

Londonderry vs. Derry: Infrapolitics within the Walled City

Introduction

The Irish Troubles, which have been occurring for centuries on the island of Ireland, have been filled with the employment of infrapolitics. Infrapolitics, as defined by James Scott is silent political struggle which can take the form of material, status, or ideological resistance (Scott, 1990). The conflict that occurred in specifically Londonderry/Derry, Northern Ireland during the 1960's – 1990's was dominated by the use of infrapolitics by the oppressed Irish-Catholic communities. Infrapolitics were crucial techniques which allowed the Irish-Catholics in Londonderry/Derry to express their opposition to the dominating English-Protestant group.

Background

In 1920, the island of Ireland – which was still under the control of the British Government – was partitioned into two separate states, Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. The separation was made based upon religious demographic; the Protestant majority (PUL)¹, often referred to as Loyalists or Unionists, was centralized in the six counties of Ulster, also known as Northern Ireland. This group then controlled the devolved government of Northern Ireland for the following fifty years. The Catholic majority (CNR)², also referred to as

¹ Within the PUL community, the dominating parties political have been the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the more radical Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Definitionally, unionist political parties were against Irish nationalism, believing that there was never an Irish state and the first nation on the island of Ireland were the British colonies. Historically, these groups are against a united Ireland and are loyal to the crown – at their most extreme they were against Home-Rule. Given that this block of individuals controlled the government of Northern Ireland up until the 1970's, they put in place many discriminative practices against CNR individuals. Such practices included gerrymandering, under-representation in government and security forces, barring access from public housing, and employment discrimination. The most radical individuals of the PUL community joined paramilitary groups, either the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The UDA was larger compared to the UVF, furthermore, it was extremely localized to different neighborhoods and heavily involved in vigilante justice. The UVF although it was smaller, it was much more politically aware and much more violent than the UDA – most loyalist attacks have been attributed to the UVF (Bell, 1993).

² The CNR community has two political parties, the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin, which is active in both the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These political groups identify as Republicans or Nationalist, believing in a united Ireland. The SDLP is often viewed as having a more moderate view of Irish nationalism, while Sinn Féin has historically taken a much more extreme view on the issue and has been more popular within the CNR community. Until the 1990's, Sinn Féin was well-known to be the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The IRA was the violent, paramilitary wing of the nationalist movement on the Island of Ireland. Their goal was to make it nearly impossible for the British to effectively rule on the island of Ireland

Nationalists or Republicans, was then centralized in the south, eventually known as the Republic of Ireland. After the Anglo-Irish War of Independence, the south of the Ireland was no longer under the control of the British Government and became an independent nation. The idea was that the CNR populations would all reside in the south and the PUL populations would be located in the north. When the governments attempted to enact theory into practice, it was not as successful as they had hoped; nearly 30% of Northern Ireland identified as CNR, with those populations centralized around the border and in the capital of Belfast. Similarly, about 30% of the Republic of Ireland was PUL and most of that demographic was found in the border region. This, understandably, led to years of violent and political conflict referred to as the Irish Troubles (Bell, 1993).

The Troubles were a result of clashes between these two communities beginning in the 1960's and lasting until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The Troubles began concurrently to the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, or the NICRA. The movement's goal was to increase equity in Northern Ireland by the removal of gerrymandering, labor restrictions, and housing restrictions that primarily impacted the CNR community; therefore, PUL groups saw this as a nationalist uprising that was an attempt to de-legitimize Northern Ireland's place in the UK. Attempts by the government of Northern Ireland to address the concerns of the movement, were overshadowed by the violence of the time. During the height of the Troubles in 1972, 476 individuals were killed, and many more were injured. There were countless massacres, such as Bloody Sunday and Poppy Day, and assassinations were conducted by both sides. The violence was brought to a fragile peace with the ceasefire between

through the use of guerilla warfare and terrorist attacks. More simply, their goal was to establish a united Ireland. (Bell, 1993).

militia groups representing both the CNR and the PUL communities and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Bell,1993).

