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Locus Of Control

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Prelude

As Belfast continues to travel the seemingly inexorable road toward 'normality', 'stability' and 'peace', the past dies. Or, more accurately, it becomes delocated. Delocation does not destroy the past but rather shifts it, sanitises it, *builds over it*. Is this the true meaning of 'progress', setting adrift the present from our shameful past, itself constructed from a conflict that had become shockingly banal? If so, then what we (Belfast) are experiencing now is something not delocated from the past but a process that has never stopped.

Did not Henry Joy McCracken (that ubiquitous figure on the Belfast scene) proclaim unswerving faith in that illustrious idea?¹ What other grand notions could have filled the mind of that great bourgeois Edward Harland as he presided over Belfast's industrial heyday while the Socialists and Papishts were beaten on the docks and burnt from their homes? Progress! Aye, a noble idea. Sure was it not progress too that inspired the young British technocrats high on LeCorbusier during the heady days of mass housing, when the working class were no longer to be feared but something to be controlled, catalogued and collated in accordance with their 'naturally' conceived divisions.

And now, it can perhaps be said, *Progressus Vicit*: the ancient divisions have been overcome in an orgy of vulgar consumerism. United not by the common name of 'Irishman' but rather by the sub-nomen 'consumer'. The End of History. A future defined by the objects of intended acquisition or intangible 'lifestyle indicators' such as 'gym membership', 'time shares' or the accumulation of 'air miles'. Past is become invisible:

"I used to live here."

"You used to live under the motorway? You must have been very poor mummy."

How can anything intrude into such a timeless zone? A politics without history lacks all but the bluster of an interminable, mindless discourse. It ceases to exist in all but the minds of its supposed practitioners.

It is here that art appears once again on the fringes of society's hetero-mediated self-representation. A society that believes itself to have vanquished history or at least that it is now strong enough to confine history's existence to certain places and moments where it can be suitably ignored and forced once again into intermittent invisibility.

The articulation of the inaudible, the visualisation of the invisible, the materialisation of a collective memory subsumed by a mountain of neon-encrusted guilt, facing the present with all the force of the future...

I. Ideology, Physicality & Development

"We transform ourselves through transforming our world (as Marx insisted)."

David Harvey (2001) *Spaces of Capital* (London: Routledge) p.24

To locate 'control' it is necessary to peer beyond the glass and concrete facades of the modern city and look to the configurations that arise in the swirling mist of a forgotten and often distorted history. Not only do we transform ourselves through the forging of our environment but we can be forged through the transformation of that environment. Although this is clear, the role ideology (overt and implicit) plays in this process is not. A town so dominated by and bound up with the history of Unionism cannot then in its physical and structural elements be immune from that stated ideology. Nor is Unionism itself a free-floating self-contained body of dogma that stands aloof from any external influence, but rather it itself operates as the articulation of a certain self-justificatory *Weltanschauung* of a section of the Belfast bourgeoisie. Dependent on the contingent circumstances, it regards itself on the one hand as the guarantor of civil and religious liberty in this British dominion² and, on the other, as the guarantor of the ethno-religious hegemony of Protestants ensured through an exclusionary all-class alliance.³

The primacy of 'control' in this ideological configuration is clear: first, the control of the majority of the working class through a religio-cultural identification with the State itself and, second, the maintenance of an economic environment conducive to high rates of exploitation (due to the depression of wages created by the existence of a Catholic underclass which served as a reserve pool of labour).⁴ The space of the city then becomes a constant battleground of transgression and manipulation leading to an inevitable carve-up as zones are marked not only by social status but by allegiance. This process (begun at the very beginning of Belfast as an industrialised city) continues right up to the present day as 'peace lines' are still erected in the name of social stability.

