

It's Not Philadelphia, Is It? : An Interview with Eamonn McCann

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People who suffer murderous repression by the State when they ask for full citizenship are likely to conclude that full citizenship is not available within the State: some will proceed then to make war on the State. The unionist insistence that the civil rights movement contained within it the seeds of another IRA campaign was, in the event, self-validating.

From McCann: War and Peace in Northern Ireland, p. 145.

Eamonn McCann was born in Derry, into the first generation of working-class Catholics to benefit from the Education Act of 1947. McCann's biography is, in a sense, paradigmatic of this generation's experiences. Guaranteeing free secondary and third-level education throughout the United Kingdom and implemented in Northern Ireland over the objections of Unionist MPs, the Education Act of 1947 led to the emergence of a generation of cultural and political luminaries, including Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, and Bernadette Devlin, and brought about social conditions propitious to the emergence of Northern Ireland's civil rights movement.

While his career as an activist and writer now spans four decades, McCann is best known for his role in the Derry civil rights movement. With Eamonn Melaugh, McCann was the primary organizer of Derry's first civil rights march, which took place on October 5, 1968. McCann describes the march's organizers as "a loose group of radicals who had been trying for months, with some success, to create general political mayhem in the city" (*War and an Irish Town* 83). Drawn from the James Connolly Republican Club and the local Labour Party, the march's organizers formed themselves into the Derry Housing Action Committee. They sought to draw attention to the lack of safe, decent housing in Derry, and to direct growing outrage among the people of Derry toward the root causes of poor housing, unemployment and lack of civil rights, which they took to be political and economic. Viewed from a geographical and temporal remove, the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association has often been represented as the driving force behind the civil rights movement. It is important to note, however, that McCann and his comrades differed with NICRA and with the nationalist establishment in every possible respect. Indeed, NICRA sought to call off the October 5 march in obedience to a ban imposed by Home Affairs Minister William Craig.

The violence with which the October 5 march was met, while mild in comparison to later developments, was far beyond anything the marchers or the people of Northern Ireland had anticipated. Approximately 100 protesters and bystanders were hospitalized when the RUC used batons and water canons to dispel the march, and fighting that broke out in the city center and around the Bogside lasted through much of the night. On the following day, images of police brutality against the marchers (including the clubbing of two

nationalist MPs) circulated not only in Ireland and Britain but around the world, generating considerable shock and outrage. This march is therefore frequently cited as a watershed in the history of Northern Ireland, because it so clearly delineated the polarized positions of the unarmed and idealistic civil rights demonstrators and the authoritarian Unionist state.

Throughout this period, McCann insisted, as he continues to do today, that organizing against the status quo in Northern Ireland is greatly impeded by the division of the working class along religious lines. His life work has thus been uncommonly consistent, and of a sort that the standard paradigm positing the Northern Ireland civil rights moment and the subsequent Troubles as a struggle between working-class Catholics and a hegemonic Protestant middle class has a strong tendency to obscure or render incoherent.

Because his career and analysis have run counter to the most commonly available models for understanding the conflict in Northern Ireland, McCann has remained relatively little known outside of Ireland, although he is well known and astonishingly widely admired throughout Ireland. He is the author of numerous books, including Pluto Press's *War and an Irish Town* (1993), a collection of his fortnightly columns for *Hot Press*, *McCann: War and Peace in Northern Ireland* (1998) and, most recently *Dear God: The Price of Religion in Ireland*. He is a member of the executive committee and a past chairman of the Derry Trades Union Council, and a member of the Bloody Sunday Campaign and the Socialist Workers Party.

I am interviewing Eamonn McCann in Cafe Sandino, a cafe that has been open for about two years in McCann's native Derry. McCann has been an activist and commentator in Northern Ireland for over thirty years, a career that started when he found himself, with Bernadette Devlin and many others, caught up in the erupting ferment of the Derry civil rights movement. The cafe (chosen for its proximity to my base of operations -- the bus station) provides a picturesque backdrop for our interview. It's decorated with giant images of Che Guevara, Emilio Zapata and, above all, Augusto Cesar Sandino, the Nicaraguan Guerilla leader killed in 1934. Slightly less prominent are more ephemeral images of Ken Sara Wiwa, Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, and anonymous Latin American insurgents, including some women. The date is March 12, 2000, and a large flyer posted on the front door advertises an evening commemorating the first anniversary of the unsolved (and largely uninvestigated) murder of Belfast solicitor Rosemary Nelson, who had, prior to her death, frequently received and reported death threats from both Loyalist paramilitaries and the Royal Ulster Constabulary -- Northern Ireland's police force. Apart from the flyer, there is little to mark the the cafe's specific geopolitical context. Interviewing a male icon of the Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement in Derry while surrounded by images of Latino revolutionaries is both thrilling and disturbing. Thrilling because Cafe Sandino represents a certain kind of "ecumenical" politicized space in the heart of Derry, and because its images of armed insurgents transmit an inspiring message of militancy and uncompromising resistance to imperialism. Disturbing because the entire symbolic equilibrium of the space is so blatantly dependent on the iconic exclusion of images referring directly to the struggle against imperialism within Northern Ireland.

MB: I'd like to start by getting a sense from you of what is happening with the Good Friday Agreement. I think that readers will be aware that, starting in the early 1990's, Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein (the largest electoral party representing Irish republicanism) participated in a series of secret talks with John Major's government and forged alliances with John Hume of the SDLP (the largest electoral party representing the more conciliatory position of constitutional nationalism), and with Albert Reynolds, then Taoiseach of the Irish Republic. Out of this new "pan-nationalist alliance" came two IRA ceasefires, starting in September of 1994, and, ultimately, the Good Friday Agreement, institutionalized on May 23, 1998, by a substantial margin of voters across the 32 counties of Ireland. Most will be aware that an impasse, created by unionist insistence on the unilateral decommissioning of arms by the Provisional IRA, became the major stumbling block to implementing the Agreement, and that what has been called "the peace process" had been bedevilled by some really notable atrocities, including the death in a Loyalist firebombing of three young children, and the Real IRA's bombing in Omagh in the summer of 1998. Most will be aware that a Northern Irish Assembly convened, but was quickly suspended by the Northern Irish Secretary when David Trimble, head of the largest unionist party, the UUP, announced his intention to withdraw from the Assembly. Could you flesh out for us how the Agreement ran into difficulties and where things are now?

EM: Well, the Good Friday Agreement is deadlocked, and in my view it was more or less inevitable that would deadlock, because the model of the Agreement is such as to ensure that the contradictions which have always lay within Northern Ireland would reemerge again, because they haven't been dealt with in the negotiations and they're certainly not dealt with in the text of the Agreement. In order to talk about where the peace process is now and very specifically where the Agreement is now, it's necessary to talk about the sort of the parlor game which resulted in the Agreement. And it seems to me that it's useful to look at the differences between, for example, the Northern Ireland Agreement and the peace process here, and the peace process subsequent to the agreement which brought about an end to apartheid, not least because the South African experience is one that has key similarities to the Northern Irish case.

If you look at the Belfast Agreement and take its text on its own, one very curious thing emerges from it, or doesn't emerge from it, and that is that nowhere in it is there a statement of what the problem is. And here we had eight political parties, in the end, and two governments, come together around a table to try to find a solution to the Northern Ireland problem, which had generated this prolonged and painful war, and they set about the discussions and the discussions had reached a conclusion after two years without anybody ever attempting to agree on what the problem is. That seems, on common sense grounds, to be a most curious state of affairs, but there's a reason for it.

