

Armed activism as the enactment of a collective identity: the case of the Provisional IRA between 1969 and 1972.

Lorenzo Bosi (Istituto di Scienze Umane e Sociali, Scuola Normale Superiore)

Niall Ó Dochartaigh (School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland Galway)

Abstract: This paper argues that micro-mobilization into armed activism is strongly motivated by the enactment of an identity that people already have prior to their mobilization as a way to strongly assert and emphasize individual agency in the face of major changes in the political context. Empirically, it advocates that those who joined the Provisional IRA between 1969 and 1972 did so in order to respond to a need for action by a northern nationalist community that stemmed from a perceived, alleged or actual, sense of second-class citizenship. We suggest that the importance of identity rather than ideology can also help us to explain why IRA members and former members overwhelmingly accepted the compromise peace settlement of the 1990s despite the fact that core ideological goals had not been realised. We conclude by suggesting avenues for future research outside the Irish context.

Keywords: Political violence, collective identity, Northern Ireland, agency, nationalism.

Correspondence Address: lorenzo.bosi@sns.it, Lorenzo Bosi, Istituto di Scienze Umane e Sociali, Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzo Strozzi, Firenze, Italia.

Notes on Contributors

Lorenzo Bosi is Assistant Professor at the Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS) and Research Fellow within COSMOS. His main research interests are in political sociology and historical sociology where his studies primarily focus on qualitative research of social movements and political violence. He is mainly interested in how and when contentious political actors shift forms actions across time and space and their impacts.

Niall Ó Dochartaigh is Senior Lecturer in the School of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland Galway. He has published extensively on the Northern Ireland conflict and on mediation, peace negotiations and territoriality. Recent publications include the co-edited books *Political Violence in Context* (ECPR Press 2015) and *Dynamics of Political Change in Ireland* (Routledge 2017). He is currently completing a monograph on the negotiating relationship between the British state and the IRA.

Author Links

Lorenzo Bosi *ORCID ID*: 0000-0003-2815-7571

Lorenzo Bosi Social Media Profiles: <https://www.facebook.com/lorenzo.bosi.758>

Niall Ó Dochartaigh *ORCID ID*: 0000-0002-0539-7727

Niall Ó Dochartaigh Social Media Profiles: @niallodoc / niallodoc.wordpress.com

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There were all sorts of people joining the IRA, there were people joining the IRA because of what was happening with the Civil Rights Movement, there were people joining because of internment, not because they believed in Republican ideology. They joined because they reacted. Even myself, I mean, people joined because they reacted to what was going on, you do not sit down and say 'I feel like a patriot and I need to join a thirty-two county socialist republic', that was evolving from that Our group here [West Belfast] was set up as an army to defend, that was the practical part of it, that's why people went out to join the IRA. (Interview, no. 15)

Among scholars of political violence, policy makers, and indeed the general public it is quite common to view individuals who engage in armed activism as if they are in search of a collective identity, meaning, community and a place to belong, so to cope with the significant frustration of life and to fill deep intrapsychic voids (inadequacy, inferiority, and uselessness). For example, 'the act of joining the terrorist group' for Post 'represents an attempt to consolidate a fragmented psychological identity, to resolve a split and be at one with oneself and with society, and, most important, to belong' (1998: 30-31). In this way individuals are said to be vulnerable to an armed group's ideology and easily recruitable by charismatic leaders who indoctrinate them with extremist ideas capable of providing meaning in their lives and a sense of coherent structure. Such readings nowadays are particularly common in analyses of the violent radicalization of a small minority of young Muslims in the West.

In recent years, a growing contingent of scholars has challenged such readings of micro-mobilization and suggested that individuals who join armed activism do so,

along with other possible motivations they might have, in order to become recognized as specific kinds of persons and as members of a broader entity that shares similar values, interests and world-views or affective ties (Arena and Arrigo, 2005; Schwartz, Curtis and Waterman, 2009; Viterna, 2013). This paper, building on this previous work, suggests that micro-mobilization into armed activism is strongly motivated by the enactment of an identity that people already have prior to their mobilization. Individuals are in a search not for identity, but for the best vehicle for enacting that identity in the face of major changes in the political context, as a way to assert and emphasize their agency as individuals (Gamson, 1992; Wood, 2001; Einwohner, 2003). Different mobilizing messages, among which a message favouring political violence might be one, are then promoted to individuals, by competing political actors, as ways to transform a sense of shame and powerlessness to a sense of individual and collective pride (Bosi, 2006).

