The Non-Payers:

Personal narrative, collective memory and the oral testimonies of poll tax rebels

Submitted by ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ to the University of Exeter as a dissertation towards the degree of MA in History

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Summary

This dissertation is the product of many months of fieldwork nationwide documenting the testimonies and personal archives of participants in the anti-poll tax movement, spanning the latter twentieth century to present day. The author is vague about the exact period, because oral testimonies span lifetimes, from the earliest influences to the moment of the interview itself. The following chapters therefore engage not only with the phenomenon of mass non-payment, but with those influences upon the testimony that foreground its intersubjectivity. Those influences such as interview context, culture, and the subjective self are explored in depth as a means of identifying collective trends in how the poll tax rebellion is remembered by the rebels themselves. The author raises questions as to the existence of a truly objective source, basing the viability of oral testimonies upon the need for a fresh approach to what historians consider credible and trustworthy. The call to embrace subjectivity is the author's means of drawing individual agency back into our analysis, as it returns from a long diversion into the seemingly deterministic principals of post-structuralism. It reviews and counterpoises two of the dominant existing works on the movement against one another, *Poll Tax Rebellion* (Burns, 1992) and *A Time to Rage* (Sheridan, 1994), and in turn against a sample of the oral testimonies collated in order to ascertain the extent of synthesis between the written and oral. The author applies the work of social cognition theorists Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, and the narrative theory of Gerald Prince and Wolf Schmid to unpack the layers of personal narratives and grasp how collective memories are created through social exchange. The piece provides a methodological and theoretical basis for a more thorough study of the orality of the movement and the post-industrial period as a whole in the author's doctoral research to begin in 2012.

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Chapter I

Introduction

I

This dissertation does not set out to write an official history of the rebellion that saw millions of British people take part in civil disobedience against a system of taxation called the Community Charge, known to history as the Poll Tax. That such an official history does not already exist is in many ways a triumph for that movement, that no dominant memory claims ownership of its legacy. A movement of such a mass character is by nature multi-vocal. While this dissertation attempts to understand the relative neglect of this social movement in academia, it does so with the aim of asking how popular histories come about and the role in this played by 'storytellers.' The author believes dialogue to be an act of agency in the creation and development of discourses.

The 'storytellers' in this case are the non-payers, both those who led the movement against Margaret Thatcher's poll tax, and those who followed. There is a common anxiety in the discipline that an oral historian's work is never complete,[1] and the same is true of this project. The author therefore makes no claim that his chosen storytellers provide an entirely representative cross section

of those involved in the rebellion. Such an undertaking is the potential focus of future doctoral research. The scope of this project is to understand the process of storytelling with regard to mass experience, the role of textual material in the shaping and influence upon oral testimonies, and how mass public events are grafted into the individual personal narrative. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the links between these individual storytellers and the existence of a collective, popular, or perhaps dominant historical discourse. The author believes there are exciting new insights to be made into the role of the individual and individual agency in the creation and development of the pervasive idea systems we live by, and that influence our social actions.

We in the social sciences have only recently begun to make a fresh turn toward rediscovering the individual agent as an historical actor. In his groundbreaking 1963 work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Edward P. Thompson lamented the old orthodoxies of labour history that tended, "…to obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts, to the making of history."[2] Thompson was referring to those historians and sociologists who employed a particularly reductionist form of vulgar Marxism, which regarded all social action as the result of certain determining socio-economic forces. No doubt structures and material conditions play an immense role in the cause of numerous kinds of social action, from the purchasing habits or the number of children in an average household to the impetus behind revolutions. But their analysis often neglected the fact that social actors did not always pursue their supposed structural interests, and in fact appeared to be informed by identities and ideas systems, potentially independent of the economic base upon which they were originally perceived to have been built. These identities and ideologies were steeped, it was argued, not in the base and superstructure paradigm of Marx, but in language.

The 'linguistic turn' as it became known was championed by Gareth Stedman Jones in his 1983 landmark study, *Languages of Class, Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, in

particular, his essay "Rethinking Chartism" (ch.3). Stedman Jones set out, "…to dislocate the ambition of a theoretically informed history from any simple prejudgment about the determining role of the 'social.'"[3] He, and his acolytes Patrick Joyce and James Vernon rode the tide of the postmodernist vogue in the humanities, of which Richard J. Evans stated in his instructive work, *In Defence of History*, "Such has been the power and influence of the postmodernist critique of history that growing numbers of historians themselves are abandoning the search for truth, the belief in objectivity, and the quest for a scientific approach to the past"[4]. But where does agency fit into this model? Has a structural determinism been replaced by a linguistic one? Can the root of all human social action be attributed to discourses? If this were the case, how do these all-pervasive idea systems change over time? Certainly, discourses are influenced by structural changes in the world; advances in science and technology, and the ownership of productive forces. Undeniably, discourses have a profound influence on our perceived identities, moral systems and worldviews. But can we accept that the social cognition or agency of individuals play no part in the creation and development of 'meaning' in our world? Are people simply socialised into discursive spheres, and act only within their linguistic boundaries? The author believes discourses cannot possibly be this rigid, and in the following chapters has sought to argue the case for individual agency in the creation and development of collective meaning.

To do this, the author first introduces the case of the anti-poll tax movement, a subject that has both struck his political interest at a time of growing anti-austerity movements around the globe, but also raised his curiosity as to why so little has been written on the subject by academics and the traditional working class organisations such as trade unions and the Labour Party. A sample of the existing literature is reviewed in chapter two, where the symbiotic relationship between the spoken word and cultural artefact is explored. In the course of extensive fieldwork the author has located a goldmine of rich source material that reveals insights beyond the historian's traditional hunt for *empirical objectivity*. As discussed in this chapter, it is the outright subjectivity of this source

material that gives it such strength. How narrators in these oral testimonies attribute meaning to their experience, how they reflect on their upbringing and political education, and what ideas come to the fore and those that remain silent, in essence, their *subjective self*, are among the key insights under particular scrutiny in chapter three. This relatively small sample also opens up significant potential for future research into the existence of similarities and variation in personal narratives between regional cultures, the urban and rural, occupational and social class, the genders and ethnicities; in essence, identifying the hegemonic and heterogeneous elements of this social movement in late twentieth century Britain. The section in chapter four on collective memory seeks to draw together some of these concepts and provide the launch pad for the gathering and analysis of a larger and more representative body of data. This dissertation, therefore, does not close the book on the anti-poll tax movement. Rather, it appears to provide many new sign posts to further study into the British 1980's, as a period of immeasurable significance in the formation of our modern post-industrial culture. In doing so, the author hopes to channel that interest along the lines of his own methodology, which advocates the psychohistory approach, and address the importance of oral tradition.

During the early months of 2011, the fieldwork conducted by the author gathered interviews from a number of provincial cities and their environs. While too few to provide an adequately representative picture of regional variation in the movement, they do uncover hidden histories often concealed by the traditional pre-eminence of London. In the order in which they took place, one was interviewed in Exeter, three in Bristol, one in Birmingham, two in Coventry, two in Manchester, one in Chester, and six in Glasgow. While all urban centres, most interviewees travelled to outlying areas to participate in rural campaigns, and are able to comment extensively. The author is proud to include the narratives of both male and female informants, although feels that the absence of testimony from non-white British respondents is a regrettable weakness. There are however a range of age groups; those who were in their twenties at the time of the rebellion and

those who were already drawing their pension. All but two of these were interviewed at their home address, and all but two were conducted one on one, but all narratives lasted an average of one and a half hours. While varying depending on the kind of informant, their age, and the rapport the author was able to build with them, between forty and sixty percent of an individual's narrative was devoted to the their early life and political education; how their worldview was generated, and how the poll tax rebellion slots into a wider life story. This was a conscious choice by the interviewer, feeling that by enclosing the narrative into a short episode of five years, such boundaries would conceal the way in which narrators create meaning over time, based on lived experiences, cultural influences, and retrospective considerations. While at present this small archive is not wholly representative of the movement, these narratives individually and collectively demonstrate such influences upon the storyteller, which can be effectively explained by the concept of *intersubjectivity*.

Traditional history has often pursued 'the official'; based on a supposedly unbiased, *objective* approach that could produce a written account about a little known time and place with an *accurate* narrative of events, treating the subject in question as though it were a foreign country, far removed from the standards and practices of the present, or the biases of historians themselves. Today there are greater calls for the recognition of the relationship between the past and the present, influencing political ideas and programmes, and our day-to-day lives. The Popular Memory Group at the University of Birmingham argued, "It is because 'the past' has this living active existence in the present that it matters so much politically."[5] Many of the early traditionalists came from the upper classes, and were inclined towards histories of nation states, institutions and revered individuals, often confirming rather than challenging the status quo. Even many of the early labour and social historians focused on the official organisations of working people that represented a minority of the better organised or notoriously worst off. But again, many of these histories confirmed and celebrated their chosen group, and made sweeping statements, presuming that all

adhered to official lines; that *meanings* were hegemonic among the group. If subjective opinions were to be used, such as the memoirs of the key figures of a given institution, they would be subject to a critical reading to determine hidden agendas and verified against so called 'hard evidence.' Such documents deemed reliable and objective for their supposed officialdom, however, failed to reveal far beyond the presumptions and speculations of the historian about the actual identities and worldviews of individuals or their culture as a whole. In an attempt to democratise the discipline some historians began to directly question those they deemed 'ordinary people.' However, these early interviewers often stuck to rigid questionnaires, and came under pressure and criticism to verify their findings. What could the unaccountable, the senile, the narcissistic or delusional layperson tell scholars that was 'trustworthy'?

It is the author's belief that oral sources are just as 'reliable' as any written source. Scholarship's whole approach views the written word as separate and superior to the spoken word, when the two cannot possibly be separated. "Orality and writing," wrote the oral historian Alessandro Portelli, "for many centuries now, have not existed separately; if many written sources are based on orality, modern orality itself is saturated with writing."[6] While written sources should be consulted for their influences upon spoken word, the elevation of the written word is unfounded. The idea of genuinely objective source material has slipped out of fashion and our definition of a 'credible' source has changed markedly. Instead, historians search for the correct analytical tools to break down specific kinds of inherently subjective source material. In the case of oral testimonies, an approach that unpacks the source's many intersubjectivities is incredibly revealing.

Intersubjectivity is well illustrated by a triangle, its three points labelled, 1) interviewer/interviewee relationship and interview context, 2) culture, including the public identities and discourses to which one conforms or transgresses, and 3) the self, as in the identity of the

narrator.[7] The three function in a dialogue, informing upon one another and influencing the resulting testimony. As argued by oral historian Lynn Abrams, "There is no such thing as an unmediated narrative – a pure or transparent oral representation of past experience."[8] 2) and 3) are explored in greater detail later, but here the author speculates as to the influence he has had on respondent's narratives. The interview is not a one-way street. It is a conversation between two agents: the interviewer, be they an academic or an activist, and an interviewee. As two free agents meeting face to face, they each possess a subjective position, have expectations of the interview experience, and will make judgements of one another, both on first impression and throughout the engagement, including appearances, accent, age, gender, ethnicity, behaviour and body language, and opinions. Therefore the historian must be 'self reflexive.'[9]

In the course of his fieldwork, the author observed his own behaviour, and speculated as to the likely influence he had on his interviewees. With an academic background, a hierarchical relationship is thrown down instantly, whereby the interviewer has command over the interview process and the interpretation of the finished recording.[10] This may cause the interviewee to initially behave formally, as one would around a stranger or professional. On the other hand, an interviewee may find the interviewer less threatening, lending greater respect to manual work or entrepreneurial initiative over academia, or has perhaps studied at university themself. The interviewer has no discernable regional accent, although what this reveals about his class background may influence the extent to which respondents feel they can relate.

It is true that first impressions count. The author is a white-British man, and at the time of the interview aged twenty-two. While the author believes his white-British ethnicity had little impact upon his white-British and Irish respondent's testimonies, a black interviewer may well have had a different experience. The expectations of the author's age and gender however will have made an impact. As the author had only just been born at the start of the period under discussion, there is

the expectation that he has little or no first hand experience, that he is perhaps naïve about the subject. A respondent may take on an almost paternal role, patiently explaining background information, while contemporising parts of their language. It is assumed, of course, the respondent is eager to help. As a man, too, the way two men interact in an interview context is likely to contrast with one that is mixed. As already suggested, a power relationship exists during an interview, where an interviewee can potentially feel vulnerable. As a means of defending himself, and perhaps in order to inflate the worth of his story, a male interviewee may behave more competitively toward the interviewer. Of course, this behaviour is informed upon by broader expectations of masculinity as well as the interpersonal relations in the interview. Similarly, a female respondent from a working class background, perhaps socialised in a period when women played a much smaller role in the public sphere, may feel unaccustomed to describing their acts of agency, preferring to describe work and social activities and aspects of their lives they shared with others, such as the family and community. In the course of his research, the author has been self-effaced by the profound role played by women in the anti-poll tax movement, and has made it his business in future to pay far closer attention to gendered histories.

Among respondents in this project are a number who would describe themselves as socialists, or have a lot of sympathy with the socialists they have met. Often before the interview took place, respondents became aware of the author's socialist views, and this would surely have influenced the ease with which many spoke of their worldviews, and what they felt could be left unsaid. In the past the historian would have been encouraged to suppress or conceal their ideological position for the sake of supposed objectivity. As demonstrated by the intersubjectivity model, to remove the inevitable influence upon the narrative by the interviewer would be to describe the ebb and flow of a river without mentioning the terrain which channels it. Certainly, not every poll tax rebel was a socialist, but the role played in the leadership of the national and local campaigns by socialists means their testimonies are as valid as any. It would be unfair to narrators

and inaccurate analysis were the author to deny his sympathies with socialism and members of the Militant Tendency, so the intention in the following chapters is to account for the effects of the author's bias.

Events occurring in the weeks and days leading up to the interview invariably influence those opinions and the pertinence of particular memories. The author's fieldwork was conducted both in the weeks before and following the Trade Union Congress 'March for the Alternative' of 26 March 2011, and at the height of the so called *Arab Spring*. Many respondents were glad to draw comparisons between their poll tax activity and the unfolding events of the anti-austerity movement. Similarly, respondents drew links between the context of the European revolutions in the Stalinist republics with those in the Arab world. The author feels that while these movements differ in many ways, the narratives of respondents are likely to have been influenced, if only subconsciously, by present day popular anger and international events.

The complexity of the interpersonal relationship between the author and respondents in a specific interview means that the resulting narrative, were it conducted at a different time, or by a different interviewer, would be completely different to that which is presented here. But the intersubjectivities behind a narrative go beyond interview context. The broader cultural context, behavioural standards of interaction, and the world of discursive identities and ideologies, the very basis of communication, play a tremendous role in the interview context, as does the interviewee's entire sense of self. Chapter two explores the role of discourses in the shaping of 'dominant memory' by examining a sample of existing written studies of the poll tax rebellion. Chapter three and four then assess the synthesis between these and oral narratives, exploring how narratives are created, negotiated and renegotiated over time, raising questions regarding the workings of memory and the definition of the self. The extent to which a half-formed (as of yet unofficial) collective memory exists, and the role of individual agents in this is the focus of chapter four and the author's

concluding remarks. The author now turns the attention of this introductory chapter to the poll tax rebellion itself.

II

The eventual abandonment of the charge represented one of the greatest victories for these people ever conceded by a Conservative government.[11]

Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years

Quite who 'these people' were becomes clear in the course of this dissertation, but the gravity of the situation that saw the scrapping of poll tax legislation is clear by this autobiographical quote. That a Conservative government was pushed into retreat by extra-parliamentary means was itself remarkable. But that a Conservative government of the likes of Margaret Thatcher's could concede to such an extent is astonishing. This government had a significantly different character to any previous post-war Conservative government. Margaret Thatcher's 1979 general election victory over James Callaghan represented a watershed that marked the end of Clement Atlee's settlement and consensus politics, which had seen extensive state ownership of core energy, utility, and industrial sectors, strong trade unions, a large manufacturing base, and a parliamentary Labour Party speaking openly about the 'British road to socialism.' The policies of the Thatcher government presented a new settlement, which saw these core industries and services privatised, outsourced to foreign firms, and floated on the stock market, changing the face of Britain from a nation of heavy industry to a finance and service led economy. With it, the lives and communities of British people of all classes changed markedly.

