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Memory and Belonging in Ulster Loyalist Identity.

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## Memory and Belonging in Ulster Loyalist Identity.

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, memory is open to interpretation, to levels of assumption, manoeuvring and appropriation. There is a constant struggle between competing interpretations of historical events, the determination of which serves to validate and legitimate views of the present and to meet contemporary political concerns. The memory of historical events carry distinct political consequences, as events of the past are altered to suit present purposes, and transmitted across generations by commemoration (Schwartz, 1982) and memorialisation (Pinkerton, 2012). This is most often conveyed by a recognised narrative (Hunt and McHale, 2008), which is characterized by the attempt to ensure coherence and further commitment amongst the collective. Individuals thus understand as their relationship to contemporary political events through the interactions they have with the past (Connerton 1989) and by way of a desire for a future, even if it is sometimes an idealized or romanticized one.

People, of course, are not inactive in constructing this sense of identity (Jenkins, 1997), which is reinforced through processes involving the continuous reformatting of biographical and group experiences (Ricoeur 1984, 2004). Through common narratives communal interpretations of the past, people frame understandings and form affiliations interpreting their social circumstances, which become central element to communal identity (Bar-Tal, 2003: 77 – 93). These coalesce around distinct forms of belonging to create and reinforce a marked sense of identity.

These memories work to weave together and solidify a sense of

collective identity, based on an interactive and shared definition around: 'the orientations of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place' (Melucci, 1995:70). Often this involves the transmission of ideas and beliefs in sometimes very understated, perhaps even unconscious ways, in a wide variety of conversations and everyday interactions, story telling and across other commonplace discourses through which people make sense of the world (Bryan and Stevenson, 2009). Such banal, everyday, and sometimes seemingly trivial interactions, alongside commonplace representations and recurring narratives, symbolism, commemoration and memorials are crucial in helping to organize political life (Billig, 1995).

Within Ulster loyalism, there are several interrelated aspects that frame political life and identity, including: the broad political and social understandings and interpretations of the past; specific constructions of loyalism as an ethno-political marker; communal identifications and affiliations. Loyalism has been seen to encompass much of working class Protestant life has often been distilled into an overt cultural expression of Britishness. It is through narratives that relate directly to key specific events that particular senses of the Self are reinforced (Burton, 1978; White, 2001). They allow loyalists draw on diverse sources to construct their identity, included: diverse senses of Britishness, Protestantism; cultural, ethnic and civic identities; class; political expression and organisation.

Over 30 years of overt conflict, however, reinforced loyalist senses of belonging and compressed it: 'into a singular identity' (Cobb, 2003: 298), constructing the dangerous Other as sectarianized social relationship

(Ferguson and McAuley, 2016, *forthcoming*) and securing the collective memory of the community (Steele, 2005: 341 – 370). Here, Hirsch (2008) refers to the transmission of memory from one generation to another as postmemory: ‘the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to constitute memories in their own right.’ (Hirsch, 2008: 103). She identifies the direct transmission of memory from parent to child and to another type of affiliative memory, which is the horizontal transmission of memory from the literal second generation to others of their generation who seek a connection (Hirsch, 2008: 114).

These processes can be found in creating part of the distinct sense of loyalism, which saw itself as having a separate history reinforced in part by discrete memory and distinct foundation myths. References to such foundational ideas are of course, central to the construction of many forms of identity because as Richard Kearney explains, such narratives carry: ‘the past into the present and the present into the past’ (Kearney, 1997). It is through this process that loyalism finds its exclusive expression of cultural separateness; an opposition to Irish republicanism; and, a somewhat paradoxical willingness to engage in both political support for, and opposition to, the British state.

These play a central role in coalescing loyalism identity, which is further compounded by the presence of sectarianized social relations and a wariness of the traitor within and without. Thus, as an identity it relies on the formation and maintenance of boundaries (Bauman, 2001) through the recognition of those seen as alike and the marginalization of the Other. In part this draws on

the collective memory of loyalism that provides a particular narrative of the conflict, which emphasizes, and is in turn strengthened by such notions. Events are interpreted through a closed narrative offering only extremely limited interpretations of the past, presenting the Other as the instigators of conflict, placing these groups within this category they were deemed as untrustworthy and disloyal and therefore, excluded from the dominant political culture and social structure of the state. More often than not in Northern Ireland this manifests as sectarian difference and for some the feeling of hostility aroused towards the Other is so intense as to legitimize a violent repost (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, 2000).

