

Place or past? Exploring the relationship between violence and commemoration in the 'new' Northern Ireland

Preliminary findings-August 2013

Project synopsis

Following yet another summer of commemorative-related violence in Northern Ireland, the practices and processes of memory and commemoration continue to present a formidable challenge to post-conflict transition in Northern Ireland. The overarching aim of our exploratory project was to explore the complexities of this particular form of violence. The project considered the ways in which communities re-tell, re-imagine and re-live memory and asked why the performance or celebration of the past can sometimes lead to violence in specific places. These questions are fundamentally important as Northern Ireland embarks upon a decade of commemorations leading up to the centenary of its creation in 1921.

The project had five key objectives. They were:

- 1) To document and map outbursts of violence in Northern Ireland associated with commemorative activities since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998;
- 2) To ascertain how best to disentangle the multiple layers and meanings of the range of spaces in which violence occurs;
- 3) To identify the range of actors involved in the complex relationship between memory and violence including the custodians of commemoration, those who participate in the celebration of memory, those who respond to the commemorative event using violence and those public bodies who are tasked with managing and maintaining public area;
- 4) To identify the motivational agendas underpinning the distinct acts of celebrating the memory and the violence;
- 5) To explore ways in which the research can support public bodies especially educational institutions and community and voluntary organisations managing commemorative celebrations during the next decade and beyond.

Preliminary findings

Objective 1 was achieved through the creation of a new dataset, which maps commemorative-related violence. Initially, the research team participated in a series of discussions about what

constituted 'commemorative-related violence'. These discussions revealed the various interpretations, which exist around what constitutes a commemorative event, along with the challenges in agreeing a general definition. In terms of collecting statistics, which highlighted violence, the research team focused on the PSNI and media. Although existing Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) data on crime exists, it does not differentiate between the types of crime. Through an extensive media search, working alongside PSNI data from 1998, the team produced a dataset of violent activities and outbursts linked to commemorative practices between 1998 and 2012 across Northern Ireland. This dataset has been mapped (using a Geographic Information System) against a number of different variables (such as deprivation indices, religious composition of neighbourhoods, physical interfaces) to explore and analyse the specificity of place and the influence of 'place' on commemoration and violence (meeting Objective 2). Essentially, this allows the research team to consider whether there are commonalities in terms of specific variables where violence and commemoration take place.

A number of significant findings have emerged from this analysis including:

- Variability in the type of commemoration that triggers violence. For example the unveiling or existence of physical memorials does not tend to instigate violent conflict. However, there is contestation over commemorative parades which has the potential to manifest into violence;
- There are very strong relationships between levels of deprivation and violence. The data sets shown that 48% of violent incidents between 1998-2012 occurred in the top 10% of the most socially and economically deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland;
- There are significant relationships between commemorative-related violence in spaces which experience other forms of crime and/or disorder;
- Commemorative-related violence is more problematic in urban centres;
- There are significant relationships between violence and interfaces in urban centres;
- There are emerging spaces of violence. Essentially, these are places which historically did not experience violence and/or public disorder during the conflict but are now witnessing violence as a consequence of commemorative events;
- Since 1998 the places where violence occurs is declining. The evidence suggests that this is because of the development of good practice among stakeholders;

- There are recurrent spaces of violence. Places that have consistently experienced violence continue to witness violence as a result of commemorative events.

Objectives 3 and 4 have been met through a series of workshops, follow-up interviews, and roundtable discussions with Loyalist and Republican community representatives, politicians, community relations' officers, victims' groups and representatives from Loyal Orange Bands. These workshops and interviews raised a number of significant questions and issues and revealed complex interconnections between space, commemoration and violence. Furthermore, participants that were actively involved in organising and participating in commemorative events talked about growing feelings of disempowerment; a lack of faith and trust in public bodies; poor community relations; and a lack of resources and policy direction in relation to the management of events. Furthermore, a public roundtable discussion took place on the theme of gendered commemoration in August to further flesh out Objective 3. This engaged victims' groups, community organisations, women's groups, academics and politicians and pointed towards the highly gendered nature of physical commemoration in Northern Ireland.

The realisation of Objective 5 was considered through a closed roundtable discussion with public organisations to discuss the challenges the public sector faces in the management of commemorative activities. This was attended by representatives from the Irish Government, Victims Commission, Heritage Lottery, INQE, Northern Ireland Housing Association, DCAL the PSNI and the Institute for Conflict Research. This conversation revealed a profound absence of formal direction or support for staff in addressing issues of political and historic contention. As a consequence many of those working in this area spoke of personal risk, of a fear of political controversy of a preference to emphasise everything EXCEPT the dominant political issue of the past and strong partisan pressure within public authorities to assert a particular narrative. The consequence was that many organisations steer away from direct engagement with politically difficult subjects. The memorialisation of the past is left to private agencies with a strong interest in and commitment to partisan narrative and is largely uncontrolled. Public authorities will seldom remove memorials placed by paramilitaries and have even provided land for formal memorialisation of illegal killings. This in turn contributes to the strong territorialisation of many parts of Northern Ireland.

Future plans

To mark the project's close the research team will host an event in the Crumlin Road Gaol in Belfast. This event will provide an opportunity to showcase the research findings and create an environment for critical debate on these sensitive issues. There are two elements to this event. The first involves three panel discussions consisting of public commentators, politicians and those responsible for orchestrating and/or mediating commemorative practices. These speakers will provide their own interpretations and views on a series of issues which have emerged from the research; they will then participate in a debate with the selected audience. The second element is an exhibition, which will allow participants to view images the research team took of commemorative events, the policing of these events, and incidents of violence at these events. The datasets will also be produced in map form and highlight key variables and characteristics of the relationship between space, violence and commemoration.