The Writing on the Wall: The Significance of Murals in the Northern Ireland Conflict

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Introduction: the weapons on the wall

Jack Santino states that in certain contexts, “signs become more than simple messages. They become polysemic weapons with social force and power, part of a larger battle”. ¹ The case of Northern Ireland seems to constitute one such context. Over the course of the bitter conflict between the Catholic and Protestant communities, often referred to as “the Troubles”, which lasted several decades, images and slogans were painted on walls in the towns and residential areas.

My investigation seeks to answer the question of what the impact of these murals was, and to what extent they can be considered a force in themselves. To do so, I have sought to apply theories of representation to the case of Northern Ireland, combining this literature with the work of experts on the symbolism of this particular conflict, such as that by Neil Jarman. Jarman argues that murals have been, and continue to be “used”, as part of the political process.² Even though they came from the communities, they contributed to forming a conception of the communities as monoliths. In Northern Irish society, there ostensibly exist two distinct spheres, consisting of various self-reinforcing layers of identity, and as a result the labels Unionist/Loyalist/Protestant and Republican/Nationalist/Catholic are often used interchangeably when referring to the communities. There is a marked absence of cross-cutting categories that might mitigate the stark sectarianism.

In the context of deep sectarian division and polarised society, communities needed to be united, to speak with one voice and clearly articulate their aspirations. In such a climate of tension, where “issues of culture are highly charged”,³ representations are far from innocent, and have been used to frame the conflict in certain ways, in the interests of some. Although the murals constitute only one facet of representations in the broader sense, they convey

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¹ Jack Santino, Signs of War and Peace: Social Conflict and the Use of Public Symbols in Northern Ireland (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 134.
important elements of these “partial realities” in a particularly visible way. Without over-stating their power as independent forces, I argue that the significance of murals is demonstrated by the way they have been, and continue to be, instrumentalised by political and paramilitary groups as a form of propaganda with the aim of gaining legitimacy and winning support. By expressing aspirations in a way that resonated with the communities, they formed part of the process by which the movements defined themselves through collective identities.

In this way, the murals can be regarded as markers of cultural identity. Rather than operating at a regional, national or European level, in Northern Ireland identity was firmly located at a communal level. Cities and towns were often internally divided and stark segregation existed between the two communities. Thus, the case of Northern Ireland provides an insightful example of how the internal politics of identity can operate in Europe, where populations are divided along social and religious lines, and the forms that the representation of this identity can take. This case also shows that these representations are in a constant process of transformation, shifting and responding to external circumstances.

The first part of my investigation provides some theoretical background with a two-fold focus, first concerning representations and their potency more generally, and secondly relating to symbols, specifically in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland. I have then sought empirical evidence in the form of observation and analysis of the murals from both communities. Lastly, I have sought to qualify this analysis by attempting to identify what may be obscured by the prevailing “two-communities” view of the conflict.

“Othering” ourselves: theories of social representation

In his exploration of the nature of stereotypes, Michael Pickering argues that their central function is to “control the ambivalent and to create boundaries”. Put another way, stereotypes operate as a means of placing and fixing in place other people or cultures from a particular, privileged perspective. It is a cognitive process which shares much with the practice of “othering” in that both are strategies of symbolic expulsion. Pickering suggests we can view stereotypes as a collective process of judgement, one that reinforces and feeds on

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4 The murals selected are those who best illustrate the overall tendencies of each movement in terms of the iconography and messages featured in these representations. This selection largely represents that of the authors whose arguments and descriptions I have based my analysis on, although in some cases I have selected examples myself to illustrate certain aspects. Since many of these murals have since been removed or painted over, these examples are taken from the databases available online such as the CAIN (Conflict Archive on the Internet) archives.

The Writing on The Wall: The Significance of Murals in the Northern Ireland Conflict

social myths, with the ultimate aim of legitimising existing relations of power. Portraying cultural signs as essential types produces the morally normative effect of rendering them seemingly natural and invariable. In this way, stereotyping others can be described as a “denial of history”. It creates an obstacle to social change and transformation, but the same applies when a group attempts to “essentialise” itself, or when individuals attempt to do so in the name of a particular group.

