Touring 'post conflict' Belfast

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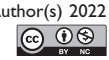
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Touring 'post conflict' Belfast

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore Belfast as a site of 'dark tourism' through a case study of Coiste which is a tour company based in West Belfast which employs former political prisoners as tour guides. These tours advertise themselves as providing an 'authentic' account of 'the troubles' through a broad republican lens. This outlook frames the narrative within which the history of Belfast is discussed by those who are considered as former 'terrorists' who draw on their lived experiences of taking part in violent conflict. While the example may seem as an unlikely contender for the role that tourism can play in peace transformation processes, nonetheless, the discourses on offer provide a necessary addition to mainstream tourism products which often involve sanitising the past and airbrushing history by turning it into an uncontentious, consumable tourist commodity. The paper is based on 'walk and talk' interviews with tour guides and Tripadvisor Reviews of these tours.

Keywords

dark tourism, political tourism, biased authenticity

Introduction

While history has always been subject to contrasting narratives and ideology fundamentally impacts on interpretation and understanding, societies coming to terms with violent pasts face a dilemma as they embrace and celebrate the often disruptive road to peace.

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They have to confront an 'undesirable heritage' (MacDonald, 2006) around simultaneously recognising the marketing advantage of having a distinctive, niche product but needing to package history in such a way that it is presented to the outside world in terms of a success story that at times involves obliterating or sanitising aspects of the past that continue to plague the present. The term dark tourism was coined by Lennon and Foley (1996) to describe the commodification of former sites of death, conflict and suffering for the tourist market. Their study has dominated tourism studies and drawing on a range of research into 'dark tourism' sites, Stone and Sharpey (2008) outline a number of sociological explanations to account for why tourists are attracted to such locations including the search for out of the ordinary tourist experiences and the desire to gaze on former sites of political conflict. In this vein, dark tourism has increasingly been recognised as a growing phenomenon particularly through its relevance to providing a lens to the past and present history of societies emerging from conflict (White and Frew, 2013). Ashworth and Hartmann (2005) view Belfast as a prime example of 'dark tourism' and argue that one of Belfast's core selling points is tours which bring tourists to 'atrocity' sites in interface areas which are working class Nationalist/Catholic and Unionist/Protestant areas where inhabitants live side-by-side apart. Hence, Belfast can be considered as an example of dark tourism, whereby areas emerging from protracted ethnic conflict become sites of alternative tourism (Smith, 1998; Seaton, 1996). Such areas with their deep-seated cleavages based on competing nationalisms and arguments over state legitimacy provide a different and unconventional type of tourist experience from the increasing homogenising experiences emanating from globalisation (Bollens, 2001). Since Belfast claims success for its peace process, touring 'post-conflict' Belfast enables tourists to see first-hand the physical manifestations of segregation in relative safety. They enable tourists to visit flashpoints of former violent relationships and gain some insight into the highly emotive events that spawned the turbulent history of the city.

Northern Ireland's mainstream tourism industry supports an image of Belfast as a city successfully reconciled with its troubled history. Hence in marketing and managing tourism, the uneasy peace that continues to characterise Northern Ireland is contextualised within a framework which focuses on a superficial reimaging of the city in ways that does little to inform, understand, accept or contest the past But as Neill (2009: 640) points out 'Belfast needs to be reimagined not just reimaged' with Hocking (2015) arguing that public space, particularly in Belfast's city centre, is narrowly used by politicians, policymakers and planners to reimage rather than reimagine Northern Ireland as a post-conflict', global, capitalist, consumerist place. However, Simone-Charteris et al. (2013: 60) argue that 'while states may encourage the development of certain types of cultural heritage resources and forms of tourism that enable them to present themselves to the wider world on their terms, they cannot exercise complete control over this activity'. This paper focuses on a case study of a tourist product in Belfast which rather than glossing over the most traumatic experiences of the violent conflict in Northern Ireland places these experiences at the heart of the tours on offer. The paper is structured around three core themes. The first draws on sites visited during the tour route as an example of 'dark tourism'. This is followed by the tour guides' attempts to illustrate the authenticity of the tours by bringing in their personal biographies drawing

on violent pasts. The final section suggests that these tours both trap the past but simultaneously provide for hopeful futures by demonstrating how former political prisoners and republican activists through the narratives that accompany these tours demonstrate their ideological commitment to a united Ireland achievable through constitutional processes rather than through the violent activities they once subscribed to.