One part of such identity formation involves drawing on processes of stereotyping, through which people distinguish between Self and Other, defining themselves and their group in positive ways and the Other in a more negative manner. Such stereotypes serve several main functions, including scapegoating the other and providing social justification for the actions of the in-group. These differences were intensified, emphasizing social differentiation (Tajfel, 1981; 1986) and amplified through exposure to the protracted violence of the Troubles. Whether directly or indirectly experienced, the resulting negative characterization of the Other intensified to the point they were seen as undeserving of any normal level of social engagement or human sympathy (Bar-Tal, 2013).

With the continued intensification of the conflict in Northern Ireland we increasingly witnessed the selective focus by one group on the political violence perpetrated by the other group. That group solidarities and memories were expressed as sectarianism became ever more significant as the conflict

developed. Importantly they drew on existing patterns of community memory and remembering, all of which heightened awareness of violence by the opponent, while of the grounds for violence undertaken by one's own side was reinforced. Group beliefs about the causes of conflict, and the reasons for its duration were thus strengthened by direct reference to the past and as a result for loyalists, everything that their community is, the Other is not (Hunter, Stringer and Watson, 1991: 261 – 266; 1992: 795 – 796).

Between the late 1960s and the paramilitary ceasefires, unremitting political violence meant that political divisions were deepened and fortified, while patterns of physical segregation intensified and ideological and political differences were reinforced. One manifestation of this was the reproduction of self-generated myths within each community, which set personal experiences within an exclusive sense of collective identity (Misztal, 2003; Olick, 2007). In the period following the ceasefire and the move towards agreed government many loyalists have continued to identify strongly and directly with those with whom they see as having a common fate reinforced by a common past.

The sense of belonging created seeks to draw together all those with a similar sense of collectivity and self-awareness to fashion an imagined community distinct to loyalism. People do of course conduct their everyday lives by referring to, and acting upon more than one social role. But while recognizing that people hold multiple identities, in Northern Ireland everyday social life still often defaults to, and finds overt political expression through the communal, and through commitment to the collective and competing senses of national identity. In building solidarity both communities in Northern Ireland rely heavily on narrative and the intensity of collective memory to strengthen

incorporation within ones own group and to create social and political distance from the Other. This involvement with the 'active past' (Olick and Robins, 1998) structures beliefs about what is to be done in the present. Loyalism consistently interprets the contemporary through past events by demonstrating the continuing relevance of the past to the group's current self-identity.

### **Loyalism and the active past**

Collective memories are thus part of a usable past, part of which is constructed to legitimize contemporary beliefs, attitudes and actions. This everyday formation of collective memories through the transmission of community narratives is vital in the establishment and diffusion of identity, because as Arthur writes the: 'political symbolism of whichever interpretation is adopted remains central to subsequent events' (Arthur, 1987: 3). One clear example is found in the populist memory and commemoration of the Great War, which has been, and remains, inseparable from broader ethno-political and sectarianized divisions.

Although at its outbreak the War found support from nationalist and unionist political leaders, and both Catholics and Protestants joined the British Army in sizable numbers, the experiences at the War's end and their position in subsequent commemorations differed vastly. The complexity and politicization of these memories were compounded following partition of the Ireland and the efforts of both states to build distinctive, and largely mutually exclusive identities (Walker 2012). In particular, both populist and official commemorations were constructed in ways to all but eliminate the (predominately Irish Catholic) 16<sup>th</sup> Division from the historiography of the



Great War in the South (Byrne, 2014). Because of their perceived Britishness they became part of what some have called 'the Great Oblivion' or 'national amnesia' (Jeffrey, 2012). In the North, however, the 16<sup>th</sup> Division were marginalized because of their 'Irishness', while during the same period the Ulster Division were lauded as an overt example of patriotism and blood sacrifice for the Union to form a core pillar of Northern Irish Protestant Unionist identity (Brearton, 1997: 89-103).