An illustration of this can be seen in the way Irish identity developed in opposition to English identity. Attempting to define a unitary Irish character, the British depicted the Irish as hot-headed, happy-go-lucky people, in opposition to the controlled, refined, and rational English character. In this way, argues Declan Kiberd, Ireland existed as a foil to set off English virtues. However, these categories had profound implications in that they conditioned the attitudes of Britain towards Ireland, allowing for its under-development to be ascribed to defects in the Irish national character, rather than being the product of an unequal colonial relationship. This supports Pickering’s argument that stereotypes are not innocuous as they are always bound up with relations of power, and often serve as a rationale for a particular course of action.

British psychologist Henri Tajfel posits an approach to intergroup relations that suggests we tend to structure our social environment in terms of social categories in order to simplify and understand the world around us. This categorisation, according to Tajfel’s definition, involves the ordering of the social environment in terms of groupings of persons in a manner which is meaningful to the subject, a practice which is a fundamental structurant of intergroup behaviour. Ed Cairns applies this approach to the case of Northern Ireland where there is a high level of “sectarian consciousness” manifested in Northern Irish people’s preoccupation with “telling” which community someone is from on the basis of the signs by which Catholic and Protestants arrive at religious ascription in their everyday interactions. Discrimination in Northern Ireland is based on stereotyped cues which must be learned (as opposed to the more obvious perceptual cues in a racial context) such as names, accents, area of residence, and so forth. The high levels of segregation in Northern Ireland depend on the constant reinforcement and reassertion of this social construction of ethnicity.

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6 Ibid., 48.
8 Michael Pickering, Stereotyping, 14.
10 Ibid, 280.
If we conceive of social identity as constructed around membership of categories, then this identity is always achieved in contradistinction to an “outgroup”, through a process of social comparison. Tajfel’s hypothesis, according to Cairns, holds that to enhance one’s social identity, an individual will try to make his or her group acquire “positive distinctiveness” in comparison to other groups through a process of differentiation.11 Otherwise a person may change membership or attempt to change existing social circumstances to achieve a more positive social identity. Representations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are thus not just a means of understanding the world but also a guide to action.

For Caroline Howarth, these categories, which she describes as “social representations”, have profound repercussions for society and the individual, as they inform the realities we experience.12 We can say that a social representation can be “used for acting in the world and on others” since we convert these representations into a particular social reality, which has consequences for the social order.13 Howarth then takes it a step further by asking how far social representations can be said to constitute our realities or “partial” realities. While some critics say representations are merely cognitive phenomena (ways of understanding the world which influence action, but are not themselves parts of action), Howarth challenges this, arguing that social representations are often only apparent in action. Representations are contained in our social actions; they inform encounters as well as institutionalised practices. In this way, representations can be said to be very real in their effects, with consequences that go beyond the cognitive and which can be extremely concrete. Hence, concludes Howarth, “representations not only influence people’s daily practices but constitute these practices”.14

Following Cairns’ analysis, categorisation per se is not the sole cause of intergroup conflict, but plays a major role, indicating the potency of these categories.15 The kind of irrational behaviour and sacrifice witnessed in Northern Ireland during the years of the Troubles is inherently of an intergroup nature (as opposed to individual level). Much of this emotion centres on matters of an ostensibly symbolic order such as flags and parades. In order to answer the question of how murals interact with or form part of this process, we must first look at the function and power of symbols, which are closely bound up with the categories assigned to groups in society.

13 Ibid, 7-8.
14 Ibid, 17.
15 Ibid, 278.
A life of their own: legislating the symbolic in Northern Ireland

Introducing his book about symbols in Northern Ireland, Anthony Buckley asserts that there is more to symbolism, in the wider sense, than just politics and power. Mirroring the role of social categories as articulated by the theorists above, symbols are also “a means through which people clarify the world”. More precisely, symbols can be used to clarify, define and structure identity, as evidenced by the range of symbolic devices or identifying markers in Northern Ireland for ‘telling’ whether someone is Protestant or Catholic. This corresponds to what Buckley terms the “conservative use of symbols”.

