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Negotiating Civic Space in Belfast

or

The Tricolour: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

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13. *Negotiating civic space in Belfast or the tricolour: Here today, gone tomorrow*, D. Bryan, 2009

Editorial note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Project's annual Workshop, on 'The City and the Contested State', in Belfast, September 2008. It relates to Research Module B5 'Public Space in Belfast City Centre', and is based on research undertaken as part of an ESRC funded project, *Imagined Belfast*, within the Identity and Social Action Programme.

Biographical note

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Negotiating Civic Space in Belfast or the Tricolour: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

Dominic Bryan¹

Abstract

What role does public civic space in Belfast city centre play in the negotiation of different political identities within the city? Focusing on key public events in this space the paper traces shifts in identity practices and focuses on negotiations over the uses of public space associated with Irish nationalism and British unionism. This, it is argued, gives a more sophisticated understanding of different types of 'shared space'. The events probed are seen as precursors and possibly drivers of political change. It is concluded that the increased sharing of civic space has probably contributed to improved political relations within the city, though there remains the challenge of understanding how public space might more effectively be used to influence relationships between the city's political identities in the longer term.

Keywords: public, civic, shared space; political identities

In this paper I will explore how public civic space in the centre of Belfast has acted as an arena of negotiation for political identities within the city. The research discussed examines political identities as they are expressed in public space. It also starts to map the shifts in identity practices, revealing a more negotiated process than is sometimes understood in the dichotomy between Irish nationalism and British unionism. By probing key public events that have taken place around the Belfast city centre since the 1960s, it becomes clear that not only are the events indicative of broader political changes, but perhaps more interestingly, they are also precursors and possibly drivers of political change. As such, by examining practical examples of how civic space is used, we have the opportunity to develop a more sophisticated analysis of different types of 'shared space'. The paper concludes that, in certain respects, civic space in Belfast has become more shared, and this has probably contributed to improved political relationships within the city. However, the need to

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understand how public space can be used to influence relationships between the city's political identities in the long term remains the greater challenge.

To begin with it is important that I give some definition, albeit loose, to civic space. At a very general level it usually refers to the broad physical, political and social spaces in which civil society operates. These encompass a range of institutions, including charities, churches, social movements and various social groups. Whilst civil society strictly excludes state institutions, these institutions, particularly democratic and funding elements within public authorities, are enablers of civic society (http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm). If we define civil society in the more traditional sense, as a place that allows active citizenship, then the definition of public civic space also plays an important role in creating citizenship for the people of the city. Civic space can thus be described as those places physical and social in which the civic is enabled to take place. This paper is more specifically concerned with the use of public space, one of the arenas in which civil society is exhibited.

Belfast, like other Irish and British cities in the Victorian period, developed a civic culture as an emancipated urban elite sought to represent the growing population through representative corporate institutions. An important element of this was the control of public space through diverse processes which included the construction of signature buildings, parks and thoroughfares, the organisation of civic events and the development of policing institutions. These processes were part of a defining of citizenship in that they identified those that belonged and those that were excluded. Exclusion, as with other cities, could be based on a number of criteria particularly social class and gender. But in Belfast, to varying degrees, it could also be ethno-religious, specifically as it related to Catholicism and Irishness. Citizenship is of course intimately related to a sense of belonging to the nation state (Faulks 2000: 29-45) and in Belfast that belonging has been highly disputed.

