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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"It's Organised Chaos": Organisation and Spontaneity in Anti-state riots

Alba Arenales Lope

Queen's University, Belfast

ABSTRACT: Riots are a violent form of action that has received little attention compared to other forms of action within the social movements field. Frequently defined as emotional and spontaneous outbursts, participants in riots are very rarely included in the research. In the present paper, the riots that took place during the period of the so-called "troubles" (1969-1998) in the North of Ireland involving the broader republican movement will be analysed. Given its long trajectory, the intensity, and the relevance of riots within the conflict, this case offers a unique opportunity to explore areas of the research into riots that have been neglected. Findings of a qualitative project drawing on 19 in-depth biographical interviews with participants in riots as part of the Provisional Republican cause will be presented. By conceptualising anti-state riots as a bilateral tactic, my findings suggest that the prevalent definition of riots as spontaneous forms of action needs to be revisited. As will be shown, anti-state (against police and army) riots were very often planned in advance and involved a significant level of coordination. The research findings suggest treating the concept of "spontaneity" in riots, as with other forms of collective action, with a certain level of caution.

KEYWORDS: PIRA, riots, spontaneity, tactics, violence.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): aarenales01@qub.ac.uk

1. Introduction: Rioting and spontaneity

While riots have been largely overlooked in social movements and Contentious Politics literature (Piven, 2012; della Porta and Gbiki, 2012),¹ this has not prevented some scholars from including them as part of the

¹ There are important exceptions to this neglect, for example Myers' (2022); the volume edited by Seferiades and Johnston (2012), Case's (2022) Tiratelli's (2020; 2022), de Fazio's, Malthaner's (2017; 2019); Rucht (2016) and Wahlstrom (2011) work, along with other research that although outside a social movements framework, has examined

repertoire of available forms of action (e.g., Bosi and Malthaner, 2015). As I will discuss in the following section, this inattention derives partially from the fact that some other scholars have exhorted us to abandon the term riot altogether as they consider the concept to be imbued with negative political connotations (Tilly, 2003).

In the present article, using a social movement framework and setting aside the question of causation, I endeavour to clarify the concept of riots through an exploration of anti-state riots (against the army and/or the police) by the broader Provisional Republican movement in Northern Ireland during the period known as the “troubles” drawing on interviews with participants about their practices as told in their stories of riots. The ubiquity of riots during the conflict – which has been addressed elsewhere (Sluka, 1989; de Fazio, 2020) – offers the possibility of exploring this particular form of action from the view of rioters themselves. The Northern Ireland context represents a critical case that while not allowing the elaboration of a general theory of rioting dynamics, can help elucidate whether riots should be considered spontaneous in all cases. The main argument I make is that rather than assuming spontaneity from the outset, it should first be explored as a matter of degree within the practice of rioting. My findings suggest that although many riots were spontaneous, there were instances in which pre-planning and coordination of different actors were involved. But before exploring spontaneity I will put forward a definition of “riots” that I believe can tackle some of the problems posited by Tilly (2003, 2006).

2. Riots and anti-state riots as concepts

One of the reasons for the lack of interest in the study of riots stems from the fact that one of the term’s main detractors was the preeminent scholar of the contentious politics approach Charles Tilly. In one of his later works, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (2003), Tilly provided a renewed typology of collective violence and argued that,

I have omitted the widely used term “riot” from the typology [of collective violence] (...) because it embodies a political judgment rather than an analytical distinction. Authorities and observers label riots as a damage-doing gathering of which they disapprove, but they use terms like demonstration, protest, resistance, or retaliation for essentially similar events of which they approve. In cataloguing thousands of violent events – many of them called riots (or the local language equivalent) by authorities and observers – from multiple countries over several centuries. I have not once found an instance in which the participants called the event a riot or identified themselves as rioters (Tilly, 2003: 18-19).

Along with the claim that participants avoid the use of the term as stated in the above quotation, Tilly argues that causal consistency is absent, therefore considering “riot” a politically charged concept rather than a valid category of analysis (Tilly, 2006). Yet, although I somewhat agree with the second point, as I will soon elaborate, the first might have been related to divergence in the type of data used, as research that draws on qualitative interviews has shown that there are examples of participants who clearly label their actions as riots and/or themselves as rioters (see, for instance, Stott et al 2018: 843-844; Wahlstrom, 2011:380; Arenales, 2015: 25; Newburn, et al 2018: 49; Leonard, 2010: 41-47; Moran, 2011: 302), which this research further confirms.

riots (see for instance Collins, 2008; Nassauer, 2016, 2019; Waddington, 2015; Stott., Ball, Drury, Neville, Reicher, Boardman, and Choudhury 2018; Bagguley and Hussein, 2007). See Case (2022), Bagguley and Hussain (2007) for reviews.

Within the renewed interest in protest violence that arose after the 2007-2008 crisis, particularly in the last decade, research on this topic has focused on understanding the process through which non-violent forms of action in demonstrations, turn violent. This is indeed a question that is justifiably of great interest to scholars, but unfortunately, it has been carried out at the expense of a better conceptualization of the concept of “riot”. Although CP scholars acknowledge riots to be part of the political violence repertoire of actions (Alimi, 2015; Bosi and Malthaner, 2015), the conceptualisation of riots exclusively as an effect of other processes or forms of action has, I believe, inhibited the study of riots as a tactic. While Contentious Politics (CP) researchers seek to understand the emergence of forms of action as an interactive process, the existence of choice and strategic decision-making regarding tactics is never denied (at least in the versions of Bosi and Malthaner, 2015; Bosi et al., 2019; della Porta, 2013). This approach conceptualises violence precisely as emerging in interactions, but the ontology or existence of demonstrations, boycotts, and sabotage as tactics is not under question. Riots, in contrast, are too often understood exclusively as a by-product and not a form of action in its own right, sometimes even presented as if they were accidental (Oliver, 1989; Brass, 2003; e.g., Nassauer’s view of riots as ‘surprising outcomes’ of protest events, 2019). While the normative nature of the term riot is analogous for Tilly (2003) to how the term ‘terror’ is treated and is equally excluded from his typology, on other occasions (2004, 2005) he considers terror as a strategy – that can, and often is used by state actors as well as non-state actors – yet riots do not hold the same consideration.