Empirically, we argue in this paper that, despite differences in the dominant individual motivations, and in ‘the recruitment processes, the types of networks mobilized, the speed and dynamics of the mobilization, the external enemy identified during the mobilization process, and the effects of repression on individuals’ (Bosi, 2012: 350), micro-mobilization into the Provisional IRA (hereafter IRA)¹, between 1969 and 1972, resonated with a need for action by a northern nationalist community that stemmed from a perceived, alleged or actual, sense of second-class citizenship. With the outbreak of the conflict (1968-1970) northern nationalists’ collective identity was challenged by the interpretation other actors sought to impose on nationalists’ non-violent mobilization. A revitalized sense of the collective “we” emerged and was imposed from outside to an extent, in a process of interaction with the environment. External views, such as the stereotype that all protestors were republicans, helped to

make that identity politically relevant. This gave the collective identity of northern nationalists a greater urgency and saliency than it had previously possessed. Subsequently, a positive sense of self and of their community was created around armed activism in the IRA as a way to gain internal solidarity and external visibility through the imputation of strength and the enacting of revenge. In its early years, much of the IRA's recruitment rested on the armed group's repertoire of action rather than on a coherent persuasive argument. In this sense, the decision to join the IRA, was not justified for the majority of recruits as a mere reproduction of an ideological alignment with traditional Republican dogma. For most of them this was acquired at a later stage as a result of their socialization into the armed group, and during time spent in jail. It was justified instead as part of the enactment of an identity. Paraphrasing Olivier Roy's work on Islamic radicalization in the west, where the French author suggests that "terrorism does not arise from the radicalization of Islam, but from the Islamization of radicalism" (Roy 2008), the IRA's armed struggle offered what many young northern nationalists thought they needed at this stage, the vehicle through which to achieve a political voice in a society in conflict, what we might call, in Roy's terms, the Republicanization of radicalism.²

Methodology

This article is the outcome of an ongoing conversation between the two authors over the past ten years and their respective research fieldwork on the Northern Ireland conflict. It draws on 30 semi-structured interviews by the two authors with former rank-and-file IRA volunteers who joined the organization between 1969 and 1972 (20 by Lorenzo Bosi, conducted in 2007 and 2008, and 10 by Niall Ó Dochartaigh, conducted

in 2011 and 2012).³ For reasons of space the quotes in this article are taken from just 9 of the 30 interviews we conducted, but the quotes illustrate themes that featured in the great majority of the interviews. To ensure their anonymity, we identify the respondents only by numbers (for Bosi's interviews) or letters (for Ó Dochartaigh's interviews). On average these interviews lasted 90 minutes, were digitally recorded by prior agreement with the respondents; and were carried out at a location the respondent preferred (including pubs, houses, public buildings and offices). For the interviews conducted by Bosi the respondents were not chosen randomly but were arranged by the staff of Coiste na n-Iarchimí ('The Ex-Prisoners' Committee', an umbrella organization for former Irish Republican political prisoners: www.coiste.ie), who identified possible respondents from backgrounds as diverse as possible (Bosi, 2012: 380-382). Two of Ó Dochartaigh's interviews were organised through Coiste na n-Iarchimí while one was arranged by Tar Abhaile ('Come Home') the ex-prisoners' organisation in Derry. The remainder were arranged through personal contacts who had been involved in the Republican movement. It thus included people who were no longer affiliated with the Provisional Republican movement or with ex-prisoners' organisations and increased the diversity of the interviewee group. During our research fieldwork we followed core ethical requirements, presenting ourselves, our intentions, background and motives to the respondents, informing them about our research, and obtaining their agreement regarding the use of the tape recorder (Wood 2006). Over the past few years intense controversy has surrounded a series of research interviews conducted for Boston College with ex-combatants involved in the Northern Ireland conflict. Interviewees in the Boston College project were promised that the tapes would not be released until after their deaths. The Police Service of Northern Ireland succeeded however in subpoenaing some of the tapes and a number of people have been arrested and/or

charged on the basis of these tapes.⁴ In the light of this controversy interviewees in 2011/12 were especially alert to the danger of self-incrimination. Accordingly, several interviewees stated at the outset that if asked about their involvement in IRA actions they would only discuss actions for which they had been convicted in court. Where interviewees did not state this themselves the interviewer emphasized that the questions were not intended to elicit information about specific IRA operations but were about more general orientations, opinions and experiences. This avoided the difficulties associated with the Boston College project by ensuring that interviews did not deal with potentially incriminating topics.

Given that we conducted these interviews in the last ten years and that respondents were recalling why, almost 40 years earlier, they had joined the IRA, it is reasonable to wonder how much their responses were self-serving, providing an opportunity for retrospective self-justification by (ex-) militants. In our interpretation of this oral material we have used extensive additional sources, including archival materials from state papers and private collections, secondary sources, and accounts in the Northern Ireland newspapers. Triangulation with these other sources helped our interpretation of the militants' statements, minimizing problems of validity, reliability, and time bias problems that are an issue with any source. One factor is especially important in mitigating the problem of self-justification. During the conflict IRA members sought to maintain a narrative that strongly and clearly justified the armed struggle. The ending of that campaign in a compromise with former enemies, and their participation in a negotiated peace settlement, has created space for a more reflective and self-critical analysis of the campaign. While we do not deny the dangers of self-justification, the post-conflict context allows us to get a much clearer understanding of motivations than it would have been possible to get during the conflict.