Particular reference is given to events at the Somme. Indeed, within this fragmented memory, it is almost impossible to over emphasize the centrality and meaning of the Somme to loyalism, or its consequence as a central reference point in formulating contemporary loyalist identity (Brown, 2007: 707 – 723). Hennessey (1998: 198) gives some indication of this when he says:

if any one event in the Great War might be selected as the moment which symbolized the psychological partition of Ulster Unionism from the rest of the island, it was probably the impact of the Battle of the Somme upon the Ulster Unionist psyche, and the Ulster Protestant community generally, coming as it did so soon after the Easter Rising.

Relationships between collective memory and collective identity are often codified through remembrance and reproduced through the enacting of commemorative events, highlighting those people and actions deemed to be of greatest significance to the group. Such enactments replicate, reproduce and perpetuate core myths and memories and act to ensure that memory is transmitted by way of: 'a whole set of cultural practices through which people

recognize a debt to the past' [and that] 'these cultural forms store and transmit information that individuals make use of' (Schudson, 1997: 346 – 7).

So, for example, Orange banners illustrating events at the Somme are commonplace, while memorials and parades extensively mark the battle, as do murals with stylized images of troops going 'over the top' at the Somme, or commemorating the four Victoria Crosses won by members of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division (Ulster) in the first 48 hours of the battle appear with increasing regularity in loyalist areas. Indeed, the Somme has become inseparable from the broad ethno-history of loyalism (Officer and Walker, 2003) and is now reproduced with increasing intensity and power within loyalism.

Within loyalist populist culture the entire events of World War are condensed into the single event of the Somme, which now form a central reference point within loyalist identity (Switzer, 2013). As such, the Somme is conflated with the Boyne, and elevated across loyalism achieving: 'near-sacred status in popular memory' (Jarman, 1997: 72) and in recent years has assumed primary significance in their celebrations that as a foundation myth it has for many become at least equivalent to that of 1690 and for some it attains even greater significance.

In the post-Troubles period many have joined Somme associations to link directly to the past and express future unswervingly to the formation of British/ unionist identity (Officer, 2001), but which link to contemporary loyalism (Graham and Shirlow, 2002). Recent memorialization by loyalist paramilitaries has led to a vast number of highly localized, populist memorials appearing in the last decade. Although there has been some thawing at the margins, and at the elite level (Walker 2012) this continues to illustrate the

depth to which the commemoration of the Great War became directly associated with that community (Switzer, 2007) and its commemoration has become an almost exclusively Unionist and loyalist event.

### **Commemoration**

Crucially, loyalist reference to, and the ordering of, memories help individuals and groups construct and understand their political life. Loyalists draw on distinctive memories that are meaningful to them, which help them understand and respond to events. Most often they seek to commemorate and replicate the events on which the memories draw. Central to this process is the weight given to perceived continuities between past and present organized through encounters with distinct political-cultural memories (Gillis, 1994; Trew, Muldoon, McKeown and McLaughlin, 2009).

Witness for example the recent set pieces attended by up to 10,000 people to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912, and the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1913. Marchers wore period costumes and some carried replica weapons in what the organizers claimed was an attempt to 'recreate a moment in history', but the connections to the present were clearly made when Progressive Unionist Party leader Billy Hutchinson, dressed as Lord Carson, read extracts of his original speech as part of the event. The passage chosen is illustrative of how the past may be used to address the present:

If you are prepared to hand yourselves over to the men, who in the past have shown themselves the most hostile element in the whole United Kingdom, to the Throne and the Constitution, then of course we must give way. But I promise you; that so long as you stand firm; I and

those associated with me, will most certainly stand firm and we will never, ever, surrender. (Carson cited in *Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 1913; Hutchinson cited in the *Belfast Newsletter*, September, 2013).

The resulting senses of fit, draws on deeply rooted collective memories, narratives and interpretations to produce understandings of loyalism that are embedded in that community (McAuley, 2010; 2015). The resulting ideas and narratives: 'give shape to ... experience, thought and imagination in terms of past, present and future' (Brockmeier, 2002: 15 – 43).

It is Prager (1998) who suggests memories are best understood as cultural products, affected not just by the wider society, but also the result of relationships to Self and the outside world. Following on from this, Connerton argues that it is so difficult to disentangle the past from the present, not just because present circumstances: 'tend to influence – some might want to say distort – our recollections of the past', but also because: 'past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present' (Connerton, 1989: 2). Importantly, outcomes of this process can also involve the silencing of competing narratives of memory (De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak, 1999) through the forgetting of core events (Assmann, 2012; Brockmeier, 2002; Wodak and Richardson, 2009).

