Propagandistic Atavism in Post-conflict Northern Ireland: On Riots As Discursive Events

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In Northern Ireland (NI), riots are frequently employed by communities as a means of voicing political discontent. In the post-conflict era particularly, NI has witnessed a growing pattern of (reactionary) riots enacted by marginalised communities who feel increasingly disenfranchised. Yet, this communicative capacity of riots remains largely unsung in the literature on political communication in NI. Significantly, such marginalised groups remain side-lined in NI's public sphere in order to stabilise power-sharing arrangements. Historically, through state-censorship imposed during NI's political conflict, "the Troubles", such peripheral status impelled marginalised movements to utilise alternative media practices (e.g., political muralism) to draw attention to their agendas (Rolston, 1991, 2003; Hoey, 2018). In the post-conflict era, however, these marginalised actors are increasingly instrumentalising riots as publicly performed spectacles to publicise their political grievances.

The loyalist riots of spring 2021 stand out as one such case study, wherein a marginalised community utilised a riot as a mediated public platform to disseminate messages to external audiences that, up until then, had been inattentive to the concerns of loyalism. In lieu of the above, the following article's objectives are two-fold: firstly, we expound a conceptual understanding of riots as "discursive events" before presenting an analytical instrument capable of analysing riots in this light. Secondly, relying on primary data, we apply this framework in an analysis of a case study of the 2021 loyalist riots in NI. Beyond demonstrating the expediency of discursive approaches in the analysis of riots, the findings of our case study illuminate the strategic, propagandistic and instrumental dimensions of the 2021 loyalist riots which research has so far neglected.

Keywords: consociationalism, rioting, Northern Ireland, public sphere, propaganda.

Riots are frequently employed by marginalised or side-lined groups in Northern Ireland (hereafter NI) to gain public visibility and attention—which they are often denied. Yet rioting is not a novel feature in the state’s political culture. As far back as 1886, records document a recursive pattern of ferocious sectarian rioting between opposing catholic and protestant communities (Radford, 2015). Amidst periods of quiescence, riots were recursively employed by communities during the Troubles as a means of enacting dissent and resistance. More contemporarily, in the post conflict era, there is evidence that marginalised actors are instrumentalising riots as publicly performed spectacles to publicise their political grievances, which they feel are side-lined in the mainstream public sphere. Significantly, the literature on political communication has thus far neglected the propagandistic and instrumental dimensions of NI riots. Indeed, in the post-conflict era more generally, the ability for (mis) deeds (e.g., riots or bombs) to command the news agenda has largely been neglected, despite numerous studies documenting this capacity at play (as a form of “propaganda by deed” (Lacquer, 1977)) during the Troubles (Somerville and Purcell, 2011; Alonso, 2001, 2016; Miller, 1992, 1994). Contemporary research on riots in NI positions them as banal and routine features of the state’s political practice (Silva and Mace, 2015; Bryan, 2015) and as being intertwined with community-based notions of recreation (Leonard, 2010; Jarman and O’Halloran, 2001) and masculinity (Ashe and Harland, 2014; McAlister *et al.*, 2013). Thus, far from being a means of resisting the *status quo*, the literature paints riots as becoming increasingly incorporated into the social milieu of post-conflict NI. Importantly, no research has addressed the novel trend of riots being utilised by side-lined groups to command attention in NI. In this light, the recent riots of the loyalist community provide an illustrative case study for exploring the strategic and communicative dimensions of riots in the post-conflict era, which remain unexamined in the post-conflict literature on rioting in NI.

Accordingly, we set two objectives for this article: firstly, we present and rationalise a framework that can deconstruct riots as discursive events, which “appear on the discourse planes of politics and mass media intensively...[and] which influence the future development of discourse” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). After outlining how riots can be conceived of from this perspective, we secondly, apply this framework to a case study of the loyalist 2021 riots, with a view to illuminating their strategic, propagandistic and instrumental underpinnings. For contextual purposes, in the following section, we provide a historical and theoretical background of NI’s conflict and how it shaped its political communication and political arrangements. We also discuss how, in the post-peace era, consociationalism has led to a structurally dyadic public sphere that quells peripheral resistance through marginalisation. After delving into literature on riots, we then offer a conceptual discussion of riots as discursive events, before presenting our analytical discussion of the loyalist riots of spring 2021. We conclude by addressing the expediency of our devised approach and reflecting on the significance of our analytical findings to the broader negotiation of visibility and status within NI’s public sphere.

BACKGROUND: NORTHERN IRELAND – CONFLICT, COMMUNICATION AND CONSOCIATIONALISM

Northern Ireland has a longstanding history of marginalised groups utilising alternative communication methods like political murals to propagate messages of resistance, (Hoey, 2018; Rolston, 1991; Goulding, 2022; Goulding and McCroy, 2020) something which is rooted in the state's turbulent and violent history. For over 30 years, the state found itself in the grips of a violent ethno-nationalist conflict, involving the British state, loyalist paramilitaries and republican paramilitaries, which resulted in over 3700 deaths. During the conflict, mass media were routinely censored to influence public perception (Hayes, 2012; Miller, 1994) and exclude resistive voices from public deliberation. This was most notably imposed by a pair of broadcasting bans which prohibited the transmission of reports on the activities of proscribed groups like republican paramilitaries (Miller, 1994; Corcoran and O'Brien, 2005). Such measures elicited reactionary communication strategies from these marginalised actors, whose alternative media practices (Somerville and Purcell, 2011; Hoey, 2018; Rolston, 1991) gradually chipped away at the communicative deficit created by censorship. Ultimately, both broadcasting bans would be abandoned in the mid-1990s to facilitate the inclusion of these groups in the peace negotiations (Miller, 2002). The resultant peace arrangements —as enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA)— empowered opposing ethnic groups as representatives in a localised political structure. This structure was predicated on the principles of consociationalism (Lijphart, 1969), which was, through a “spirit of accommodation”, prognosticated to give rise to new integrative political practices, collective political consensus and a shared identity. This hope proved myopic, however, as the predominance of the ethnic binary prevailed into the 21st century. Rather than strengthening inter-ethnic cooperation, the new political structure effectively incentivised ethnic political elites to perpetuate their privileged positions by pursuing short term political capital (Hayward, 2014). This ensured that they maintained favour among their respective support bases. Striving toward long-term political integration, for example, which includes concessions, reflection and adaptation, might incur immediate losses in ethnic support. Such tribalistic politics has cultivated a zero-sum political system that is beset by distrust and a lack of bipartisan cooperation (Taylor, 2008; Rice *et al.*, 2013; Rice and Somerville, 2013), as is evidenced by the numerous instances in which the NI Parliament (Stormont) has been dissolved or has reached an *impasse*.¹

