

Derry '68: The International Perspective.

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This article is an extract from the new Introduction to Eamonn McCann's classic book War and an Irish Town, due to be republished shortly by Haymarket Books.



One of the loudest cheers I heard in the Bogside during the civil rights era came in response to the cry: 'The whole black nation has to be put together as a black army, and we're gonna walk on this nation, we're gonna walk on this racist power structure and we're gonna say to the whole damn government – "Stick 'em up, motherfucker, we've come for what's ours..."'

The declaration was the last item in the 10-point programme of the Black Panther Party (BPP), enunciated in rich, booming R&B tones on the soundtrack of a film projected against the gable which was later to become Free Derry Wall in the small hours of a riotous night.

The cheer, I think, had as much to do with the liberating daring of the language as with the sentiment of the slogan. But the reaction did signal the extent to which the young Bogsideers felt a connection, even a sense of fellow-feeling with the Panthers, then under murderous assault by the Feds and local police forces across the US.

I recall, too, an AGM of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in St Mary's Hall in Belfast which descended into fractious rowdiness when Michael Farrell proposed that we send a message of solidarity to the BPP. 'Wrecker' was the least of the insults hurled at the mild-mannered Magherafelt

man. The vote (the motion was lost) revealed, hardly surprisingly, that the split on the issue replicated the differences between 'moderates' and 'militants' on strategy in the North itself. Where we stood on global matters reflected the stance we took locally, and vice versa. The fact that there was an international dimension to the North's civil rights movement has virtually been written out of history. In part, this reflects the chronic insularity of Irish historiography. But that cannot be the whole reason. The North is scarcely mentioned in accounts of 1968 generally. Tariq Ali, in his regular regurgitations of his '68 experience, makes glancing

reference to Belfast and Bernadette Devlin, but clearly sees the struggle in the North as having been a distracting sideshow. Commentators with a more acerbic view of the 1968 events likewise consign Northern Ireland to the margins of what matters.

To insist on the relevance of global events, then, is to venture onto ground which has been little disturbed by the stomp of the standard-issue chroniclers who assume that Northern Ireland can be understood entirely and cannot be understood other than in terms of Orange versus Green. Fifty years on, this applies particularly to the players and commentators who marched lock-stepped towards the segregation settlement of April 1998 - the 'Belfast' or 'Good Friday Agreement': in the text referred to only as the 'Multi-Party Agreement' - hymning Harry Chapin's 1972 hit: 'Flowers are red, young man/Green leaves are green/There's no need to see flowers any other way/Than the way they have always been seen.' Those who support a settlement which allocates every citizen of the North to the Orange camp or the Green camp, and which requires sectarian politics to continue to dominate, will tend naturally to present all that has gone before in Orange/Green terms.

The belief or hope of the left at that the time had been that we could paint the future any colour we chose, that we weren't fated merely to continue our history but could conquer it. We didn't, of course. But it is a matter of record and still needs saying that, in Derry at least, the activists who triggered the civil rights campaign didn't, in the main, see themselves as Orange or Green, but a hue which, we believed, would, in time, and maybe not very much of it, obliterate the colour-coding of religious division which long had

provided the template for Irish, especially Northern Irish, politics. We had a glimpse – no more – of possibilities beyond the old limits of thought. My great friend Johnnie White, commander of the pre-split IRA in Derry in the late 60's and a socialist fighter all his life, including within republican organisations, managed a smile through his pain in the last conversation we ever had: 'Back then, McCann, that was the best.' And so it was.

Northern Ireland in that interlude fitted naturally enough into a thrilling narrative unfolding across the world. If the revolutionary perspective soon faded in the North, giving way again to the old conflict which advocates of communal politics felt comfortable with, well, so did the conventional pattern of social democracy versus conservatism reassert itself across western Europe, Republican and Democratic Parties in the United States resumed ritual contestation of the narrow ground between them. Stalinism re-emerged in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc. Business as usual, up to a point. The American connection is the one that was most vibrant and remains most relevant. I recall bringing back to New York the golden key to the city which Bernadette Devlin had received from Mayor John Lindsay and, on my first night in town, presenting it to Panther leader Robert Bay at a ceremony in Harlem which attracted a little media coverage. My friend the novelist Jimmy Breslin told me immediately afterwards that that had been 'stupid, stupid, stupid. You shoulda done that on your last night, not the foist!' Absolutely right. By next morning, all thirteen of the speaking engagements arranged for me had been cancelled by their Irish-American sponsors. One crusader for equality and civil rights in the

North explained from Boston that I had associated the cause of civil rights with 'niggers' and that this would prove damaging to solidarity activity in the US. What US civil rights activists, who had risked their lives and saw lives lost in voter registration drives in the badlands of Alabama and thus helped inspire the movement in the North, would have made of this perspective isn't hard to imagine: Up against the wall, motherfuckers.