My argument is that some of the problems with the study of riots are related to their fuzzy conceptualisation, not the term itself, and that rather than obliterating the term from CP research, I believe that what is required is better conceptual precision, a task I endeavour to achieve in this article. Definitions of riots are often elusive, and either too specific or overly general, although very often they are simply absent. In an attempt at clarification, McPhail suggested a definition of riots as consisting of one or more people who, as “part of a larger gathering, are engaged in violence against a person or property or threaten to so engage and are judged capable of enacting that threat” (McPhail, 1994: 2). The problem with this definition, which resembles the most common conceptualisations, is that it is overly broad and closely resembles the legal definition (Stevenson, 1992). Horowitz (2001) considered riots instances of collective violence exclusively between different ethnic groups, excluding protest rioting. On the contrary, in social movement research, scholars tend to only conceptualise riots as collective violence that happens between challengers or protesters and authorities (e.g. Seferiades and Johnston, 2012; Case, 2022). The variation in the understanding of riots depending not only on the issue, but on the historical moment begs the question of whether it is also the meaning of the term riot which has experienced variation since it was codified under King George I’s Riot Act in 1714 (Tilly, 2006), and not only the practice, which recent research has pointed out (Tiratelli, 2020).

The exclusion of riots from Tilly’s typology (2003) means that riots are analytically subsumed entirely under demonstrations in his analytical framework (p. 15 and 200-212). The typology includes, among other forms of actions, brawls (when, “within a previously nonviolent gathering, two or more persons begin attacking each other or each other’s property”, Tilly, 2003: 154); scattered attacks (when “in the course of widespread small-scale and generally nonviolent interaction, a number of participants respond to obstacles, challenges, or restraints by means of damaging acts; examples include sabotage, scattered clandestine attacks on symbolic objects or places, assaults of governmental agents, and arson”, Tilly, 2003: 171) and broken negotiations (“various forms of collective action generate resistance or rivalry to which one or more parties respond by actions that damage persons and/or objects; examples include demonstrations, protection rackets, governmental repression, and military”, Tilly, 2003: 16). Riots that take place during demonstrations would therefore constitute a type of broken negotiations. Yet, the fact that riots tend to happen during or after demonstrations – but not only on those occasions (Tiratelli, 2020) – does not imply that they should be conflated. In the context under study, for example, riots were

not only employed as a form of protest, but they were also used as a decoy. Other researchers have opted for the term “violent protest” (De Fazio, 2020) instead, but this choice also has its drawbacks as it is far more encompassing than rioting (for instance, sabotage and arson do not only happen in demonstrations).

In order to improve our conceptualisation of rioting, I suggest bringing Black’s classification (1993) to Tilly’s typology. Following this, scattered attacks could fit seamlessly with *unilateral violence* “flowing from one direction from one party to another” (Campbell, 2009: 154). Likewise, brawls would classify as *bilateral violence* “flowing in both directions at once” (Black, 1993: 5). But in broken negotiations it is difficult to discern, from the above definition, to which of these categories it would correspond. Building on the understanding of riots held by the participants interviewed in my research, riots might be understood as a type of bilateral violence, that is, as with brawls, in rioting there is an interchange of violence by the confronting sides, resembling a small-scale battle. In some ways, this conceptualisation is implicitly embedded in most analyses of riots that are often called “clashes”, “street battles”, “street fights”, or “confrontations” (Collins, 2008; Wahlstrom, 2011; Janowitz, 1969; Juris, 2008; Nassauer, 2019; della Porta, 2013; Waddington, 1992; Waddington and King, 2012; Peterson, 2001; Bosi, 2013; Yasan, 2021). Riots would therefore be differentiated from pogroms, ambushes, bombing attacks, or lynchings, as these are forms of unilateral violence, but they would also differ from other forms of bilateral violence such as brawls, conventional battlefield war, and gun battles, in terms of the weaponry used and scale. The minimum size generally required to be considered a riot is at least 30 to 50 people (Myers 2022), which is numerically superior to brawls, and greatly inferior to conventional warfare (Tilly, 2003: 15-16), and includes more frequently throwing of projectiles (e.g. Molotov cocktails, bottles, stones, rubber bullets, and pellets) and close proximity violence (such as fists and baton charges), rather than using firearms (Case, 2022), as in gun battles. Some events transited from one form to another. For example, especially at the beginning of the period studied, it was not uncommon to see “mini-riots” between youngsters and the army, which could start as either brawls, stone pelting by children, or harassment by the soldiers, and quickly evolve into a full-blown riot when more people joined in, and from that to a gun battle between PIRA members and the British army (Sluka, 1989: 266-267). As has been previously pointed out, most of the actual actions that take place in riots – as with the forms of violence described above – are however not violent *per se* (e.g., running, taunting; Collins, 2008).