Northern Ireland's public sphere, therefore, can be characterised as a broadly dichotic structure in the post-conflict era, wherein ethnically divided sphericules (Gitlin, 1998) constitute the dominant nodes of affiliation. Within

1 Most recently, Following the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scandal, for instance, Stormont was suspended for three years (January, 2017-January, 2020).

these sphericules, elite political representatives (namely, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)) hold internally hegemonic positions, acting as the primary definers of politics for their respective support bases. So, instead of encouraging a new, integrated political praxis, the peace arrangements have effectively institutionalised the differentiation of these ethnic groups and allowed them to pursue their contradictory identity assertions (Rice and Somerville, 2013; 2018). Whilst both sides ostensibly hold a commitment to establishing a “shared identity”, their tribal preoccupation with polarising issues, such as language rights and ethnic parity, suggest that they are not concerned with fully cohesivising Northern Irish society. Importantly, these centralised actors, by commanding the news agenda in a highly partisan media-scape, have also maintained their legitimacy by routinely delimiting the public sphere and marginalising dissenting voices within their own segment of the ethnic divide (Rice and Somerville, 2018; McLaughlin and Baker, 2010). As such, far from being an open space of opinion formation characterised by meaningful transactions in the “spirit of accommodation”, we must interpret NI’s public sphere as structurally dyadic and curated by gate-keepers with a view to stabilising current power dynamics, and quelling peripheral resistance.

Image 1. Dichotic Structure of Northern Irish Public Sphere

Source: Own elaboration.

Peripheral to the centralised actors, however, we can also discern resistive voices or counter publics (Fraser, 1990): an array of marginalised political groupings which, to varying degrees, challenge the legitimacy of the new, consociational hegemonic order. Although an eclectic array, such actors do not typically recognise the legitimacy of elite representatives and structures (Tonge, 2012; McAuley and Spencer, 2011). Relatedly, they often do not support (or are critical of) the 1998 GFA and its resultant political framework. Members of these counter-publics

typically reside in territorially hardened and segregated communities that have not seen a reduction in the level of insularity since the adoption of consociationalism (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006; O'Dowd and Komarova, 2011). Moreover, these communities feel disenfranchised from the established political framework and are among the most deprived communities in terms of educational attainment, access to infrastructure and crime and disobedience (*Multi-Deprivation Measure Index*, NISRA 2017). Within these groups, hard-line, puritanical, nationalist ideologies thrive and legitimate more extreme courses of political agitation. In this sense, they pose a peripheral, but perennial threat to the new hegemonic order established by the 1998 GFA. Accordingly, the establishment ensures that these groups are often excluded from mainstream media coverage; and, that what little coverage they *do* receive is subjected to negative stereotyping as criminal or unintelligent through largely depoliticised representations (Reilly and Trevisan, 2016; Hayes, 2012). Therefore, marginalised groups such as the Ulster loyalist community and the dissident republican community are hampered by a communicative deficit in the post-conflict public sphere.

To counteract this deficit, such groups have continued a legacy of utilising alternative media and conflict propaganda techniques to challenge media bias/exclusion in the context of NI (Somerville and Purcell, 2011). New bottom-up media or conflict media (e.g., political murals) have routinely been used as spaces of consolidation for these groups to challenge elite political actors, vent community grievances or question the legitimacy of peace (Hoey, 2018; Bowman-Grieve and Herron, 2020; Goulding and McCroy, 2020; Goulding, 2022 forthcoming). Worryingly, we have also seen a rise in violent forms of protest or civil disobedience being utilised by such groups to draw attention to their respective communities' concerns —something they feel is unattainable through regular communication channels in the public sphere. Notably, the public spectacle of culturally atavistic rituals, such as political bonfires, parades and funerary practices, have been utilised to communicate contemporary political messages (Jarman, 2020; Hoey, 2013).² Similarly, (unsanctioned) parades constitute a recurring feature in the practice of these groups who vie for recognition of their political legitimacy.³ Such events are used by these groups to command the local news agenda by releasing accompanying press-releases (Goulding, 2022 forthcoming). Importantly, outside of these ritual, choreographed endeavours, one can also note the proliferation of forms of civil disobedience or rioting within these communities, which are instrumentalised as communicative endeavours by these marginalised actors.

² See, for instance, the commentary on Bobby Storey's death that featured on 12th of July Bonfires in 2020.

³ See, for instance, the unsanctioned republican Easter Commemoration Parade which preceded the murder of journalist Lyra McKee in 2019.

