, if the Unionist elite could be compelled to renounce the unfair practices that perpetuated its stranglehold on local and provincial institutions. And yet, this global movement to which the Northern Ireland civil rights movement (allegedly) belonged was defined in very different ways by constitutional nationalists, red republicans, and radical New Leftists. Some might say there were three, not one, civil rights campaigns operating at once in the province, each driven by a distinct and exclusive agenda.

There is a good deal of disagreement in the secondary literature over the level of discrimination that existed in Northern Ireland leading up to the civil rights campaign.[40] However, authors such as John Whyte, Bob Purdie and Richard Rose[41] have demonstrated that discriminatory practices had gone on with much the same intensity for nearly four decades. Certainly, the significant lack of popular support for the republican

border campaign of 1957-62 suggests that Unionist discrimination was not sufficiently intolerable in the early sixties to drive large numbers of Northern Catholics into the revolutionary fold. A more important issue to consider, then, is not the extent of actual discrimination that took place but the changing consciousness of those who suddenly came to believe that discrimination in Northern Ireland had exceeded its tolerable limits. While there is little doubt that discrimination had occurred and did occur, the reasons for which many Northern Catholics and some Protestants reacted the way they did, when they did, had as much if not more to do with what they were reading in the papers and watching on television than with what was being decided by a few Unionist-controlled municipal councils.

Bob Purdie, the foremost authority on the history of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement, did not probe very deeply into the international aspects of the movement. A handful of other authors, such as Owen Dudley Edwards, Paul Arthur, Andrew J. Wilson and Brian Dooley, have attempted to do so, at least in part. Each of their works reveals a portion of the complex web of foreign influence that distinguished the Northern Ireland civil rights movements from all previous anti-partitionist campaigns. It was, in fact, the civil rights movement's fierce opposition to sectarianism, steeped in the international rhetoric of non-violence, human rights, and national liberation, that prevented the Unionist authorities from dismissing it out of hand. Until 1963, armed revolutionaries could be arrested, interned, and easily discredited. Children holding placards, women singing African-American freedom songs, and unarmed students getting clubbed by policemen were not so easily ignored, especially in the age of television. Nonetheless, as the civil rights camp grew, so did the number of loyalists willing to put down this so-called seditious conspiracy with every means at their disposal. As loyalist violence was unleashed and armed republican paramilitaries re-entered the political landscape, the civil rights movement, because of its commitment to non-violence and its inability to forge a united front, could not maintain popular support in the midst of a bitter civil war where bombs and bullets overshadowed placards and speeches.

The short life span and mitigated successes of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement are best explained by the fact that it was a deeply divided coalition. The narrow strip of ground on which the movement stood united in the fall of 1968 eroded as

quickly as it had appeared. It never did develop strong, central leadership such as the American movement had in Martin Luther King, Jr., and it was easily splintered by internecine squabbles over methodology and political convictions. Forging a strong and united movement proved, in the end, impossible to achieve, mainly because the movement had, like some three-headed mutant, no single long-term vision under which an anti-Unionist majority could unite.

The Northern Ireland civil rights movement has not been altogether ignored by the historical literature, but it has remained, to this day, a subject of secondary importance in Irish historiography. All too often has the movement been discussed solely in the light of the sectarian problem or as an introduction to the period of the Troubles. Our understanding of the civil rights movement as a broad coalition of socialists, and as the fruit of the international protest culture of the late sixties, has suffered because of this. Bob Purdie was right to warn us that the Northern Ireland of the sixties is "a lost world in which most of the political landmarks are different [than those of the Troubles] and different assumptions and aspirations underpin politics."[42] As post-Troubles Northern Ireland enters a new era in which sectarianism might perhaps begin to wane, we can hope that the civil rights movement, as an anti-sectarian force, will stir-up greater interest and research in the years to come.

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[1] For examples of historical works on Northern Ireland see Dudley Edwards (1970), Moody (1974), Hennessey (1997), Loughlin (1998), and Bardon (2001).