Bryson and McCarthy describe symbols as “emotional shorthand”, a phrase which reminds us they have an immediate, direct impact. Instantly recognisable, they are an “easy visual way” to express a sense of belonging but can also play a more active part in encouraging it, by helping to create a sense of occasion, highlighting the importance of particular moments, figures or events. These are the ceremonial practices by which a community demonstrates that it is a community, and encourage a sense of shared allegiance, pride and loyalty. Together, these symbolic practices constitute a means to grasp and express something about one’s individual identity and the world, while taking away the complexity of identity.

Buckley remarks that symbols draw our attention to certain things while obscuring others. This process is analogous to the selectiveness of collective memory and national histories. These, like symbols, are inevitably partial. The full meaning of symbols often gets lost or overlooked, as they tend to become simplistic representations of group identity. The question of which symbols will define a given situation is largely determined by the question of whom and whose interests predominate, just as dominant social categories reflect this. In Northern Ireland, several historical agreements have had an impact on how symbols were used, an indication of how much they were ingrained in the mentality of the people.

As Bryson and McCarthy point out, controversy over displaying symbols has a long history in Ireland. Violent incidents surrounding the display of flags led to the Flag and Emblems Act of 1954. The Act made it an offence to interfere with the display of a Union

17 Ibid, 5.
20 Lucy Bryson and Clem McCartney, Clashing Symbols, 144-145.
Walking the Tightrope: Europe between Europeanisation and Globalisation

Jack flag. Although it did not refer directly to their flag (the orange, white and green tricolour), the Act was interpreted by Republicans as a means of oppression of a community through the suppressing of their particular symbols. Its regulations were rigorously enforced leading to events such as in 1970, when two men were sentenced to six months imprisonment for painting a Tricolour on a wall in Belfast. Then in 1980, a 16-year-old was shot dead while painting Republican slogans on a wall.\(^{21}\)

These examples illustrate the power of symbols to lead to violence. Certainly the act itself did little to diminish tension and instead contributed to a new IRA military campaign. This is evidence of symbolism as closely related to politics. Buckley adds that it is because symbols represent the genuine political interests and aspirations of real people that they so often have their force.\(^{22}\) This is especially the case in divided societies, where symbols gain heightened significance.

The need to legislate on matters of a symbolic nature stems from the fact that such symbols function as propaganda, ideological and symbolic markers, and as such possess a certain power. However, as Jarman points out, there is a tendency to focus on symbolic displays, such as murals, purely as images, ignoring their materiality. As well as being visual displays, murals are also objects with a physical presence. As such, according to Jarman, they are “more artefact than art”.\(^{23}\)

Symbols in space: the nature of murals

Murals, like other kinds of symbols, have a physical presence in the public space which adds an extra dimension to their iconic content, according to Jarman. He argues that murals are “site-specific”,\(^ {24}\) in that the images take meaning from their location while the location in turn has an altered significance due to the presence of the paintings, in a reciprocal relationship. Moreover, murals create a new type of space; they redefine public space as politicised space.

Bill Rolston takes Jarman’s argument a step further, calling for murals to be viewed not merely as artefacts or objects, products of artistic and political activity, but as a “dynamic

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\(^{22}\) Anthony Buckley, “Introduction,” 15.


\(^{24}\) Ibid, 82.
element in the political process”. For instance, murals often reflected commitment or otherwise of political groups to the ongoing peace process, and had the power to reinforce that commitment for the communities that viewed them.