Along with the interchange that characterises riots, it is my contention that some riots are used strategically and tactically, as is the case of anti-state riots, a term I borrow from Moutselos (2020). Drawing on Doherty’s definition of tactics as “forms of action that have been deliberately chosen with the aim of influencing or coercing one or more of opponents, the general public, and fellow movement activists” (Doherty, 2013:1), I conceptualise anti-state riots as *temporally condensed public confrontations between the forces of the state and a challenging gathering of non-state actors involving the use of violence against each other to varying degrees used strategically by non-state actors*. It is important to note that not all riots that involve the state forces and protesters necessarily fall into this category, as a crucial ingredient is their deliberate utilisation in pursuit of a broadly understood strategic purpose. Although the distinctive feature of anti-state riots lies in the existence of an interchange, they are very commonly accompanied by violence against objects (arson, throwing objects at windows) (McPhail and Wohlstein, 1983; Case, 2022) and looting (Newburn et al. 2018). The confrontational dimension of the definition is essential in distinguishing it from other forms of action, for example, the tactic of stone pelting (Ganie 2021), attacks on symbolic objects (Juris, 2008; Case, 2022), and setting fire to a rubbish bin, which are all violent attacks, do not become a riot unless the forces of the state engage in violence. Likewise, if in a demonstration, the police attack protesters who remain in their ranks, without retaliating, that would not

constitute a riot either, it might more accurately be labelled as repression and passive civil resistance². These examples, technically, could be considered violent protests, but not riots under the definition presented in this article.

After putting forward a concept of anti-state riots that defines them as a form of bilateral violence used as a tactic, we can now return to the matter of spontaneity. Despite some notable exceptions (Auyero, 2003, Brass, 2003; Malthaner, 2019), one of the most common and pervasive assumptions across much of the literature concerns precisely the spontaneity of riots. Assumed, rather than demonstrated, the meaning of spontaneity is itself largely left undefined. In most instances, riots are said to be the result of an “outburst” (Auyero, 2003), with their spontaneous “nature” entrenched in the definition (e.g., Malthaner, 2017; Kotronaki and Seferiades, 2012; Waddington, 2015; Rucht, 2016). For example, although the multivariate approach of Waddington stresses that riots are the result of rational and purposeful behaviour, Moran and Waddington, nonetheless claim that “any credible explanation of rioting must therefore be capable of accounting not only for the underlying logic (or rationality) of such behaviour, but also its *characteristically spontaneous*, emotional and invariably destructive nature” (Moran and Waddington, 2016: 15-16, stress added). A conceptualisation of riots as a bilateral form of action might also help understand such recurrent characterisations of riots as spontaneous insofar as actors depend on the actions and reactions of other participants, particularly the authorities. As with other tactics, there is a certain level of contingency that cannot be overlooked (Doherty, 2013; Pearlman, 2018); in the case of rioting, this contingency element might be more relevant than in other tactics, but it does not render riots as an essentially spontaneous endeavour.

In this regard, Oliver’s article (1989), which is surprisingly rarely cited in research on riots, helps to disentangle the relation between contingency, planning, and spontaneity in riots. In her research on ‘crowd events’, as she terms them, that “are part of larger social movements”(Oliver, 1989: 23) observes that the precipitating events or flashpoints were not causally explanatory in many instances, as “the actual riot would start when some people began ‘rioting’ (sometimes brawling, sometimes throwing rocks through windows, sometimes attacking the police who were nearly always the source of the final precipitating incident) and were not stopped” (Oliver, 1989: 21). Likewise, in a more recent exploration of the timing of riots Brass, (2003: 364-366) and Tiratelli (2022) reached a similar conclusion, suggesting that the key for riots are provocations, which are present in the origin of the events examined questioning the ‘explanatory power of triggers and identity in accounting for riots development’ (Tiratelli, 2022: 13). Similarly, Malthaner, combining Katz (2015) and Collins (2008) argues that “the ability of actors to act is not limited to adapting their behaviour to given situational conditions, but their competence proves itself in their ability to influence the situation” (Malthaner, 2019: 163 own translation). In summary, although contingency has a strong presence in riots, participants have room to exert certain control over the event.

Traditionally, spontaneity has been perceived as opposed to organisation in social movements (Snow and Moss, 2014). Riots, by extension, have been regarded as disorganised, that is, unstructured, uncoordinated, and unplanned (e.g. Malthaner, 2017; Kotronaki and Seferiades, 2012), which derives from an inadvertent conflation of organisation and formal organisations (Ahrne and Burnsson, 2011) leading to a blind spot in dealing with the existence of organisation in protest events carried out outside the realms of formal organisations (den Hond et al., 2015). Conversely, the absence of formal organisations, or the occurrence of activity that takes place in protests which does not follow the protest organisers' plan does not necessarily entail disorganisation. As many studies on social movements have amply demonstrated, collective action can be organised in the absence of formal organisations (e.g. Flesher Fominaya, 2015). This characterisation has,

² Cf. Stark (1972) considers this a police riot.

in turn, been used as an argument to exclude them from the realm of Contentious Politics literature (Piven, 2012).

In light of this, I suggest exploring the organisational practices (Gunzelmann, 2022) present in rioting. To that purpose, I believe it more fruitful to consider organising as a matter of degree, rather than in dichotomic terms. Spontaneous riots surely exist, but rather than assuming that all riots are spontaneous, we should first establish the degree of organisation involved. To this end, I follow Snow and Moss' definition of spontaneity which is, "a cover term for events, happenings, and lines of action, both verbal and non-verbal, which were not planned, intended, prearranged, or organised in advance of their occurrence" (2014: 1123).

My contention is not to claim that all riots are planned or include a high degree of coordination. Instead, I simply conceptualise organisation as a matter of degree, which requires the identification of the extent to which specific riots are organised – or planned – and the level of coordination entailed, rather than simply assuming spontaneity from the outset.