ULSTER LOYALISM AND THE 2021 RIOTS

Ulster loyalism denotes a variation of Ulster unionism, an ideological genus that espouses the maintenance of NI's union with the United Kingdom. Whilst unionists strive toward the retention of the political union, loyalists primarily declare allegiance to the British monarchy. As a nationalist identity, loyalism thrives in working-class communities and engenders distinct cultural characteristics that stem from Northern Irish Protestantism (McAuley and Spencer, 2011). Moreover, it avows a clear ideological opposition to Irish republicanism, which constitutes an Other from the loyalist perspective. Politically, loyalism has operated from the margins of power since partition. Indeed, it is routinely criticised for its failure to produce a cohesive political project over the course of the 20th century, with a wide array of organisations and actors enjoying only localised support. Although it belongs to the wider unionist community, it has always been held at arm's length from "respectable" unionism because of its violent dispositions (Jarman, 2018) and its pervasive discourse of "threat", which clash with the legitimisation of the discourse of peace and concession in the post-conflict era. Defence and protection of territory—symbolized by the severed and clenched Red Hand of Ulster, as seen on unionist flags and loyalist paramilitary badges and murals—continue to serve as loyalism's most salient discourse features. Loyalist communities bemoan a pervasive, encroaching sense of unwanted change to the status quo that they seek to defend and maintain. Loyalism's unwavering commitment to the status quo is captured by its motto of "No Surrender!" Although political loyalism had a brief moment of activity in electoral politics after the signing of the 1998 GFA, when David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson were elected to Stormont, today, it has no discernible electoral constituency. This is due, in part, to the fact that unionist voters have never identified with the logic of loyalist paramilitarism (Jarman, 2018).

Thus, within NI's wider consociationalist framework, loyalism can be categorised as a counter public. Loyalism's political deficit accounts for its lack of status in NI's dyadic public sphere; a marginality captured by the pervasive negative stereotypes that circulate within Northern Irish society. Moreover, loyalism's clear ideological aim has ensured that its tenets have not been renegotiated since partition; as a result, the loyalist sphericule of opinion formation remains a largely homogenous space devoted to in-group preservation. Relatedly, loyalist media activity and its utilisation of new media and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) unfolded at a lesser pace than its republican counterpart in the post-conflict era (Bowman-Grieve and Herron, 2020). Rather, loyalists hold a deep affinity for public expressions of their cultural identity; expressions which they see as ethnic rights under threat from the perceived de-ethnicisation created by consociationalism.

From this perspective, atavistic displays of identity hold great symbolic meaning to the loyalist community and have become routine, ritualised staples in their practice (McAuley and Spencer, 2011). Bonfires and parades around the Twelfth of July celebrations, which celebrates the unionist "planter myth" as a point of origin, are of particular importance for the loyalist community. This structured discourse, however, has ensured that loyalism's responses to what most conceive as political progress has remained formulaically scathing of such developments. For instance,

the implementation of the Northern Irish Protocol on 1 January 2021, as part of Brexit, establishing a new “hard” trade border in the Irish Sea, was met with a high level of fear and anger. Based on UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s promise to avoid a “hard” land border between Britain and Ireland, loyalists expressed outrage at the new Irish Sea border, with street graffiti declaring that the “Protocol equals war” (McKay, 2021b), and the Loyalist Community Council (LCC) (a loyalist umbrella organisation that represents the views of paramilitaries) condemning it as a betrayal. Ire in the community was already high due to the cancellation of the annual unionist Orange parades in 2020 during strict lockdown measures in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This ire was furthered in June, when, despite the restrictions, 24 Sinn Féin politicians opted to attend a public funeral for former Provisional IRA Intelligence chief Bobby Storey. Loyalists subsequently demanded that the republican politicians be prosecuted for breaching lockdown restrictions. But, months later, in what was seen by loyalists as a show of favoritism toward republicans, the North’s Public Prosecution Service decided against proceedings; thus, confounding loyalism’s sense of disenfranchisement from the unionist political establishment and Northern Irish security institutions.

It is against this backdrop that the loyalist riots began to unfold on 29 March 2021 —the day before the Prosecution Service announced its decision not to prosecute Sinn Féin’s politicians for attending the Bobby Storey funeral. Sporadic rioting initially began in a loyalist area of (London)Derry city, one of NI’s historical urban “seismic areas”, against officers working for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Rioting was sustained for a total of four nights here, before copycat rioting ensued in south Belfast on 2 April 2021 —a symbolically-charged day insofar as it marks the anniversary of the 1998 GFA. This was followed by additional rioting in mainly unionist working-class areas in the towns of, among other town skirmishes, Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus, Ballymena and Coleraine. Fierce sectarian rioting also occurred in west Belfast, at an interface between loyalist and nationalist areas, which is divided by the peace line (an ideological edifice) —though low-level interface trouble in these areas is ongoing (McKay, 2021b). Rioters filmed the escalating chaos as they launched “missiles” at the PSNI, with one notable video circulating on social media of one rioter going up in flames after a co-rioter inadvertently set him on fire with a petrol bomb (Beesley, 2021). During one of the worst nights, rioters hijacked and burned (after ordering the driver and passengers out) a Public Transit bus in a loyalist area. The chaos, which began with a republican death, continued to escalate until the subsequent monarchical death of the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Phillip on 9 April 2021, when loyalist organisations called for an end to the rioting to “mourn” his death (Beesley, 2021).

