

## **Museums and 'difficult pasts': Northern Ireland's 1968**

by Chris Reynolds and William Blair

### **Abstract**

This article contributes to the debate on the increasingly prominent role of museums in the interpretation of what have become known as 'difficult histories'. It begins by outlining the impact and legacy of contested history within the context of Northern Ireland before focusing on how and why some museums have come to see their role and purpose, and define their social impact, in relation to the increasingly prevalent practice of confronting uncomfortable heritage. The role of National Museums Northern Ireland and its experiences in interpreting contested history provides the backdrop for a discussion of its recent collaborative project on the seminal events of 1968. This venture's innovative methodological and theoretical approach, it is argued, provides valuable lessons for the broader challenge of dealing with the difficult legacy of Northern Ireland's past as part of the ongoing peace process. It also offers a possible blueprint for other museums to adapt in their efforts to confront their own 'difficult histories'.

### **Keywords**

1968; Northern Ireland; Troubles; Museums; Difficult History; Memory; Agonism

## Museums and 'difficult pasts': Northern Ireland's 1968

by Chris Reynolds and William Blair

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We live in a mnemonic age where, in recent times, we have become obsessed with the past (Bell 2008, p.148). This 'historic turn' has had many interesting consequences, in particular the 'memory boom' it has spawned as academia has followed this surge in interest for all things 'past' (Winter 2000, pp.69-92). Explaining this shift necessitates a consideration of a number of factors, one of which is the suggestion that, so worried are we about the future, we seek some sort of solace in the past (Cubitt 2007, pp.1-2; Phillips 2004, p.2; Radstone and Schwartz 2010, p.2; Wertsch 2002, p.30). However, this would be to suggest that the past is an area where only comfort or reassurance can be found. The truth is somewhat different, mainly because not all histories provide a positive alternative to the current-day predicament.

Such 'difficult histories', as Rose argues, 'describe memories of pain, suffering, oppression and grief' (Rose 2016, p.4). How to deal with them has become the focus of intense interest as more and more attention is afforded to helping societies become better equipped with overcoming the challenges presented. The fact that the German language has its very own term for this task; 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung'—roughly translated as 'coming to terms with the past'—is just one example of the growing recognition that, in order to secure a brighter future, societies with contentious histories must be prepared to face up to them or, as the Ghanaian term 'Sankofa' translates, 'to go forward, you must first go to the past' (Berea College 2018, online).

This article interrogates the increasingly prominent role that museums can and are playing in the process of dealing with such 'difficult pasts' and considers whether such interventions 'heal or hurt' (Gilbin 2014). Taking as its focus the example of Northern Ireland and, specifically, an Ulster Museum

project on the seminal events of 1968, it is argued that museums can indeed be a constructive arena for assisting post-conflict societies to confront and deal with the challenges of the past. In particular, museums provide the ideal context for the development of strategies drawing on an 'agonistic' approach that accepts that one must avoid seeking to rewrite history in the interests of achieving an impossible consensus. For as Gebler argues, '[y]ou cannot change the past, but with understanding you can sometimes draw the poison out of it' (Gebler 2001, p.405).

### **Northern Ireland's contested past**

The year 2018 marks 20 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in Northern Ireland and the anniversary has been accompanied by both sombre reflection and a wide -ranging debate on the fitful political progress since that peace accord. There can be no question that the Agreement signalled a significant turning point for the 'troubled province.'<sup>1</sup> The two subsequent decades of peace have seen significant changes for Northern Ireland, the majority of which have been very positive. The current socio-economic, political and cultural circumstances are undeniably a long way from the dark days of the Troubles.<sup>2</sup> That said, political progress is intermittent and faltering and there is little agreement on how to deal with the legacy of the past. Deep-seated divisions remain and community tensions still surface over issues of flags and parades, particularly at interface areas. The hard won 'normality' that Northern Ireland now enjoys can appear as a surface veneer, masking rooted divisions in a society that is still far from normal (Byrne 2014; Tonge 2013, pp.92-93).

#### *A painful legacy*

Although the events leading up to the conflict are well established, there remains no consensus about the causes of the Troubles, its nature, or how it should be remembered. It has been interpreted as an anti-colonial struggle, an ethno-political conflict, and a terrorist campaign against democracy. The death toll would eventually reach over 3,600, many more would suffer terrible injuries and the province was subjected to persistent violence with bombs, riots and shootings an almost daily occurrence (Thornton et al. 2004).

