Conceptualising Islamic "Radicalisation" in Europe through "Othering": Lessons from the conflict in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Recent terror attacks across Europe have raised concerns about the issue of "radicalisation" amongst sections of the Islamic populations. In particular, the attacks have highlighted the need to better understand how "radicalisation" processes occur; in what ways they might be prevented and, indeed, how they might be reversed.[1]

This paper argues that there is a need to move away from current discourses around "radicalisation" as being a negative process that lends itself to generating violent extremism.[2] Rather, the paper suggests that the Freirean definitions of "radicalism" and "sectarianism" provide a better conceptual approach to the issues currently faced in Europe and, indeed, that a programme of political "radicalisation" may actually be part of any solution to the threats faced.[3]

To present this analysis the paper situates current discourses around "radicalisation" within the experiences of Northern Ireland and particularly the factors that helped to generate and maintain conflict over a sustained period of time. Using the concept of "Othering"[4], the paper explores the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict during the 1960s and assesses how the Irish Republican Army (IRA) came to appeal to so many young people.[5]

To develop these arguments a number of methodological approaches will be adopted. In the first instance, a literature review will help to critique current approaches to "radicalism" and processes of "radicalisation". This review will establish the primary argument of the paper that better conceptual approaches can be applied to explain why young people might be attracted towards those extremes that legitimise violent actions.

This argument will be advanced by a historical analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland as it descended into conflict and augmented by a small number of interviews with Republican ex-prisoners whose involvement with the IRA dates back to the early years of the conflict. These interviews focused on a number of key issues. Firstly, they sought to ascertain the motivations for becoming involved with militant republicanism in the first instance. Secondly, the participants discussed the influences that shaped their political thinking at that time. Finally, they sought to assess the impact that various programmes of political education – both formal and informal – had on their political thinking and, more specifically, on their attitudes towards the use of violence.

The final section of the paper seeks to demonstrate the transferability of these experiences to that of the situation now confronting Europe in the form of Islamist extremism.

Problematic Definitions

Alex Schmid, in his extensive literature review on "radicalisation", highlights the difficulties that exist when it comes to both defining and using the term. He points out that:

> The terms "radicalisation" and "de-radicalisation" are used widely, but the search for what exactly "radicalisation" is, what causes it and how to "de-radicalise" those who are considered radicals, violent extremists or terrorists, is a frustrating one.[6]

Schmid argues that the 'popularity of the concept of "radicalisation" stands in no direct relationship to its actual explanatory power regarding the root causes of terrorism',[7] whilst Mark Sedgwick, similarly, highlights the difficulties that surround the use of a term that 'is understood and used in a variety of different ways'.[8]

Defining radical is, therefore, problematic.[9] Sedgewick points out that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines radical as 'representing or supporting an extreme section of a party'. As such, he argues:

> …the term may be used as a synonym for "extremist", and in opposition to "moderate". It serves the useful purpose of indicating a relative position on a continuum of organized opinion. "Radicalisation" thus indicates movement on that continuum.[10]

A historic analysis of radicalism, however, suggests a greater level of complexity than this allows for. This dictionary definition, for example, suggests that "radicalism" is almost entirely negative but this has not always been the case. Throughout much of the period between the American War of Independence and World War I, many within the political mainstreams were keen to extol their own "radical" credentials – it was a political outlook that was seen to advocate social and political reform that would benefit the wider populace.[11] What is more, history has subsequently come to present many of those (negatively) deemed "radicals" in their own time in a rather more positive light – the suffragette movement being one obvious example.

This is reinforced by those definitions that link "extremism" with the propensity for violence. Although "extremism" may indeed be equated with a willingness to use violence, the same cannot be said for "radicals" who, as Schmid argues, 'are not *per se* violent'. Although they may 'share certain characteristics' with violent extremists, he insists that:

> …there are also important differences (such as regarding the willingness to engage in critical thinking). It does not follow that a radical attitude must result in violent behaviour – a finding well established by decades of research.[12]

Cathal McManus has argued that this has parallels with the interpretation of radicalism put forward by Paulo Freire during the 1970s.[13] McManus points out that Freire adopted a positive interpretation by arguing that, although radicalisation entailed an 'increased commitment to the position one has

chosen', it was 'predominantly critical, loving, humble, and communicative, and therefore a positive stance'. The radical, Freire insisted, will not 'deny another man's right to choose, nor does he try to impose his own choice' but rather will attempt to 'convince and convert, not to crush his opponent'.[14]

A key characteristic of radicalism emerging from both Freire and Schmid, therefore, is its criticality; radicals will be willing to critically analyse their situation and have an open mind to the views and opinions of others. Such a criticality is not a characteristic associated with violent extremism and, as such, raises the necessity for an alternative approach. For this, McManus advocated two concepts: "sectarianism" and "Othering".[15]

Othering and the process of Sectarianisation

In identifying radicalism as a positive concept, Freire identified "sectarianism" as being its polar opposite. Arguing that sectarianism is 'predominantly emotional and uncritical', he presents the sectarian as 'arrogant, antidialogical and thus anticommunicative'. As such, the sectarian will 'disrespect' the 'choices of others' and will seek to 'impose his own choice on everyone else'. Furthermore, Freire stresses 'the inclination of the sectarian to activism' and 'sloganizing, which generally remains at the level of myth and half-truths and attributes absolute value to the purely relative'.[16]