The argument of the left was that our natural allies in the US ought surely to be those who, like us, were fighting against oppressive power. The contrary argument of Irish-American solidarity groups and civil rights moderates at home was that it made no sense to alienate powerful interests in the US who might be persuaded to back a campaign for justice in the North despite their denial of justice to the lower orders at home. To raise issues of injustice in the US would be, as one prominent Bogsider at the time, 'to split our support'. The knock-on effect was significantly to strengthen the argument that demands which went beyond a rebalancing of community advantage were to be discouraged; if possible, rooted out.

■ This is not a matter of mere historical interest. The same consideration has more recently led nationalists who are anti-racist and in support of gay rights at home to march shoulder-to-shoulder with bigots on Paddy's Day parades in the US, some who railed when it suited them against US bombing in the Middle East then to sing dumb and stand grinning alongside the boss of the bombers when the occasion arose. We need the White House to press the British to put pressure on the unionists to make concessions to nationalism, runs

the same decrepit logic as we'd encountered in the '60s.

Thus, a few years ago, the late Martin McGuinness could travel with then DUP leader Peter Robinson to speak at the Fortune 500 gathering of top US capitalists and hold discussions about peace in the North with Paula Dobrianski, George W Bush's envoy to the Northern peace process and fanatical pro-war neo-con. Martin was doing no more than following through the logic of the early civil rights moderates and the strategy of nationalists for more than a hundred years.

Similarly, there are those who style themselves anti-imperialists but who won't say boo to an arms company which fuels imperialist war for profit lest they make enemies of corporate America. When the Raytheon 9, members of Derry Anti-War Coalition, myself among them, occupied and 'decommissioned' the arms company's Derry plant in August 2006 in a (successful) effort to disrupt production of military equipment being used in Israel's assault on Lebanon, the main nationalist parties, the SDLP and Sinn Féin, self-proclaimed opponents of the arms trade and Israeli aggression, refused to support the action - because of the likelihood it would alienate US business and political interests which might otherwise take a positive approach to Derry's economic needs and nationalist concerns generally. Opposition to imperialism and war profiteering, like solidarity with the victims of racism in the 1960s, is subjected to the needs of 'our community' vis-à-vis 'the other side'. Not that 'our community' benefited one bit in either instance - although there are, sometimes, of course, political and personal benefits for those who flip-flop into the arms of the US ruling class.

To this extent, the flip-flopers can be said to have prospered. In contrast, the socialist adventurism of the late '60s is commonly said to have ended in personal and political disappointment and eventually to have been revealed as no more than a flurry of sanguine naivety. But that's not the only way to understand the period. The ideas of internationalism and revolt from below which animated young people around the globe 50 years ago are more relevant in the globalised present than they were in the heady days of gas and barricades in the Bogside. It's the current sharp relevance of the global context which makes it imperative to see the Northern Ireland events of the late '60s against the background of the war, tumult and repression which was raging across the world at time. As Johnnie had recalled in reverie in his last days of life, rampaging down Rossville Street behind the same flag as was floating over demonstrations in Chicago, London, Paris, Sydney, had been a heady experience which all involved had wanted to linger. There had, perhaps, been an element of willed optimism in our high expectations. Maybe, occasionally, we were dizzied by the vastness of what seemed possible. But there was, too, reason to believe.

January 1968 saw uprisings in every city in Vietnam and the seizure by the Viet Cong of part of the US embassy in Saigon. US soldiers battled for weeks to retake the ancient capital, Hue. Outside Hue, a US general uttered the immortal words: 'We had to destroy the city in order to free it.'

The fact that an army of poor peasants could take on and push back the forces of the greatest power on earth had a shattering effect on the self-confidence of

the US ruling class - and gave a huge boost to the morale of anti-imperialists everywhere. Lyndon Johnston, who had been regarded as a shoo-in for the Democratic nomination for the 1968 presidential election, became suddenly unelectable: in February, anti-war outsider Gene McCarthy swept the New Hampshire primary. Johnston addressed the nation: 'I will not seek, nor shall I accept, the nomination to stand as president of the United States.' The Vietnamese had destroyed the reputation of the US military and finished the career of a man who had so recently seemed to bestride the world. Phil Ochs sang it best: 'Train them well, the men who will be fighting by your side/And never turn your back if the battle turns the tide/For the colours of a civil war are louder than commands/When you're white boots marching in a yellow land.'