The contrast with the South African experience is quite large. Nobody ever doubted what the South African problem was; the problem was white minority rule, which couldn't be sustained any longer. And so we must have Black majority rule, and so we had discussions which were prolonged and difficult, and legitimate ground for arguing about the acceptability and the adequacy of the settlement which was reached. But at least

people knew what the problem was, and therefore the negotiations concerned making the transition from white minority rule to Black majority rule and what changes in law, what changes in the institutions of state and what changes in the administrative apparatus of security and justice and so forth, policies and practices and attitudes and so forth, in what way all *these* things would have to be changed so as to effect the transition from the old situation into a new and more democratic situation. In Northern Ireland they set about resolving an undefined problem. A little quip which I used at the time was, Mr. John Hume, the leader of the SDLP, said that the Agreement was a miraculous achievement, and I was moved to observe that this miracle resembled most Irish miracles in that it was a cure for which there was no known disease. To the outsider, and indeed to many people in Northern Ireland, you might think that the problem is quite simple: the problem is that in Northern Ireland, at least in one perspective, the Northern Ireland state had been constructed for historical reasons and imperialist reasons, in 1920-21, so as to give effect and to give recognition to the identity of one community only in the North, and to exclude the other community from any share in the state, or to deny them the ability to feel involved in the state, or to feel that there was any congenial place for them in the state; that there was this one-party rule mirroring sort of a one-community validation, that this was the problem, and that therefore, if that's the problem, then the solution was to construct a way in which *each* of the communities could be represented and to proceed on that basis. But see, that was never actually spelled out explicitly, and for a very simple reason: that the unionist side in the Agreement was never willing to acknowledge what the problem was and was never willing to accept responsibility for it. So that, for example, the party which had held unbroken power, well electoral power, anyway, unbroken office, in Northern Ireland from 1921 to the abolition of the old Stormont parliament in 1972, that is to say the Official Unionist Party, was never required to admit, in the way that the South African National Party, for example, was required to admit, that it had been at the heart of the problem. That it was its policies and its approach to Northern Ireland, and its sense of what the state was about and what allegiance to the state meant, that that *was* the problem and that had to be abandoned and an entirely new approach put in place. The Ulster Unionist Party never had to admit that. Over and over again people involved in the Belfast negotiations said that, "well, we are a divided community," without ever saying "*why* were we divided? In what *way* were we divided?", as if there was a division which had resulted from an unfortunate misunderstanding and, I mean it's thirty years of murder and mayhem as the result of a *misunderstanding*, and that if only the two sides could *understand* one another, and, as the phrase went, "learn to respect one another," then everything would be okay. But this didn't deal with the material reasons for the division in the first place, or what interests had been served by this situation, and in what way the objective situation had changed so as to bring about the possibility of a new arrangement.

None of this was dealt with at all. This led to this curious situation in which the mantra at the time was, "there are no winners and no losers," but if there's no winners and no losers, then what was the game about? And the result was, for example, that here in Derry, during the referendum campaign, when both the Official Unionist Party, led by Mr. Trimble, *and* the SDLP, led by Mr. Hume *and* Sinn Fein, led by Mr. Adams, the three main pro-Agreement parties, all of them were going around campaigning for a yes vote,

but actually they were campaigning for a yes vote on an entirely contradictory basis. This came into focus in Derry here just a few days before the vote. Mr. Trimble was conducting a photo opportunity on the ancient walls of Derry, which beetle over the Bogside. He stood looking over the Bogside, which is a huge Catholic nationalist area, the place where the Troubles began in 1968, and he said to journalists, "this Agreement marks a new beginning for Northern Ireland because," and he waved his hand to indicate the Bogside, "the people down there now accept that they are British. Now, meanwhile, literally as he said that, *literally as he said it*, in the Bogside there were canvassing teams from both the SDLP and Sinn Fein *also* asking for a yes vote as Mr. Trimble was, on the basis, *they* said, that Mr. Trimble now accepted that the Bogside was Irish. Now these were two starkly contradictory approaches, and you didn't have to be a political scientist to see that there was something seriously wrong with this campaign, and that it contained the seeds of its own destruction, when it was blindingly obvious, but hardly anybody pointed it out at the time, because it was adjudged inappropriate or unhelpful to draw attention to the difficulties. But that sort of contradiction was written into the Agreement.

At the moment the institutions of the Agreement are suspended because Mr. Trimble said that if the British government *didn't* suspend the Agreement he was going to walk away and withdraw his party's support for the Agreement, and that would have had the effect of collapsing the Agreement anyway. And Mr. Mandelson, the Secretary of State, on behalf of the British government, took the view (and from his own point of view he was probably right), that it was better for him to intervene and simply suspend the institutions of the Agreement, rather than have them collapse of themselves as the result of Trimble walking away. And there have been bitter complaints, particularly from Sinn Fein, about this unionist veto, about the unionists exercising the veto and the British backing off before the unionists. That's true. But of course the veto was contained within the Agreement. It's a bit late in the day, it seems to me, for Mr. Adams or Mr. Hume to complain about a unionist veto, when they signed an agreement and held it up as holy writ to their own supporters which *contained* the unionist veto. Because, you see, the "no blame, no shame" approach of the Agreement meant that the "two communities" (as we say in Northern Ireland), *each* is given a veto over political progress. I mean, that's quite explicit and there is a mathematical formula written into the Agreement which spells that out, that no *key* decision can be made in the Assembly (and key decisions include the election of ministers and all decisions to do with the spending of money are designated as key decisions, which, that doesn't leave a lot out, if the election of officers and ministers and *all* decisions which involve money, and it's hard to think of a government decision which doesn't involve money at some point, are designated key decisions) -- for any such decision to be made it requires -- the mathematics are slightly complex -- either weighted majority or parallel consensus. That is to say either a 50% at least of designated unionists *and* designated nationalists, *or* a 60% overall majority involving *at least* 40% support from each of the designated unionists and designated nationalists. That's written into the Agreement. So all that Mr. Trimble was doing *really* was saying "I'm going to exercise the veto that this Agreement gives me" and the British government saying "well that would be disastrous, so we'll suspend them." So, those who say that Trimble is walking away from the Agreement or Mandelson is walking away from the Agreement really are not being honest with their own supporters, it seems to me. They signed up to this

Agreement and this shouldn't come as a revelation to them. Many people, including myself, pointed out at the time (and you didn't have to be very bright to see this and to point it out) that this was more or less inevitable, that if you give two sides a veto in a situation in which there is no acknowledgment of what the original problem was, where there is no clear statement of in what way the new arrangements are supposed to overcome the old difficulties -- in that situation it is inevitable that each side is going to mobilize its own forces to the maximum in order to get the most pressure and to use the veto which it has been given as a tactical and strategic device. What else are they supposed to do? This is ordinary, common bourgeois politics. And in a sense that's all that's happened.

Having said all that, of course, it is difficult to see what other type of agreement *could* have come out of the discussions, given the nature of the parties, the fact that they are communally based. That within both the unionist and the nationalist communities there is endless competition as to which party will best represent the one community vis a vis the other. That is to say specifically in unionism there's the Democratic Unionist Party led by Mr. Paisley and the Ulster Unionist Party led by Mr. Trimble, and their argument *really* before their electorate is which of us is going to get the best deal and which of us has performed best and can be trusted to perform best for *our* community when compared to the other. And similarly on the nationalist side there's the SDLP and Sinn Fein making the same argument. And given that that's the pattern of politics in Northern Ireland and has been down through the years, if you make an agreement based upon that, while not putting more blame on one community than on the other or on the politicians representing one community more than the politicians representing the other, then deadlock is inevitable. This is something which was pre-programmed to deadlock, and it doesn't deal, it never dealt with the fundamental problem in Northern Ireland -- in fact, it's based upon evasion of the fundamental problem, and therefore I'm ambivalent at best about apportioning blame for the breakdown of the Agreement. I think that what we're going to *have* to do now, and that sooner later, whether it's now in the year 2000 or whether we're going to have to go through yet another period of bloodletting before we come back to it, we're really going to have to look more fundamentally at our position, and we're going to have to examine the adequacy of the Agreement rather than debate endlessly about who is and who is not living up to the spirit of the letter of the Agreement.

