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How the 'suspect community' became 'critical engagers': the (re)framing of the Irish republican narrative on policing in Northern Ireland.

This article is an empirical case study of how the Irish republican narrative on policing in Northern Ireland evolved from an absolutist position of rejection to one of post-conflict 'critical engagement'. Drawing on previous research by McEvoy and by Mulcahy it evaluates the strategic dimensions to the (re)framing process that aided mobilisation throughout the course of the conflict and into the transition in Northern Ireland. Positing that the Irish republican policing narrative can be conceptualised into four distinct phases (passive rejection, 'Ulsterisation', disbandment and 'critical engagement'), it critiques how the process of (re)framing enabled Irish republicans to adapt their policing narrative to mobilise in response to unfolding political developments in Northern Ireland. Although cognisant of certain dominant themes prevailing across multiple narrative phases, this article examines how the issue of policing was subject to changing narrative frames as the 'end point' the narrative sought to make changed from phase to phase. The changing 'end points', this article will argue, developed in tandem with changes in the relationship between Irish republicans and the Northern Ireland state.

Introduction

In January 2007 a specially convened Sinn Fein *Ard Fheis* voted in favour of endorsing the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The *Ard Fheis* motion committed the party to 'support the PSNI and criminal justice system' so that 'a civic policing service, accountable and representative of the community is delivered as quickly as possible' (CAIN 2007b). The move was part of a choreographed process to re-establish devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. In the wake of the St Andrews Agreement that followed the formal ending of the

Irish Republican Army (IRA) campaign in July 2005, it was designed to entice the hard-line Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) into a powersharing executive. The move was nonetheless remarkable given the hostility that had characterised relations between Irish republicans and Northern Irish police forces (Ellison and Smyth 2000) - most notably the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) (replaced by the PSNI following police reform).

This article critically examines the evolution of the Irish republican policing narrative and posits that it can be conceptualised in four broad phases; *passive rejection*, *'Ulsterisation'*, *disbandment* and *critical engagement*. Conceptualisation into distinct phases is *not* to suggest that certain dominant themes do not pervade across phases. Instead of denying such fluidity the conceptualisation proffered herein highlights how 'frame elaboration' – essentially making certain aspects of a 'master frame' more central than others - (Snow, Tan and Owens 2013) was integral to how individual and collective narratives represented events on the ground at different phases of the conflict. The conceptualisation into different phases reflects how framing involves interaction and communication with other constituencies and the prevailing socio-political 'opportunity structures' that social movements mobilise within (Coe 2011). So while Irish republicans may have *always* had an inherent degree of rejection across the phases (*critical engagement* apart) 'frame elaboration' reflects the different representations of *why* policing should be rejected that were birthed by interaction with changing state narratives, the changing role of the RUC throughout the conflict and the changing approach of Irish republicans towards the Northern Ireland state. The latter of these is of central importance given the inherent link between state legitimacy and policing legitimacy. The most notable examination of how Sinn Fein discourse was shaped by their increased tactical interaction with state structures

(in this case the courts and rule of law) was conducted by Kieran McEvoy (2000). McEvoy observed how this strategic interaction came to ensconce itself more permanently as a constitutive element of Sinn Fein's post-conflict brand of Irish republicanism. This article aims to build on McEvoy's research through using the application of social movement theory to critically examine how Irish republicans altered their policing narrative to mobilise in response to the wider political environment of Northern Ireland and in tandem with their changing relations with the state. In doing so it offers insight into the strategic importance that underlines narrative framing and mobilisation in the face of a changing relationship with the state and its security apparatus. In drawing out these dimensions the article aims to look beyond narrative as outcome – essentially what the narrative imparts – to instead critically evaluate how narrative (re)framing is an inherently strategic process involving choreographed interaction with internal and external factors to manufacture a degree of political agency that can shore up overarching political positions. In short, it will trace how strategic (re)framing occurred every time wider political developments demanded a new narrative 'end point'.

Although social movement literature has rarely featured in political studies on Northern Ireland, a strong case exists for applying it to Sinn Fein because it *evolved* into a bureaucratic political party with a significant parliamentary presence having *initially* emerged as the political wing of a social movement birthed by communal resistance (Bean 2007: 52). Before becoming 'a competitive actor in a political market place' it confined itself to anti-establishmentarian street politics of agitation and protest in support of the IRA (Tonge 2006). Indeed, the mobilisation process itself substantively changed throughout the Sinn Fein evolution into a mandate-seeking constitutional political party. Mobilisation is the

process by which social movement entrepreneurs induce individuals into taking collective action (Gamson 1975). It occurs when they successfully turn a sense of collective discontent into agency through the investment of time and resources to remedy this discontent (McCarthy and Zald 1977). For radical social movements, like early Sinn Fein, this takes the form of public and/or violent protests against existing power structures (Raento 1997). However, entry into constitutional politics seen Sinn Fein become a *political party* mobilising its 'community of resistance' to vote in favour of a new form of representational politics rather than encouraging social agitation by the 'community of resistance' itself (Bean 2007: 84). Accordingly, mobilisation had evolved from getting bodies on the streets to publicly and violently oppose the state to getting voters to vote for Sinn Fein.