Tourism in belfast

Between 1969–1998, around 3500 people died as a result of political violence in Northern Ireland colloquially referred to as the 'troubles' (McKittrick et al., 2001). Prior to the outbreak of the 'troubles', over one million tourists visited Northern Ireland yearly and this fell to just over a quarter of a million by the mid-1970s with the bulk of tourists coming from the UK and Ireland and visiting Northern Ireland mainly to visit family and friends (Wall, 1996). This pattern characterised tourism in the region up until the 1994 IRA ceasefire and the subsequent signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. After this Northern Ireland repackaged itself as a peaceful tourist destination and visitors to the area increased significantly reaching over five million by 2019 (NISRA, 2020). Prior to Belfast establishing its place as a peaceful destination, Roulston (1995) argues that formal tourist organisations acknowledged that the 'troubles' could be packaged as a curiosity factor for 'dark tourism'. However, since the Good Friday Agreement, the mainstream tourist approach was to downplay the 'troubles' and highlight Belfast as evidence of the outcome of a successful peace transformation process. This involved showcasing Belfast as the location where the Titanic was built, taking tourists on Game of Thrones tours showcasing sites made famous by the popular fantasy television series and presenting Belfast as a luxury destination with upscale restaurants and cultural venues (Hocking, 2015). In relation to the Titanic, Cochrane (2015: 61) argues that the venue 'has become an emblem of post-conflict regeneration in Northern Ireland with global recognition'. Overall, this policy largely reflected efforts to 'erase the Troubles from the City Centre' (Wiedenhoft Murphy, 2010: 546). Nonetheless, alongside these sanitised images of Belfast, there has also been a proliferation of 'troubles' tours involving Black Taxi tours, commercial bus tours and numerous walking tours from a variety of different small-scale operators. For the most part, these are packaged to provide 'neutral' commentaries on the conflict and a 'balanced' view of 'past' antagonisms between the two main communities and their respective associations with the British State. Leonard's (2011) research for example, discusses how open-top double decker buses bring tourists through the streets of West Belfast to gaze from the comfort of the bus on the various political murals that dot the overall area with guides providing commentaries outlining how Belfast has moved from the dark days of the conflict to the modern city landscapes which provide the core focus of the tour route.

Coiste, the tour company which forms the basis of the case study on which this paper is based make no claims around neutrality and balance. Rather, their tours are advertised upfront as providing a history of the 'troubles' in Belfast through a republican lens. The organisation is based in West Belfast, an area which by 2001 ranked first in terms of the

number of civilian deaths associated with the 'troubles' (McKittrick and McVea, 2012). The area served as one of the prime locations for major conflict flashpoints during the duration of the conflict and includes a number of atrocity sites where both perpetuators and victims lost their lives. Within this area, Coiste has emerged as the dominant organisation for 'authentic troubles' tours. Its tour guides are all former political prisoners who use their 'credentials' to showcase their past involvement in the conflict. Led and influenced by these tour guides, tourists gaze on contested, dark landscapes injected with tour guides' transmitted meanings. The tour guides position themselves as products of the history which is being revisited and they inject personal opinion into their narratives reflecting personally lived history. They see their role as fundamental to creating an authentic identification with the landscapes visited by drawing on these personal experiences to arouse feelings of empathy and to project themselves as authentic locals with direct experience of the history on offer.

The notion of 'authenticity' was introduced into sociological accounts of tourism in the 1970s by MacCannell (1973) who compared modern tourists to traditional religious pilgrims seeking authentic experiences. While the concept remains contested with some commentators arguing that too much emphasis is given to authenticity or that it is frequently staged (Cohen, 1984; Ritzener and Liska, 1997), Wang (1999: 350) argues that authenticity is a particularly valid concept for exploring 'history or culture tourism which involve the representation of the Other or of the past'. Leonard (2011) argues that tour guides in such places inject emotions into their performances in order to garner support and empathy for the partisan narratives on offer. She uses the term 'biased' authenticity' to describe how some tour guides in Belfast portray a distinct gaze and this involves directing and framing the gaze of tourists by 'selecting, glossing and interpreting sites' in ways which support their biased narratives. This notion of a 'tourist gaze' was coined by Urry (1990) to describe the expectations that tourists may have when they visit heritage sites and how local tour guides may reflect back this perceived gaze in order to influence how sites are understood.

These kinds of biases are usual when one is visiting politically contested places where despite the presence of peace processes, uneasy relationships continue to characterise local politics. A number of authors (Noy, 2011; Cohen-Hattab, 2004; Bowman, 1996) argue that politically orientated tourism is often little more than politically biased propaganda. In other words, in politically contested places, narratives are rarely neutral. Tour guides in these contexts can play a crucial role in informing tourists' interpretations and understandings of the history and current politics in contested regions. But, while interpretations of history are likely to always reflect some bias, where this bias is based on the authentic, real, genuine experiences of tour guides, this provides potent memories of a lived history which may have a greater impact on tourists than that provided by professional guides without such "authentic" backgrounds.