3. The "troubles" and the Broader Republican Provisional Movement

For this research, I regard the Broader Provisional Republican Movement as encompassing not only the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), and the political party Sinn Féin, but also connected organisations such as the youth scout organisations for boys Na Fianna Éireann, and for girls, Cumann na gCailíní (Hay, 2008), and Cumann na mBan (Reinisch, 2019). I also include other related associations and groups, for instance, the Relatives Action Committee (Ross, 2023) and local supporters who were not involved in any specific formal organisations but who provided active support through protests, picketing, attendance at rallies, hiding weapons, providing food and shelter, civil disobedience campaigns, rioting, and so on (Ó Dochartaigh and Bosi, 2010; Bosi, 2013). It should be pointed out however, that my use of the term "movement" as in social movement, does not coincide with the more frequent meaning that generally is used to refer to members of the PIRA and Sinn Féin.

Even though the article explores riots using the conceptual approach of social movement studies, the dynamics of the case under study, as an armed conflict, are closer to those of a civil war – and a war of national liberation for the republican participants (White 2017; Bell 1997, see also O Dochartaigh, 2021). Although the use of social movement theory to understand political violence is not new (e.g., della Porta, 2013, Wood, 2003), the potential risk of overlooking the impact of the particularities of the conflict on the use of riots should be addressed. For this reason, and to provide an adequate contextualisation of the case under study, I will briefly outline the characteristics of the conflict, the PIRA as an organisation, and the place of riots within the conflict.

This research is set in the specific context of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland, a period that is usually considered to cover the years spanning from 1969 until 1998. In the late 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement demanded reforms in the face of rampant institutional sectarianism against the Catholic minority. These were followed by increasing police repression and riots, which escalated until the summer of 1969 when the British army was deployed. Thus, began a period of conflict, usually referred to as "the troubles" which escalated as the Irish Republican Army (by 1970 split between the Provisional and Official IRA (OIRA)), on the nationalist/republican side, along with loyalist paramilitary groups such as Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association on the unionist side, engaged in violent confrontation that competed for the legitimate use of violence with the state for more than 30 years, with 3,350 people killed (1,840 civilians) and 47,500 people injured (Bosi and de Fazio, 2017). During this period, the occurrence of violent intercommunal clashes, riots, bombings, murders, torture, and imprisonment permeated life in the area.

Combining the emphasis on the control of the state (Kalyvas, 2006) and the classification offered by della Porta (2013), Bosi (2013) defines the PIRA as a semi-military organisation, which, similar to guerrilla groups, possessed “dense relationships with their constituencies” (Bosi, 2013: 84). Yet, contrary to guerrilla groups, semi-military groups operate in and to some extent control concentrated, rather than extended territories. The PIRA, therefore, did have some level of territorial control, however, this was at the local, not the state level (Ó Dochartaigh, 2013, 2010; Bosi, 2013). In this strategical control of the territory, riots played a role, as Bosi points out:

PIRA’s strategies of territorial control were focused on disrupting the order of the state in those local territories, for example, through street fighting (rioting) that generally consolidated a state of enmity between local constituencies and the state police or British army. (Bosi, 2013: 90)

The use of a social movement theoretical approach presents a set of challenges. Bosi and Malthaner warn that rather than a logic of mobilisation, rebel governance involves unique relationships with local populations, emphasizing compliance, control, and legitimacy through order, security, and social welfare. This approach poses new challenges for insurgents turned “rulers” (Bosi and Malthaner, 2015, p. 446). Nonetheless, the impact of a context closer to a civil war should not affect the contribution made in this article, as the aim is to refine the concept of anti-state riots rather than develop a more general theory of rioting dynamics.

4. Research Methods

This research relied on 19 in-depth biographical interviews with persons who actively participated at least once in anti-state riots, and who regarded that activity as part of the republican cause. In addition, I consulted different historical books on the “troubles” and on the PIRA, biographies, and autobiographies, alongside archival research (an in-depth but focused consultation of *An Phoblacht*, *Republican News*, and the merged publication *AP/RN* from 1970-1998).

Much of the scant research using qualitative interviews included a sample of participants who were involved in a low number of riots (e.g. Arenales, 2015, 2016; Newburn, et al 2018; Case, 2022). The high frequency of riots in working-class nationalist areas of Northern Ireland’s cities allowed some rioters to gain considerable experience through their participation in riots, which through the use of interviews helped generate a very thick and complex picture of rioting as a practice, including the organisation of riots, as well as providing the participants interviewed with numerous instances to recollect.

However, as pointed out in the previous section, these advantages are also suggestive of the critical case that they represent. Indeed, the embeddedness of violence within the quotidian of riot participants, as well as the highly contested legitimacy of the forces of the state are two factors that substantially affect the dynamics and practice of riots. As the aim of this article is limited to challenging the consideration of spontaneity as a defining characteristic of riots, I believe this particularity should not affect the overall argument. There is of course a great deal of scope for comparative case studies in future research, which could account for the influence of the factors mentioned above.

My interview method involved a combination of semi-structured interviews, and Life-stories (della Porta, 2014; Atkinson, 1998). As I was interested in understanding riots as a process and a practice, I sought to elicit recollections of riots using episodic narrative interview questions (Mueller, 2019). With these questions, I asked participants to focus on describing in detail specific stories of riots that they remembered. The data collection took place between March 2020 and June 2021. The research obtained the approval of the Ethics Committee of the author’s school. The primary means of contact with participants was made via community and ex-prisoners associations that facilitated gatekeepers. However,

the case under study is not ex-members of the PIRA, but individuals who took part in riots to defend or support the republican cause. As I was aiming towards a more diverse sample and to enhance the heterogeneity of my research (Small and Calarco, 2022), I considered it necessary to go beyond the participants offered by community and ex-prisoner associations. I achieved this by using the snowball technique, and also, by asking people I knew from my involvement in political events, or my personal contacts (friends, acquaintances), who provided me with more participants. There were no specific requirements in terms of the gender of my participants, but unfortunately, I only succeeded in interviewing one female rioter³.