Before proceeding to a more in-depth methodological note certain caveats should be noted. Firstly the article is not a narrative 'balancing act' but an empirical case study of the policing narrative constructed by Irish republicans. Insightful studies on policing narratives from other perspectives exist elsewhere (Lawther (2010), Mulcahy (2000) and Brewer and Magee (1991)). Secondly the article aims to examine how Irish republicans framed their policing narrative to mobilise on the issue of policing *not* to comprehensively or exhaustively study more nuanced political developments within contemporary Irish republicanism. Finally there are some within the wider Irish republican constituency that have not endorsed policing. That does not diminish the examination of the evolution of the policing narrative proffered by Sinn Fein but rather provides an insightful examination into the strategic process of counter-framing.

Empirical data is drawn from two distinct sources. Primarily it is drawn from the archives of Irish republican publications like *Iris* and *An Phoblacht* and from localised newssheets and

Sinn Fein policy documents sourced via the Northern Ireland Political Collection at Linenhall Library, Belfast. This has been supplemented by original data drawn from semi-structured interviews with 30 community activists, political activists and former combatants across a broad spectrum of opinion within modern Irish republicanism. In order to create 'maximised comparisons' (Christians and Carey 1989: 367) the sample included interviewees of both genders, from several different urban and rural locations and from different (and no) political groups. Interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity meaning that all 'person specific' information that may lead to identification (Wiles, Crow, Heath and Charles 2008) has been omitted. Data sets were analysed using 'thematic analysis' (Kohler Riesmann 2002) which effectively meant examining *what* was told rather than *how* it was told. This was then mapped onto a broad timeline of changing political developments in Northern Ireland. This approach drew on Mulcahy's (2013) concept of 'signal events' – high profile events relating to policing in Northern Ireland that are useful for evaluating wider political changes. From this the four narrative phases of *passive rejection, Ulsterisation, disbandment and critical engagement* were deduced and further developed. As the aim of this article is to determine *how* and *why* Irish republican discourse on policing changed throughout the conflict and peace process, a 'signals event' framework is justified because it acknowledges the importance of the causality link between 'opportunity structures' and 'end points' in the (re)framing process. A change in macro-level 'opportunity structures' is reflected in change at street level reality ('signal event') which in turn forces a social movement to recalibrate its discourse accordingly (new 'end points') in order to successfully spur the collective into taking a certain course of responsive action ('mobilisation'). Applying empirical data to such a framework provides a deeper insight into under examined processes of Irish republican collective mobilisation and Sinn Fein party modernisation on the specific issue of policing.

Passive rejection

During the 17th century the British enacted the colonial policy of plantation that displaced the mainly Catholic native Irish with Protestant settlers from Scotland and England. Using the rhetoric of the dangerous 'native' as justification for arming themselves (McIntosh 1999:16) the Protestant 'planters', with their political and religious allegiance to Britain, acquired a strong sense of affinity with and ownership of militias and police forces tasked to protect their privilege (Breathnach 1974:17). This pattern persisted throughout subsequent centuries meaning that by the time the Government of Ireland Act (1920) partitioned Ireland to create the Protestant dominated state of Northern Ireland the precedent of those with religious and political allegiances to Britain using police forces and the rule of law to protect their privileged position was well established.

The Northern Ireland state was founded on notions of Protestant supremacy and loyalty to Britain. The RUC were integral in protecting this supremacy by repressing the minority Irish Nationalist community who had an innate identification with the newly created Irish Free State and a political aspiration of rejoining this state (Farrell 1983). The minority community also contained a smaller number of Irish republicans who shared this aspiration but gave articulation to it through the use of political violence. Although this violence was at most a questionable threat to the security of the state (Hanley and Millar 2009), it allowed the Stormont government to direct now permanent 'emergency legislation' against the minority community as a whole (Farrell 1983). A system of 'divided society policing' emerged whereby the dominant group took ownership of policing and criminal justice, while the minority community were alienated from this system (Weitzer 1995). Walsh (1983:8) evaluates:

> From Stormonts creation to its demise in 1972, the loyalists occupied the seat of government without a break. They used this position of power to make their situation even more impregnable. They organised an armed force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) with a paramilitary wing, the B-Specials whose particular role was to protect the state against internal and external attack. Draconian emergency legislation in the form of the Special Powers Act (Northern Ireland) 1922-33 was enacted.

Stormont's Unionist government had a 'formidable internal security apparatus' to rule over the minority community through 'explicit coercion' (Ellison and Martin 2000). Attuned to the wider implications of this in a society operating a 'divided society' policing model, the Irish republican narrative became shaped by 'boundary work' (Hunt and Benford 2004:443) distinguishing between 'them' who ran and defended the state and 'us' who were discriminated against. This helped to strengthen solidarity – defined as the 'identification of' and 'identification with' a particular group (Hunt and Benford 2004:439) - within the minority community. This was given succour by RUC misuse of legislation like the Flags and Emblems (Display) Act and the Special Powers Act to suppress cultural and political displays of Irishness (Farrell 1983).

