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OLAF ZENKER

BETWEEN THE LINES  
OF SOCIO-CULTURES  
OF TRAUMA:  
REPUBLICANISM,  
DISSENTERS AND THE  
POLITICS OF META-  
TRAUMA IN THE  
NORTHERN IRISH  
CONFLICT

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Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, PO Box 110351,  
06017 Halle/Saale, Phone: +49 (0)345 2927-0, Fax: +49 (0)345 2927-402,  
<http://www.eth.mpg.de>, e-mail: [workingpaper@eth.mpg.de](mailto:workingpaper@eth.mpg.de)

# Between the Lines of Socio-Cultures of Trauma: Republicanism, dissenters and the politics of meta-trauma in the Northern Irish conflict<sup>1</sup>

Olaf Zenker<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Longstanding political violence often leads to specific socio-cultures of trauma characterised socially by mass traumatisation and culturally by specific ways of representing and handling these traumatic experiences. While there is variation within such socio-cultures, certain ways of processing trauma become more hegemonic than others as powerful political actors back them. This creates context-specific configurations in which locals must find their way through empowered narratives of ‘chosen trauma’ and enforced silences of ‘chosen amnesia’. In this article, based on in-depth life story interviews contextualised by fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2003–2004, I follow an exemplary informant from Catholic West Belfast, Northern Ireland, through his difficulties in locating himself within his local socio-culture of trauma. Characterising the ambivalence and problems he experienced when identifying himself as ‘Irish’, I suggest that these difficulties should be interpreted as resulting from his position ‘between the lines’: his ways of handling traumatic experiences did not square up with the hegemonic Republican trauma narrative but rather read ‘between the lines’ by filling in the blanks in Republican representations. Thereby *de facto* establishing a counter-narrative, this individual also positioned himself ‘between the (front-)lines’ of power, producing local encounters that were characterised, at best, by incomprehension and, at worst, by threatening silence and repudiation. The article concludes that this ‘meta-trauma’ – that is the traumatic experience of repeatedly failing to socio-culturally integrate one’s own traumatic experiences – needs to be conceptualised and thereby processed against the politicised background of such socio-cultures of trauma rather than misinterpreted as an individualised failure to cope with a personal experience of suffering.

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<sup>2</sup> Olaf Zenker, Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern, Laenggassstrasse 49a, 3012 Bern 9, Switzerland; Email: zenker@anthro.unibe.ch.

## Introduction

In his intriguing study exploring concepts of identity, culture, and suffering with a displaced Kashmiri Sikh, Aggarwal (2007) draws attention to the methodological problem of how to evaluate the accuracy of information garnered in verbal communication. Arguing from within cross-cultural psychiatry, he suggests analysing both the ‘spoken text’ for informational content and the ‘unspoken subtext’ for interactional context, putting special emphasis on the dynamics between transference and countertransference during psychiatric interviews.

Aggarwal addresses a general quandary in social science research that has a long methodological history. Within anthropological life story research – the methodological field in which this article is situated – an earlier analytical emphasis on ‘the telling of the truth’, i.e. Aggarwal’s informational content, has increasingly given way to focusing on ‘the truth of the telling’, i.e. Aggarwal’s interactional context (Frank 1995). Yet as Peacock and Holland (1993) argue, oral accounts need to be investigated with regard to interactional context as well as informational content given that both aspects are mutually implicated. Thus, whether one is ultimately more interested in the interactional context of communicative acts or the informational content conveyed in such accounts, each focus methodologically requires the other as its background. Both sides need to be simultaneously reconstructed in an analytical strategy of mutual interpretation that aims at both an internal analysis of the oral accounts and external triangulation. However, the decision to foreground either the interactional context or the informational content (and thus to de-emphasise the other) impacts the scope that the analysis of these encounters can occupy in the actual presentation of results.

This article largely foregrounds the informational content of a number of in-depth life story interviews with one person, a key informant and friend from my ethnographic fieldwork in 2003-4 in ‘Northern Ireland’,<sup>3</sup> a man in his late forties whom I shall call Dónal. While the interactional context of our encounters is thus somewhat backgrounded in this article, this context will still be repeatedly addressed, especially at the end of my content analysis, where the reconstructed information will be reconfigured in the light of our interactional encounters. For now, suffice it to say that I experienced interviews with several informants as quite specific – and those with Dónal were merely paradigmatic in this respect – in that just by empathically asking questions about identity and suffering I triggered certain interactions precisely because I thereby configured a speaker position that was usually *not* existent for my interview partners. This article tries to make sense of these peculiar encounters and ultimately suggests that they should be treated as symptomatic of a much broader mismatch between individual attempts to come to terms with traumatic experiences and socio-culturally prevalent or hegemonic forms of trauma management.