Despite attempting to distribute participants evenly throughout the whole period, the number of participants who took part in riots in the period 1968-72 outnumbered the rest and most participants were from the major urban areas in Northern Ireland, Belfast, and Derry (Table 1).

All the interviews were audio recorded, lasting, on average, over an hour and a half, although a few lasted more than two hours. They were all transcribed by me. Participants were given pseudonyms from the beginning, their personal data was never recorded in any way, and when the interviews were transcribed, the recordings were destroyed.

Table 1- Participant sample characteristics

<i>Interviewees</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age of Riot Initiation</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Birth date (approx.)</i>	<i>Length of time rioting</i>
Bernard	Male	20s	Belfast	1950s	Occasional
Brendan	Male	Childhood	Belfast	1980s	10 years
Brid	Female	Childhood	Derry	1960s	2 Years
Charlie	Male	Childhood	Belfast	1970s	7-9 years
Colm	Male	Early teens	Belfast	1950s	3 Years
Connor	Male	Early teens	Belfast	1960s	15 years
Cormac	Male	20s	Derry	1950s	Occasional
Daniel	Male	Childhood	Belfast	1970s	+10 years
Fionn	Male	Childhood	Derry	1960s	10 years
Gearóid	Male	Childhood	Derry	1950s	20 years
Jack	Male	Childhood	Derry	1970s	10 years
James	Male	Childhood	Derry	1980s	+10 years
Kevin	Male	Childhood	Belfast	1970s	+10 years
Liam	Male	Childhood	Derry	1950s	3 Years
Mark	Male	Early teens	Derry	1950s	3 Years
Oisín	Male	Early teens	Derry	1970s	7-9 years
Seamus	Male	Mid to late teens	Derry	1950s	2 Years
Sean	Male	Early teens	Belfast	1950s	5 years
Tom	Male	Mid to late teens	Lurgan	1960s	3 Years

³ Since having potentially ideal characteristics to access female respondents – a woman in my thirties (according to Wax, 1979) – the difficulty encountered could be explained by two main reasons. First, recent research specifically aimed at understanding the perspectives of women militants (e.g. Reinisch, 2019; O’Keefe, 2013; Alison, 2004), while my research did not, and second, the challenges posed by the pandemic that broke out exactly at the start of my fieldwork, which involved significant difficulties in gaining access to any participants.

I have adopted a “topic summaries thematic analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 231), which “provides descriptive detail about the patterns observed in the data” (Saldaña, 2021: 259), selecting long excerpts, classifying different stories of riots, and then, I fragmented each riot story, coding the different stages identified within each story. I used NVivo 12 to assist me in the data analysis.

Riots have not generated a very rich production of scholarly work within the study of the conflict in Northern Ireland (with the exceptions of Peroff and Hewitt, 1980; Cairns, 1987; Sluka, 1989; De Fazio, 2020; Leonard, 2010). Thus, in-depth interviews have been used both in a more classical interpretive sense, that is, to understand the perspectives and experiences of interviewees, but also in treating them as “key informants” (Blee and Taylor, 2002). This carries the risk of obtaining inaccurate information of hard data as well as risks associated with reconstruction and memory since some of the experiences narrated took place in their earlier life. However, when possible, I triangulated the information using archive research as well as other scholarly accounts. This does not completely neutralise this problem but minimises it. Despite the inherent risks of using qualitative interviews to obtain information and not only subjective experiences, interviews are particularly helpful in the field of social movements as they allow access to a wider range of social movement participants than what is reflected in documents and propaganda (Blee, 2013: 603, see also White, 2007). In addition, accessing the narratives of those who use riots is highly pertinent given that “pleading for recognition, the rioters are, however, not recognised as legitimate actors” (della Porta and Gbiki, 2012: 99).

5. Two stories of riots

In this section, I present some findings based on my interviewees’ narratives. I first put forward and provide an analysis of two instances of riot stories that involve differential levels of planning and coordination. In determining whether a riot can be considered spontaneous, I draw on the definition of Snow and Moss (2014) as presented above. Then, also drawing on some illuminating narratives, I make a few observations that challenge some common assumptions about riots. First, I present the types of riots that can be considered planned, which required preparation and coordination of different actors. Second, I argue that the heterogeneous composition of riot participants, as in other contentious forms of action, implies differential levels of involvement in the preparations, coordination, and tasks performed during the event itself⁴. The stories selected and presented represent stories sharing similar characteristics of riots as told by a wide range of respondents.

5.1 A spontaneous riot

A recurrent narrative involved stories of riots that happened in reaction to house raids. During the conflict, house raids were part and parcel of life in working-class nationalist areas. From the implementation of Internment without trial in August 1971, forces of the state regularly carried out house raids in these areas.

⁴ Brass’ work on what he regards as “intercommunal riots” in India (1997, 2003) presents interesting commonalities. This scholar argues that far from being spontaneous, attacks were very often planned in advance and involved the division of tasks such as “conversion specialists” (2003: 32); informants “who carry messages to political group leaders” (ibid.), propagandists, vernacular journalists, poster plasterers, *rumormongers*, fire tenders, recruiters, and *goondas* (thugs). Given the centrality in Brass’ research of the discourse dimension of the riot production, the roles identified in our works do not seem to coincide. Brass’ conceptualisation of riots is, however, closer to what I regard as unilateral attacks or ‘pogroms’ (Case, 2022).