Methodology

Given that the overall focus of the research was on how tour guides present and talk about place, it was decided to implement walk and talk interviews, with tour guides taking me

on the typical tours they conduct with tourists and outlining to me the discourse they present. Walking interviews enable researchers to explore the link between self and place (Evans and Jones, 2011). Walking within specific places produce meanings and understandings whereby places are rendered as not just a background but an outcome of action. Hence, walk and talk interviews enable researchers to make connections between what people say and where they say it (Holton and Riley, 2014) and turn interviews into 'conversations in place' (Anderson, 2004). Kusenbach (2003) argues that walking encounters should reflect as much as possible 'natural' everyday journeys. Tour guides were asked to personally take me on their traditional tour route. Each walking tour lasted three hours and followed the same route. Three walk and talk tours involving the author and tour guides were undertaken during the first week of March 2020 just before the pandemic lockdown occurred. A number of additional tours were undertaken prior to the personal walking tours conducted with tour guides where I accompanied other tourists on tours and observations noted during these tours support and add to the validity of the specific walk and talk interview component of the methodology. The walk-and-talk interviews were recorded by a digital recorder and were transcribed verbatim. I also took photographs at specific stops and this enabled me to remember places after the interviews were completed and enabled me to immerse myself more fully when reading the transcribed accounts of the interviews. The walk-along interviews enabled me to listen, observe and ask questions throughout the route. While political tours are of course organised with 'customers' in mind and I was able to see this when accompanying general tours involved other tourists but personally accompanying tour guides on their standard journey where I was recast in the role of researcher enabled me to understand more fully the importance of place in the discourses they produce. It also enabled me to get an insight into the tour guides' attachment to the neighbourhoods they were visiting.

The walk-and-talk interviews were supplemented with an analysis of reviews of the walking tours on Tripadvisor. Coiste's website has a direct link to Tripadvisor reviews where tourists describe and evaluate their tour experiences online. Tripadvisor is considered as one of the world's largest travel websites (Carter, 2016). Reviews are 'digital traces' of tourists' memories of the places they visit and they give an insight into tourists' thoughts at a particular point in time (Alexander et al., 2018). The accounts are provided with the expectation that they will be read by others. Carter (2016: 235) argues that reviews posted on Tripadvisor 'constitute narrative appraisals of tourist sites; that is visitor-authored stories about places'. According to Safaa et al. (2017) would-be tourists no longer rely on the official statements made by tourist providers but want to know what other tourists are saying. Reviews relating to Coiste tours generated a sample size of 161 reviews and a thematic approach was adopted to highlight core themes. This involved noting (where available) the name and location of the reviewer, reading the content over and over in order to identify overarching themes and using a colour-coding manual approach to grouping themes. Alexander et al. (2018) argue that Tripadvisor reviewers rarely give information about themselves in reviews and this was evident across the reviews. This makes it difficult to develop any kind of background profile of respondents in terms of gender or other background details. Some reviewers did not

specify their name (and indeed may have used pseudonyms) and while most mentioned their location, not all did. However, those who did identify location indicated that they were visiting from a wide range of countries including UK, Ireland, Australia, USA, Canada, Spain, and Italy. Despite these limitations and potential concerns about reliability, Alexander et al. (2018: 4233) argue that Tripadvisor reviews 'provide a window onto ordinary hard-to-research popular attitudes….especially by ordinary people'.

Coiste walking tours

The walking tours organised by Coiste follow pre-determined routes. Their main tour involves a walk through Catholic/Republic West Belfast which is partitioned from Protestant/Unionist West Belfast by various peace lines and barriers. Concrete walls, steel gates, metal fences topped with barbed wire provide tourists with the physical features of ongoing segregation in West Belfast and the overall route snakes through locations of past violence and contemporary hotspots of contention. Murals depicting perpetuators and victims of the conflict mark street corners and gable walls while former perpetuators of the conflict are enshrined and remembered in the various memorial gardens that characterise the area. The tour starts at Divis Flats which is a short walk from the city centre where the guides give an introduction before presenting a brief but dense description of the conflict in Northern Ireland. This description is presented through a broad republican lens and enables tourists to understand the history and significance of the places visited. This frame is established at the outset. For example, Jonathan's[1] opening statement is as follows:

> So I've been doing the tours maybe for around 10–12 years now and as I say the backdrop to the tours we do and the frame within which we talk is that we will always talk about the conflict as being an anti-imperialist conflict, a colonial struggle so we try and set it in the context of history and the never ending struggle to end British influence and rule in the country.