Most mural-painting occurred in the working-class estates in Belfast and Derry, two of the areas most affected by the violence and polarised by sectarian divisions. The impetus for much of the painting is to be found in the commemorative parades of the summer marching season when areas are extensively decorated with flags and bunting, with kerbstones painted, and so forth. However, murals constitute a more permanent display, and permit more elaborate ideas to be expressed, allowing traditional images to be “re-presented” in different contexts.26

Painted lampposts and kerbstones often mark the entry into a distinct territory but many murals are deeply embedded within communities. This exerts a degree of control over the image and its meaning, with access to murals being of a restricted spatial nature, indicating they were primarily aimed at a local audience. Two bodies of mural works, representing the two communities, have developed in parallel over the past decades but do not constitute a debate between the two communities.27 The murals remain a part of two largely separate internal discourses, with the cultural practices of the two communities operating in different spaces at different times.28 In light of the introspective nature of symbolic practices, it will be useful to consider the mural-painting of each side on its own terms, in terms of its emergence and development during the Troubles.

**Loyalist murals: Orange dawn**

Mural painting in the Loyalist community dates back to a century ago when artisans adorned gable ends of houses within their community with images of King William III or “King Billy” as he was popularly known, in commemoration of the victory at the battle of the Boyne in 1690.29 A key date for Loyalists, this victory is celebrated annually in July, when the marches of the Orange Order take place, against the symbolic backdrop of myriad of banners, bunting and arches.

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27 Ibid, 209.
28 Ibid, 232.
Despite being previously closely associated with power, by the 1980s the power and influence of the Order had begun to diminish, as a result of political reform. Paramilitary groups, on the other hand, were rising in influence, attracting increasing numbers of working-class members. However, activists in working-class Loyalist areas tended not to paint paramilitary images until the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which gave Dublin an input into Northern Irish affairs and legalised the tricolour flag as well as Irish language signs. This measure heightened political tension and from then on murals were increasingly filled with military iconography, with few other themes represented.

Traditional images found on Orange banners (such as the crown and bible, Londonderry coat of arms, battle of Somme commemorations) still appeared on some murals but by far the most widespread were the representations and emblems of paramilitary groups. Murals ceased to be about Orange celebrations of unity, becoming instead declarations of territoriality, as much to other paramilitary groups as to Nationalists, with fierce competition for control of areas. Paramilitary groups dominant in a given area governed the painting of murals and their content often directly commissioning, leaving little room for artistic or political spontaneity by muralists.

In terms of iconography, murals consisted largely of images of armed and hooded figures, beside military references and slogans. The juxtaposition of paramilitary and traditional emblems was used by paramilitary groups to locate themselves within the Loyalist community, and the wider Unionist tradition, as well as legitimise themselves in the political arena.

Figure 1: Loyalist mural on Frenchpark Street, Belfast (1989)

30 Bill Rolston, “Changing the Political Landscape,” 7.
31 Ibid, 8.
33 http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/edm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/
This process, by which traditional symbols are confronted with new ones, can be seen on a mural in Frenchpark Street in Belfast (figure 1) for example, which articulates notions of loyalty to the Crown and Britain, but also clearly defines a position of self-reliance based on the security of the gun.

Following the 1994 ceasefire, the proportion and explicitness of such murals and their militant message intensified. This was to reassure communities that the ceasefire did not constitute any kind of “surrender”. Since defence had always been a fundamental part of Loyalism, and one which a ceasefire could make redundant, murals which spoke of the continuing need for defence and vigilance appeared, such as the one on Belfast’s Mount Vernon Road depicting paramilitary figures as armed and “ready for war” (figure 2).

![Loyalist mural on Mount Vernon Road, Belfast (1995).](image)

Cairns argues that the Protestant community has long enjoyed a positive social identity, based essentially on a strong sense of heritage and especially the triumphs celebrated annually. However, the fact that the Parades were still felt to be necessary even when Unionist power was at its height indicates that Protestants never possessed a completely secure social identity but instead felt it necessary to engage in continuous social competition in order to maintain a “positive social psychological distinctiveness”.

