Sous les pavés... The Troubles
Northern Ireland, France and the European Collective Memory of 1968

Studies in Franco-Irish Relations
Introduction

The year 1968 has become the focus of such intense, prolonged and sustained debate that it is guaranteed to go down, at the very least, as one of the most pivotal moments in the post-war history of Europe and the world. Traditionally, much emphasis has been placed on the national framework in relation to these events, with complex debates and discussions within individual nations as to what happened, why and what is has all meant and continues to mean.¹ Such a nationally specific focus is hardly surprising; the sheer magnitude of the revolt sent shockwaves through each nation concerned, forcing diverse and serious internal questioning that has been central in shaping respective national narratives on this “year” of upheaval. Given the immediacy of the urgency to understand, in many cases, it has been the very protagonists who have been central in forging the dominant narrative. This has inevitably led to a situation whereby, in each national setting, a specific representation, largely inflected by former militants and actors from the time, has come to dominate how these stories are told. As will be argued later, the strength of consensus varies from country to country (and this is vitally important in terms of the transnational memory) but generally this trend is obvious in all nations involved. However, in recent years, a notable change has become increasingly evident.

As the generation of 1968 passes, a cohort of researchers with a new approach to this period has emerged, reflecting a more general desire to break down the limited perspectives that have monopolised national narratives. This has been evident in a number of ways.² In terms of the actors, 1968 is traditionally associated with young people, with a particular focus on universities and rebellious, politicised students. However, as part of the push to go beyond the conventional narrative, there has been a clear desire in recent times to examine the roles of other actors so often marginalised. Such a widening of the optic has been equally

² For an example of how this has been evident in the case of France see Chris Reynolds, *Memories of May ’68. France’s Convenient Consensus* (Cardiff, UWP, 2011), pp. 130-35.
evident in terms of the temporal framework. The very use of the term “1968” to describe this period of protest is a potent example of the restrictive nature of conventional representations. Here too, however, there have been concerted efforts to break free from such a constricted timeframe and instead broaden the focus to incorporate a longer period running from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. This has led to the prevalence of terms such ‘the Long 1968’, ‘the Sixties’ and ‘les Années 68’.

This shift has been significant in relation to the third and final development; the transnational turn in “1968 studies”. Broadening the temporal focus has certainly aided the consideration of nations where the chronologies of their revolts differed from the limited “1968” optic. However, this has also been the result of growing recognition of the very real transnational element of this period of revolt. Whilst questions and debates remain over the nature of certain national narratives, there has been increasing recognition of the need to write the transnational into national stories and vice-versa. Though a certain degree of recognition of the international nature has always existed, the concerted effort to examine it closely has been overshadowed by internal, national debates. From an academic perspective, and despite some attempts in the 1980s to open up a discussion on this theme, it was – as Klimke and Gassert argue – not until the mid-1990s that the ‘transnational/ global/ international networks of 1968’ became the focus of a genuine research agenda. Since then, a degree of momentum has been building around this question. The 2008 anniversary signalled

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5 Philipp Gassert and Martin Klimke, (eds), 1968 – Memories and Legacies of a Global Revolt (Washington, German Historical Institute, 2009).

the culmination of this process when the transnational angle became one of – if not the – most important themes of the huge swathe of material and debate that coincided with the 40th anniversary. One only needs to cite some examples of the sheer breadth of academic publications and activity in 2008 order to take stock of the prevalence of this area of research and interest. This desire to break out of the national framework has continued since 2008 and will undoubtedly feature again as a prominent theme in the 50th anniversary in 2018.