This sets the context for an interpretation of the troubles which firmly locates it within the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland and throughout the tours, guides return to this dominant framing. This is evident in the first element of the 'dark tourism' narrative employed by the tour guides which refer to two killings which took place at Divis Flats. As Brian explains:

> We would describe the events around how (name of teenager) and (name of British soldier) were killed in 1969 and obviously the thing about that would be the way in which you had the indiscriminate fire of the RUC into the Divis flats complex and (name of teenager) obviously was shot dead in his bedroom and (name of British soldier) was shot dead as well and needless to say it comes as a bit of a surprise to people when you tell them that (name of British soldier) was a British solider and he was needless to say the first British soldier killed in the conflict, and his story is largely ignored particularly if you go to any, like for example the memorial in Staffordshire in England that has the names of all the British soldiers killed in the conflict in the north, it doesn't include (name of British soldier) and

> the way that I would explain that to people is to say that (name of British soldier)'s story is a kind of an embarrassment if you want, to the British, I mean he was killed by his own people you know and it goes against that narrative you know of the IRA and republicans being to blame and again it's kind of overlooked that most of the people who were killed in the initial years of the conflict or particularly in 1969 were actually killed by the state or by loyalists and again this is part of that narrative of as I say of blaming republicans and exonerating political responsibility for the conflict.

The tour guides use this story to suggest that other accounts of the troubles in Northern Ireland are also subject to bias and erasure. Hence, while they acknowledge that their perspective is biased, they justify this as a general outcome of how societies retell their histories. The guides return to this theme throughout their tours suggesting that in talking about the past, it is usual for societies to engage in dual processes of remembering or forgetting and for one account to be emphasised over others because it accords with wider interests and ideological viewpoints.

The tour includes a visit to the International Wall located on the Falls Road. This area is a popular tourist spot with open-top red tourist buses and Black taxi tours making it a regular stop. There were a number of black taxis with groups of tourists at the International Wall during each of my visits. The International Wall is used to legitimate the republican struggle by framing it within struggles ongoing in other countries, the most common being Israel/Palestine, South Africa and the Basque region of Spain. The Wall also contains images of various icons of international justice such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Frederick Douglass, a former slave and subsequent champion of anti-slavery in the USA who began a lecture tour of Europe in Belfast in 1845. The murals change regularly to reflect recent events. The Wall enables the tour guides to view themselves as victims of international struggles and hence their past actions become defensible given the injustices they and their communities have had to confront. A few hundred yards from the wall is the site of the Falls Road Memorial Garden where none of the other tour organisations make a stop. The Coiste guides describe the purpose of the garden and its connection to the area in which it is located, going through the names of local 'volunteers' listed on the remembrance plague and describing how each one was killed. The guides discuss how these memorial gardens permeate working class areas of Belfast and how they remind locals and visitors of republican volunteers who fought and lost their lives during the troubles. This history is presented as a living history and the guides point out the care with which these memorial gardens are maintained as proof of community support for these remembrances. Of course who owns the past is far from straightforward and open to contestation. Hence, while the paper presents tours from a republican perspective, it is important to emphasise here that these tours rely on specific republican memories rather than from an overall republican perspective. This brings to the fore the complicated nature of memory and whose memory is being portrayed. Coiste, not only represents a one-sided view of history but one that may not be shared by others in the Republican community including those of the individuals being commemorated.

Throughout the route, we gazed on murals depicting major events in republican history such as the killing of three members of the IRA in Gibraltar in 1988. At other

times, we visited sites where actual atrocities had taken place. For example, we visited the Bobby Sands mural which is situated on a gable wall of Sinn Féin's Head Office in Belfast One of the guides used this location to recount another horror 'dark tourism story' concerning an incident that happened at the location in the 1990s where some of those working in the Sinn Féin office were killed. As Mark described it:

> He (the killer) had smuggled in a pump action shotgun which he used to shoot 5 people. He killed 3 of them the other 2 who were wounded recovered from their wounds.

This account along with many other stories brought the reality of 'dark tourism' to the fore via walking through streets where many atrocities had taken place. While at one level, many of the stories recounted were unsettling, Tripadvisor reviews suggested that some tourists felt that getting an insight into the area's troubled past necessitated 'telling it as it is'.