RIOTS AS DISCURSIVE EVENTS

Discursive events are discursively constructed or performed events which emerge “on the discourse planes of politics and mass media” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). In this sense, the individual, material actions which constitute a riot are not

events in and of themselves; rather, they collectively become “a discursive event if [and only if] it influences further discourse”. (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016) Discursive events do not “occur in a discourse, in a text”, but rather it is constructed in public cognition and discourse by “institutions, laws, political victories and defeats, demands, behaviors, revolts, reactions” (Foucault, 2013: 194). As such, a discursive event “is neither substance, nor accident, nor quality nor process; [they] are not corporeal” (Foucault, 1972: 231). Yet, this does not mean events are exclusively immaterial and ideational. Rather, a discursive event “takes effect, becomes effect always on the level of materiality” (Foucault, 1972: 231). As such, “treating discourse as an event implies awareness not only of the material context in which discourse arises, but also of the material context that discourse creates” (Cooper, 1988: 7). Accordingly, from an analytical perspective, “each material aspect of a discursive event should imply an incorporeal meaningfulness” (Cooper, 1988: 6). Below, we present a conceptual framework that can be utilised to deconstruct the loyalist riots of 2021 as discursive events, enacted by a marginalised community in the broader public sphere of NI.

Riots have been the focus of a discrete line of scholarship since the late 19th century (Le Bon, 1895; Sighele, 1891) in which they have been varyingly conceptualised as homeostatic disruptions of social order or as being conditioned by a host of psycho-social or sociological factors (Wilkinson, 2009). Although a recurrent feature of NI’s political culture,⁴ riots can be seen as a decisive strategic option from the perspective of a marginalised group. When, for example, relatively powerless groups engage in (political) violence or civil disobedience, they are typically equipped with a unique set of predispositions, assumptions and habit (Waldman, 2016) and they rely on their collective memory to inform such action. Rioting has played a recursive part in the post-conflict political activity of loyalism and NI in general, which speaks to Clausewitz’s (as cited by Scheipers, 2017: 47-48) argument that resistant forces “must vitalize their energies as far as the nature of [their] weapons permit”. In this sense, such groups, in the absence of any viable communicative alternative, see no choice but to rely on banal, ordinary forms of resistance or subaltern tactics, such as rioting. In the contemporary era, these groups rely on mass media and social media as force multipliers in circulating aesthetically impressive and provocatively charged images and text as a powerful form of “thought artillery” (Virilio, 1994: 5) that pierces the minds of audiences. Riots are therefore made contentious by the type of visibility, defined as a form of attention management (Brighenti, 2010), that loyalists are seeking in the public sphere. Loyalist rioters, to paraphrase Hayward and Komarova (2019: 63), *deliberately* use “various techniques and devices of visibility to communicate and interact with various audiences”. As such, visibility is not just a tool for (re)claiming territory, it is also at the strategic core of rioting itself, that is, it is what is being fought over (Hayward and Komarova, 2019).

4 See the *Belfast Riots Commission Report* (1886), for instance, which evidences a tradition of fervent rioting in the city.

Significantly, we posit that riots are not only used by politically marginalised groups to showcase a fervent identity to an external audience, but they also serve to condition group identity and ideology. At the same time, to the extent that they can usurp the news agenda, the explanation and rationalisation of such events impacts public opinion through their sensationalist resonance and public interest. Thus, as discursive events, riots cohere internal group structure and affect, while simultaneously communicating messages to external publics. We also posit that riots (i.e., their conduction/interpretation) are, on the one hand, constituted by/constitutive of latent ideological and identity features; and, on the other, that they are performed spectacles that shape broader public discourse. Our analytical aim, then, is to deconstruct how riots (and the individual misdeeds which constitute them), beyond expressing identity, serve to condition their explanation at the level of society and socio-political institutions. As such, by employing analytical filters, we aim to isolate these strategic and communicative dimensions of riots in a way that can facilitate a more direct engagement with them. To do this, we utilise an analytical framework that, following Ricoeur (1973), interprets riots as a form of meaningful action and sees the constituent elements of riots as analysable at the level of text. These meaningful actions or misdeeds collectively constitute the over-arching discursive event, which percolates into the public sphere and, reiteratively, informs socio-political practice. In this way, our analysis strives to identify how/if the explanation of a riot (*Erklärung*)—as furnished by the riotous community—conditions their broader comprehension (*Verständnis*) in public discourse as acts of propaganda.

**Image 2. Mutually constitutive/constituted levels of text/
discourse/social practice**

Source: Own elaboration.

Accordingly, our framework ties the textual realisation of riots as misdeeds, perpetrated by individual rioters, to the negotiation of their explanation in public discourse; and, in turn, their conditioning effects on the internal and external perceptions of group identity within the riotous community and their political grievances. To do so, we delineate riots according to their *latent* and *manifest* aspects, that is, (1) the ideational and immaterial structures that conditioned their conduction; and, (2) the manifest, material realisations through which

the discursive event is constructed. Importantly, these dimensions are situated conceptually on a recursively conditioning/constituting loop (visualised below in image 3). Regarding latent dimensions of riots, we isolate aspects like group structure, ideology and the historical context of loyalist rioting. Regarding manifest dimensions of riots, we discuss logic, materialisation, textual function and the frames constructed in relation to how riots are comprehended in public discourse. Each of these are explicated further in tables 1 and 2 below, where they have also been linked to an illustrative question which can evoke the dimension under consideration.

Image 3. Latent and manifest dimensions of riots on a recursive loop

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 1. Latent dimensions of riots as discursive events

Latent Dimensions	
Group Structure <i>How are the cast of rioters relationally dynamised as a collective?</i>	Riots are enacted by individual rioters whose relational power dynamics (in terms of centrality, status and resources) underlie internal processes of group identity construction (Wilkinson, 2009). Furthermore, a group's wider societal positioning and relation to out-groups, domains of opinion formation and political contestation must also be considered. In accounting for both structural levels, our intent is to outline how these power dynamics impact the production of knowledge around riots as discursive events.

