

Deconstructing “Criminalisation”: The Politics of Collective Education in the H-blocks

Jacqueline Dana and Seán McMonagle

For people involved in liberation struggles, it is not enough to commit oneself to the ideal of freedom; instead one must break from the structures put into place by the oppressor government and society. One of the crucial steps in gaining freedom is forming a system of self-education where the ideas of a revolutionary movement can be developed, tested through discussion and passed on to others within the movement. In the case of the Irish Republican movement, a good deal of this education takes place within the confines of prison, amongst political prisoners.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire proposed that oppressed peoples wishing to be free must first learn not to perceive of themselves as ignorant outsiders with an inferior culture to that of the dominating class. According to Freire all people possess knowledge to bring about their own freedom. This is where education comes to the forefront of the struggle. Friere (1989) argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from their oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption (Friere, 1989: 39)

One of the problems with some populist-type movements is that the leaders often belong to the upper class, members of the “educated” elite, which invariably possess, in Freire’s judgement, “a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know”(Friere, 1989: 46). In this way oppression never is addressed head on, and substantive changes never come about, for the leaders second-guess the people’s needs (while rarely taking actions that would drastically alter the status quo).

The oppressed instead must come to realize their responsibility for their own liberation, and accept their ability to transform their own situation themselves. In the end revolutionary change can only come through dialogue, not from what Freire calls “libertarian propaganda.” Education then must take on a new form - instead of indoctrination it also must take on the form of dialogue where everyone’s experiences and knowl-

edge are considered and explored. Students become not receptacles for knowledge but “critical co-investigators” working together with their “teacher” to learn new truths about their situation. As Freire puts it, within such a system “no one teaches, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world” (Freire, 1989: 67-68).

Freire’s concept of non-hierarchical, dialogue-based education can be applied to the system begun by prisoners within the prisons of Northern Ireland, particularly within the H-Blocks at Long Kesh. From a desire to share and enjoy their native Irish culture as well as from their need to learn more about the political struggle, incarcerated Irish Republicans developed an educational strategy to combat the pervasiveness of the English world view. Education, in fact, became a focal point in the battles against Britain that would be staged within prison walls.

When large numbers of Irish Nationalists and Republicans were arrested and interned beginning in 1971, the new prisoners made a determined effort to share whatever knowledge they possessed of their traditional Irish culture with the rest of the internees. In Long Kesh internment camp, alongside the IRA military drills, weapons classes and strategy discussions that were a priority at the time, the few POWs who knew Irish Gaelic or had a knowledge of history or other subjects became teachers, sharing their knowledge with the others within the freedom of the “cages” where there was little interference from guards or restriction of movement.

This process changed dramatically with the introduction of the new prison system, in place after 1976. Following the recommendations of Lord Diplock, officials built a new prison with traditional cells, and in tandem began a policy of “criminalisation.” Henceforth, instead of internment without trial, and subsequent prisoner-of-war status and treatment, political prisoners were sent to Her Majesty’s Prison Maze, known popularly as the H-Blocks. Here they were expected to wear a prisoner uniform and be restricted to individual cells, relinquishing all elements of their inherent political status.

The British government was not prepared for the level of resistance to criminalisation that would come with the new policy. Newly convicted Irish Republicans refused to wear a uniform and thereby accept the British attempt to depoliticize their motivations, and this meant in turn that they had no options other than to replace the detested uniform - their only clothing option - with blankets wrapped around themselves.

Because they did not “conform” to prison rules, they were denied free association and many other “privileges” granted to conforming prisoners. Unfortunately, this meant the end to the formal prisoner taught classes in language, history and politics that had existed within the cages of the internment camp.

However, the “blanket protest” as it became known, along with the subsequent “dirty” and “no-wash” protests, did not bring an end to political education on the part of the prisoners. Because they were on protest, Republican prisoners could not sit together and have classes. Instead of admitting defeat, the prisoners discovered that they could still educate one another, but now by shouting to their neighbours through doors, out windows or along water pipes. In this way a slow process was established where all men in a wing could share information by repeating it along the line until everyone was included. As former Republican political prisoner Felim O’Hagan explained, such a process had a great “levelling” effect on the prisoners (O’Hagan and McKeown, 1991: 7). Individual status amongst the prisoners was effectively negated by a lack of interaction, forcing them to acknowledge themselves as equals. Without the availability of books, classrooms or even anything but the crudest of writing materials, each man became equally responsible for contributing his own knowledge to the best of his ability. Those who had become fluent in Irish while in the internment camp, for example, now were able to bring their knowledge to the corridors of the H-Blocks.