McManus, in his analysis of continuing political divisions in Northern Ireland, argues that there is a need to better understand how these 'slogans', 'myths' and 'half-truths' become such powerful and effective tools. To do so he suggests the need to analyse those processes of Othering that help to shape and define group identity but which, more specifically, contribute to the growth of sectarianism.[17]

Othering is defined as a process of identification that establishes similarity and difference between groups.[18] Whilst such a process of identification is likely/natural, Othering seeks to establish a hierarchy with each in-group viewing 'the Other as in some way lesser' and as posing some form of threat to "our" way of life.[19] Grove and Zwi, for example, argue that Othering 'defines and secures one's identity by distancing and stigmatising an(other)' and claim that its 'purpose is to reinforce notions of our own "normality", and to set up the difference of others as a point of deviance'.[20]

McManus situates Othering within Anthony Marsella's 'constructions of reality' concept which argues that a group develops its sense of superiority through 'a particularly positive interpretation' of its own status as 'self-righteous, moral, justified and "good" by virtue of religion, history and identity'.[21] These culturally constructed perceptions of reality act as the social bond of a community and help to provide it with a shared sense of history and solidarity which is further reinforced by negative attitudes held towards the Other, who are often seen as, not only lesser, but as a threat and danger to the interests/existence of the in-group. As such, conflict, or the potential for conflict, is often a consequence of Othering.

The potential for conflict is increased by two further aspects of Othering. In the first instance, because Othering becomes an important element in generating a group's social bond it will mean that large sections of the populace become *susceptible* to the sectarianism it can generate. This means, at times of heightened tensions, there is potentially a pool of people that may be prepared to turn to violence should that be deemed necessary.

The second consideration lies in the fact that Othering is often a two-way process wherein conflicting groups will each become convinced of their own superiority over the evil and/or threatening Other. As such, there will exist a belief in both groups that they need to take action against the Other in order to defend their own interests. However, each "action" merely serves to reinforce the negative perceptions held by their Other and helps to generate increased sectarianism.

Building on this analysis of Othering, it is possible to present a framework that outlines the growth of sectarian attitudes and explains how these are likely to feed extremist attitudes (Figure 1).
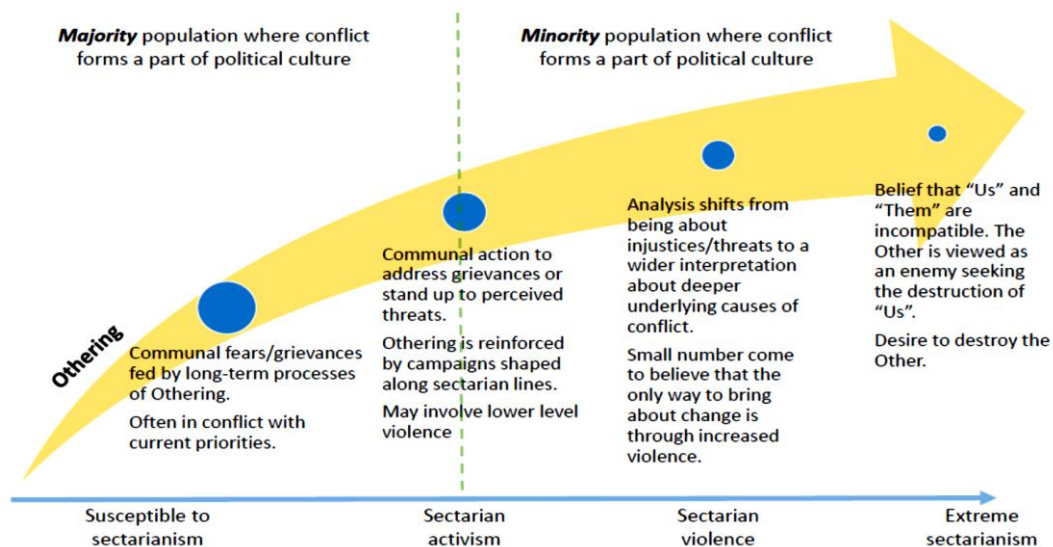
Figure 1: Processes of Sectarianisation through Othering

As discussed above it begins on the premise that longer-term processes of Othering have helped to create two groups/communities that are susceptible to the type of sectarianism described by Freire. Each views the Other with great suspicion and will interpret their actions as being designed to undermine or suppress the in-group.

The second stage in the process is a growing communal reaction against perceived threats and/or injustices and which normally takes the form of an activism. This activism will be organised along sectarian lines with the interests only of the in-group being considered – thus any fears, insecurities or injustices experienced by the Other will largely be ignored. Indeed, it will also ignore the fears and any sense of threat felt by the Other arising from the "Sectarian Activism" itself, and any negative response by the Other will be interpreted as simply more evidence of their sectarianism.

Although the activism will be largely peaceful, it may also take on a 'low level' violence – that is to say, a violence that is primarily uncoordinated and often reactionary.

The third stage in the process emerges from the growing frustrations, fears and anger created by the "Sectarian Activism" stage. The lack of change brought about by the Activism facilitates an analysis which argues that the Other is incapable of changing voluntarily and, as such, a minority will come to support the use of armed actions. This may, in certain circumstances, see members of the in-group apply a historic political analysis – such as a previous demand for national independence – to the current crisis. Importantly, whilst only a minority may morally or actively support the violence, the majority within the in-group can *understand* why there are those who have turned to militancy. This *understanding* is grounded in their sharing the same anger/frustrations/sense of fear as the militants.