In addition to such physical damage, one cannot overestimate the impact of the 30 years of violence in further entrenching the communal divides that lay (and continue to lie) at the heart of Northern Irish society. However, people's experience of the Troubles was largely determined by where they lived, their occupation, political involvement—or simply the result of being 'in the wrong place at the wrong time'; a situation that could often have tragic consequences. Whilst everyone was impacted by the Troubles, everyday life continued and the story of Northern Ireland's recent past must also acknowledge the resilience of a society that refused to collapse into internecine conflict. Too often the voices of those who sought to challenge sectarianism and work for peace are those that go unheard.

The current political deadlock of the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont must be understood as part of the continuing challenge to achieve and maintain durable peace, something that has been further challenged by the destabilising consequences of Brexit, which risks undermining the progress achieved by the Good Friday Agreement (Tonge 2016, pp.338-42). The notion of securing peace as a continuing process is something that has been recognised by local government and, backed by the intervention of

the British and Irish governments, has engendered a proactive approach in attempting to negotiate the challenges that remain (Potter 2016).

The 2014 Stormont House Agreement is a recent example that sought to lay down structures that would enable Northern Ireland to effectively confront the range of stumbling blocks that have prevented the peace process from advancing and, in some cases, risked undermining it entirely (NIO 2014). This agreement notably saw a commitment to bringing in academic expertise to help create an Oral History Archive and a Historical Timeline of the conflict as one element of an evolving strategy. Another important consequence was the formation of the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) commission in 2016 with the remit of producing a report with recommendations on how to deal with the challenges facing the peace process (FICT 2016).

Amongst the issues that have been the focus of attention (such as questions on identity, flags and parades), perhaps the most significant, and certainly that which is of most relevance to this article, is the delicate and difficult question of just how to deal with the legacy of the past.

### *Conflicting perspectives*

It is not difficult to understand why dealing with the past is such a challenging issue for the Northern Ireland peace process (Hamber 1998). One only has to consider the proximity of what was a hugely damaging 30-year conflict that affected people right across Northern Irish society (Lundy and McGovern 2008, pp.29-48). Many people continue to live with the consequences of the associated death and destruction and in many cases are still awaiting some kind of justice or at least accountability for what they experienced (Dawson 2014; Bell 2003). The past, and in particular, the Troubles, continues to define much of life in Northern Ireland and the divisive nature of the conflict continues to be a critically important consideration.

Whilst the peace process may well have ended the violence and the Good Friday Agreement has unquestionably been successful in providing a framework to better manage the inherently contested aspirations within the province, it did not resolve the underlying reasons for the conflict (Clancy 2010). Northern Ireland remains a divided society and therefore contains opposing perspectives on how the past should be remembered (Lundy and McGovern 2001). For that reason, the past is perhaps the greatest of all challenges facing the peace process. Each community looks back over the period of the Troubles from its own particular perspective and therefore contains all the necessary ingredients to help perpetuate the divisions that must be overcome if Northern Ireland is to secure a brighter future.<sup>3</sup> There is widespread agreement that a peaceful and secure future is predicated on overcoming this challenge (Hamber and Kelly 2016, pp.24-44).

However, despite attempts, it would appear that efforts thus far have been without success and one can point to the current political deadlock as evidence of this failure; the inability to come up with an effective strategy on legacy issues is one of the main reasons for the enduring absence of a Northern Irish government (Dudgeon 2018). Current proposals are focused on addressing the needs of victims and mechanisms to support truth recovery. Engaging the public within a wider conversation around the period of the Troubles lies outside of these official processes. However, framing multiple contexts for exploring the recent past and opening broader dialogue is also fundamental to society moving forward.

This must involve a broader range of voices, speaking to diversity of experience, enabling a complex and nuanced picture to emerge. It is precisely this challenge and opportunity that lends weight to the idea that a new approach is required, and one where National Museums Northern Ireland has a central role to play.

### **Museums and 'difficult histories'**

In recent times, museums have experienced hugely significant, and for some, 'radical' change (Ross, 2004). This is true in terms of museum practice as, in particular, institutions have sought to adapt to the new terrain determined by technological change, with the rise of the Internet perhaps most influential (Black 2012, pp.1-13). However, one can also point to important developments in the role museums play in society. What were once unyielding, conservative, unadventurous and authoritative repositories of knowledge have, in last three decades, become much more vibrant and important 'socio-cultural actors' with an influence spreading way beyond a previously limited reach (Bigand 2017, pp.40-42).

#### *An independent voice*

Much debate exists as to why the role of museums has changed so significantly. One could see this as a consequence of the more general 'turn to the past' that has emerged in recent times, with heightened interest in all things 'memory' placing museums in a logically privileged position (Macdonald 2013, pp.3-5). Moreover, as apathy and disillusionment with politics becomes increasingly widespread and prominent, it is hardly without surprise that the general public seeks to explore alternative means through which to understand the present, the past and the possibilities for the future.