‘Trauma’ as such did not constitute the main focus of my fieldwork. Instead, I had come to Belfast primarily to investigate the construction of ethnicity within the context of the Northern Irish conflict – the so-called ‘Troubles’ – that had violently erupted in 1969 and recently passed into a more hopeful phase with the peace process beginning in the 1990s. However, despite recent

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<sup>3</sup> In the politicised Northern Irish context, the use of words referring to the region is itself a matter of dispute, purportedly reflecting one’s own position on the conflict. Having used the label ‘Northern Ireland’ in order to unambiguously specify the polity at issue, I subsequently use the terminology used by most of my informants in Catholic West Belfast, who typically prefer terms such as ‘the North of Ireland’ or ‘occupied counties’ to ‘Northern Ireland’ or ‘the province’. The fact that the informant I focus on in this article does not follow this convention himself is emblematic of the dissent that is at the heart of this text.

changes, local society remained deeply divided and remains so until today. This divide can be characterised according to three basic dichotomies, namely in terms of religious background, ethnic identity, and political aspirations. The first dichotomy separates the local population along the lines ‘Catholic’ versus ‘Protestant’ religious backgrounds. Regarding the second, an almost exclusively Catholic part of the population sees itself as ‘Irish,’ whereas Protestants tend to characterise themselves as ‘British’. The third pertains to political positions, which most local Irish describe as ‘Nationalist’ or ‘Republican’ for themselves. Both positions concur in aspiring for a united, independent Ireland but differ on the issue of political violence as a means, with ‘Republicanism’ considering such violence to be legitimate. In contrast, the majority of the ‘Unionists’ or ‘Loyalists’ advocate the maintenance of ‘the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’, with only ‘Loyalism’ also advocating physical violence (Coulter 1999: 10–22, Zenker 2006). As public opinion data shows (Trew 1998, Coakley 2007), there has been a far-reaching homology between ‘Catholic’, ‘Irish’, and ‘Nationalist/Republican’, on the one hand, and ‘Protestant’, ‘British’, and ‘Unionist/Loyalist’, on the other. Yet some variations and cross-cuttings do exist and provide the basis for precisely those tensions that are of interest in this article.

In cities like Belfast, the overall social divide is manifested in considerable residential segregation (Doherty and Poole 2000: 189). This particularly applies to West Belfast, where I did fourteen months of fieldwork on the relationship between the Irish language and Irish identity (Zenker 2008; see also Zenker 2006, forthcoming a, forthcoming b). This part of the city consists of two areas – a Protestant one to the north and a bigger Catholic area to the south – physically separated by so-called ‘peace lines’ across which interaction continues to be limited. It is hence not surprising that virtually all my informants in Catholic West Belfast came only from the Irish Nationalist/Republican community. What is more, Catholic West Belfast is widely perceived as one of the radicalised heartlands of Irish Republicanism.

Regarding the methods of data collection, I used both participant observation and informal interviews for contextualising an extensive series of in-depth life story interviews with a total of twenty-eight key informants. In order to ensure a more representative sample, I selected well-acquainted interviewees according to age, gender, and class. Regarding the interactional context of these interviews, it was striking that many of my interlocutors, while adjusting their accounts to our specific encounter, evidently *reproduced* largely preconceived positions and typically articulated personal experiences of violence and suffering mainly in Nationalist terms that ascribed primary responsibility for the ongoing conflict to the oppressive British state. Yet during other interviews the interactional context was markedly different in that my interlocutors rather clarified and thereby *produced* for themselves their positions in our interactions and often explicitly commented on this very fact. During such encounters, several interlocutors talked about their traumatic experiences in decidedly non-Nationalist ways, and this was especially the case with Dónal, whose exemplary case I will focus on in the remainder of this article. Having discussed this text with Dónal, he kindly gave permission for publication, assuring me that he felt sufficiently protected in terms of anonymity and appropriately represented in terms of his feelings.

I had met Dónal just after my arrival in Belfast at an Irish language course where I was enrolled in the beginner class and Dónal in the advanced. We ended up having lunch together, and when I mentioned my research he told me that despite being a Catholic from West Belfast he regarded himself as ‘European’ rather than ‘Irish’. Dónal offered to talk about his sense of identity, and in the coming months we repeatedly met and conversed informally in various Irish-language contexts.

In addition, we arranged for a total of five extensive interviews, each of which lasted three to four hours. These tape-recorded interviews, taking place between autumn 2003 and summer 2004, took on a decidedly unstructured character with me participating largely as an active listener. All quotations provided in the following are taken from transcripts of these interviews.