For the purposes of this paper it is worth categorising two ways in which the civic is defined through the use of public space. The first category includes all of those people and events that inhabit that public space, including social movements, which may often oppose the state or public authorities. This designation, as will be discussed, is controlled both by broad normative rules of what is deemed acceptable in the public sphere and by specific legislation, which in the UK and Ireland has usually been described as 'the keeping of public order'. The second, narrower, way

that civic public space is defined is by looking at instances when the use of the space is specifically enabled, even encouraged, by the state or public authorities. In the examples discussed below, these are events in public space run by Belfast City Council and allied institutions in part as a means of denoting the city and its potential. This would include events that receive public funding and civic legitimisation such as the Lord Mayor's Show. Put another way, the first type of public space is more readily defined through democratic norms of freedom of speech or freedom of assembly and takes place simply because a particular social action is not legislated against. In contrast, the second type of space is a more limited sphere which attains positive approval or support from a public authority representing the values of the city as understood by those in power with the authority to craft hegemonic images of the city. As I will argue, there is a shifting relationships between these two types of public space with an event like St Patrick's Day first being given freedom of assembly then being given civic legitimisation by the Belfast City Council who take on the management of the public events on the day. Examining how the events change over time is informative in understanding the relationship between political identities in the city.

In the context of Northern Ireland, and Belfast in particular, the exploration of public space leads to a discussion of 'shared space' (see Komarova 2008). As Komarova points out in her examination of *A Shared Future* (OFMDFM 2005), despite some noble definitions, and in fairness, some quantitative indicators (OFMDFM 2007) numerous ambiguities remain as to what is meant by shared space. What I seek to do in this paper is explore the changes in practice within the public sphere and to examine what they might tell us about the nature of shared space.

Unionist Hegemony in Belfast

The hegemonic control of civic space in Belfast by the politics of Unionism emerged in the second half of the 19th century and was reinforced when Belfast became the capital of Northern Ireland in 1921. The range of parades organised by the Orange Order and other Protestant, loyalist institutions had not, for much of the 19th century, been part of civic conceptions of the city. Under parading legislation applicable across Ireland, parades, including those of the Orange Order, were banned from 1836 to 1845 and from 1845 to 1872. Even after 1872, and despite the growing importance of Orangeism amongst the development of Unionism in Ulster,

the parades were often of a rough, drunken and plebeian nature, were frequently blamed for rioting and, accordingly, were not exactly welcome in the city centre (Bryan 2000: 29-59). Though Orange parades were allowed to use the city centre while Irish nationalist expressions of identity, such as the 1898 centenary commemoration of the United Irishmen, were excluded, Orange parades were never unproblematically representative of civic Belfast. This, despite the involvement of many members of the political elite. However, within the newly formed state of Northern Ireland, controlled by the Ulster Unionist Party, which was dominated by Orangemen, the Twelfth began to reflect the activities of a civic event. Ministers of Government spoke at Twelfth of July events, and in 1926, the Twelfth was made a public holiday. In the 1930s, against the backdrop of heightened political tensions between Northern Ireland and the 26 counties of the Free State, the number of loyalist parades grew dramatically.. Whilst examples exist from the 1930s through to the 1960s of authorities restricting certain Orange parades in Northern Ireland, often in cases when they seemed to overtly threaten public order, this was the exception rather than the norm (see Bryan 2000: 60-77). The parades were patronised by senior politicians and took place in most cities and towns in Northern Ireland. Though public authorities never explicitly funded the parades, they received massive support through policing and other resources. As such, it is reasonable to characterise this period as one where Orange parades were hegemonic and dominant within the civic sphere. The political strength of the parades derived from broad, cross-class appeal within the unionist political identity. But due to their plebeian and almost carnivalesque nature the parades did suffer in their capacity as a civic event. . Clearly, the heavy drinking and sectarianism associated with the parades broke some of the rules of the civic, as legally and normatively defined. For instance, local newspapers were frequently sent letters from Orangemen and spectators complaining of the behaviour of drunken bandsmen.