The Thatcher government was initially weak. With rampant inflation and unemployment reaching three million it was expected Labour would quickly return to power by 1983. Her change of fortunes came with the Argentine invasion of the Falklands in 1982. Among the gains personally made from the resulting conflict, Thatcher was thereafter portrayed as the uncompromising Iron Lady. The 1983 election went disastrously for Labour. The party was internally divided. While the leftwing were able to propel Michael Foot to the leadership, Foot's pacifism contrasted starkly with the patriotic overtures of Thatcher's South Atlantic adventure. With an occasionally incoherent and contradictory party manifesto, Labour failed to draw the confidence of voters. Thatcher strengthened her majority. With a second term assured she reshuffled the cabinet, surrounding herself with close ideological allies. In response to their dreadful performance at the polls, the Labour Party lurched to the right; replacing Foot with would-be modernizer, Neil Kinnock.

In the course of his leadership, Kinnock was to extol the virtues of respectability and electability. This meant breaking the myth that the party was the junior partner to the trade unions, and launching a series of witch hunts against the far-left within the party, particularly the Militant Tendency. The cautious TUC executive mimicked the emphasis of the party leadership. In support of their brothers in the National Union of Mineworkers, the TUC and Labour Party leadership would not risk alienating sections of potential Labour voters in Middle England. Instead, the yearlong struggle of the mineworkers was supported in the main by grassroots campaigns, the miner's support groups. The strike was bitter. Battles with police such as that at Orgreave, and the cordons set up to intercept flying pickets on Britain's motorways characterised the most venomous industrial conflict since 1926.

With the miners forced back to work, Thatcher appeared unassailable. But many felt sure that Labour could capitalise on the bitterness caused in the dispute and sweep to power in 1987. Despite the drive at respectability, drawing the party image into line with the perceived moderacy of

British voters, Thatcher's majority held for a third term. The 1987 election special of the popular satire programme, *Spitting Image*, screened a spoof election broadcast where the Labour shadow cabinet's puppet counterparts appear under a banner reading, "Britain will win (But we won't),"[12] such was the perceived hollowness of their message. The party would remain out of office for another decade. Three elections on, with the scalps of both Galtieri and the trade unions, Thatcher's faith in her ability to make good on all manifesto pledges reached its zenith. Buried in the 1987 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto was written the following:

> We will reform local government finance to strengthen local democracy and accountability. Local electors must be able to decide the level of service they want and how much they are prepared to pay for it. We will legislate in the first Session of the new Parliament to abolish the unfair domestic rating system and replace rates with a fairer Community Charge. This will be a fixed rate charge for local services paid by those over the age of 18, except the mentally ill and elderly people living in homes and hospitals. The less-well-off and students will not have to pay the full charge but everyone will be aware of the costs as well as the benefits of local services. This should encourage people to take a greater interest in the policies of their local council and in getting value for money.[13]

1987 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto, The Next Moves Forward

This was the poll tax. Under the old rates system each household made a single payment based on the rent value of the property. What the Conservatives proposed, however, was a charge per head for every adult of voting age unless otherwise exempt. For example, a household of two over eighteens in a given constituency would now pay two lots of tax rather than the single payment based on their home. In theory, under the new system the local authority would then set a cheaper rate for their constituents with concessionary rebates arranged for those who registered according to the exemption criteria. Apart from these exempt groups, the blanket rate was set on the basis of an area's social demographic and service usage, resulting in identical poll tax bills landing on the

doormats of both a mansion and a council house. As was oft quoted of Nicholas Ridley, Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment, "A duke would pay the same as a dustman."

In advance of the tax being introduced in England, Ridley's Department of the Environment published a pamphlet titled *The Community Charge (the so-called 'poll tax'): How it will work for you*, which was delivered to homes nationwide. In a Q&A format flanked by cheerful cartoon taxpayers, the pamphlet read, "It is the bill your local council will send you to cover part of the cost of the services it provides … Almost everyone aged 18 or over will pay something, including people who have not paid rates … Almost everybody will pay the community charge. Only about half of all adults pay rates. So the community charge will share out the cost of local services amongst nearly everyone … It will not be easy to get out of paying the community charge. The community charge has nothing to do with the right to vote."[14] The Green Paper, *Paying for Local Government*, was debated in the House of Lords on 28 January 1986. While all who spoke appeared to agree with the need for reforms to the complex system of central government grants, Lord Elton was prompted to clarify the practical and moral issues associated with the tax, and brush off its only historical precedent, as pointed out by Baroness David, the 1381 Peasants Revolt. During the debate, Baroness Stedman argued, "The community charge, poll tax or residents' tax—by whatever name it goes—is a regressive tax in that it hits and hurts the poor and the larger families on lower incomes much more than it does the rich."[15] Lord Elton, somewhat unconvincingly, responded, "I detect from both the noble Baronesses a feeling that because this is a fixed charge for all ratepayers it is either unfair or regressive. The changes in the impact per household will be marginal. I have the figures here, but I recall that for over eighty per cent of households—or over eighty three per cent, I think—the change in the first year will be less than one pound a week."[16] In his opening remarks, Lord Elton had qualified the need for reform, stating, "At present in England, around thirty five million adults are eligible to vote in local elections. Only eighteen million are directly liable as ratepayers. Of these, three million have their bill met in full by housing

benefit. In many authorities well over fifty per cent of the voters pay no local rates and therefore have little interest in restraining spending by the local authority; indeed, they have a clear interest that it should spend more."[17] He points out the imbalance and unfairness of this system, arguing that rates fall disproportionately on the shoulders of those with the least to gain from local services. A standardised community charge however would spread the burden among a larger group of liable payers, easing the cost on higher earners, and in theory, set at an acceptably low rate for all. This however neglected the fact that many non-rate payers didn't pay a council tax precisely because they could not afford to. In truth, those least able to pay would be asked to make the biggest sacrifice relative to their financial position.

The Local Government Information Unit and Child Poverty Action Group co-authored an essay in 1989, following the passing of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, divulging the cumulative effect of the link between housing benefits, as altered by the Social Security Act 1986, and the impending changes to local taxation. While Lord Elton denounced the traditional rates system as giving an incentive for increased local service spending, the co-authors in their introduction to *A Charge on the Community* pointed out that ministers based this logic on the assumption that local government accountability meant voters lobbying for service cuts. "One of the central objectives of the new tax is to promote 'accountability,' an objective which implies greater control over the activities of local authorities being exercised by individual voters. But there is also a subsidiary theme: ministers have suggested that voters do not really want the level of services currently provided, and that improved accountability will entail a shrinking of local government. As with social security, this retrenchment of state welfare is seen as enhancing the power of individuals to pursue their own independent objectives."[18] The introduction of the poll tax, therefore, cannot be understood without examining the changes made to means testing under new social security legislation, and the continuity of Thatcher's small government ideology, which favoured private and voluntary control of local services. Rigorous new means tests would increase the numbers liable for

the community charge, who would now also need to purchase the services that had previously been state provided. Even if the tax had been as low as Lord Elton suggested, the poor would have additional costs to grapple with later. The regressive nature of the tax became obvious once local authorities set the new rate. By this time, the history of 1381 was already repeating itself in a fresh revolt.

The tax was to be introduced in Scotland first in April 1989 before being rolled out in England and Wales the following financial year. This incensed many Scots who believed they were being treated as laboratory guinea pigs. A pamphlet published in 1988 by the fledgling Strathclyde Anti-Poll Tax Federation, *The Coming of the Poll Tax* read, "It may seem a small sum of money to those more well off in society but a remarkable consistency is displayed in the straw polls conducted among the giro queues at post offices throughout Glasgow – no-one can afford to lose the price of two pints of milk, a loaf and small tin of beans each week, CERTAINLY NOT TO PAY THATCHER'S POLL TAX."[19] Glasgow and Edinburgh are home to some of Western Europe's poorest housing schemes. It was in these dense sprawls where unemployment and poor housing are the norm where in 1987 a handful of activists began building for public meetings amongst their neighbours. They denounced this unfair tax and called on everyone who could afford the new rate to withhold payment, and to stand shoulder to shoulder with those who could not afford to pay. It was argued that if enough people refused to pay the tax, those vulnerable to reprimand could be protected, and eventually Westminster would be forced to scrap the legislation. The strategy found popular appeal, and very quickly in the lead up to the tax's introduction Anti-Poll Tax Unions began to spring up among the schemes. According to the list of affiliates published on 20 January 1989, a matter of months before the tax was to begin, the Strathclyde Anti-Poll Tax Federation had brought together forty six APTUs, twelve trade union bodies, ten youth and student bodies, and eleven community and tenants organisations on the basis of a twenty pound affiliation fee.[20]

Meanwhile, during these early stages, the national leadership of the Labour Party sent instructions to it's braches to hold public meetings and launch the 'Stop It' campaign. The aim of 'Stop It' was to raise awareness of just how regressive the tax would really be, and brought together those who were willing to organise against it. Very quickly, however, the Labour leadership's preoccupation with respectability meant that calls for civil disobedience that amounted to breaking the law were vehemently opposed. The top-down 'Stop It' campaign was quickly outflanked by the rapidly growing support for the Strathclyde Federation's non-payment strategy. Later, it would be Labour councils actually implementing and enforcing the tax, repeating time and again, "The only way we are going to get rid of poll tax is by voting out both the tax and the Conservatives at the next general election."[21] Voters, as it would transpire, would have had a very long wait.

Labour's disowning of another movement meant the TUC once again followed the party line. While thousands of rank and file members of both organisations were to support the movement and refuse to pay, the leadership came down hard on branches that tried to officially support or encourage non-payment, with budget arrestment, suspension, or even expulsion. Many in the early stages of the movement had believed 'non-collection' by those workers in tax collection offices to be the key to breaking the tax. Indeed, many activists had little experience in the organisation of community campaigns as opposed to the traditional union dispute. The problems with this strategy became clear early on, as it would mean a small number of workers suffering to defend others, only to be replaced by a new workforce who may willingly collect. With the official labour movement unwilling to use collective bargaining to stop the tax, non-payment emerged as the only possible means of halting it, but for many seemed unfeasible.

The first public action against the tax in Scotland came as the tax registration documents arrived. The growing Strathclyde Federation and the 'Stop It' campaign both called for disruption to the process, but advised against a boycott, as the penalties for a failure to register carried large fines.

It was also a needless rebellion, as local authorities could simply find such details on the electoral register if not provided willingly. Baroness David in the Lords debate years earlier had drawn attention to the likely difficulties of compiling a new register. "I am interested to know why the Government have changed their mind as a proposal for a poll tax was rejected in the 1983 White Paper. I quote: A new register would … probably be needed. But this would make the tax expensive to run and complicated; particularly if it incorporated a rebate scheme. Without a rebate scheme a poll tax would bear harshly on people with low incomes."[22] Expensive and complicated it was. And matters were made worse still for local authorities as registration documents were returned with deliberate mistakes and needless questions to delay and disrupt the process. All of this was legal but only a delaying tactic, and the registers were eventually cobbled together. Those who did not appear on the register were often those who had recently moved house, were a transient group such as migrants and students, or those who had sacrificed their vote by evading the electoral register. Others registered under false information, claiming to be exempt, although most were later found out. Those who refused flatly to register on principle suffered as expected.

The day the bills arrived in homes around Scotland, the Strathclyde Federation marched on George Square, Glasgow, and collectively burned their bills outside City Hall. This was a stunt that would be repeated nationwide by non-payers, appearing in local newspapers with varying degrees of sympathy. Until that point the movement had been engaged in a phoney war. For all the unity and rhetoric that had brought the campaign together, it was immaterial unless mass non-payment became a reality. Very quickly, however, the extent of Scots in arrears became known, and the higher the number got the more confident others became to stop paying, when eventually, as England and Wales approached the new financial year, the news spread that one million Scots had stopped paying the poll tax. In the south, where the phoney war was only beginning, there was suddenly a burst of momentum with APTUs mushrooming across the country, from the urban centres of traditional working class militancy, to the hitherto unheard of rural nooks and crannies.

Non-payment was a reality. The tax could be beaten.

The government had miscalculated. If the English and Welsh were to be dissuaded from following suit, enforcement had to isolate and coerce individuals into paying. As bulwark against this isolation, the newly formed and growing All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation called a national demonstration in London and Glasgow on 30 March 1990, the day before the second round of bills were to arrive. Transport was arranged by APTUs from all quarters making the demo the biggest to date in British history, with 200,000 in London and 50,000 in Glasgow marching simultaneously. What began as a peaceful, festive march through Westminster on a designated route to end in Trafalgar Square descended into violence. Television news broadcast police horses and vehicles ploughing into the crowd, and smoke billowing from nearby buildings. While accounts vary, the media and government blamed the federation and its far-left affiliates for the violence, while many eyewitnesses blamed police tactics and the use of *agent provocateurs*. "A small group – obviously determined there would be trouble one way or another – had already started the countdown to violence … bricks and paving slabs were used to smash shop and takeaway windows as looting started, with cars overturned as running battles continued with police into the night."[23] It was expected Middle England would be repelled were non-payment associated with violence and the 'loony left.' Whatever the extent of alienation caused by the 'Battle of Trafalgar Square,' the real battle against enforcement began as the bills began to arrive in England and Wales. Even if the message had been tainted, there was still already an anti-poll tax army organised in communities nationwide.

Before reprimands could be taken against non-payers, local authorities had to present a court summons to give those in arrears the opportunity to appeal their case before magistrates. If the magistrate found the individual was liable, they would be asked to pay their debt else face a committal hearing. Once this stage was reached, the non-payer would be in danger of being charged

with a civil offence. In Scotland, the local authority's powers ran out at this point, as under the Debtors (Scotland) Act 1988, nobody could be imprisoned for indebtedness. In England and Wales however, imprisonment for non-payment could, and did happen. As the imprisonment of constituents reflected badly on local authorities, this was often a last resort once all other means of securing payment had been exhausted.

The other means of enforcement open to local authorities differed between Scotland and the rest of the UK. In Scotland the means by which poll tax debts were to be recouped was through the *poinding* and warrant sale of the debtor's personal belongings. Instead of the private bailiff firms hired by local authorities in England and Wales, sheriff officers were sent to homes around Scotland with powers to force their way into a property. A *poinding* was a valuation of goods that would take place at a pre-appointed time, so debtors knew when to expect the visit. These goods would later be collected and, within a year to the day, were to be auctioned off at a warrant sale. For Scottish APTUs, therefore, the aim was to stop *poindings* taking place at all through the mass picketing on the day of those homes known to be targets. If the APTUs failed to stop a *poinding*, then the warrant sale had to be stopped. The time and location of the warrant sale would be advertised at the Sheriff Court, so it was possible for non-payers to organise in advance. If the *poinded* goods failed to reach auction by the one-year deadline, the warrant was void. Through their activities, not a single warrant sale successfully took place in Scotland.

Magistrates' courts all over the UK were sent into chaos. The sheer number of non-payers meant that to get through all hearings and committals the court had to summons batches of people, often area by area, to be processed on the same day. Expecting only a few dozen to actually adhere to their summons, magistrates were shocked when hundreds of angry non-payers followed their APTU's advice and arrived en mass. To make matters worse, non-payers individually tried to take up as much of the court's time as possible; pretending not to understand proceedings, giving defiant

speeches, and leading the court down arcane legal dead ends. An obscure piece of common law known as the 'McKenzie friend' was resurrected by APTU activists, which meant that without legal qualification a layperson could accompany the defendant in the dock and, in most cases, offer advice during proceedings, although sometimes they may be allowed to speak on their behalf. Meanwhile, local supporters and those waiting for their hearing outside the courthouses held large protests, chanting in support of fellow non-payers. Very quickly there developed a backlog of cases, limiting the number of non-payers who felt the full force of legal reprimands. Again, like the disruptions to registration, holding up the courts could only last so long. The use of bailiffs, wage arrestment and imprisonment spread as the courts failed to sufficiently intimidate rebels into payment.