Broadly, the dominant collective memory of the Home Rule/ Great War period in loyalist communities has served several purposes: to legitimize the Britishness rule Northern Ireland; as a means to laud the events as a core pillar of Northern Irish Protestant Unionist identity; and for some to legitimize paramilitary organizations and operations within the loyalist community itself.

Thus, following Partition the memory (and forgetting) of the past was enlisted in the cause of contemporary politics of the day. It was militarized and politicized during the course of the Troubles and it remains a touchstone of collective loyalist identities to this day.

### **Politics of Remembrance**

Remembrance and commemoration in Northern Ireland is therefore, highly politicized, moreover, as Becker reminds us, such events: 'leave a deep imprint on those who experience them' (Becker, 2005: 108). Commemoration is saturated with political meaning, so much so that they remain fundamental in understanding the regulation, continuation, and transformation of the conflict. Its function and outcome remain contested, and far from being suspended in some academic debate, the effects of competing claims on ideological and physical space continue to structure everyday political relationships. It is this that provides the mechanisms and context for the individual to recall some occasions and actions and to forget others. Hence, recollections and remembrances are acquired at a societal level and that it is also at this level that people: 'recall, recognize, and localize their memories' (Halbwachs, 1980: 38).

We can usefully draw on the work of Margaret Somers (1992), who argues that we can best understand the construction of such narratives as a social process that transcend the individual to become cultural interpretations. Such events are seen as part of a collective history, the recalling of which provides security and a coherent understanding of the Self and the community. Moreover, through these memories it is possible to highlight continuity with the past, witnessed through an understanding that: 'the loyalist

people have ... paid a heavy price for the privilege of being British ... [through] our sacrifices in two world wars' (*Loyalist News*, 30 September 1972, cited in G. Bell, 1972: 74). As elsewhere, the memories of such core events are maintained through narratives often determined by contemporary political tensions and conflicts of the present (Kinnvall, 2006; 2012). The broad terrain that is reinforced for loyalist memory is one of a people constantly under threat of attack.

### **Narrative and Memory**

The formation of loyalist collective memory draws on an overarching meta narrative that rolls together events as diverse and separated by time as the Enniskillen bombing, the Siege of Derry, the Battle of the Boyne, the sacrifice of the Great War, the Ulster Workers Council strike of 1974 and many other events to mark a continuity of action, thought and politics. It is a narrative that brings together particular strands of social memory, representations and identities, all of which are held together by an accepted knowledge and chronology of events (both real and assumed), as these subjective histories are told, re-told, and transmitted across generations.

As Jens Brockmeier (2002) explains, these narratives help position people in their reactions to everyday events and experiences by providing the context for explaining and understanding events. They go to help construct the imagined community of loyalism is reconstructed and reproduced through direct reference to collective memories and which are made meaningful in the contemporary world. Importantly, these memories have everyday meaning in the ways people attach relevance to particular events in their past in understanding the present (Hirsch, 1995). Hence, memory must be made

living and part of everyday experiences (Bruner, 1990; Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997) where 'people carry a memory and that the memory itself is also a carrier' (Rodriguez and Fortier, 2007: 7).

Memories and representations do not just function to support social identities, rather membership of a particular groups also t and generate those social identities. Through this engagement with active, living memory (Schwartz, 1982) loyalists seek to answer core questions surrounding the identity of Self and their social and political relationships with others (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001; Olick, 2008). None of this is to suggest that individuals do not have memories that are unique, or that some memories will be shared with others and some not (Zerubavel, 1996). But it is to emphasize that collective and individual memory are multi-layered.

Social memory is always facilitated through individuals (Olick, 2007). Importantly, however, although memories are shared not everyone remembers past events in the same way. It is also important to recognize that the past is not a given or a fixed entity to be passed on. Rather, the past is continually reinterpreted and re-evaluated and often this remembering occurs directly in relation to factors related to the present.

The resulting memories provide one instrument through which people authenticate and validate the actions and identity of both Self and the group (Assmann and Shortt, 2012). Thus, the collective memories of groups in conflict, such as loyalism, predictably write, rewrite, interpret and reinterpret an exclusive history, to legitimize and ennoble one's own community, while highlighting the unjust nature of the values and actions of the Other. As Halbwachs reminds us essential to collective memory is that it: 'retains from

the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive' (Halbwachs, 1980).