As the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) campaigned for reform of the exclusionary state in the 1960's, it was greeted with RUC heavy-handedness meaning that 'complaints about discrimination soon gave way to complaints about the RUC' (Ellison and Martin 2000). It could be argued that this represents the first 'signal event'. An 'injustice frame' recognising RUC defence of the exclusionary state as a 'political wrong' (Polletta 1998) began to frame a narrative that tied the unacceptability of the RUC to the

unacceptability of the discriminatory 'Orange state'. Rejection of the RUC is predicated on its role as a 'private army for the Unionist party' (*Republican News* 1973). Policing, rather than being 'normal', is depicted as threatening to the minority community regarded by the state and its policing apparatus as a 'suspect community'(Hillyard 1988). As political violence erupted in Northern Ireland amidst the attempted suppression of the NICRA campaign, the view of policing representing a political threat gained increased traction. RUC activity in combating political violence was presented as an extension of their role in suppressing minority community dissent (*The Tattler* 1971). The ability of the narrative to instil such an outlook is illustrated by one former combatant's comments that 'the police for me just meant an arm of the state and it was an illegitimate state as far as I was concerned and a violent and sectarian arm of that illegitimate state' (Author interview April 2013). Similarly another former combatant recalled feeling that 'their [RUC] primary responsibility was maintaining the state and the state to me was a deeply flawed state. It was discriminatory against me and the community I come from' (Author interview July 2013). As evidenced by these assertions, the Irish republican policing narrative had succeeded in terms of 'boundary work' by placing 'them' in the RUC apart from 'us' within the minority community and had succeeded in utilising an injustice frame to portray RUC defence of the state as a political wrong.

Attitudes to policing, then, were invariably reduced to an evaluation of the relationship between the Unionist dominated state and the Protestant bloc (RUC and B Specials) defending it. This structuralist view birthed a number of key narrative tropes that would retain central importance throughout subsequent narrative phases; *sectarian* as articulated through 'us and them' calculations, *coercive* in that policing manifest itself in the use or

threat of violence and *political* because policing problems owed themselves to fundamental problems with the status quo the security apparatus were defending.

With Irish republicans harbouring political ambitions of reunification that placed them in de facto opposition to the very existence of the Northern Ireland state, it was politically expedient to mirror their criticism of the state in their criticism of the RUC. This created an absolutist position on policing; republicans *absolutely* rejected the Northern Ireland state ergo the police force tasked with upholding that state must also be rejected *absolutely*. Through historic appeals to generations of discrimination at the hands of the privileged 'planter', a narrative of daily oppression feeds into a grander Irish republican political desire for reunification. The 'end point' appears to be that the use of the police force to enforce Unionist supremacy is symptomatic of a flawed 'Orange state' that must be rejected and - due to its failure to sufficiently reform itself – removed through political violence. This 'end point' reflects the 'outsider' nature of their relationship with the Northern Ireland state that sees a convergence of their 'otherness' within the Unionist dominated Northern Ireland state and their violent ideological opposition to the states very existence. When the British Government prorogued the Stormont regime in March 1972, however, the Irish republican policing narrative had to evolve beyond a position intrinsically linked to rejection of the 'Orange state' in order to chime with the changing political environment.

Ulsterisation

The next 'signal event' was the emergence of state polices of 'Ulsterisation' – using the indigenous RUC and Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) to front counter-insurgency (Boyle, Hadden and Hillyard 1980:32) – and 'normalisation' – portraying the RUC as a 'normal' police force fighting 'normal' crime (Walsh 1983). Two new 'end points' emerged; the RUC's

counter-insurgency role justified republican violence directed at it and this counter-insurgency function meant the RUC were not a 'normal' police force. To make these 'end points' 'adversarial framing' (Benford and Snow 2000), portraying the Nationalist community as the 'good' victims and the RUC as the 'evil' oppressors was adopted. This (re)framing justified violence directed at the RUC and reified existing detachment from a police force historically regarded as threatening rather than 'normal'. Although the narrative exhibits continuity in terms of the core themes of *sectarian*, *coercive* and *political* policing, the expression of these tropes reflects a change in their manifestation from RUC violence against NICRA protestors to more aggressive and concerted counter-insurgency policing violence against the wider Nationalist community.

When 'Ulsterisation' was introduced in 1976 the IRA promised the RUC a 'long hot summer' (*The Volunteer* 1976), justifying this violence by depicting the RUC as an active participant in the conflict. This became particularly relevant by the 1980's when the RUC began exhibiting identifiable characteristics of counter-insurgency policing - targeted killings, extracting intelligence from suspects and collusion allegations (Celador 2005). The RUC were dismissed as 'another section of Britain's military forces' (*Sceal* 1986a), the implication being that, contrary to the British states 'normalisation' policy, they were 'legitimate targets' of IRA violence as an integral component of the British 'war machine' in Ireland (*Iris* 1985:33). With republicans arguing that 'Ulsterisation' had been enacted to make occupation 'seem more acceptable' (*Sceal* 1986a), directing increasing violence at the RUC and highlighting its active counter-insurgency role in the conflict created an onground reality that stood in contrast to the state narrative. With those articulating narrative frames needing to give them credibility if the narrative is to sufficiently mobilise the collective (Benford and Snow 2000), Irish

republicans were able to do so through emphasising the militaristic orientation of policing in Nationalist districts. This can be seen in one interviewees remarks that 'growing up policing in my mind would have been closely associated with the Army... the Army and the police would have patrolled together so it would have been easy to have that sort of coalescing of the thinking that the police and Army are the same thing' (Author interview September 2013).