In turning to violence, of course, (and irrespective of the small numbers involved) the in-group reinforces the Othering processes by confirming the negative attitudes held by their Other towards them. Due to the uncritical character of sectarianism, the Other in this case can *never* understand the use of this violence because they do not recognise as legitimate the fears/insecurities/grievances of *their* Other. As such, those engaged in violence come to be viewed simply as "evil" and "terrorists" who need to be defeated militarily and without compromise. Indeed, when sectarianism predominates, compromise is viewed as an act of treachery.[22]

In these circumstances, neither group will recognise the role they have played in helping to create – and sustain – the conditions for conflict.

Stage four, "Extreme Sectarianism" is a stage that only a very few ever reach. It centres on the belief that "Us" and "Them" are entirely incompatible and that for "Us" to survive – and thrive – there is a need to destroy the Other.

Although this process of sectarianisation provides a useful framework within which to assess the transition towards extremism, there are a number of further important elements within it that also need to be considered.

Firstly, although a political and/or religious idealism will become part of a wider meta-narrative of those that come to engage in violence, this will not necessarily be the primary motivation for early participation in any sectarian activism. This activism will be inspired initially by individual and later group feelings of inequality and/or alienation – the micro- and meso-level narratives. The vast majority of those that come to espouse a political/religious ideal will only do so after this initial activism and as they fall under the influence of more ideologically driven leaders.

The second consideration, therefore, is the role played by these ideological leaders who seek to apply a meta-narrative to the contemporary context. This application, as mentioned above, will be grounded

in a very particular – and one-sided – reading of a historical cause that ignores wider complexities. Nevertheless, the narrative will resonate with some activists and will be seen to explain their hardships/inequalities/alienation.

The complex processes that facilitate sectarianisation highlight the need to better understand the Othering that lends itself to an individual's transition towards violence. In particular, there is a need to better understand how *all* the actors in a conflict have contributed to the Othering processes that create the conditions for conflict.

This is by no means easy. Peter Neumann[23], in his introduction to the *First International Conference of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, points out that in the 'highly charged atmosphere' following the 9/11 attacks it became 'very difficult to discuss the "roots of terrorism", which some commentators claimed was an effort to excuse and justify the killing of ordinary civilians'. The terror attacks in America and Europe since 2001, however, have reinforced the need to better understand the factors and processes that lead local, often well-integrated individuals, to turn to violence. This requires us to move beyond the scope of 'radicalisation' which, in the popular media, often tends to put the emphasis on the individual perpetrator and ignores wider causes related to long-term Othering.

It is vital, therefore, to understand Othering and how it helps to generate and sustain conflict and sectarian tensions. To do so it is useful to explore how it has impacted elsewhere and in this regards Northern Ireland is a useful, if imperfect, comparison. It should be noted, for example, that the recent terror attacks carried out in the name of the so-called Islamic State (IS/ISIS) are very different from the type of violence witnessed in Northern Ireland over its thirty years of conflict. Indeed, it could be argued that at least some elements of ISIS now represent "Extreme Sectarianism" – a stage that no grouping in Northern Ireland ever espoused.

Processes of Sectarianisation and Othering: Lessons from Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland came into being in 1921 amid much violence and political turmoil. Designed as part of a compromise aimed at settling a long-term conflict between the aspirations of Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism, its creation merely served to raise new questions concerning how the large Catholic/nationalist minority within its territory – approximately one third of the population – would become reconciled to a state they opposed.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Irish Catholics and Ulster Protestants had come to view each other with increased suspicion.[24] Strongly held religious beliefs[25] helped to define new political and cultural divisions that brought the island close to civil war in 1914 over the question of Home Rule.[26] This issue, centring on whether Ireland should have its own parliament in Dublin to deal with exclusively Irish matters, was in part a consequence of long-term processes of Othering wherein both

communities came to view themselves in a positive light and their Other in an entirely negative fashion.[27]

Within this, Irish/Ulster Protestants came to view themselves as representing the Protestant British Empire in Ireland and as defenders of the true word of God against the idolatrous and superstitious Irish Catholicism.[28] This combination of politics and religion helped to generate the belief that Protestantism was the standard-bearer for liberal democracy and moral righteousness on the island.[29] This was in stark contrast to their perceptions of Irish Catholics who were viewed as a backward "race" inclined to laziness and criminality and who, due to their domination by an intolerant Papal authority, were incapable of accepting dissenting religious and political views.[30] Indeed, popular representations of Irish Catholicism within the Protestant community sought to emphasise the threat posed by the former, who, they believed, were out to destroy Protestantism in Ireland[31]; a view reinforced by the nationalist movements that emerged over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were seen to have strong clerical support.[32]

Similar processes of Othering were also to be found within the Catholic population during the same period. This narrative often centred on the idea that the minority Protestant population – aided by a political and economic ascendancy established over the previous century – opposed political reforms that would allow a more representative democracy to emerge. Catholics had campaigned for greater equality within the new United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (1801) but had come up against opposition from Irish Protestants who opposed any concessions to what they perceived as a hostile Catholicism; fears the latter often did little to allay.[33] This opposition helped to reinforce the already well-established belief that Irish Protestantism was grounded in bigotry and sectarianism and fundamentally opposed to the emergence of an Irish democracy.[34] Within this narrative it was the Irish Catholic population that were the champions of liberalism, democracy and tolerance.[35]

Crucially, of course, both sides were unable to recognise how their own actions – sectarian activism – contributed to enhancing the fears and hostility of their Other.

