

The Path to Revolutionary Violence within the Weather Underground and Provisional IRA

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The 1960's was a decade defined by a spirit of activism and advocacy for change among oppressed populations worldwide. While the methods for enacting change varied across nations and peoples, early movements such as that for civil rights in America were often committed to peaceful modes of protest and passive resistance. However, the closing years of the decade and the dawn of the 1970's saw the patterned global spread of increasingly militant tactics used in situations of political and social unrest. The Weather Underground Organization (WUO) in America and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in Ireland, two such paramilitaries, comprised young activists previously involved in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (NICRA) respectively. What caused them to renounce the non-violent methods of the Students for a Democratic Society and the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association for the militant tactics of the Weather Underground and Irish Republican Army, respectively?

An analysis of contemporary source materials, along with more recent scholarly works, reveals that violent state reactions to more passive forms of demonstration in the United States and Northern Ireland drove peaceful activists toward militancy. In the case of both the Weather Underground and the Provisional Irish Republican Army in the closing years of the 1960s and early years of the 1970s, the bulk of combatants were young people with previous experience in more peaceful campaigns for civil rights and social justice. When these activists perceived that peaceful outlets for the redressal of their grievances had been made unavailable to them by state resistance and repression, they resorted to means of force as the only apparent option.

The varied contexts in which this shift happened demonstrates the global nature of their movements. In her memoir *Flying Close to the Sun*, Weatherman Cathy Wilkerson writes:

“Those of us in [SDS] and, later, Weatherman, saw ourselves as part of a worldwide uprising of young people working for freedom and equality.”¹ Although the WUO and PIRA reflected the unique historical context of American institutional racism and English occupation, the militants saw themselves as actors in a global, rather than national, movement. Leftist movements against imperialism, racism, and capitalism mutually influenced and inspired one another in such far separated places as America, Northern Ireland, Puerto Rico, and North Vietnam. This point is demonstrated by the similarity of statements found in the training manual of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, referred to as “The Green Book,” to Wilkerson’s account. In reference to the global nature of their struggle, “The Green Book” declares that the PIRA “stands with... the neutral and non-aligned peoples of the third world” and sought a socialist alternative to allegiance with either the American or Soviet bloc.² Across differences in methods, adversaries, and ideology, these movements can still be linked together as part of a decade spanning pattern of leftist dissent against the white western establishment, referred to as the “global 1960’s.”

Historians of this global movement, including the Weather Underground Organization (WUO) and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in particular, have developed a framework to examine violence carried out by so called terrorist groups under the same criteria as violence carried out by the state. This includes a rejection of the term “terrorist” by scholars such as Robert W. White in *Out of the Ashes: An Oral History of the Provisional Irish Republican Movement*. White argues that terrorism is any act of violent coercion against a broad target area to achieve political ends, and thus ought to be applied to state and non-state actors.

¹ Cathy Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 2.

² Martin Melaugh, “Text of Irish Republican Army (IRA) ‘Green Book’ (Book I and II),” Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) Website, accessed November 22, 2019, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/ira_green_book.htm.

Selective application of the term to non-state actors implies some level of increased legitimacy for civilian victims of state violence, and ignores the role that state suppression plays in driving so called “terrorist” groups to adopt violence in the first place.³ There is a consensus among scholars of political violence among the global anti-imperialist movement in the sixties and seventies that popular attitudes toward such movements assume moral deficiency, and that such should not be the case in historical analysis. Nearly all of the scholarship on both movements can be categorized as attempting to discern the motives and meaning behind political violence in a nuanced way which accounts for the feelings of the militants themselves.

Political violence carried out by paramilitaries is often presented as linked to state violence in attempting to explain pathways toward militancy. Dan Berger explains the radicalization of many future WUO members in terms of the brutal institutional resistance to the earlier idealism of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Civil Rights Movement. He states “without understanding the impact of state repression, radical movements don’t make sense. The rationality and motivations underscoring the rise of groups such as the Weather Underground... is apparent only in the context of dozens of murdered Black radicals... [as the] the government conducted an expanded, and often secret, war against all forms of dissent.”⁴ However, this argument is not universally accepted. Jeremy Varon, in contrast to the work of Berger, explains the move of the WUO away from SDS activism and toward violence as a result of the context of the decade. The tide of revolution and social ferment which spread globally

³ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 11.