As such, museums, largely perceived to be an independent voice outside of direct political control, have increasingly acquired a position of responsibility and prominence in ongoing debates into such areas. Furthermore, growing collaboration between academia and the museum sector has meant that the level of independence and expertise therewithin has been increased, thus enhancing the level of trust attributed to museums (Klein 2000, p.3; Pakier and Str ath 2010; Wertsch 2002, p.30; Winter 2000, pp.69-92).

Whilst museums have acquired more weight as social actors in general terms, it is in post-conflict societies that one is able to take stock of the significance of such a change (DeLugan 2015). There are many examples across the world where museums have become pivotally important and potent vectors in providing venues for areas trying to overcome the legacy of conflict with a view to securing a brighter future (McGrattan and Hopkins 2017; Walters, Laven and Davies 2017; Giblin 2014; Crooke 2005). That such an important role has been acquired by museums in such conditions is undoubtedly strongly linked to the questions of independence and trust outlined above.

#### *Museums and 'difficult heritage'*

With this context in mind, it is interesting to consider the significant and relatively recent trend in museological practice that has seen an 'increasing willingness of museums to take on what is often characterized as "difficult subject matter"' (Bonnell and Simon 2007, p.65). Sharon Macdonald describes how, since the 1990s, there has been a shift in how museum culture has approached what

she describes as 'difficult heritage'. Having previously ignored such histories, preferring to focus on 'more comfortable or self-affirming narratives', in recent times, museums have taken on a much more proactive role in confronting the challenges of contested pasts with 'increasing attempts to publicly address problematic heritage and "difficult pasts"' (Macdonald 2008, p.5).

This has particularly been the case in societies coming to terms with what Williams describes as 'dreadful, violent histories' with areas that have experienced war, genocide, terrorism, state repression, massacres and apartheid just some of those in which museum spaces are becoming important spaces in providing a platform for working through those experiences (Williams 2007). Julia Rose offers some explanation for the emergence of this trend with particular reference to the importance of globalisation in emboldening difficult histories (Rose 2016, pp.10-12). Macdonald also posits a number of reasons to explain why this shift has taken place and why the 'ignoring, silencing or destroying' of 'the awkward past' has become, in some cases, no longer an option' (Macdonald 2008, p.3).

It is interesting to consider the extent to which such a rise in the emphasis on 'difficult heritage' in museums is a cause or a symptom of the concomitant elevation of such institutions to a position of importance in post-conflict societies. But this is not the only related question of interest; one only has to reflect on the wide-ranging alternatives to the term 'difficult heritage' to take stock of the fertility and complexity of this emergent debate. These include, for example, 'challenging history' (Kidd et al. 2014), 'hot topics' (Cameron and Kelly 2010), 'uncomfortable heritage' (Logan and Reeves 2009), or 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996).

If one were to distil such debates, the underpinning question revolves around the pros and cons of the actual impact on societies of confronting such difficult pasts in the public domain of museums. Macdonald previously argued that the trend of difficult heritage in museums was 'troublesome' and 'awkward for public recognition with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity' (Macdonald 2008, p.1). The risks associated with such an approach have been recognised elsewhere with understandable and increasing notes of caution sounded about the need for careful management so as to avoid doing more harm than good (Vejo-Rose 2011; Lehrer 2010). Rose, for example, explains how engaging with difficult histories can 'rattle the collective memories learners have relied on, making learners anxious and even fearful' (Rose 2016, p.18).

However, as an increasing consensus has emerged on the positives of confronting difficult pasts, it has become clear, through tangible examples, that museums can and do play constructive roles in such a process (DeLugan 2015). The debate over 'hurt or heal' has therefore arguably seen the pendulum swing more towards the latter. Indeed, Macdonald's 2016 intervention in this debate signalled a change in her once cautious note on the potential damage of 'difficult heritage' with a much more positive assessment outlining how it is 'no longer necessarily a disruption to positive identity formation' (Macdonald 2016, p.19). Rose acknowledges the evident risks attached to the confronting of 'difficult histories' including resistance, trauma, shock, guilt shame or controversy. She nonetheless argues that such risks are outweighed by the benefits that

*elevate and remember the forgotten communities, shape social justice ideologies and educational aims, advocate for human rights, reveal silenced histories, aid those who are grieving, keep history current*

*and relevant, strengthen individual and community identities, teach concern for others, and help society distinguish between immoral and moral living* (Rose 2016, pp.25-68).