These processes of Othering were fundamental in shaping the political culture of Northern Ireland in its formative years and ensured that the bitter divisions of the past would continue to plague the new state.

They help to explain, for example, why the Unionist government failed to use the new opportunity presented to them to build a state capable of representing all its citizens.[36] The reality was that the combined sense of hostility towards and fear of their "Other" made any movement towards conciliation unlikely.[37] Although 'most Catholics did not actively work against the Northern Ireland state'[38] both the passive hostility of the majority and the active opposition of a minority helped to feed unionist fears and convince them that their negative perceptions of the Other was accurate. This was seen to justify, in spite of a stated commitment towards the values of liberal democracy, their pursuing

policies of discrimination designed to limit the political, social and economic participation of Catholics in the state[39]; reflecting McManus's argument that Othering will lead groups to adopt policies that very often contradict what they claim to stand for.[40]

The discrimination experienced by Catholics, of course, merely reinforced their negative perceptions of Ulster Protestantism and provided them with further evidence of what they perceived to be the bigotry and sectarianism of the Unionist administration. Over time, this helped to generate a strong sense of communal grievance, which, Elliott argues, 'produced a highly sensitised victim psychology'.[41]

By the late 1950s, however, there were signs this situation was starting to change and that some within the Catholic population were beginning to question traditional nationalist narratives; their focus turning instead to addressing the socio-economic ills faced by large sections of the community.[42]

Two key factors aided this process.

In the first instance there was a growing acceptance by many Catholics that partition was going to be a reality for the foreseeable future – a fact emphasised by the declaration of a Republic for the 26 County state in 1948.[43]

The second factor lay in the fact that significant sections of the Catholic population had started to benefit from the welfare reforms introduced in Britain during the 1940s and, in particular, from the educational reforms of the period.[44] The 1947 Education Act (Northern Ireland) had created new opportunities for Catholics to access both a grammar school education and, subsequently, higher education, which helped to raise the socio-economic ambitions of sections of the population. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the first generation of these Catholic graduates were emerging with high expectations for their future and many were even beginning to think about this future within the context of the partitioned state they had been brought up to dislike so much.[45] For this to become a reality, however, they argued that the state needed to change and reforms introduced that would deliver greater equality and justice.

The demands being made, essentially seeking British rights for British citizens, were seen to mark a new departure for the Catholic population in Northern Ireland; 'reform not revolution' was now seemingly the key goal. Under the political leadership of the liberal unionist Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill, it initially looked as if progress could be made[46] but these hopes were dashed as O'Neill, under pressure from his own hard-line rank and file, failed to deliver on his early promise. The anger and frustration that this generated amongst Northern Catholics manifested itself in a US style civil rights movement that aimed to put greater pressure on Stormont to implement reforms.

In so doing, however, they aggravated unionists who, as Richard Rose has highlighted, largely rejected the idea that there was discrimination in Northern Ireland.[47] For Unionist leaders, Northern Ireland was a bastion of British democracy[48] whilst for working class unionists/loyalists, there was an added sense of grievance in that they believed they faced similar social issues as their Catholic counterparts.[49] As such, many within unionism came to view the civil rights cause as a front for Irish nationalism and, more specifically, the Irish Republican Army (IRA)[50] and, consequently, refused to acknowledge the genuine grievances being raised.

The subsequent loyalist campaigns against the civil rights movement represent a drift into a sectarian activism that centred on a growing perception of being under threat from their Other. These fears not only prevented the in-group from recognising the legitimate grievances of their Other, but it also led them to take actions that ran contrary to the principles they claimed to represent, namely, liberal democracy and tolerance of dissenting voices.

In the same vein, however, the civil rights movement also represented a drift into sectarian activism by sections of the Catholic population. The 'highly sensitised victim psychology' identified by Elliott, ensured that many within that community did not fully recognise the dire social and economic situation faced by their Protestant counterparts whose own socio-economic struggles did not figure prominently in the demands for change being made. Indeed, a key component of the nationalist narrative by the 1950s and 1960s was the sweeping generalisation that the Protestant working classes were a privileged community, rewarded for their loyalty to the Unionist elite.[51]

The hostile and, eventually, violent unionist response to the civil rights campaign served to generate new levels of anger and frustration within the Catholic population – an anger that also eventually erupted into violence at civil rights marches between demonstrators and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).[52] This violence, in turn, reinforced the unionist fears that the Civil Rights movement was always little more than a front for militant republicanism.

The initial violence by both communities, but only ever a minority in each, served to hasten the drift into stage three of the process of sectarianisation through Othering – that of "Sectarian Violence". In seeking to understand this transition it is important to get a clearer sense of the motivations that led people to join a militant organisation that would, ultimately, go on to wage a violent thirty-year campaign against the state.