⁴ Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 8.

through the 1960's convinced the small group of white American radicals that the revolution was within grasp, and loyalty and struggle on their part would awaken the rest of society.⁵

Historians of the conflict in Ireland make similar arguments to Berger in order to account for the motives of young Catholics who took up arms for Republicanism. Max Hastings' *Barricades in Belfast* argues that Catholics began campaigning for Civil Rights following the collision of the decade's activist spirit with the entrenched discrimination within Northern Irish society. However, popular support for armed struggle against British Occupation only became widespread following protestant attacks on Catholic communities in retaliation for their protests.⁶ *Out of the Ashes* by Robert White, *Say Nothing* by Patrick Radden Keefe, and *A Secret History of the IRA* by Ed Moloney also blame attacks against Catholics following civil rights campaigning for escalating violence in the region. However, unlike Hastings they blame institutional violence against Catholics on the part of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the British Army as well.

Analyses of political violence in Northern Ireland also must grapple with the complexity of the hundreds of year long background to the conflict which raged in the 1960's. Although the PIRA's war with Britain was ideological, focused on formation of a socialist republic across all of Ireland, it was also sectarian. The PIRA emerged out of a split within the ranks of the IRA which also produced the rival Official IRA. Scholars differ as to the exact reasoning for the breakaway of the provisional faction. Ed Maloney, in his *Secret History of the IRA*, emphasizes

⁵ Jeremy Varon, "Between Revolution 9 and Thesis II: Or, Will We Learn (Again) to Start Worrying and change the world?," in *The New Left Revisited*, ed. John McMillian and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 214-240; Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home : the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁶ Max Hastings, *Barricades in Belfast; the Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland* (New York: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1970).

Catholic sectarianism and nationalism as distinguishing the PIRA from the rival Official IRA. In his view, Provisionals sought to act as the armed forces of the Catholic citizens of Northern Ireland in opposition to their Protestant enemies, while Officials sought to distance themselves from armed struggle and emphasized increased community activism across the religious divide.⁷

While defense of Catholic communities was undoubtedly a reason for the emergence and rise of the PIRA, scholars such as Lorenzo Bosi and Patrick Radden Keefe are right to point out that it was but one of many reasons. Bosi emphasizes that left wing ideology and reactionism to opposing violence were only motives for those republican combatants who joined the PIRA after 1969. Those that joined the unified IRA before 1969 were usually more driven by family traditions of republicanism and Catholic nationalism.⁸ This argument is echoed by Patrick Radden Keefe in his work *Say Nothing*, which provides an in depth case study of why Dolours and Marian Price, two women from a republican Belfast family, joined the PIRA as full fledged combatants while still in their teens. Keefe's account best reflects the commonality of ideology with such organizations as the WUO in that both fought imperialism and discrimination, but also acknowledges the history of sectarianism in Ireland. The Price sisters were raised in a family for which republican radicalization was routine, but it was their experience being attacked by Protestants while peacefully marching for civil rights which pushed them into the ranks of the Provisionals.⁹ Historians writing solely on the Weather Underground have also looked to their emergence in 1969 out of a split within SDS with the rival Progressive Labor Party (PL) faction to provide insight as to the goals and objectives of the organization. Not unlike the conflict

⁷ Moloney, *Secret History of the IRA*.

⁸ Lorenzo Bosi, "Explaining Pathways to Armed Activism in the Provisional Irish Republican Army, 1969–1972," *Social Science History* 36, no. 3 (2012): 347-390.

⁹ Keefe, *Say Nothing*.

between the PIRA and OIRA, the work of Dan Berger and Ron Jacobs defines the WUO as committed to armed struggle in support of oppressed non-white populations, whereas the PL sought revolution through Maoist ideals of community activism and labor organization.¹⁰

Both the PIRA and the WUO reflect the impact of the spread of revolutionary ideology through the 1960's, tying together revolutions from all corners of the globe into one cohesive story. However, the scholarship on both organizations also reveals the degree to which motives for carrying out political violence varied from individual to individual according to each specific national context. The only universal conclusion is that the best methodology is one which gives equal weight to the actions and ideas of the the WUO and PIRA as well as their opposition.

Viewed on a macro scale, the path from activism to revolutionary violence followed by the Weather Underground is easy to trace. It began with Students for a Democratic Society, a protest organization in America for students who identified as part of this global movement. The organization was founded in 1960 on college campuses centered in the northeast as a student extension of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), a liberal organization from the "old left." However, the organization emerged in its better known form following the publication of the Port Huron Statement in 1962, a landmark declaration of student radicalism which declared that, in David Gilbert's words, "beyond electing leaders, people need to directly participate in discussing and determining the decisions that affect their lives, including in the economic sphere."¹¹ In other words, it was no longer feasible to simply appeal to and wait for liberal lawmakers to address the issues identified in society. Rather, those affected by systems of oppression ought to rise up and demand change for themselves. Primarily comprising white

¹⁰ Ron Jacobs, *The Way the Wind Blew : a History of the Weather Underground* (London: Verso, 1997).