MB: Right. One thing that I know that Bill Rolston has called for is a Truth-telling Commission similar to what's been done in South Africa, and I kind of get the idea from what you are saying that perhaps that's part of what needs to be done -- to actually do an inventory of what has actually happened, in order to reach a sense of what would then be an Agreement that would address the actual problem?

EM: A truth-telling commission, or a truth and reconciliation commission, or whatever it would be called, might well be a useful device, if everybody approves it on an even basis. You see, again, the model of the truth and reconciliation commission (and there've been others, in Guatemala, for example, although the one most cited here is the one under Bishop Tutu in South Africa), many people would question how satisfactory that experience was, because from the point of view of many of the Black people in South

Africa, they've been very explicit about this, it seemed to me that members of the security forces who had committed the most appalling atrocities simply had to come along and say "I did that; I did it for political reasons" and they were automatically granted amnesty, and I don't know whether that actually reconciles things. Bishop Tutu describes it in his sort of a warm, quasi-Christian way, that "people can begin to look at one another as they share in this experience," but I doubt it myself. But certainly, telling the truth about what happened, particularly if we had the truth about what the security forces were up to, not just in the course of the Troubles but before hand, the oppressive relationship between the security forces of the state and the nationalist community, certainly if we had the truth of that come out and that was acknowledged it would be a big step forward. But there's very little chance of that happening, really. The British authorities in particular are steadfast in their unwillingness to acknowledge their own role in the Troubles at all. Indeed the chosen stance of the British government and Mr. Blair, as of all his predecessors, was to present themselves as sort of benign outsiders standing between two contending factions of warlike people and trying to wean them away from violence and to supervise the arrangements which will enable selfish, unruly people to live at peace alongside one another. There's no acknowledgment at all, so far, of Britain as an actual participant in the violence in Northern Ireland, much less an acknowledgment that they were the initiators of the social and political and economic problems, and therefore of the violence which is rooted in those problems. So if we're going to have a truth and reconciliation commission... I mean, I think that the Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries, for various reasons, are probably quite willing, and many of them have, come forward now and say what they did, and how much they regret the things that they did, or some of the things that they did; there's no sign at all of the British state being asked to do this. And again, if you go back to the Agreement, you will find nowhere, *nowhere*, not a phrase in the Belfast Agreement acknowledges the role and the culpability of the British state in Northern Ireland; it is simply off the agenda. And I think that history may find it remarkable that the Irish Republican movement, in particular, signed up to an Agreement which implicitly granted historical amnesty to the entirety of British imperialism in Ireland.

MB: Beautifully put. I think you yourself, though, have suggested one of the reasons why Sinn Fein might have signed on to such a thing. Which is that they may have been under more pressure than anybody was really aware, given the demonization of the entire nationalist community that goes on in the press both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic and abroad, that there may have been a lot more pressure building from below to bring an end to the armed struggle. That people couldn't just keep gritting their teeth and sort of rationalizing one thing after another. And that's a very difficult thing to talk about; it would be difficult to talk about from within the nationalist community, and tricky to articulate from outside as well. I think you're in a kind of unique position of being able to point that out.

EM: Well, I think that the Republican experience of the last thirty years is a very singular one. I know we find all sorts of parallels, and Republicans in particular liken themselves to the PLO, the ANC, and so forth, the Sandinistas, and so forth, and of course there are parallels, obviously, and similarities. But each of these situations is

unique and distinct, and of course the Northern Ireland situation is unique and distinct. And it's got ideological features which are curious. For example it's possible to question just how *republican* the Republican struggle has actually been. By that I mean that at the heart of republican ideology is the notion of Irish nationhood and the imperative to vindicate Irish nationhood and to settle for nothing less than the thirty two county Irish republic and to trace their origins back at least to 1916 and the Easter Rising in Dublin, and indeed to regard the institutions envisioned in 1916, and which took shape then in the War of Independence between 1919 and 1921, to see them as the sole legitimate source of authority in Ireland. And that's very crudely and briefly what lies at the heart of Republicanism. And that view of Irish history and of their own role within it has certainly had a utility for Republicanism, in that it provided the basis for what many on the outside would see as the intransigence, and people on the inside would see as steadfastness as they pursued their goals down through the years. Now this was really a minority point of view, the Republican point of view was a minority point of view among nationalists in the North right up to the early 1970's. It's interesting to look back right across the sweep of the twentieth century and to see that the Catholics of Northern Ireland were always the *least* republican Catholics in Ireland. For example, as far as Republicans are concerned, the key, defining election in Irish history was the 1918 general election, when Sinn Fein overthrew the old constitutional nationalist party and a *big majority* of the nationalist seats in Ireland went to Sinn Fein rather than to the old party, which was the remnants of Parnell's party. And if you look closely at that election, Northern Ireland was the one area where Sinn Fein did *not* dominate nationalist thinking, where the old constitutional party still retained considerable support. There was only one constituency, there were actually two, but one was an aberration, in Wexford, but in a straight, clean fight, as it were, between constitutional nationalism of a very moderate nature, supporting Britain in the First World War and all the rest of it...

MB: The Redmondites...

EM: The Redmondites, yeah. The only constituency in the whole of Ireland where in a straight fight the Redmondites beat Sinn Fein was West Belfast -- the heartland, now, we are told of traditional republicanism. And in that election, a man called Joe Devlin, a conservative, right wing, uh...

MB: imperialist...

EM: Yes, indeed. But he beat De Valera, who was the Sinn Fein candidate! And beat him handsomely. And the only place in Ireland! It's very interesting, when you look back on it, that it should have been the Falls Road, in Belfast, that was the least Republican place in all of Ireland. And of course it was, I think, precisely because in that time the Falls Road was hemmed in; the Catholic community was a minority community, had experienced great violence, and it wasn't at *all* clear, if the people there had opted for a militant republicanism, how exactly they were going to put that into practice. They would have had to fight a *war* against the majority Protestant population surrounding them. And what would be the result of that war, given that they were virtually unarmed, and the loyalist paramilitary groups were *very well* armed, and vast numbers coming out of the

British Army after World War I and so forth, and with their paramilitary organizations intact -- indeed, the paramilitary organizations which were to *become* the police force and the military forces of the new Northern state. So right up until 1968 and the early days of the Civil Rights movement, Republicans in Belfast and Derry were very much a minority tendency.