The remainder of this article, through the example of a recent Ulster Museum project on Northern Ireland's 1968, will contribute to this ongoing debate and argue that museums have a pivotal and constructive role to play in assisting post-conflict societies to come to terms with their 'difficult pasts'.

### **Northern Ireland's Ulster Museum**

In response to the proposals of the Stormont House Agreement of 2014, a group of prominent academics met in 2016 and compiled a number of recommendations that would help to maximise the potential of the objectives of this new agreement (Historians and the Stormont House Agreement 2016). In particular, they cited the importance of drawing on the wealth of academic expertise that existed as an important means of overcoming the inherent distrust that exists within the public domain towards political interference that, as they argued, only served to enhance the divisions that needed to be overcome.

It should be noted from the outset that many of the difficulties Northern Ireland faces in dealing with its past do not derive from deficiencies in academic understanding of the Troubles. The problem is rather the strength with which partisan narratives are held by the public and, in many cases, promoted by political actors invested in one-sided interpretations of the conflict (Historians and the Stormont House Agreement 2016). It is precisely in such a general and specific context that the role of Northern Ireland's museum sector becomes an important consideration.

During the period of conflict from 1968-1998, the Ulster Museum generally steered clear of confronting the interpretive challenges presented by the Troubles, focusing instead on re-examining earlier historical periods that have left a significant cultural and political legacy. These were usually linked to significant historical anniversaries and were characterised by a desire to locate events in Ireland within a broad historical and international context. In doing so, the aim was to open up new perspectives and challenge the prevailing popular myths.

### *Interpreting the Troubles*

In 2003, the museum opened a new temporary exhibition, *Conflict: The Irish at War*, which explored the theme of conflict from prehistoric times through to the Troubles. Critically well received, the exhibition ran for three years until 2006 when the museum closed for major refurbishment. Re-opening in 2009, the new suite of galleries featured one dedicated to the Troubles; it was the first time that the 'conflict' had been given its own dedicated space. However, this was widely regarded as a regression in terms of the institution's ability to deal with difficult history. It was characterised by an absence of original objects, instead relying exclusively on photographs, presenting, in effect, a version of the conflict as seen through the lens of photojournalists.

Yet, just as the peace process has enabled significant changes to the general circumstances of life in Northern Ireland, so too has it offered a window of opportunity for the Ulster Museum to change its approach on how the past is handled within its walls. Macdonald outlines how shifting contexts are a

crucial consideration for the fluidity of 'difficult heritage' as 'what was once seen as a sign of a country's achievement may later come to be understood as a reason for regret' (Macdonald 2008, p.2). The need to take advantage of this new 'peace-time' context has dovetailed with the growing pressure to confront the difficult past of the province head-on. In response, National Museums Northern Ireland has taken the opportunity to reconsider its interpretive approach as one that focuses much more on academic and community engagement.

In 2018, after a long period of development, a new exhibition replaced the Troubles gallery. Entitled *The Troubles and Beyond* and supported by the UK Heritage and Lottery Fund, it sought to address the challenge of representing contested history based on the principles of community engagement and a desire to support a full and inclusive narrative. [Insert fig 1] This new exhibition does not shy away from some of the more difficult aspects of the conflict and includes the lived experience of individuals as well as looking more broadly at the social, cultural and political history of Northern Ireland.

The new gallery space provides a platform for genuine and constructive discussion and debate around what happened, why and its legacy today. As Poulot argues, this is in keeping with emerging practices around the treatment of difficult pasts where 'the museum becomes a forum where public discussion on issues of memory and history can take place' (Poulot 2012, p.9). Upon its launch, the exhibition met with critical acclaim, demonstrating the extent to which this new, peace-time context has indeed provided an opportunity for a different, more critical examination of this difficult period to help expose and confront the true complexity of the conflict and the opposing perspectives, present then and enduring to this day.

Close collaboration between the museum and academia, as well as community stakeholders, was instrumental in the development of the gallery. The coming together of the independent museum space with rigorous scholarly research and contributions from the public has undoubtedly enhanced the level of trust invested in the resulting exhibition and in the museum itself. It is important to bear this context in mind when examining the success of the 1968 project at the Ulster Museum.