If a non-payer was a council employee, or if a private sector employer or colleague was politically opposed to non-payment, it was often possible to arrest the non-payer's wages, deducting poll tax arrears before the employee received their pay packet. Some banks allowed authorities to freeze and arrest bank accounts. This became more widespread as local authorities found bailiffs were not only failing to enter properties, but were actually being targeted by gangs of non-payers. Traditionally, bailiffs have been viewed as a bogyman in working class communities, suited thugs who, although they couldn't legally force entry to debtor's homes, would threaten the poor and take away their belongings. But this spell was broken as what were effectively citizens' militias made up of housewives, pensioners, young people and the unemployed organised squads of 'Bailiff Busters,' who imitated the Scottish strategy of union dispute style mass picketing of a threatened home. In many areas, the Busters went further and set about intimidating the bailiffs. Their cars were pursued, and number plate registrations publicised on flyers and posters to aid the Buster's quick response if bailiffs were spotted on the estate. "They would be notified swiftly by scouts, who would be aware of bailiffs' car numbers, which the federation hopes to discover from tip-offs," explained Summerset's *Western Daily Press* days before the bills were to arrive.[24] In many larger

cities, the offices of bailiff firms were invaded and occupied for a matter of hours by non-payers. These publicity stunts kept both the issue fresh in the public eye, and disarmed the shadowy image of bailiffs among the poor.

When all other options were exhausted, and deals could not, or would not be struck in the courts to pay the debt in smaller increments, imprisonment was used. However, the most vulnerable and those with the least to lose such as full time political activists and pensioners were often the most likely victims. This gave local authorities some disastrously bad publicity. The 7 February 1992 issue of the *Militant*, which campaigned hard against the imprisoning of its supporters and others, wrote in its headline story, "Magistrates are meekly obeying Tory orders and sending away the poor, including a dozen pensioners, several disabled people, two pregnant women. In the worst recession in sixty years, most people sent down have been unemployed."[25]

The government insisted Thatcher's resignation had nothing to do with the poll tax; that it was due to internal splits over Europe. Whatever the genuine cause, a sequence of by-election disasters convinced many in the party that a change of figurehead was needed if the government was to survive the next election. After an initial attempt to enforce the tax, her replacement John Major, finally in 1992 deemed it 'uncollectable.'

This chapter raised the concept of intersubjectivity. It speculated as to the possible effects of the author upon the non-payer's narrative. And it gave an overview of the poll tax rebellion based on an empirical approach using public papers, newspaper articles and campaign literature. Before we can make a qualified analysis of individual testimonies, the narratives created, and the portrayal of the subjective self, the author turns attention to some of the existing literature on the rebellion. His specific interest is with the likely effect the worldviews and public memories contained in these

works had on the prevailing memories held by respondents. The author poses the question; is there an official memory in circulation influencing the group narrative, or does there remain a vernacular memory open to greater flexibility?

Chapter II

Competing Narratives: Poll Tax Historiography

I

It is not a tale of the heroic deeds of hardened political activists, for compared to the action and courage of ordinary people these pale into insignificance.

Danny Burns, 1992[26]

Political leadership of this campaign was vital. Militant provided it.

Tommy Sheridan, 1994[27]

All written and oral communication is facilitated by language. There are many different ways of sharing the same information; sentence structures can differ, the choice of words, where its author places emphasis. While the information given may be fairly original, the *way* it is stated cannot be, for in order to be understood its author must conform to a certain extent to existing structures that foreground the expectations of the reader or listener. These structures are themselves loaded with meaning. Language is not innate; we are not born with it. We learn language as a social experience, absorbing the norms and standards of communication and behaviour. These norms and standards of our collective life are the dominant discourses of a given period, and change over time. It is the author's view that personal agency plays a role in the revision of discourses, often gradual, although sometimes paradigm shifting where more noticeable slips take place. He disagrees with

the notion of linguistic determinism. While there are the larger discourses that influence social organisation and worldviews, such as religious faith and the expectations of gender, there are also smaller ones, such as the shared significance of an historical event. There are official dominant discourses taught in schools and at state ceremonies of the collective meaning of the Battle of Britain, such as self-sacrifice, of owing a debt to the fallen, as a defining instance of national character and the loaded notion of *the Good War*. There are unofficial, vernacular discourses that transgress, compete or complement dominant strands. As already suggested, there is an unfounded tendency to lend greater trust to written narratives over orality. For this reason, the influence of the most prominent written work on a historical period must feature in any analysis of related oral testimonies. This chapter therefore identifies the dominant discourses that have foregrounded the popular memory of the *Battle of the Poll Tax* so the author is able to later demonstrate the extent to which oral narratives conform or transgress the textual. How many ways can you tell the poll tax story? Which story is the strongest, and why?

Danny Burns lived and worked in Bristol at the time of the poll tax struggle. He became active early on in the campaign, attending some of the first small meetings in Bristol that sought to imitate what had been taking place in Scotland. As the campaign grew he became secretary of the Avon Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Unions, travelling extensively in the South West of England building support for non-payment. Later he went on become a non-aligned member of the All Britain Federation national committee. He is today a sociologist with thematic expertise in participation. From 2002 to 2010 he was Professor of Social and Organisational Learning at the University of the West of England. Today he is the director of SOLAR (Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research).

Bristol has a strong tradition of anarchism and left-libertarianism, a corner of the political spectrum that has never been particularly potent in Britain. Burns, at least at the time of writing his

work, *Poll Tax Rebellion* (1992) appears to adhere to this perspective. His subsequent publications, such as *The Politics of Decentralisation: Revitalising Local Democracy* (1994) and *Systemic Action Research: A strategy for whole system change* (2007), continued to stress our capacity for self-organisation, and the necessity to organise outside the traditional labour movement and renounce the need for vanguards and party executives if capitalism is ever to be replaced by a just and humane society. He is still a community campaigner, although he and his work are little known today.

Poll Tax Rebellion was the first detailed retrospective account of the movement to go to print. It is a thin glossy book of 202 pages, with an abundance of graphics and photographs and a wide margin that together give its pages the appearance of campaign literature. The book continues to circulate through second hand and online bookshops and can be obtained quite easily. While its readership is likely to be greater than any other book on the subject, they are likely to be activists themselves. It may be awkward ascertaining whether the book directly influenced the memories of those readers who participated in the movement, but it should be possible to identify the extent to which it speaks on behalf of a trend of opinion. The quote at the beginning of this chapter is taken from the book's preface, where Burns goes on to say, "The aim of this book is to tell the story, as much as possible, in the voices of those who were involved."[28] This dissertation is not the first attempt to consider eyewitness testimonies from the poll tax, although by different means and for different ends to those presented by Burns. He goes on to qualify, "In the end … the book represents my view of events and takes a non-aligned position, as I did in the campaign."[29] What Burns means by non-aligned is that he represented views other than the political parties engaged in the movement. As becomes clear in the book, to be non-aligned does not mean to be passive or non-partisan. Burns paints himself as an unrelenting critic of authority and hidden political agendas, which he saw as stifling the will and the creativity of the indignant population. While telling the story of the rebellion, the book's key themes are the extensive criticism of what he believes to be

the Militant Tendency's subterfuge and power agenda in contrast to the non-aligned, and an attempt to challenge the media portrayal of the infamous poll tax riots.

The first chapter justifies its title, "A Hated Tax," by providing a coherent and well-supported background of the origins and the unfairness of the flat rate, drawing on articles from *The Guardian* newspaper, local and national Conservative statements, community campaign literature, and the sound bites of protestors taken during the rebellion. Every other page includes an uncited political cartoon or photograph to demonstrate ironically the absurdity and unfairness of the tax. Burns constructs a narrative of a growing resentment against Thatcherism in which, "For many the Poll Tax was the last straw … The cumulative effect of these changes had made conditions intolerable."[30] He later calls it, "an exceptional imposition on their lives which had to be dealt with by exceptional means."[31]

The non-aligned view that Burns claims to support is backed up in chapters two and three where he critiques the involvement and strategy arguments of political organisations both in the initial stages of the movement and in the localities throughout. He begins with the Labour Party and trade unions; pointing out the regressive role they played in the campaign, "a confrontation between the poorest people of Britain and those who claimed to represent them."[32] Burns argues that the campaign of petitioning and objection led by these representatives that aimed to stop the poll tax before it was introduced was "extremely naïve," and driven by party political point scoring and a preoccupation with electability. "They thought it a folly to undermine a parliamentary democracy which had been fought over for many centuries – a system which they saw a redressing inequalities in society, and so they rejected a campaign to break the law. But they also knew they had to be seen to be doing *something*."[33] "Kinnock had made it clear in January [1988] that the Labour Party would not get embroiled in 'an illegal campaign' and as far as the leadership was concerned, that position was not negotiable."[34] Later, he argues, "Labour policy-makers had failed to grasp that

for most people non-payment came from the harsh reality of their economic experience, not a theoretical commitment to resistance."[35]

While a supporter of non-aligned networks, Burns does not revile far-left groups for their involvement. "The importance of these groupings should not be underestimated … they provided the political and intellectual ideas which underpinned the resistance strategy. As the movement grew and ordinary people began to outnumber the political activists, their tactical influence diminished, but their strategic influence continued to set the agenda."[36] Burns explains how the first Anti-Poll Tax Union was set up in Maryhill, Glasgow by the Workers Party of Scotland. Soon after, WPS and the Revolutionary Democratic Group set up a union in Leith, Edinburgh. By autumn 1987, Community Resistance Against the Poll Tax and the Militant Tendency began to rally around the issue. Burns appears to have sympathies with Community Resistance, and counterpoises them against the Militant. "Their philosophy was broadly socialist, but anti-state and not centralist … Community Resistance activists rebelled against the bureaucratic models of organisation inherited from the labour movement, these were seen as exclusive and alienating … They took political inspiration from anarchist and autonomous direct action in Spain and Italy, self-organisation characterised by squatters in London, Berlin and Amsterdam, and the 1968 uprising in France. They stressed the importance of the movement being non-aligned, believing that if the campaign was directly linked to a particular party, faction or organisation, vast numbers of people would not get involved … unlike other groups, they refused to call on the labour movement to lead the Anti-Poll Tax movement."[37] While Burns respects the strength of Militant's working class base, their activists came from a very different background and tradition to Community Resistance. "Militant's involvement is interesting because they had no real history or experience working outside traditional structures."[38] Burns points to the wave of expulsions and the rightward turn of the Labour Party as motivations behind Militant's shift of focus to community organisation. He identifies Russell Taylor, a Militant supporter from Edinburgh, as the agent who lured his regional

executive away from Labour's 'Stop It' campaign toward the localised non-payment strategy. Burns quotes Allan Armstrong, chair of the Lothian Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Unions; "[Militant used] their whole bureaucratic machinery to establish groups they could control right from the start."[39] Burns goes on to argue Militant's line "raised serious questions about organisation and democracy in the movement."[40]

The Militant Tendency began publishing an eight-page monthly journal called *Militant* in 1964, which called for the socialist transformation of society as set out by Leon Trotsky. Rapidly growing in sales and frequency on the tide of radicalism wrought by the '68 generation and protest against the Vietnam War, the journal called for democratic control of the heights of industry, as set out in the Labour Party constitution under Clause IV, and set about building an international network of similar journals - the Committee for a Workers' International. Its editor was Peter Taaffe, who today is the general secretary of the Socialist Party of England and Wales. The journal's supporters worked within the Labour Party with the aim of using what they saw as a mass vehicle of the working class to build a mass revolutionary party. Therefore, since Militant was effectively a party within a party its supporters were constantly attacked by the Labour rightwing who called for their expulsion. While Taaffe and the editorial team were expelled in 1981, other Militant supporters went on to become Labour MPs, including Terry Fields, Pat Wall and Dave Nellist. Militant found their greatest successes in the Labour Party Young Socialists when they won a majority on its national executive and Andy Bevan was appointed party Youth Officer. By far the greatest achievement of the organisation was when it controlled Liverpool City Council, 1983-87, and carried through its illegal *needs budget*. From this peak of activity and vilification in party and press, the Militant entered the poll tax fray.

Burns devotes great detail to his criticism of the Militant Tendency, which he saw as inherently undemocratic and as undermining the strength and popularity of the movement. Of non-

registration, Burns suggests there was a hidden agenda behind Militant's disparagement of avoiding the new tax register. "Underlying the Militant perspective was their link to the Labour Party. Because one of their prime objectives was still to elect a Labour government, Militant supporters strongly resisted a campaign which would involve people in losing their vote because they were not on the electoral register."[41] On the issue of standing non-payment candidates in local elections he argues, "Militant opposed standing anyone against the Labour Party because they were 'the official party of the working class', even when Labour Party candidates were openly opposed to non-payment," which he calls, "farcical."[42] Burns argues that non-alignment removed those party agendas that placed their interests before those of the movement. He therefore identifies a clear divide down the centre of the movement in Scotland and later for the movement as a whole, both ideologically and geographically, between the non-aligned and the Militant Tendency. "The two political ideologies which underlay the Community Resistance network and the Militant Tendency, became the dominant ideological strands in the movement. Militant was particularly influential in Dundee and Glasgow. Non-aligned groups (inspired by Community Resistance) were strongest in Central Region, Aberdeen, the highlands and the boarders. Edinburgh had a fairly mixed influence throughout the campaign."[43]

Burns identifies key contrasts between the two ideological strands. In the non-aligned groups, "The atmosphere … tended to be extremely informal, and this made it possible to involve people who were not used to public meetings and keep them interested."[44] In contrast, "Militant would call public meetings (which were often well attended) and then, often at the same meetings, call for elections to determine who would make up the executive committee and who would be delegated to the federation."[45] Burns argues this was an undemocratic approach, as shy or inexperienced members of the public were unwilling to stand at such short notice, and tended to vote for those who organised the meeting; the Militants. "As a result, large numbers of delegates to regional and city federations were Militant supporters – often the only ones in their group, and as

such extremely unrepresentative."[46] Burns felt that this meant members of the public were not involved in the administration of their union and existing informal networks were not brought together. It also created unaccountable cliques that took official decisions or 'lines' before meetings. "Through this type of organisation they made an explicit attempt to gain control of the city-wide federations."[47] Burns also accuses the Militant of sectarianism when they set up rival unions where existing ones had been long established, and exclusive campaigns such as the Labour Movement Campaign Against the Poll Tax, which Burns pays little heed to. "This activity was carried out to ensure that Militant had enough votes in the federation meetings to take control of them and it was not only confined to small areas … This cynical approach created a great deal of resentment and many local group members began to feel that they were being used. As a result, Militant quickly lost the trust of many non-aligned activists who had initially been sympathetic to them because of the work they had done on the ground."[48] "Because of this extraordinarily brazen manipulation [by Militant], the All-Britain Federation lost what little trust remained of the majority of Anti-Poll Tax activists. Large numbers of non-aligned groups refused to send delegates and, in some regions, virtually all the Anti-Poll Tax groups opted out … by then all hope of an effective All-Britain Federation had disappeared."[49] Despite his membership of the national committee, Burns clearly views the Fed as an irrelevance, seeing it as the co-ordination forum for Militant controlled groups, while the more flexible, non-aligned groups controlled their affairs on a more democratic and participatory basis.