For those who are interested in statistics, when I was writing about it recently, I looked at an account of the annual Easter commemoration in Derry in 1967, the year before the balloon went up. Of course Easter is the great day, the holy event of the republican calendar, celebrating the 1916 Rising. And according to the *Daily Journal*, the local paper, the attendance at the republican rally in Derry was twenty seven. And after that there was a letter to the *Daily Journal* pointing out that it wasn't really twenty seven because the twenty seven included two members of the RUC Special Branch who were trying to spy on the thing. So this was a tiny fringe organization at the time. But what they did represent was the intransigence of refusing to recognize -- this was a group which had refused to recognize the authority of the Northern state or, indeed, at that point, the Southern state either. And that sort of militant stance, in the *aftermath* of the attacks by the RUC of the Civil Rights Movement, when mass elemental anger swept through the Catholic community of the North, the Republican movement was like a lightning rod that attracted that, and people coalesced around it, and it matched the mood of the people. Now, your political organization which can match the mood of the masses is doing very well! I mean, of course it's really an absolute *key* for any revolutionary organization of any sort -- whether nationalist revolutionary or socialist revolutionary or anything else, to be in tune with the mood of the masses when they grow into militancy, and begin to ripen towards confrontation with the state, so, I mean the Republicans certainly did that. But, if you look, then, at the last twenty five years, I think it's questionable the extent to which the masses were *actually* coalescing around republican ideology. I don't think that they were, in that respect. Although this has only occurred to me, I must say, since the ceasefires, because the ceasefires and subsequently the Agreement fell so far short of what Republicans had been fighting for that when the ceasefire was called first in September 1994, it seemed to me an absolute *mystery* as to why the Republicans took to it so enthusiastically, and all but without dissent, that Sinn Fein supporters rallied to the Agreement. And how could they accept something which was... not just didn't deliver *everything*, but didn't come *close* to their demand of British withdrawal from Ireland and the constitution of a single united republic across the island? And the explanation, I think, is that in many ways it had been an illusion. It's dangerous to talk about the masses having illusions, because I think it's patronizing and usually just wrong, but in this case I *think* that what we actually saw -- my reading now is that the political developments and ideological developments within Republicanism go back to the late eighties. That being that the republican leaders realized at a fairly early stage, certainly by the mid-eighties, that actually the *mass* of their supporters, although they were *extremely* loyal to the Republican leadership, they had come through and shared a very intense and painful experience, and that's certainly true, certainly still their followers are very, very loyal, to the republican movement, but there hadn't *actually* been support for the key ideas of Republicanism. And one way of looking at the process leading up to the ceasefires is not, as it's commonly presented, of Mr. Adams and Mr. McGuinness sort

of carefully and sensitively leading a militant community towards constitutional politics and *luring* them away from violence and into constitutionality. Another way of looking at it is that they were realigning their own movement to meet the actual thinking of the people that they sensed that they were, if not far out in front or in another way of looking at it, far behind, but certainly were out of alignment. The ideas of republicanism were not in alignment with the mass of republican supporters, and the adjustment was not the mass of people adjusting themselves to the new stance of republicanism, but the movement itself adjusting itself to where its supporters were actually at and doing that in a way that involved the abandonment of armed struggle, and necessarily the presentation, particularly to their *core* supporters, of a new strategy as a better way of achieving the old traditional aims. And this was a -- to look at it in a cynical way -- subterfuge, but I suppose if you wanted to be positive about it, you would say it was just a common sense way of doing it, to argue that they had discovered a *better* way of achieving a united Ireland than armed struggle, that this meant postponing the achievement of their ideals, abandoning armed struggle and putting in place new alliances with the SDLP, with the Dublin government, with corporate Irish America, and that this would give them a political clout which would be stronger and more effective than the military clout of the IRA. Now it seems to me that that was wrong, but that was the argument. And that strategy may well be coming to grief.

MB: Right. I'm thinking of three different things all at once -- let me see if I can pull them out. One is that in a certain way, this realignment could be seen as an attempt to realign with where the civil rights movement was originally going. Because this does seem more attuned to that sort of direction [that is, basic civil rights], or to open back up that possibility. I think you are right about what the weaknesses are that are going to make it not possible to pick up that stitch with this particular crochet hook, but that's one thing -- I wonder if this doesn't mark a kind of yearning in people's hearts to go back to what had been something that had seemed to offer real hope. Whereas I think that what happened after Bloody Sunday and after internment is that people's hearts were so broken that the politics that came in was (I feel the same way as you do about not projecting too much onto what other people are thinking), but it was a *very* hard road -- it was a *very* hard, painful road, and its high point came with the Hunger Strikes. And this is another thing that came into my mind is that I think that there were two trajectories within mainstream republicanism, which consisted of what was happening within the prisons, and then what was happening outside the prisons. And I wonder if part of what's happening isn't that the people who were within the prisons who were really transformed in these incredible ways, intellectually transformed and ideologically transformed, at depth, had a different experience in ways that may have been effaced by the depth of the emotional identification that was felt by people on the outside. But that the people on the outside underwent emotional experiences but didn't get -- you know, I think the status of socialism and the status of class analysis was really important within the prisons -- during the period leading up to the Hunger Strikes and thereafter, class analysis was really important and that was one of the defining *features* of the new republicanism. But I don't think it was on the outside, and I think that may have been hidden because what Bobby Sands meant to people who had been through the prison experience and what Bobby Sands meant to people on the outside would have *looked* like the same thing and *felt* like

the same thing, but wouldn't have meant ideologically the same thing. Does that make sense?

EM: Yes, it does make sense. As I've said before, history might well record the twenty five years or whatever it was of republican armed struggle not as a resurgence of traditional Irish republicanism, but as a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement in another way.

MB: So history may actually see more of a continuity between the Civil Rights struggle and then the emergence of modern republicanism?

EM: Yeah. Let me say one thing... it's a marginal point really, but if you go down to the Bogside and look at the murals, the huge murals on the walls, I find it very interesting that they all date from the period of 1968 to 1972. There's hardly anything... I don't think there's *anything* that comes from the armed struggle itself. There's a monument in the cemetery, now, to the Hunger Strikers, and so forth, and there's references to the IRA and the armed struggle, but the huge murals are all about the Civil Rights movement. And I think that's the period, and that's the experience that the community feels the most comfortable with. That's when it remembers itself as having been at its best, when there was the most hope and the most sense of forward momentum. And the Civil Rights struggle, like civil rights struggles anywhere, was about equality. People wanted to be treated equally, they wanted dignity, they didn't want to be fucked about because they were Catholics or Blacks or women or whatever they may be, or because they came from a Catholic nationalist background. They didn't want to be treated like shit, which is what was happening. And to an extent I think *that* demand, and an absolute insistence on being treated with dignity and treated *equally*, is what has carried the struggle through. And that's a very basic thing! Politically, it's a very low-level demand [laughs], really, just to look for equality. But from the outset, it was a demand which the Northern state couldn't meet. This led to the attacks by the state on the Civil Rights movement, and therefore led to a *retaliatory* assault on the state as expressed through the IRA, but maybe it always was a struggle just for equality and for political arrangements of whatever kind, which would guarantee equality.

You see, in the way I look at it, there was *mass* enthusiasm for the Agreement in 1998 -- no question about it. I mean, I argued against the Agreement, and it was a very lonely task, to argue in certain parts of the Bogside against the Agreement. In fact, some people told me I was mad -- "you're mad!," they'd say, because there was only this tiny little group of people, in places like the Bogside, seemingly aligning themselves with Ian Paisley and so forth.

MB: Exactly! It put you in really bad company, right? [laughing]

EM: Yeah. And you could say that, of course -- we had great difficulty to find space, and to make the argument, amid the great enthusiasm for it. And that sort of confirmed something in my mind, because the Agreement was all about equality. Everybody's now going to be equal, but as I say, without ever explaining why they have been *unequal*, and

no blame being attached to any institutions of the state, or political parties on the unionist side or anybody else, for the long years of inequality and oppression. But it promised equality, and people went for that, saying *that's* what we want. And they were told to believe, even though other people were being told the opposite at the same time, they were *told* to believe that this document could deliver equality, and they said yeah, we'll go for that, we'll vote for that, yeah, of course, it's terrific. Now we're two years down the line and we're discovering that there's more to it, that perhaps that was wishful thinking. I believe it was wishful thinking -- it was delusion. But nevertheless, that confirmed in my mind that the dynamics within the Catholic community, both around and within the Republican movement, were far more complex and subtle and contradictory than they appeared from the outside, and that certainly you can't find an adequate account of what was happening simply by talking about particular republican leaders like Jerry Adams and the people around him changing as they grew older and wanting to make peace with their neighbors and convincing militants that they should do this and so on. I mean, that really is a trite and banal account, albeit that it is the standard account of what has happened to Republicanism. In reality it's far more subtle, far more contradictory, and still very far from being resolved.