Groups of women developed a system where collectively organised patrols would warn of the presence of the army, using whistles and banging bin lids (Aretxaga, 1997).

Tom, who participated in riots mainly during the early 1980s, when he was a teenager in Lurgan, recalls participation in these types of riots in the following manner:

We would've heard bin lids... that was the alarm and followed the sound. And when we got there, uh, the British army were raiding houses... And when they came out of the house, they get on the Saracens⁵, everybody started throwing stones and bottles at them. And I joined in, and I felt really good about it. You know, I felt I'm fighting back. (Tom)

The sequence of this narrative is illustrative of a spontaneous riot *par excellence*. An immediate reaction to the actions of the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary, the local police force at that time) or the British army in a nationalist area provided the trigger or flashpoint for the event. House raids were obviously not expected beforehand, consequently, advance planning was not plausible. However, this cannot be categorised as an “unorganised” form of action. Given the recurrent nature of house raids, and riots more generally, there was a script that was followed: the banging of bin lids or whistling would warn of the presence of the army in the area and would act as a signal for locals to come out in support of people who were having their houses raided, then, the interaction between the army and locals would escalate, going from insults, to throwing stones, bottles, with army personnel engaging in the confrontation. Although the riot was spontaneous, there was a level of expectation that raids would occur, that is, they were anticipated (Brass, 2003), yet the specific moment of the state forces' incursion was unpredictable (Brass, 2003). Despite their spontaneity, these events were not disorganised as the lack of previous planning did not entail an absence of communication and coordination between participants.

The aim of the riot and the bin lid and whistle system was not limited to protesting and showing “anger” but also alerting people to the presence of the army or police, allowing the movement of hidden PIRA members and equipment from the area. It also disrupted the raid with the intention of preventing potential arrests.

5.2 A planned riot

Most interviewees also narrated stories of riots that were planned in advance. Oisín, who took part in riots in Derry during the 1990s, explained how one of the riots that he got involved in was a form of protest at the release of Lee Clegg. Nine months into the 1995 PIRA ceasefire, the British Soldier Lee Clegg was released on license after serving less than two years of a life sentence for murdering Karen Reilly and had been permitted to rejoin the army (White, 2017). In response, rioting erupted. As he recalls:

The whole province, the Republican people weren't happy that this happened. So, there was a few people called, and that's to organise a protest and there's also a few people organised a riot for after the protest. So, someone said to me, or asked me to gather materials for this, regarding bottles, petrol, and cages from a shoppin' complex and after the protest we barricaded off one of the roads leadin' intae a Republican area. So, the RUC approached the barricade, and they were beat back, and that first there was the start of the riot. So, they came in with back up. So, we knew then that it was gonnae be a riot. So, we gathered up materials that we had and distributed them within the rioters, that went on for two nights. [The riot would start with] The barricade, they came in to drive over it, to try and drive

⁵Saracens were armoured vehicles used by the British army in Northern Ireland during the conflict.

over the top of it tae disperse the materials that was in the barricade, but there was a car in the barricade, so it didn't disperse everything. And once [they] tried tae move it, then the first petrol bomb was thrown... once the backup came, the riot squad (...) were attacked by the petrol bombs and stones, then they would have retaliated by firing plastic bullets. (Oisín)

Anti-state riots, which in this instance were organised as a form of protest, followed a different dynamic than the previous riot story. Even though these riots happened in reaction to something that was considered morally wrong, generating outrage, the story does not seem to support the idea that this was “spontaneous”, at least not following the definition provided by Snow and Trom (2014). The planning on this occasion might have been more compressed in time than other protests which oftentimes required months of preparation, but both the demonstration and the riots required “backstage preparation” (Rucht, 2017), including the coordination of different participants, the collection of materials, hijacking a vehicle, the elaboration of a plan, even if it could be considered rudimentary. This riot, therefore, cannot be considered spontaneous.

Consistent with the work of Tiratelli (2022), the explanatory power of the trigger in this planned riot seems to be diminished by the presence of a conscious provocation. To generate the confrontation necessary for a riot to break out, organisers required the presence of the RUC, hence, the riot participants set fire to the hijacked car and set up a barricade, proactively drawing them into the area. As in the case of other forms of protest, however, plans do not always work as designed, as contingency shapes the situations where riots take place (Pearlman, 2018). However, provocations are deliberately deployed to cause a reaction, making the occurrence of a riot more likely. This is a clear attempt to exert a level of control over events.

Some of the dynamics seen briefly in the stories presented above can be examined in more detail if we shift our attention to analysing the organisational practices (Gunzelmann, 2022; Den Hond, et al, 2016) present in the narratives related by respondents.

6. Organising riots

In this section, I analyse some important elements that were recurrent in the practice of rioting among interviewees. Returning to the preparation stage I discuss that even in the absence of a plan, there can be an expectation that riots could erupt. Before moving to the following section, I examine the different levels of involvement in riot preparation and in the event itself.