A symptom of Militant's domination according to Burns was the control they placed over information. "They didn't produce information from the All-Britain Federation because they wanted the *Militant* newspaper to become the voice of the movement," the official narrative. "I was told numerous times by Militant members to stop complaining about the lack of information because if people wanted it they could read *Militant*."[50] Burns also feels this left the federation leadership out of touch with the mood of the movement, causing them to underestimate the projected numbers

on the 30 March demonstration, a topic to which Burns devotes his longest chapter, "Riot and Rebellion." Here he outlines a narrative of the day's events, without including details of public speakers or the organisation of the federation's stewards. The narrative focuses entirely on the provocation caused by heavy handed policing on the one hand, and the mass of protestors trying to defend themselves on the other. Burns does not make a distinction between groups in the crowd, viewing them as a homogenised mass of 'ordinary people,' arguing that while anarchist elements in the crowd were always present on such demonstrations, riots did not always result. He describes the police as "out of control, some thriving on the tension, others terrified."[51]

> The fact that no-one lost their life was a miracle. It was not a result of sensitive policing. It was a testament to the responsibility of the crowd, who shepherded older people and children out of harm's way, and who actively defended themselves against police brutality. If the demonstrators hadn't fought back in such a determined way, there is little doubt that someone would have been killed.[52]

Burns uses words like 'courage' and 'bravery' to describe demonstrators, condemning the "'trial by media' presenting a completely biased and distorted image of what happened."[53] He believes, "There was a clear attempt to link the violence with non-payment."[54] Tommy Sheridan and Steve Nally, federation chair and secretary, condemned the violence and threatened to hold an internal inquiry and "name names." Burns accuses the federation of selling out their supporters to the authorities, and condemns their reluctance to defend those arrested and show a willingness to aid supporters at future demonstrations. Together with others who felt betrayed by the federation line, Burns helped launch the Trafalgar Square Defendant's Campaign, which called for the unconditional defence of those arrested, to be controlled by the defendants themselves, and to be independent of political organisations.[55] Burns knew this would frustrate the Militant led federation. "They didn't like the idea of a campaign which was accountable to the defendants – because they wouldn't be able to control it, and they didn't like the idea of unconditional support for all defendants."[56] Again, a clear ideological divide between the two dominant strands in the movement is demonstrated. It also shows the non-aligned movement was not a passive force. Burns

steps just shy of condoning violence, going as far as to suggest "Often attack is the only effective form of defence and, as a movement, we should not be ashamed or defensive about these actions, we should be proud of those who did fight back."[57] "[I]t was based on real anger. It was not orchestrated by any political group. This gave it a greater impact."[58]

Burns ties up his conclusions in his sixth and final chapter, "After the Poll Tax: What is Left?" in which he details his views on popular participation and the "chronic weakness" of official labour and party leaderships.[59] In the case of the Labour Party and its union backers Burns believes "Many … were simply afraid of jeopardising their careers. Some feared losing control to a mass movement which acted both spontaneously and unpredictably – a movement which couldn't be manipulated because of its sheer size."[60] Burns believes these groups were involved in the campaign of disinformation so that constituents would maintain faith in their representatives, convinced there was nothing they could do personally to resist the tax. By maintaining many of the Labour Party's traditional organisational structures, the Militant continued to quash individual initiative in the communities. "To engage people in a mass campaign the Anti-Poll Tax Unions had to challenge this culture of organisation. They had to make people feel wanted and included and give everyone a sense that they had a role."[61] Burns believes the campaign was so successful because there was no hegemonic leadership. Burns suggests that even without the involvement of the Militant and its federation, the movement would have organically grown in roughly the same way and would have succeeded in making mass non-payment a reality. Leadership for Burns is about being dispensable, and giving the broadest body of people the confidence to organise themselves. Therefore, in the Burns narrative it is possible to argue that no official narrative or memory of the rebellion exists because of the pluralistic nature of its leadership structure. This suggests that oral testimonies may reveal marked regional and organisational variations depending to a large extent on the respondent's opinions toward the Militant Tendency. Burns personally draws a distinction between participation and representation, in which representatives and institutions will

always put their interests before those they claim to represent; therefore communities must take leadership into their own hands.[62]

<center>II</center>

As the two quotes at the beginning of this chapter show, Tommy Sheridan takes a strikingly different view of the role of Militant to that presented by Burns. Sheridan had been a Labour Party member and Militant supporter since the age of seventeen, and at the time of writing participates in the leadership of Solidarity Scotland from his prison cell in H.M. Prison Barlinnie. The author wrote to Sheridan in early March 2011 asking for advice and a possible interview. While the Scottish Prison Service denied the author's request for a recorded interview, Sheridan made the following recommendations: "I would … suggest you try and get a hold of the book *A Time to Rage* by Polygon. It chronicles my record of involvement in the campaign and although the co-author is now a Murdoch employee and quite unsympathetic it is well written. You should also come to Glasgow for a weekend and speak to people like my mother Alice and other women she will put you in touch with. She and they were the rock solid backbone of the campaign and prevented several hundred attempted poindings and warrant sales."[63] The author went on to spend a week in Glasgow during which time Alice Sheridan was able to supply some excellent contacts, and a copy of *A Time to Rage* was obtained.

Sheridan's book is indeed a chronicle of his involvement. But unlike *Poll Tax Rebellion*, the book also places the movement into a sweeping history of working class struggle, with particular focus on the past and present of the Labour Party, which had expelled him in 1989. The book also appeals to the future, exploring Sheridan's own socialist conversion narrative, raising the need to change society while delivering an impassioned indictment of capitalism. Human examples of poor

health and housing, alcoholism and street crime make this a touching and convincing read. It is a history text, a manifesto, and an autobiography all at once. It was written and published in 1994 following the split of Militant between those who wished to stay in the Labour Party, and the majority those who felt Labour's obstructive role in the poll tax campaign and general rightward turn warranted a move to autonomy as Militant Labour. The book therefore represents a defence of Militant's record and independent identity. Sheridan had followed the majority becoming leader of Scottish Militant Labour. At 262 pages, with a traditional typeset and only four full page photographs found in the middle of the text, *A Time to Rage* is longer and more formal in appearance than *Poll Tax Rebellion*. The book appeared in paperback, and apparently as few as two hundred copies were ever produced. Unlike *Poll Tax Rebellion*, the book is very hard to obtain. The copy analysed here was kindly loaned by a respondent, Hannah McArthur, to whom Sheridan wrote an inscription on the inside cover. The co-author, Joan McAlpine, is today a famous columnist for the Murdoch owned *Sunday Times* and *The Scotsman* and is a rising star in the SNP. As Sheridan's current imprisonment is the result of a lengthy court battle with Murdoch's *News of the World*, relations between the co-authors have deteriorated. Frequently, while conducting fieldwork in Scotland, even those who today oppose Sheridan and Solidarity directed the author to *A Time to Rage* for the best history of the movement. In the course of interviews some respondents even cited the text when describing first and second hand information, particularly those who themselves were mentioned by Sheridan in its pages. While few copies are in circulation, the text seems to have taken on the role of an official history in Glasgow itself. Without a doubt the book has had a huge influence on the oral testimonies collected in the area.

Glasgow Green, Britain's oldest public space, is home to the People's Palace social history museum and Winter Gardens where, as their tourist guide explains, "you'll learn about the story of the people and city from 1750 to the end of the 20th century … Find out about the birth of the trades union movement and the struggles of the working class in the city."[64] The gallery curator in the

health and housing, alcoholism and street crime make this a touching and convincing read. It is a history text, a manifesto, and an autobiography all at once. It was written and published in 1994 following the split of Militant between those who wished to stay in the Labour Party, and the majority those who felt Labour's obstructive role in the poll tax campaign and general rightward turn warranted a move to autonomy as Militant Labour. The book therefore represents a defence of Militant's record and independent identity. Sheridan had followed the majority becoming leader of Scottish Militant Labour. At 262 pages, with a traditional typeset and only four full page photographs found in the middle of the text, *A Time to Rage* is longer and more formal in appearance than *Poll Tax Rebellion*. The book appeared in paperback, and apparently as few as two hundred copies were ever produced. Unlike *Poll Tax Rebellion*, the book is very hard to obtain. The copy analysed here was kindly loaned by a respondent, Hannah McArthur, to whom Sheridan wrote an inscription on the inside cover. The co-author, Joan McAlpine, is today a famous columnist for the Murdoch owned *Sunday Times* and *The Scotsman* and is a rising star in the SNP. As Sheridan's current imprisonment is the result of a lengthy court battle with Murdoch's *News of the World*, relations between the co-authors have deteriorated. Frequently, while conducting fieldwork in Scotland, even those who today oppose Sheridan and Solidarity directed the author to *A Time to Rage* for the best history of the movement. In the course of interviews some respondents even cited the text when describing first and second hand information, particularly those who themselves were mentioned by Sheridan in its pages. While few copies are in circulation, the text seems to have taken on the role of an official history in Glasgow itself. Without a doubt the book has had a huge influence on the oral testimonies collected in the area.

Glasgow Green, Britain's oldest public space, is home to the People's Palace social history museum and Winter Gardens where, as their tourist guide explains, "you'll learn about the story of the people and city from 1750 to the end of the 20th century … Find out about the birth of the trades union movement and the struggles of the working class in the city."[64] The gallery curator in the

late 1980s and early 1990s was Elspeth King. King recognised the historical significance of the poll tax movement, and the profound role past events such as the 1915 Rent Strikes played in the inspiration and strategy of the present. She therefore included dozens of banners and reams of campaign literature from the many local APTUs in the gallery along side the many working class struggles of previous centuries. However, when Glasgow won the title of European Capital of Culture in 1990, King was effectively forced out of her job when the council created an identical post, Keeper of Social History, and gave it to somebody else. When the author visited the Palace in April 2011, all that remained of the poll tax rebellion were two Scottish Trade Union Congress posters; those of an official and recognised organisation as opposed to the many grass roots, federation or Militant prints, one banner belonging to Castlemilk APTU, and two small panels, one quoting the 1987 appeal by the federation for non-payment, the other a very short description of the movement that recognises Tommy Sheridan as its leader. McAlpine writes in her acknowledgments, "[P]olitical considerations attempted to put the anti-poll tax movement out of mind. Here was the biggest campaign of civil disobedience this century. A campaign which started in Glasgow. Yet it had no place in the official citadel recording the people's past … [Instead it was] a sanitised version of their history."[65] For McAlpine, therefore, the book is an attempt to rescue the genuine history of the movement, using the accounts of those involved, and vouch for its role in the present, neglected by an image conscious and possibly embittered local authority. Did the book succeed, or is there still a battle over dominant memory?

Tommy Sheridan today, and throughout his time in the public eye, is a love hate figure. Entering public office for the first time as a city councillor for Pollock from his prison cell, jailed for preventing a warrant sale, Sheridan is today serving three years for perjury. While at the time of writing new evidence has revealed Sheridan's phone was hacked by the *News of the World*, against whom he had initially won his deformation case, he remains behind bars for apparently lying to the court about allegations of extra marital relations. The scandal has resulted in the splitting of the

Scottish left between those groups who still support the Scottish Socialist Party and their decision to give evidence against Sheridan, and those who followed him in launching Solidarity. During the author's fieldwork it was clear wounds were still fresh, and that any views on the poll tax struggle would be filtered through a lens of resentment and allegiances. The author is inclined to support Sheridan.

Chapter one of *A Time to Rage*, titled 'It's the poor wot gets the blame' paints a lucid image of a freshly killed community, Pollock, which through the 1970s and 80s had seen its industrial lifeline cut, causing the post-war housing scheme to slip into isolation and degradation. The chapter is instantly autobiographical, as Sheridan recalls his childhood meeting his father returning from work over a footbridge that had connected the scheme to the main bus routs to the shipyards and factories. Throughout the chapter Sheridan draws links between his own experience and that which must have collectively befell the residence of Pollock and other such peripheral projects. These traces aim to identify Sheridan's learning process; his socialist conversion narrative, including the influence of his parents, his university education where he discovered Marxism, and the Miners' Strike, "For me … the harbinger of a new society."[66] It also sets the scene and the social context that parented the rebellion; that the poll tax, "was all part of the one miserable plan," that had seen the dispossession of communities that would eventually fight back.[67] Sheridan clearly appreciates the role of history in the present and believes an effort to conceal Scotland's radical heritage has taken place for political ends. "It's vital to have this sense of history and pride – something to relate to."[68] The book is written in a familiar, oral style, which perhaps reflects the oral traditions of the working class community Sheridan grew up in.

'Pollock fights back' and 'Building the federation,' Sheridan's second and third chapters, chart an alternative rise of the movement to that presented by Burns. "By late '87 a few scattered groups were talking about refusing to pay the tax. One started in Maryhill, and there were a few in

Edinburgh, the most important and biggest being the Militant inspired Labour Movement Against The Poll Tax."[69] While Burns dwelled heavily on the WSP and Community Resistance role in Maryhill and Lothian, Sheridan is eager to point out Militant's central and rapidly successful role in the Glasgow schemes. He also claims, "The idea of mass non-payment was first raised by one of our older firebrands, Chic Stevenson, at that time Labour Councillor for Queenslie, who proposed a motion at the annual conference of Militant in Scotland in the Autumn of 1987."[70] Sheridan argues that it was his Militant led Pollock APTU that set the model taken on nationwide. Like Burns, however, he goes on to describe the historical precedents for the non-payment strategy, dwelling at length on the Tenants' Defence Leagues set up during the Glasgow Rent Strikes of 1915-22. Sheridan draws a particularly strong link with the Communist Party led National Unemployed Workers' Movement of the interwar period. While Burns appears eager to point to the grass roots, non-party political origins of the non-payment campaign, Sheridan emphasises Militant's strategy debates in relation to history; the active role of the past brought to the fledgling movement, between which Militant built the bridge, playing the part of the *long-term memory* of the workers' movement. Without this, bringing past lessons to present problems, Sheridan believes the non-payers would have been ill equipped; a dialectical view absent in the spontaneous participation model offered by Burns. "You are never alone if you know your roots … We had right – and history – on our side."[71] For Sheridan, the movement was as much about the revival of old traditions as the creation of new strategies.

Both authors criticise the role of the Labour Party leadership and the spoiling tactics of 'Stop It', as well as the SNP's meek version of non-payment. "Had we waited for an instruction from the labour movement leaders we might never have passed the starting line."[72] Later Sheridan states, "The record of the Labour leadership told us 'Stop It' was probably as far as they were willing to take civil disobedience. But we still hoped for official trade union support."[73] Sheridan does not suggest every anti-poll tax campaigner in Glasgow and beyond was a Militant.

Like Burns he recognises the grass roots nature of the movement, giving specific attention to the many women involved in the movement who described themselves as 'non-political.' Both authors argue for the role of agency; the gap between representation and participation: "It exploits concern for the working class to stop them doing anything for themselves."[74] While Burns saw Militant as blunting and excluding a potentially broad and vibrant movement, Sheridan sees it as sharpening and reinforcing its historical identity and method. "The Labour Movement leaders who tried to freeze us out often claimed Militant were jumping on the band wagon of anti-poll tax feeling. But it was Militant who built the band wagon in the first place … [T]he federation was largely made up of people who belonged to no political party. But every successful campaign needs a coherent structure and a committed leadership. Militant provided that leadership."[75] Much later in the book, in chapter eight, Sheridan even states, "For a long time Militants restrained themselves because they didn't want to damage the movement."[76] With Labour refusing membership to federation supporters for their potential Militant sympathies, "It really began to worry us. Here we were, involving hundreds of thousands of people in a mass movement for civil disobedience. Was it going to dissipate? Were we going to lose all that energy and anger? … [P]eople had nowhere to go politically. Nobody showed them the way. Unless there's an organisation to give people a clear direction and keep them involved, you will lose them."[77] While Burns viewed this as a control agenda undermining this specific campaign, Sheridan saw it as necessary if momentum was to be maintained, and anything lasting to emerge once over.

Burns had criticised the rigidity of Militant led APTU meetings in contrast with those of the non-aligned. Sheridan however suggests that Militant adapted through experience to the new dynamic in meetings. "At first our Militant activists called meetings in areas where they lived. Eventually individuals with no political affiliations were asking me to speak at the launch of their own unions. If you have a background in the labour movement, meetings tend to run along a certain groove. You're introduced. You speak. People listen. There's a stilted discussion, a summing up,

maybe a vote. Then you all go home. But these meetings called by tenants' associations and community councils were full of people for whom standing orders might as well relate to the army parade ground … You had to learn to use different language, to jump the worn groove of the average Constituency Labour Party meeting."[78] In Sheridan's account there is no evidence of Militant imposing. Rather, he and Militants were invited and became adaptive to different conditions. Burns had agreed with the Labour leadership to the extent of accusing Militant of setting up the federation as a front organisation, of undermining the potential breadth of support, and causing Militant to lose the respect of many non-aligned activists. "This accusation was a bit patronising to … the Castlemilk anarchists, and all the ordinary folk who made up the Fed," argues Sheridan, "But this salvo backfired on Labour because being identified with non-payment built respect for Militant."[79] Sheridan was aware of the strong opposition to Militant; as he goes on to explain at length in his fourth chapter, 'Expulsions.' Both books can be read as indictments of the Labour Party for abandoning its grass roots character, while the authors differ in their view of how to fill the resulting vacuum on the left.