[2] Works by Arthur (*The People's Democracy*, 1974) and Dooley (*The Black and the Green*, 1998) are, to date, the only historical monographs which treat specifically with an aspect of the movement, while Purdie (*Politics in the Streets*, 1990) has written the only comprehensive history of the movement as a whole. For journalistic accounts of the period (embedded within analyses of the Troubles), see works by the Sunday Times Insight Team (1972), Van Voris (1975), B. Whyte (1985), Coogan (1996), B. O'Brien (2000) and Walsh (2000); for accounts of an autobiographical nature, see Devlin (1969), McCann (1974), Farrell (1976, 1988), McKeown (1984), McCluskey (1989), and Currie (2005); for works of a political nature, see Bew et al. (1993, 1996), Coulter (1999), and P. Rose (2000); and for sociological accounts, see R. Rose (1971, 1976), the second edition of Barritt & Carter (1972), and Hewitt's 1981 article in the *British Journal of Sociology*.

[3] See, for example, Bew and Gillespie: *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1993* (1993), Coogan: *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (1996), O'Brien: The *Long War: The IRA and Sinn Féin* (1999), Ó Dochartaigh: *From Civil Rights to Armalities: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (1997), Rose: *How the Troubles Came to Northern Ireland* (2000), and Taylor: *Loyalists: War and Peace in Northern Ireland* (1999).

[4] i.e.: An American (Brian Dooley: *Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland and Black America*, 1998), a Scot (Bob Purdie: *Politics in the Streets: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*

In Northern Ireland, 1990), and a Northern Irish graduate student and former participant-observer (Paul Arthur: *The People's Democracy 1968-73*, 1974).

[5] Given the lack of specific works on the subject, this expression necessarily includes all works of an historical or social scientific nature that include some analysis of the movement and its context.

[6] Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern, eds.: *Who Are 'The People'? Unionism, Protestantism, and Loyalism in Northern Ireland* (1997), p.4-5. Some of the few exceptions I have found to this pattern is a Master's thesis by Mary Katherine Bolster titled: *Women on the March: Women in the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland in the 1960s* (1991), as well as Dooley's *Black and Green* and Purdie's *Politics in the Streets*.

[7] Jonathan Moore: "The Labour Party and Northern Ireland in the 1960s," in Eamonn Hughes, ed.: *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland 1960-1990* (1993), p.74.

[8] Arthur (1974) and Dooley (1998) are the only monographs that diverge from this trend. Despite their auspicious titles, Guelke's *Northern Ireland: the International Perspective* (1988) and Ó Dochartaigh's *Ulster's White Negroes: From Civil Rights to Insurrection* (1994) do not address the question of foreign influence in much, if any, depth.

[9] Coogan: *The Troubles*, p.10.

[10] Ibid. p.4

[11] Bruce: *The Red Hand*, p.27, 28. See also *God Save Ulster*, p.93.

[12] See, for instance, the memoirs of Conn McCluskey: *Up Off Their Knees* (1989), p.15-16: "Fifty years of the same sort of agitation by the Nationalists had achieved nothing. Heated discussions about the 'border' would be a waste of time and energy. Our idea was, since we lived in a part of the United Kingdom where the British remit ran, we should seek the ordinary rights of British citizens which were obviously denied us." Se also John Hume: "The Northern Catholic," *Irish times*, 18 and 19 May 1964: "A United Ireland, if it is to come, and if violence, rightly, is to be discounted, must come about by evolution, i.e.: by the will of the Northern majority […] It will, of course, take a long time."

[13] Bruce: *The Red Hand*, p.27.

[14] The writings of Paul Bew (*The British State and the Ulster Crisis: from Wilson to Thatcher*, 1985; *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1993*, with Gordon Gillespie, 1993) and Henry Patterson (*The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland*, 1989; *Northern Ireland 1921-1996: Political Forces and Social Classes*, with Paul Bew and Peter Gibbon, 1996) are noteworthy examples.

[15] D. George Boyce: "Past and Present Revisionism and the Northern Ireland Troubles," in Boyce and O'Day, eds.: *The Making of Modern Irish History* (1996), p.217-19.

[16] Ibid. p.217-219

[17] Martin Luther King, Jr. was incarcerated for his public stand against segregation in Birmingham, and subsequently wrote his famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Following this, the University of Alabama was desegregated and President Kennedy announced his intention to end segregation in the South with a civil rights bill. In late August, while Dungannon squatters occupied the condemned estate houses of Faimount Park, news of the 250,000-strong civil rights march on Washington reached Northern Ireland households. African-American activists, such as the socialist Bayard Rustin and student radical John Lewis (SNCC) spoke at a subsequent rally, as did Dr. King, pronouncing his landmark speech "I have a Dream".

[18] *Dungannon Observer*, 18 May 1963.