Armed activism as the enactment of a collective identity

Individuals' sense of collective identity allows them to identify with broader groups. Personal identities are then always collective identities at the same time (Tajfel, 1979). The dynamic process of collective identity formation and development is not static, not 'being biologically preordained or structurally or culturally determined' (Snow, 2001: 200), but it is intertwined with the perception of what is politically possible and it changes as a consequence of long-term shifting realities, strategic needs and immediate exogenous threatening events. As Jasper and McGarry write, collective identities 'are not only banners to inspire mobilization, they are cultural stereotypes that damage and distort' (2015: 2). Collective identity is not only a self-assessment process constructed by individuals and political actors who want to represent and mobilize these, but collective identity is also contingently shaped and constrained from outside by those actors opposed to these identities, in order to control or constrain them. The construction of collective identity is therefore environment-dependent and not a fixed property of social actors firmly rooted in prior social categories (Melucci, 1996).

Macro-level changes can create a context in which a particular collective identity becomes salient and prompts collective action on behalf of a group to re-establish pride and assert dignity. Mobilization then does not create new collective identities, which did not exist before. Instead it rearranges 'the priority ranking of social identifications that already matter to people in varying degrees' (Gould, 1995: 19). It does this by favouring those mobilizing messages - in which the repertoire of action

plays an important role - that best align with the new socio-political context (Bosi, 2006). 'The more people feel that interests of the group and/or principles that the group values are threatened, the angrier they are and the more they are prepared to take part in collective action to protect their interests and/or to express their indignation' (Klandermans, 2015: 226-227). As the social movement literature has repeatedly suggested, state repression can be a bloody phenomenon capable of producing moral shocks, anger, shame, humiliation, indignation, outrage, disgust and/or fear, when it is viewed as unjustified for its harshness (della Porta, 1995). In those situations individuals who might feel threatened themselves as part of a community indiscriminately under state repression might mobilize and adopt different forms of actions available to them. Such mobilizations are taken in order to improve their positive self-evaluations as a community that does not want to appear powerless or demeaned by a dominant group in the escalating conflict. Reaffirming pride helps to situate us in relation to other actors' views of us as well as our own beliefs (Jasper, Forthcoming). As Jocelyn Viterna writes: 'Changes in social movement arenas can challenge existing individuals' salient identities. When individuals feel that their existing salient identities are challenged, they seek to transform their behaviours in ways that maintain their positive self-sentiments. If they come to believe that the identity of 'participant' is congruent with, and even protective of, existing salient identities, then movement participation may seem a natural and even necessary thing for 'people like me' to do' (2013: 54).

Where the binding is based on emotions such as anger, outrage, or revenge against an external enemy, who is considered responsible for harming them, individuals feel it possible, among other options, to join an armed group, partly because of a sense that anyone else in the community would do the same, regardless of their personal

gains, adversities or risks. In those cases micro-mobilization into armed activism is not presented as unintentional, or as a product of chance, or of a deep sense of personal transformation. Rather, the justification for it is that a sense of enactment of their identities is gradually experienced through political violence. Armed activism for these individuals combines pride in community difference with indignant anger over perceived oppression. In this there is a clear assertion of agency, which becomes in itself a reason for acting in order to fight imposed subordination. As James Jasper writes 'pride often depends on externalizing instead of internalizing anger and blame for a group's plight' (2014: 211). There exists in this a sort of 'coming out' that is a gradually empowering transition from outrage to more active dignity and pride. It manifests itself in externalizing through the strongest possible means the powerlessness that a community might feel and this is often felt to require moral shocks. Armed activism conforms then, in these cases, to individuals' identity and the like-minded behaviour of other members of the community they belong to, augmenting their identities.

Northern nationalist identity

The nationalist community in the North of Ireland has a long history of involvement in mainstream Irish nationalist politics, both in the Home Rule party of the late 19th and early 20th century and the organized Republican movement from the 1860s onwards. Irish nationalism was a deeply-rooted element of communal identity (Hepburn, 2008) but there was a distinctive northern version of this nationalist identity that was shaped by the proximity to a strongly unionist and Protestant community that, from 1920-21, dominated and controlled the regional regime. Todd (1990) argues that Irish nationalism

in the North is ‘a complex, internally differentiated ideology, centred on three interrelated concepts nation, community and justice’ (31). That is, it is centrally concerned not only with Irish sovereignty and nationhood but also with the issue of justice for the northern nationalist community within a unionist-controlled state. A more recent study, from the same scholar, argues that partition led to ‘a different symbolic articulation of very similar elements’ on the two sides of the Irish border (Todd, 2015: 23).

Historically there was stronger support in the North for the Home Rule movement and later for the conservative nationalism of the Nationalist Party, than for militant republicanism. While republican candidates swept the boards in most of the island of Ireland in the 1918 election the Home Rule Party remained strong in the North (Bew, 2007). Alongside the relatively weak militant republican tradition there was another distinctive tradition of physical force in northern nationalism. It derived in part from a long history of agrarian violence with strong sectarian dimensions in the Ulster countryside where Catholic nationalist and Protestant unionist populations were intermingled. There was also a history of violent street confrontations at the boundaries between segregated communities in Belfast and Derry, beginning in the 1830s. The first Catholic gun club established in west Belfast for local defence after major rioting in 1857, for example, had no association with Republicanism (Farrell, 2015: 144-5).