Performing and challenging authenticity

Authenticity is established by tour guides writing themselves into the history they are recounting. They are not passive bystanders to this history but played an active role in the conflict. All three are former political prisoners or are described in some discourses as former 'terrorists'. This active background and involvement in the IRA is woven into the narrative of the three tour guides and was a standard part of the narrative delivered when the author joined other tour groups involving different tour guides. Alongside bringing personal biographies into their narratives, throughout the tour, the guides recounted stories from their past showing that they were part of local history and these personal stories further enhanced authenticity. According to Hansen and Mossberg (2017), one of the most important aspects of tour guiding is story telling. This includes selecting what stories to tell and recounting the stories with passion and enthusiasm. Stories provide tourists with background insights into the places they are visiting and authenticity is enhanced if tour guides embed personal stories into their narratives. As Overend (2012) points out, tour guides bring sites visited alive by performing 'spatial stories'. This was positively commented on in a number of Tripadvisor reviews:

> Right from the start we were very interested in his stories, which were very personal as well. We are two history students, so hearing 'living history' from (name of tour guide) was very fascinating to us. (Tourist, Netherlands: July 2019)

> He showed us the main spots where terrible things happened, and gave us highly detailed information about everything. (Tourist, Spain: Dec. 2018)

> Very touching personal stories as you walk down the Falls Road where much of the struggles occurred. (Tourist, Morocco: May 2019)

One example of the personal stories recounted by all three tour guides was their account of serving time with Bobby Sands one of the most iconic figures of the troubles. Bobby Sands was the first republican to go on hunger strike and the first to die. He was elected a member of parliament whilst on hunger strike. He died on 5th of May 1981 after spending 66 days on hunger strike and his death prompted several days of rioting in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland. The guides recount how over 100,000 people lined the route of his funeral and each argue that his death marked a turning point in Irish politics. Since all three tour guides indicate that they were imprisoned with Bobby Sands during this time hearing them recount stories of their prison experiences allows for a very authentic experience. Accounts are permeated by the term 'we': 'we stopped cleaning ourselves', 'we stopped washing ourselves'. Mark recounts his experience as follows:

> We always sort of believed that the Brits would allow somebody to die you know that they were never gonna make any sort of concessions to us without getting a pound of flesh and we always thought that somebody would die and obviously Bobby accepted that too by going on (hunger strike) first I have to be honest I never thought the 10 prisoners would die but again it kind of highlighted the determination on our part and obviously the determination on the British part as well, because as I say they had invested quite a lot in the whole criminalisation policy so eventually 10 prisoners died.

The guides do not shy away from the circumstances that led to their imprisonment. While this article focuses on specific walk-and-talk interviews with tour guides, as already outlined, I joined tourists on several walking tours offered by Coiste and on each occasion, tour guides volunteered information about their imprisonment to further demonstrate their active connection to the 'troubles'. In relation to the walk-and talk interviews, Jonathan talked about how he was jailed for handling explosives while Brian recounts his background as follows:

> I was arrested in January 1977 and I was charged and eventually convicted of trying to kill a RUC man so I was given a life sentence and I ended up doing 16 years of it mostly in Long Kesh.

These narratives are delivered in matter of fact tones. Their aim is not to shock but to provide further evidence of the guides' experiences as authentic members of former paramilitary organisations engaged in a struggle over national identity. The guides also stress wider community acceptance and tolerance of their paramilitary pasts. As Jonathan put it:

> There was a general understanding that when people like us were getting out of jail, we were going back to a community that we were part of…..so it was easier for us to reacclimatise because we didn't have to look over our shoulder with people thinking we were gangsters or criminals or whatever and even though some people didn't like what the IRA was about, at least they understood why it was there.

This authenticity is also enhanced and demonstrated by the guides knowing members of the community. Throughout the tour route, guides call out greetings to passers-by often using their first names. Moreover, throughout the tours, cars regularly slow down to beep their horn and shout quick pleasantries through open car windows. Throughout the tours, the guides draw on these instances of 'friendly recognition' (Kusenbach, 2003: 476) to demonstrate the implicit webs of social relationships that connect them to the wider community.

The tour guides' political backgrounds were mentioned repeatedly in Tripadvisor reviews with adjectives such as tour guides being 'honest' and 'candid' repeatedly used:

> He experienced the violence during The Troubles and was himself imprisoned three times. (Tourist, Norway: March 2020)

> (Name of tour guide), a former prisoner did a wonderful job explaining what happened, and putting a personal lens to it. It was fascinating to hear the perspective of someone who actually lived and was directly affected by the experience. (Tourist, Canada: Sept. 2018)

> His personal insight as an ex-IRA member and former prisoner was just powerful (Tourist, USA: Nov. 2018).