6.1 Preparing materials

As part of the preparation stage, a frequent narrative involved the collection of materials to be used in riots, such as milk bottles, breaking up paving stones for missiles, and the manufacture of petrol bombs. One of these stories was remembered by Daniel, who was a child at the beginning of the 1980s. This respondent vividly recalled a significant level of planning and coordination between West Belfast locals for a riot that broke out after the death of a hunger striker. Following the removal of political status for Loyalist and Republican prisoners in 1976, an important wave of protest took place inside the prisons. In October 1980, the first H-Block/Armagh Hunger Strike began. Within months, during the second round of hunger strikes, the campaign developed support at a mass level. As the hunger strikes went on with no sign of concession from the British government, and the deaths of hunger strikers were expected, people in nationalist areas were prepared for this eventuality. Riots erupted after the death of Bobby Sands and took place with increased intensity and regularity in nationalist areas over the following months, particularly after the death of each hunger striker (White, 2017). As Daniel recalls:

What I remember is where I lived... there... was a petrol bomb factory, basically, I'm talking hundreds, maybe thousands of petrol bombs being made at one time. And it was like it was like a conveyor belt. So, you had somebody who was carrying the bottles up, and then somebody would pour the petrol in. You had people pouring the sugar in, and people doing the works and then they'd have to be couriers. And they were bringing out to the people that was doing the riots. (Daniel)

Here too, the preparation in this riot goes even further than the story told by Oisín and encompassed the elaborate division of tasks. Such a high level of infrastructure and resources required coordination to collect large amounts of petrol, bottles, crates, and people to make, transport, and store them. Coordination therefore involved gathering materials, manufacturing, and storage of petrol bombs, and distributing materials to rioters.

6.2 Expectations

The level of planning and coordination found in the previous story contrasts with other accounts which did not suggest that my respondents had made a plan in advance. However, there existed an expectation that a riot might occur. For example, the following interviewee, who took part in riots mainly during the 1990s in Belfast, suggests that there were conditions for riots to take place:

If a demonstration, for example, isn't stopped or whatever, dead on, let's walk on. We've made our point... Let's go home. But then if the state goes against you, then say hold on a wee second, let's get ready, because they've made that bit worse. (Charlie)

However, for Charlie, the expectation was such that some level of preparation was involved:

...you'd wait on that kind of moment of escalation. Once that escalation starts, you've maybe brought a different jumper. You take your coat on, or your jumper on with the hood up with... Maybe some of the crowd, have already been far more, better pre-organised.

As Charlie posits, the expectation that a riot could erupt made him prepare for its potential occurrence: he brought different clothes so that if the expected riot commenced, he could participate while minimising the risk of being identified and arrested. In this story, contingent factors gain relevance for his particular involvement. There is a less obvious attempt at controlling the situation than in the case of Oisín, and his participation depends on the actions of the forces of the state. Moreover, the narrative hints at the suspicion of Charlie that other people could have organised the riots in advance. This leads to another element to be taken into consideration in understanding the organising practices in riots: the heterogeneity of participants.

6.3 Heterogeneity of Riot Participants

Several participants (seven to be more exact), claimed to be part of a group of riot organisers at some point in their riot careers. Often self-denominated as a "core group", those who were part of such groups of rioters had more responsibility in the planning and coordination of riots, including meso and micro mobilisation of other actors (Rucht, 2013) as they would be in contact with other groups of rioters and often with members of the PIRA to coordinate actions.

James, who rioted in Derry during the 1990s was part of one of these core groups, as such he described that while riots could have a participation of hundreds, his core group was constituted by 10 to 20 members who:

Would've organised it, and everybody would've followed it. (...) So, we would've went and say, 'this is it, this is going to happen', and everybody will follow in suit (James)

Similarly, Gearóid, who also rioted in Derry, but during the 1980s, explained some characteristics of this core group:

There wasn't a structured organisation, but by their appearance, you know, they were all dressed similar. They looked like an army(...). They would have had influence, amongst you know(...) people who've just joined in. They would've at times (...) advise people to stay back, or 'you better get ready' or, 'don't go to that street there', you know, advising that type of stuff, aye. (Gearóid)

These core groups of rioters were common in Belfast and especially Derry and were locally based in different neighbourhoods as some of the interviewees explained. They were often in charge of the coordination and mobilisation of different groups of rioters from different areas, and as the previous excerpt narrates, they sometimes provided informal leadership to other less involved and experienced rioters. The very existence of informal groups, including the "core group of rioters" having a more relevant role in the planning and coordination also challenges the usual characterisation of riots as spontaneous. This spontaneity is often evidenced in the research by the lack of affiliation to or membership in formal organisations (e.g. Kawalerowicz and Biggs, 2015). Informal groups are harder to find and examine than formal organisations (Rucht, 2013), but in order to understand organising practices in riots, these types of organisations must be taken into account.

Some of these core rioters mentioned that during the 1980s members of the PIRA approached some groups of rioters and encouraged them to use their skills in ambushes. In the following excerpt, Jack explains the difference between riots and these attacks:

Well, in a riot you would've a lot more people, you know. When the police started getting attacked, you were maybe only 20 people. And once they, once they were attacked, they [the attackers] get straight out of the area (...) out and gone, you know. Whereas a riot, they would've set at the William St. Sackville St. and rioters would have stoned them, they [the state forces] would've come in and vice versa. (Jack)

In Jack's narrative, the subtle difference between ambushes (unilateral violence) and riots (bilateral) can be clearly observed. Both use the same type of materials (essentially petrol bombs), but they differ from riots in that they do not expect nor require the violent reaction of the state forces, in fact, after the attack, participants had to leave, whereas, as he argues, in riots there would be a clash.