Conflict over urban ethnonational segregation and the minority community’s subordinate position in both economic and political terms strengthened strong communal solidarity and a sense of belonging to local communities defined by nationalist identity (Ó Dochartaigh, 2010a, 2011b). Shared historical and contemporary experiences of subordination by external forces reinforced the reciprocal emotions at the neighbourhood level. Identification with local neighbourhoods was thus a particularly

strong element in northern nationalist identity. A corollary of this was that many Catholics living outside such areas, as small minorities in Protestant dominated areas, did not identify with a Northern nationalist identity because it was not part of their local environment and was therefore not strongly present in their everyday lives.

Northern nationalism was a collective identity that by no means pointed to a strongly determined allegiance to Irish republicanism, despite a long tradition of using physical force to assert the position of the minority community. It was an identity founded on a deep commitment to local networks and solidarities, with community needs tending 'to prevail over individual rights' (Todd, 1990: 34), and was defined in opposition to a discriminatory state apparatus that was almost completely dominated by the majority unionist community.

Micro-mobilization into the IRA, 1969-1972

In the late 1960s the Northern Ireland Civil Rights campaign, whether experienced thorough television or at first hand, provided a crucial first stage in mobilization for many northern nationalists who later joined the IRA, dramatizing a confrontation with what was perceived as an unjust and repressive state. It gave dramatic public form to everyday personal experiences of discrimination and a long-standing if diffuse sense of living in an unjust society (Ó Dochartaigh, 2008). This is how a former volunteer described how he was politicized and slowly moved to join the IRA:

I was coming back from school, it was the 5th of October march in Derry, I went to ask my parents what was all that about and they were saying “well it’s nothing”, it was a deliberate policy of no information, because of the nature of the state you were afraid of people getting involved in politics. So by accident a friend and I went down town, as teenagers do, to look for girls, we went to the Diamond and we met a friend of ours who was completely wet on that day, we asked “what happened to you?” and he was terrified. The first thing we saw then was a water cannon through the city center, and the next thing to happen was rioting police who begun attacking people with no apparent reason. Everyone who was coming to the Diamond was assumed to be a marcher. We started to run, terrified by this water canon. We had never seen one before. Police was attacking people and they charged us, but we run down to the gate where it starts the Bogside. At this point many people were making a stand. They were stoning police. So of course for a fourteen years old boy, having the chance to throw a stone and we started to throw stones. And it begun from then, we started from then and every time there was a march we were there and took part in the riot, which was always happening. From then we were starting to ask questions “why do we need one man one vote?” Once we had a handle on all this, we then realised that we were second class citizens in our own country. In a country where we were told “you can’t join the police” “you can’t join some organizations”. When we received this information we became politicized. We were starting to listen especially to people on the left, who were particularly vocal... ..the apparatus of the state was against the civil rights, where loyalists were burning nationalist areas. It was from this sort of injustice that people like me started to look at republicans for solutions and they had the physical force argument. So at sixteen we were ready to join the physical force kind of argument and this is how I ended up in the republican movement. (Interview, no. 20)

This context of militant mass mobilization against the state ensured that when British troops were deployed to restore order in August 1969 there was a high expectation of change, an expectation of a transformation of the system and a kind of liberation. Instead power remained with the existing structures and a minimalist reform of policing was insufficient to secure state control of the areas that had rejected state

authority during the civil rights campaign (Bosi, 2016; Ó Dochartaigh, 2016). The British army responded to unionist demands for tough action by applying strong pressure on local defence associations and the IRA to remove defensive measures such as barricades and to halt patrolling by vigilantes. The essential problem was that these areas had forced out state security forces and established alternative structures for defence. The British Army now sought the dismantling of those structures to facilitate the re-entry of a police force and a Unionist government that remained in the most important respects the same as the one they had fought to expel (Ó Dochartaigh 2005). This perception of the British Army as the agent for the restoration of unionist power was a decisive factor in mobilisation. Between August 1969 and early 1972 many thousands of people fled their homes in Belfast, the vast majority of them northern nationalists seeking refuge in predominantly nationalist areas such as west Belfast that were seen as more secure against loyalist attacks. In those areas which felt under attack by both state forces and loyalists the IRA was seen as a force that represented and defended local communities that faced intense pressure and danger. As one respondent from the west Belfast district of Ballymurphy states: 'People in the community were not supporting the armed struggle, but they were supporting their own survival. Because that was what it was' (Interview no. 18, in Bosi 2012: 368). In nationalist working-class areas and in rural areas there was a feeling that they needed to defend themselves and to respond to this violence, because they feared that they were going to 'disappear' during the attacks to which they were subjected in those early years. The same respondent previously quoted even claimed that: 'without the IRA there would have been a genocide in this country' (Interview no. 18). The reinforcement of positive reciprocal emotions was an outcome of having survived together a series of violent events.