After 1920, the existence of the Irish Free State provided the external threat (and the Catholic population of Northern Ireland the internal threat) around which the discourses of Britishness were built. Irish nationalism had shifted from the constitutional political formations of the Irish National Party and the Ancient Order of Hibernians to the Irish republicanism of Sinn Féin and an annual commemorative cycle that now incorporated the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. Legislation, in the form of the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act of 1922, was hastily introduced by the new Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) regime in Northern Ireland, giving significant powers to the newly formed, and predominantly Protestant, Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)

to control public order. Consequently, demonstrations of an overtly Irish republican nature never appeared in the centre of Belfast. In 1933, five thousand people were reported to have knelt on the Falls Road, in the predominantly Catholic west of the city, and recited the rosary when the RUC attempted to ban a march to Milltown Cemetery. Bans were enforced in the years following and in 1937 led to serious rioting on the Falls Road. However, in 1939, the same event continued unhindered although police asked those participating to remove Easter lilies, a symbol of Irish Republicanism (Jarman and Bryan 1998: 45-47).

A more complex threat to Unionism derived from left-wing politics. The Northern Ireland Labour Party was an electoral threat to the Ulster Unionist Party in working class Protestant areas of the city. Belfast like other industrial cities possessed a strong trade union movement. And, as with those cities, it suffered from the vagaries of the capitalist system most obviously during the depression in the 1930s.. May Day parades have been ever present in the city since 1921. The authorities' attitude to labour demonstrations depended on political conditions. In 1925, a large demonstration to protest the conditions of the poor in Belfast was banned. In 1932, marches to campaign for better pay, organised on both the predominantly Protestant Shankill and on the Catholic Falls Road, were banned under the Special Powers Act. Since many Protestants in the city associated themselves with the labour movement, it was more difficult for Unionist rhetoric to depict expressions of identity from the trade union movement as a threat (Jarman and Bryan 1998: 47-48).

Demonstrations in Belfast in the early 1960s

Post-war legislation to control public space was reinforced with the Public Order Act (NI) of 1951 and the Flags and Emblems (Display) Act of 1954. After the southern Irish state declared itself a republic in 1948, the Tricolour increasingly became the symbol of nationalist resistance in Northern Ireland and thus was the target of restrictions from the state. However, examples of political protests in Belfast in the early 1960s reveal some relatively vibrant political spaces. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) held a number of ban-the-bomb protests, socialists demonstrated against U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, tenants of Belfast housing corporation -- both from unionist and nationalist areas -- rallied against rent rises and mothers angry at the lack of road safety convened demonstrations (Nagle 2008a, 2008b). All of these took place in the city centre around the City Hall. Some

protests even had a republican character to them. For instance, members of the Republican Party demonstrated against the proposed sale of the locally owned Northern Bank to the 'British owned' Midland Bank (IN April 1965).

Two examples provide a not uncharacteristic picture of civic politics in the centre of Belfast at this time. On 2 August 1965, 400 Corporation tenants, mostly women, part of the Amalgamated Corporation Tenant's Association, demonstrated in front of Belfast's City Hall over increases in their rents. A not-so-snappy placard from the Ballymurphy estate in West Belfast read 'Higher rents, higher fares, higher food prices – why not just change the name of Belfast to Belsen' (IN 3 Aug 1965). The following month a sit-down protest by CND in front of the American Consulate on Queen Street clashed with police. Later that day, another sit-down protest was organised on Chichester Street near City Hall (NL 20 Sep 1965).

These apparently minor events matter for two reasons. First, they reflect significant political activity in public space from a cross section of political backgrounds. In 1961, the Amalgamated Committee of the Belfast Corporation Tenants Association, containing representatives from across the city, was formed.. It mobilised nine Councillors in August of that year to march on City Hall (IN 2 August 1961). nationalists from Ballymurphy, Turf Lodge and Andersonstown were active protestors on issues that would become part of the civil rights demonstrations , which launched in earnest in 1967 (Nagle 2008a: 53-54). Indeed, Nagle argues that in Belfast, the People Democracy arm of the civil right movement, rooted in the political activism occurring at Queen's University, failed to co-opt the activities of tenants groups in the city (Nagle 2008a: 55). Northern Ireland CND was formed in 1958, and from May 1960, the group initiated an annual Easter parade. Over the years that followed, its campaigns concentrated on the U.S. Consulate in the city. Not surprisingly, the membership of CND incorporated Protestant clergymen and Quakers as well as trade unions and a medley of left-wing activists. It is also interesting to note that although the CND was organised on a Northern Ireland-basis, the Republic's branch participated in the 1962 demonstration (*BT*, 21 April 1962). Initially, newspaper coverage noted that the behaviour of CND marchers was exemplary (NL, 9 October 1961). But by the mid-1960s, as the example above suggests, forms of direct actions started to be utilised. This reflected the increased involvement of a number of radical organisations and individuals that would become part of the civil rights movement (Nagle 2008a: 49).