The heightened selectivity of the framing process is integral to creating a sense of victimisation and to attributing blame for this victimisation (Benford 1997). Using the onground impact of counter-insurgency policing, the Irish republican policing narrative created a sense of grievance within republican communities by depicting it as a symptom of ingrained sectarianism within the RUC- a task made easy by the force's predominant Protestant composition and ethos (Ellison and Smyth 2000). The excesses of RUC counter-insurgency policing became 'loyalist harassment' doled out to Nationalists by 'loyalist gunmen' (*Sceal* 1986b). Republicans argued 'the RUC are not a police body and will not be accepted as such... but will be viewed for what they are and what they represent – an extension of the loyalist paramilitary groups' (*The Freedom Fighter* 1976). Constructing this narrative of victimisation had two discernible effects; it furthered the 'boundary work' of the *passive rejection* phase *and* it expanded beyond this by engaging in 'emotional work' (Hunt and Benford 2004: 447). 'Emotional work' draws on emotion – in this case the anger and vulnerability inherent in victimisation – to reinforce solidarity within the collective. It then invokes 'moral emotions' to reign down moral judgement on an identifiable wrongdoer – in this case the RUC – in order to reinforce the outlook of the collective (Goodwin, Jasper

and Polleta 2004: 423). This 'emotional work' would reify opposition to and detachment from the RUC as the ethno-nationalist 'other'.

As counter-insurgency policing intensified in the 1980's republicans drew on cases of 'shoot-to-kill' (Ni Aolain 2000), the use of plastic bullets (Rolston 2000), 'collusion by neglect' (*The Freedom Fighter* 1977), active collusion (Sinn Fein 1990), attacks on republican funerals (Plunkett 1987) and the supergrass trials (Delaney 1983) to (re)frame their narrative with 'moral shocks' (Polletta and Jasper 2001). The intrinsic value of 'moral shocks' is twofold; they help to mobilise the collective to demand political action to change whatever wrong has shocked them and they appeal to a wider audience by drawing in peripheral sympathies (Jasper and Poulsen 1995). The success of 'moral shocks' on both fronts in the Irish republican policing narrative is evident. Invoking 'moral shocks' meant that 'shoot-to-kill' (Amnesty International 1994), mistreatment of detainees (Amnesty International (1978) Human Rights Watch (1992)), collusion (Relatives for Justice 1993) and the abuse of emergency legislation (Committee on the Administration of Justice 1995) received increased scrutiny from human rights groups. Republicans were acutely aware of the advantages of channelling interest from such quarters, acknowledging that the anti-supergrass 'Stop the Show Trials' campaign needed to embrace 'those sections of the community whose opposition to the use of perjurers is based on humanitarian or civil liberties motives and who endorse the campaign's central demands' (Delaney 1983). The problems of counter-insurgency policing had thus expanded beyond a restrictive core of militant Irish republican activists to include moderate elements that disagreed with Irish republicanisms militant agenda but were nonetheless perturbed by events on the ground.

'Moral shocks' also allowed republicans to mobilise the collective in violent resistance to the RUC. This is reflective of the more general onground application of 'repression-mobilisation' theory (Khawaja 1993) in Northern Ireland where increased state repression led to increased Irish republican mobilisation against it (Campbell and Connolly 2003). The ability of 'moral shocks' to mobilise the collective is apparent in one former combatant's reaction to one high profile case of RUC violence they had personally witnessed:

> From that day onwards I just turned my attention against them and I swore I would do all I could do to see them disbanded because that wasn't policing... they were terrorising people. So how do you fight people like that? You go to peaceful protests and you're beaten off the streets, you were arrested, you were put in jail so you fight fire with fire. And that's what I did (Author interview July 2013).

Having adopted the 'Armalite and Ballot Box' strategy, 'moral shocks' also featured in Sinn Fein election literature. Unlike the 'harmless and acceptable... salaried, career politicians' of the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Sinn Fein were local community based activists who had 'challenged RUC, UDR and British Army harassment of the nationalist people and demonstrated on the streets against their shoot-to-kill policy' (Sinn Fein 1983b). Election literature engaged 'moral shocks' to highlight that Sinn Fein candidates had not only resisted internment, H-Block and political imprisonment but they had also been their foremost victims (Sinn Fein 1983a). This use of 'moral shocks' continued into the 1990's, with their 1997 general election manifesto stating that during parades disputes Sinn Fein had 'shown strong and creative leadership on the streets when it has been most needed' (Sinn Fein 1997c).