If the confrontation surrounding the civil rights movement had created a sense of a justified communal revolt against a repressive state, the presence of the troops intensified the friction. For many it was the repeated abrasive encounters with British troops that provided direct motivation for mobilisation – the sense of an arbitrary, illegitimate, repressive force. The infringement of personal dignity, the sense of powerlessness and the moral outrage all played a role. As IRA attacks began to intensify the military response became increasingly harsh and for some teenagers the experience of brutalisation and violent confrontation became a regular one. One of the central aspects of this experience was the sense of being beyond the protection of the law, of a lawless state:

even at that early stage in my life, 14 years of age like, I was a regular visitor at Fort Monagh which was a British army fort, constantly arrested on the streets, taken in for questioning for 4 hours and during those 4 hours you were heavily beaten like by British soldiers [who asked] who you knew in the IRA and what was in the IRA and it would always entail a slapping session at the least, sometimes a little bit more... You'd have been brought in, put into this enclosure, it was a breeze block enclosure and it was like a cattle sort of thing where, and concrete walls and you were placed in that and you were faced against the wall and just constantly your head was banged off the wall and you were beaten in the back and stuff like that... All they were about was just beating the life out of you. (Interview B)

The transition to the armed struggle appeared to respond to the need to defend their primary solidarity networks. Many of those interviewed had been imprisoned or interned while still in their teens and this experience helped to cement their commitment and intensified their sense of opposition to the state. The presence of the troops and their actions during this intense early stage of the conflict was a central focus for many.

When former IRA members spoke of the ultimate goals of the movement those aims were frequently expressed in terms of the removal of the troops:

After Bloody Sunday [the killing of 13 people by British soldiers at a civil rights march] for me I was very clear about wanting to get involved and to get the British out of Ireland basically. (Interview J)

It was the issue of state coercion, experienced in everyday life as well as through dramatic public events such as Bloody Sunday that gave force to republican ideological narratives (Ó Dochartaigh, 2010b). It was the immediate issue of an oppressive military presence that ensured that the republican ideological message resonated strongly with those living in areas of intense military presence and the republican goals gained much of their attraction from the promise of removing this oppressive presence. The IRA had a militant and radical mobilizing message that was closely aligned with the preferences of many young northern nationalists.

A great deal of the literature on the Northern Ireland conflict has taken a strongly culturalist approach, explaining political violence in terms of inherited traditions and communal loyalties. McGarry and O'Leary (1995, 227-40) argue that this is particularly true of much of the historical literature. For Townshend for example (1985, 394) the commitment of Irish Republicans to the use of armed force can be explained 'by an inheritance of communal assumptions validating its methods as well as its ends'. Some of these culturalist analyses suggest an almost mechanical relationship between socialisation into a militant political tradition and mobilisation into the IRA. This tends to marginalise individual agency, highlighting instead the force of communal myths and inherited traditions, beliefs and loyalties. In this view mobilisation is linked

to identity not through agency but through the structural force of inherited traditions in which individuals are imprisoned. However, while a significant proportion of IRA volunteers came from families in which there was a republican tradition the connection between that tradition and their decision to join was not a mechanical one and in some cases the existence of a republican tradition actually produced efforts to prevent mobilisation. Most of the interviewees from Republican backgrounds emphasize strongly that there was no pressure placed on them by family to become involved and in several cases interviewees were actually dissuaded or prevented from joining by relatives who had been in the IRA themselves.

I'd have been arrested and my father [a former IRA member] would have come to the barracks and got me out after the 4 hours and stuff like that and he actually tried to discourage me at that early age because basically probably his own life experience of what he'd been through in the 40s and stuff like that. ... he probably didn't want that for me or none of my brothers and sisters. So I mean there certainly was no active encouragement and in fact certainly during arrest times he would have actually discouraged me and said 'at the end of the day it's going to lead you to gaol if nothing else'. (Interview B)

It was not that these former IRA members had rejected republican ideology or the republican tradition but rather that they sought to save those they knew from going through the same experience they had gone through. In other cases volunteers got to know about their relatives' involvement in the republican struggle only once they joined the armed group.