The transnational turn described above is certainly a positive development in this burgeoning field of research. However, it is possible to argue that a dominant narrative has come to characterise representations of Europe’s 1968 in the same way that has been evident on the national scale. It would appear that certain

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“1968s” are considered much more prominent than others that have arguably been forgotten. When one considers the term “1968” from a European perspective, the events of France spring immediately to mind. It is fair to argue that of all the European national revolts of this period, it is that of France and the famous mai 68 that dominates how this period is remembered and recounted. There are incontestably many question marks surrounding the validity of the conventional representation in France itself with, for example, the reductive over-emphasis on Paris, the month of May and students coming in for increasing scrutiny. Nevertheless, the French 1968 is largely held up and regarded as the ’68 par excellence. This can be explained by a number of factors. The sheer magnitude of the French events that saw the nation brought to a standstill and pushed to the brink of a political crisis was such that – both at the time and since – it inevitably drew a great deal of interest from around Europe. There can be no doubt that during the heady days of May-June 1968, all eyes were trained on Paris whose influence was not without consequence on subsequent revolts elsewhere. Such an influence can also be related to the weight of France and Paris historically in setting an example to be followed. Such has been the centrality of France from the French Revolution through to the revolutions of 1848, that it cannot be a surprise that the French 1968 was considered as the ‘epicentre’ of this period of protest. In terms of securing a prominent place in how Europe’s 1968 is remembered, one must also consider the role played by the iconic images of the French events. For example, the street-fighting students launching cobblestones towards the monochrome and menacing French riot police with Parisian boulevards and buildings as the backdrop have somehow come to encapsulate how this revolt is presented as a youthful rebellion against an anachronistic and unyielding system. The same could be said of the enduring images of the occupied Sorbonne, the graffiti-clad walls of the Parisian Latin Quarter and the (now highly collectible) Beaux-Arts posters. Another significant consideration is the strength of the national consensus surrounding the events on France that has enabled such a strong French narrative to emerge and shape the European story.

The accumulation of these factors has led (as evidenced by the prevalence of studies of France and the omnipresence and centrality of mai 68 in transnational

9 Chris Reynolds, Memories of May ’68.
10 Dramé and Lamarre (eds), 1968, p. 24
11 To be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.
12 The sheer magnitude of material produced on the French events of 1968 has led to some describing the output on 1968 as an industry in itself (Reader, Keith, ‘Joyeux anniversaire! The May 68 industry’, Modern and Contemporary France, 8 (2)
studies\textsuperscript{13} to the French events of 1968 securing the role as the benchmark, the paradigmatic 1968 against which all other 1968s are measured, they have, in Klimke and Gassert's words, secured 'canonical status'.\textsuperscript{14} Such a privilege has not been bestowed on all nations – as is evidenced by the case of Northern Ireland.

The surge in transnational studies explained above has led to a broadening of the number of nations considered as having experienced a revolt of some kind at this time. From a European perspective, this has led in particular to a much greater emphasis on countries in the East as well as Western European nations often marginalised.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, the list of nations on the roster of Europe's 1968

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has grown exponentially beyond the core nations of France, Germany and Italy to include eastern states such as Yugoslavia, Romania and Hungary, or peripheral western revolts such as those in Belgium, Switzerland and Norway. However, it is particularly striking that the case of Northern Ireland remains virtually absent. There have been a small number of studies that have identified what happened in Northern Ireland as part and parcel of this period of revolt.\footnote{Fraser, \textit{1968: a student generation in revolt}, pp. 231-60; Klimke and Scharloth, \textit{1968 in Europe}, pp. 137-51; Dramé and Lamarre (eds), 1968; pp. 137-47.} However, in general, Northern Ireland is mostly notable through its absence in the vast majority of relevant studies.\footnote{For example, not one of the 12 studies cited in footnote 13 affords any attention to the case of Northern Ireland.} Such an omission in academic studies is reflective of the more general absence of Northern Ireland in how 1968 is considered. If France, as argued above, automatically springs to mind at the mention of the term 1968, such a connection is simply not so logical or forthcoming in the case of Northern Ireland.