### **Northern Ireland's 1968 @ the Ulster Museum [insert fig 2]**

'1968' has become synonymous with a period of revolt and rebellion that swept the globe in the period stretching from the mid-60s to the mid-70s (Katsiaficas 1987; Caute 1988; Fraser 1988; Jameson 1984). In recent years, '1968 studies' have increasingly focused on the transnationalism of the period with an ever-growing list of countries being added to those thought to have experienced a "68" (Zancarini-Fournel 2016, 778-865; Gildea, Mark, and Warring 2013; Dramé and Lamarre 2009; Crane and Mueller 2008; de Groot 2008; Farik 2008; Førlund 2008; Klimke and Scharloth 2008). The consensus that has emerged is that any country's experience in 1968 must be understood in the wider international context of the time. Whilst the geographical optic has continued to widen, the virtual absence of Northern Ireland in the emergent transnational collective memory has been notable (Cornils and Waters 2010; Dreyfus-Armand 2008; Fink, Gassert and Junker 1998; Caute 1988).

Northern Ireland did indeed experience a set of events that very much resembled what happened elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> [insert figs 3,4 &5] Therefore, this erroneous absence from the dominant narrative is not to be understood as a result of it being a case apart. Instead, consideration must be given to the events



that followed, which in the case of Northern Ireland meant that the memory of this period became buried or seen as interchangeable with the start of the Troubles (Reynolds 2015, pp. 149-185). In the same way that the peace-time context has enabled a fresh, more critical look at the Troubles in general, so too has a window of opportunity opened to right the wrong that is the marginalisation of Northern Ireland from the transnational memory of 1968 (Reynolds 2017).

#### *A successful collaboration*

The 2015 publication *Sous les pavés...The Troubles: Northern Ireland, France and the European Collective Memory of 1968* which explained how and why Northern Ireland's 1968 had been side-lined and made a case for it to be written into the narrative, marked the beginning of a long-term collaboration between Reynolds and the Ulster Museum that would evolve in three stages (Reynolds 2018). Stage one entailed a minor intervention in the section of the Ulster Museum History galleries that covered the period in question with the objective of increasing the focus on what happened in Northern Ireland and what had taken place elsewhere in the world at the time. This saw a number of quotations added to existing content in order to draw out the connectedness of the province to events in the US and in Europe. Following the success of this collaboration, a decision was made to undertake a complete overhaul of the 1968 section.

This second stage drew on the oral history approach of Reynolds' study, with 10 former protagonists agreeing to take part in filmed interviews. The subsequent installation in the gallery of extracts of the recordings, together with newly curated objects, combined to offer a more thorough and interactive experience for the visitor. As well as integrating clips from these testimonies into the gallery, a set of extended videos of these interviews were developed and made available via the NMNI YouTube channel.<sup>5</sup>

The effectiveness of this new display was confirmed when the project team was approached by those involved in developing the local GCSE history curriculum (CCEA) with a request to organise dedicated study days for school pupils studying the period.<sup>6</sup> Such was the success of these study days that a set of bespoke, online educational resources were developed in collaboration with CCEA which provide students with a range of activities for before, during and after a visit to the museum.<sup>7</sup> These resources are in use throughout the province and effectively tie together the requirements of the curriculum with the content delivered in the museum. The third stage of the project focuses on the 50th anniversary of these events.

Building on the momentum achieved thus far and drawing on 30 filmed interviews, the project team developed an extended, travelling exhibition entitled *Voices of 68* and a range of accompanying events. The exhibition is scheduled to be hosted in a minimum of 20 venues in the UK and Ireland. A dedicated one-day symposium saw the exhibition launched at Nottingham Trent University.<sup>8</sup> A static, extended version of the travelling exhibition was hosted at the Ulster Museum and was accompanied by a dedicated three-day event that included a GCSE study day, a day of reflection led by the interviewees of the project and a day on the role of women in 1968 and beyond. Some of the interview material garnered for *Voices of 68* has also been used by an NMNI partner organisation, the Nerve Centre, in their influential and important exhibition *The Lost Moment*.<sup>9</sup>

[insert fig 6]

That the project should have evolved and expanded to this extent gives some indication of its success and effectiveness. The level of engagement with the project is one indicator of its success: interviewees have not only been willing to give up time to share their testimonies with the project team, they have also been directly involved in the associated programme of events organised and have even donated objects to the museum's collection. Feedback from the general public, teachers and school pupils has also demonstrated a high level of engagement with, and support for, the project. This was particularly evident during the GCSE study days when in excess of 200 school pupils participated with great enthusiasm in the range of activities put on for them.