Militant had been an entryist organisation until the split. Sheridan likens the expulsion of members branded as extremists to the witch-hunts that took place in Strathclyde in the seventeenth century, which had been based on rumour and personal vendettas and used by authorities to frighten the population to conform. "By rejecting older activists," writes Sheridan of Labour's expulsions, "the party turned it's back on a rich past. But it also cancelled out its future by ridiculing the young."[80] The question of the Labour Party's rightward turn is one of the key themes of the book. "There was lots of talk about throwing away cloth caps," Sheridan quips of Kinnock's modernisation programme. "Speaking as someone who has never worn a cloth cap, I believe Labour's failure had nothing to do with head gear. Labour failed because it did not map out a socialist alternative to the madness of the free market."[81] In Sheridan's view, Labour under Kinnock and later Smith had wholeheartedly embraced capitalism, albeit calling for a more humane

variant. "Managing capitalism," he retorts, "is like managing a slaughterhouse. No matter how efficient you are, no matter how humane, blood is spilled in the end. Slaughterhouses could not exist without death. Capitalism would not exist without exploitation."[82] It is through this analysis Sheridan likens Kinnock's modernisation to Ramsay MacDonald's blindness to grassroots opinion in the '20s. While Burns has analysed a snapshot image of the rebellion, Sheridan considered it as part of a film reel; of the culmination of many stories and traces in history (including that of the Labour Party), and historical memory that caused events to occur in the way they did.

Poll Tax Rebellion and *A Time to Rage* differ greatly not only on the question of the role played by Militant, but also on their handling of the 30 March 1990 riot. Sheridan presents a more diverse picture of crowd participants than in the Burns account. Both authors agree there were participants who had not intended to resort to violence, "They were so incensed by the truncheons and riot shields that they fought back."[83] Both authors also criticise heavy-handed policing where, "the Metropolitan Police used a mallet to crack a peanut … [I]t shouldn't surprise anyone. The London force was already notorious for its behaviour … [W]e began to suspect the police may have started the trouble deliberately … All their decisions were designed to increase the likelihood of trouble and give them an excuse to charge."[84] Sheridan differs from Burns, however, in his refusal to be uncritical of some elements of the crowd. "We [the federation] accepted a small band of troublemakers had acted stupidly … I was overcome with revulsion at what a few people purporting to be demonstrators were doing."[85] While Sheridan recognised some elements of the crowd were what he calls, "Thatcher's Children, products of an uncaring society which sees no place for love and co-operation, were taking their revenge,"[86] understanding the role of poverty and lack of prospects among many of the youth involved, he also identifies a layer of anarchist, anti-establishment groups who acted shamefully. In order to counter the accusations of Burns and anarchist groups in the movement that he and Steve Nally were "grassing people to the police," he argues, "It would have been a contradiction in terms. The Federation has been involved in numerous

forms of illegal activity. Our members were the first to go to jail for non-payment of the tax."[87] While Burns offers uncritical support to all rioters, blaming the violence entirely on police behaviour, Sheridan points out how federation stewards were ignored by police and physically attacked by anti-authority groups. "You'll find many of these groups contain people from privileged backgrounds whose grudge against society is from a middle-class point of view. Perhaps they rebel against their parents' materialism. It's a pampered and privileged rebellion. People from that background see it as a bit of fun." Almost as a direct reply to Burns's, "Often attack is the only effective form of defence,"[88] statement, Sheridan argues, "It's easy to have a go at obscene wealth but offer no alternative except to attack. It's all very macho. But they don't talk about another way of organising your life, or of organising society."[89] Unlike Burns, Sheridan takes an explicit line on justifications for violence. "I am often asked if violence is justified in such circumstances. I abhor violence. It's too prevalent in our society. The good things about human beings – solidarity, co-operation and love – are often put on the shelf in favour of confrontation and aggression. But I'd draw a line between violence and physical anger … There is the violence of poverty …That's a form of acute mental violence."[90] He would agree with Burns that politicians are to blame for creating the conditions that cause riots, although the latter refused to condemn the violence of 30 March.

The key similarities in the two accounts are the condemnation of the Labour Party's abandoning of the grassroots, and praise for the capacity and power of agency. Both are critical of police and local authority behaviour, and paint similar pictures of the resistance strategies on the ground. They conflict, however, in their views on the movement's origins, the means and extent of leadership, and the boundaries of their narratives. Burns, with his academic background, views the movement in isolation, scrutinising the dynamics of participation and the necessity of dialogue and knowledge sharing. For him, the movement is a living example of how an atomised population can via their own agency build independent networks that dispose of officialdom. Sheridan, with his

roots set deep in working class heritage and the practical application of his Marxist analysis in contrast places the movement into a much larger narrative, identifying a running thread in history that leaders such as himself were able to bridge as a means of giving rebels confidence and direction. While both authors see the will and agency of the population as essential, Sheridan views Militant's involvement as a means which sharpened an effective campaign. Without their contribution, Sheridan believes non-payment would not have been as widespread, and that many more rebels would have suffered in isolation.

The two ideological strains demonstrated in these books, *Poll Tax Rebellion* and *A Time to Rage* are unlikely to be the only narratives of the movement. Indeed, there are many accounts by anarchists and assorted left groups, as well as other Militant authors. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, Burns and Sheridan's are among the dominant poles of attraction for such accounts, and with the limited space available are therefore the objects of closest attention. Key features such as personal political identities, views on the Labour Party, and opinions of Militant's impact on leadership and participatory agency must be sought in the oral testimonies, and their interplay with the Burns and Sheridan accounts measured. If we may identify these dominant ideological strains as the *Non-aligned narrative* and the *Militant narrative*, the extent to which respondents in their oral testimonies conform to either, or indeed subvert them entirely, will go some way to ascertaining the existence of a dominant memory or one which is vernacular.

Chapter III

Storytelling, Memory and Personal Narrative

I

This chapter, while providing an overview of the scholarly field and drawing on examples from the author's own research, argues that individual memory and the exchange of information are steeped in storytelling. It explains how stories are made up of discourses and narrative structures, which function as a means of creating and circulating meaning amongst individuals and groups. The author proposes that it is through storytelling that we give structure to our lives as part of a broader cultural environment, which in turn either compete or unite our representation of the past with others. How the subjective narrative is created and fits into our intersubjective triangle is demonstrated by the way in which poll tax rebels tell their stories in light of the interview context and potentially dominant *Non-aligned* and *Militant narratives*. Behind the subjective narrative are the individual memory and its means of handling input prior to its communication in story form.

Social cognition researchers, Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson of Northwestern and Yale universities produced a remarkable essay, *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story* (1995) in

which they argue, "stories about one's experiences and the experiences of others are the fundamental constituents of human memory, knowledge, and social communication."[91] The following discussion of their thesis underpins the author's view of how storytelling turns an individual lived experience into a shareable narrative, and how these narratives are negotiated and renegotiated over time and through communication. The author therefore supports the following three points:

1. Virtually all human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences

2. New experiences are interpreted in terms of old stories

3. The content of story memories depends on whether and how they are told to others, and these reconstituted memories form the basis of the individual's *remembered self*.[92]

The co-authors suggest there are two means by which human beings use stories; firstly to apply what they already know from past experience to "new input", and secondly as a means of communicating this information to others. What this therefore suggests is that what we consider to be factual memory; the stating of one's name and address for example, is in fact "encoded in the form of stories." This is to say, everything we communicate or comprehend is not drawn from an internal computer hard drive, but rather thousands upon thousands of stories based on experiences, second hand information, or through our own composition. How we communicate these stories, how much of them we verbalise and how frequently determine often how memorable they are. Stating one's name and address is a short story, drawn from multiple longer stories that ensure such data is present in one's memory. The co-authors therefore propose, "there is no factual knowledge as such in memory."[93] "What we know that seems factual is actually derived from personal stories."[94] This can be the case in belief systems as well as facts. That which may seem an entirely fresh opinion on a subject, "careful examination tells us that old stories in their memory are

the ingredients of the seeming novelty…rewrites of existing stories in memory, adapted to fit new circumstances." Therefore, "Understanding the world means explaining its happenings in a way that seems consonant with what you already believe." We support our views with autobiographical stories rather than abstractions:[95]

> I remember even when I was like five or six or seven going with my uncle, who was a van driver to North Devon where we delivered toys, he was a, he was selling toys, and we went to this little village in North Devon, and after he'd done the work he had to do he took me to a market where they were buying and selling cows, and, and, and pigs and so on. And, you know, I have a distinct memory of feeling very uncomfortable that day because I saw the way in which the farmers in their suits were shouting at the <pause> people that were bringing the livestock in, and it stuck in my mind for years that, you know, why, why would one person shout at another person like that, and, and later on when I realised really, you know, in, in the rural areas as in the cities there is a hierarchy of people under capitalism and that hierarchy states that if you own the means of production or if you own the livestock that gives you the opportunity to shout at people, and to threaten people because you ultimately have power over whether or not they can continue to work, you can get rid of them. So, that little example was always rattling around in my head. I felt really uncomfortable that day, at that fact that, that for the first time, possibly, in my entire life, and I was very, very young, I had seen injustice and I had seen those people who were being shouted at, biting their tongues and not replying, so I reckon, you know, even from a very young age, I was aware that something wasn't right in the world.[96]

Robin Clapp was aged fifty-three when he agreed to give this interview. Today a full time worker for the Socialist Party in Bristol, Robin was able to self-reflexively access this specific example and articulate a short story in order to demonstrate the production of his present beliefs. He also explains how it was later on that he realised the systemic roots of the farm workers' dilemma through the unoriginal concept of class hierarchy.

Story based memory also foregrounds what seem to be descriptive statements. A description of the social milieu of a period is in fact the product of multiple experiences that developed an overall impression, from which meaning is deduced. Kenny Cunningham, who is today chair of the Chester Trades Council and a similar age to Robin, describes his early adulthood in '70s Glasgow:

It was just the grey, just the nothingness, it was, it really, we were waiting, it was like, we're holding our breath, you know, something had to happen, everything was rubbish, even music was rubbish, you know we were really, music in the early '70s had been brilliant, and then you're in the mid-70s and it's the Eagles is the best you can get and, you know, Eagles are fine but, you know, we were praying for something else to happen, on all fronts, and I think it was almost like the '50s again, the mid-70s was like a little throw back, I mean I hadn't lived through the '50s, but people who lived through the '50s will tell you it was horrible! <laughs> we were just waiting for it to finish, please! And there was that sort of feeling, you know, that there's got to be something coming along here you know.

And did it?

Well it eventually did yeah, it didn't completely, but you try, you're filling your time in between, you know, there's music, you know, there's alcohol obviously massive, massive, massive alcohol consumption

Was that a big part of the culture?

You know, I mean, Jesus, it was unbelievable how much people can drink. Drinking was just it. Drinking was absolutely it. And getting drunk you know, not just drinking, getting drunk … just that whole kind of stagnation thing…[97]

Just as Robin remembers discomfort and injustice in his experience, Kenny recalls impatience at the "greyness", linking a decline of '60s optimism and the end of the long boom to his personal experience of the quality of music and prevalence of drinking culture. But by what means do such past experiences reach a present day articulation in the form of a story?

Schank and Abelson base our mental adaptability on a process of *script writing* - a script being "a set of expectations about what will happen next in a well understood situation." This hypothesis suggests that through childhood and early life one learns scripts of standard behaviour, and through experience one engineers these scripts to include what we have learned. We do not consciously run through these scripts; they are simply the norm by which we live that mean daily routines and rituals require minimal thinking power. We therefore grasp new experiences by referring to past ones, and learn by building on our existing scripts.[98] We do not remember every day of our school-life; rather, we build on a script of key memory stories to construct what we

imagine is and was an average school day, deducing an overall meaning and forgetting the sequence of events and the inconsequential details. Memory is therefore the creation, storage and retrieval of stories in one's personal index; in this case, the school index, which through telling and retelling is ever evolving. "It makes retrieval easier; it lets memory work less hard; it allows forgetting; and it provides a constancy of lessons to be learned that does not need to be constantly re-examined."[99] For example, Catherine Tributsch-Flood, a Green Party activist from Manchester in her forties, and Kenny both claim to have attended so many demonstrations in their politically active lives that the details and chronology of 30 March 1990 do not feature in their stories. Rather, they will both possess a *London demonstration index*, where only those out-of-the-ordinary events stand out amongst a *haze* of cityscape and placards. But the overall meaning of street protesting as a strategy, and their expectations of crowd and police behaviour have in the process been built upon:

> I just, it's just a blank for me, really. I've been, I don't know, I've just been on so many demonstrations in London, they all just, sort of, melded into one.[100]

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> *Do you remember where you were on the march?*
>
> Oh, God knows, God knows, the marches all blur into one to me I've been on so many of them
>
> *You're not the first to say that! <Laughs>*
>
> I don't like marches any more
>
> *<Laughs>*
>
> Don't like em'. Done too many.[101]

Of the communication of these stories, the co-authors argue, "Conversation is no more than responsive storytelling." This is to say that both parties when in discussion are engaged in a process

of reminding, which itself underpins understanding. "We tell stories for many reasons, one of which is to indicate to our listener that we have understood what he has said to us."[102] One cannot understand something if it does not cause them to recall an existing memory. Therefore, because we all possess different memories and experiences, our own idiosyncrasies, we understand the same input differently. "We are accessing the gist of that story and then re-expressing that gist in English … one that perhaps leaves out one point or embellishes another. The words we choose may depend upon the audience. The ideas expressed may depend upon our reinterpretation of past events in the light of events that have occurred since the story we are telling took place," for example, the interview context. The reminding process brings our past to bear on present tasks. If a child complains of boredom at school, one refers to their ready created school-life index, retrieves the gist of a similar story, and communicates it in order to demonstrate one understands. This model stresses the social advantages of storytelling, which is where the author's interest in the creation of collective memory resides. "They span historical time and social space, spreading object lessons and encouraging social solidarity."[103] The following example follows a more conversational structure, which demonstrates this process. Betty McErchen, a ninety year old non-aligned tenants' association activist, and Alice Sheridan, Tommy's mother and a former Militant now in her seventies were interviewed together at Betty's home in Govan, Glasgow. They discussed the social consequences of religious sectarianism they experienced in early life. The interviewer's prompting, and the velocity of the dialogue demonstrate this reminding process:

So you experienced this Catholic and Protestant divide for quite a long time?

Betty: Oh very much. All ma' life. In fact, it still goes on.

Alice: Ay, its only recently, the 60s' it started to die doon'

Betty: Peter oot'

Alice: Oh, it was a terrible theng'. Priests use' te' come te' ye' hoose' if ye' married a non-Catholic an' tell ye' ye' was livin' in sin. Didn't they?

Betty: Oh, ay, uh huh

Alice: An' er, oh it was a terrible theng', an' if, er, sometimes a guy married a Catholic or vice-versa, if the football team, Celtic or Rangers havin' a game they batter the wife, oh, it was terrible, terrible. I could never get ma' head round it how ye' could judge anybody by what religion they were

Betty: By what religion they were, because it were a funny thing te' say, but mos' of the really good people I've met are Protestants. They werenae wha' the other side made em' oot' te' be. They were kind people, an' er, pretty intelligent.

So you found that as time went by you felt like this was a fiction, that this division really didn't matter, that the solidarities between people…?

Betty: No, it never did to me, because I chummed it up with Protestant girls, an' tha' was a sin tha' I committed.

