Beneath the Troubles, the Cobblestones:
Recovering the 'buried' memory of Northern Ireland's 1968

Chris Reynolds

This short piece interrogates transnational perspectives of 1968 by briefly analysing the place of Northern Ireland in the broader narrative. Whilst the Northern Irish events appear to share many characteristics with popular memories of this period, it rarely features in the ever-expanding roster of those having experienced a "1968". The enduring marginalisation of the province from the transnational collective memory is not to be understood by the specificities of the particular context there. Instead, one should look at the divergent post-'68 afterlife known as the Troubles to make sense of what is in fact an erroneous absence. However, since the onset of peace, possibilities to recalibrate this perspective have opened up with valuable lessons for the broader challenge of managing the legacy of Northern Ireland's contested past as part of the ongoing Peace Process. Let us begin with a brief outline the events of 1968 in the 'troubled province'.

Following a period of building tension and mounting action around the issues of discrimination and inequality in the mid to late 1960s, a second-ever, and peaceful, Civil Rights march took place on Derry/Londonderry's Duke Street on October 5, 1968.[1] The heavy-handed response of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), captured on camera and circulated locally, nationally and internationally, triggered the beginning of Northern Ireland's 1968. The ranks of those involved soon swelled and expanded, importantly bringing on board a youthful, student-based body known as the People's Democracy (PD). Street protests and actions of civil disobedience multiplied and by mid-November the government was dealing with a mass movement. Faced with this pressure, and despite much opposition from within his own ranks, the then Prime Minister Terence O'Neill was forced to offer concessions. His intended objective of halting protests failed as the PD pressed ahead with a controversial 'Long March' (modelled on the US Civil Rights Selma to Montgomery march of 1965) between Belfast and Derry/Londonderry on January 1, 1969. The inevitable tensions provoked by this action came to a head on January 4 at Burntollet

[1] For a more detailed and thorough analysis of this period see, Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland's 68. Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the* Troubles (Dublin, 2007); Chris Reynolds, *Sous les pavés…the Troubles. Northern Ireland, France and the European Collective memory of 1968* (Bern, 2015); Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets/ The origins of the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1990).

bridge when a group of Unionist counter-protestors brutally attacked the peaceful marchers. This marked a significant turning-point as the sectarian tensions of the province – hitherto successfully contained during this period of protest – were now exposed and would become increasingly uncontrollable. O'Neill's eventual reaction to call a general election for February 24, 1969 effectively marked the end of Northern Ireland's 1968. Even a cursory consideration of the characteristics of this movement strongly suggests that it was part of what is now broadly considered to be a period of transnational protest.

From a contextual point of view, Northern Ireland was exposed to the same socio-economic and cultural developments that are considered to have been a critical factor in explaining the emergence of this period of protest elsewhere. Furthermore, when one thinks of the cast of 1968, images of young people pushing back the boundaries of the acceptable in a bid to break new ground and challenge the status quo come to mind. One's reading of 1968 should of course not be limited to just young people; the intergenerational interaction of this time is also a vital consideration. The prominence of the PD together with its youthful, headstrong approach creating tensions with the more moderate and cautious elements of Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) places the province very much in line with experiences elsewhere. In addition, as protestors around the world observed, and were inspired by, their peers, the cross-fertilisation of forms of action became a central factor in building a sense of transnational togetherness. The importance of space, sit-down protests, ultra-democratic structures, and the forms of expression on the streets of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry certainly testify to how activists there were plugged into the zeitgeist of protest sweeping the globe. The most visually striking example of this is surely the collection of PD posters that were directly influenced by those from the Parisian *Beaux Arts* that have become iconic in representations of the paradigmatic French events of *mai 68.* Finally, whilst one must be careful to avoid simplifying ongoing debates on how this period can and should be interpreted, one particularly pertinent possibility is that it should be considered as a revelatory crisis of some sort. That is, the protests, inspired (but not limited to) the vigour and desires of a new generation, declining the deference of their elders, exposed a whole raft of issues requiring attention that had been left to fester in the post-war era of relative comfort, stability and prosperity. The case of Northern Ireland

dovetails with such an interpretation.[2] With these overlapping characteristics lending weight to the argument that Northern Ireland did indeed experience its very own "1968", it is interesting to consider its place in the transnational narrative.

Recognition that this was a period characterised by a wave of common revolt sweeping the globe has become an increasingly significant element in studies on this extraordinary moment.[3] Furthermore, as well as a consolidation of the notion that a complete understanding of any "1968" is predicated on taking stock of the exceptional international context, recent trends have seen what can be described as peripheral '68s being brought into the narrative, changing its overall structure.[4] However, despite the quite obviously strong commonality between what happened in Northern Ireland and the general view of what took place elsewhere, it has been surprising to note an enduring marginalisation of the province in transnational perspectives. Whilst it is arguable that such an absence can be explained by the specificities of the Northern Irish context, this surely misses a vital point in making sense of this period. Every country, region or area involved had its own specific contexts and demands. "1968" should be understood as an opening that empowered widespread challenges to status quos everywhere. The transnational commonality was not based on similar demands but instead on the shared gateway opened at this time that provided the possibility for them to be voiced and heard. Northern Irish 68ers were granted access too. Instead, the absence of the province is to be understood by its very different post-'68 afterlife.

In the history of Northern Ireland, 1968 is generally considered to be the year the Troubles began. The untenability of O'Neill's position as Prime Minister was made clear in the February 1969 elections, as was the further entrenchment of communal divides. Over the course of the next six months, tensions continued to mount and the spectre of violence

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[2] Reynolds, *Sous les pavés…the Troubles,* 83-118.