Latent Dimensions	
Ideology <i>How do the riots speak to the underlying central and adjacent ideological (cl)aims of the group?</i>	<p>When conceptualised as discursive events, riots serve to express group ideology both internally and externally. Following Calhoun (1997), nationalist ideologies can be seen as discursive formations or constellations of central ideological claims or aims that a group reproduces in their discourse. These aims inform a group's codified behaviours and dispositions which govern its group (inter)actions or "habitus" (cf. Bourdieu, 1977). We argue that rioting should be situated within this habitus with the understanding that they are strategically oriented toward these (implicit) ideological (cl)aims.</p> <p>We accordingly treat strategy as "actions [that are] objectively oriented towards goals that may not be the goals [that are] subjectively pursued". (Bourdieu, 1993: 90) Further to the pursuance of these central (cl)aims, group ideology is also negotiated in response to more exigent concerns. Thus, both the central and adjacent aspects of a group's ideology must be examined in their reproduction in riots as discursive events.</p>
Latent Process <i>How do riots gain meaning from/ draw on previous riots which were enacted by the group? What tactics from the group's repertoire have been invoked?</i>	<p>Interpreting riots as discursive texts also warrants a closer examination of their diachronic significance within a group's activist repertoire. Similarly, rioting will hold certain meanings, significance and currency because of its enactment in the group's collective memory. How contemporary acts of rioting legitimate and draw from/or differentiate from previous rioting events is crucial in assessing their symbolic importance, along with the materiality through which they are manifested.</p> <p>Outside of the group's history, the broader public's disposition to rioting must also be assessed to see how this influences the negotiation of a riot's meaning, particularly in the context of a wounded society that is still haunted by the violence of the Troubles.</p>

Table 2. Manifest dimensions of riots as discursive events

Manifest Dimensions	
Logic <i>Which logic of action best accounts for the explanation of the riots in public discourse? How does this attribute/negate agency and responsibility or causality?</i>	<p>In analysing the underling logic of riots, our aim is to identify the process of instantiation and spread that sustained them. For this purpose, we consider four archetypal logics of action (which build on the literature on types of collective action within publics, (see Habermas, 1989 and Bruns and Burgess, 2011): (1) <i>Collective logic</i>, which refers to action undertaken as a result of a centralised process of consultation; (2) <i>connective logic</i>, which signifies the underlying rationale behind "reactive" rioting where one actor follows another into riotous activity; (3) <i>synoptic logic</i>, which involves the many watching the many, wherein rioting unfolds <i>en masse</i> in response to mass mediated events rather than through memetic uptake; and, (4) <i>instrumental logic</i>, wherein rioting within groups can be instrumentally orchestrated by elites for a variety of purposes and functions.</p> <p>Although there is a significant overlap between these logics of action (with specific riots typically not falling neatly into one category), they provide a workable framework to identify how riots (are represented as) unfold(ing). Rather than aiming to categorise the exact, positivist logical progression of these events, the aim here is to assess how these logical flows are reproduced in the discursive construction of the broader public comprehension of such events. Very often these logics are reproduced in discourse through metaphors and temporal (re)ordering and serve legitimising functions which elide/attribute agency.</p>

Manifest Dimensions	
Manifest Process <i>Can the material realisation of the riots be linked to the group's repertoire in terms of materialism of symbolism?</i>	<p>Riots are realised as individual misdeeds, or textual actions that construct the broader discursive event. Accordingly, we isolate two discrete foci, which, when analysed, elucidate riots as meaning-making performed events. The material and symbolic dimensions are discussed for their respective strategic and symbolic currency.</p> <p>In so doing, we aim to link the (historically conditioned) materiality and symbolic currency of riots to their overall comprehension in Northern Irish society.</p>
Function <i>What purpose does the riot fulfil? How has this been explained in broader public discourse?</i>	<p>As textual phenomena, riots (aim to) realise specific purposes, often only implicitly understood by the perpetrators of individual misdeeds. This purpose or "function" denotes its "social role, its capacity to serve certain demands of the community which creates the text". (Lotman <i>et al.</i>, 1978: 233) In demystifying the function of the riots, we link its overall comprehension in public discourse to the latent ideological context of loyalism and the explanations furnished by loyalists.</p>
Frame <i>How has the information been framed to condition the riots' explanation in public deliberation?</i>	<p>And finally, the negotiation of riots' comprehension in discourse relies on a (strategically motivated) process of (re)ordering information in narrativised explanations that come from communicative elites. In this case, from within loyalism or mass media. The accumulative effect of the negotiation process, results in salient "frames" of interpretation that emerge in the public discourse. As such, our aim with this final filter is to identify how the foregrounding/elision of specific information was negotiated in determining the frames of comprehension that filtrated into public discourse.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

As such, we hypothesise that the above filters will provide an elucidatory basis from which we can unmask the loyalist case study riots not only in terms of their strategic underpinnings and significance to the loyalist community, but also as their socio-cultural negotiation in the public sphere and comprehension in broader public discourse.

APPLICATION TO THE LOYALIST 2021 CASE STUDY

To inform our application of the framework, we rely on primary and secondary-mediated information available in the public sphere. Our choice of sources for this task was designed to reflect the nuanced and tribal media consumption patterns that characterise NI's media system (Ramsey, 2015, 2016). Thus, we base our analysis on the mediated material, which reported on/ conditioned the perception of the discursive event under analysis.

LATENT DIMENSIONS

Group Structure: How are the cast of rioters relationally dynamized as a collective?