> This was an essential tour as the conflict is told by a participant who didn't dodge any of our questions about what he had been (Tourist, USA: April 2019).

This intimate sharing of personal stories enhanced tourists' notion of gaining an authentic insight and heightened their immersion with the places visited and gazed upon (Hansen and Mossberg, 2017; Bryon, 2012).

While tourists are not empty vessels ready to incorporate uncritically the narratives on offer, nonetheless, they present a 'trapped' audience that the tour guide can influence for the duration of the tour. However, far from being passive gazers, tourists have the ability to disrupt both the official and unofficial discourses on offer (Lisle, 2000). Tripadvisor reviews suggest that many tourists are aware that what is on offer during these tours is a biased but at the same time 'authentic' account of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. There was an acknowledgment throughout the Tripadvisor reviews that tourists were aware that a process of framing occurs in terms of how the area and its history is presented by tour guides:

> It has to be conceded that there are those who would argue that the tour I had taken was delivered from a purely republican viewpoint. My answer would be that in many ways they are correct but I would add that the tour is not promoted as anything else (Tourist, UK: July 2016).

> He (guide) was very knowledgeable and fully acknowledged that his version of events are according to his beliefs (Tourist, No Location: Dec 2019)

> The tour only goes through republican areas which might give a biased view of the situation but as long as you keep that in mind that does not matter that much. To hear the situation and stories from someone who was actively affected and actively involved in the troubles is the best way to learn about and understand it (Tourist, No Location: Nov 2019).

> His (guide's) insights into event of that time provided us with information that we would never have learned from history books or elsewhere (Tourist USA: Sept 2018).

Hence, Trip Advisor tourists were aware that they were being presented with a one-sided view of history and that other alternative viewpoints were likely to coexist Moreover, these accounts by tour guides were not uncritically received. According to Overend (2012: 47), in organised tours, there tends to be an 'unspoken contract in place which assumes that the information provided will be accurate'. However, tourists do not passively accept what they are gazing on and the interpretation that they received. For example, one tourist on Tripadvisor felt that the history presented was inaccurate in many places:

> Whilst the personal experiences of these tour guides cannot be criticised or diminished in any way, an issue that I had certainly with the republican tour was that some of the information imparted was factually inaccurate…..The injustice of colonial rule is self-evident but these inaccuracies give way to others who will say that this is evidence of exaggeration for effect (Tourist, UK: Feb. 2020).

This theme emerged in Patri's (2009) research with tourists visiting the International Wall whereby tourists from other areas experiencing political conflict were in some cases outraged by what they saw as very different levels of conflict and its manifestations being subsumed into simplistic accounts of fighting global imperialism and equating one conflict as equal to another. This is a common problem with the concept of dark tourism. Its tendency to group very different sites and experiences under one banner lead Isaac and Platenkamp (2018) to argue that the concept should be abandoned altogether while Stone (2006) argues conceptually differentiating between sites exhibiting various 'shades of darkness' might lead to better understanding of dark tourism in general. Bringing tourists opinions into this framework might lead to greater conceptual clarity around why tourists are motivated to visit dark sites and if their experiences confirm or challenge their (and tour providers) understandings of such places.

Biased authenticity and peace transformation

Since the core aim of Coiste tours is to keep the conflict in Northern Ireland in the present, then the ongoing existence of these tours can be considered as constraining efforts at peace building. This is particularly important given that at the sites visited, only one version of the past is presented and while alternative pasts are periodically alluded to, they are dismissed by the tour guides as 'inauthentic' accounts. Tourists are moved through landscapes of past conflict and are told about the legacies of the injustices

suffered from a specific 'authentic' republican lens. Rather than located as objects for the tourist gaze by formal tour operators who often provide sanitized versions of the past, tourists on Coiste tours gaze on marginalised communities who through these local tour guides are empowered to tell their version of the past Can these bottom-up versions of 'phoenix tourism' be part of peace transformation processes? (Causevic and Lynch, 2011). Cochrane (2015) argues that products such as those on offer by Coiste present Belfast as negatively trapped by its sectarian past and unable to move forward through the constant repetition of discourses that reify past macabre events including glorifying sites of former conflict. A heated Northern Ireland Assembly debate on the pros and cons of 'troubles' tourism produced concern from unionist politicians about the potential of such tours to 'glorify terrorism' (NIA, 2008). By presenting a singular version of the past, recounting narratives based on conflict, division and separation, these tours are seen as obstacles to the various inter-communal peace transformation initiatives that are also part of the localities being toured (Skinner, 2016; McDowell, 2008).