Alice: Not everyone was like tha' righ' enough, but there were too many like tha', er, and er, an' if you were goin' back oot', ye' mother didn't ask ye' where ye' worked it, she asked ye', 'What was he? A Catholic or a Protestant?' <laughs> 'What's his name? That's no' a Catholic name,' <laughs> They had no idea. How we were seen I have no idea <laughs>

Betty: Talk abou' persecution![104]

In the course of this dialogue, the author can identify at least six memory stories that were cooperatively sparked in a reminding process:

1)   Fewer personal instances of sectarianism after the '60s

2)   Instances of priests coming to the home

3)   Instances of domestic abuse linked to Old Firm games

4)   Instances where Protestants did not fit sectarian stereotypes

5)   Instances of secret friendships over the sectarian division

6)   Instances of secret relationships over the sectarian division

"We remember by telling stories. Storytelling is not something we just happen to do. It is something we virtually have to do if we want to remember anything at all."[105] What the co-authors suggest is that in order to remember an experience, we construct a story. As time passes, the finer nonessential details of the context, the setting, or the other characters begin to fade, but the intrinsic meaning of the story remains, subject to new experiences and discourses. In the process of retelling, many of the finer details are therefore recreated, or *misremembered*, in order to fit culturally coherent norms and structures. Telling is remembering - a means of reinforcing memories. Therefore, the more frequently the story is told, the stronger the memory, although the finer details that are not essential to the story may diverge from reality with the aim of making the story work in conversation. "Stories change over time because of the process of telling, because of the embellishments added by the teller. The actual events that gave rise to the story in the first place have long since been forgotten."[106] The co-authors believe such embellishments include *detail addition*, where descriptive material is added or fabricated to enhance how memorable the story is; *commentary*, where reflections and hindsight are dispersed in the telling; and *role-playing*, where the teller adopts the imagined point of view of another agent.[107] Dave Griffiths, born in the early '60s and active in the Coventry Militant told the interviewer an animated story about the first rebel to be threatened with jail for non-payment, Cyril Munden. The story uses role-play and commentary. The extent of embellishment is a task of verification:

> The firs' bloke, I'm sure you've been told this, bu' Rob an' I ad' a lot t' do wi'
> him, bu' I'm sure he'll av' passed away now, maybe not, wonderful bloke called
> Cyril Munden in Northampton, the firs' bloke who's gunna' be jailed <laughs>
> for not payin' his Poll Tax! We wen' t' meet him, righ'. An' we knew he was a
> pensioner, we'd spoken t' him on the phone, so me an' Rob drove over, say look
> Cyril, y' need t' know wha' y' puttin' y'self, cos' he said I'm not payin', I'm
> goin' t' jail, so we're thinkin' 'great!' bu' we're avin' a, look, y' better know wha'
> y' in for cos' the las' thing y' wan' is someone goin' t' jail an' syin', 'oh, this is
> terrible, I wish I'd never done it!' tha' would demoralise everybody, y'know? If
> y' gunna' take tha' step, be very clear y'know wha' y' doin'. Anyway, we walk
> through the door, he's got his Arnhem Paras red beret on, he says, 'I know what

bein' stuck in an 'ole is for a few weeks!' y'know, avin' been stuck ou' there in Arnhem, 'So prison 'olds no fear for me, an' I'm not payin' this disgustin' un… blah blah blah!' He gave us the rant, we thought <laughs> why've we come ere' t' advise him? We wen' through the motions, he told us off for tryin' t' talk him out of it, I said, we're not tryin' t' talk y' out of it, were jus' tryin' t', y'know, 'I know the consequences, don't go talkin' t' me!' He was gunna' be the firs' one jailed, he was absolutely defiant! Imagine it for Thatcher. Ere' she is comin' t' kill the grea' unwashed workin' classes, make em' pay, who's she pickin' on? Cos' y'know, she dressed herself in nationalism, the Falklands, oh, an Arnhem hero veteran, y'know, who fough' for his country. So, an' we all know wha' appened' there, I dunno' if you do, bu' captain cash of the *News of the World*, AKA Rupert Murdock an' the Tory party paid his Poll Tax for him so he wouldn't go t' jail. He was furious![108]

The result is we often come to believe our own stories over the true events whether they are accurate or not. They therefore have tremendous power over memory and our sense of self,[109] because telling doesn't always mean conversation. We obviously remember things we have not told others. The process of *rehearsal* is a means by which the individual may collate data into a coherent whole for their own sense of *subjective composure*. But as already explored, the dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee has a profound influence on what is verbalised. "The trick for any listener is to send out the right signals," write the co-authors, "those that encourage the telling of the stories that the listener wants to hear. In the selection and evaluation process, eliciting the listener's approval is very important. We want to please our listener … An interactive storyteller, one who tells a story in parts while being interrupted by his or her listener, alters the story according to the interruptions … the outside world determines which of our stories are worthy of telling by the way it listens to them. These stories then become our own definition of self. We are the stories we like to tell … the *remembered self*."[110] The co-authors therefore regard both the interview context and the dominant discursive norms as central to the stories we create as a means of structuring our experiences, and therefore constructing *the self*. Betty justifies her remembered self when asked:

What made you want to be so actively involved in that? What made you think it was your responsibility to do something in the community like that?

Betty: Cos' I'm a natural rebel.

A natural rebel?

Betty: Yeah <laughs>

That's terrific

…

Betty: <pause> Well I was born a nurse an' born a rebel, if
you can put the two together <laughs>

Alice: Well, you were oldest of a big family, ye' had te' figh'
for them

Betty: Ay, the oldes' a' nine

Alice: Uh huh

Betty: I say I was never young! I didnae have a childhood,
because ma' mother would have a kid every year an' nine months,
an' it was lef' te' me te' help her oot'. She could never have
managed. A toddler, summed, a toddler runnin' around her knees
an' one's suckin' at her bres', so, she had, an' then all tha' poverty
an' illness te' contend wi', so I stepped in te' the breech, righ' when
I could walk.[111]

In this example, much as Robin did at the beginning of this section, Betty self-reflexively

accounted for her social identity as a nurse and a rebel on the basis of meanings drawn from early

experiences and responsibilities, which fine-tuned her worldview. All of the above examples go

some way toward supporting Schank and Abelson's model of story based memory, in such a way

that vindicates the intersubjective triangle and the role of the individual agent in the evolution of

discourses.

II

For the purposes of this dissertation, the author is concerned with the extent of interplay

between this *remembered self* of the poll tax rebel, the interview context (including the

interviewer's influence), and the dominant discourses of the rebellion in the form of the *Non-aligned* and *Militant narratives*. There are of course other theories regarding different *kinds* of memory, such as semantic or episodic. But Schank and Abelson continue to assert the mind is wholly unlike the linier, binary computer processor; that autobiographical memory is a social invention.[112] This fits with the author's view that the aim of the oral interview is not the finding of objective facts, but what *meaning* can be derived from the way in which respondents structure and verbalise their memories; produce meaning, contingent on cultural and contextual variables. Before we can compare narratives, the author explores some of the theories of narrative.

Stories, when either rehearsed or told to an audience, are influenced in the main by discourses and by narrative. Abrams tells us, "A narrative is an ordered account created out of distorted material or experience." This raises the question as to whether there is anything inherently structural about narrative itself. Schank and Abelson go as far as to suggest that certain *skeleton stories* or a process of *story fitting* exists, which are in effect *tropes* that a storyteller (individual or institution) will adopt to achieve a particular aim, subsequently fleshing out this narrative device with the supposed facts of an event. "The art of skeleton selection is exactly that – an art. Very little objective reality exists here. One can see and tell about events in any way that one wants to."[113] The question is; why does the agent in question choose to tell their story using a particular recognisable trope? For example, to again use the case of the Battle of Britain, a memory based on a "defence of the nation" prototype has stuck. Schank and Abelson believe we use such tropes to avoid isolation, to enable others to understand us. To do this we select widely accessible discursive concepts that we are confident solicit the desired reaction. It is often also a political choice: one that will fit with our existing worldview. It is often simply the meaning of the story that is remembered rather than the facts themselves.[114] One skeleton story, or trope, which appears frequently in source material, is one of growing resentment against Thatcher, particularly in the period between the Miners Strike and the poll tax. Such a trope could be applied to anything from the tyrant

Macbeth, whose deeds eventually caught up with him, provoking the English advance and causing his demise, to the communist parties of Eastern Europe at the time of the poll tax, whose repression and corruption similarly saw, in the case of the Chauchescus in Romania, bloody reprimand. It is a *comeuppance trope* leading from the belief that the high waters of resentment finally breeched the levees of submission and fear, where a movement likened to a tsunami, an iceberg striking the flagship, a mountain of unpaid bills, a wildfire sweeping the country; all graphic, elemental imagery serving a narrative in which the despot is swept aside by collective might. It is a powerful narrative device likely present in nearly every culture. But how hegemonic is it with regard to the poll tax movement? In the Burns and Sheridan accounts there is an impression that the tax was 'the last straw'. Many, certainly in the labour movement, would agree. The following three extracts are taken from interviews with Wayne Coombes, a retired rank and file member of the Socialist Party in Bristol, Rob Windsor, a former Socialist Alternative councillor for Coventry City Council, and Gordon Dangerfield, a lawyer currently based in Glasgow who was once the Labour Party perspective parliamentary candidate for Dumfries and Galloway. They provide a glimpse of some opinions that allude to our *comeuppance trope*.

A)

> I, it was <pause> there, it was a bit like Marmite, really <laughs> you know, either you loved Thatcher or you hated her, there was really nothing in between. There were lots of parts of South Bristol that hated Thatcher but there was still this thing about the Falklands factor, you know, she's, you know, look at Foot, if we'd have had Labour in…and there was still a certain thing about the unions become too strong and among certain people, you know, at least she's redressed the balance…
>
> *Even Labour supporters thinking that?*
>
> Yeah. We had rampant inflation and all that, you know, that started to get under control and everything and I would say as the 80s' went on that got more and more of a minority view as the realities really started to hit people, I think. So again, in the 80s', late 80s' and that, it was a bit of a boom, you know, so a lot of people weren't too badly off, until of course the Poll Tax had hit.[115]

_____

B)

> I think it thought it could literally get away with anything. It was swaggering throughout working class communities … And it was that swagger that Margaret Thatcher's government had that did two things. I think it scared a lot of people, but I think it mobilised a lot of people too. I think a lot of people like myself thought, we've had enough of you. You thought you'd had everyone beat. You've beaten the miners. You've had a go and beaten these print workers. Now we're going to find a way to beat you. And, subsequently in the Poll Tax, that's precisely what we sought to organise.[116]

C)

> There also was a lot of genuine opposition and criticism from people [to non-payment]. I mean, in Stranraer I remember it being, having a lot of criticism and a lot of people saying publicly <laughs> that, 'That is disgraceful,' you know, 'especially because you're a lawyer you shouldn't be doing that stuff.' So, wouldn't want to propagate the myth that somehow everybody in Scotland rose up and we were all suddenly became a nation of direct action. I would say it was a pretty small minority still of people who were on the front line of this, and then, probably not even a majority who supported it and a very, very vocal, whatever, substantial minority who were very vocally against it. But at the same time everybody was against the Poll Tax, I mean, very, very few people would stand up and actually defend the Poll Tax. The big controversies were just about how you should oppose it.[117]

Rob's account B) provides a dramatic narrative with a distinction placed between those who were frightened into submission, and those like himself who's built up resentment broke the levee; an empowering *comeuppance trope*. As an experienced public speaker and agitator, Rob would find such hard hitting and easily recognisable tropes a powerful tool for building traditions and inspiring others. Wayne's account A) identifies a pro-Thatcher view that gradually slipped into the minority as *realities* began to bite, but views the poll tax in itself as a particularly poignant moment for many whom until that point had been personally better off under Thatcher. He later cites his own father, who was a working class conservative but who could not deny the tax was unfair. He is more cautious about the use of this trope. Gordon's account C) argues that while indeed the majority were

against the tax, he challenges the *myth* of a vast tide of collective resistance, differentiating between various supporters and opponents of the struggle. Gordon, unlike Wayne and Rob, has never been a member of the Militant, and so has no political stake as such in the political meanings ascribed to the movement. Throughout his testimony, Gordon is keener to criticise the Labour Party and Scottish TUC leaderships for their attempts to rein in the movement. While all three acknowledge such a trope exists in the popular memory of the movement, they do not all accept it without accounting for clear variations.

Portelli tells us, because oral histories are narrative sources, our analysis, "must avail itself of some of the general categories developed by narrative theory in literature and folklore."[118] He briefly offers some examples of narrative behaviour and their possible causes, such as *alternate velocity*, when a long period or large event is verbalised only limitedly, and when brief, seemingly slight episodes are given significant airtime and detail. Portelli speculates that respondents may in the process be demonstrating the personal significance they pin to the episode or to direct attention away from it if they consider it to be sensitive. Indeed, some points may be hidden altogether. In short, attention to narrative velocity may evidence a less explicit layer of meaning. Portelli also points out the constant crossing of boundaries between different kinds of narrative device and narrative perspective during a narration: the historical, the poetical and the legendary, as well as the personal 'truth' and the 'shared imagination' of the collective.[119] As we have already seen, these boundaries may also cross between *variable remembered selves*, where Portelli suggests respondents speak ironically about a former self. Dave Griffiths crosses multiple boundaries into fiction and fable while describing chaos in the magistrates' court:

> Bu' wha' I remember as I say was the comedy in the courts. So many of these frustrated, Bumble like figures ou' of Dickens tryin' t' bully ordinary people, an' although mos' ordinary people were like mice, others were like lions! Veterans rippin' in t' em'.[120]

Abrams, too, advises we search for particular narrative devices in testimonies, including emphasis, embellishment, cadence, structure, digression and silence as a means of deducing meanings not explicitly stated.[121] She argues that the study of competing narratives provides insight into cultures and the pervasive meaning making structures we depend upon in our effort to be understood.[122] Like Portelli, she also suggests that there are multiple layers of narrative; that which the respondent verbalises, the models and structures they employ in the effort to be understood in their cultural environment and interview context, and that which results after passing through the historian's analytical filter, which further modifies the narrative.[123] Schank and Abelson's *skeleton stories* concept is complemented by Abrams's identification of common cultural structures of telling, including fairytale, memory story, formal speech giving, anecdote, folk tale and simple every day speech acts, contingent upon linguistic, psychological and social structures.[124] Abrams goes as far as to plot a *typical* narration with the following characteristics, which, although rarely all found in every narration, provide a fairly accommodating model:

1) Summary of event –an abstract or preface to the narrative
2) Outline of story context – what Abrams calls *orientation*
3) The specific event
4) Reflection – potentials or possible meanings are weighed up
5) Outcome – which Abrams calls the *resolution*
6) Return to the present – also referred to as the coda, which functions as the past/present link or as a moral of the story[125]

Such elements are evident in the following story by Alice Sheridan:

I used te' get wee children comin' up te' me, we'd be standin' at Govan Cross, y' know, I had the loudhailer an' wha' not, the leaflets an', this wee boy, be abou' five. He was on his wee bike. An' he come up and he tugged at ma' [indicates her sleeve] coat, an' he says, 'Mrs, is tha' the Poll Tax?' I says, 'Yes, son.' 'Is tha', are you's fightin' Maggie Thatcher?' I says, 'Yes, son.' An he puts his hand in [indicates his pocket] an' he says, 'Can I give ye' tha'?' An' it was ten pence. Now, some people'd argue I shouldnae have taken tha', but I said te' him, 'Are ye' sure, son?' 'Yeah, I wan' ma' pocket money, I wan' te' give it to ye'.' Tha' wee boy wanted te' give me tha'. An' I wasnae gunna' insult him by not takin' it.

Aright? An' ye' used te' get that a lot with pensioners. Some pensioners would maybe put ten pounds in, an' ye' say, 'Excuse me that's fine, can ye' afford tha'?' 'I cannae afford not to.' That was the response. So, well I got lots of children come over, 'Can we help ye' figh' Thatcher? Can we help ye' figh' Thatcher?' [To Betty] She was hated here, wasn't she?[126]

Summary: "I used te' get wee children comin' up te' me…"

Context: "…we'd be standin' at Govan Cross, y' know, I had the loudhailer an' wha' not, the leaflets…"

The event: Boy offers his pocket money to help fight Thatcher

Reflection: "Now, some people'd argue I shouldnae have taken tha'…"

Resolution: "I wasnae gunna' insult him by not takin' it. Aright?" "'I cannae afford not to.'"