During the Troubles, the city of Londonderry/Derry was a particularly contentious area. This city has been a battleground for religious disputes since the Siege of Derry in 1689³. After the Siege of Derry, when Protestants took control of the city, the CNR and PUL communities lived separately; after being pushed out, CNR communities reside outside the walls in the bogside and PUL communities reside inside the walls⁴. As time progressed and the Troubles heightened, Londonderry/Derry became a contentious area. In the city, CNR populations were continuously discriminated against by being denied jobs and housing, being pushed out to the bogside, and experienced voter disenfranchisement. Londonderry/Derry was also a stronghold for the IRA. The group often denoted pipe bombs, carried out assassinations, and engaged in firefights with both British soldiers who were stationed there and the PNR groups inside the walls (Bell, 1993).

Ideological Infrapolitics: *Londonderry v. Derry*

The original, Celtic name of the city is “Derry” but when the English first took control of the city in the 1600’s the name was changed to Londonderry; but the name did not become contentious until the Troubles. During the Troubles, how an individual referred to the city, was indicative of their allegiances. If someone was a member of the CNR community, they would refer to the city as “Derry;” and if a person was a member of the PUL community, they would call the city “Londonderry.” As power over the city’s government shifted between the two groups, so did the name (Bell, 1993). Both practices – the name as identification and the

³ The 105-day battle where Catholic King James II fought Protestant William of Orange for control of Derry. William of Orange won, claiming the signifying the beginning of Protestant domination in area (Bell, 1993).

⁴ Here is an illustration of the city’s layout: <http://derrybluebadgeguide.com/bishop-street-the-fountain-area/>

common change of the city's legal name – continue today. This is an example of ideological infrapolitics because it is a subtle declaration of opposition on the part of CNR communities. According to James Scott, ideological infrapolitics is when the subordinate group develops dissident underground ideas, movements, or culture that are at odds with the dominating party (Scott, 1990). The use of Derry is a subtle declaration that they refuse to pledge their support to the PUL government by maintaining the usage of the Celtic name.

Status Infrapolitics: Murals and Walls

Status infrapolitics, as stated by Scott, is the use of a hidden transcript of discontent by the subordinate group. This often takes the form of symbols and gathering spaces that allow oppressed groups to display their anger (Scott, 1990). Within Londonderry/Derry, the use of Murals and construction of the Free Derry Wall are both examples of status infrapolitics. Murals were commonly used throughout all of Northern Ireland by both sides to display sentiments of anger, sadness, power, and hope. In Londonderry/Derry, it was predominately used by the IRA and CNR groups to display scenes of abuse and sentiments of rebellion. Although the artists are widely known now, during the Troubles, they remained anonymous. The anonymity allowed them to truly voice their opinions and grievance, simultaneous to bringing the issue of senseless violence to the forefront.

Similarly, the Free Derry Wall was erected during the height of the Troubles in 1969 to denote the bogside as IRA controlled territory. This is an example of status infrapolitics because while it is a massive sign with a clear message, it conveyed that the residents of the bogside did not respect the PUL government as legitimate. It was also a signal to the PUL communities that they were not welcome in the bogside; that gave the CNR community an area to mobilize and

organize in without interruption. The sign remains up today as a memorial for those from the CNR community who died in the Troubles.

Material Infrapolitics: *Garbage Lids and Masked Men*

Material infrapolitics is the everyday forms of resistance conducted in silence, be it by masked individuals or small actions that go unnoticed (Scott, 1990). During the Troubles, the policing in Londonderry/Derry was taken over by the British military. During their patrol, children would bang garbage lids on the ground in order to warn adults that the British soldiers were approaching. This act seemingly has no consequence, but it allows people to get off the streets in order to avoid possible brutality from the British soldiers. The material infrapolitics of garbage can lids protected the residents of the bogside from further victimization.

As mentioned early, the area of the bogside was an IRA stronghold, but the members of the IRA would commonly cover their faces with masks in order to not be identifiable to the authorities. At their funerals, gatherings, and when they carried out attacks, they would never show their faces which made it more difficult for the British soldiers to suppress their movement. Although, both acts are small, they are infrapolitical in nature; they send silent but clear messages of discontent and rebellion to the dominant PNR communities of Londonderry/Derry.

Conclusion

The troubles in Northern Ireland were riddled with infrapolitical acts, but nowhere more than in Londonderry/Derry. The city's name was an example of ideological infrapolitics. Furthermore, small, anonymous acts such as banging garbage can lids on the ground or painting a mural where infrapolitical actions that declared a message of dissent. The oppressed Irish-Catholics of Londonderry/Derry incorporated acts of infrapolitics in their daily lives during the Troubles in order to resist the discrimination being enacted against them.

Works Cited

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