Complex Dynamics of "Sectarian Violence": Politics of Irish Republicanism

Irish republicanism in the 1960s, reflecting the wider situation of northern Catholics, was experiencing a period of transition.[53] The IRA started the decade in the middle of a military campaign, launched in 1956, that was having little meaningful impact. In 1962, they formally called an end to their efforts and blamed its failure on the wider Catholic population 'whose minds have been

deliberately distracted from the supreme issue facing the Irish people - the unity and freedom of Ireland.'[54] This statement is very much symbolic of the divide that had emerged between Northern Catholics and republicanism – a divide that the republican movement sought to bridge throughout much of the 1960s.[55]

Although republicanism did enjoy a period of growth during the middle part of the decade, it was only between 1968 and 1972, as the violence surrounding the civil rights demonstrations intensified, that significant numbers of (young) people joined the movement. Crucially, these new recruits were not necessarily joining because of a long-term political attachment to the republican ideal but because of the tensions generated by the Sectarian Activism of the period.

This can be seen in the testimony of many who joined the IRA at that time. Former IRA prisoner and hunger-striker Gerard Hodgkins, for example, in an interview with journalist Peter Taylor, when asked if he had been aware of the IRA prior to his joining states:

> No, not really. The IRA would be a sort of folk memory. You would see on some walls graffiti, 'Join Your Local Unit', or 'IRA' or a Tricolour painted on the wall. It was just something you'd seen and you knew they were rebels. But really I hadn't a clue what they were.[56]

This was further evident in the reflections of another IRA man, Tony Miller, who recalls how he was encouraged into action by his experiences of "The Battle of the Bogside".[57] He recalls how this confrontation between Catholic youths and the RUC instilled in him a 'serious hatred' for the police and desire to 'sort of take revenge because you saw people getting battered and choked with CS gas'.[58] It is worth noting here that the violent police response – coupled with the early counter-insurgency approach of the British military in places such as Derry (Bloody Sunday, 30th January 1972) and Ballymurphy (9-11 August 1971), as well as the use of internment without trial[59] – helped to reinforce a growing sense of anger against the state. The IRA, and more specifically the Provisional IRA that emerged in early 1970, provided a mechanism to not only 'take revenge' but also, eventually, the initiative. In so doing, however, it reverted to an older republican (meta)-narrative that shifted the issue away from the original source of conflict – civil rights – to the more traditional issue of Irish unity. Given the tensions of the period this narrative was now seen as having greater resonance to those already caught up in increased violence.

These developments had major implications for the republican movement as its ranks were swelled by significant numbers of young men and women angered by the events around them. Gerry Adams has argued that the movement was 'ill-prepared and unable to cope with the needs and potential of that period' and identifies the 'primary problem' as being a 'lack of politics'. This, he argues, ensured that:

…the reinvigorated republican struggle which emerged then was an inadequate one, because the only republican organization which arose from the ashes was a military one: it had little or no proper educational process, nor formal politicization courses, and there was scant regard paid by the leadership to such needs.[60]

A primary consequence of this failing was that it ensured a generation of fighters that, initially, lacked a deep grounding in the republicanism they claimed to be fighting for. As the conflict intensified, and the IRA went on the offensive, these new recruits merely came to espouse the somewhat simplistic notion of "Brits Out"[61] and there was little consideration given to a political strategy capable of delivering their main goal of Irish unity.[62] Importantly, the key means for addressing such issues did eventually arise in the prisons.[63]

Transformative Education and the Prisons: Learning for War – Educating for Peace

Commenting on a post on the republican blog site 'The Pensive Quill', one contributor, identified as "Dixie", states:

Most of us, if we are truthful, who joined the Republican Movement at an early age; I was 16 and spotted at the front of riots, hadn't a clue about 'Isms' socialism or otherwise. It wasn't until the prison system swallowed us up that I heard of such things. In fact I first heard about socialism walking round the yard while on remand from Red Micky Devine. What kept us going through the Blanket Protest was the belief that we could bring about the ideals we learnt from Micky, Bobby and the likes of Tommy McKearney… I left jail with a head full of ideas which I hoped would change things for the better...[64]

This reflects the experiences of many who joined the ranks of the IRA in the early years of the conflict and who spent considerable periods incarcerated as a result.

One IRA ex-prisoner (ExP1), interviewed in late 2014, described growing up in North Belfast with little political awareness of the 'national question'; rather, he talks about a politics that tended to centre on trade union and labour issues. He maintained that he knew little about the history of Irish nationalism and republicanism, neither of which figured prominently either in the home or at school. His first experiences of this politics stemmed from the early years of the civil rights demonstrations and, more specifically, when his family faced threats of being burned out of their home by loyalists. By his mid-teens he had joined the republican movement and ended up in prison as a result.

He describes how his prison experiences had a significant impact on his political thinking, which, up until then, had focused exclusively on advancing the "armed struggle" he had joined. He used his time to study – informally – politics and Irish history and participated in the many political debates being organised by republican prisoners. Central to his story was the radical education he experienced with

thinkers such as James Connolly, Karl Marx and Paulo Freire amongst the required reading alongside the revolutionary writings of Che Guevara.

Of huge importance in this process, as highlighted in the Dixie quote above, is the role played by ideological leaders in pushing this education.[65] These figures were already well grounded in a particular political narrative – a politics normally instilled through family/communal connections that often dated back generations – and capable of applying their analysis to explain contemporary events. They presented an argument that the events of the time – the unionist response to the civil rights movement, for example – needed to be understood within a wider historical context and that lived injustices were merely the latest example of the sectarian Other demonstrating that it could not, and would not, tolerate "Us". The priority, therefore, was not to reform the status quo but to return to a historic ideal.