This can be seen in the following statement from the UVF, which highlights what they see as a distinct heritage, drawing on loyalist history and discrete collective memories as follows:

Great names and great events from Ulster's history pass through our thoughts, including that of William of Orange or his General, Duke Schomberg. Who can ever forget the bravery of the thirteen Apprentice Boys, who defied authority and manned the walls of the Maiden City for 105 days of starvation and deprivation? Giants of great stature such as Edward Carson, Sir James Craig, along with their comrades in Colonels Crawford and Wallace, immediately spring to mind ... the signing of Ulster's Solemn League and covenant in 1912, with the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force with 100,000 armed, trained and disciplined men, ready to face and fight the might of the Empire ... Simply to remain British (*Combat*, November 1990).

As Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1991) explain, it is through such statements, and often their associated ceremonies, that participants are reminded of their place in the broader social and political movement, by locating them within what are seen as longstanding traditions. Social memories not only shape how we understand both the past and present, but frame what we conceptualize as achievable futures through the: 'dynamic social and psychological process' of drawing on social memories to create a: 'collective narrative' (Devine-Wright, 2003: 28). Moreover, and somewhat



contradictorily, social memory is concerned at the same time with process of both stability and change, referring to continuity and a conservation of the past, while reinterpreting past events to provide justifications for both social and political beliefs and the needs of the present (Wertsch, 2002).

Hence, loyalism often draws deeply on a narrative of the past that presents the contemporary conflict as merely the latest phase in a struggle to preserve, not just the existing constitutional position, but also a broader sense of their identity, which is seen as constantly threatened by other cultures and identities, primarily, of course, that of Irish nationalism and republicanism, which they continue to regard as alien, hostile and belligerent. For one section of loyalism the only way to resolve the contemporary political and cultural instability is by a re-emphasis of tradition in the face of what is perceived as the continued assault on loyalist culture. Concern that loyalism is under coherent psychological, cultural and political attack has manifested in recent times directly around the issue of Orange Order parades and the dispute surrounding the flying of the Union Flag on Belfast City Hall. The repost from loyalism has drawn deep on the collective memories of that community.

### **Shared loyalist memory**

It is crucial to ask who shares (or is allowed to share) such collective memories. Loyalist collective memory is maintained and reproduced: 'through a community of interests and thoughts' (Connerton, 1989: 47) and by drawing on specific understandings of the past to configure specific forms of collective memory. Collective memory is central to the narratives of past experience constituted by specific groups to empower particular forms of identity. The

rituals and customs that support collective memories, in turn, help to create, sustain and reproduce the imagined community of loyalism by identifying individual experiences as part of a continuity of history, place and social belonging.

Take, for example, the commemoration to the UVF at Cherryville Street, in East Belfast. This stands on the original site of Willowfield Unionist Hall, opened by Sir Edward Carson on May 16th 1913 as a drill hall and rifle range for the original UVF. It was demolished in 1983, but was marked by a memorial the centrepiece of which highlights those members of the UVF 2nd Willowfield Battalion who died in the First World War. Alongside this, however, are memorials to the contemporary UVF and its: 'Fallen Volunteers of 3rd Battalion, East Belfast Brigade', commemorated in a granite plaque reading: 'In solemn remembrance we salute the brave men of Ulster without favour or reward they fought militant Republicanism on it's [sic] own terms. Within loyalism it becomes crucial to: 'remember those who gave their lives and hold their memory for future generations so that their loyalty, courage and sacrifice will never be forgotten' (*News Letter*, 12 July 2007).

The links to the broader loyalist narrative is clear, dovetailing with the view that Northern Ireland's place as an essential part of the United Kingdom rests on the blood sacrifice of previous generations. In this way, loyalist collective memory: 'retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive' (Halbwachs, 1980). This remembered past, however, only remains meaningful to the present through 'the self-conscious memory of individual members of a group' (Crane, 1997). The resulting loyalist narrative performs

several roles not least of which is to provide a point of stability when individuals and groups are struggling to make sense of situations they see as socially and politically uncertain. In this context, the group narratives offers recognizable images and reassurances, which act in reinforcing existing worldviews.