Second, these events suggest that the Belfast city centre was historically a more dynamic political, civic space, rather than a mere platform for Orange parades. Although the unionist administration and the police frequently made clear their attitude to displays of the Irish Tricolour (Bryan and Jarman 1998: 41-50), radical politics reflecting more complex constructions of identity were active in the city, often in front of the City Hall. In other words, the conception of public civic space was comprehensive enough to allow some political expression that not only challenged unionist hegemonic ideas but also, in measure, reflected left of centre ideals, including those expressed by Irish republicans. It is interesting therefore to think about why such political activity was seen as relatively non-threatening up until the mid-1960s but, in the form of the civil rights movement, became much more threatening, despite similarities in issues, tactics and the people involved. There may be a number of reasons for this, including the tensions that surrounded republican commemorations of the 50th Anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966 and the continued fractures within unionism as an alternative power base developed around Rev. Ian Paisley, who was himself a fine exponent of the public demonstration.

The Lord Mayor's Show in Belfast

The annual Twelfth Orange parades in Belfast, by far the largest public events in the city, have reflected political Unionism in general and often boasted senior UUP Government ministers in their ranks who appear for the political speeches mid-day. However, whilst they have used the resources and service of the Corporation they are not directly publicly funded. The civic life of the city has been reflected in other events such as the Lord Mayors Show, organised by the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the turning on of the Christmas tree lights in the grounds of City Hall. In the 1960s, the Lord Mayor's Show contained a broad spectrum of civic life, including charities, major local companies and various representatives of the military. (In 1962, the British Army had five floats including a Centurion tank, making between fifty and a hundred floats (NL, 21 May 1962).) Themes from this time included 'Ulster Entering the Sixties' (IN, 23 May 1960), 'Ulster in Action' (NL, 19 May 1962), 'Buy Ulster Goods' (IN, 6 May 1963), 'Pride in Progress' (NL, 22 May 1964) and 'Enterprise 65' (NL, 15 May 1965). In 1964, a visit from Princess Margaret coincided with the show (NL, 20 May 1964), and in 1966, the *News Letter* made a point of reporting that six of the floats were from 'Eire' (NL, 20 May 1966). The event reflected the nature of civic space at the time, which espoused unionist values and appeared to be relatively

uncontested. That said, in 1968, civic bliss was disrupted when anti-Vietnam protestors threw themselves in front of a contingent of sailors from the American warship *USS Keppler* who were taking part in the show (BTel, 2 August 1968).

Conditions in Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s, the height of the conflict, were very different with insecurity and unemployment at its height. The city centre had seen bombs planted by the IRA and UVF, and security measures such as the use of the British Army were implemented from the early 1970s onwards.. Many occasions of violence could be cited but perhaps the most infamous was 'Bloody Friday' on 21 July 1972 when the IRA detonated 20 bombs in the city killing nine people and seriously injuring 130 more. The economic impact on the city was obvious, let alone the image Belfast hoped to promote throughout the world. The Lord Mayor's Show went into decline. By 1980, the President of the Chamber of Commerce was appealing for the big employers, who had not recently taken part in the Lord Mayor's Show, to return (IN, 4 Dec 1980). The British Army had also left the parade; they now had a different role on the city streets. And by 1994, the Lord Mayors Show in Belfast had only 40 floats (NL, 9 May 1994).