But one could equally ask, does sanitising the past and simplifying ongoing complex political relationships to promote a more palatable tourist product contribute positively to understandings of the messy journey societies emerging from conflict have to undertake on the path to peace? Coiste tour guides disrupt simplistic versions of the past which gives credence to dominant state approved narrators by reminding tourists that the past is subject to many competing interpretations. But these former political prisoners also recount their conversion to mainstream politics as a framework for achieving their political ends. They are beneficiaries of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) which allowed for the early release of paramilitary prisoners provided that they embraced peaceful constitutional means to secure their objectives. The guides narrate these transformations beginning with the election of Bobby Sands. As Jonathan puts it:

> Republicans had never really involved themselves in electoral politics and it was a massive ask you know, it was a really big step in a direction that nobody had really thought of going.

In a similar vein, Brian says:

> We found we could use electoral politics to develop the struggle and Bobby being elected showed to the world that it wasn't a terrorist campaign, that the struggle here had political support, that it had popular support and getting elected sees the whole party becoming a different entity… I mean you had to get subsequent people elected, you had to deliver, you had to open up advice centres, you had to be able to go into council or whatever and be able to fight your case and deliver for local people

Cochrane (2015: 61) suggests that the potential exists for tourists undertaking such tours to 'take a more insightful perspective on their homeland's own conflicts when they return and act as catalysts for progressive change within their peer groups and broader communities'. Coiste specialises in organising tours for university students studying political science in other countries. Hence, they recognise the need for their tourism products to reverberate beyond local geographies. Brown (2009) argues that these types of tours

can have a transformative impact on such groups enabling them to understand more fully the complexity of the journey from conflict to peace. While the Tripadvisor reviewers commented positively on seeing first-hand sites of conflict and hearing stories from former political prisoners who were protagonists in the conflict, nonetheless the reviewers also positively articulated how these dark events and dark activities were also framed in discourses of peace and its messy transformation:

> This was amazing and really gave me a lot to think about. Having the opportunity to meet an ex-IRA member who served jail time and is now supporting the peace process while ensuring that history is not forgotten (Tourist, USA: July 2016).

> I was left in no doubt that he in common with the overwhelming majority of people who joined such organisations as the IRA are now committed to bringing about the unification of Ireland through the use of purely constitutional means (Tourist, UK: June 2015).

> There is more to this tour than just stories from the past The guides will also talk about the peace process and what the future should look like. This is taken very seriously by the tour guides. It is their chance to speak with the public as veterans of the armed struggle (Tourist, Georgia: July 2019).

At the same time to consider these tours in terms of contributing to peace through former combatants discussing their move to mainstream politics is fraught with tensions. The discourses provided by the guides locate major responsibility for the conflict in Northern Ireland with the British State and British policy. This enables them to present their involvement as a legitimate response to British injustice and the casual way they talk about their convictions in terms of killing 'legitimate targets' is an unpalatable reminder that the line between a 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' is likely to be subject to indefensible justifications. For example, there is no mention that civilians with no political affiliation were among 53% of those killed and that republicans are considered responsible for around 59% of these deaths (Ferguson et al., 2008). Throughout the tours, there is no mention of the IRA's bombing campaign, the kneecappings of local people and the shooting of informers. There is no mention of how new dissident factions of the IRA have re-emerged and how these groups are considered to have access to military weaponry (Hoey, 2019; McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009). There is no mention of the post-traumatic stress experienced by both perpetuators and victims of the conflict and Northern Ireland's above average rates of mental illness, alcoholism and suicides although some of the tour guides admitted that they suffered from nightmares and ongoing psychological problems (Tomlinson, 2012). This partial recollection of the past is common in ethnic tourism where tours are subject to 'collective amensia' with the many varied protagonists to the Northern Ireland conflict including the British State engaged in highly selective representations of the past which involves obscuring aspects that portray their involvement in a negative light (Bew, 2013).

Yet, despite these omissions, the stories on offer are at the same time part of the history of Northern Ireland. To brush these versions of history under the carpet does little to promote

understanding of aspects of Northern Ireland's bumpy road to peace and the numerous ongoing challenges the region faces as it attempts to achieve this objective. It is also a reminder of the impossibility for tourism to provide an agreed discourse that embraces the multiple accounts which generally accompany peace transformation narratives.