The increased levels of ghettoisation that took place in the late 1960s and 1970s were indicative not only of heightened dissatisfaction with the status quo by all sections of the working class but it crucially signified the failure of Unionism to contain the tensions implicit in the foundation of Northern Ireland. The corporatist ideology that informed its functioning could no longer exclude the growing and increasingly educated Catholic population whose very articulation of

itself signified a radically altered public. The 'subjectification' of this section of the population gave rise to a properly political situation in which the previously un(ac)counted stepped into the breach of what has been called the 'empty universal'⁵, in which a certain section of the people invoke the mantle of 'the people', thereby displacing the supposed legitimacy of the existing order. Rancière characterises the politicisation of the situation (i.e. the challenging of the status quo by an internal albeit excluded portion of the population) thus:

"... it is through the existence of this part of those who have no part, of this nothing that is all, that the community exists as a political community."⁶

Excursus I. Sailortown

The history of Sailortown in the Belfast docklands reflects these trends clearly. For it was here that a section of Belfast's maritime working class experienced the industrialisation, pogroms, hardship and eventual delocation that informed the history of Belfast's working class population. The forcible exit from the east of the city where industry was strongest; depression and unemployment; solidarity and community; finally, forced dispersion around the city. The destruction of Sailortown in the 1960s illustrated the adaptation of official state ideology to the conditions of modernity in which the values of community and solidarity were subordinated to those of individualism and consumption. The exchange of Sailortown for the M3 was a powerful metaphor for the values that were coming to dominate the perception of space in the city. As Guy Debord noted in 1959:

"The breaking up of the dialectic of the human milieu in favor of automobiles (the projected freeways in Paris will entail the demolition of thousands of houses and apartments although the housing crisis is continually worsening) masks its irrationality under pseudopractical justifications. But it is practically necessary only in the context of a specific social set-up. Those who believe that the particulars of the problem are permanent want in fact to believe in the permanence of the present society."⁷

"In this way, necessity becomes implicit in the official discourse to ensure that no other option seems possible. The importance of the task at hand will therefore override all other considerations because history and the impermanence of the particular circumstances that exist at any one time appear as fictions whose use is long past."⁸

This is how Sailortown could be destroyed without consultation and even with the trust of the inhabitants.

II. Culture, Hegemony & Resistance

"In losing their ignorance, the bourgeoisie have become impenitently malign."

Theodor W. Adorno (2005) *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso) p.34

However, the ghettoisation of Belfast was by this stage firmly entrenched. The geographic structures implying power relations old or new began to serve a radically altered purpose as zones that emerged as accidents of history started to develop a community possessing subjective agency. This process too was developed and reflected on a physical basis through the visual self-representation of communities that were becoming more and more solidified through political actions and allegiance.

The painting of murals was central to this process of self-creation and self-representation. Indeed, the existence of such displays transformed the very nature of the place that was inhabited: 'it is the public space in which the [mural as] artefact is sited that is changed.'⁹

So, the existence of murals as the physical expression of the community also allows the community to transform itself. This does not imply however that what had developed were homogenous communal blocs acting in

authoritarian unity, rather (as Harvey points out¹⁰) there exists a dialectical relationship between community formation and the institutionalisation of that community. Such a dialectic creates an internally dynamic process of formation, expression and supercession of the origins of the community itself which persist through often heroic founding myths that serve to justify the authorities indigenous to the community. This process is also replicated at the level of the physical, i.e. in the fluctuating persistence of the mural through time:

"Although the painting of a mural may appear to constitute the finished artefact, it actually may be just the beginning of a complex social life, which may well continue long after the original painting itself has been over-painted or destroyed."¹¹

The life of the mural as it is reinvigorated by the community provides a potent reminder of the possibility of that community fading away or losing relevance to those who construct it. Its physical nature betrays an underlying fragility that is exposed to shifts in values and the supposed imperatives of economics.

Excursus II. Barracks

"To dedicate a new school is not the same as to convert a military fortress into a school. We intend to continue converting even the small barracks into schools, because every town no matter how small, had military barracks."¹²

Throughout Belfast the British military presence looms large in the form of barracks (some empty some occupied). In Andersonstown, the barracks was closed in 2005 but its status is still contested by the local community who have repeatedly demanded (through community groups, political representatives and popular mobilisation) that the ground on which it stood be handed over to the community as a whole. However in recent years the Minister for Social Development has twice attempted to allow the space to be acquired privately, most conspicuously by the Carvill Group.¹³

The continued resistance to the Andersonstown Barracks site remaining outside the control of the community reflects the process of forming and maintaining a community mentioned above. The creation of such a subjectified public demonstrates the impetus to maintain a physical community of resistance that demands to recreate itself and its environment on its own terms. The physical nature of this process becomes clearer due to the rapidly changing landscape in Belfast. That a community can articulate (and recreate) itself on such a basis also points to the fragility of the processes that give rise to spatial conflicts like this one. For through such a struggle, the reality of the changing shape of Belfast becomes apparent, and the fictions that inform its seemingly timeless centre are exposed.