¹¹ David Gilbert, *SDS/WUO: Students For A Democratic Society and the Weather Underground Organization* (Toronto, ON: Arm the Spirit, 2002), 12.

middle class students at elite colleges, through the decade the organization emerged as the leading voice of students influenced by the spirit of the global 1960's. SDS was responsible for important demonstrations on a wide array of issues, but especially emphasized opposition to the Vietnam war and support for civil rights and black power. As the decade progressed, SDS followed a common trend among 1960's leftist movements and grew increasingly radical as the war and draft escalated under President Johnson and the Civil Rights movement descended into violence in 1968. The Weather Underground, initially referred to as the Revolutionary Youth Movement or Weatherman faction, was one of several groups looking to steer the future direction of SDS. As opposed to the rival Progressive Labor Party (PL) which sought to define SDS according to Maoist philosophy focused on class conflict, Weatherman emphasised the importance of examining oppression through the lens of race and gender. This divide between the Revolutionary Youth Movement faction of SDS and the Progressive Labor Party is demonstrative of the division brought on among radicals on the left by the presence of nationalism in the global struggle against imperialism. RYM and the WUO were intended to serve as outlets for white radicals to assist marginalized populations in their own nationalist struggles.¹²

In 1969 at the SDS national convention in Chicago, a leader of the Weatherman faction named Bernadine Dohrn led a walkout and demonstration against the PL, which was eventually ousted from the organization. Although both continued to claim the SDS moniker, the convention marked the emergence of the Weather Underground as a distinct organization. Over the course of its campaign, which lasted roughly until 1977, the organization would spearhead

¹² Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America : the Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006).

numerous riots, bombings, and counterculture programs aimed at disrupting American capitalism and the Vietnam War through attacks on property, starting with the “Days of Rage” riots in 1969 and culminating with the bombing of the pentagon in 1972.¹³

In contrast to the militancy of the Weather Underground, Students for a Democratic appears a more moderate outlet for social change. However, SDS itself rose to significance as a representation of the new left which emerged amidst the activist spirit of the 1960’s. Originating as a student wing of the League for Industrial Democracy, the differences which drove SDS away out of the LID as an independent organization were those ideals which defined the global spirit of the 1960’s. The two groups recurrently clashed due to the vehement anticommunism of the LID, a common mark of the moderate liberal left. SDS, rather, identified as a leading force within the new American left, comprising the generation who came into adulthood in the 1960’s and were influenced by the global spirit of activism, and attempted to include all array of perspectives through a policy of open debate. This also differentiated them from previous radical leftist movements in America, such as the American Communist Party, in that they identified with a global movement among third world peoples, rather than a soviet led communist international.¹⁴

The context of the decade thus influenced and altered the century old struggle for racial equality in America. Raised in a white middle class New England household, David Gilbert identified as a “militant liberal” when he arrived at Columbia University as a freshman in 1962, and quickly joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). His work for the organization involved him in a tutoring program for underprivileged Harlem children, and despite his prior

¹³ Berger, *Outlaws of America*.

¹⁴ Berger, *Outlaws of America*.

commitment to the idea of civil rights, he asserts in his memoir that he was shocked by the degree of oppression to which he was exposed. “If the experience had been only of the starkness of oppression, I might have remained a militant liberal. But I saw... the strength of the Black people and the vibrancy of the culture they developed in the face of those hardships.”¹⁵ Such experiences taught Gilbert and his contemporaries that the power for social change lay within oppressed communities themselves. Racial inequality in America would not be solved through reform on the part of the white, liberal establishment. Just as the North Vietnamese were rising up against their white oppressors to assert their right to self determination, so too would black Americans have to rise up in the name of their own rights. Thus, activism which empowered and organized marginalized communities was prioritized from the start. In Bill Ayers’ memoir, he paraphrases the platform of the Weather Underground, outlined in their 1974 manifesto *Prairie Fire*, as: “the worldwide anti-imperialist struggle had a counterpart inside the borders of the U.S.- the Black Liberation movement; and the responsibility of mother country radicals here in the heartland of imperialism was to aid and abet the world struggle.”¹⁶ The white activists of the WUO did not intend to be at the forefront of the revolution, and considered the struggle for black liberation led by people of color themselves as the primary campaign to which they were dedicated. This emphasis also primed the organization’s membership for ready acceptance of the black power ideology and linked the struggle for civil rights in the US with the movement against the Vietnam War through a narrative of imperialism. This would prove conducive to the transition from peaceful demonstrations toward political violence, as WUO activists were radicalized by state reactions both domestically and in peripheral nations.

¹⁵ David Gilbert, *Love and Struggle: My Life in SDS, the Weather Underground, and Beyond*, (Oakland, CA:PM Press, 2012), 26.

¹⁶ Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days: a memoir* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2001), 140-141.