MB: What's the overall climate like now? How militarized do things feel in the North?

EM: Well, the situation's a mess [laughs]. It's very difficult to read. It's never been as difficult to read the situation as it has been at the moment. I mean, speaking personally I've never found it as difficult to predict what is going to happen within the next year, in fact I don't know what is going to happen. And usually -- frequently I get it wrong, but I used to be, frequently, arrogant enough to say "here is what is going to happen, because here are the forces which are involved, and here's the way they're moving, and therefore we can predict." and so on -- and I look at it now and I say I haven't a *clue* what is going to happen. The situation is very militarized; there's still watch towers and surveillance equipment all around us. There has been a diminution, certainly, of the British Army presence on the streets, which they would say is simply a response to the security situation. But certainly they have spies out all the time, and there's absolutely no doubt that the secret forces of the British state are continuously active.

The paramilitary groups all still exist, of course, and they're not going to go away. People look at the streets and say there is less violence, and there *is*, of course -- much, much less violence than in the nineteen seventies and in the eighties. But there is certainly no lessening of sectarian feeling. It may not be as intense or focused in its expression, a lot of the time, but it's certainly there. If anything, the potential for major, mass sectarian violence is at least as great now as it ever was in the past, and this sectarian feeling is actually augmented by the fact that the Agreement acknowledges no aspect of social existence in Northern Ireland *other* than Catholic nationalism or Protestant unionism. Again, this isn't an abstract thing, it's written into the Agreement.

MB: It copper-fastens identity along one axis.

EM: Oh yeah, absolutely. It's all on one axis. For example, if you're elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly, on the very first day, it's written into the Agreement, what you have to do is identify yourself as either nationalist, unionist, or "other." There is provision for *others*, and the Women's Coalition and the Alliance Party have both opted to identify themselves as "other." But very interestingly, having admitted the existence or the possibility of "others" in registering, they then disappear from the Agreement. When it comes to deciding how you'll elect the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, and the Executive, and the Cabinet, and when it comes to making all key decisions, * * * * *

MB: You were born and raised in Derry, right?

EM: Mm hmm.

MB: And your father was a socialist, right?

EM: Yeah, my father was a--my father was one of those Catholic socialists--he went to mass literally every morning and communion. [He was a] very devout Catholic, but also was an activist in the trade union movement and a socialist and he was able to be both these things simultaneously.

MB: And do you think they were connected for him, or compartmentalized?

EM: I think they were compartmentalized to a certain extent--well, they were connected to a certain extent. He would have seen it as living a moral life. I think he regarded the Catholic Church as about his salvation in the next world and being a socialist as salvation in this world.

MB: Very reasonable! [laughs]

EM: But I mean, they were compartmentalized, yeah.

MB: I would have thought that the most common outlet during his time for social dissatisfaction would have been some kind of nationalism, and I was wondering if you had a sense of how he came by his socialism.

EM: No, my father was never a nationalist. . . . Indeed, one of my father's boasts used to be that there never was a nationalist vote that came out of our house! Nowadays, in the year 2000 . . . , the entire population of the Bogside is deeply nationalist, or that's a nationalist area [but] when I was growing up, the nationalist party was always opposed, at *every* election, by some sort of labour candidate, whether Northern Ireland Labour, or Irish Labour, or Independent Labour, and quite frequently this would just be opportunist trade union bureaucrats who would fancy themselves becoming politicians, but nevertheless, they would run for the labour ticket. They never were elected, but did reasonably well; the voting was usually about 60/40. The nationalists would win in the

Bogside by about 60/40, or maybe 70/30. But certainly the idea that there was just a solid block of nationalists, of people who were thinking nationalism and voting nationalism, is untrue. There always was a Labour presence.

MB: And there was always a split that way--they were always in opposition *to* each other?

EM: Absolutely.

MB: Okay, that explains things to me about the political environment you came up in.

EM: Absolutely. All my early memories of politics are of crowds of men--it was always men--in the front room of the house in a room filled with smoke, because there were a lot of trade union disputes of one sort or another going on, and my father was the secretary of the local branch of the electricians' trade union, and was a member of the local trade union council, which brings together all the unions in the area. So there was quite a lot of activity. . . . So we'd always had a sense of the trade union movement. The great heroes that I grew up with when I was a child--I don't mean *knew of*--we were taught about Patrick Pearse and 1916 and in a vague, general way, one was expected to have some sort of reverence for that tradition-but . . . the name which loomed largest . . . was Aneurin Bevan, who was the Minister for Health in the British Labour government [and] who brought in the Nation.^[2] That was *the* great achievement of the post-war Labour government. And of course the unionists at Stormont, in the Northern Ireland government, were unable to prevent it. All of them, the unionist MP's at Westminster, every single one of them, voted against the National Health Service, voted against what you would call Medicare, . . . but of course it was a United Kingdom decision and not a Northern Ireland decision, and it was imposed against their will. In fact, it had to be delayed for a year in Northern Ireland, as was the Education Act of 1947, which brought in free . . . secondary and third level education. It took an extra year to get it in in Northern Ireland through the insistence of the unionists. Nevertheless, these were great achievements as far as people in the Bogside were concerned. So we were very well aware of that history. And of course the union my father was a member of was a *British* trade union, and was dominated, during those years, by the British Communist Party. . . . So that's the environment that I grew up in, and that wasn't all that unusual.

As late as 1967, in local government elections in Derry, the local Labour Party (which was a flimsy, moderate, opportunistic organization), nevertheless got thirty percent of the vote across the city, both in Catholic and Protestant areas. And that's only a year before the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. So there *was* a tradition there, shallow as it was, perhaps, compared to the deep roots of nationalism going back in Irish history, nevertheless it was there, and that certainly affected me. So that when I went to university, it was just natural for me, I don't remember ever thinking about it, I joined the Labour Club, and became a member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party and was on the Executive of the Northern Ireland Labour Party by the time I left university. There's nothing *strange* about that. . . . In the present context, that sort of political trajectory is a bit odd because there's no channels for that anymore, no structures in which you could

have that type of political experience. But that was quite common among the people that I knew, and our neighbors and the people who would visit the house. And I suppose that's affected the way I've thought about politics from the outset. I *never* thought of myself as a nationalist. . . . This business of people who swell with pride at the sight of the Irish tricolor, I find that bizarre, really. I mean, I understand about social rituals. Obviously it's common, the social role of nationalism, particularly in oppressed societies, it's not a mystery, obviously, the songs and the symbols of nationalism and so forth. But I can honestly say I've never felt it. . . . I don't feel deprived at not feeling it either [laughs]!

MB: Even the republican ballads--nothing?

EM: Well, some of them are OK and I can sing some of them and so forth, or I can even join in the chorus, particularly late at night in a pub, I suppose. But no, I've never been part of that at all, and I don't really want to be part of it. I think it will pass: this too shall pass away.

MB: I want to ask you about the 1798 Rebellion. You've written about it; you perceive that a different trajectory emerges if we map out paths in Irish history starting from there instead of the Easter Rising (1916) or worse yet, the Anglo-Irish War and partition (1922). Was that ever talked about--was that something that early on you saw as somehow a part of, not necessarily a socialist tradition, but a tradition of resistance to the state that is not based on nationalist pride but a sense of fair play?