III. Middle Class Ascendancy, or the Dominance of a Fiction

"... the 'middle class' is, in its very 'real' existence, the embodied lie, the denial of antagonism... [it] presents itself as the neutral common ground of Society."

Slavoj Zizek (2000) *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso) p.187.

The 'common ground of Society' in Belfast is, according to conventional wisdom, anything but 'neutral'. Contestation and transgression are the watchwords of present-day Belfast as consumerism attempts to bring everybody into its indiscriminate embrace. The emergence of Belfast as a focus for production and consumption can be directly traced through the development of the 'peace process.' Richard Haas (then US Government's representative in Belfast), in an address to certain businessmen in 2002, highlighted the great increase in production stemming from the 'peace process': foreign investment has created 31,000 new jobs since 1998; Northern Ireland's

manufacturing output has risen by 25% in the past few years; and exports have doubled in the past ten years.

Crucially, he also highlighted the role the bourgeoisie play in structuring (both economically and physically) the 'new Belfast':

"...we have seen time and again that business leaders constitute some of the strongest voices urging Northern Ireland's politicians to do the right thing."

"Business men and women focus year in and year out on the bottom line; in doing so, they probably best understand what can be gained – and lost – from any given situation. Economic progress is measured in profit margins, productivity, returns on investment, and other tangible indices. This progress manifests itself in the wider community through higher incomes for families, home and car sales, more theatres, shops and restaurants in thriving neighbourhoods. In both these realms – that of the economy and that of the community – we have seen direct benefits from the peace and stability created by the Good Friday Agreement."¹⁴

Peace and stability, then, form the basis from which a successful consumption-driven society is established. The language used in Haas' statement is clearly illustrative of the nature of the 'right thing', as he calls it. For the 'right thing' in this context is clearly the ending of widespread, non-state violence¹⁵ so that an arena might be created that would allow a correctly consumerist model to arise.¹⁶

What then emerges from the economic development that corroborates, justifies and defends the 'peace process' is an arena that in fact disguises the social relations that sustain it. Thus the reality of antagonism is automatically expelled from the city centre as public sphere. The intrusion of the political is prohibited by the instrumentalisation of the public sphere for the purpose of a consumption that effectively 'de-publicises' the public. This de-publicisation has a number of facets. Firstly it locates the coming together of disparate persons into a unity only by dispelling any intrinsic commonality by replacing it with an extrinsic identity forged through the experience of sociality as mass consumption. Secondly, it supplants the *critical* (that is to say *democratic*) potential of an experience of the public. Such a critico-democratic potential exists in the very possibility provided by the coming together of disparate individuals into a public mass that by its own existence legitimates and/or challenges dominant ideas and institutions. In this way the mass or active public is replaced by the homogenising aggregation of individuals as undifferentiated consumers.

Furthermore it should be clear how this corresponds to the intermittently hysterical praise of the stability provided by the 'peace process' and the all but non-existent critique. To this fact can be added to the striking absence of any real debate on the causes of the current economic crisis and its relation with the political institutions and policies that have been followed with so much élan by the political and business elite. It must then be understood that what is happening here is very much tied up with the process of the de-publicising of the public mentioned above. For only in this way is it possible to appreciate the wilful blindness that has infected the entire body politic in this time of economic woe and the terminal inability of politicians in Ireland to come up even with a coherent criticism that does not entirely reek of crass opportunism, never mind an economic plan that does not seek recovery in the exploitative speculation that characterises mainstream economic and political discourse.