### **Theory and Methodology**

Throughout the iterative process that has seen the project develop, there has been a committed approach to obtaining feedback and a willingness to act on such valuable, constructive criticism to help improve the next stage. Feedback has been collected from visitors, interviewees, teachers, school pupils and through a commissioned evaluation process that established focus groups and workshops leading to a detailed and instrumental report that has helped inform both the approach and the content.<sup>10</sup>

The final indication of the success of the project is in relation to the work of the aforementioned FICT commission. This body, set up to provide recommendations on dealing with some of the challenges facing the Northern Ireland peace process, one of which is dealing with the legacy of the past, has cited the Ulster Museum 1968 project as an example of good practice. In order to explain the success and effectiveness of this project, it is essential to consider its underpinning methodological and theoretical approach, the combination of which is both innovative and potentially has broader applications for Northern Ireland and beyond.

From a methodological perspective, it is first important to note the close and reciprocal relationship between the curatorial work of the museum and Reynolds' academic research into this period. Secondly, the focus on the use of oral history is an essential consideration. The embedding of such testimonies into the exhibition content (physical and online) has been a key element in creating an engaging, interactive and immersive experience for the visitor and has also been very important in giving people with diverse backgrounds and experiences the opportunity to have their say and inflect their own history. Thompson argues thus about the potency of oral history in his seminal work on this approach:

*Oral history can change the focus of history itself, and open up new lines of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history – whether in books, or museums, or radio and film – it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place (Thompson 1988, p.2).*

This particular methodology is indeed universally effective but also has a particular resonance in the Northern Irish context. Storytelling and oral history initiatives have long been acknowledged as an important and distinctive element of peacebuilding and reconciliation. 'In the absence of a formal truth and information recovery commission, academic and community oral history and 'storytelling' projects have provided an important outlet for victims and survivors. [...] Providing opportunities to hear other voices can ultimately contribute to the complex work of reconciliation' (Historians and the Stormont House Agreement 2016).

### *Engaging the public*

The third element contributing to the success of the project is the extent to which it is public facing. Throughout, the team has sought to engage the general public as broadly as possible with a view to encouraging debate and discussion on this seminal period in Northern Ireland's recent past in the hope of facilitating the emergence of a new, fresh and even constructive perspective. Events have been organised at the Ulster Museum and within the range of venues the travelling exhibition has visited. There has also been a strong commitment to facilitating visitor contribution to the material on display. This has been achieved via the garnering of feedback that has then been curated and included in a dedicated reflection space at the Ulster Museum.

The final, and connected, aspect of the methodological approach has been the focus on the importance of education. From the outset, there has been a commitment to reach out to young people via their schools. The fact that this period is now studied as part of the GCSE curriculum has facilitated the link between the project and the education sector. This means that, through the study days and the provision of online resources, there is a genuine possibility to inflect the minds of a generation of young people who will be essential in helping to shape a future of peace in Northern Ireland.

In addition to this multi-faceted methodology, one must also factor in the theoretical approach based on the notion of agonistic remembering. Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, Cento-Bull and Hansen have developed the idea of agonistic memory and are applying it in an important Horizon 2020 project entitled UNREST (Mouffe 2000 and 2005; Cento-Bull and Hansen 2016, pp.390-404).<sup>11</sup> As Cento-Bull and Hansen argue, having transitioned from a form of remembering based on antagonism to one based on cosmopolitanism, the time has come for a change on how remembering is managed. They argue that the cosmopolitan approach, despite its merits and undoubted progress from the antagonistic age that dominated prior to the end of World War II, is held back by its quest for a consensual narrative.

By attaching so much importance to finding an agreed perspective on the past, difficult histories become taboos, pushed to the margins and avoided. The problem with this approach is that by marginalising such issues, they are then open to manipulation from extreme elements who will then use them to weaken the system they oppose. This framework is used to help explain the current difficulties experienced by the EU and in particular the rise of populist politics (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016, p.393). The solution proposed is one based on agonism: i.e. instead of avoiding difficult histories, it is argued that they should instead be brought into the debate.<sup>12</sup>

### *An agonistic approach*

The consensually dialogic approach is replaced by one based on agonism that accepts the existence of contesting perspectives and argues that only by providing a space for them to come together can any real progress can be made in managing such difficult pasts. Bearing in mind the discussion above about the independence of museums leading to a certain degree of trust amongst the general public (enhanced by increasing collaboration with academia), their potential as ‘agonistic spaces’ further consolidates the prominence of their role as vectors in helping societies deal with difficult pasts (Pozzi 2013, pp.7-15; Mouffe 2010). The 1968 Ulster Museum project has not only provided a potent test case for this new strand of memory theory: the agonistic approach may well be the biggest clue to explaining the overall success and effectiveness of the project.