Intriguingly, in 1995 Republican prisoners group *Saoirse* complained that they were not allowed to participate in the show (IN, 5 May 1995). They held a protest a few hundred yards from city hall. This is significant as it further suggested a new place for Irish republicanism in the civic centre. In 1993, Republicans had been allowed to hold a protest in the city for the first time so an early challenge to this event of civic pride is particularly interesting and clearly reflective of the changing political environment. Sinn Féin, with significant representation on the city council, was increasingly trying to play its part in civic life. And in another interesting twist, in 1998, the Lord Mayor's parade, led for the first time by a nationalist mayor, was re-routed when loyalists blocked the route because of a float entered in the parade by the Ormeau Residents Action group, who had also been involved in protesting Orange parades (NL, 25 May 1998). Furthermore, in 1998 the Lord Mayor's Show was described as a 'carnival' with Chinese dragons and a float from London's Notting Hill Carnival. The nature of the show was changing significantly. What seems to be taking place was a new negotiated identity for the event. By 2008, the Lord Mayor's Carnival contained no sponsored floats but was made up of community groups and performers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. As such, the Lord Mayor's Show looked very different from those of forty years earlier. The nature of the civic space and the identities expressed within it had changed. Before discussing the implications of this, I would

like to compare the Lord Mayor's Show with one of Belfast City Council's newer civic events.

St Patrick's Day in Belfast

On March 17 2006 a St. Patrick's Day 'carnival' was organised through the centre of the city. The main part of the parade took the form of a multi-ethnic carnival with images of St. Patrick provided by a number of the community groups involved in the festival. Children were handed multi-coloured shamrocks by council workers, the green shamrock was apparently viewed as unacceptable to some unionist councillors. Under the council's guidelines for events, no political flags (which in theory includes both the Union Jack flag and the Tricolour) were to be carried in the Carnival parade or at the staged event in Custom House Square. Whilst a few Tricolours were carried in the parade by people walking along beside the parade and some flags were waved by spectators, only about a 100 were waved by the 4,000 spectators in Custom House Square. So how did Belfast City Council come to be organising a St. Patrick's Day 'Carnival' parade as part of its calendar of events?

Republican parades and demonstrations were sometimes even banned from predominantly Catholic parts of the city (Jarman and Bryan 1998: 78). However, in August 1993, despite protests from unionist councillors, the Internment Commemoration parade was allowed into the city centre and the president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, gave a speech in front of the statue of Queen Victoria at City Hall. In March 1998, the first St. Patrick's Day event took place in the city. Organisers came from the West Belfast Festival, Féile an Phobail, an event born out of the Internment Commemorations in the west of the city, which had received some public funding. As such, organisers were aware of the possibilities of accessing public funding for St. Patrick's Day and from 1997 onwards a debate started into what role Belfast City Council might play in promoting the day.

The debate was made more interesting because St. Patrick, an Irish saint that allegedly brought Christianity to Ireland, had long been recognised and celebrated by Protestants in Ireland as well as by Catholics (Cronin and Adair 2002). So, perhaps unlike the Twelfth of July, there was the possibility of cross-community, 'inclusive' support. In the nearby towns of Armagh and Downpatrick, St. Patrick's Day parades had been viewed as cross-community for some time. However, the nature of the

parade in Belfast, which included a variety of nationalist and republican symbols, [and the Republican prisoner support groups that had attempted to enter the Lord Mayor's Show in 1995, was widely viewed as 'political'. The attitude of one Republican commentator writing in the *Andersonstown News* made it clear that for some the event was about Irish nationalists making claim to the city.

'The tens of thousands who turned Belfast city centre black with green on Tuesday were doing more than scribbling footnotes, more than even contributing chapters to our history. They were shredding the pages of past wrongs, binning the Belfast of the pogroms and second-class citizenship, erasing the painful memory of too many Twelfths on the wrong side of the swagger stick ... and proudly painting their own prologue: we've arrived.