Leading on from a depiction of the force as the protectors of an exclusionary state, the Irish republican policing narrative duly evolved to become premised on establishing 'end points' that justified republican violence against the force and rejected 'normalisation'. Narrative (re)framing became a strategic process of interacting with the wider political environment by using 'emotional work' and 'moral shocks' to further distance the collective from the RUC, bring in peripheral sympathies and to aid violent and electoral mobilisation against the RUC. Through interaction with the 'structural opportunities' of changing state policies Irish republicans drew on existing themes but strategically (re)framed them to relate to the changing environment. Strategic (re)framing would continue as counter-insurgency policing lessened with the gradual emergence of the peace process in the 1990's.

Disbandment

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) promised a 'new beginning' for policing, leading the British Government to establish the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (Patten Commission) to review the matter. In tandem with general movement out of political violence and the embedding of the peace process, Sinn Fein's political script began to noticeably depart from simplistic 'Brits out' rhetoric to become more human rights and equality orientated. These wider factors further shaped the Irish republican policing narrative; one was the 'signal event' creating scope for an amplification of the narrative and the other determined how this would be framed. Reflecting how Northern Ireland was standing on the cusp of a new political dispensation, the Irish republican policing narrative moved the depiction of the RUC beyond that of 'legitimate targets' to (re)frame policing as an issue of human rights and equality to be addressed as part of a wider peace process. The

'end point' became establishing that the RUC must be disbanded in order to 'leave the mistakes of the past behind us' (Sinn Fein 1997b).

Although still contextualised by historic grievances (Sinn Fein 1995), the narrative adopts a human rights frame. This (re)frames the matter *not* in the language of ideology but in the lexicon of international human rights (Sinn Fein 1996). Drawing on observations made by human rights groups the narrative frontloaded how the RUC 'have been indicted by all the leading human rights bodies in the world' (Sinn Fein 1997a). Engaging the language of human rights allowed Irish republicans to depict RUC policing as an historic wrong that cultivated systematic human rights violations. This human rights dimension became more relevant as the RUC violently clashed with Nationalist residents protesting against contentious Orange Order parades (Pat Finucane Centre 1995:5). Drumcree intensified 'micromobilisation' on the issue of disbandment. 'Micromobilisation' is 'the collaborative work that individuals do on behalf of a social movement or social movement organisation to muster, ready, co-ordinate, use and reproduce material resources, labour and ideas for collective action'(Hunt and Benford 2004:438). A co-ordinated 'Disband the RUC' campaign involving letter writing, posters and white line pickets took root within republican communities. Collectives will struggle to mobilise on a given issue if there is a failure to make that issue relevant to the broader public (Marullo and Meyer 2004). The prominence of media coverage on the Drumcree dispute, however, meant that RUC heavy-handedness was beamed across the globe, opening up the republican policing narrative not only to a domestic audience outside these immediate areas but also to an increasingly concerned international audience. The ability of the narrative to reach a wider external audience was also aided by the public consultation process that was rolled out across the North of Ireland

as part of the Patten review. Although the consultation process quickly became mired in the wider politics of the policing legacy (Murphy 2013), these forums nonetheless became invaluable in enabling Irish republicans to mobilise on the issue of RUC disbandment so as to broadcast their policing narrative beyond the traditional confines of their own support base.

Recognising the Patten consultation process as an opportunity to reinforce their 'end point', Irish republican discourse adopted 'diagnostic framing'. 'Diagnostic framing' diagnoses, from the collectives perspective but to an outside audience, *what* is wrong and *who* is to blame for this wrong (Snow and Byrd 2007). The diagnosis proffered was that violent RUC conduct exhibited at Drumcree, as well as historically through counter-insurgency policing, was indicative of ingrained sectarianism within the force. The logic of this being that the RUC would have to be disbanded if prospects of long term peace were to be realisable. Although the narrative reverts to dominant tropes of RUC sectarianism and violence (albeit public order policing rather than counter-insurgency policing), it nonetheless moves beyond a crude depiction of a bigoted 'Orange' force. Attuned to the growing salience of human rights and equality within Irish republican discourses (McEvoy (2000), McGovern (2004), Bean (2007)), the narrative depicts disbandment of the RUC as a precursor to any lasting political settlement. The RUC were no longer 'legitimate targets' but a 'core problem' to conflict resolution (Sinn Fein 1996). While diagnostic frames may be reliant on being empirically credible for acceptance (Jasper and Poulsen 1995), the reality is that the adverse impact RUC policing was having on the ground in Nationalist communities chimed with an Irish republican argument that the force needed disbanding in order for Northern Ireland to 'leave the mistakes of the past behind and effectively remove the causes of conflict' (*An Phoblacht* 1998). 'Prognostic framing' enters the Irish republican policing narrative. With

'prognostic framing' highlighting 'what has to be done' to remedy a supposed wrong (Snow and Byrd 2007), it is apparent that from the Irish republican perspective, the disbandment of the RUC and the creation of a new police force is the only viable solution to an historic policing problem.