In terms of the 'visual', this process can be seen in the fact that displays that on a superficial level may seem to have some political import (such as the anti-war demonstrations that have occurred occasionally over the past number of years) are met with placid support at best or more often with total disinterest by people who are after all in the centre of Belfast to consume. Thus what may seem

Black Mountain, 2008. Photographs by C. Devlin & C. Gillen.





'The Mountain as Notice Board', Hatchet Field, West Belfast Ellis, Dessie, 'I would rather die than be Extradited to Britain'. Interview with Dessie Ellis, *An Phoblacht / Republican News*, 8th Nov. 1990, Sraith Nua Iml 12, Uimhir 44, 9

to be political becomes in fact a mask with which to disguise the absence of the political. And it is this very absence that defines the public, defines it in the sense that it negates it.

This is not to say however that the real antagonisms that underlie the politico-economic fabric have evaporated. Rather, they have expression in the persistent sectarianism that recently resulted in the murder in Coleraine of Kevin McDaid as two police officers stood nearby; circumstances disturbingly similar to those in the murder of Robert Hamill in Portadown twelve years ago, and only days after the public inquiry into Hamill's death heard evidence of police collusion. The recent spate of racist attacks in Belfast further confirms the violent reality underlying increasingly hollow official statements heralding official recovery and political progress.

The question then becomes one of whether it is possible to challenge the violent, exploitative nature of the status quo at all, or whether the retreat into sectarianism and racism are inevitable outcomes of a situation whose own logic demands the eradication of these features yet depends on them for its very existence. This reality is evident in the marketing of Northern Ireland as an essentially low wage economy¹⁷, a situation directly derived from a sectarianised conflict that both divided the working class and created a climate of underinvestment.

Excursus III. New Protest in Belfast (RIR / No Bush)

When the Royal Irish Regiment paraded through the streets of Belfast on 2nd November 2008, the notion of the police as arbiters of the 'distribution of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*) in Rancière's schema¹⁸ becomes apparent. For in calling the demonstration, the British Ministry of Defence clearly saw such a parade as apolitical and so suitable for the public realm. The intrusion of the political (in the sense of an aggrieved and historically located subject) into the public sphere was thus prohibited and confined to the limits of the city centre through the rulings of state agencies enforced by the PSNI.

This process of the expulsion and persistent intrusion of the political is mirrored in Belfast artist Christoff Gillen's recent work on the Black Mountain, at the northwestern fringe of the city. Rather than being forced out of the consumer-driven public sphere, Gillen's work enunciates into the public sphere from afar, thus replicating and subverting the forcible removal of the political from the public. The re-located (and so re-created) public becomes the people of Belfast willing to engage with a visualised text that articulates the absent public without becoming lost of the

privatised public of the centre. In this sense the de-publicisation of the centre becomes the vehicle for the re-location of the (political) public. The ever-nascent public then repeatedly attempts to overcome its destruction by insisting on being heard on its own terms.

What Gilen's work evinces then is a referral to a point in the past when that same mountain was the focus of a public in action, evoking the formation of the United Irishmen on nearby Cavehill or the use of the mountain as a signifier of a community's support for the republican hunger strikers in 1981. On these occasions a line was drawn that marked the transformation of a people from subjected mass to subjectified agent. The significance of such allusions today must surely rest in the stultifying atmosphere of a consumer-led strategy for growth in an entrenchedly sectarian environment (an aspect further highlighted by the location of his work directly above the so-called 'peace line' separating the Ballygomartin and Whiterock Roads) and the dissolution (though not disappearance) of the prospect of reclaiming the space lost from the public in the name of a universal yet concrete enterprise.

IV. Space, Conflict & Art, or Towards the Future

In light of the continued economic decline, rising unemployment and halted development, it is not without interest to reflect on Haas' words to the Belfast bourgeoisie in 2002. Although it was clear that 'peace and stability' would be necessary for a properly thriving capitalist economy in Belfast, the other factors at work in such a building process (such as the concrete potential and structural necessity of crisis enmeshed within the very framework of capitalism itself) were flagrantly ignored. The concomitant suppression of the expression of individual and cultural difference as anything other than oppositional identity that is inscribed into this process further exposes the vacuity of the rhetoric of progress and normality.