The heavy military content of murals can also be taken as evidence of deep insecurities among the community. The fragmentation and territorial antagonisms within the community

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35 Ibid., 52. Plate 98.
seems to confirm murals as part of an internal Unionist discourse, rather than aimed at the Republican enemy. Rolston argues that since the onset of the Troubles, the Protestant community has gone through a period of confusion regarding its identity and status. This uncertainty has been worsened by the ambiguous attitude to the British state, one of loyalty balanced by fear of betrayal. Old symbols and values have lost their meaning yet new ones have not been forthcoming to replace them. Some new symbols have emerged however, for instance the figure of Cuchulainn, long-regarded as a Nationalist hero and widely used in Republican visual displays, has been claimed as a Loyalist hero as part of a revision of Irish prehistory as can be seen in a Belfast mural which draws a line of continuity between Ulster’s present day “defenders” and its “ancient defenders” (figure 3):

![Loyalist mural on Newtonards Road, Belfast (1992).](image)

**Republican murals: we are Ireland**

For many years Republicans did not paint murals, the streets being effectively policed by Unionists as a result of legislation such as the Flag and Emblems Act which prevented any ostensible signs of Nationalist politics and culture. That changed with the hunger strike of 1981, when Nationalist areas produced countless murals in support of the hunger strikers’ demand for political status. Early murals were dominated by the hunger strikers, especially the leader Bobby Sands. Many images depicted prison brutality or long-haired emaciated figures of prisoners with strong Catholic overtones as suffering Christ-like martyrs, such as a mural on Rockmount Street which contains overt Catholic imagery (figure 4).

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37 Bill Rolston, *Politics and painting*, 47.
38 Bill Rolston, *Drawing Support 2*, 17. Plate 32.
39 Ibid, 76.
Republican murals thus came into being as a crucial element in the political dynamic of the time and acted as a key factor in mobilising political action. There were also murals which referred directly to the “armed struggle” of the IRA, with portrayals of weapons and hooded men but these never dominated imagery, unlike Loyalist murals. However, murals aiming to portray the IRA as inheritors of a long-standing tradition and to connect its aims and aspirations to those of the wider Nationalist community appeared, often with volunteers posing in a landscape of symbols, as with Loyalist paintings.  

40 http://irelandsown.net/practice.html  
41 Neil Jarman, Material Conflicts, 239.  
42 http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/viggiani/west_mural.html.
This can be seen in a mural on Beechmount Avenue where an IRA gunman features alongside the shields of the four provinces of Ireland, as well as the date 1916 – when the Irish Republic was proclaimed (figure 5). This date is used to provide the historical legitimacy, and ideology for the contemporary Republican movement, as well as to justify the IRA’s armed struggle.

Since its emergence, Republican mural painting has expanded to address a wide range of political issues and themes, becoming one facet of a broader movement and culture of resistance. Republican murals differ from Loyalist murals in that they grew out of a movement, which began in the prisons during the 1970s internment period, when prisoners gained familiarity with Irish history, mythology and language as part of a return to a previously neglected heritage leading to a resurgence of religious, Gaelic and historical symbols. These were then forged together with internationalist icons to create a new Republican iconography.  

Murals-painters turned to Ireland’s Celtic past as further legitimisation of the Republican position, as exemplified by a mural in Derry depicting a Celtic figure and symbols alongside a Gaelic poem, “Mise Eire” (I am Ireland) by Padraig Pearse (figure 6):

![Figure 6: Republican mural on Chamberlain Street, Derry (1985).](image)

Given that Catholics were considered to occupy the inferior position in Northern Ireland, one would expect, says Cairns, a negative social identity to result. However Cairns points out that the Catholic community recognised “cognitive alternatives” early, and began to establish a more positive social identity, based on resistance and pride in a remote Celtic past. Another way social identity was improved was by reclaiming the stereotype of the passionate Irish

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43 Ibid, 233.
44 [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rmural4.htm](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rmural4.htm).
temperament. Catholics took the negative characteristics ascribed to them and made them positive, subverting the initial stereotype.\textsuperscript{46} This development supports Cairns’ thesis that groups try to change circumstances in order to gain a positive social identity, which includes changing their self-perception. This was also fuelled by Catholic grievances about socio-economic deprivation. When individual opportunities and aspirations are blocked, the internal cohesiveness of a group can become strengthened in defence, a key explanatory factor for the relative unity of the Republican side.