When the Patten proposals were eventually made, Sinn Fein reserved judgement until they had examined the proposals in detail. They did, however, express early concern as to whether the proposals went 'far enough in addressing the failed legacy of policing in the Six counties' (*An Phoblacht* 1999). Although the PSNI replaced the RUC in November 2001 and the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) came into being, Sinn Fein continued rejecting policing on the basis that the Policing Act fell significantly short of the Patten proposals (Sinn Fein 2001). Through enacting reform the state had, however, managed to 'reclaim' some of the 'political space' (Marullo and Meyer 2004:59) occupied by Sinn Fein on the matter, by successfully placating the SDLP on the matter. Although initially critical of the dilution of the Patten recommendations further amendments in light of the Weston Park talks had secured SDLP backing (Murphy 2013). Sinn Fein, on the other hand, asserted that they would continue fighting for further concessions to take policing closer into line with Patten (*BBC* 2001).

As the new millennium dawned, the Irish republican narrative still exhibits disconnect from policing but had nonetheless moved beyond an absolutist position. This reflects the quandary of the 'inside/outside' position Sinn Fein had adopted post-GFA and post-Patten. In accepting the GFA they had recognised the de facto legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state - albeit coated with a discourse of using its structures as a springboard for employing equality based reform to catapult them into a united Ireland (McEvoy (2000), McGovern

(2004), Bean (2007)). They were also actively legislating the rule of law in Northern Ireland's powersharing government. While they had rejected the Policing Act they had, however, shown some tacit satisfaction with the Patten framework for reform (Murphy 2013). Both of these created a fundamental change in the Sinn Fein position towards the state and policing that would require further strategic (re)framing to move beyond ideological absolutist rejection that no longer corresponded with their increased engagement with the post-conflict state. The remedy to this quandary was to draw on wider post-GFA discourse to strategically (re)frame policing as an issue of reform and human rights rather than ideological opposition to 'British' policing or the 'Orange state'.

'Critical engagement'

Sinn Fein participation in the powersharing institutions created under the GFA birthed a discourse of equality based reform from within that was undermining the traditional Unionist grip on political power (Bean 2007). The collapse of these institutions amidst claims of an IRA spy ring at Stormont brought Sinn Fein protests that the affair was concocted by 'a fifth column against change' within the PSNI (Sinn Fein 2002). These 'securocrats', republicans protested, were using 'political policing' to impede the Sinn Fein project of equality based reform (Sinn Fein 2003). Depoliticising policing to disempower this 'securocrat' element therefore became the Sinn Fein aim, with policing increasingly presented as a valuable resource worth contesting. If implementing equality based reform from 'within' policing furthered the 'republican agenda' by disempowering 'securocrats', Sinn Fein argued, it was necessary to examine if political conditions were favourable to such an actuality (Sinn Fein 2006). Using the discourse of equality based reform Sinn Fein slowly

guided their constituency into a protracted consultation process on policing that culminated in the January 2007Ard Fheis vote.

How extensive or meaningful this consultation process was has since been questioned, exposing internal tension over party modernisation – a process where older, problematic ideological strands are refined to reflect contemporary societal reality through policy change that will appeal to more voters (Dommett 2015). Given the natural unease involved in departing from previous positions, the process is most successful where there is strong internal discipline (Ozbudun 1970). Critics of Sinn Fein party modernisation argue that it has been driven by deference to centralised authoritarianism (i.e. the diktats of the leadership) that was cultivated within the jails and then subsequently exported to Nationalist communities post-GFA (McIntyre 2008). A system of managerialism thus emerged within the 'Sinn Fein state' (Bean 2007) that allowed the leadership to gain influence through the role former prisoners loyal to them played initially in funded local community structures and latterly through local government and assembly posts (Tonge 2006). Accordingly, critics opine that the policing debate was an extension of this managerialism whereby mid-level local apparatchiks convinced the grassroots support base to rubber-stamp a predetermined leadership decision. The Sinn Fein leadership succeeded because they 'had surrounded themselves with people who were 'yes men' within the movement who would swear that Gerry Adams is the new messiah… you can see that clearly now when you look back and analyse situations' (Author interview September 2013). Consequently, the policing debate 'wasn't a real discussion within the Nationalist community' but a charade whereby the Sinn Fein leadership 'tried to say "we've consulted with our grassroots and they support it" but all these meetings were loaded with Adams' brown nosers' (Author interview June 2013).

While the Sinn Fein leadership argued that the move was vital to building greater political strength through an increased mandate – or as Gerry Kelly articulated 'creating more Irish republicans who will support and be active in our struggle' (CAIN 2007c) – opponents dismissed it as an electoral ploy to chase middleclass votes in 'what was once SDLP territory' (Boyle 2007) – something subsequent election results indicate has worked (Tonge 2009: 174).

The 'critical engagement' phase is notably different to earlier narrative phases. Unlike other phases it appears to have been strategically constructed for an exclusively internal audience. The 'end point' is no longer about using 'moral shocks' to tell an external audience of the shortcomings of policing or for internal mobilisation against policing. The 'end point' is now persuading a grassroots support base to buy into policing by strategically (re)framing 'critical engagement' with policing as a combative type of reform that would advance ideological goals and prevent repetition of past abuses.