Growing up in a family with a Republican tradition could therefore produce pressures against mobilisation into the IRA, as well as in favour of it. The interview evidence here suggests that even where volunteers came from a family with a history of

republican activism, their involvement strongly reflected the aim of asserting agency. Given that mobilization into the IRA is so frequently represented as a communal or collective act, it is striking how many former IRA members emphasize the individuality of their decision, its non-collective character. One volunteer deliberately avoided his republican family connections when joining the youth wing, the Fianna Eireann, and emphasized strongly the individual character of the decision:

I could have went to ...people who knew the family connection [with the IRA] ... but this was something I wanted to do and not let anybody know that I was going to be involved...it wasn't like 'let's get our friends together here and we'll all go and join the Fianna Eireann'. This was something that I as an individual wanted to take up on. What my friends wanted to do would be up to themselves but I knew what direction I wanted to take... I had been thinking about it for a long time.
(Interview D)

Former volunteers have stated that individual choice played an important role in their decision to join the IRA. In their accounts of those early days they take full responsibility for their part in the struggle. In the narrative accounts of those we have interviewed we clearly found traces of recklessness as well as adventure seeking, which are typical conceptions of adolescent functioning (Barber, 2001). This agency of youth fused in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the worldwide idea among young people to take matters into their own hands (violent and non-violent participation) as they saw themselves as potential agents of change for their communities. As one former volunteer from Derry put it:

You had the Vietnam War, you had the Reds and the Sorbonne, the PLO, you had all those things all going on and like you did think, I did think 'revolution in the air' and maybe you did have a chance of succeeding here, you know what I mean. You had that sort of, you know; you didn't think you were fighting a cause that wasn't winnable (Interview L).

In that context of increasing political opportunities and rising expectations it was the IRA that was most willing to be active. Where the social movements and political violence literatures have correctly stated the importance of networks in facilitating mobilization (della Porta 1995; Sageman 2004), as a collective social process, this reading cannot fully explain the process of mobilization as if it is driven uniquely by pre-existing networks. In the process of joining an armed group, which is neither linear nor a point in time, there are some decisions that individuals take on their own even if these decisions might be influenced by others and for this reason are not really taken in isolation. For example, one respondent recalls his personal choice, comparing it with the fact that not everyone from the same community engaged with the IRA:

Inevitability wasn't a factor. At that particular time I was 17, I was looking at what was happening around me, I probably made my own conclusions very very quickly and I just made a decision to join the IRA. With a sense of being able to fight back with any sense of meaning at the British and at Unionism. Not that I fully understood then, but I just felt that what was done towards us was wrong and that someone had to do something, and that is what it was what motivated me. A very very simple choice forward. And the only wagon at that particular time was looking at other people that lived here who were IRA men, and sort of saying yeah I want to be one of them. (Interview no. 4)

The republican armed struggle was a broadly popular social political movement in local neighbourhoods, where most people did not participate directly, but where there was a general sympathy by many towards those who did. This sense of broad popular

support tended to justify the righteousness of their mobilization for those who selected this repertoire of action.

The importance of agency is evident too in the willingness of some volunteers to move from the Official IRA into the Provisional IRA. One volunteer from Belfast describes how she first became involved in the Officials at the age of 12 and then moved into the Provisionals when she was 14:

When I first joined the Republican movement, I first joined the Officials with a group of friends from the same street where I was living. A lot of that time was taken up with history language, political lectures, and it was only then that I was politically minded and realised what all the politics was around me. It was not until I was fourteen that I was saying that the Officials were not doing enough, and then I joined the Provisionals. . . . So much was happening. My brother was interned at the time. The beatings that were going on, the loss of friends, everybody was really affected physically and mentally. It was then that in my own mind I was saying to myself that "it is not enough what I am doing in the Officials," I needed to do something more, and the armed struggle, I felt, was the only way to push this forward and trying to succeed and get a better life for our people. And that's why I went to the Provisional movement (Interview no. 13, in Bosi 2012: 369).

Her early mobilisation confirms the findings of the literature on networks which states that people join along with the people they know and with whom they are connected. Her subsequent decision to move to the Provisionals because they were willing to support an intensification of armed action and supply weaponry for a campaign against the British Army while the Officials weren't, illustrates by contrast that this was a deliberate personal decision and illustrates the importance of individual agency. In this case the decision to join the Provisionals involved a break with existing networks and relationships. Even in the case of those who stayed with the Official IRA

and who agreed with its ideological critique, the much more intense militancy of the Provisional IRA was very attractive. This is how a former Official IRA volunteer, who did not leave the organization, saw the situation at the time:

The split was between Catholic defenders and secular republicans... . They [Provisionals] were coming down and saying to people that they were given guns by the Irish Government. And to be honest I was tempted. If I had not a gun I would have gone with them. (Interview no. 26)

It emphasizes that the desire to strike at the state and the demand to take forceful action and to push hard against the state was so strong that it almost overpowered ideological preferences and organisational loyalties in this case. The same volunteer emphasizes that he stayed with the Officials not because they were less militant but despite this fact and that it was an ongoing source of discontent. He describes how he wanted to continue the armed campaign even when the leadership declared a ceasefire:

The ceasefire was explained to us by the leadership as a tactic that the struggle, the war, will continue. The tactic was to show to the protestant people that we wanted a compromise and that would allow us to reorganize, in order to remobilize and carry on. That is the way the leadership sold it to the rank and file. That's how I bought that at the time. But in retrospect the leadership was right in leading us away from violence. And they were right not to say let's stop because we would have not accepted that. But they win to put violence off. However at the time I would have not agreed. (Interview no. 26)

In this case, the level of militancy of rank and file volunteers was so great that the leadership of the Official IRA could only suspend its campaign on the basis that they would restart the campaign at a later stage.