As such, it is important to recognise that the primary aim of initial debates and educational programmes in the prisons was to give political context – and thus a sense of legitimacy – to the growing militancy of the IRA and were certainly not an early attempt to replace the 'armed struggle' with a purely political activism.[66]

Despite this, however, it is clear that the programmes, both formal and informal, did have a longer-term impact on how the prisoners came to view the conflict.

ExP1, for example, describes how his studies made him more aware of the complexities of the conflict and encouraged him to enter into a period of "self-evaluation" leading to a questioning of the "war" by the late 1970s. This was, he believed, quite common amongst the prisoners although it was never talked about given the heightened tensions in the prisons over political status.[67] The prison conflict of the late 1970s and early 1980s, he argues, set back these critical reflective processes by at least a decade when programmes of study were re-established.[68]

An important consideration, therefore, reflected in the comments by both "Dixie" and ExP1, is that a real understanding of their "isms" only came about *after* their joining the republican movement and, in both cases, the increased sense of radicalism gained from their politicisation greatly impacted their political thinking and priorities.

This was evident from other interviews conducted and, importantly, even from those who claimed to have been politicised prior to joining the movement.

Ex-Prisoner 2 (ExP2),[69] although not coming from a particularly political family, did begin to take an interest in republican politics during the 1960s and was a participant in various civil rights demonstrations. Like Adams, he claims that the movement lacked strategic thinking and direction during the 1970s but that this had started to change during the 1980s due, in no small part, to the educational programmes – formal and informal – in the prisons. On a personal note he claimed that

the debates and discussions, alongside reading groups and formal programmes, encouraged him to cast a 'critical eye' on republican strategy and this included a critical reflection of the 'armed struggle'.

As with ExP1, the content of the debates were also of importance for ExP2. He described discussions that questioned the morality of conflict and how these were being influenced by a growing realisation that military actions were not likely to bring about republican objectives. Again, the radical ideologies that framed these discussions stood out, with figures such as Freire, Marx and Maurice Cornforth mentioned.

ExP3[70] had a somewhat different experience from the previous interviewees in that he was slightly younger and joined the IRA at a time when the conflict was already at its height in the 1972/73 period. His decision to join was influenced by what he described as a feeling of excitement that the IRA was part of a wider revolution against colonialism, and referenced events in Mozambique, Angola and Kenya, as well as the writings of figures such as Frantz Fanon, as being particularly influential.

Again, despite the apparent politicisation prior to his joining, the debates and discussions in prison seem to have had a similar impact on his thinking. Whilst they reinforced his political radicalism – his commitment to the idea of a socialist republic, for example – they also led him to question the ability of the 'armed struggle' to advance this ideal. He claims that he became increasingly cognisant of the limitations of the struggle and convinced of the need to develop a radical political movement capable of creating the type of society he believed was envisaged in the historic 1916 Proclamation of Independence.[71]

These developments were of crucial importance when it came to laying the foundations for the peace process. They highlight that there were at least some republican activists already privately questioning the IRA's military campaign at a time when leading republicans were beginning to devise their 'armalite and ballot box' strategy[72] – a strategy that would eventually put a much greater emphasis on developing Sinn Féin as a political voice for republicanism. The prison debates, discussions and programmes of education had helped to reframe the nature of the movement's radicalism to one more in line with that presented by Freire. Although republicans retained a 'commitment to the position one has chosen', they were now willing to listen to the views and opinions of the Other/s. These programmes, therefore, helped to pave the way for a more strategically engaged republican base to emerge and which possessed a clearer focus on republican aims and objectives that extended over and above advancing the 'war'.[73] When, therefore, the republican leadership eventually began to speak about a peace process, it found a movement largely willing and able to engage with such an idea; albeit the Othering generated by the years of conflict has ensured a relatively slow process beset with various stumbling blocks.[74]

The conflict in Northern Ireland demonstrates the outworkings of the Process of Sectarianisation and highlights the complex dynamics that help to generate and sustain violence. Of particular importance is the transition from the micro- to the meso- to the meta-narrative that is seen to legitimise such violence.

In the first instance we can identify a struggle within elements of the Catholic community. This centred on local and individual grievances against a state that they felt detached from, pitted against their rising socio-economic ambitions. This we can describe as a micro-level narrative/s. The grievances felt were reinforced by what became an epoch-defining moment – the civil rights movement – which generated an increased level of Othering leading to a wider sense of a 'Catholic community' ever more detached from the Unionist state. This can be viewed as the meso-level narrative. Finally, we can identify a meta-narrative wherein a wider/historic political ideal came to be applied to contemporary political events and which, for a minority, was seen to justify/legitimise the use of violence to bring about change.[75]

Having explored the nature of this process, it is important to determine how transferable it might be to the current issue confronting many European countries – Islamist extremism.

Othering and Islamist Extremism in Europe

On Monday 22nd May 2017, a 22-year old British Muslim, Salman Abedi, detonated a home-made bomb in the foyer of Manchester Arena as crowds left following a concert by the pop singer Ariana Grande. The bomb killed twenty-two people, injured dozens more and sent shock waves across British society.[76]

This, and similar terror attacks carried out in major towns and cities across Europe, raise important questions about the motivations for carrying out such indiscriminate acts of violence against innocent civilians.[77] These questions take on greater importance when it is considered that the attacks are often carried out by people, like Abedi, who are born and/or raised in Europe and who are often attacking the very community from which they came.[78] This is further reinforced by the significant number of Muslims that have recently left Europe to fight for Islamist groups in both Syria and Iraq.[79]

In seeking to understand these motivations it is important to explore the role of Othering and how it aids a process of sectarianism. As part of this, it is possible to identify micro-, meso- and meta-narratives amongst sections of the Muslim community in Europe that facilitate this transition.