**Beyond borders**

The allusions to Celtic heritage as well as the increased use of Irish language were part of a process by which the Republican movement legitimised itself through notions of an ongoing struggle against imperialism, emphasising the importance of a distinctive indigenous identity. This occurred on both sides, since the Unionist appropriation of Cuculainn follows a similar logic in terms of reinterpreting history to portray a group as ‘native’. However, legitimation was pursued not only by looking to the past, but also looking out beyond the nation’s borders.

Political scientist John McGarry remarks how Nationalist and Unionist partisans have drawn links between Northern Ireland and other divided societies. The favourite comparison of Republicans was between their struggle and that of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.\textsuperscript{47} This expression of IRA solidarity with the ANC implicitly put Unionists in the racist Afrikaner position, painting them as a minority defending the status quo. This corresponded to a Nationalist interpretation of the conflict whereby Northern Ireland was seen as a colony suffering from illegitimate British rule and the resulting externally imposed conflict.

This parallel found expression in murals such as a painting depicting Nelson Mandela on the Falls Road (figure 7), one of several solidarity murals used to link the IRA campaign with other national liberation struggles (such as Basque, Palestinian, etc.). Furthermore, its strategic position opposite a mural of Bobby Sands, the leader of the hunger strikes who became an iconic figure, was used to make an analogy between the two men and their countries.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 10.


Conversely, a favourite parallel of the Unionists was that of Scotland or Wales, implying that the Irish Republic, a ‘foreign’ government displaying external aggression and irredentism, was the cause of the conflict. These parallels allowed both communities to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ violence, glorifying their own armed struggle, such as the IRA’s explanation of its actions in the register of national liberation and anti-colonial struggle, or the Unionist paramilitaries’ references to ‘defence’. The parallels also had political consequences in that they could influence actors, both within and without, and thus were chosen also for their instrumental value, in terms of rallying support as well as attracting sympathy from outsiders. This applies to the representations which appeared in murals more generally, and can be seen more clearly in the way that the paramilitary groups subsequently became politicised. For example, the initially spontaneous outburst of painting on the Republican side was subsequently co-opted within the resurgent Republican movement and became part of the Sinn Fein publicity apparatus for gaining support. As such, murals were effectively performing the same function as before in terms of rallying support. However, rather than generating support for paramilitary groups, the aim was now to secure votes for the new parties that gradually replaced them. This is illustrated by a Republican mural using heavy Irish symbolism to urge people to “Vote Sinn Fein” (figure 8):

![Figure 7: Republican mural on the Falls road (1988).](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/mmural1.htm)

49 http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/mmural1.htm.
50 Neil Jarman, Material Conflicts, 234.
The Writing on The Wall: The Significance of Murals in the Northern Ireland Conflict

Figure 8: Republican mural on Beechmount Avenue, Belfast (1983).  

The expansion of murals and other public imagery following the 1994 IRA ceasefire confirms how the medium became central to the political process. Yet in light of their partisan nature, it is worth taking a moment to ask in whose name the murals claim to speak, and investigate the underlying tension.

**Opposition and dissent: painting in whose name?**

Murals attract opposition from two quarters: from within and from outside. They have often become prominent targets for destruction and vandalism, with the defacing of Republican paintings sometimes carried out by members of security forces, as a kind of symbolic assault. In terms of within, it has been claimed murals echo the feelings of the majority of the people in an area. However, the acknowledged close association between the murals and paramilitary groups is both a reason to oppose the paintings and also a reason not to speak out publicly (and in so doing challenge the authority of paramilitaries within one’s own community). Paramilitary groups have their base within the working-class estates, but these areas contain a wide body of opinion and therefore it is too easy to assume that all the paintings were welcomed, but also difficult to gauge levels of opposition to them.