In contrast to these core rioters, Bríd, a woman who participated in riots mostly during her childhood in Derry, acknowledged that she was outside that group of "core rioters", but she could observe the presence of coordination during the riots:

But as you grow up, you knew, for example, (...) that there were certain people had been put at the front of the riots, usually youngsters, so they were, that happened to us. And the boys at the back were calling all the shots (...). So, there was ones put at the front, I think two guys at the back were giving the orders, and I remember thinking ye know? There is a, there's a method here. (Bríd)

Bríd's observations would be consistent with Collins' (2008) analysis of riots, where he identified different layers of rioters, that in his view would correspond to different degrees of skill and experience. Her experience is particularly interesting because she contrasts her previous riot participation as a child, to her later experience. There is tacit awareness that during the later riots, she realised that there was a level of coordination that she had been completely oblivious to beforehand. Similarly, Kucinkas (2015) correctly points out that, when social movement researchers observe protesters in action as outsiders, it is not difficult to see actions as spontaneous that are, in fact, not⁶. Even other riot participants, as Bríd's narrative illustrates, could be unaware of the existence of a plan. Here too, it is perhaps important to make a distinction between spontaneous and unpredicted (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). There might be participants in riots who plan to engage in a riot, however, the exact moment might be more difficult to prearrange in advance as riots require the active engagement of another party. This does not render the examination of triggers or paths (Nassauer, 2019) that lead to riots irrelevant. Rather, understanding the process in which riots develop is highly pertinent but this should not entail overlooking the fact that if they occur, they cannot always be explained as accidental, but rather at least in great part, due to the active involvement of actors that regard riots as a form of protest, as well as the active involvement of state forces who repress protesters.

Discussion and conclusions

My analysis suggests that during the conflict, even though spontaneous riots, that is, those without previous planning, were fairly common, these riots could not be considered disorganised, as there was coordination to some extent between different riot participants. However, there were also instances of riots that clearly included pre-planning and coordination prior to the event. Riot organisers gathered materials in the days or weeks before the event, sometimes in great quantities, involved volunteers in mass scale manufacture of petrol bombs, hijacked vehicles, and deliberate provocation of state forces in order to initiate riot confrontations. This article has also built on the idea that riot participants, as in social movements are not "unitary actors" (Ryckman, 2020: 319), and has shown that there were informal groups of riot organisers that could make a plan in advance, whereas other rioters could remain oblivious to the existence of this, getting involved in riots simply as they occurred. Moreover, contrary to Tilly's findings (2003), all the respondents in this project regarded the events they took part in as riots, and themselves and others as rioters. In the small sample of narratives displayed in this article, three of them (Oisín, Jack and Bríd) use the term riot.

Theoretically, this article makes two main contributions. First, it challenges the view that riots are essentially a spontaneous form of action, building on the recent research on the distinction between organisation and organising (den Hond et al., 2015; Gunzelmann, 2022), it demonstrates that riots can be organised without the direct involvement of formal organisations, suggesting a shift in our attention to organising practices. In turn, building upon a conceptualisation of riots as a bilateral form of violence, this research opens up the possibility of considering some riots, particularly anti-state riots, as a tactic. This points at a controversial issue that perhaps is difficult to deal with for social movement researchers who are critical of the authorities as emphasising the deliberate use of violence by demonstrators might be interpreted by some as a means of condoning the repression of the state forces. While acknowledging that the government is a primary source of violence (Piven and Cloward, 1991), and that violence emerges in reaction to it, this reaction also needs explanation. An exclusive focus on repression by the state in protests at the expense of neglecting the

⁶ For example, in their review on spontaneity, Snow and Moss (2014:) explained riots that took place in 1983 (Snow and Moss, 2014: 1132), the authors, however, do not explain what led them to the conclusion that the attack by counterdemonstrators was not actually planned in advance.

potentially deliberate use of violent tactics might have the unintended effect of diminishing the agency of those who mobilise in political violence for strategic purposes.

Based on qualitative data, this article has offered a challenge to the assumption that riots are a spontaneous form of action. The qualitative research is situated in a context closer to civil war, where the legitimacy of the monopoly of the use of violence by the state is questioned. The study of anti-state riots in this context, given the widespread use of different forms of violence, riots, being one of the most common, has allowed the development of a more complex understanding of riots. However, the dynamics of riots were affected by this particular context. As previous scholars have pointed out, the contested nature of space, gave the PIRA some level of control of the local nationalist areas where riots took place (Ó Dochartaigh and Bosi, 2010; Bosi, 2013). These areas were characterised by informal networks of support, and riots were among these forms of support for the PIRA as they challenged the legitimacy of the state forces. Taking the form of protests against particular actions of the government or state forces, and other instrumental purposes, such as their use as a decoy. These characteristics, interesting as they are, cannot be said to be generalisable to other contexts, particularly as the legitimacy of the monopoly of violence of the state— although never completely achieved (Baczko et al, 2018), is not often challenged to this degree. For this reason, future research should comparatively analyse these findings with rioting dynamics in contexts where there is not an open armed conflict, for example, in Western Europe or the United States.

Nonetheless, the main focus of this article has been to clarify the extent to which the assumption of spontaneity can be applied to riots, in general. Even if this was an anomalous case, as a significant number of riots included pre-planning and some level of coordination, it undermines the inclusion of spontaneity as a defining feature of all forms of riot. This does not of course imply the opposite argument, that all riots are planned, but it opens up new areas of inquiry. For example, future research could analyse the influence of civil war dynamics on the generation of relatively permanent infrastructures making the occurrence of planned riots more likely. Likewise, the findings offered in this article can be seen as complementary to other theories. Given the usual volatility of riots (Simiti, 2012; Case, 2022), even when riots include a plan, the state forces may not react as expected, or when they do, and clashes take place, riot organisers might not manage to mobilise other riot participants who were not included in the pre-planning – whose participation, therefore, could be considered to be spontaneous. Thus, if we want to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of riots, it is necessary to incorporate the interplay of triggers or flashpoints and background factors (Waddington, 2015), provocations (Tiratelli, 2022), and as well as the impact of identity (White 2001), emotional, and situational dynamics that take place during the event.

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Author’s Information:

Alba Arenales holds a PhD in Sociology from Queen’s University Belfast. Her main research areas include social movements, political violence, tactics, and the sociology of emotions.