Discussion

The Provisional IRA was an all-Ireland organisation but the vast majority of those who joined were members of the minority nationalist community in Northern Ireland who were living in local communities with strong social networks and a strong sense of local identity, where there was anti-systemic political consciousness, and a tradition and history of the use of force for perceived defensive purposes, where association with conservative Irish nationalism and, to a lesser extent, republican traditions, co-existed with a history of relative quiescence and in which organised republicanism and the IRA were far weaker than they had been south of the Irish border.

The prospect of excitement and the desire for recognition by peers were of course important factors for many who joined the IRA, but our sources indicate that those young northern nationalists who mobilized into the IRA did so mainly because of an awareness of, and commitment to, the status of their community, which they felt was seriously excluded in terms of opportunities and services and highly repressed. The armed struggle in their view was the best vehicle capable of fighting against perceived discrimination and identity misrecognition and for achieving a political voice in the region. Although they regarded a united Ireland as an appropriate endpoint of the process of ending oppression, most of the young northern nationalists who joined the

IRA equated the armed campaign with a struggle to reclaim dignity for themselves and rejected what they felt to be the long-subordinate position of their own community.

Joining armed activism meant for these young northern nationalists the enactment of an identity which was traditionally anti-systemic and sympathetic toward unconventional forms of participation but was not strongly tied to Irish republican dogma and was less supportive historically of militant republicanism than nationalists south of the Irish border. In this sense, the decision to join the IRA, was not justified for the majority of recruits as a mere reproduction of an ideological alignment to the traditional Republican aim of achieving Irish reunification, but as part of the enactment of an identity. They fused the need to reclaim a sense of dignity, honour, and pride for the nationalist community in Northern Ireland to a wider political objective, that of Irish reunification.

In saying that IRA members became active in order to enact an identity we are not suggesting that this was the only way in which they could do so. Many people in nationalist communities chose other forms of political action, including party political activism through the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the moderate nationalist party, or through other smaller parties, most of which strongly opposed the IRA. Others became active in peace movements which gathered strength in the early and late 1970s. But the crucial point about mobilisation into the IRA in the early years of the conflict was that it was understood by those who joined it as an organisation that represented a large mainstream element within the nationalist community. They joined as an expression of their membership of this community, on the understanding that the bulk of local people were supportive of the IRA, not in rejection of community or in a search for an alternative identity. The IRA was widely recognised as an important and

mainstream expression of collective nationalist identity by many outside the movement as well, and joining the IRA was widely recognised as an expression of identification with the community. Even those forces within the nationalist community who were critical of the IRA limited their condemnation of the IRA. They were not isolated in the same way as, for example, the Red Brigades were isolated by the Communist and Socialist left in Italy in the same decade (Bosi Forthcoming). Eamonn McCann, a prominent Marxist activist who had a sympathetic but critical view of the IRA summed it up well when he wrote that the ‘understanding’ that ‘turning to the gun was an understandable response ... was shared by many – quite likely the majority – who, nevertheless wished for a different, non-violent response’ (McCann et al, 1992, 55).

This new reading of the process of Republican micro-radicalization not only challenges much of the existing literature on micro-mobilization into the IRA, which over-emphasizes continuities over the specificity of the movement in each historical period, it also explains how the majority of the Republican movement could accept the peace process even though the dream of a unified Ireland remained unfulfilled (Bosi 2012). We agree with Kevin Bean that ‘the determining characteristics of Provisionalism’s trajectory were discontinuity and contingency rather than adherence to Republican tradition’ (2007: 251). When the IRA leadership moved towards negotiating a settlement that fell far short of core republican ideological goals, first in the abortive peace process of 1975 and then in the process of the 1990s, it was driven partly by the calculations of *realpolitik* when confronted with a stalemate situation (Ó Dochartaigh, 2011a, 2015). But during both periods the leadership knew that it could move in this direction because the bulk of its rank and file activists in the North were not “extreme” and rigidly ideological nationalists who joined the organization because of their fealty

to the core values of Irish Republicanism, but because they were looking to have a voice in the conflict and to enact a collective identity that was based on strong local identifications and a sense of belonging to an excluded minority group. Jennifer Todd recognised as much long ago:

although traditional nationalism remains important in Sinn Féin's rhetoric, it is combined with a strong emphasis on the need for change in social and political power relations.. ... Nationalist self-determination is presented - often in traditional terms - as the aim, but it is associated with an escape from perceived victimisation and an opportunity for control over one's own destiny on an everyday as well as a national-political basis. (1990: 41)

Clubb (2016, 613-616) has pointed out recently that the disengagement frame that the Republican leadership promoted among its membership in the early 1990s was successful because it resonated strongly with the mobilising messages around exclusion and discrimination that had been important to the growth of the Provisional IRA in the first place. In fact the movement leadership indicated from a very early stage of the conflict its openness to a negotiated settlement that would involve deep compromises on core issues such as Irish reunification (Ó Dochartaigh 2011; 2015). In this sense, alignment between the meso-level goals of the movement leadership and micro-level motivations among the grassroots was a constant throughout the conflict.

