

## Associational Groups, Memories and Transitions to Peace: The Case of Northern Ireland

On Falls Road in West Belfast, a traditionally Catholic area, a bright, confident man greets you from his perch on the side of a house. A quote accompanies his dimpled grin: “Everyone republican or otherwise has their own particular role to play... our revenge will be the laughter of our children.” This vibrant mural memorializes Bobby Sands, and serves as a reminder of Northern Ireland’s violent history.



Bobby Sands, a member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, became a martyr to the IRA when he perished leading a hunger strike in a British prison. His strike was focused on the goal of achieving political prisoner status, which the British had stripped the prisoners of. The then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was unmoved by such protests, stating that “[Crime is crime is crime. It is not political.](#)”

Along with the mural of Bobby Sands, Belfast is decorated with political murals commemorating a time rife with violence and sectarian tensions known as The Troubles. In

recent years, however, there has been an increasing effort to paint over these murals to promote reconciliation.



However the question remains: are the murals merely a relic of the past, memorializing a violent history? Or, perhaps, do these murals represent wounds that haven't quite healed, nearly 20 years after the [Good Friday Agreement](#)? These are just a few of the questions that Professor Joachim Savelsberg and PhD student Michael Soto will be tackling with their research.

Professor Savelsberg teaches in the Department of Sociology where he specializes in law, human rights, and the sociology of knowledge, memory and representations. His previous research has included topics such as responses to [human rights violations in Darfur](#) and

numerous other publications focused on memories and the law. With this research project, entitled “Associational Groups, Memories and Transitions to Peace: The Case of Northern Ireland,” Professor Savelsberg will take a look at memory of the conflict and the ways it has been impacted in the peace process.

Working with him is Michael Soto, a PhD student in the Sociology department, with interests in the peace building process in Colombia. Building off of this particular research project, Soto will be using the case study of Northern Ireland’s transition to peace in order to illuminate possibilities for Colombia. For him, the importance of such research lies in the connections to be made between Northern Ireland’s transition to peace to contemporary examples. He states, “In a sense, Northern Ireland provides a glimpse of what may lay ahead for Colombia following its 2016 peace agreement with the FARC.” Soto hopes that the findings in this research will inform his own dissertation on the Colombian peace process.

This research comes as a part of a larger initiative at the University of Minnesota. The [Human Rights Lab](#) funds interdisciplinary research in the human rights field through the [Grand Challenges grant](#). By funding interdisciplinary work, the hope is that questions such as the ones posed by the Belfast murals will be given space to be explored and analyzed to advance the field of human rights.

With this aim, Savelsberg and Soto strive to elucidate the progress of Northern Ireland’s peace process and reconciliation projects. Specifically, the researchers hope to look at reconciliation efforts through the lens of grassroots initiatives to develop an understanding of how these initiatives help or hurt the peace process. According to Soto, most research in this field focuses on formal efforts rather than grassroots, community level efforts to aid the peace process. By focusing on these ex-combatant and victim groups, the researchers also hope to find

answers to questions such as “How does participation in these groups affect memory of the conflict? How do they affect how participants see themselves and each other?”

This summer, Professor Savelsberg and Michael Soto are conducting fieldwork in Northern Ireland by interviewing people involved in grassroots work to bridge sectarian divides. The interviews will serve as data collection for their larger research project, and will help clarify many of the questions and themes their research poses.

By looking at the Northern Ireland peace process, 20 years later and at a community level, Savelsberg and Soto hope to provide insight into other peace processes and ultimately, offer a new analysis for the field of human rights to consider when contending with all that a peace process entails.