On 27 October, three weeks after the Duke Street march, half a dozen of us flew to London, where I spoke at a huge Hyde Park rally calling for US withdrawal from Vietnam, and was greeted by chants of 'London, Paris, Derry, Berlin, We shall fight and we shall win.'

In August, we'd expressed our internationalism in more whimsical style, sending a telegram of solidarity from 'the people of Derry' to 'the people of Czechoslovakia' c/o the General Post Office, Prague. The Prague Government had earlier in the year split apart over how to handle rising demands for democracy. In the space created by the split, students, intellectuals and workers all over Prague and in other cities had begun meeting to discuss socialist ideas for the first time in a generation. Meanwhile, Polish students, emboldened by events across the border, occupied the universities and fought police

who arrived to eject them. The August invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet army snuffed out the spreading flickers of freedom; our telegram, if noticed at all, will have seemed comically irrelevant. But it conveyed the sense that we had of involvement in everything. Both of the monolithic systems, whose domination of the world had for so long seemed set in stone, were at last and at least being challenged. Any radical worth his or her salt, including in Derry, was thrilled and energised. The feeling of being part of it fuelled our resolve. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis in April. What followed across the US was characterised in the media as 'riots'. A better word would have been 'uprising'. Thousands of young people stormed out from African-American and other neighbourhoods to tear down symbols of the system and engage in hand-to-hand combat with the uniformed representatives of oppressive authority. Many moved away from the moderate politics of Dr King and turned towards the Panthers and other uncompromising groups. A few weeks later, at a sit-down protest on the lower deck of Craigavon Bridge, Roddy Carlin struck up a chorus of the song most associated with King, We Shall Overcome. By the end of Roddy's rendition, the crowd of a couple of hundred (it's a very easy song to learn) was singly lustily along. A week after King's murder, there was a spasm of street demonstrations in West Germany following an assassination attempt on student leader Rudi Dutschke. The right-wing Springer media empire had for months been running a hate campaign against him. Prolonged serious violence marked attempts to storm Springer offices in West Berlin and other centres.

In May, Paris erupted. Students built barricades in the streets around the Sorbonne and drove the police from the vicinity. Factories and offices emptied as workers, against the urging of trade union leaders, struck in solidarity, and for their own class demands. The 10 million-strong stoppage which followed was the biggest strike ever in Europe. The notion of the struggle across the world as historic, seismic, the defining clash of our time, wasn't entirely fantastical. The following month, students in Yugoslavia laid siege to the parliament building in Belgrade chanting 'Down with the Red bourgeoisie' precipitating the biggest political crisis so far in the cobbled-together Titoist country. It was in August that the Soviet Union's Red bourgeoisie ordered armoured columns across the border to crush Czechoslovakian democracy and seize the country's leaders – and that our solidarity was conveyed from Post Office Street. In the same month, thousands of Chicago cops attacked demonstrators against the Vietnam War outside the Democratic Party convention in Chicago – Norman Mailer's blood-and-guts accounts remains one of the great pieces of American journalism. The anti-war voice of the grassroots majority was drowned out by a roar of pro-war patriotism. Convention delegates with an anti-war mandate took the view – the same view as taken by Barack Obama and then by Hillary Clinton who opposed the more egregious US attacks on democracy and law overseas, then voted repeatedly for appropriations to fund the slaughter – that once the die was cast, no attitude was patriotically permissible other than to 'support our boys'. Irish-American Chicago Mayor

Richard Daly, who had sent in the cops to club the demonstrators into submission, was a strong supporter of civil rights in the North and, later, a valued ally of Irish nationalism. In October, student and others were massacred in droves by paramilitary police when they marched for democracy during the Olympic Games in Mexico City. A square near the university was left carpeted with corpses. The death toll was in hundreds. British news desks ordered journalists in the city to confine themselves to reporting the Games; the violence didn't fall within their sports remit. Instead, outrage was focused on Tommy Smith and John Carlos, first and third in 200 metres, when they showed their backing for civil rights on the podium. Both received their medals shoeless and in black socks to symbolise black poverty. Smith wore a black scarf to represent black pride. Carlos had his tracksuit top unzipped to show solidarity 'with all blue-collar workers in the US' and wore beads which, he said, 'were for all those lynched or killed that no-one said a prayer for, that were hung and tarred, for those thrown off the side of boats in the middle of passage'. Australian silver medallist Peter Norman joined the pair in pinning the badge of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (the group the protesting US Athletes were associated with) to his lapel once he'd realised the purpose of their action. British sports journalists were able, after all, to report on political repression. Both US athletes were banned from the sport. In the back room of the Bogside Inn, we cheered and raised our fists in salute to the television footage. Each upsurge of struggle sent out a flurry of sparks which helped ignite struggle elsewhere. Everywhere,