The IRA leadership knew that many of their new volunteers were motivated by immediate experience and the new political context rather than ideological positions, and from the early 1980s the leadership itself was dominated by the new wave of volunteers who had entered the organization in the early 1970s. The large influx of

volunteers that occurred in the context of the breakdown of state control and a struggle to transform power relations in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, had also transformed the Republican movement (Bosi and Della Porta 2012). It was in certain respects a new movement, unlike any previous iteration of the IRA, a movement driven by the twin goals of ending unionist domination and the repressive security system associated with that domination.

Conclusion

There is wide recognition in the literature on radicalization of the disjuncture that often exists between a group's ideology and individual motivations for joining (Schmid 2013). Our findings reinforce the consensus that ideology is of secondary importance in choosing which group to join and suggests instead that identity is crucial in this process. It is not a search for identity however that motivates individuals to join armed groups. Instead, individuals seek to enact an identity they already have, in the face of major changes to the political context. Young northern nationalists sought out an organisation whose militancy and high levels of activity best matched their aim of expressing defiance and pushing for dramatic political transformation. It was the militancy of the Provisional IRA rather than the fine detail of its ideological programme that was most important in making it an appropriate vehicle for the enactment of this identity. This finding too can be applied to all forms of armed activism and can usefully be used to help understand the decisions of why young people join armed groups whose formal ideological programme seems at odds with their own beliefs and lifestyles. It is the militancy, the defiance, that makes certain groups attractive as the best vehicle to express an existing identity, and it is strong commitment to armed action in this context

that can help groups to grow and recruit.

The evidence also suggests that enactment of a collective identity has to be understood not as a process whereby collective identity, personal networks or family traditions of militancy push individuals towards violence in a kind of mechanical way, but as an expression of individual agency. It is an active choice which is made on the basis of identification with a community and many of our interviewees rejected deterministic explanations of mobilization, and emphasized strongly their individual agency.

In explaining mobilisation into armed activism the emphasis we place on collective identity does not contradict the importance that the social movements literature has tended to give to networks, organisation, resource mobilisation, ideology, rational calculation and political traditions but it does suggest that they are insufficient to fully explain the agency which stands behind the decision to join armed activism and point to the need for greater analysis of how identity works, particularly how it works in combination with these other factors.

What the findings of this research also show is the importance of locality and local community to the identities which IRA volunteers enacted in joining the armed group. The fact that IRA volunteers identified so strongly with local neighbourhoods and linked the goals of the IRA so directly to local conditions points to the way in which wider identities, in this case national, work most powerfully when given local territorial form in a district and local face-to-face community identified with oppositional identities. The most important community in terms of identification is the local and where a local community has strong oppositional identity and a fraught relationship to forces that seek to dominate it, joining an armed organisation serves to express a very powerful and deeply-rooted identification with a local district. In this

case what we see is a search for an organisation or form of political representation that seems to express most clearly that sense of a local community. In our case those local areas are associated with ethnonational identity but the finding applies equally to identification with localities based on the politics of social class. This conclusion points to the importance of collective identities strongly associated with local spaces and local communities as a key factor in mobilisation into all forms of armed activism and suggests that in understanding the link between identity and militant mobilisation in both national and transnational movements we should focus especially on identities that are strongly anchored in local communities and contexts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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¹ After several unsuccessful military campaigns (1938-40, 1956-62, and sporadic attempts in between) the Irish Republican Army (IRA) came onto the scene again in 1969. This time,

it was in the aftermath of the struggle for civil rights which unleashed the escalation of a communal conflict and the consequent deployment of the British army. A group of senior IRA members who were dissatisfied with the leadership's limited response to violence in the North established a 'Provisional' IRA Army Council. They began to build the Provisional IRA as an alternative to the original organisation which then became known as the 'Official' IRA (Ó Dochartaigh, 2008). By the mid 1970s the Official IRA was no longer a significant actor and the Provisional IRA was usually referred to simply as the IRA in the Irish media and in public discourse in Ireland. We follow this usage.

² Differently from Roy, our approach interprets political violence within the socio-political context (Bosi, Ó Dochartaigh and Pisiou, 2015). We argue that when individuals are confronted with major changes in socio political context they might resort to political violence in order to reassert their agency.

³ We have excluded 5 interviewees who were already in the republican movement before 1969 from this sample of 30 respondents. This was a distinctive cohort of militants who followed an ideological path of mobilization within the IRA once the split came in 1969/1970. While it is important to mention this cohort of militants, because they provided 'linearity' for the armed groups, it is important to stress that they formed only a tiny minority of those northern nationalists active in the IRA after 1969.

⁴ Irish Times, May 22, 2014, 'PSNI to seek entire Boston College tape archive'.
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/psni-to-see-entire-boston-college-tape-archive-1.1805726>