[3] C.f. for example, David Caute, *Sixty-Eight. The Year of the Barricades; A Journey through 1968* (London, 1988); Ronald Fraser, *1968: a student generation in revolt* (New York, 1988); Philipp Gassert and Martin Klimke, *1968 – Memories and Legacies of a Global Revolt* (Washington, 2008); Robert Gildea, James Mark and Anette Warring, *Europe's 1968. Voices of revolt* (Oxford, 2013).

[4] Patrick Dramé and Jean Lamarre, *1968. Des sociétés en crise: une perspective globale/Societies in crisis: A global perspective* (Laval, 2009); Nora Farik, *1968 Revisited.* 2008. *40 years of protest movements* (Brussels, 2008); Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, *1968 in Europe. A History of Protest and Activism* (New York, 2008); Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Les luttes et les rêves. Une histoire populaire de la France. De 1685 à nos jours* (Paris, 2016), 778-865.

became ever more present. Northern Ireland was, from this point on, set on the nightmarish descent into the Troubles.[5] Clashes between the Nationalist population and the security forces increased in intensity, culminating in the Battle of the Bogside in August 1969. The British Army was called in to help bring order and, over the course of the next three years, violent and radical forces grew in prominence on both sides of the community. The tragic events of Bloody Sunday in 1972 were confirmation that Northern Ireland had reached the point of no return. The conflict raged until 1998 with over 3,600 people losing their lives.[6] As well as this horrific death toll, the period was one defined by violence, destruction, hatred and division. No-one involved in the protest movements of 1968 envisaged or intended to trigger the horror that was to follow. However, the fact that the conflict did emerge so soon afterwards set the province apart and provides the key to understanding the absence of Northern Ireland from the transnational story.

In the case of France, *soixantehuitards* have arguably been the most important vector in the construction of a very positive national collective memory of 1968. In the immediate aftermath of *les événements* and, crucially, on every decennial anniversary since, the 'memory barons' of *mai 68* have been wheeled out to regale anyone prepared to listen to the tales of the heady, iconic days of their glorious past.[7] Such an outlook has come to dominate transnational perspectives of the period, with 1968 largely considered to be a positive, progressive step forward for those having experienced it. The same clearly cannot be said in the case of Northern Ireland. In the short-term, those involved were forced to maintain a low-profile as any association with the protest of 1968, in the context of the Troubles, was a risk to personal security. In the medium to long term, as the casualties and deaths mounted, a certain degree of guilt and responsibility for precipitating such horror was felt by some of those involved. The obvious consequences of this divergent post-'68 afterlife has been a very different process of memory construction. Unlike France, there was no immediate desire to forge a positive narrative. This was confirmed as the province

[5] Too many studies of the troubled history of Northern Ireland exist to be all cited. Some particularly useful starting points would include, Thomas Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland. 1920-1996* (Basingstoke, 1997); David McKittrick, and David McVea, *Making sense of the Troubles* (London, 2001); Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939, The Persistence of Conflict* (Dublin, 2007).

[6] Chris Thornton, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and David McKittrick, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh, 2004).

[7] Chris Reynolds, *Memories of May '68. France's Convenient Consensus* (Cardiff, 2011).

spiralled further into the nightmare of the Troubles. During the conflict, there was no clamour to take ownership of the legacy of 1968 in the same way obvious elsewhere. Therefore from both within and without, the memory of Northern Ireland's '68 can be described as having been buried beneath the horror that was the Troubles, thus explaining the absence of the province in the popular memory of this period. However, the current peace-time, post-Troubles context provides the grounds for a recalibration of the memory of this time and the possibility to write Northern Ireland into the transnational narrative.

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 effectively brought the conflict to an end.[8] The subsequent era of (albeit fragile) peace has led to many changes. One such area concerns perspectives on the province's contested past. 1968 is a potent example of how this new context has provided an opportunity to reframe memories of such significant moments. The first peace-time anniversary of 1968 took place in 2008. Forty years on, and for the first time, this period was subjected to the same commemorative glare that has become so commonplace elsewhere.[9] A whole plethora of events that took place to mark this anniversary fed into (and fed off) an undoubted surge in interest. In the conferences, workshops, concerts and screenings, most notable was the widespread involvement of former participants, now keen to tell their stories and make their voices heard. Furthermore, having hitherto been afforded little attention, 1968 became the focus of a tense battle between the two dominant Nationalist political parties (Sinn Féin and the SDLP) over the ownership of this period's legacy, again marking an important change. Finally, there was a quite obvious effort made in this commemorative period to situate the events of Northern Ireland's 1968 within the exceptional international context of the time. This shift, as signalled by 2008, highlighted the possibilities opened up in the era of peace to right the wrong that is the absence of the province from the transnational memory of 1968. Such a recalibration broadens the contextualisation of this period that can only help enhance understandings of this pivotal moment and provides valuable lessons for the significant challenge of confronting the difficulties of the contested past as part of the Peace Process. The ongoing recovery of the buried memory of Northern Ireland's 1968 is sure to characterise the 50th anniversary of these seminal events.

[8] Patterson, *Ireland since 1939,* 335-38.

[9] Chris Reynolds, "Northern Ireland's 1968 in a Post-Troubles Context," *Interventions* 19, no. 5 (2017): 631-45.

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Dr Chris Reynolds is Associate Professor of Contemporary French and European Studies at Nottingham Trent University. His main research interests are in relation to the events of 1968 from a French, Northern Irish and European perspective. In addition to a wide range of articles and chapters on these topics, he is the author of *Memories of May'68: France's Convenient Consensus* (University of Wales Press, 2011) and *Sous les pavés…The Troubles: Northern Ireland, France and the European Collective Memory of 1968* (Peter Lang, 2015). Chris is currently leading a significant project with the Ulster Museum on the question of Northern Ireland's 1968.