Ideologically policing became 'the new arena of struggle' (Gerry Adams cited in *BBC* 2007), allowing Sinn Fein to portray 'critical engagement' as a transformative measure in the face of resistance to change from opponents. Mary-Lou McDonald told the *Ard Fheis* that 'we were right to withhold support from the PSNI and to stay off policing boards till now. By doing so we maximised the pressure for change... having achieved the threshold for a new beginning to policing... the time is now right to engage' (Sinn Fein 2007c). Discernible in the above arguments is the notion of policing becoming another resource in the republican arsenal of equality based reform. According to this logic endorsing policing was, much like accepting the GFA (Coulter and Murray 2008:5), a 'process' that would lead to a United Ireland rather than an 'outcome' falling short of it. The reappraisal of policing on these

grounds mirrors an earlier reassessment of the law whereby an atavistic rejection of the application of 'British law' in Ireland gave way to a realisation that it made pragmatic sense to strategically engage with the law to gain political and material capital (McEvoy 2000). This (re)framing eased grassroots supporters into accepting the move. Accordingly 'critical engagement' is seen to be:

> About all the things we have to change totally. The mindset, the structures, the procedures, the culture ... the only way to be changed is when people go into them and actually say 'no we're not doing it that way, we're doing it this way here' (Author interview June 2013).

The strategic (re)framing of the narrative to adhere to a wider political discourse justifying increased engagement with the post-conflict state helped to reaffirm to the collective that ideological advancement lies in 'participatory republicanism' rather than 'militant republicanism' (Tonge 2008:59).

Noticeable too in this strategic (re)framing is increased emphasis on accountability. Given the historic lack of police accountability (O'Rawe 2008), (re)framing the matter in terms of an increased – perhaps even inflated – sense of accountability made the 'sell' an easier one politically. The strength of the accountability frame is evident by the fact that the *Ard Fheis* motion specifically stated the intention behind 'critical engagement' was that 'political policing' would be made 'a thing of the past' by Sinn Fein representatives on policing oversight bodies (CAIN 2007b). The move was framed with 'zero sum' appeals that republican representatives on policing oversight bodies would 'remove another pillar of the corrupt state from enemy hands' and bring 'the arrogance of power to book' (Sinn Fein 2007b). By this stage policing was no longer deemed a political threat but a site of strategic

political struggle through which long term goals premised on equality based reform could be realised with a view to eventually achieving ideological goals in their totality. In addition to being intertwined with strategy, (re)framing also becomes intrinsically linked with agency in a new dispensation. By depicting the issue as one requiring pro-active Irish republican involvement, the (re)framing orientates itself towards an 'end point' that rather than *rejecting* policing on ideological grounds republicans must a*ccept* it on such grounds and match this with increased political agency.

Appeals for political agency fed into Sinn Fein's posturing as a post-GFA 'ethnic tribune'. 'Ethnic tribunes' are favoured by voters who regard them as best placed to safeguard sectional interests and secure further concessions (Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty 2008). Sinn Fein's initial electoral appeal was that it represented a more radical threat to the status quo than the SDLP (MacThomas 1991) but post-GFA it is now premised on challenging the SDLP ability to deliver for Nationalists (Tonge 2009: 167). By the time it had surpassed the SDLP in the polls, Sinn Fein had successfully used a discourse of equality based reform of the state to install itself as the primary defender of newly acquired Nationalist interests (McGovern 2004). The nature of consociationalism aided this electoral pitch because previous generations of exclusion could be usefully juxtaposed against gains made through participatory politics, with the Nationalist electorate who have grown in support for GFA power-sharing subsequently rewarding Sinn Fein (Evans and Tonge 2013). The Sinn Fein leadership therefore engaged perceived SDLP shortcomings to reaffirm the need for republican agency in furtherance of discourses of accountability, transformative change and political empowerment. As an 'ethnic tribune' Sinn Fein, unlike the SDLP, had refused to prematurely endorse policing until scope for 'radical change' emerged (CAIN 2007c). While

they strategically disengaged to create this, the SDLP had 'failed to hold the PSNI to account' by becoming 'cheer leaders for the PSNI' (CAIN 2007a). The cumulative effect of this was an argument that transformative change required republican participation in policing precisely because 'we cannot leave policing to the unionist parties or the SDLP or the Irish government' (CAIN 2007a). While rooted in rhetorically useful discourses about equality based change and achieving ideological advancement via building political strength, this argument nonetheless seeped into the grassroots psyche:

> We are now in the situation where we're in government and in the institutions and running them... that is the strategy… I mean are we relying on the Unionists to change the nature of policing? Well it's not going to happen. Are we relying on the SDLP? Well that's not going to happen. So the only people who have any hope at all of changing the situation is Sinn Fein so we have to be in there (Author interview June 2013).

Selling policing as a site of transformative change also softened the general image of policing. The PSNI were no longer seen as a political threat but as a community service. This fed into the argument that republican communities need 'proper policing' (Sinn Fein 2007a) and located police composition within a framework of equality based reform (Dickson and Osborne 2007). 'Critical engagement' thus became concerned with transforming an historically unrepresentative police force into a more representative police service that would deliver 'non-partisan policing for... all of our people' (Gerry Adams cited in CAIN 2007a). Sinn Fein quickly framed the issue in terms of making 'policing with the community... the core function of the PSNI and actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the police service in tackling crime' (CAIN 2007b). The

success of (re)framing policing as a community service rather than a historic, sectarian political threat can be seen in the remarks of one former combatant who, through lived interaction with post-reform policing, concluded that there were now those within the PSNI who are motivated by a desire to deliver 'a proper policing service' in republican communities and who are 'completely different' to sectarian RUC officers of the past (Author Interview July 2013). The Irish republican policing narrative has therefore evolved considerably from policing agents being protectors of the 'Orange state' and 'legitimate targets' to now being – admittedly imperfect – community servants.