It was the response on the part of the government to the increasingly revolutionary student left which drove the WUO toward violence. In David Gilbert's words, "the more we tried to change things and the more we studied, the more we saw how systematically our government has crushed peaceful and democratic efforts to level the playing field for the poor."¹⁷ Gilbert and his fellow SDS activists drew from American institutional opposition to the civil rights and anti war movement in concluding that violence was the only available effective mode for change. However, as middle class white students who allied and identified with the black power movement, they did not have to directly suffer the violence themselves.

Cathy Wilkerson explicitly outlines her memoir *Flying Close to the Sun* as an attempt at explaining her pathway of radicalization.¹⁸ She dedicates an entire chapter to the year 1968, yet it is equal parts an account of leftist movements across America in that year as it is her own personal narrative. As a white activist aiming to supplement the primary movements for black power and national liberation led by people of color themselves, it was enough to witness such events as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the nation wide riots that followed, and the government crackdown which saw some 5,000 arrests and eight deaths in the nation's capital alone without personally suffering from the violence. Their alliance with the Black Panther movement was built on the assumption that white students from the middle class such as themselves were inherently privileged in a society ordered by institutional racism. The system they were attempting to destroy was one which had benefited them through their lives at the expense of those people of color they sought to help. As such they were aware that the true wrath

¹⁷ Gilbert, *Love and Struggle*, 86.

¹⁸ Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 1.

of the system inflamed by their actions would be felt by the marginalized communities who so desperately needed help in the first place.

Yet, many future Weatherman did suffer attacks and physical injury at the hands of the police. Their movement began with the assumption that their privileged identity prevented them from experiencing the destructive nature of imperialism as true victims. However, their demonstrations often involved confrontations with law enforcement, often engendering attacks by the forces of the state. From August 26 -29th 1968, as frustration with President Johnson's continued escalation of the Vietnam War mounted, a massive demonstration was planned for outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The protest was staged by a wide array of groups from the American new left, including SDS, the Yippies, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They had planned a three day long period of demonstrations intended to be theatrical and inflammatory, such as the staged inauguration of a pig, yet not violent. However, at the direction of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, the protest was subject to excessive and violent harassment by the police force through the entire weekend.¹⁹ In his memoir, SDS and WUO leader Bill Ayers described the scene as Chicago law enforcement charged and attacked the demonstrators:

The police, like angry cattle, their nostrils flaring, stampeded through the clouds of tear gas into Lincoln Park that night, swinging nightsticks with wild abandon, cracking heads- BAM! BAM!- leaving people bleeding in the grass, or grabbing those who resisted, piling them like logs into paddy wagons.²⁰

Ayers' vivid description paints a horrifying picture of police brutality, involving the coercive use of violence against a previously peaceful group. It also reflects the traumatic effect which being

¹⁹ Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 53.

²⁰ Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, 129.

subject to attack by those meant to protect you has on its victims, leaving painful memories fixated in the mind over thirty years later.

These experiences directly translated into the ideology of armed revolution which the Weather Underground adopted. Their 1974 manifesto *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism* addresses the need for revolution and armed struggle in the campaign to end imperialism. The document contains a section entitled “Why Is Revolution Necessary” in the opening pages. In their analysis, revolution is needed as a means of transitioning control of society’s means of production from the capitalist ruling class to the people who were previously exploited through the system of global imperialism. Armed Struggle refers to the need for violent methods to achieve this revolution. The section concludes with the statement:

Imperialists defend their control of the means of life with terrible force. There is no reason to believe they will become humane or relinquish power. As matters deteriorate for imperialism, there is every reason to believe they will tighten control, pass their contradictions on to the people, and struggle for every last bit of power. To not prepare the people for this struggle is to disarm them ideologically and physically and to perpetrate a cruel hoax.²¹

This is an explicit declaration that violence was merely the means by which the struggle against imperialism would be won. Moreover, the use of violent means toward achieving their goals was not a choice made of their own volition. Their hand was forced by the commitment of the state to defend its position of power from reform by way of terror and violence. This commitment was demonstrated to them as they suffered police brutality in Chicago and watched the violent end of the civil rights movement and the escalation of the war in Vietnam on their television screens.

The exact program of violence they adopted reflects the importance of state violence in justifying their own militarism. As David Gilbert describes, each bombing carried out by the

²¹ *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism*, (San Francisco, CA: COMMUNICATIONS Co., 1975), 3.