After five years of prison protest and hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981, the British government unofficially began to grant many of the Republican prisoners’ demands, including 24-hour association in the wings and access to study materials. As a result, the prisoners now are able to organize themselves in a communal society, where everything is shared as equally as possible, including the general maintenance of the wings, food received in parcels, postage stamps, and the use of the television and other items. For these men, living as political prisoners means the ‘community’ always comes before personal gain.

Living in this way teaches the men how to interact on an equal level. Regardless of one’s position outside, in the H-Blocks no one is considered more or less important than another, and each man is obligated to contribute to the best of his abilities. In turn, this system affected the formation of the prisoners’ own educational system. The communal lifestyle encouraged the prisoners as a whole not to return to a hierarchi-

cal educational system where one person alone would be the teacher and authority. The prisoners instead arrange classes and debates in such a way that they incorporate everyone who wishes to participate, holding each person accountable for doing a fair amount of reading and then interpreting the ideas and leading discussions, and appointing only a facilitator to keep things on track. In this way they become actively involved in the pursuit of knowledge instead of simply being passive recipients.

In order to understand the prisoners' educational program, it is helpful to examine some of the classes that the prisoners commonly organize for themselves in the Republican wings of the H-Blocks. Each wing sponsors many different subjects pertinent to the interests of the prisoners, including historical analysis, political ideologies, jail history and Irish language. Each *rang*, as a class is called in Irish, usually is led by two men who ensure that all avenues and sides of any given topic are explored. These leaders facilitate the discussion by posing questions to the others and make sure that there is adequate debate on all subjects.

The first *rang* new prisoners participate in, and the only one required of those considering themselves political prisoners, is "Jail History." The class covers the history of Republican prisoners in Long Kesh, from the time of the blanket protest and hunger strikes to the present day. Those in the political wings make this class compulsory because it examines the importance of the struggle inside the H-Blocks, helping to define what being an Irish Republican POW is all about. In this class, men discuss the prisoners' successful struggle for *de facto* political status and better living conditions for all Republicans held in prison in Northern Ireland. From others who experienced the early days of the prison regime they learn how the prisoners in Long Kesh and elsewhere achieved the unofficial political status that they enjoy now through both physical resistance and determined protests.

As a result of the jail history classes Republican activists learn they can continue the struggle even while incarcerated. Whether on the outside a prisoner was an active IRA volunteer or simply a civilian who sold the political newspaper *An Phoblacht/The Republican News*, there is a role for him within the prison - he learns not to become complacent and accept his fate at the hands of the British government. All POWs discover that because of the Republican educational program no one is useless, and that being in prison does not mean that the British govern-

ment has defeated them. Their work just takes on a different form and operates within a different context.

Other classes address the prisoners' political involvement from a theoretical viewpoint. A frequent class is the politics or ideology *rang*, which is commonly made up of about eight men who examine different ideologies such as capitalism, socialism, liberalism and fascism. The men read up on one of the ideologies each week and debate positive and negative aspects of the topic. In this way they have a better grasp on different methods of government and economic systems, making it easier to consider the ramifications of those which the Republican movement espouses. After a group completes a basic introductory *rang* in ideologies, some of the men may elect to go deeper into these issues, choosing to have a more intensive capitalism versus socialism *rang*, where they can debate the specific merits and flaws to each system.

Continuing from the days of internment are the abundant Irish language classes. In the early days of the H-Blocks, when men were on the blanket protest, future hunger striker Bobby Sands was one of the main people to encourage the use of Irish in the wings. Having become fluent himself while in the cages of the internment camp, he began teaching the others Irish "out the doors." This entailed shouting the lessons up and down the wing, and the "students," if lucky enough to have a bit of graphite and toilet paper, would write the words down. Others would write the lessons on the walls if possible or try to commit the lesson to memory. In this way Sands and other Irish speakers began the classes, with the focus on general phrases about day-to-day activities.

Quickly, the study of Irish became a crucial part of the POWs resistance to the prison regime. Since most prison officials did not understand Irish, the prisoners took advantage of this, and much of the Irish spoken conveyed information about the prison and the guards to other prisoners. When they realized the effectiveness and popularity of this system, Sands and others began teaching the language in earnest, helping the men build up a much larger vocabulary so they could engage in conversations. It was generally acknowledged among Republican prisoners that if they wanted to know what was happening then they would have no choice but to learn Irish.