EM: Oh yeah, 1798 still remains a greatly inspiring event, and not just because it was non-sectarian and went across the religious divide (Wolfe Tone was Church of Ireland, most of the leaders in the North were Presbyterians). It was internationalist in its perspective and was right at the cutting edge of modern political thinking of the time. When you read some of the debates, they are arguing in Belfast about Danton and Robespierre, and St. Croix, and relating to the United States and Paine's *Rights of Man*. You know, the first edition of Paine's *Rights of Man* published in Ireland was published here in Derry, in fact just about a hundred yards from where we're sitting, at a little publishing house in Shipley Street in Derry, and was published *entirely*, as far as I can gather, by Protestants--Church of Ireland and Presbyterian people--and indeed by people who were descendants of, one hundred years previously, the Apprentice Boys, the great heroes of the Loyalist tradition!

You go to Dublin today, and in Dublin city center there's a block of flats called the Oliver Bond flats, named after a Derry man who came from Faraquay Street named Oliver *Cromwell* Bond, a great hero of 1798 in these parts. But of course being in Dublin they couldn't actually call it the Oliver *Cromwell* Bond flats! [both laugh]. . . . That was a radical thing to be, one hundred years [after Cromwell], and [there's] that sort of connection between the radicalism of the British Isles, as it would have been called back then, and the development of Irish nationalism and Irish republicanism. . . . It just alerts us to the fact that there is more to this story simply than the oppressed Catholic Irish on the one hand and British imperialism and its Protestant supporters in Ireland on the other.

That basic model--it's not inaccurate, it's just incomplete. Wolfe Tone himself had an attitude to Catholicism which is closer to that of Ian Paisley and of modern unionism, and he believed that one of the reasons for seeking to end the oppression of the Catholics in Ireland was that he believed that in conditions of freedom and equality, the influence of the Catholic Church would wither away. He's probably right about that...

MB: Especially if it had happened then!

EM: Oh yeah. People are always quoting Wolfe Tone but they quote things that suit them. So *I* will quote things that suit me, like, he said "I'd rather not have a priest about the place." People talk now about unionists not wanting Catholics about: he refused to allow two Capuchin monks to come with him, Wolfe Tone, on the expedition from revolutionary France back to Ireland! He wouldn't have them on the ship! He said "no, I'm not going with priests." He was bored in Rouen, when he was waiting for the flotilla to be put together to sail to Ireland, and in his diaries he records going to mass one day. He wandered in as mass was being said, despite the revolutionary conditions and so on, and he came out and recorded in his diaries, "how can people tolerate such abominable nonsense?" It's not widely publicized that this was his view of the holy sacrament of the mass, under Irish republicanism!

There's lots of things in 1798, but [what I find most important is] the fact that these were wonderfully progressive and courageous people of their time, [and] that they were overwhelmingly non-Catholic. To this day [I'm inspired by] the writings and the speeches of Henry Joy McCracken, for example, a Presbyterian merchant in Belfast. They tried to take Antrim, and [he wrote the] wonderful phrase, he said "We're trying to take Antrim, and it's not quite Philadelphia, is it?" "Not quite Philadelphia." That should have been the title of a novel or something. But anyway, it was all they had to try and capture, and they failed.

And the failure of 1798 was a great, great tragedy in Irish history because the degeneration of politics afterwards, and the rise of the Catholic Church in southern and western Ireland, had the effect of alienating Protestant radicals... I mean, it wasn't until the 1880s that unionism managed to get a majority on Belfast City Council! It took as long as that. There were always the whigs. The main Protestant newspaper when I was growing up was still called *The Northern Whig* -- the whigs being the opponents of the Tories, you know, sort of the radical party in British politics. That strain is very very small now, but you still get echoes of it in radical press materials -- and it may be a bit fanciful, but occasionally, just *occasionally* in some of the rhetoric of working class loyalism you find echoes of it. You can find bits of that coming out, even [with] the Apprentice Boys in Derry sometimes when you debate and argue with them just on a casual basis in pubs and so forth, when you meet them. . . . So there's things going on there still. It doesn't do to exaggerate it, because that would just be silly, but there's more to this place than [Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists].

MB: No, there is this strand of unionist rhetoric that definitely sees unionists as the inheritors of the Enlightenment, and that that's what they're defending. Which is weird,

but it makes sense given all the different roots that you're sketching out; it's making more visible to me where that came from. All of this seems connected to your depiction of a reading of a play *from* 1798 that took place at the Apprentice Boys' Memorial Hall on the 200th anniversary of the 1798 Rising. How did you come to be there? You didn't explain in the article. Did they invite you?

EM: Well, it was very strange, but we were working with the local Trade Union Council, which I am a member of, celebrating 1798 and the 200th anniversary. . . . Somebody, I don't know who, but somebody had [this] notion [that] since [1798] had involved Church of Ireland and Presbyterian people in Derry [that we should address that]. . . . And in Derry, particularly, it was an entirely Presbyterian and Protestant affair [because] 1798 was condemned by the Catholic Bishop . . . [who] warned Catholic people that if you go into this enterprise you will be *infected*... by Presbyterianism, and that was his reason for telling Catholics not to become republicans! And so we were going over that and also we had our own little campaign. . . . In all, there were thirteen apprentice boys in Derry who, [in] 1688-1689, closed the gates of Derry [against King James], and they're the great heroes of the unionist tradition in Derry, and they became "free men of Derry." Their names were recorded, these thirteen glorious heroes, the thirteen apprentice boys. One hundred years later, the families of two of them joined the United Irishmen, and rose up against British rule in 1798, and their names were *removed* from the list of free men of Derry. So, we actually tried to run a little campaign, which never came to anything because we couldn't get any support for it, to have them reinstated, two hundred years later. And somebody approached the Apprentice Boys and said "look, these are two of your thirteen original *guys*," and that initiated a bit of a dialogue and the end result was that the Apprentice Boys had invited us to launch the 1798 celebrations in their Hall. We were a bit dubious about doing it, because we didn't want to give credence to a sectarian organization, but since they had *invited* us, it would have seemed just *churlish* not to engage and see could this be taken any further. So we had this bizarre experience of tripping into the Apprentice Boys' Hall, and one of the leaders of the Apprentice Boys did us the *honor*, I suppose, of greeting us in Irish. He had learned--he couldn't speak Irish, of course--but for the occasion he had learned a few words of Irish: *Failte Romhaibh*--welcome all. I don't speak Irish, so. . .

MB: So you can't say for sure what he said [laughter].

EM: That's right [laughing]. So that was just a little indication that some things are passing. It doesn't do to exaggerate this, of course. . . . But at least it's there--there's little sparks there.

MB: This is the sort of thing you talk about in your article "Across the Great Divide--Let's Do the Mau Mau Together." I really loved the final passage, where you wrote "those who are most gung ho for a 'united Ireland' should be especially assiduous . . . to maximize the chance of a break to the Left rather than to the Right [on the part of the Protestant working class]. That means making space for Protestant people in the politics of opposition to the State" (63). And that does sound like the sort of thing that staging

some kind of joint commemoration of 1798 is doing, is pointing out that there are other forms of opposition to the state than nationalist opposition to the state.