WUO was undertaken in response to a specific atrocity committed by the state or imperialist interests, and the group “placed the highest priority on avoiding civilian casualties, and fortunately succeeded.”²² Their war was aimed at the destruction of the western imperial system, and according to their definition did not necessitate violence or the loss of human lives. They also pursued peaceful revolutionary outlets, including placement of political graffiti and the circulation and production of radical literature. Each time they escalated to the point of violence and a bombing was carried out, the state had set the precedent for the use of force. For example, Gilbert writes: “the WUO’s more than 20 bombings included the U.S. Capitol Building after the U.S. expanded the war in indochina by invading Laos in February 1971.”²³ Their ideology reflected the fact that as white American students, they would not directly suffer from such a violent provocation by the government against a third world population. They intended to do their part in the struggle against global imperialism, and each instance of state violence demonstrated to them that their struggle could not be won without a forceful response of their own.

The path to revolutionary violence followed by the volunteers of the Provisional Irish Republican Army is strikingly similar to that of the Weather Underground, and reflects the influence of the global movement against imperialism on the unique Irish conflict. As political discontent and activist spirit spread globally in the 1960’s, the context of the decade brought new complexities to the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. Following hundreds of years of colonization and numerous attempts at armed insurrection, Ireland gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1921 at the end of a guerrilla war fought by the nationalist Irish Republican

²² Gilbert, *SDS/WUO*, 22.

²³ Gilbert, *SDS/WUO*, 22.

Army (IRA). However, the process of British colonization resulted in a slight majority of Protestants in the six counties in the north, which remained within the United Kingdom. Life in the occupied six counties was defined by this entrenched religious divide. The two populations were almost entirely segregated in terms of housing, education, and employment, with much of the societal structure built around the maintenance of a protestant ruling class. Catholics were thus marginalized in such areas as voting rights, public housing, political offices, and law enforcement.

Violence had been a fixture in the region for decades as the two populations would clash in riots and street battles. However, as the global wave of activism transformed earlier battles in Ireland in the mid 1960's, the Catholic population was inspired to demand an end to societal discrimination on a broad and united front previously unseen. Inspired by the movement in America, they demanded their own civil rights. Thus, the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was formed in 1966. The organization worked to empower Catholics and began holding public demonstrations which were often met with violent responses by the police or Protestant factions.²⁴ Amidst these violent responses, many young Catholics took the step from activist to militant. The IRA had been active in the region following southern independence in the 1920's, and worked to disrupt British governance through guerrilla warfare and armed insurrection over the following decades. However, it lacked public support and strong military capabilities, and tended to view the conflict with Britain in terms of class rather than religion and ethnicity. This meant explaining the British occupation of Ireland and the subjugation of its

²⁴ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 47-49.

populace through a Marxist lens, in which sectarianism is viewed only as a distraction from the fact that the bourgeois British abused the Irish proletariat across religious lines.

In 1969, a group of IRA volunteers representing the new generation within the organization split off over differences involving the necessary response to the rioting and state violence of the previous two years and whether or not the movement ought to begin participating in the British parliamentary system.²⁵ The old guard came to be called the “Official” IRA in contrast to the new “Provisional” IRA. The provisional faction did not shy away from sectarianism, and intended to both fight the British occupation and defend Catholic neighborhoods from attacks by the police or Protestants through shootings and the use of bombs, often with high civilian and combatant casualty rates. It was this faction which would attract thousands of young Catholics to its cause and serve as the driving force in the thirty year conflict known as “The Troubles” which followed. Although the organization’s leadership were typecast as traditionalist, sectarian Catholics in contrast to the Official IRA, the bulk of their membership were young Irish men and women acting within the larger context of global activism in the 1960’s. This generation came of age during the opening years of the troubles from 1967-1972 in which Catholic communities were continuously under siege from attacks by the State and their tacit allies among Protestant paramilitaries, and were pushed toward adopting violence by their experiences of state provocation. For example, between March 4, 1972 and May 30, 1972, eighteen volunteers were killed in action for the Provisional IRA, and only one was not a teenager.²⁶

²⁵ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 64-70.

²⁶ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 90-91.

This new generation of Irish Catholics turned to violence slowly, following a period of radicalization which began with their experiences in the campaign for civil rights in the mid 1960's and ended with such atrocities as Bloody Sunday in 1972. Initially, the influence of leftist anti-imperialist movements throughout the third-world and within the United States on young Catholics drove them to adopt an alternative method of struggle against the British occupation than the traditional armed activism of Irish Republicanism. In republican tradition, each generation has dutifully staged an armed insurrection no matter how insurmountable the odds or extensive the casualties. However, liberation movements of the early 1960's such as that for civil rights in America had demonstrated to some that an alternative route was available. If Americans could come together across racial divides to peacefully organize and protest an end to the institutional oppression of Black Americans, why couldn't Northern Irish citizens from both the Catholic and Protestant communities come together to end discrimination against Catholics?