some who had become involved in protest politics on account of grievances particular to their own community or group saw that they were not alone, either in the nature of their oppression or in the fight for its overthrow.

The last-resort analysis of reformed radicals and other respectable sorts has it that this internationalist spirit, which might have struck even level-headed people as reasonable at the time, has been exposed in the interim as sheer light-mindedness, charming in its way, reflecting an era of innocence, but of no relevance even in rhetorical terms to modern material reality. There are few propositions farther than this from the truth.

Internationalism is more relevant today than ever – not because anti-capitalists wish it so but because capitalism itself, the never-ending source of our political ills, has never been more integrated on a global scale. For socialists, the basis of internationalism has never lain in fellow-feeling with struggles which coincide with or parallel our own - although that sentiment would be a start – but in understanding that, because those who run the world in the interests of the rich are organised across countries and continents, so must opponents of capitalism be organised if we are to confront them in appropriate array, in a formation which makes victory possible at least. We must see and understand those who struggle elsewhere along the same lines as ourselves not only as campaigners we sympathise with but also, and more importantly, as part of the same movement pitched against the same force.

In this perspective, obviously, the idea of hobnobbing with the main architects of the invasions

of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria while avoiding contact with the US anti-war movement represents not a subtle strategy – ‘They are not using us, we are using them’ – but a betrayal of the anti-war movement worldwide: it comes close to going over to the other side.

The point is made more sharply by consideration of campaigns against the widening inequalities between the rich and the rest of us across the world. The crisis of capitalism which shuddered the world in 2008 and brought the lines of class division into sharp relief is not amenable to solution in any one country – not even the economic superpower, America. The same banks, the same bail-outs, the same interlinked issues.

Likewise with the fight against racism and homophobia, for abortion rights, for the defeat of oppressive US surrogate regimes, in solidarity with all those yearning for freedom from Russia, China, the EU etc., in defence of civil rights, jobs, wages, working conditions, in every struggle for liberty and justice, we are weakened when we shape our strategy to keep powerful interests aside.

This is particularly true in Northern Ireland, where neither the US nor any major power has a compelling strategic interest and so can feel free to give or withhold backing from this or that faction, without anxiety about repercussions.

You put your own struggle above all else, seek support from any powerful interest willing to back your particular cause, you find yourself soon on the wrong side of the barricade.

It’s a point made with sharpness and humour at a packed meeting marking the 40th anniversary of the civil rights movement in Sandino’s pub in Derry on November 4th 2008 -

the night of Barack Obama’s election - by Emory Douglas, Minister of Culture in the Black Panther Party in 1968 and one of the producers of the film we had projected onto Free Derry Wall:

‘It’s a wonderful night, full of hope, and we have to hold on to the hope, so we can push for the things he (Obama) promised would come when he fails to deliver, as he will. Real change, if it comes, will come from below, just like here, just like anywhere.’

His associate Billy X, historian and archivist of the Panther Party, added: ‘Wall Street will still be there. The Israeli lobby will still be there. The chiefs of staff and the CIA, the industrialists, oil barons, the owners of the media, all of them still there, the people with money and their mouthpieces who hate and fear the working class all over the world. All Obama has won is the presidency.’ ‘All the folk who organised for him down in the streets have to stay together, stay strong, if they are to see this through, because the job’s not done, far from done. If he seriously tried to make the changes that are needed, they’d kill him. Kill him without even thinking about it. Maybe they will anyway. We have to go forward together. If we are ever to win, we must all rise up together.’ Billy’s favourite song wasn’t a blues but another by Ochs, about another US invasion we’d marched against in the 60s: ‘The fishermen sweat, they’re pausing at their nets, the day’s a-burning/As the warships sway and thunder in the bay, loud the morning/But the boy on the shore is throwing pebbles no more, he runs a-warning/ That the marines have landed on the shores of Santo Domingo.’ If we hold on to the memory, draw out the lessons, the best is still to come.