Conclusion

Despite the significant decrease in the levels of violence since the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland remains a largely divided society and continues to grapple with a number of issues on its journey towards peace and reconciliation including its failure to set up an appropriate framework for acknowledging and dealing with the past (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009). Reaching consensus on the past continues to pose major problems partly because many nationalists and unionists view history differently and retain competing narratives and this is rendered even more complex when one considers the dominant narrative of the British state which continues to underplay its role in the conflict (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). Brexit, while not a subject of this paper has according to the majority of analysts exacerbated existing political and societal divisions (Hayward, 2018). Hoey (2019) argues that while the Good Friday Agreement established the conditions for peace transformation and encouraged former IRA members to embark on achieving their objectives through constitutional means, the organisation was unable to sell this new ideology to all its supporters, hence dissident groups such as the Continuity, Real and New IRA continued to evolve and after the Brexit referendum, incidents involving republican dissents reached an eight year high. While, currently, most opinion polls suggest that the majority of people in NI continue to support the region's position as part of the UK, the Brexit poll has encouraged Sinn Féin to press for a referendum on the issue of reuniting Ireland (Hayward, 2018). The Good Friday Agreement provides for this under the consent principle which compels the Secretary of State to initiate this if it 'appears likely' that a majority of those voting would support a preference for a united Ireland. It is anticipated that as Brexit's damaging impact on Northern Ireland gains momentum that this could lead to mounting support for such a referendum. Tour guides from Coiste present a united Ireland as their ultimate ideological goal and current political developments may encourage future tours to present this aim as having widespread community support and this in turn could further endorse their past involvement in the conflict in Northern Ireland as a legitimate reaction to the colonial relationship with the British State.

Sectarian divisions continue to flare periodically. The Northern Ireland Protocol which set up a sea border between Northern Ireland and the UK has provoked fury among unionists and loyalists and facilitated widespread rioting which degenerated into intercommunal rioting at one of the interfaces covered by Coiste tours (Ward et al., 2021). The incident demonstrates that peace in Northern Ireland continues to be fragile and as Nolan (2014) indicates Northern Ireland achieved 'peace without reconciliation'. The current situation in Northern Ireland is a reminder that touring places emerging from conflict remains inherently political. This is particularly the case where the past continues to impact on the present and where the legitimacy of the state remains ultimately contested.

However, hearing first-hand stories from protagonists of former conflict who have embraced constitutional means to achieve their ends and whose current political activism involves recounting stories of the past to tourists visiting their localities has the potential to enable this type of tourism to play a role in conflict transformation. Lennon (2017) notes the problematic use of the term 'dark tourism' in that it is a prejorative term with visits to 'dark' sites tending to be overwhelmingly presented in negative ways which limits consideration of the potential positive impact of 'dark tourism' to actively participate in the process of peacebuilding. Nisbett and Rapson (2020: 2) argue that 'attention to the voices of those actively involved in the conflict may enable both a better understanding of their struggle and the potential of tourism to contribute to post-conflict transformation'. In a similar vein, McEvoy and Shirlow (2009: 31) argue that ex-prisoners could serve as 'moral agents in conflict transformation around which peacemaking can be constructed rather than as obstacles which must be "managed" out of existence'. Because of their violent pasts, Coiste tour operators have the potential to provide a powerful voice in peace transformation processes. While McEvoy and Shirlow (2009: 40) argue that this necessitates exercising caution in ensuring that the end result is not 'postulating some form of naïve eulogising of all those who once took up arms', nonetheless, the rejection of violence as a means to political ends by Coiste tour guides transmits a powerful peace message. But this necessitates tourists also hearing alternative stories and short visits to dark tourism sites involves tourists making choices over the range of products on offer given their typical time restrictions. Those who decide to support local initiatives involving locals giving their biased version of the past enables tourist to gain insight into perspectives told by those who were at the heart of the past conflict and whose transformation to constitutional means is a necessary journey if peace is to be maintained and developed. But these products are beneficiaries 'of the conflict transformation process rather than a catalyst for its occurrence' (Cochrane, 2015: 53). Hall (1994) for example, questions whether tourism can ever be a channel for peace in that dominant narratives often rely on simplifying the past and making it palatable for tourism consumption while local narratives may involve nuanced accounts of ongoing tensions which glorify and trap the past in the present including providing ongoing justifications for past atrocities. Each peddle different narratives but whereas professional providers often operate under the guise of 'neutral' tours or 'balanced' accounts, tour guides from Coiste, at the outset, critically unpack and challenge the notion of authenticity by establishing the concept as a contested, subjective term. As such, this research illuminates that in politically contested societies, there is no such thing as an overarching, truthful account of political conflict. As Xie (2011: 40) points out 'authenticity is not equal to historical accuracy'. In other words, authenticity is a negotiable concept. This acknowledgement makes the concept of biased authenticity a useful one for understanding the many versions of history which characterise politically contested societies as they progress towards peace.

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