Firstly, it is important to recognise an underlying tension within sections of the Muslim community that have settled in the West. Although many have settled in Europe to exploit the socio-economic opportunities it provides, a minority struggle to overcome long-held negative views of the West that they have been socialised with. A Gallup poll from March 2002, for example, found that a majority of residents surveyed in nine Islamic countries believed that 'Westerners have immoral lifestyles and

weak family values'. Those polled further believed that the West does not respect Islam and that Westerners are, in general, 'arrogant and believe their societies and civilization are more superior and advanced'.[80] Such negative views of the Other, which will foster their own sense of in-group superiority, transfer with those that settle in the West.

This is evident in the experiences portrayed by Maajid Nawaz in his autobiographical account *Radical* which depicts his life experiences growing up in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s.[81] The picture presented by Nawaz is one that, in many ways, resonates with elements of the Catholic community's situation in Northern Ireland during the 1950s and 1960s. We see, for example, that Nawaz was raised in a household with conflicting social and political discourses. On his mother's side, he describes a determination to use the opportunities for socio-economic progress that moving to Britain provided and highlights the emphasis placed on 'the need to study, to work hard and make the most of themselves'.[82] This contrasts, however, with the politics espoused by his father who is described as being 'anti-colonial' and who regularly held political discussions on such matters in the house.

Exposure to such views serve as a form of socialisation for younger generations into a political culture that spawns doubt about their new homeland – seen to be that of the 'coloniser'. Although such a politics may initially appear to conflict with their own realities and priorities, specifically their social and economic ambitions, it nevertheless creates a negativity that feeds a process of Othering. This is reinforced by negative experiences they encounter, such as racial victimisation or (perceived) social barriers that hinder their socio-economic development.[83] All of this contributes to what Neumann describes as a 'lack of identification with the Western societies they (or most of them) were born and grew up in'.[84]

To address such issues there has been a significant number of community organisations established, since the 1990s, that seek to better represent Muslim interests.[85] Such groups, which have developed across many Western countries, represent a form of "sectarian activism". The most prominent in the UK, for example, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), lists amongst its aims and objectives the strengthening of 'all existing efforts being made for the benefit of the Muslim community' and 'the eradication of disadvantages and forms of discrimination faced by Muslims'.[86]

Although such groups, like the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, claim to be 'non-sectarian'[87], they are an important part of the process of sectarianisation. Operating through peaceful and constitutional means, they campaign for positive change for their particular in-group and, as such, naturalise the idea of a separation from the Other – even those confronted with similar socio-economic issues. As was the case in Northern Ireland during the 1960s, this has helped to generate a new meso-level Othering wherein the idea of a Muslim communal identity developed a new and greater significance.[88]

Although these groups have provided an important service for Muslim communities across Europe, their work was made more difficult as a consequence of what was an epoch-defining moment – the September 11th attacks of 2001. These attacks, alongside others such as those in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), helped to intensify the processes of Othering in Western Europe as manifested in a growth of anti-Islam[89] and anti-immigration sentiment and the subsequent rise of 'populist radical right' parties across the continent.[90] These parties, grounded in a 'nativist' political outlook have been to the forefront in propagating the idea that all Muslims are terrorists and that Islam is an inherently violent religion incompatible with Western values.[91] The more recent terror attacks in Europe have served to further reinforce and popularise such views amongst sections of the European population and are, increasingly, becoming mainstreamed through policies designed to curtail immigration.[92] Fawaz Gerges argues that:

> A climate of fear and panic has taken hold of the European and American imagination. The terrorist threat, though real, has been blown up out of proportion with British Prime Minister [then David Cameron] saying that ISIS poses an "existential" threat to his country, a statement that mischaracterizes a limited menace with a strategic. In the US, in an attempt to reduce the danger to the homeland, Republican presidential candidates have called for banning Muslims from entering the country and for bombing civilians in Iraq and Syria, a recipe that aides Salifi-jihadists like ISIS.[93]

These responses to the Islamist terror threat have acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As radical right parties make political gains by exploiting and/or promoting anti-Islam sentiment, they enhance perceptions of social exclusion amongst (young) Muslims, particularly as their narratives become ever-more mainstreamed.[94] This alienation has been further enhanced by events associated with the "War on Terror" and, in particular, the wars in Iraq and Syria which have led to the deaths of hundreds of innocent Muslim civilians – deaths that some in the Muslim community believe are under-reported or trivialised in contrast to Western casualties.[95]

It is at this stage that a meta-narrative becomes crucial.