The objective of this study is to explain just why Northern Ireland’s 1968 finds itself on the margins of, and arguably forgotten in, the European collective memory of 1968. The lack of connection may lead one to assume that in fact nothing happened of any significance in Northern Ireland at this time. This, of course, is not the case and, as will be demonstrated, the real reason lies elsewhere. Having established the French events of \textit{mai 68} as the paradigmatic revolt of this period, this study will measure the revolt of 1968 in Northern Ireland against that of France in order to demonstrate how it did have a 1968 that clearly merits a place in the ever-growing list of nations that form part of this European revolt. Attentions will then turn to trying to explain and make a sense of the absence. The analysis will progress across 5 core chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter 1 presents a fresh take on what is described as ‘France’s paradigmatic \textit{mai 68}’. Organised around the themes of ‘prelude’, ‘spark’, ‘spread’, ‘peak’ and ‘turning point’, this chapter provides an original take on this very well-trodden area of research from two important perspectives. Firstly, the chronology of this account of the French events bucks the traditional trend that tends to divide the events into three (almost separate) phases – student, social and political, ending with de Gaulle’s radio address of 30 May 1968. This chapter instead begins with a prelude before imposing a new chronological framework that tracks the

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development of the crisis from the trigger that was the 3 May, through the swelling of the movement to its high point around 24 May, before the decline right through the (often forgotten) June 1968. The second originality of this chapter is the fact that the version of the events presented is based around oral history interviews with 20 prominent former activists. The interviews, carried out by Professor Robert Gildea as part of the *Around 1968* project, provide a fresh and original narrative from the perspective of those so closely involved.\(^{18}\)

In order to enhance the comparative element of this study, Chapter 2 ‘Northern Ireland’s forgotten 1968’ mirrors the structural approach of Chapter 1 by telling the story around the same chronological framework (‘prelude’, ‘spark’, etc.). Here too, the originality resides in the source material that underpins this chapter. A collection of 21 interviews with very prominent actors in Northern Ireland’s 1968 are used to tell the story and offer a fascinating insight through the narratives of those involved. These interviews, carried out by the author as part of the *Around 1968* project, brought together a range of prominent actors who, whilst having commented widely and at differing levels on their experiences in 1968-69, have very rarely come together to such an extent for a single project.

Having set out the stories of the respective 1968s, Chapter 3, entitled ‘Comparable Revolts?’ continues to draw on interview material and presents a comparison between the two sets of events. Structured around the pillars of ‘contexts’, ‘activists/protagonists’, ‘action’, ‘expression’ and ‘interpretations’, it is argued that enough similarities exist between Northern Ireland’s 1968 and the paradigmatic French events for the former to be included on the list of nations considered as forming part of Europe’s 1968.

Having established that the absence of Northern Ireland is not related to the events there being so different that any such inclusion would be impossible, the study continues with Chapter 4 delving into the complex area of transnational collective memory in order to uncover the real reason behind the marginalisation of Northern Ireland’s 1968. This chapter begins with a consideration of the rise to prominence of memory studies, the complexities involved and the importance of memory in terms of national identity. The notion of a European

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18 The *Around 1968* project brought together 14 international researchers (including the author) who carried out approximately 500 interviews with activists from this period across Europe. The team produced a database of the interviews as well as a number of publications (Gildea, Mark, and Warring, *Europe’s 1968*; Robert Gildea and James Mark (eds), *Voices of Europe’s ‘68*, *Cultural and Social History*, Vol. 8, Issue 4, December 2011). For more information see http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/research/project/around-1968-activism-networks-trajectories.html.
collective memory (the reasons for, the process of construction and the challenges associated) is explored via the example of the 1968 events. A model explaining the stages of construction of a transnational memory, with the idea of ‘communities of memory’ as a crucial component is presented. It is argued that this model helps explain why, in the case of Europe’s 1968, some nations dominate the collective memory whilst others are left on the margins.

Drawing on the arguments outlined in Chapter 4, the fifth and final core chapter entitled ‘Understanding the absence’ explains how Northern Ireland’s absence from the European narrative is not related to national specificities in terms of how the events were played out there. Acknowledging the divergences from the paradigmatic model, Chapter 5 goes on to argue that the explanation for the absence is to be found in the divergent aftermaths that have led to the memories of the French and Northern Irish events being inflected in very different ways. This argument is then mapped on to the model presented in Chapter 4 to demonstrate how and why the Northern Irish 1968 has been marginalised from the European collective memory.

The study concludes with an examination of how the place of Northern Ireland’s 1968 in how this European revolt is remembered is experiencing an important change as a result of the contextual shift engendered by the peace process and the ending of the ‘Troubles’. 