As with other nationalist communities, the group-internal dynamics of loyalism are based on an elite-grassroots axis (Brass, 1991), where specific actors (individuals or organisations) maintain certain status, power and centrality built on perceived legitimacy. During the 2021 riots, the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), which has provided long-standing loyalist paramilitary groups—specifically, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Red Hand Commando (RHC)—with a united, non-militant mouthpiece for airing loyalist grievances, functioned as a centralised mouthpiece for the wider loyalist community. It effectively acted a centrifugal front for concerned parties to cohesively provide commentary on the riots. The centrality afforded to the LCC reflects a much broader reliance on primary definers in shaping NI's news agenda (Rice and Somerville, 2018). It also enabled the LCC, around the time of the riots, to emerge as the core representative of the loyalist community in the public sphere. Based on this, the running commentary they provided had a significant impact on how the riots were understood in the public sphere. Many online local and global newspapers, for instance, circulated the same narrative, framing the riots as the “the worst violence in years”, perpetrated by a community that was “ignored, bullied [and] patronised” (Carroll, 2021b).

Group structure also relates to the demographics of the rioters. Various sources categorise loyalist rioters as a cohort of mainly male youths, around the ages of 13 and 14 (though some were as young as 12) (Beesley, 2021; McKay, 2021a; McKay, 2021b; Kennedy, 2021). From this, and given the role of the LCC, we can infer an instrumental power dynamic at play, wherein loyalist elites propagate sectarianism amidst their youth through a sustained cycle of fear, suspicion and distrust of others—which often includes the manipulation and exploitation of young rioters (McKay, 2021b). This is exemplified by the post-riot co-opting of university-bound Joel Keys (19), a former advocate of moderate unionism, by the LCC as its new spokesman (McKay, 2021a); and, by other media statements that were subsequently made by loyalist rioters (McKay, 2021b). The LCC, then, was clearly aware of the propaganda potential of rioting. Consequently, the riots, while exhibiting episodic spontaneity, have a calculated component that is dedicated to ensuring the loyalist narrative is controlled in its proliferation into public deliberation: a process curated by loyalist elites.

Ideology: How do the riots speak to the underlying central and adjacent ideological (cl) aims of the group?

As noted earlier, loyalists have yet to establish a coherent intellectual or political ideology that will allow political loyalism to gain standing in the public sphere (Horgan, 2013). At their ideological core, however, they are royalists who maintain a puritanical allegiance to the British monarchy. Moreover, loyalist's collective memory is dotted with “statement-events” that point to certain historical events

like the “planter myth” (noted above) as a point of origin, along with a series of “trials” regarding catholic infringement with “victorious” outcomes (i.e., the Williamite wars). These historical memories shape contemporary atavistic cultural traditions, like the annual Twelfth of July bonfires and Orange marches and parades (in defence of Protestantism). They also provide the ideological justifications for refuting catholic claims to territory as well as a certain orientation to social action that catalyses atavistic behaviour. Such atavistic spectacle, like rioting, is a defensive posture directed at opposing any kind of change that would undermine the protestant cause in what is perceived as a hostile and encroaching world, anchored by a “fixed” and unchanging historical discourse of “No Surrender!”.

This ideological basis provides the context for what Rummel (1976), terms “trigger events”; a series of events that loyalists believed threatened their central ideological values and warranted a disruptive reaction. Significant events, as suggested above, like the 2016 Brexit vote (in which Britain voted to leave the EU); the subsequent the EU-UK exit negotiations; and, the steady ascent of republican party Sinn Féin (via the exploitation of uncertainty) within NI and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), created an atmosphere of uneasiness for unionists/loyalists regarding the political future of NI and the constitutional destiny of the six counties. The pressures wrought by the final EU-UK exit agreement, specifically, the Northern Ireland Protocol, outlining a new Irish Sea customs border, triggered a loyalist backlash as these destabilising events challenged its puritanical ideological values. Loyalist rioters, therefore, sought a theatrical displacement of the “new” status quo, with additional accusations (in response to the Prosecution Service’s decision to not prosecute 24 Sinn Féin funeral attendees) directed at the PSNI —based on the perception that it operated a “two-tiered” policing system (i.e., with the protestant-dominated PSNI using a particular set of rules for loyalists and exceptions made for republicans). From the loyalist perspective, the riots both defended the centralised ideological tenets of loyalism whilst also providing a platform for a vociferous denunciation of recent political events: a critical perspective they felt had been neglected by formal politics prior to the riots (Horgan, 2021).

Latent Process: *How do riots gain meaning from/ draw on previous riots which were enacted by the group? What tactics from the group’s repertoire have been invoked?*

Rioting as an “active” text has been a recursive feature of socio-political reality for both loyalists and republican communities since the 19th century onward as a response to their perceived powerlessness. Riots, according to Radford (2015: 5), were particularly ferocious during Belfast’s 1886 sectarian riots near Crumlin Road, “eclips[ing] anything seen during the thirty years of ‘the Troubles’” in the contemporary era. Moreover, urban riots also occurred in other areas, such as (London)Derry, the second largest city after Belfast in NI, and the towns of Lurgan and Portadown, which also experienced sectarian riots —though on a lesser scale. NI’s urban spaces, historically marked by protestant-catholic segregation (i.e., communicating streets), have thus long been marked by a “spirit of resistance to

authority” and specific “battlegrounds” or “seismic areas” where rioting occurred most frequently—to be contained and controlled by a quasi-military police force’ (Radford, 2015: 120). During the Troubles, loyalist riots were carried out by various organisations that identified as paramilitaries or community defenders. Unofficial loyalist gangs like the Tartan gangs eventually formed a subculture built around civil disobedience in defence/pursuit of loyalist ideals and an intuitive understanding of the strategic dimensions of “reactive” rioting, which involves exasperating security forces (Mulvenna, 2016). The continuous presence of rioting in the contemporary era, then, should be seen as part of an intertextual history from which loyalist riots gain meaning and significance from, in a continuous discursive struggle against change whose theatre of battle spans past, present and future. (Kennedy, 2021) Such an extensive history of rioting within loyalist’s repertoire further conditions a conceptual linkage between past violence and social turbulence and the contemporary civil disobedience enacted in the post-conflict era.