EM: I think it's more necessary than ever to make the point that you don't *have* to base yourself--and indeed it's not the best way forward--to mobilize nationalism *against* the Northern state. Because if you do that, implicitly, you're consigning the entire Protestant population into . . . involvement with the state and defense of the state. . . . It doesn't require a Marxist understanding of history--it just requires some *glimmering*--I mean a sociologist of any kind could work out that there are masses of disadvantaged Protestants who of course will be recruited to the service of the state by unionists and by flagwaving and imperialistic jingoism and so forth. It would be a crime, it seems to me, to regard the entire Protestant population as hopelessly reactionary. Which they *aren't*! Why should they be? In a very crude way, if you want to put it into a phrase, we should seek to mobilize the working class, and the poor generally, and marginalized people, *against* the state. And of course that can only be done on the basis of insisting on the equality of all people.

MB: I don't think you're going to like me saying this, but after talking to several people here in Derry and in other parts of Ireland and telling them that I was going to interview Eamonn McCann I'm going to have to refer to you in print as a folk hero of the Civil Rights movement. It's amazing to me, your stature--so many people across the spectrum were excited to hear that I was interviewing you. It's really notable to me how highly your integrity is regarded, particularly here in Derry, in your own community. And especially here, when I mentioned your name almost everyone brought up your role in the Civil Rights movement. So I'm interested in knowing how you came to play the role you did in the Civil Rights movement.

EM: The Civil Rights movement was almost an accident in itself, and my involvement was very accidental. In fact I never intended to be involved in it. I was living in London in the beginning of 1968 and I only came home because I had a sister coming home on holiday from Canada, and she hadn't been home for five years, so I hadn't seen her for five years, and I just came back for a week. I was living with a woman, and I had a steady relationship and a house, . . . and working full time for the Greater London Council as a tree transplanter. It was a wonderful job--I really liked it. I just came home and bumped into people--old friends--who were squatting people into houses and involved in agitation and during my week here I began to help out doing that. And I postponed going back, and postponed it again, and postponed it again, and the momentum developed and I never did go back to London. So I became involved in that way, without having intended to at all. So there was no *strategy* whatever involved. I never decided "this is the way to go and we should create a civil rights movement," it just sort of happened around me. There's a certain sort of pleasant innocence about that in one way, but also it was regrettable as well because in fact we didn't have a strategy. I mean looking back on it now, you can imagine what we should have done and what we should have said. . .

MB: Were you working with People's Democracy?

EM: Well, People's Democracy emerged in the wake of the October 5th 1968 demonstration in Derry, which was attacked by the RUC. The violence was very minor compared to what came later, but it was very shocking at the time. And People's Democracy emerged at Queen's University in Belfast after that and everything associated with it. I was never a member of the People's Democracy, largely because People's Democracy didn't *have* any members.

MB: [laughs]

EM: Well it was in the spirit of the times, I mean it was a radical student group and *everybody* was a member of it. They used to designate that *anybody* who came to a People's Democracy meeting was a member of the People's Democracy and had full voting rights and stuff like that. So the composition of the movement could change from week to week, and did. So this was, in many ways, a very useful sort of agitational structure because it meant that you were never hidebound by anything. But it also made it very difficult to develop coherent politics because . . . a different group of people could just go along and overturn what people had done before, and nothing ever became permanent policy. There was no way of developing a coherent set of ideas in that context. And that was very detrimental to political development, it seems to me. But I mean I was in Derry . . . and I rejoined the Labour Party then in Derry in the middle of 1968, when all this was going on, and we were working with young republicans (there were only a few of them around), and people who were members of *nothing*, but were involved in tenants' associations and housing action groups and unemployed groups and so forth. So it was a very disparate and incoherent group of people and, again, it would help things to work, because we used to just decide to do things standing at the corner. Someone would say "let's do such and such" and we'd say "yeah, let's go!" and then we'd do it. *Immediately*.

Our timing was right by sheer accident, that all these things were developing, the contradictions in Northern society: a generation of people had come out of the Catholic community in the North which now *had* some self confidence, which had been to secondary school and then to university and was unwilling to put up with the type of treatment that the previous generation had put up with. And also the British welfare state was important; it gave people a sense that at least there wasn't a bottomless pit of poverty to fall into, that there were certain *minimal* rights . . . that you're entitled to as a citizen. All these things were important, and also economic changes were important. The south of Ireland [was] emerging into the world; protectionist policies of the Fianna Fail governments in the south down through the years had been abandoned. They were now looking for investment from outside. The nature of society was changing in the south. Women were coming into the workforce, which had never happened before. Until the late *sixties*, it was the *law* that a female member of the civil service in the south had to resign when she got married! . . . It was madness!

And *all that* was beginning to change, so somewhere in the middle of all that a little group of agitators just fell into place in Derry. The old political parties, the old nationalist party in Derry and the older republicans entirely missed what was happening. We didn't actually intellectually apprehend it, but I think emotionally, just because we were on the

street and we were in our late teens and early twenties, we got into the mood of it, and it worked. You know, it worked! And suddenly we had hundreds of people and then thousands of people around us on these marches and so we thought, "Christ, this is great - this shit just might work!!" [both laugh]. So that's very good, fine, except, except, of course, that the structures that we had, or the *lack* of structure that we had, meant that we found it very difficult, indeed impossible to *handle* the situation which arose. We didn't even have a common organization to try to recruit people into, or to provide leadership, or anything at all. Or even a tradition to refer to . . . and of course after a couple of years that's where republicanism came in, with a *long* history, rooted *deep* in Irish society, and a *long* tradition that everybody more or less understood, even though they may not have known the history in detail. Everybody understood that republicanism is about 1916 and Patrick Pearse and Eammon De Valera and all of that. . . . We didn't have *anything* like that at all, as a counter-attraction to it or an alternative structure to it, so we became involved willy nilly, just surfing along on it, and really making things up as we went along. . . . Sometimes now I read things where people explai[n] why certain decisions were taken at the time, and the strategy behind it, and indeed I read some of my old comrades describing it in this way. And if they had had a strategy at the time then I dearly wish they had told *me* about it back then [both laugh], because I didn't know they had all these thoughts in their heads at the time! So it was a bit of a mess, to be honest, a bit of a mess. And you can romanticize it now, as we frequently do, like Springsteen, like "Glory Days"--you're sitting in a bar talking about glory days, and I do that myself at times--but Jeez, it was a terrible mess.

MB: One thing that struck me as you were talking is that Republicanism and the nationalist tradition draws its support vertically in time--it derives its authority from earlier precedents. And your movement--a movement that in a way has gone down in history without a name--seems to have been constructed horizontally, around the world, based on an awareness of something that was happening simultaneously in a lot of different places. I thought it was really significant, for instance, that the term Free Derry, on the Free Derry Wall, came from Berkeley, and that you were the mediator for the transferal of that bit of radicalism from Berkeley to Derry.

EM: It was an obvious thing to do at the time. The Black Panthers were *enormously* popular in the Bogside, *enormously* popular. Kids knew about Hughy P. Newton and Bobby Seals. We had a memorial week for Fred Hampton, I recall. He was killed in Chicago . . . they riddled an apartment where he was staying with bullets and killed him, and Bobby Hutton, he was killed in Oakland. And we *knew* all these names. And I remember somebody brought a Black Panther propaganda film over to Derry when we had Free Derry. After all, it was 1969, just after the British troops came in, and they didn't come right into the Bogside, so we *held* the Bogside, the community ran the Bogside for a period of months, and late at night we used to show this film, which ended, I recall, with the ten demands of the Black Panther Party, about free breakfasts . . . and anti-harassment, and always ended with this terrific [in a baritone voice] "Ten. Up against the wall, motherfucker!" The daringness of this "motherfucker" word, and the big black R&B voice, and we would roar and cheer at this, it was terrific, and the people related to that. And of course it was the time of May '68 in Paris and the anti-Vietnam war protests

(I'd been involved in that in London, before I had come back, in the Vietnam solidarity campaign), so there was always a sense that we were a part of that. Not only did we not look backwards--speaking for myself and the people immediately around me in that period--into Irish history, but we actually believed that we were leaving that behind. This seems terribly naive, looking back. Indeed, it *was* terribly naive! But my sense was that we'd consigned all that to the past. That our own nationalism, whatever progressive social role it ever had, had come to an end long ago, and this was now a new generation with new politics and so forth. Looking back on it, we seemed to be winning people to this point of view, but it actually was just the aggressive rhetoric that was associated with the youth movement, and the student movement of the time. People cheered the tone of it, it wasn't the content at all that people were relating to. And again, of course, who knows what would have happened had there been a strong and serious political organization or organizations coming out of that, arguing, with newspapers and an organized presence in the community and so forth. Had there been that, maybe things would have been different. Who's to say? Certainly it would have been possible to come out of that period with a very strong and organized socialist presence, but since we didn't have a socialist organization to act as a focus for it, that didn't happen.