Dolours Price, a Belfast native from a militant Republican family became active in the civil rights group "People's Democracy" as a teenager before joining the Provisional IRA. Patrick Radden Keefe claims the spirit of the decade inspired her to initially reject her family's tradition of armed resistance to British rule:

the whole sectarian schism between Protestants and Catholics was a poisonous distraction, she had come to believe: working-class Protestants may have enjoyed some advantages, but they, too, often struggled with unemployment. The protestants who lived in grotty houses along Belfast's Shankill Road didn't have indoor toilets either. If only they could be made to see that life would be better in a united- and socialist- Ireland, the discord that had dogged the two communities for centuries might finally dissipate.²⁷

Price and the countless other young activists who joined the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (NICRA) and People's Democracy (PD) in marching for Civil Rights in the years

²⁷ Patrick Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*, (New York, New York: Doubleday, 2019), 16.

leading up to the start of The Troubles in 1969 believed in the doctrine of peaceful resistance, community empowerment, and anti-colonialism propagated by those dissenters who embodied the global 1960's.

Fittingly, leaders of the Civil Rights movement in the North of Ireland looked directly to the American Civil Rights movement as a model for which to launch their campaign. For some, this went so far as to mean direct exposure to and education at the hands of American activists. Eamon Mccann, who would emerge as a movement leader and one of Ireland's most prominent leftist activists, was present in London on July 15, 1967 when Stokely Carmichael addressed a varied network of leftist leaders at the Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation. Carmichael, who popularized the term "Black Power" and worked within the movement which would adopt this term as it's motto, spoke of the need for a network of leftist activists throughout the globe dedicated to the fight against imperialist capitalism. Carmichael insisted that "black people... see our struggle as closely related to liberation struggles throughout the world," and that those struggling for liberation in the inner cities of the West were third world people themselves. Institutionally oppressed populations within western urban areas, including Black Americans and Northern Irish Catholics, were "very real colonies, in the sense that they are capital and cheap labour exploited by those who live outside the cities."²⁸ Such assertions convinced Irish activists like Mccann that the sectarian situation in Ireland was not unique to the Irish, but a reflection of the struggles experienced by all people who were oppressed by western imperialist and capitalist systems due to ethnic differences. Thus, true social progress in Ireland appeared attainable if activists would only draw from the lessons of similar movements such as that in the United

²⁸ Simon Prince, "'Do What the Afro-Americans Are Doing': Black Power and the Start of the Northern Ireland Troubles," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 3 (2015): 519.

States, rather than repeating the same mistakes made by countless previous generations of young Irish rebels.

In response, the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland began in 1968 under the leadership of young activists such as Eamon Mccann, Michael Farrel, and Bernadette Devlin, who viewed themselves within the context of third-world socialism. However, the movement itself reflected a large coalition of leftists and Republicans, focused to a varying degree on class conflict and Irish unification, but all with the goal of attaining societal equality through community activism and peaceful demonstrations. The first march held following the founding of the NICRA in 1967 occurred on August 24, 1968 between the towns of Coalisland and Dungannon. Despite the peaceful attitude and ideological variety found within the crowd of 2,500 marchers, it was made clear even at this initial stage of the movement that dissent on the part of the Catholic minority would not be tolerated by the British regime in Northern Ireland. According to Robert W. White's oral history on the Provisional Republican movement, "on the outskirts of Dungannon, they were stopped by a police barricade and learned that they had been banned from the centre of town, the Market Square. Behind the barricade were... loyalists, armed with clubs and chatting with police officers."²⁹ This scene reflects the duality of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, in that the sectarian nature of the conflict mobilized opposition from the Protestant community while the colonial nature of the conflict engendered a response from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). When the next march was held in Derry on October 5, 1968, only six weeks after the demonstration held by SDS in Chicago was attacked by law enforcement, opposition by the Northern Irish police would be more explicit, violent, and total.

²⁹ Robert W. White, *Out of the Ashes: an Oral History of the Provisional Irish Republican Movement (Social Movements vs Terrorism)*, (Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2017), 50.

Attacks at the hands of the RUC would be the driving force for many young Civil Rights campaigners into armed activism. The march intended to reach Derry's city centre on October 5 was stopped by police outside the city gates who laid upon the marchers with nightsticks. In the words of one such republican anonymously quoted in *Out of the Ashes* by Robert White:

the [government] reaction through the RUC was so vicious and so naked in its sectarianism and its determination to hold on to power, and its complete and utter denial of rights to a huge proportion of the community... When the RUC drew their batons, it wasn't a case that they pulled out their batons to hit people. They pulled out their batons and attacked the crowd to destroy the people on that street.³⁰

To this activist, the RUC attack demonstrated a clear rejection by the British of democratic ideals and processes in order to maintain control. Attempting to diverge from the power structure in place through peaceful methods was futile in that it would inevitably be destroyed through the state employment of violence. Faced with the futility of peaceful protest and activism, some turned to militancy.