'Critical engagement', however, further fractured broader Irish republicanism. A significant minority spanning several different (and no) political groups continue to reject policing, reflective of the fact that collectives fragment when some opt to engage with concessions and others continue rejecting them (Olzak 2004). If the evolving Sinn Fein narrative was fashioned through strategic interaction with changing state policies, the anti-policing counter-narrative has similarly been fashioned through strategic interaction with the 'critical engagement' narrative. The anti-policing 'end point' is to dismiss any notion of change within the function and nature of policing. It has demonstrated considerable fluidity in intertwining key frames from previous narrative phases to establish this 'end point'. Absolutist ideological rejection, for example, is evident through assertions that the PSNI remains a 'British occupational force' that is 'unreformable while there is British occupation' (Author interview November 2013). Similarly, *Ulsterisation* 'adversarial framing' of counter-insurgency policing has been retained, with the PSNI dismissed as 'an illegal paramilitary gang' (*The Sovereign Nation* 2014b). Consequentially anti-policing republican groupings continue to mobilise in protest at PSNI harassment of republican activists (*Starry Plough*

2007) and the 'internment by remand' of republican activists opposed to the post-GFA political status quo (*The Sovereign Nation* 2014a). Given that Northern Ireland is witnessing – at the surface level at least – less militaristic and more normalised policing, the counter-narrative has been forced to reflect this. Rather than relying on widespread 'suspect community' harassment, as in previous phases, the counter-narrative has been tweaked to specifically reflect the discriminate harassment of republican activists. Continued 'adversarial framing' has birthed a victim centric narrative within the constituency that is broadcast externally and internally (Whiting 2012). Like in previous narrative phases, this has imported human rights concerns from external audiences. The counter-narrative has duly adopted human rights groups' concerns about 'the policing you don't see' and lacunae in accountability mechanisms (Committee on the Administration of Justice 2012).

The combined effect of continuing to draw on these historic frames through counter-framing is to challenge the Sinn Fein 'lie of "community based policing"' through exposing 'the reality of increased use of draconian legislation, harassment and brutality' (*Poblacht na nOibrithe* 2012). In seeking to make this 'end point' the strategic nature of narrative (re)framing again comes into focus. Counter-framing by anti-policing republicans has drawn strategically from two opposing approaches to the post-GFA state; the reformist insider approach of Sinn Fein and their own continued absolutist ideological opposition to it. The latter has relied on strategic interaction with the former to keep policing framed as a political threat thus reinforcing ideological opposition to the GFA, justifying 'spoiler' violence directed at the PSNI and fundamentally challenging the PSNI image as a community police service. In sum, then, strategically counter-framing their narrative with historic tropes

communicates that where the 'PSNI/RUC' are concerned 'the leopard does not change its spots and neither does the nature of British rule in Ireland' (*Saoirse* 2009).

Conclusion

In tracing the evolution of the Irish republican narrative on policing from a position of absolutist rejection to one of post-conflict 'critical engagement' this article has provided an insight into how master narratives must be examined beyond strict concentration on narrative as outcome. This is not to deny that the magnitude of change in terms of narrative as outcome is not in itself significant or worthy of sufficient examination. This case study has shown, however, that narrative (re)framing is a more expansive process than outcome because it is an inherently strategic, politically valuable means of keeping a grassroots collective base on board in constantly changing political landscapes. It allows narrative to communicate changing political strategies in their most base sense to the grassroots, thus creating opportunities for agency and mobilisation in response to altering political relationships with external state structures. Most notably, the process has been invaluable to managerailist party apparatchiks engaged in party modernisation designed to increase electoral charisma. Feeding into leadership self-images and rhetorical discourses, it locates specific policy change within this broader discursive territory opened up by changed 'opportunity structures' purportedly favourable to fundamental change. Proof of this is seen by the fact that the Irish republican policing narrative once framed by threat, injustice and 'moral shocks' has evolved to become framed by opportunity, accountability and community service, thus mirroring increased Sinn Fein involvement in the full political life of the post-GFA Northern Ireland state. Those once mobilised to violently oppose policing in Northern Ireland via strategic narrative (re)framing induced agency have now been similarly

mobilised to 'critically engage' with it. The counter-framing process engaged in by anti-policing republicans also speaks to the truth of narrative (re)framing being a process of strategic interaction with macro-level 'opportunity structures'. It reflects the causality link between 'signal event' and mobilisation, even if responsive agency is primarily driven by rejection of party modernisation processes rather than significant changes in state policy. In conclusion it can be seen that whether the narrative is (re)framed in favour of or against 'critical engagement' it has been adroitly constructed through strategic interaction with external factors that lie beyond the narrow confines of the Irish republican constituency.

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