Coda: "She was hated here, wasn't she?" - ongoing resentment against Thatcher

Despite these structuralist approaches above, the narrative theorist Gerald Prince argues there is no consensus among scholars about a definitive theory of narrative. There are those literary theories who argue *everything is narrative*, who would gel with Schank and Abelson's model, while at the far end of the spectrum are those who claim *nothing is narrative*, because discourse and context are everything.[127] Like Portelli and Abrams, Prince encourages scholars to consider certain narrative variables such as speed, frequency, distance, point of view, choice of adopted discourse, existence and events, goal directed actions, mere happenings, states and processes.[128] Much of the contention between theorists boils down to the role of the individual agent, *the narrator*. Wolf Schmid, another literary theorist, identifies two distinct trends in narratology; an older classic interpretation that points to a mediating authority between the author and what is narrated, the narrator, as an essential characteristic of narrative, and a more recent structuralist trend that argues the narrator is not essential, stressing instead the requirement of a *change of state* represented in the text in order to qualify as a narrative in contrast with a mere description. This, he argues, means narrative theory can be applied to mediums such as comic strips that have no narrator.[129] For the oral history material presented here, of course, there *is* a narrator, but the

concept of a *change of state*, from one equilibrium, to a disequilibrium, to a new equilibrium fits with the models presented by Portelli and Abrams. By providing a distinction between narratives and purely descriptive texts, however, can Schmid's model harmonise with Schank and Abelson's view of an entirely story based memory? "Descriptive texts," argues Schmid, "represent static situations: they describe conditions, draw pictures or portraits, portray social milieus, or categorize natural and social phenomena," moments in time and single states.[130] Schmid, however, goes on to suggest that narrative and description are not mutually exclusive; that together the two components create stories, the narrative representing the movable, *the changeable state*, the description identifying the static characteristics of the state before and after the change took place. This change, Schmid argues, must be a significant *event* with a lasting influence on the narrative. For example, Robin identifies a schoolteacher's advice as a *hinge moment* in his narrative:

> I decided to get involved in the Labour Party Young Socialists through a teacher at school who suggested that me and my friends might want to become politically active, so we went to a meeting in someone's front room, and, as they say, the rest is history … the, the teacher played a role of a cipher really, he wasn't important in the subsequent involvement of myself and my school friends, he was just the right guy and the right moment, pointing us in the right direction for how we might join a political organisation.[131]

The relevance of specific events to a narrative, however, can be down to individual interpretation; as Robin suggests, the teacher was to play no further role. The scholar must deduce whether narrative or description predominates in order to identify the text as one or other.[132] Earlier in the chapter, the author quoted Kenny's description of the social milieu in '70s Glasgow. As part of the full testimony his remarks were similar to the contextual orientation at the beginning of Alice's narrative of campaigning at Govan Cross; it served as part of the storyline. While Schank and Abelson's story based model works to explain how the mind stores and retrieves data, verbalised or other medium based articulations must possess certain characteristics in order to qualify as narratives, namely *change over time* centring around one or move *events*. In poll tax

testimonies, however, narrative represents changes of state together with varying degrees of description in order to demonstrate said changes, producing stories in which there are at least two mediating agents - the narrator and the interviewer.

The author believes the poll tax rebel's testimony is made up of a complex, fluid storyline, complete with multiple changes of state and other narrative devices. The stories produced are intrinsically subjective and potentially far from accurate portrayals of actual events. They are instead demonstrations of what the events and period under discussion *meant* for the individual respondent, contingent upon the individual memory stories unique to them, the influence of the interview context and the days and weeks preceding, and the prevailing discursive structures borrowed or into which they are socialised that aid the listeners understanding, including those linguistic structures such as tropes or skeletons, and those identities, ideologies and worldviews represented in dominant discourses such as those found in Burns and Sheridan's written accounts. No two narratives can ever be entirely alike. Now the interview context, cultural variables and subjective memory and narrative have been explored, completing the intersubjective triangle, the author has sought to draw these together to identify those elements in the testimonies that are hegemonic and those that are heterogeneous; addressing the question, is there a collective memory of the anti-poll tax movement?

Chapter IV

Collective Memory: Official verses Vernacular

I

Anna Green wrote her essay, *Can memory be collective?*, with the view that personal, autobiographical memory had been sidelined in favour of collective or group memory. She accuses some historians of reductionism, deliberately neglecting the individual accounts of lone agents, believing they had no impact upon the public world. "As a consequence, human subjectivity came to be perceived as socially and culturally determined to the point where the idea of personal memory became irrelevant."[133] Green believes this is the result of a failure to fully engage with "the deeply problematic relationship between the memory of the individual and that of the group."[134] If historians have moved beyond meta-narratives and wish to explore the popular memory of the non-hegemonic classes in society, then the hunt for those individuals who subvert official histories ought to be of key interest. If individual anomalies begin to show a trend, either of a significant rejection of the official memory, or, more striking still, a complete deviation that presents a hitherto unheard conflicting narrative, then our picture of the past has until now provided only a minority view. Therefore, the aim should be to turn this simple reductionism on its head and

show how social agency and dialogue produce collective memories.

The contemporary notion of collective memory is derived from the work of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945). Halbwachs in particular sought to move the focus away from the subjective mind and its experience of remembering; showing instead that memory is in fact a group process dependent on one's social arrangements and rejecting the notion of an entirely individual conscious state. "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories."[135] The German sociologist argued that coherent and persistent memory is a social activity, as are the selection of what individuals deem worthy of remembering or discarding. It is also through the group that the individual takes on memories of events they did not directly experience. In his thesis a distinction is drawn between history in the form of static heritage that plays no role in the present, and collective memory that is seen to be *living* and influencing the routines and rituals of the present. As Green argues, "Halbwachs's approach to memory was driven by a search for mechanisms of social cohesion."[136] The concern with the notion of collective memory is that it may be too broad a term. Are we in danger of making sweeping generalisations of historical consciousness? Green identifies two variants in contemporary scholarship: the *distributed version* and the *strong version*, the latter prone to generalising the *mentalité* of an epoch, the former allowing of discursive contestation.

When two individuals discuss an event they both witnessed, their stories will be unique, as experiences and personal indexes differ, although they are likely to search for a *common ground*, a collective understanding of an event, which levels off the key points and discards the details that a single individual significance. The story is therefore condensed, circulated, and returned to the individual, influencing their own index and how they will later recount the story. "It is a precondition of our collective life in culture," writes narratologist Jerome Bruner, "I doubt such

collective life would be possible were it not for our human capacity to organise and communicate experience in a narrative form. For it is the conventionalisation of narrative that converts individual experience into collective coin which can be circulated, as it were, on a base wider than a merely interpersonal one."[137] "Our own experiences," suggest Schank and Abelson, "are not likely to change the world view of those with whom we surround ourselves. Rather their world view will shape the stories we tell, and thus we remember and believe."[138] This hypothesis suggests 1) personal and group memories are intertwined, and 2) public memories are social creations. While Schank and Abelson give the impression that this is an aggregation of the individual, whose personal memories become blurred like a single face in a crowd, Green views this process as a vindication of hitherto unappreciated individual agency in the creation of collective memory. Through dialogue we share our recollections and harmonize a shared meaning.

The author believes an examination of the extent to which oral narratives subvert or relate to the written narratives of Burns and Sheridan, with particular attention to views on the Labour Party and trade union leaderships, the Militant Tendency, and the participatory agency of the non-aligned will go some way toward identifying those elements of the movement that are, if not official, then popular or *strong*, and those elements that are more distributed. Given the limited breadth of testimonies under consideration here, identifying strong cases of conflicting narratives may only be possible with further research. The conclusions drawn by contrasting these written and oral samples, however, will serve a useful basis for such future work.

II

As demonstrated in chapter two, both Burns and Sheridan's books were highly critical of the official labour movement's role in the poll tax struggle. While Burns arrived at the conclusion that

officialdom, leadership and paternalism were shown to be detrimental to social movements, which required grass roots control free of political manipulation and agendas, Sheridan spoke more specifically about the history of the Labour Party as a force for changing society from its inception to date. The following short stories illustrate a blanket indictment of the official labour movement for their role in the rebellion. Close examination, however, allows us to understand whether this condemnation was a rejection of official representation and political leadership, or something more specific about the Labour Party that was at fault. Drawing lessons from our intersubjective triangle, it is important to bare in mind the context of these interviews. Early 2011 was a period where the anti-austerity movement was gaining momentum in the UK, and the left was engaged in fresh discussions on the strategy of fighting cuts. Just as Labour councils had implemented the Tory poll tax, the national leadership have again asked local authorities to make Tory cuts. The narrator's opinions regarding Labour's failure to provide an explicitly anti-austerity message will certainly influence the meanings they attach to the party under Kinnock. Before joining the Militant, Robin Clapp began attending Labour Party constituency meetings. His first impressions, and the meanings he deduced from them are sharp in his memory:

> I had a rude awakening when I went along to my first Labour Party constituency meetings, and found that many of the people in those particular meetings were not people that I would have defined as socialist in their outlook. They were elderly, they were cynical, they looked down on young people. I distinctly remember sitting in a meeting where I had two rightwingers sitting either side of me, and after I'd made a short contribution, they both leaned across me and started talking about me in the most utterly patronising way, and saying that young people really knew nothing and that I would grow out of this and so on, and I was quite shocked by that, but actually thought, well, if a two minute contribution could have such an impact upon them and can make them feel so scared then firstly I want to come back next time and do four minutes and then do ten minutes because that would make them even more scared, but secondly, why are they in the Labour Party if all they see it as is as a vehicle for a cosy chat? Surely they want young people who're going to be a bit edgy, who are going to put forward new ways of thinking, new, new ways of doing. And I realised shortly after that, you know, that there was a rightwing within the Labour Party and there was a leftwing within the Labour Party and I began to differentiate people much more in terms of the ideas they put forward rather than just in terms of whether they seemed nice people or not nice people and, well, I

guess that's a process everybody goes through when they become politically active.[139]

Robin knew before the poll tax battle that within the Labour Party were elements hostile to the strategies he endorsed. Like Sheridan, Robin sees the role of the official labour movement in social movements as a positive, if placed under a combative leadership. Robin's refusal to be intimidated in these meetings demonstrates his commitment at that time to realising such an active leadership as opposed to abandoning the party altogether. Kenny Cunningham had a similar experience at his first Labour Party meetings in Edinburgh:

> Terrible people a lot of them. The Labour Party was an eye opener just because of their real resistance to, you know, it was just they liked it the way it was and anybody coming along challenging the way they run it they were gunna' clobber and it was a, you know, foundational experience, character forming you know that those Labour Party meetings where you were having to stand up for your point of view knowing you were gunna' get crunched.[140]

For some like Catherine Tributsch-Flood, echoing Burns's views on officialdom, it was no surprise that official support for non-payment failed to materialise:

> I just see the Labour Party and the leadership of the trade union movement as part of the establishment, and they don't really want to challenge the establishment because they're part of it.[141]

Non-Militant Labour Party activist, Gordon Dangerfield casts an interesting light on his early involvement in the party. While he acknowledges the regressive positions taken by the leadership, his personal experience was one of free action:

> I've always been really lucky in the Labour Party. What happened in Greenock was I got involved with the Labour Party Young Socialists, and the leadership was irrelevant to us, like, we were doing our own thing, a group of likeminded people, and there were some older people who were in the party on the left in Greenock too, and we kind of formed loose coalitions and loose caucuses with

them. And really what kind of goes up to those days was completely irrelevant to us, we were just doing our own local stuff. And then in '86 I went to work in Stranraer and I went down to the Labour Party there, exact same thing, I wasn't in the Young Socialists by now, it was the Labour Party, you know, it was a very small constituency party, but same thing, it was a small group of us, we were totally on the left, leadership still totally irrelevant to us, doing our own thing … It wasn't really so much that they encouraged autonomy in the Labour Party; they absolutely discouraged it. It was just that we ignored them, and did our own thing.[142]

Curious of why Gordon was today so critical of the party, the author later asked:

Did you ever become particularly disillusioned with Labour, at what point did that really begin to happen?

From the moment I joined

From the moment I joined?

Yeah, I mean, I never ever had any expectations of the leadership. I think anyone who joins any political party and has any expectations of the leadership doesn't understand the political process. One of the reasons why leaders are so keen to basically make the rank and file just voting and cheering for them is that they understand very well that by the time they get in the positions they're in they're utterly divorced from the interests and beliefs of the people that put them there … And so, unlike many people who claim to have got very disillusioned by the Blairs and the Kinnocks and the Smiths and whoever, I always knew, I always knew they were arseholes, I mean, they wouldn't be where they were if they weren't, you cannot, you cannot get into that position without being an arsehole, it's the definition of the process.[143]

Like Burns, Gordon takes the non-aligned view that officialdom by supposed representatives is itself detrimental to movements. Hannah McArthur, a fifty-nine year old resident of Glasgow's Springburn estate who had also been a non-aligned activist against the poll tax, unlike Gordon did become disillusioned with Labour as a result of a number of negative experiences with some of its local activists. A rift with the Labour chairwoman of Jameson Community Centre, Josephine Bradley, resulted in a long feud between the two women, which further drew Hannah away from Labour. The author asked her:

What do you remember about the Labour Party in the community, I mean, earlier on, even before the Poll Tax?

Before the Poll…? I never bothered with them. Er, I put in for, I can't remember his name, a man, stayed in this, jus' doon there, er, he was a councillor, but he had a surgery up here, er, once a month or so, but there were nothin' done, there were really nothin' done abou' here.

There was no real tradition among the Labour Party?

No, no, not tha' I, I mean, I was jus' brought up with Labour, 'Vote Labour, vote Labour,' I'm talkin' bout ma' parents an' tha', 'You do not vote anythin' except Labour.' I wouldnae vote Labour. I really wouldn't. Er, I did at one time, but I would never do it again

…

So, you've had no faith in Labour really from quite an early stage because you felt like they weren't really contributing anything to the community?

No, honestly, I really didn't, I mean, I vote SNP, I mean, I'm being honest, I mean I voted, er, socialist, er, when I got involved in tha', cos' I seen wha' they were doin', er, an', an', oh God, I would go hail an' snow up te' differen' places in Pollok [canvassing for the expelled Sheridan on an anti-poll tax platform], an' nearly killed myself, but it was good, it was good, er, no, when I was young I was, er I voted Labour, er, it was drummed into you's, but a lot of people then, er, they kind a'grew up a bit more an' they see things they doon't like, y' know, why vote for somebody y' doon't like? Y' know, so, that's the way it is for me. [144]

When it became clear that the Labour Party would not be willing to officially back the non-payment campaign, many rebels were not surprised but angered nevertheless, as shown in Catherine and Dave's accounts:

But I think one thing I would like to say, as a member of the Labour Party at the time – I was absolutely appalled by the stance taken by Neil Kinnock. He not only attacked Liverpool Labour Council, he refused to support the anti-Poll Tax campaign, which could have brought down the Tory government, but he would just not support us and he in fact said, 'Law makers can't be law breakers.'[145]

————

The [1992] general election Labour should av' won, bu' it never aligned itself

with the anti-Poll Tax movemen'. It tried t' keep its distance from it, they said, 'Oh, this is terrible, they're breakin' the law!' Labour councils were jailin' people rather than oldin' fetes for em', sayin', 'Well done for defyin' Mrs. Thatcher,' it was, no, 'Welcome t' jail. We'll suppor', y'know, we don' like the poor bein' picked on, bu' we will jail y' if y' figh' back,' that's wha' in effect the Labour Party were sayin'. They were takin' photographs of us defendin' people in courts, as an argumen' for our expulsion! Now I joined the Labour Party t' elp' the poor if y' know wha' I'm sayin, t' stand up for, well it was becomin' an expellable offence in the Labour…[146]

In all of these extracts there is a marked gap between rank and file members of the Labour Party and communities with the leadership itself. Both Burns and Sheridan had perceptively argued that across the board there was disillusionment with Labour, marked by their repeated failure at the polls. We can, however, see oral narratives attracted to both the *Militant narrative* and the *Non-aligned narrative*; those who persevered with the labour movement and risked expulsion from the party in the belief that its structures and experience could aid the cause, and those who lost or never had illusions in officialdom and instead looked to their own communities for leadership.