A central strand of the agonistic approach is the need to remember ‘historical context’ (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016, p.400). To that end, the initial primary objective of the 1968 project to write Northern Ireland into the transnational narrative of this period is clearly agonistic and helps explain how the door to greater agonism was opened. Indeed, broadening the context to take into consideration the international picture enhanced the ‘narrative hospitality’ of the project and enabled the regrouping of a more diverse range of perspectives than one is used to hearing when discussing this period.<sup>13</sup> The wide spectrum of interviewees from across Northern Irish society has helped shape a narrative based on the notion of ‘inclusive multivocality’. The subsequent contesting narratives that are brought together in the same place very much fit the notion of agonism by moving away from the hitherto dominant cosmopolitan approach and accepting that the consensual approach is futile.

[insert figs 7 & 8]

The focus on oral history further enhances such credentials by quite literally allowing a broader range of people to have their say, thereby exposing the range of perspectives that exist. As Thompson argues, such an approach ‘thrusts life into history itself and it widens the scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people.’ (Thompson 1988, 10). Furthermore, such orality helps provide the grounds for the passion of interviewees’ testimonies to shine through and become part of a much more visceral, immersive, and thus effective experience for the visitor. Also, key to the agonistic approach is the focus on education. As explained above, engagement with local schools and collaboration with the curriculum bodies has been a central feature of the 1968 project and the students and their teachers have warmly received the presentation of such diverse voices:

*I think it was good that international protest was brought up because it gives you a better insight into what the world was like back then;*

*It gives people a better understanding of why the civil rights came out;*

*These [activities] have shown me that they were important and did have an impact on Northern Ireland;*

*I am more aware of the international events at this time and how people in Northern Ireland were inspired by them;*

*I now appreciate international influences more as they extremely impacted Northern Ireland;*

*By hearing other people's stories it helped me to understand better.<sup>14</sup>*

Finally, certain elements of the project have been developed specifically in order to ensure maximum impact of the reach of the approach in what is known as 'agonistic contamination' (Pozzi 2011, 13-14). For example, the travelling aspect of the exhibition will help broaden the geographical reach of the project; the use of augmented reality will help extend beyond the typical museum visitor; and a range of online resources, including a digital version of the exhibition, have been made available to enable visitors to further explore the material before, during and after viewing the exhibition.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the rolling integration of visitor feedback into the exhibition has been conceived to encourage and facilitate contributions from the general public.

### **A Collective Narrative**

To sum up, the combination of the methodological and theoretical approach lies at the heart of the success of this project. The focus on oral history, with a commitment to multi-faceted public-facing activities, where education is at the heart of an approach based on agonistic remembering, has facilitated the creation of an original, effective and popular treatment of one of the most important turning-points in Northern Irish history. In particular, bringing together voices from all aspects of Northern Irish society into one space is what sets this project apart.

The 'usual suspects' are of course part of how the story is told but they do not monopolise and instead *Voices of 68* avoids seeking some sort of consensual narrative on this period and instead embraces the notion of a 'conflictual consensus', thereby presenting more fully the complexity and divergence of what was such an important set of events. In so doing, it has facilitated the necessary process of providing an alternative to the further entrenchment of separate, independent narratives on the period that have hitherto enabled the past to endure as a source of division. Instead, and as demonstrated, the difficult past in fact becomes the source of something much more positive and constructive.

The significance of 1968 is clear. Fifty years on, this importance is enhanced by the fact that this anniversary effectively opens up a process that signals the beginning of a succession of 50th anniversaries over the course of the next 30 years. Such milestones will mark increasingly difficult, challenging and potentially divisive moments from the Troubles. It is therefore perhaps even more essential than ever that an effective solution to dealing with the legacy of the past is found. The success of the Ulster Museum 1968 project, as evidenced via the level of engagement, the positive and constructive feedback and, importantly, its citing in the influential FICT commission report, lends weight to the argument that herein lies an approach that could be used elsewhere. The commitment of the Ulster Museum and a number of important stakeholders to explore the development of a long-term

project that will use the Troubles and Beyond gallery as a platform for an approach based on this model is but further evidence of the potential on offer.

There have of course been numerous challenges to overcome in the development of this project and one must be wary of the potential and ongoing risks associated in bringing together such contested perspectives. Nevertheless, and in particular given the stalemate surrounding the issue of dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland, the potential benefits of such an approach certainly merit it being afforded an opportunity.

Macdonald, discussing the example of Germany's 'turn to difficult heritage', points to how this *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* entailed 'an understanding of the past as needing to be addressed and "mastered" because otherwise there was a danger that it would do the "mastering" and would infect subsequent life and generations.' The applicability of such sentiments to the current context in Northern Ireland is striking. The 'mastering' of the past through the agonistic approach outlined above will assist the peace process in confronting the difficult pasts that lie in our commemorative future, this 'lurking presence – a virus in the system – that [could] lead to sickness in society' (Macdonald 2016, p.14).