The same republican who described the police attack in Derry in 1968 also referenced police brutality during riots known as "The Battle of the Bogside" as pushing him toward joining the IRA. The riots erupted following a Protestant parade commemorating a 1689 English victory which was purposefully routed through Catholic neighborhoods. Catholic rioters barricaded themselves in the Bogside area of Derry following clashes with the RUC, and the two sides exchanged tear gas and petrol bombs over two days from August 12-14 1969 in a battle over control of the neighborhood. The anonymous republican states: "people knew when they started firing in gas in so much quantity and people were really ending up in hospital in bad shape... petrol bombs weren't really sufficient anymore."³¹ Although activists in the PIRA and Weather

³⁰ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 51.

³¹ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 56-57.

Underground suffered similar experiences of police brutality during peaceful demonstrations, the Irish revolutionaries differed in that they themselves were constituted a third world population oppressed and exploited by western imperialism. To the quoted republican, if “petrol bombs weren’t sufficient anymore” then more drastic means were justifiable considering the defense of their community from state violence was at stake. This idea of community defense was central to provisional republicans in that it also differentiated them from the Official IRA, from whom they broke away in December 1969. Following the Battle of the Bogside, which many Nationalists perceived as sectarian attacks by the state, those that formed the Provisional IRA emphasized the need to defend Catholic communities by attacks from the state and Protestant rioters as well as carry out armed struggle against the British state.

On January 14th, 1972, remembered as “Bloody Sunday,” British soldiers opened fire on a crowd of unarmed civil rights marchers leaving 14 people dead. This atrocity was the most blatant and horrific use of violence carried out during The Troubles by the British state in defense of their colonial system in Ireland, and was a defining experience in convincing many young activists that violent revolution was justified.³² The march was a 20,000 strong demonstration against the British policy of internment, a policy introduced in 1971 allowing soldiers to indiscriminately raid Catholic neighborhoods and arrest ‘suspected’ IRA members. The policy was meant to quickly apprehend large numbers of provisional volunteers in an effort to halt the rapidly growing organization. However, it served as a justification for invading and harassing entire Catholic neighborhoods, and few of those arrested ended up actually being IRA volunteers.³³ The policy thus escalated tensions between both sides, and as the march in Derry

³² White, *Out of the Ashes*, 87-89.

³³ Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 100-101.

was concluding on January 14th, 1972 demonstrators and soldiers began exchanging stones and tear gas in what had become a very typical scene. Members of the parachute regiment attempted to make arrests from the crowd of demonstrators, and amidst the commotion opened fire on the unarmed crowd without clear provocation. While previous instances of state violence on the part of the British had been instrumental in driving recruits into the PIRA, none had so clearly demonstrated the brutality which the state was willing to use to defend its position. Robert White quotes a teenage volunteer from a non-republican family who joined after the killings as saying: “it showed me the state wasn’t going to be reformed. Any state that goes out and shoots down people in peaceful protest, it’s quite obvious.”³⁴ Violence was not the preferred method of nor was it chosen by the young volunteers of the PIRA who joined. Rather, it was the only available option because of how explicitly the British demonstrated that their presence would not be undone through marches and political reform.

The revolutionary ideology of the Provisional IRA was thus dependent on the British occupation to justify the use of violence. In 1977 the organization updated training manual known as “The Green Book” which they had been published underground in the 1950’s. The document asserts the position of the Provisional IRA that they are the legitimate successors to the government of the Irish Republic declared in 1918, and as such both the Irish state in the south and the British occupied state in the north were illegitimate. It was the presence of this occupying force, and the many atrocities and misdeeds they levied on the native Catholic population, which justified the IRA’s armed struggle. As the legitimate government of Ireland, they saw it as their right to make war against any foreign enemy waging violence against the

³⁴ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 88.

Irish people. According to the Green Book, the first thing taught to recruits was that “The Irish Republican Army, as the legal representatives of the Irish people, are morally justified in carrying out a campaign of resistance against foreign occupation forces and domestic collaborators.”³⁵ This declaration was at the heart of their program of violence. Unlike the Weather Underground, the Provisional IRA targeted enemy soldiers and paramilitary members in a campaign of bombings and guerrilla style attacks. The sectarian nature of the conflict between the Protestant and Catholic communities also motivated attacks born of discrimination or carried out without regard for civilian casualties. However, subjugation of the native Catholic population by foreign occupiers in their land maintained their conviction that the armed struggle against Britain was justifiable at its heart. The presence of the British state and the program of violence they initiated brought about the Provisional IRA’s campaign of violence. In the words of one volunteer:

It’s always republicans asked to justify the struggle. They IRA’s campaign and the republican struggle was a response to the Civil Rights Movement being crushed by the state- the unionist state- and it was the unionist state for unionist people. Anyone who looks at the footage of the civil rights marches, from Burntollet to Derry, can’t help but look at the protests in Alabama, in Montgomery, and say just change the colour of the faces.³⁶

The civil rights movement in Ireland and the campaigns for civil rights and an end to the Vietnam War in America were both crushed by the forces of the imperialist governments who stood to profit from the survival of their exploitative system. The Provisional IRA and The Weather Underground emerged out of the violent conclusion of these movements, providing an outlet for those activists who drew the conclusion that a violent imperialist system could only be undone through a violent revolution.

³⁵ Melaugh, “Green Book,” CAIN Website.

³⁶ White, *Out of the Ashes*, 347.

Violent state reactions to campaigns for social change reflect a determination by the state to maintain power in denial of the rights of citizens. Dissent is intimidated and attacked, and movements are intended to dissipate as the hopes for progress diminish. However, this tactic led to increased violence on the part of dissenters in response. According to David Gilbert, the Weather Underground used militancy and coordinated violence against state property in the hopes of “piercing the myth of government invincibility.”³⁷ State repression of dissenting campaigns is intended to intimidate the opposition into believing that resistance is futile and change is unattainable. The adoption of violence, according to Gilbert, is a response to the image of invincibility which the state itself cultivates through violence. The WUO, and militants like them, intended to prove that this image was intangible.

It was the establishment themselves who demonstrated that piercing this myth was impossible through peaceful means. Cathy Wilkerson refers to her adoption of revolutionary violence as an “acceptance of the same desanctification of human life practiced by Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and William Westmoreland. I accepted their supposition that, in the end, violence is the only effective strategy for social change.”³⁸ Violence committed by non-state actors in the name of social progress and activism is deemed “terrorism,” and is thus judged unethical. Yet, the same means are employed by actors within the state at a near constant rate. Reference to the Weather Underground and Provisional IRA as terrorists rests on the assumption that governments and states have a monopoly on the use of force, and thus can employ violence legitimately. However, this view ignores the role the state plays in setting the precedent for the

³⁷ Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 285.

³⁸ Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 2.

use of violence. Citizens who make use of the same methods often merely follow the example of the state.

Explaining what motivated activists of the 1960's to forgo peaceful protest and adopt revolutionary violence is vital to preventing the repetition of such tragic and destructive narratives in the future. In this case, history is a warning. In the age of Donald Trump, Americans appear to be divided to a similar extent as in the 1960's. As the perception of government ineffectiveness and anger at racial inequality continues to spread, revolutionary change and activism may once more take hold among a disaffected portion of the population with the urgency of the 1960's. In such a case, a government response which employs the same violent methods used against activists in Students for a Democratic Society could engender the spread of revolutionary violence once more.

The same can be said of the United Kingdom's response to any future demonstrations involving Brexit and its implications for Irish unification. The Good Friday agreement signaled an end to the Troubles when signed in 1998. An important condition of this peace is the existence of an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, in the case that Britain were to leave the European Union, the maintenance of this open border would be made impossible by the differing customs and trade policies of the UK and Ireland being that one is in the EU and one is not. A hard border with customs checks would once again separate the six counties in the north of Ireland with the Republic in the south. If Catholics in the north were to lose their ability to freely travel to the Republic, rioting and paramilitary groups may become commonplace among their community once again. Alternatively, the solution favored by the administration of Boris Johnson would leave Northern Ireland within the EU

customs zone and would create a hard border with customs check between the region and the rest of the EU. This would effectively unite the island of Ireland among economic lines and would weaken the British occupation of the region, engendering resistance among the Protestant population. In either instance, it is of vital importance that Britain draw from the lessons of the 1960's. If the outcome of Brexit produces increased community resistance and activism in the region, state suppression on the part of the British could fuel the rise of paramilitary organizations once again.³⁹

The armed campaigns carried out by the Weather Underground Organization and the Provisional Irish Republican Army reflected the unique social situations of each country in which they took place. However, to truly understand the shift made by the activists of both organizations from peaceful protest to revolutionary violence they must also be analyzed as part of the global movement against imperialism which helped define the 1960's. Members of both the WUO and PIRA began as passive demonstrators who were inspired to fight for change by this global wave of activism. Only when these peaceful movements were violently repressed through police brutality and military force did they adopt violent methods. The case of both organizations demonstrates that government use of violence in suppression of reform movements only stands to engender further violence.

³⁹ Jen Kirby, "Brexit's Irish border problem, explained," *Vox*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/world/2019/2/18/18204269/brexit-irish-border-backstop-explained>.

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