III

Sheridan wrote *A Time to Rage* in the aftermath of his 1989 expulsion from the Labour Party, its 1992 general election failure, and the split in Militant that saw he and the majority leave Labour and set up the independent *Militant Labour*. Feeling that the Labour Party was no longer reclaimable as a mass socialist party, his and the testimonies of many former Militants would therefore be keen to defend their legacy as an organisation, and provide signposts for building new broad lefts on the basis of their method. Militant interviewees reflect on what attracted them to the organisation, and draw comparisons between its approaches with those of the Labour rightwing and *ultra-lefts* that refused to engage with the official labour movement altogether. As illustrated in chapter two, however, Burns regards Militant's involvement in the poll tax rebellion as stifling and undemocratic, and considers it fortunate that they were never able to gain leadership over the whole

movement. He believed in the need for organic participatory agency on the part of the communities themselves. Of the following extract from Wayne's interview, Burns may feel vindicated in his assertion of Militant's paternalistic, evangelising, superior and top-down approach that he believes lacked faith in community agency:

> I think we <pause> we provided the main impetus for that, about the need to link up. I mean people quickly seized on that, they could see the sense in doing that. A lot of them saw the [Militant led] Bristol Anti-Poll Tax group as somewhere to go for advice, you know, particularly the more working class ones, you know, "This is all new to us. We'll send a delegate along. You tell us what to do, you tell us what we need to do, you know. We've got a real practical interest in this." But in terms of organising coaches up to the demonstration we virtually done that ourselves. I think we organised about thirty coaches from Bristol. We have one person working full time on organising all the coaches, and all that organisational and all that work, and providing all the structures was virtually all done by us. All that hard daily graft, you know. Cos a lot of the independent groups wouldn't necessarily have the skills to do that.[147]

Wayne is talking about the organisational skills inherited from the labour movement that Burns criticised as inflexible, inaccessible and intimidating. Wayne's belief that non-aligned groups from working class areas of Bristol would ask to be told what to do, or wouldn't have the skills to act without Militant guidance may confirm Burns's prejudice. On the question of whether Militant monopolised the flow of information or could be accused of subterfuge in the hijacking of a genuinely community based movement, Burn would see the comments of Paul Gerard, a teacher and Manchester based Militant, equally affirming:

> We got our information early through the pages of the *Militant*, we knew what was going on and what was gunna' happen. And we could see that our comrades were getting really organised for it and we knew that we would be organised here as well and it was just a matter of time and making sure that, y'know, you caught the mood and got the meeting organised and, y'know, that, it would be very often too that it would be our comrades who were in the driving seat…[148]

It is on the question of leadership that Burns appears to attack Militant most vehemently.

Militant's involvement of course went much deeper than the charismatic public stature of Sheridan, despite the celebrity status he has enjoyed since. Contrary to the claims made by Burns and in line with Sheridan, Militant interviewees argue they actually helped facilitate information exchange and grass roots control of the campaign. Robin relates this idea in a story about a mass meeting at which he feels Militant's engagement was vindicated. In the course of the narrative he also challenges accusations of having jumped on the bandwagon, and points out that Militant activists had overstretched; the heavy commitment actually damaged the organisation. Importantly he argues, unlike Burns, leaders should not be expendable, rather that without Militant's involvement the movement would have been blunted and without substance. Militant's success was due to its ability to *speak the right language*:

We went to one evening meeting in the Forest of Dean, I think four or five of us drove up from Bristol. We had about a hundred copies of the Militant in our bags. We sold every single copy before the meeting to people going in to the meeting. And by the end of the meeting there were twice as many people in there than had been in there at half past seven, and we had no newspapers to sell! And, you know, I was one of the platform speakers and I was just submerged at the end by people queuing up to ask me technical questions about the Poll Tax, wanting advice, wanting reassurance really. And that's how it was, you know? We were obviously political people. We obviously as the Militant saw the anti-Poll Tax movement as being a decisive movement in which we must intervene. But, our intervention was not that of an organisation that just goes in to recruit and then walk away again. Our intervention was based on the long term strategy of ensuring that we could build strong community based Anti-Poll Tax Unions out of which would come people who would respect the work we were doing, the best of whom would then perhaps would want to find out about getting involved in socialist politics. But we certainly didn't go into the Anti-Poll Tax movement with the kind of glib approach of, well, this is a really good recruiting prospect for us – lets just recruit a few people then sort of sit down self satisfied having just done the job. This was something we saw as really a long term strategy, and in truth, what that did was, you know, create periodic headaches for us as the Militant because we found ourselves leading a mass movement of eighteen million people and of course at the same time we were trying to do all the other things we would have ordinarily done as a political party … it's a tremendous tribute to Militant comrades that, you know, around the country from the North of Scotland to Cornwall we managed, because of the political ideas and the clarity of our strategy to be given the opportunity to be at the head of that movement, and I'm firmly convinced now, as I was then that if we had not been at the head of that movement one of a number of things may have happened. The movement could have been driven into a blind ally by the trade union leaders.*

> The movement could have been deflected from developing by the dire warnings and threats of the Labour Party that you will all go to jail if you don't pay your Poll Tax. Or the movement could have been circumvented by a kind of adventuristic development, you know, involving the SWP, the syndicalists and anarchists who would have concentrated just on big staged events and demonstrations and not known how to engage the tens and hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who don't go on those demonstrations but are the very ones who need to be the backbone of a mass non-payment campaign, so, we used every tactic we could, including the mass demonstrations, but we always recognised that the key to winning this battle was, you know, developing the anti-Poll Tax movement in the communities, and that meant speaking to people in their own language, and for a party like ours that's easy, because we come from these communities, we can speak to people in their own language, its no affectation on our part, its quite natural to go round our own streets and talk to the people and saying to them, we're not paying, how about you?[149]

More testimonies of this kind would need to be examined to determine whether this is an embellished account, or whether it reflects anything like the national trend, but Robin's attention to the importance of "speaking the same language," the orality of Militant's engagement, is something the author returns to in the conclusion. Criticism of the 'adventuristic development' that Robin believes the movement could have taken without the explicit non-payment strategy laid down by the Militant led federation underpins the position the group took toward the violent direct action seen at the 30 March demonstration, which as seen in chapter two conflicted with the positions taken by Burns and various anarchist groups.

Those respondents who recall their involvement in the march and subsequent riot confirm the arguments of both Burns and Sheridan, pointing to the likelihood of planned provocation on the part of the police as the cause of the violence. Dave Griffiths, who was a steward on the demonstration, drew the following conclusions from his experience:

> I'm sure, there's a myth growin', I'm sure your other interviewees av' ad' this, the myth of the riot tha' beat the Poll Tax – the riot was designed to undermine the Poll Tax movement by Thatcher. They were definitely involved in wha' went on. I remember one bloke, stood behind, I'll jus' mention this, screamin' for the crowd to attack the police, an' myself an' other stewards turned round an' did a

rooney an' who the eff are you? What y' think y' doin'? Y'know? When we went t' check, he started runnin' an' we chased him he disappeared in t' a police van, an' I saw tha', I saw it appen', an' no one will ever convince me otherwise … Thatcher wanted trouble on that day so she could say, 'Look at the loonies. If y' get involved in this you'll end up in trouble. Y' don't wana' do tha',' an' it was an attemp' to keep people away.[150]

Similar narratives abound in much a similar from. Narrators are aware of the myths surrounding the demonstration, and relate their own battle stories. The broadly held position is that there was a conspiracy to undermine the non-payment campaign, and that the blame for the riot lay with Thatcher's tax and provocation, not the protesters themselves. The media portrayal of the riot commended the bravery of police officers and condemned what it viewed as wonton criminality on the part of a hand full of protesters committed to causing damage and disruption. Commentators placed the blame on Militant organisers for stirring up trouble. Like Burns, the lawyer Gordon Dangerfield was not surprised by how the demonstration was reported on, and defends the actions of the crowd who he believes were victimised. He argues from a theoretical standpoint, because he did not personally witness the riot, but draws comparisons with the present day context:

…the fact is even those so called handful of people have always been attacked and provoked and always, always are victimised in some way. So it isn't even like there's some small handful of people out to cause trouble. It's that there are some people who are prepared to go further than others in pursuing civil disobedience. And they're the ones that get picked on and provoked and then trouble happens. I mean anybody who's been involved in these things knows that's how it works, and it works to this day. In the recent protest[151] that's how it works as well. But, so I think that's the way it's always reported. And again, I don't have any illusions at all about how things are going to be reported. So I didn't watch that thinking, 'Oh no! What will this do to the movement! This might get us a bad name, you know, I wish those trouble makers hadn't have done that!' I just knew that's how it always is and that's how it will always be, and what is magnificent is all of those people turned out, and some of those people who were truly committed went further than others, and I know exactly what happened to them and I don't believe anything that I hear negatively in the media because I've been there myself and I know how it really is. But all of that's second hand, I was just watching it on TV.[152]

Many in Militant did not measure commitment on the basis of how far rebels were prepared

to go in terms of property damage. While they agree police behaviour had been the primary cause of disruption, they refused to condone some of the activities of other left groups in the crowd, as they believed such behaviour would damage the breadth of support for non-payment. They do not however believe their refusal to uncritically support those arrested undermined trust and respect for the federation. Wayne differentiated between the middle-aged core of the non-payment campaign, and elements among the youth drawn to violent direct action groups:

> Yeah, was <pause> before the trouble, before the big trouble started, there was a row of police going along who all had anti-Poll Tax stickers on their lapels, and that, not discreetly, then a bunch of anarchists came along and, drinking cider, pissed outa' their heads started throwing bottles at the police. I'm thinkin' fuckin' hell, what's the matter with you? There's these police supporting it … And then we heard what was happening, and my reaction was bloody hell, I bet it, you know, the anarchists have been at it again and they provoked it, from what I saw on my little section, obviously from the wider picture, cos that had been going on elsewhere earlier given them the excuse to go in if…cos I know a lot of anarchists were hell bent on, you know, provoking a riot even if the police <laughs> didn't cause one themselves. It was like, "This is our opportunity to have a go at Thatcher." Probably a lot of unorganised youth as well, you know.
>
> *You think there might have been a lot of resentment built up…?*
>
> Yeah, over the years. This was the pressure cooker. They knew there would be loads of people going up there. "Lets get our own back for not just the Poll Tax, but for everything that's happened, you know, over the last decade or so," you know?[153]

Dave Griffiths related a story to demonstrate his concern that those groups encouraging violence would actually undermine the movement:

> I remember in the month or so before the mass, national demonstration people who hadn't been much involved in the Poll Tax campaign who argued that it wouldn't be tha' effective suddenly because they saw big crowds all came an' got involved, the sort of people I described y' see in London, and they of course ad' t' make up for their spectacular failure t' do anythin' previously, so they'd always turn up to a council meetin' with a bag of flour or somethin' tha' made em' look more angry than anyone else by lobbin', as if that's got, y'know, absolute pricks, y'know, I'm not knockin' it, but it was pretty pointless wha' they were doin' and that did start to create, y' could see a layer of the more workin'

class crowds we'd been getting' to these events goin' <sharp intake of breath> … this woman, I was gunna' give y' the example of the effect on em' – she phone up an' I say righ' we'll get y'a place on the bus, 'No, no,' she ses, 'I need t' know where t' go, we're gunna' book a bus from our factory.' Bloody great, righ', eres' some stuff, I'll phone y' back in a few days, make sure y'sorted, I'll check if there's any change. Phoned her back with about three or four days to go, an' of course a lot of the regional news ad' ad' the flour bag throwers an' all the res' of it, and I phoned her up an' said, right, ows' it goin' for y'bus? 'Oh, yeah,' I mean, she was very polite, 'We won' be goin', y'know, we can't ge' a bus,' an', oh well, d'ye wana' come on one of our buses, d'ye wan' us to arrange a way of linkin' up? 'Oh, no, well, we've seen there's been a bit of trouble an' we thought we wouldn't go down,' so y' can see why Thatcher would be interested, or, so its not liablis' not Thatcher, *the powers tha' be*, would want there to be trouble at tha' demonstration, y'know, t' convince people they don't wan' t' ge' involved with these nutters, basically.[154]

Paul Gerard had been reading Burns's *Poll Tax Rebellion* in advance of the interview, but had not yet reached the section where Burns criticises the federation's refusal to back defendants.

> I think there was debates on the left, then, about, cos' I seem to remember the anarchists and some sections of the left saying Trafalgar Square Defendants Committee. There was a defence committee for the people that got pulled on the day. And they were saying, oh, the Fed's not supporting them, we need to support them. And I think, as is often the case the SWP[155] tended to sit in the middle a bit and say, well, the Fed could do more… Yeah, but, I think there was a little bit of a debate on the left, about, a little bit of friction on the left … About, y'know, and we were being accused of having snitched or said that we'd snitch, which never actually happened.[156]

While Burns and anarchist groups were quite vocal in their criticism of the Militant led federation's position, respondents give the impression that the line did not have a great impact on those involved in local APTUs. Although rival organisations were set up within the federation, many anarchist groups and their literature were confined to the London area, and so failed to greatly influence opinion further a field in the same way Militant could.

In these three key examples, a) views on the Labour Party, b) the leadership of the Militant, and c) the riot, it is evident that a strong *Militant narrative* exists in an oral tradition. While both

Militant's and the Non-aligned's narratives often cross boundaries between one another, it can be argued the *Militant narrative* is the more homogenised and thorough as part of an institutionalised, official history of the Militant itself. The Non-aligned narrative, as presented by Burns is more flexible, therefore by contrast more difficult to identify in accounts as a distinct trend. Future research should commit to identifying a greater number of non-aligned participants in the communities themselves, and a greater number of voices critical to the Militant and the Militant narrative itself beyond the small, London based left-libertarians and anarchists. This means appealing for respondents in specific housing estates around the UK, as close to the grassroots as possible, on the basis of the geographical and ideological divisions identified in the course of this dissertation.

Conclusion

Dialogue as Agency

In these chapters the author has illustrated the intersubjective approach as a means of opening up oral data to fresh insight, challenging those who decry its credibility as *objective* historical evidence. He has also applied Schank and Abelson's convincing model of a story based memory to the work of literary theorists in the area of narrative, drawing upon examples from his own research. The author drew these concepts together in order to demonstrate the relationship between the written text and the oral testimony, while raising the question of whether one or more collective memory stories are in circulation regarding the mass experience of the poll tax struggle. It would certainly appear, on the basis of this small sample, that while Burns's book has the largest circulation of any book on the subject, as an organisation the Militant Tendency is the only group to have developed a thorough narrative of the poll tax struggle that may be termed *a tradition*. The *Militant narrative* is a highly potent story that the organisation considers not only a facet of its own heritage, but also as a living, vibrant example impacting on the campaigns of the present and programme for the future. The condensed, collective narrative appears frequently in pamphlets and papers and the branch meeting discussions of its local and splinter organisations, as a means of

vindicating the political method. While Burns also drew lessons addressing the role of community agency that could be applied to present campaigns and ways of organising, its message appears far less grounded in a homogenised group identity, and less accessible as a shareable narrative. Burns has created a narrative that fits with his theoretical model of participation, where it remains in a readable, although to a great extent exclusively textual form. By contrast, *while the objectivity* of the Militant version is down to individual interpretation, it has been constructed with an eye to orality. The *Militant narrative* is imbibed with rhetoric, tropes, anecdotes and political lessons that can be easily communicated and circulated by word of mouth, from the platform of the public meeting, to the high street leaflet and paper sale, to the picket line. *"Speaking to people in their own language,"* as Robin praised of his organisation means to appeal to the skeleton stories they recognise, appeal to the discourses they are familiar with, in essence to tell stories they can relate to as a means of educating and inspiring others in their method. And just like the oral historian, listening and understanding takes the political activist closer to achieving a shared narrative. To both analyse and engage in dialogue is an act of agency. If the activist did not want to spread this message, bringing the past to bear on the present, they would stop telling the story. It is through such dialogue that shared meanings take root and influence discourses. Both the spread of the non-payment campaign and its lessons for those in the future are the result of a dialogue among many agents who became aware of a shared worldview, and acted upon it. Once a collective meaning reaches mass proportions it becomes a material force. Appropriately, Karl Marx wrote in 1843, "It is clear that the arm of criticism cannot replace the criticism of arms. Material force can only be overthrown by material force, but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses."[157]

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