Here, it is important to be clear that there exists no single interpretation of loyalism; indeed, given its historical fragmentation into different organizations and groups each placing a somewhat different emphasis on the various themes identified, there never has been a homogeneous or unvarying sense of loyalism. What unites loyalism is their reliance on a distinct historical collective narrative. Central here is a recognition that the interpretations of collective memories are not continuous and as with all such memories these are transmitted within a particular historical, social and political context.

While memories are profoundly social, framing beliefs and orientating intentions (Schwartz, 2000: 251), the interpretations of these collective memories are subject to constant processes of negotiation and re-negotiation and the product of political conflicts and social contestations in the present (Nets-Zehngut, 2013; Olick, 2007). In Northern Ireland, Brian Hanley has suggested that both: 'communities hold their conflicting "memories" dear, and rival political organizations have invested much in their own reading of the outbreak of the Troubles' (Hanley, 2013).

Loyalist identity draws on distinct and exclusive collective memories to reinforce discrete attitudes, social values and allegiance to one's own group, whilst at the same time clearly identifying the Other as separate, deceitful and a group of which one is always wary. It is important to highlight that to be

meaningful loyalist collective memory must be active and functioning, represented and communicated through contemporary social relations and perhaps most importantly passed through narratives (Connerton, 1989). Learned memory, as opposed to actual experienced memory, plays an important role in motivating and mobilizing loyalists. Here, mobilization can be understood as involving broad process of persuasion (Bar-Tal, 2013), through which individuals identify with the objectives of the group and approve of its actions whether tacitly or otherwise (Klandennans, 1998).

In conflict, collective memory is used to increase cohesiveness, to solidify boundaries between the in-group and the Other (Lambert, Scherer, Rogers and Jacoby, 2009) and to promote, or even lionize, ones own group. At the same time members of the Other are dehumanizes through narratives that attribute negative intentions and hostile actions to the other group (Elcheroth and Spini, 2011). Thus, within conflict situations much collective memory focuses: 'on the other sides responsibility for the outbreak and continuation of the conflict and its misdeeds, violence and atrocities; on the other hand, they concentrate on self-justification, self-righteousness, glorification and victimization' (Bar-Tal, 2003: 84).

In times of overt conflict, collective memory and time are collapsed to respond to existing political and social connections. They provide the cultural calligraphies through which members not only view their collective past but also identify the social and political dynamics of today. They steer the group through aims for the future. Feelings of political alienation and cultural threat are now also deeply engrained within loyalist consciousness (Pehrson, Gheorghiu and Ireland, 2012) which forms the basis for further disconnects

between working-class loyalism and the political representatives of unionism (Southern, 2007). Social identity rests on a process of self-categorization achieved in part through shared social representations, collective memory and narrative (Devine-Wright and Lyons, 1997; Hammack, 2011).

These reinforce common origin, and highlight mutual past events to illuminate present experiences and sense of identity (Bell, 2003; Edkins, 2003). The strength of the loyalist narrative highlighting a perceived common past, provides senses of commonality and continuity crucial to the construction of a meaningful social identity. This rests in a shared present, which itself is an extension of a common past. In the current phase loyalists have drawn on collective memories in ways that sees them express their cultural politics and sense of identity and in a more essentialized form, part of which seeks to confirm (or re-confine) the broad parameters of Northern Ireland society within a distinct Protestant–British cultural and political ethos and frame of reference that loyalists draw upon to understand contemporary events.

### **Loyalist Cultural Memories**

Recent social unrest in Northern Ireland, following the decision to fly the Union flag only on designated days at Belfast City Hall (Mastors and Drumhiller, 2014) is a clear example of this. As a crucial site of unionist social memory, it demonstrates the potential for such culture clashes to undermine the prospects for reconciliation in a divided society (McCaffrey, 2013). In the view of Mervyn Gibson, the Grand Chaplin of the Orange Order, however:

... the flag protestors did this generation a great service by waking us from our slumber – apathy, pessimism and defeatism were

walking us into a united Ireland. Rather than waking up to fight each other, we need to concentrate yet again on defeating republicanism, this time in the current cultural war. Let this generation not be found wanting, do not fight the war on yesterday's battlefield – fight the war on today's battleground (Cited in BBC News, 2015).