## Conclusion

Whilst it is too early to identify explicitly any direct impact of the project, the likely advantages are clear. By setting aside any attempts at finding some sort of consensus and instead providing a trusted platform for the expression and interaction of multiple, contested narratives on a seminal moment such as 1968, the minimum one can expect is increased inter-communal empathy and understanding. Such progress will not only contribute to helping Northern Irish society make sense of how it got to where it finds itself today, it can also ensure that it is better placed to avoid any repeat of the dark days of the Troubles in the future. One cannot help feeling that if such an approach can be employed in the very difficult and complex context that is Northern Ireland, surely there would be lessons available to other post-conflict societies and those dealing with their own 'difficult histories'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example some of the many events organised to assess the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute/good-friday-agreement-20-years-on/> [Accessed on 27 June 2018]; <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-good-friday-agreement-at-20-delivering-the-promise-of-a-rights-based-society-tickets-44143297792> [Accessed 27 June 2018]; <https://agreement20.wordpress.com> [Accessed on 27 June 2018]. The following special issue, available in open access, provides a flavour of the extent of the debate. <https://olh.openlibhums.org/collections/special/agreement20/> [Accessed 27 June 2018].

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the history of the Troubles, see Hennessey 1997; McKittrick and McVea 2001; Patterson 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst competing narratives are logically channelled through the binary optics of Nationalist and Unionist perspectives, one must also take into consideration the existence of inter-community wrangling over the legacy of the past (Kearney 2018; Rodgers 2018).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed and thorough analysis of this period see, Prince 2007; Reynolds 2015; Purdie 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Northern Ireland's 1968, YouTube playlist. [Online]. Available at; [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL\\_UqxDN1Li8\\_14DIIIWFXKkaQSEX2SVNM](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_UqxDN1Li8_14DIIIWFXKkaQSEX2SVNM) [Accessed 22 October 2018].

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.nmni.com/whats-on/1968-an-opportunity-missed>. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification taken by secondary school pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by the age of 16. Details of 12 October 2017 GCSE study day are available at <https://www.nmni.com/whats-on/1968-an-opportunity-missed> [Accessed 22 October 2018].

<sup>7</sup> 'Northern Ireland's 1968', NMNI online resource. [Online]. Available at <https://www.nmni.com/learn/1968-history-resource/Home.aspx> [Accessed 23 October 2018].

<sup>8</sup> Details of 15 June event at Nottingham Trent University are available at <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/about-us/events/events/2018/05/voices-of-68-contested-pasts,-museums-and-the-northern-ireland-peace-process> [Accessed 23 October 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Details of Nerve Centre 'The Lost Moment' exhibition are available at <http://nervecentre.org/news/story/lost-moment-exhibition-opens-nerve-visual> [Accessed 23 October 2018].

<sup>10</sup> 'Evaluation of 1968 research and interpretation re Collecting the Troubles and Beyond at the Ulster Museum.' carried out by Social Research Centre. 28 December 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For more details about this project, see the UNREST blog: <http://h2020unrest.blogspot.co.uk/2017/04/welcome-to-unrest-blog.html> [Accessed 20 October 2018].

<sup>12</sup> 'Agonism' (from the Greek *agon* meaning 'struggle') is a political theory that argues for the inclusion of conflict as part of the political process with potentially positive benefits.

<sup>13</sup> The following people were interviewed as part of the project: Paul Arthur; Paul Bew; Gregory Campbell; Ivan Cooper; Anthony Coughlan; Austin Currie; Anne Devlin; Michael Farrel; Mervyn Gibson; Denis Haughey; Erskine Holmes; Anne Hope; Judith Jennings; Bernadette McAliskey; Nelson McAusland; Eddie McCamley; Eamonn McCann; Chris McGimpsey; Dympna McGlade; Aidan McKinney; Maurice Mills; Geordie Morrow ; Mike Nesbitt; Hubert Nichol; Henry Patterson; Brid Rodgers; Brid Ruddy; Carol Tweedale; Eileen Weir; Fergus Woods.

<sup>14</sup> Sample of anonymous student feedback submitted following GCSE study '1968: An opportunity missed?' hosted at the Ulster Museum, 24 March 2016.

<sup>15</sup> The digital version of 'Voices of 68' is available at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/voices-of-68/id1401984783?ls=1&mt=11> [Accessed 15 October 2018]

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