'Glorious Green Gridlock' *Andersonstown News* 21 March 1998

The event very clearly heralded the entrance of Irish Nationalism and Republicanism into the civic sphere in its broadest sense. At last, there was recognition that at least the Tricolour could be waved in the centre of Belfast. In this sense, it was clearly an expression of the Sinn Féin demand for parity of esteem, suggesting, not unreasonably, that they should get the use of public space in the way that Unionists have long utilised it. Notably, at the same time that this took place, a debate started as to what role Belfast City Council should play in funding the event. This is all the more intriguing because, as discussed above, the Twelfth of July had never received fiscal, civic backing. St. Patrick's Day, the most quintessentially Irish day, was looking to get recognition in a way that the Twelfth never had. Over the years that followed, annual Council debates took place over the merits of providing funding for St. Patrick's Day. Each year organisers made claims that the event was 'inclusive' and different strategies were developed, such as handing out flags that might be more acceptable than the Tricolour. Sometimes stunts intended as jokes, such as men in black berets and dark glasses driving a white car with 'Garda' on the side, clearly, and understandably, were seen as sinister by unionist newspapers (NL, 18 March 2002).

Meanwhile, the political and policy environment was changing rapidly. Following the 1998 multi-party Agreement there were ongoing attempts to set up a coalition government at Stormont which included nationalists and republicans. Belfast City Council was now a hung Council with the Alliance Party holding the balance of

power. The Agreement had also led to the *Northern Ireland Act of 1998* which imposed upon a public authorities a legal duty to promote equality and the desirability of promoting 'good relations' (Section 75). In 2004, Belfast City Council published a good relations strategy document which, amongst other aims, looked to celebrate diversity (Belfast City Council 2004). In 2005, the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister issued *A Shared Future* policy document which called for 'support for cultural projects which highlight the complexity and overlapping nature of identities and their wider global connections' (OFMDFM 2005: 1.2.2).

And so in 2005, after recommendations from Belfast City Council's Good Relations Panel, the Council agreed that it should take the lead in organising an 'inclusive' outdoor event for the following year's St. Patrick's Day. With the Council running the event, attempts to reduce the number of Tricolours, replacing them with multi-coloured shamrocks, took on a high profile. In addition, council T-shirts were given away to cover up the Celtic Football Club tops people might be wearing. Although in 2006 stewards working for the Council were apprehensive at asking people to put Tricolours away as they entered Custom House Square, during the 2008 event they were much more confident. When spectators were asked to 'please put the flag away as this is a cross-community event' a surprisingly large number of people accepted the request. In addition, surveys conducted by the Institute of Irish Studies in 2006 and in 2007 suggest that more Protestants were attending the event -- 12% in 2006 growing to 17.6% in 2007. A further survey by Millward Brown Ulster in 2008 put the figure at 33%, though their method of collecting data was not the same as the previous two surveys. There is however some evidence that the St. Patrick's Day event, organised by the council, is being attended by Protestants as well as by Catholics, and that those participating recognise the importance of making it a shared event.

A new civic in Belfast?

By 2008 the nature of civic space in Belfast had changed significantly compared to the 1960s. The Irish Tricolour had entered the city, but almost as soon as it got there, there were attempts -- in the name of shared space -- to persuade it to leave. To use the criteria for civic space that I alluded to at the start of this paper, the Tricolour has been allowed into the broad civic arena defined by freedom of assembly but has been excluded from the narrower range of civic events encouraged by Belfast City

Council. St. Patrick's Day has become part of the broader repertoire of events taking place in public space in Belfast, but it has had to conform to the contemporary definition of shared space in the city. However, reflecting the policy of the Council, to conform to the policy of sharing space the holiday could only work as a multi-ethnic carnival with few local cultural traditions involved. To accomplish this, to a certain extent, community involvement has actually been reduced. As such, it probably lacks many of the cliché Irish elements of most St. Patrick's Day events around the world. Significantly, it is also defined as a children's event, and unlike many St. Patrick's parades around the world (and the Twelfth of July) there is a clear absence of alcohol. And whilst it is true that unionist councillors have not backed the event in the Council chamber, the development of the St. Patrick's Day carnival in Belfast does show some elements of a shared experience and identity across the normally conflicting political identities. In 2008, the carnival was even led by an UUP Lord Mayor of Belfast.