MANIFEST

Logic: *Which logic of action best accounts for the explanation of the riots in public discourse? How does this attribute/negate agency and responsibility or causality?*

In analysing the 2021 loyalist riots, we can identify a clear pattern of logical escalation with PSNI officers and republican/nationalists serving as meaningful targets. Loyalist unrest began on 29 March 2021, in the Tullyalley area of (London) Derry when a gang of loyalist youths armed with masonry blocks and irons bars set out to target surrounding nationalist neighbourhoods. Intercepted by the PSNI, the gang turned its anger towards the police, throwing one petrol bomb at police vehicles before they were dispersed. This early riot follows a collective logic insofar as it appears to have arisen from a centralised process of consultation. This initial outburst marked the beginning of four nights of escalating unrest, engendering a more connective logic, as copy-cat riots, through a pattern of memetic uptake or self-deployment, spread within and beyond (London) Derry into other loyalist neighbourhoods before spilling over into nationalist neighbourhoods in Belfast. Such frames of logical progression were conditioned by the justificatory frameworks proffered by the LCC. This was reflected in their broader explanation in the mainstream media reportage that avoided any mention of paramilitary involvement. However, the PSNI and other elite sources in the Northern Irish public sphere have observed that the riots were concentrated in areas that are controlled by loyalist paramilitaries, which suggests that the riots were condoned, or at least acquiesced to, by loyalist paramilitaries. This is further reinforced by the number of car hijacks (actions which ordinarily invite vigilante punishment in these communities) that were carried out during the riots; as well as the youthful demographic of rioters engaged in the misdeeds (and some of their media narratives (McKay, 2021a; McKay, 2021b). Additionally, as a mark of respect for the passing of Prince Philip, the rioting was eventually called off by loyalist elites. This suggests the existence of a (backgrounded and denied) instrumental logic at play.

Manifest Process: *Can the material realisation of the riots be linked to the group's repertoire in terms of materialism or symbolism?*

Loyalists, to paraphrase Bell (1987), reacted to peripheral events within a well-defined historical repertoire or tradition that legitimised their actions and anchored their strategy. This strategic background (and the inter-generational defiance that permeates "reactive" rioting) seeps through the minds of rioters like a liquid text pulled from the library of collective memory to the rioting foreground, "juxtaposing moments of the historical past with the convulsive events of the present". (Murphet, 2020) Armed with the imperative to discursively represent "oneself", loyalists strategically pursued a conquest of both the media and social media with their "sermon in stones" (i.e., kerb stone or bricks); an important (and historical) "accessory" in the ammunition of rioters that is linked to NI's visual aesthetic or ubiquitous building material. (Stainer, 2005) Based on their own political calculus, loyalists chose other material objects lighted with symbolism and aesthetic pleasure, like the burning of a Public Translink bus in Belfast, as a type of symbolic attack on Stormont's consociationalism and the "drip-drip erosion of [British] sovereignty" over NI (Carroll, 2021a). The riots, which lasted roughly ten days, also predominantly occurred at the most aesthetically strategic time of day, often in historically resistive spaces, relying on the darkening sky to illuminate the exploding fireworks and petrol-bombs, as well as burning buses, cars and debris (and even parts of the peace walls) for "spectacle's effect" (Virilio, 1994: 5). Indeed, such images are synonymous with the Northern Irish conflict, a point encapsulated by the proliferation of the colloquial term "Hot Summer" as a signifier for such twilight rioting. The worst flashpoint, at the interface of the Lanark Way peaceline, separating the two ethnic communities, was particularly symbolic of this: a feverish discourse-in-motion with rioters converging into "enemy" territory, as they hurled taunts and missiles (colloquially termed "Belfast Confetti") in a dialogical struggle between loyalism's "No Surrender!" and republicanism's competing "Tiocfaidh ár Lá" (i.e., Our Day Will Come). Throughout, then, the material choices made in enacting the riots can be linked to the latent symbolic aspects of the conflict, which conditions their meaning and significance as a resistive discursive event.

Function: *What purpose does the riot fulfil? How has this been explained in public discourse?*

Ritualised or sporadic atavism, like rioting, fulfils a cathartic in-group function that re-affirms and solidifies the loyalist community's internal cohesion in the face of perceived threats. Yet, externally, we can also discern a more strategic political function at play: rioting as a communicative act of propaganda by misdeed. In this view, rioters (or more specifically, their community elites) capitalise on the affective power of atavism and the contextual socio-political currency of rioting within social cognition to command unfamiliar attention in the broader public sphere. Such strategic atavism is instrumentally coaxed with a view to influencing the news-agenda and drawing public attention to the

marginalised community's grievances. This propagandistic function was further sustained by the number of choreographed riot-related press releases issued by organisations operating under the LCC's umbrella. Owing to their marginalised position, it took nearly a week for riots to get meaningful coverage in the British press (Gray, 2021). Yet, in doing this, loyalist elite actors successfully attained a notable standing in the news agenda (and in turn, public deliberations) by ordaining or legitimating such activities (Carroll, 2021b) (or condemning them where expedient) (Morris, 2021). This ensured that their political rationale and justificatory frameworks had a significant impact on the riots' broader *Verständnis/comprehension* in society.