Although many, initially, do not think of themselves within the context of the *ummah,* they have, due to Othering, come to view themselves as being part of a Muslim community increasingly detached from Western society. The meta-narrative of groups such as al Qaeda and ISIS seeks to give this detachment a new and wider context wherein previous local and national experiences are placed within a global (historic) framework.[96]

In particular, they do much to play upon and promote the idea that the West is inherently hostile to Islam and Muslim interests and seek to use both historical and contemporary events/issues to reinforce their point.[97] Stern and Berger draw attention to the role played by various military conflicts or genocidal campaigns, 'such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan or the genocide in Bosnia', in the

propaganda of jihadist groups[98], whilst both Byman[99] and Hegghammer and Wagemakers[100] highlight the historic role that has been played by the Palestinian issue in such publicity.[101] More recently the focus has centred on the crises surrounding Iraq and Syria and, as highlighted above, the deaths of innocent civilians at the hands of "invaders" and "infidels". Sageman, for example, found that most of the 'neojihadis' he interviewed 'attributed their politicization to watching videos of slaughtered Muslims in distant lands'.[102] This can be seen to represent the first key element of the jihadi narrative that presents Muslims as victims of an aggressive West that views Islam as its enemy.

A central part of this jihadi story is the idea that Muslims, for too long, have been happy to play the victims and, worse still, many now strive to imitate those that inflict such sufferings. ISIS urge young Muslims to fight back against the "near" enemy[103] by building an Islamic State that does not respect the artificial boundaries established by the West and its "allies".[104] In so doing they talk of an epic battle between "us" and "them" – "good" and "evil" – that seeks to restore "true" Islam to its rightful place.[105] For this to happen the adherents of "true Islam" need to confront, not only the threat posed by the West, but also those Muslims that are deemed to have abandoned their Islamic ways having embraced Western values and morals.

As such, the violence espoused by ISIS has something of a redemptive character wherein those that feel they have fallen by the wayside can find favour again by fighting, and dying, for the caliphate, 'the abandoned obligation of the era'.[106]

This has a considerable impact on the type of people that groups such as ISIS can appeal to. While they will, of course, be able to attract those impacted by the deep sectarian divisions in Muslim countries, they will also appeal to those not necessarily grounded in a deep understanding of Islam, particularly in the West.[107] Recent research by Basra, Neumann and Brunner[108] has shown that many recruits into the ranks of jihadi groups have lengthy criminal pasts and have only recently become adherents to their Islamic faith.[109] What is more, as Roy[110] points out, many of the new recruits will have shown little political interest previously and will have no history of involvement in campaigns traditionally associated with Islamist groups. This, indeed, is an important consequence of the meta-narrative pushed by jihadi groups who argue that political action is pointless and changes nothing. ISIS, in particular, rally against a "bended knee" political action and argue for a much more forceful approach to looking after Muslim interests[111] - a message that resonates with a generation rebelling against the compromising previous generation.[112]

The key point emerging from the turn to violence therefore, as was the case in Northern Ireland, is the failure of politics to address genuine Muslim grievances at local, national and international levels.[113] Given, however, that new recruits into extremist groups are not necessarily inspired by a religious fundamentalism should offer hope that measures can be taken to prevent others from turning to violence.[114]

This requires Western governments to recognise the Othering processes that are facilitating a sectarianisation of society more broadly and which are not confined to the Muslim community. As such, there is a need to move away from those policies that simply place an onus on Muslim communities to address 'radicalisation' within their ranks, and adopt strategies that challenge sectarianism in its entirety.

Three key priorities emerge from this.

At a local and national level there is a need to address the factors that have facilitated the rise of the radical right across Western society and to more directly challenge their narrative that seeks to blame all contemporary social ills on immigration and, specifically, Islam. Central to this is the need for programmes that can facilitate (cross community) discussion on such topics as nationhood, citizenship and diversity and which challenge stereotypical notions of "us and them", highlighting the complex realities of national identity.[115]

Secondly, there is a need to provide new opportunities for young Muslims to engage more constructively with politics. In the first instance, this can centre on programmes that encourage 'radical' political thinking but which highlight the ineffectiveness of violence to achieve end goals.[116] These programmes should encourage strategic thinking around addressing key concerns.

Finally, dealing with such concerns will require a commitment, on the part of government, to invest in local and national initiatives that address perceptions of social inequality and exclusion. Crucially, it also necessitates a commitment to addressing the wider macro-narratives that have a fundamental role in sustaining Othering across generations. This includes prioritising long-running sores such as the Palestinian issue, as well as securing greater stability across the wider Middle-East.

Conclusion

There remains much to learn from the conflict and subsequent peace process in Northern Ireland. As this paper has argued, this is particularly true in terms of understanding the complex dynamics that help to generate and sustain violence.

By developing a "Process of Sectarianisation through Othering", this paper has argued that there is a need to move away from the idea of "radicalisation" as a negative concept. Indeed, based on an analysis of the impact of educational programmes amongst republican prisoners in Northern Ireland, it has been suggested that an increased political "radicalisation" helped to facilitate a process of critical reflection on the IRA's armed campaign and its ability to further their aspirations.

As such, it has been argued that similar community programmes may be of benefit in addressing the issue of Islamist extremism. Through an exploration of the processes of Othering that have increased

sectarianism between elements of Islam and the West, the paper draws attention to the complexities driving extremism and the need that exists to better confront such processes.

Central to this are political programmes of education that can generate better strategic thinking around how to deal with those social ills that feed sectarianism across society – including that currently manifesting itself in the rise of "radical right" parties.

Crucially, it has also been argued that there is an onus on Western governments to deal with a wider meta-narrative that sustains Othering across generations of Muslims with a priority given to long-running issues such as that of Palestine.

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