When we compare St. Patrick's Day to the Lord Mayor's Show there is a strange twist. The Lord Mayor's Show has also redefined itself and taken on exactly the same form: *carnival*. It is ironic that a form of carnival, so often the space for resistance in other cultural contexts, has become the acceptable 'shared' space for civic representation in contemporary Belfast. Whilst it could be said that carnival, as it is used in Belfast, becomes a 'neutral space,' the identity politics developing around it is nevertheless compelling and potentially dynamic. There is evidence that key civic events in the city have evolved in a way that can be shared. In 2008, the Lord Mayor's Show was led by the incoming Sinn Féin Lord Mayor transported in a rickshaw.

It is also worth noting that in an apparently belated attempt to join 'the civic', dictated by government policy on shared space, the Orange Order have been redefining the Twelfth as *Orangefest* with some public funding from the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure.. *Orangefest* was in part inspired by successful changes made to the Apprentice Boys annual Siege of Derry parade in Londonderry in August which is now branded as the Maiden City Festival. The changes in Derry were not simply cosmetic but contained real developments to the parade and involved significant new cultural events in the week beforehand. The *Orangefest* in Belfast also involved events before the Twelfth as well as 'family friendly' changes to the destination field on the day of the parade, such as bouncy castles. In addition, the Orange Order, along with the PSNI, has worked to reduce the amount of alcohol

consumption on the Twelfth, though my impression in 2009 was that this was pretty ineffective. However, having watched many Belfast parades since 1991, whilst there have been a couple of floats in the parade in 2009 as part of the Orangefest redesign, there were no significant changes manifested in the main parade. There is certainly no attempt to embrace any form of multiculturalism along the lines of the Lord Mayor's Show and St. Patrick's Day events.

Much can be made of the continuing, communal territorial divisions in Belfast and the apparent ineffectiveness of policies to create 'shared space'. This paper is not intended as an argument that the divisions in Belfast are withering away. Much of the evidence points to greater division (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006, Murtagh 2008). However, what I do want to argue is that there is significant evidence that there have been important changes in the nature of civic space in the city and that if we look at access and control of public space there are indications that types of sharing are taking place. Most obviously there is a more equal access to public space than would have been the case in the 1960s. This might appear to be a relatively minimal change but we should not underestimate the effect on the political climate that derives from the right of Irish nationalists and republicans to express their political identity in the heart of the city. It must make a difference that Irish republicans are now at the heart of the city of Belfast both in terms of the political structures of the City Council and in the popular utilisation of spaces around the city centre for protest.

What is equally interesting are the changes that have taken place to more narrowly defined civic events like the Lord Mayor's Show and particularly the development of St. Patrick's Day as an event funded by Belfast City Council. It does suggest that the nature of 'the civic' as delineated by institutions such as the Council has changed in such a way as to influence the nature of key public events in the city. This is still some distance from overcoming the political and territorial divisions that exist across the city but it cannot be dismissed as insignificant. We may be seeing the development of a 'civic culture' or a 'public space' that is shared in significant respects and does offer an element of common identity to the citizens of the city that was lacking in 20th-century Belfast.

The question which is more difficult to answer is how much this change to the nature of civic space influences people's sense of identity and also local politics. Can a sense of civic belonging in Belfast provide a common identity which mediates the existing British and Irish political identifications? Active citizenship within the city,

facilitated by equality of access and shared participation in the civic centre, would seem to be a potentially important part of conflict transformation. There is evidence that those previously excluded from the city welcome their enhanced access. But whether civic events can play a greater role in developing community relationships, as is hoped in Belfast City Council's policy documents, is harder to assess.

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