This is made clear by the LCC's media statements that ushered in an end to the riots "[o]ut of respect for [their] Queen Elizabeth II" (in the wake of Prince Philip's death) (Morris, 2021). Such statements sought control over how the riots should be discursively framed by the media, suggesting that loyalist elites were "determined to ensure that these serious and legitimate political concerns felt across Unionism and Loyalism [would not be] allowed to be framed in terms of criminality". Rather, the "balance of blame" (Rummel, 1976) for disrupting the social order should fall on the institutions responsible for allowing the implementation of the "hard" Irish Sea border (which "they fear will economically 'tilt them towards a united Ireland'" (Carroll, 2021b), and on the PSNI for its perceived favouritism toward republicans (Morris, 2021). Moreover, the LCC made it clear that they would ensure that these "injustices" would be "recognised and ratified" in the post-rioting public sphere (Morris, 2021), a sure indication of the strategic intentionality behind the rioting. By resorting to discourses of threat, the LCC has also strategically manoeuvred itself into a relatively centralised position where its demands will be taken more seriously —especially after its youthful spokesman, Joel Keys, refused to rule out the possibility of future violence in post-riot media statements (Bradfield, 2021). Indeed, within the cultural, latent space of the public sphere, the spectre of violence provides these riots with a level of political currency insofar as they represent negatively connotative aspects of the substate's violent history —to which the general populace of NI would undoubtedly be opposed.

Frame: *How has the information been framed to condition the riots' explanation in public deliberation?*

As strategic, communicative endeavours, the riots were framed along the ideological lines of unionism and loyalism, and the event's overall framing shifts blame accordingly. This ideological framing was based on the perceived erosion of loyalism and its values, and the British government's betrayal of the loyalist community with the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol (inter-textually reinforced by local street graffiti that read "No Irish Border, Ulster Sold Out" (Hirst, 2021). Both processes "triggered" the riots and served as the argumentative premise for a loyalist reaction. The justificatory framework relied on by loyalists was further shaped through a series of coordinated press releases by the LCC, in which they also elided or avoided any discussion of the involvement

of loyalist paramilitaries. Instead, they extolled the legitimacy of the riots and their underlying political rationale. Thus, we can note the construction of a “provocation narrative” (Boudana and Segev, 2017), advanced by elite loyalist organisations in the run up to/during the riots that conditioned their broader comprehension in the public sphere. Media coverage surrounding the riots, for example, afforded much coverage to the LCC’s temporary withdrawal of support of the 1998 GFA on 3 March 2021—several weeks before the riots (Faulconbridge and Ferguson, 2021). As the riots unfolded, there was formal legitimisation of the severity of the violence with many media outlets framing the violence as the “worst violence in years”. Further evidence of the strategic beneficence of these atavistic spectacles can be noted in the fact that the riots commanded attention during the 2021 G7 summit, (rather ironically, during talk on protecting democracy) (Carroll, 2021b). This is matched by the post-riot proliferation of online loyalist political communities like the Unionist and Loyalist Unified Coalition (ULUC), a protest group that is responsible for organising a (growing) number of anti-Northern Ireland Protocol and “two-tiered” policing protest rallies (i.e., unauthorised parades) throughout NI.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to offer a conceptualisation of riots as discursive events and then apply this understanding to the loyalist spring riots of 2021 using a new analytical framework. To this end, the seven filters operationalised above provide a workable analytical framework for illuminating the strategic, propagandistic and instrumental dimensions of the 2021 loyalist riots. Our analysis also provides an empirical basis in showing how the proliferation of rioting can be seen as propaganda of the deed in post-conflict NI: a place where riots are performed, like the chapters of a text, in a series of spectacles, by communities who exploit the emotional and political currency of the past by insinuating a return to violence. Situating these actions within the context of the broader dichotomous public sphere and its fractured political system, the communicative expediency of the riots can further be appreciated for its ability to draw attention to politically marginalised communities. We posit that these communities are (somewhat) structurally incentivised to adopt such drastic measures by invoking the spectre of the Troubles and by threatening a return to violence as a strategic, discursive threat. Additionally, we contend that the loyalist riots of 2021 (and, indeed, a host of similar riots and deeds from both loyalists and republicans) highlight the inability of consociationalism to yield wholesale social integration and its institutionalisation of the ethnic divide. In routinely depriving such marginalised communities of the “oxygen of publicity” with a view to defending peace and short-term political gains within the ethnic bloc system (Hayward, 2014), political elites ultimately ensure that resistive, dissenting and marginalised political voices go unheard in the public sphere. This kind of censorial and migratory action has been historically proven to provoke violent reactionary strategies from marginalised groups in NI (Hayes, 2012). Our analysis therefore

provides a timely contribution to the broader understanding of contemporary atavistic spectralism in NI and its place within the broader negotiation of power.

Less generally, however, it serves as an empirical corroboration of a growing, internal recognition within loyalism regarding the need for political representation, and, jointly, as an understanding of the barriers that must be removed to achieve this. Communicatively, then, our analytical approach can assist in depowering the imageries of marginalised groups like the loyalist community as *Other* which habituate contemporary Northern Irish political discourse. In deconstructing the ideological aspects of riots as strategic, political endeavours, we can situate politically marginalised groups within the broader context of NI's struggle for hegemonic power within a flawed political system. Riots may be seen as a form of resistance to externally imposed threats to the depowered loyalist community, and as a performance of sacred identity in the face of encroaching change. Consequently, the novel proliferation of propaganda by riot is related to the structural deficiencies of the Northern Irish public sphere, abetted by a system of consociationalism, which actively excoriates dissenting voices to perpetuate the existing hegemonic order. Indeed, with loyalist ire continuing to simmer through (unsanctioned) protest parades, agonised against Sinn Féin's recent attempts to push its discourse on all-island unification, we prognosticate that continual acts of propaganda by riot will abound until the integral communicative divisions within the Northern Irish public sphere are bridged in a way that permits inclusive dialogue for all.

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