But I do think, looking back on it, . . . I find it interesting that the period in our history in this town which is most celebrated and honored in terms of murals and lectures and all sorts of nostalgic exhibitions and so forth is that period. It's that period when people thought of themselves as casting off the categories of the past and relating to the wider world. The Civil Rights movement: people even to this day still think that that was the best time, really, and that was the most hopeful time. I mean, we can't go back there and we don't want to go back there, but things that were present there and which have been lost sight of since, I think it's important to rediscover.

MB: And there do seem to be things happening, such as the Bloody Sunday work that's being done. There does seem to be a feeling that there is something there that needs to be retrieved.

EM: Yeah, there has to be a re-examination. I mean, the Agreement of 1998 certainly represents the culmination of the political developments of the previous quarter century, with all the mainstream parties involved. And if that doesn't work, then there simply will have to be a re-examination of "well, where did this start?" and "how did we get here?" I am hopeful and I'm optimistic that there is going to be a wider-ranging and deeper examination of politics over the next couple of years than we've had in the last few years, and in that context, I think that there are socialist arguments to be made which will make more sense now than perhaps they made two or three years ago.

MB: Which brings us then to the Socialist Worker's Party. When did you get involved? It's always come after your name since I've been aware of you.

EM: Of course I was in and around The Tendency for a long time, from the days of the anti-Vietnam War movement. . . I wrote occasionally for the British paper, *Socialist Worker*, without ever being a member of the party. In the end I joined the SWP in Ireland

in 1983. And the reason I joined was quite simple: I was involved in the abortion referendum in southern Ireland, fighting against the constitutional prohibition on abortion. That was a very wide-ranging campaign, with all sorts of liberals and progressive people involved, liberal Catholics through to Maoists and everybody else, and I just became more close to the SWP people. They seemed to me to be making more sense than anybody else. And I joined in the middle of that campaign, and I've been there or thereabouts ever since. I mean, I wouldn't claim to be the most disciplined revolutionary in the party--indeed I'm not. I'm inconsistent, at times, in the amount of time and energy I give to it, but I do try my best to be a *reasonably* loyal party member, and I do certainly, subjectively, believe in the perspectives and policies of the SWP, and they make more sense to me than those of any other political organization.

MB: Can you describe the SWP?

EM: Well, if you have any sort of Marxist or revolutionary socialist politics you're outside the political mainstream, of course, but the SWP is also outside the mainstream of Marxism as well; we're a minority of a minority. What originally attracted me to the SWP or its predecessors, in London of the 1960s . . . was the slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but International Socialism." And I always had, like any teenage idealist, concerns about the Soviet Union and the fact that people seemed to be getting fucked about over there to an enormous extent. And mainstream left wing socialism was forever on the defensive about the Soviet Union and that never sat comfortably with me. So I liked the analysis and I took to them, without ever understanding where they came from, which was from a debate within Trotskyism in the post-War world and the Korean War and so on, was where The Tendency actually came from. I wasn't aware of that until after I was involved with The Tendency. But [it] both intellectually and temperamentally appealed to me. There was a libertarian spirit to it, or at least libertarian when compared with the Stalinite or Stalinist-influenced versions of Marxism that were on offer at the same time. And I also believe very much in the whole idea of socialism from below--but everybody, in a sense, who's a socialist believes in socialism from below. . .

MB: Not vanguardists.

EM: Vanguardists don't, no. And of course this is an ancient problem: what is the relation between the party and the masses. But [I liked] the emphasis that the SWP and its forerunners placed upon rank and file activity. And I remember exactly, I remember the very first thing [that got my attention] was in an argument over whether the Soviet Union was a workers' state, and Tony Cliff, who was a sort of intellectual leader of the International Socialist Tendency (as the overall organization was called), ask[ed] the question, "Who are the workers whose state it is? Can you identify them?" And that just struck *such* a note of common sense! I mean, if it's a workers' state, then it must be *their* state. *How is it* their state, if there's no democracy in the working class movement and in the Soviet Union decisions aren't made on a mass democratic basis? So that appealed to me as well. The absence of dogmatism also appealed to me. I mean, of course all revolutionary parties are dogmatic to an extent, but it can be a matter of degree, and even in the rhetoric of it. . . . To this day, I mean I really try not to be rude to them, but I really

can't stand people who've got the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and can write it out for you on one page of A4 paper and give it to you, because I think that class reality is messier than that. While at the same time we have to be clear in our ideas. I don't mean that you can muck about with essential concepts. But all that appealed to me about the SWP. And in Ireland particularly, when they came back to Ireland and got involved in southern Irish politics, the SWP was one hundred percent absolutely *against* unionism, *against* Orangeism, *against* the northern state, *with* the people who were fighting against the northern state, while giving no concessions to nationalism, while saying all the time "we're not doing this on a nationalist basis," and arguing that from within an H-Block campaign, for example. Tactically and strategically, we did it very badly, I imagine, looking back on it, because we alienated a lot of people and didn't explain ourselves very well, but nevertheless, the facts are that we were one hundred percent in favor of mass mobilization on the streets and giving unconditional support to the Hunger Strikers, but at the same time waging propaganda battles and ideological war against nationalism which was very much on the ascendant at the time. I mean I *absolutely* approved of that, and felt very comfortable with that. And still do. And still do. And I still feel very comfortable being a member of the SWP in Derry. We've got no problem at all--on the contrary!--to get stuck into the Bloody Sunday issue and to get stuck into arguments against the Orange marches and all the rest of it, while at the same time making it plain that we want to base ourselves on class mobilization rather than community mobilization. It can be difficult at times, and if we have an achievement over the last twenty five years, *really*, it would be in just keeping the show on the road, and continuing to exist in what are very unpropitious circumstances, very objectively. I mean, twenty years ago there must have been about half a dozen organizations describing themselves as Trotskyist, with a presence in Northern Ireland, and I think we're the only one left. And it isn't because we're smarter than anybody else--I mean, that's certainly not true--or that we've any particular trick about it, but I think we got that thing right--that simple thing right: that you don't compromise on your opposition to the state for fear of alienating Protestants, *you don't* compromise on that, but neither do you compromise in your opposition to nationalism for fear of alienating Catholics.

[1] This is the full text of an interview with Eamonn McCann that I published, owing to length considerations, in two pieces. The first half appeared in *Rethinking Marxism* 13:1, 2001, pp. 83-97. The second piece appeared in the spring 2002 issue of *Eire/Ireland*. It is my current favorite example of "what I do."

[2] For more details on Aneurin Bevan and the National Health Service, cf. McCann's essay "The National Health Service and the Struggle for Civil Rights," in *McCann: War and Peace in Northern Ireland*. Dublin: Hot Press Books, 1998.