With the end of the protests, prisoners set up a formal educational program for Irish. As it operates today, those with good Irish organize a number of courses for different levels of learners. Those with a moder-

ate knowledge of Irish might teach a *bun rang*, or beginner's course, while those prisoners holding gold *fainní* and considered fluent take the advanced *rangs*. In the beginners' class the prisoners tackle easy vocabulary that allows them to express ordinary actions that take place on the wings. The higher level classes use textbooks, but these books are left up to the discretion of whoever facilitates the class. In all Irish classes, everyone is encouraged to test each other. The "teacher" is there to facilitate and guide the *rang*, but ultimately everyone is responsible to himself and for each other.

Another class, one known as "Historical Analysis," is perhaps the most important to the Republicans, for in many ways participating in this group helps solidify their own ideas on the struggle and helps form their dynamic ideology. Functioning as a discussion and debate circle more than a "class," Historical Analysis allows POWs to explore the history behind incidents in the period 1966 -1986, such as the civil rights marches, the fall of Stormont, internment, the hunger strikes and Bloody Sunday. The class has a certain amount of pre-planned structure. A draft outline of contemporary Irish history was written down by one of the POWs, and it is this draft that the prisoners use as a starting point. In the draft, each chapter outlines an important event and asks questions for the class to tackle. For example, the first chapter considers the Northern Ireland government in the years 1966-69, with the problems created by the conflict between civil rights marches and Stormont, and poses the question, "Was the state reformable?"

A section of the Historical Analysis class would have about eight men participating, and each week two of the men would take turns covering one of the chapters in the outline and assigning reading to the others. The week's leaders draw up a number of points to discuss, as well as formulate questions to ask the others as a way to initiate discussion. The group then examines the topic from all sides, trying to determine what happened, why the event happened the way it did, and engaging in debate to decide if the Republican movement could have done anything differently and what lessons can be learned from the event. In this way British, Loyalist and IRA actions are all held up to equal scrutiny. Sometimes the group will agree with the ideas in the drafted history, but often they see new aspects of the event that had not been considered before. Furthermore, as an important dimension to this process, often at least one of the men in the wing may have been a

participant or witness to the event discussed and can share his experiences with the others, bringing an emotional and human side to the otherwise academic discussions.

Besides the classes, on each wing there is the Sinn Féin Cumann, a gathering of some of the more politically active men on the wing. This group sponsors at least one discussion a month on a variety of current events and issues important to the men as a whole. Some recent topics include the recent IRA cease-fire, the Downing Street Declaration, issues of crime and punishment in the community, sectarianism, and the role of the Irish language and culture in the struggle. Overall, those involved in the Cumann work through issues affecting the Republican community as a whole, both inside and outside of prison, and it would be these men that members of Sinn Féin consult for a representative selection of the feelings and ideas of the prisoners. And once out of prison, many Cumann leaders become more actively involved in the political side of the movement, some even becoming Sinn Féin candidates in elections.

Seen together, these classes and debates open up a dialogue between the prisoners where all who choose to do so can take an active role in the education and political development of the wing. No one needs to sit and receive information handed down by experts removed from the scene of the struggle - instead, everyone becomes both teacher and student. And information and knowledge is not static and pre-determined, but instead is constantly updated and developed through the combination of everyone's experience and analysis.

As a result, the education that takes place in the H-Block empowers the prisoners to work for the end to their own oppression. Although many of them attend the prison administration's classes to A and O Level exams and work within the prison's Open University system to get university credits, the prisoners' political education, that which refines their knowledge of the struggle and their own place within it, occurs in the wings, unofficial but very much alive. As long as they continue to explore their own culture and history and debate the ramifications of events outside, the Republican prisoners resist the criminal label the British government tries to attach to them. Ultimately the "educational programme" in the H-Blocks helps Republican prisoners remain actively involved in the movement, and in some ways even contributes to the movement as a whole, for it is the men in the H-Blocks - the prisoners - who have the leisure time to read and debate topics fully. These men

come to terms with what it means to be an Irish Republican activist in today's political climate, and they also come to a serious understanding about what the struggle has meant to the people of Northern Ireland for the last twenty-five years.

REFERENCES

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