[19] Ibid.

[20] *Dungannon Observer*, 15 June 1963.

[21] *Dungannon Observer*, 7 September 1963.

[22] See *Dungannon Observer:* 7 September 1963 (letter), and *Irish News:* 21 October, 18 November, and 5 December 1968.

[23] *Derry Journal*: 31 January 1964, quoted in Brian Dooley: *Black and Green* (1998), p.30.

[24] See for example CSJ: *Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth* (1964).

[25] The publications of the Campaign for Social Justice drew heavily from the theme of racial segregation in America, South Africa, and Rhodesia. See for example CSJ: *Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth* (1964).

[26] Cathal Goulding: Speech at the Wolfe Tone Commemoration, Bodenstown, June 1967, in *United Irishman*, July 1967.

[27] See Cathal Goulding: "EOLAS interviews Cathal Goulding," *EOLAS* #10 (October 1973), reprinted in *RECON*, Vol. III, No.1 (January 1975), p.42-44. This quote should be read in the context of Goulding's

"stages" theory of Irish independence—a step-by-step socialist revolution in both Irish states using popular agitation and democratic channels to bring about the creation of a single socialist republic. The programme called for the democratic restructuring of Stormont through a new constitution that guaranteed proportional representation, civil liberties, and a principle of Irish Union. British withdrawal would occur in negotiated stages and end with the reunification of the two Irish states. See *Tuairisc, The Newsletter of Muintir Wolfe Tone (The Wolfe Tone Society)* 31 August 1966, and Wolfe Tone Society: "Statement of the Wolfe Tone Society on the Northern Crisis," 23 August 1971 (Linen Hall Library—Northern Ireland Political Collection: Belfast, Northern Ireland).

[28] Goulding seemed convinced that a revolution, if there ever was to be one, would be initiated by the working class and not by a small band of professional soldiers. See Cathal Goulding: interview with John Rooks, "The Mind of the IRA," *Belfast Telegraph*, 17 February 1966.

[29] Goulding never managed to assert his full authority over the republican grassroots. His socialist theories were seen by important members of the IRA council as a "proposal to divert the IRA into the never-never land of theoretical Marxism and parliamentary politics." (Seán MacStiofáin: *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* 1975, p.99). MacStiofáin, was to lead the haemorrhage of Northern republicans out of the official movement to form the Provisional IRA in 1970.

[30] Sinclair: *Unemployment*, p.10-11, 18.

[31] See James Stewart (Communist Party of Ireland): *The Struggle in the North*, p.8, 10-11; Goulding: "The New Strategy of the IRA" in *New Left Review*, No. 64, p.53, and "*EOLAS* interviews Cathal Goulding," in *RECON*, volume III, No.1, p.36; and Sinclair: *Unemployment*, p.18.

[32] *Irish News*, 24 June 1968.

[33] *Irish News*, 26 August 1968.

[34] Michael Farrell: *Twenty Years On*, p.12.

[35] Emphasis in the original. Ciaran McKeown: *The Passion of Peace*, p.41, 44.

[36] *Irish Times*, 7 October 1968.

[37] See the quote by Michel Farrel below (footnote #39).

[38] McKeown: *The Passion of Peace*, p.50.

[39] Farrell: *Twenty Years On*, p.57.

[40] See for instance the virulent exchange between Christopher Hewitt ("Catholic Grievances, Catholic Nationalism and Violence in Northern Ireland During the Civil Rights Period: A Reconsideration," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.32, no.3, 1981; "Discrimination in Northern Ireland: A Rejoinder," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.34, no.3, 1983. "Catholic Grievances and Violence in Northern Ireland," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.36, no.1, 1985), Denis O'Hearn ("Catholic Grievances, Catholic Nationalism: A Comment," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.34, no.3, 1983; "Again on Discrimination in Northern Ireland: A Reply to the Rejoinder," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.36, no.1, 1985), and Kassian Kovalcheck ("Catholic Grievances and Violence in Northern Ireland: Appraisal and Judgment," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.38, no.1, 1987).

[41] John Whyte: "How Much Discrimination Was There Under the Unionist Regime, 1921-68?" in Tom Gallagher and James O'Connell, eds.: *Contemporary Irish Studies*, (1983); Purdie: *Politics in the Streets* (1990); and Rose: *Governing Without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (1971).

[42] Purdie: *Politics in the Streets*, p.1.