As Gibson's response to the street protests of 2013 and 2014 indicates, one articulation of loyalist identity is being expressed by a small but significant faction through a response to a perceived cultural erosion and loss and of their British identity. Many loyalists who would not condone the violence emerging from such protests still share collective memories and a sense of loss and insecurity expressed by loyalist demonstrators (McDonald, 2014). This for some marked a repositioning of sections of loyalism, whereby: 'one saw an increasing popularity of loyalist parades, and an accompanying shift ... away from its traditional "Ulster-British" ideology to a more narrowly monocultural and rebellious position' (Dowling, 2007: 54).

These communal understandings are seen as defence, drawing directly on collective memories that have been organized and adjusted in order to fit current expectations. The lines of engagement are drawn in what is seen as a culture war, the boundaries of which are set by collective memories that have become fully intertwined with other experiences, such as those of economic decline and social deprivation (UTV News, 2014). Central in understanding why the issue of the Union flag flying over City Hall has produced the intensity of reaction it has, is an understanding of how this is indicative of the broader

feelings of disenfranchisement and marginalization identified throughout loyalism.

Prominent amongst the loyalist street protests of late 2012 and early 2013, for example, was a large banner reading: 'We will not be the generation to fail Ulster'. Core sections of loyalism now see themselves as socially and culturally marginalized, and for many loyalists there is the feeling that political stability and ultimately their sense of security can only be achieved by an immobilization (perhaps even a reverse) of existing social and political relations in Northern Ireland. Such views re-enforce, and in turn are reinforced, by the strength of loyalist identity, their sense of community, the loyalist interpretation of collective memories, the loyalist narrative of ethno-political difference and so on.

A sense of remaining faithful to a specific encircled past, commemorating the sacrifices of previous generations, and more recent victims reproduce long-standing social and political divisions through a commitment to unchanging senses of belonging. Collective memory is activated by political events and actions. The range of the social processes identified still informs the active past, the construction of identities and how these are expressed, clearly enunciating how memory is dynamic social force. Such collective memory draws directly on narratives surrounding *major events* seen as: 'relevant to group members' lives [and] that cannot be disregarded' (Bar-Tal and Labin, 2001: 268).

The strength of reliance on a particular understanding and interpretation of collective memories mean that for the moment loyalist identity appears to be circumscribed and unchanging. Social identity should never be regarded

as a fixed possession, but rather as a fluid, although not necessarily rapid, social process. Within this understanding the individual and the social are seen as inextricably related and their social world constituted through the actions of the group.

The strength of collective memory in determining contemporary loyalism can of course inhibit social and political change. However, no-matter how seemingly predetermined identities are, impermanent and collective memories are conditional and not fixed, they are fluid, not solid. All existing formations of identity, no-matter how firm or stable they may appear, occur as a shifting rather than an enduring set of social relationships. Interpretations of the past can and do change (Radstone and Hodgkin, 2003) and the process of collective memory formation is fluid, not fixed. The social identity of both the individual and the group can, be subject to a re-emphasis, re-selection, or reinterpretation of collective memories as was seen with the emergence of the grouping widely know as new loyalism, which emerged in the late 1990s. Memory is a central component of political identity, which is constantly constructed and reconstructed.

## **Conclusions**

Collective memories bind together identified communities through mutually recognized presentations, representations, understandings and interpretations of the past. One of the major ways in which loyalist collective memory is increasingly reproduced, shared and reinforced is through its populist narratives. Such narratives carry forward memories from one generation to another and one historical period to another. Consequently, while loyalism's



ties to memories of the past are constantly reproduced, at the same time they are redefined in terms of contemporary identities and political responses.

In a situation of conflict, the community turns to what it feels it trusts and knows, reinforcing the view of the dangerous Other as the reason for, and perpetrator of, the conflict, of which the culture war in which many loyalist see themselves engaged is merely the latest skirmish in which they draw on memory in a particular way to seek reassurance in their current political situation.

The loyalist interpretation of history is used as a form of political reinforcement, to set contemporary political issues directly in the context of what has gone before. Importantly, collective memory does not act as a precise review of past circumstances; rather, it reconstructs explanations through memory shaped by broader social forces, including commemorative displays and ritual. This involves the prioritization of those memories that best allow for the endurance of fundamental beliefs. None of this is to suggest that these group narratives are read or interpreted entirely consistently or that group members act upon the narrative in uniform ways, but there are dominant readings of the broad loyalist narrative.

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