The reality of the situation continues to reside at street-level where the hegemonic ideology is both affirmed and resisted in a continual interplay of images, texts and fragments whose very existence attests to the conflictual nature at the heart of reality in present-day Belfast. The official non-existence of that ideology is attested to by the facts of loyalist decommissioning and Sinn Fein/DUP scrambling for US dollars. The reality is however made clear by the new inscriptions that dominate working class communities where naked sectarianism (in the form of graffiti stating 'KAH' or 'KAT'¹⁹) vies for importance with the affirmation of the supremacy of the (secular) 'Hoods'²⁰ – a final victory over divisive ideology!

The destruction of the public (as self-articulating agent) then forms the background to today's visual culture (itself dominated by an aesthetically hollow consumerist bulk) as different ways are increasingly sought to overcome the historic failures of emancipatory politics. Where these are to be found can be seen in the fragments of resistance that litter our streets, in the oppositional and the still-existent communities that mobilise against the privatisations of space which remain central to dominant narratives of 'development.' It remains to be seen however what role the disused and abandoned building sites will play in this coming dispensation; and whether developer-in-chief Barry Gilligan²¹ will find any contradiction between this role, and his position of chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Notes

1. McCracken was one of the founders of the United Irishmen, leading them in the Battle of Antrim in 1798. He was hanged by the Market House in the city centre.
2. "Northern Ireland is the one part of the United Kingdom which has a written constitution - the Government of Ireland Act, 1920. This Act specifically prohibits the Northern Ireland Parliament from making any laws which endow one religion or discriminate against another. Any such Act could be challenged in the courts and ruled to be inoperative. A similar prohibition applies to executive acts. In effect, the Government is not entitled to do what Parliament is not authorised to permit it to do. If there were such illegal actions by the Government, any person has the right and the opportunity to challenge them before the Courts." Ulster Unionist Party (n.d. 1968?) *Northern Ireland Fact and Falsehood: A frank look at the present and the past.* (Belfast: Ulster Unionist Party). <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/discrimination/quotes.htm>
3. As Craig insisted: "All I boast is that we are a Protestant Parliament and Protestant State." Quoted in Jonathan Bardon (1992) *A History of Ulster.* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press) pp. 538-539.
4. Slavoj Žižek (2000) *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso) p.179ff.
5. Jacques Rancière (1999) *Disagreement* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press) p. 10
6. Guy Debord, *Situationist Theses on Traffic*, see: <http://libcom.org/library/internationale-situationiste-3-article-2>
7. Herbert Marcuse (2002) *One Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge) p.97. He points out the danger of such technical rationality when he writes, "If the linguistic behaviour blocks conceptual development, if it militates against abstraction and mediation, if it surrenders to the immediate facts, it repels recognition of the factors behind the facts, and thus repels recognition of the facts, and of their historical content."
8. Neil Jarman, *Painting Landscapes: the place of murals in the symbolic construction of urban spaces* <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdb/murals/jarman.htm>
9. David Harvey (2001) *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) p.192
10. Neil Jarman loc. cit.
11. Fidel Castro (1961) <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610128.html>
12. See: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2008-11-10.8.13> for details.
13. See: <http://www.state.gov/s/p/rem/15318.htm>
14. It is interesting to note in this context that later in his statement (*ibid.*), Haas sees the "normalisation" of the British military presence as a prerequisite for "moving the peace process forward."
15. See Jean Baudrillard (2005) *The System of Objects* (London: Verso) passim.
16. http://www.investni.com/index/locate/why_northern_ireland/competitive_costs.htm
17. Jacques Rancière (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum) p. 3, p 70.
18. "Kill All Huns [Protestants]/ Kill All Taigs [Catholics].
19. The most common annotation of this is the ubiquitous U[p]T[he]H[oods].
20. Gilligan is the Director of Big Picture Developments, who were responsible for a major apartment development at the former Ormeau Bakery in south Belfast. Gilligan / BPD also own important sites across the city including the Crumlin Road Courthouse, which was sold by the Northern Ireland Courts Service for £1, and has now been destroyed by fire.