The language of the ‘two communities’ or the ‘two tribes’ view became common to media representations of the conflict from the mid 1980s, and as subsequently reflected in the

51 [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rmural3.htm#r3](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rmural3.htm#r3).
52 Neil Jarman, “Painting Landscapes,” 94-95
political institutions set up to deal with the conflict, notably the Good Friday Agreement.\textsuperscript{53} However, Andrew Finlay has argued against a vision of Northern Ireland as dichotomous, and warned against a reification of the division. In Northern Ireland, the fact that as many murals are painted on walls deep within communities as at interfaces, is evidence, he argues, of a struggle over meaning within, rather than between communities.\textsuperscript{54} Northern Ireland is not divided up into discrete, internally homogeneous cultures, and it is dangerous to assume so especially when communal rights become enshrined in institutional practice or law. This is because “it licences those who would wish to freeze or fix communal boundaries such that their ‘traditional’ authority is enhanced and that they can more effectively police internal differences”.\textsuperscript{55} This is especially crucial to remember when murals are often painted by and for paramilitary groups and their supporters, as it is often in their interest to claim to speak for an entire community, to the detriment of the individual rights of its members to define themselves in their own terms.

**Conclusion: an arguing society**

Jarman describes a mural in Rathcoole which has been painted over and re-painted three times: the mural now remains but unfinished.\textsuperscript{56} This seems an apt metaphor for the state of identity in the North which might be described as an uneasy truce reached between competing viewpoints. Howarth points out that the multiplicity and tension inherent in any representation presents possibilities for communication, negotiation, and transformation. In this way, every society can be described as an “arguing society”.\textsuperscript{57}

Buckley describes this as the “subversive use of symbols” as opposed to the conservative use (as a structurant of reality) described earlier. Because they have no single meanings, symbols provide alternative visions.\textsuperscript{58} There is creativity, borrowing and innovation involved in symbolic and representational activity, as we have seen here, in order to gain positive social identity and legitimacy. The flexibility of symbols derives from the fact that they do not carry meaning inherently but give us the capacity to make meaning.

These meanings often then become a battleground for different versions of history and political ideologies, both between and within groups, involving the “(re)negotiation of inter-
subjectively agreed realities”. As with all battles, there are winners and losers in the conflict over social representation, the outcome of which determines the prevailing representations, in my estimation. Especially in situations of conflict, it is important to remember that certain groups or members of groups have different degrees of access to the public sphere to present or contest particular claims to ‘the real’. In the post-conflict environment of Northern Ireland, the question now posed is how to find and promote more open, cross-community symbols.

Concerning the discussion of a new flag for Ulster, Roy Garland writes of the need for “a symbol that has the capacity to solicit the talents and allegiance of members of both main traditions, whatever their ultimate aspirations”. However, the fundamental problem in Northern Ireland is that there have always been “two concepts of the land which cancel each other out” and as a result, “paramilitaries attempt to cancel each other out, to erase each other’s history and thus each other’s culture”.

This search for new symbols to transcend this impasse is embodied in the “Re-imagining Communities Project” in Belfast, where paramilitary murals have been replaced by images which can cross the sectarian divide, such as the one on Alliance Road which “celebrates citizens of note from both north Belfast and the city as a whole, as well as a number of local landmarks” (figure 9):

![Figure 9: New mural on Alliance Road, Belfast (2009).](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/re-image/glenbryn.asp)

As Rolston points out, murals have the capacity to be mobilising and educating, but they cannot act independently. In other words, they cannot encourage peace and progress in the

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59 Caroline Howarth, “A social representation is not a quiet thing.” 19.
63 http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/re-image/glenbryn.asp.
absence of widespread political commitment from movements, communities and paramilitaries.\textsuperscript{64} Symbols succeed only when they highlight social realities with sound political foundations, and in Northern Ireland there is a need for these first in order for the symbolism of peace to resonate and reflect reality.\textsuperscript{65} This, it seems, is where the power of symbols ends.

\textsuperscript{64} Bill Rolston, “Changing the Political Landscape,” 14.
\textsuperscript{65} Anthony Buckley, \textit{Symbols in Northern Ireland}, 14.
Bibliography