During our first interview in October 2003, Dónal realised that he had never told his story before. He explained that even though some people had suffered very directly in the course of the Troubles, ‘all of us have been impaired; we are all painted shades of the victim colour’. According to Dónal it was ultimately impossible to say whether people living in areas such as West Belfast, where violent incidents had occurred frequently, ‘were somehow more traumatically affected’ than people who experienced trauma because of only one incident. Dónal seemed convinced that all people in the North of Ireland had lost something as a result of the Troubles, and, as he emphasised, ‘a lot of people have not had the opportunity to tell their personal story’. Yet he insisted, ‘you *do* need to tell it, even if you only tell it once. Because it’s a pent-up thing that you have got in there that needs to be spoken out aloud’. As we will see, Dónal’s choice to call himself ‘European’ rather than ‘Irish’ directly stemmed from this whole idea of ‘trauma’ and victimhood, given that, as he phrased it, ‘the Irishness that I have, has been severely damaged by the trauma that I experienced throughout that whole process’.

In the interviews, Dónal drew on the biomedical discourse of ‘trauma’ in order to make sense of his painful experiences. The notion of ‘trauma’ as referring to some kind of mental injury first emerged in the late nineteenth century in relation to clinical symptoms of hysteria within Western psychiatry. Yet as an acknowledged psychiatric phenomenon, it gained general acceptance only in 1980, when the diagnosis of ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (PTSD) was officially introduced in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association 1980). By that time, mental health workers and activists had lobbied effectively on behalf of Vietnam War veterans to have their war-related trauma recognised as a psychological malady (Trimble 1985, Herman 1992: 7–132, Young 1995: 5).

In the most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), PTSD is defined in terms of a direct connection between a traumatic experience – such as a serious threat to one’s life or physical integrity or witnessing violence – and a set of subsequent psychiatric symptoms, including re-experiencing the traumatic event and symptoms of arousal as well as of withdrawal (American Psychiatric Association 1994: 427). PTSD is thereby represented as having a timeless and universal reality merely ‘discovered’ by Western biomedical science (e.g. in Trimble 1985, Herman 1992). Critics have claimed, however, that the reality of ‘trauma’ and PTSD should instead be seen as a product of Euro-American science, which has only been ‘universalised’ within Western public health systems and through the globalised humanitarian agendas of governments and NGOs (Bracken et al. 1995, Young 1995, Summerfield 1996 and 1999).

It was this biomedical discourse of ‘trauma’ that Dónal was obviously referring to in our first interview. However, it soon became apparent that his invocation of this ‘trauma’ discourse was aspirational rather than based on a well-established local pattern for making sense of painful experiences. This is not to say that ‘trauma’ and PTSD did not form part of the biomedical toolkit of the Northern Irish National Health Service – they did. Following recommendations by the Social Services Inspectorate Report *Living with the Trauma of the Troubles* (1998), a number of Trauma Advisory Panels (TAPs) had also been set up, coordinating the local provision of health and social

services for people affected by the Troubles. However, as the recently published Eames/Bradley Report (Eames and Bradley 2009: 88) observed, ‘much more needs to be done in the area of post traumatic stress: to create a greater understanding of trauma; to ensure effective responses to it; to ensure adequate service provision and accessibility of those services’. My own experiences in Catholic West Belfast somewhat reflect this observation, in that the medicalisation of suffering in terms of psychological ‘trauma’ did not really set the dominant terms in which traumatic experiences were being processed in everyday life. Instead, the local scene seemed to be rather dominated by what could be called another ‘socio-culture of trauma’.

Recent transdisciplinary research on social suffering, violence, and subjectivity argued for the collapse of older dichotomies separating ‘the individual from social levels of analysis, health from social problems, representation from experience, suffering from intervention’ (Kleinman et al. 1997a: x) and emphasised that cultural representations, social experiences, and political processes are interlinked through complex power relations (Kleinman et al. 1997b, Das et al. 2000, Das et al. 2001). Following this lead, this article focuses on the interplay between socio-culturally pre-structured lifeworlds of individuals and their varied attempts to come to terms with their traumatic experiences. For this purpose, the notion of ‘socio-culture of trauma’ might be a helpful concept in referring not only to culturally specific ways of handling experiences of suffering under the social condition of mass traumatisation in (post-)conflicts. Rather, such a socio-culture of trauma also is comprised of conflicting cultural strategies of narrating and/or eclipsing collective traumata – moving, so to speak, between ‘chosen trauma’ (Volkan 1991, 1997) and ‘chosen amnesia’ (Buckley-Zistel 2006) – that become socially hegemonic to differing extents, depending on the degree to which individual strategies secure backing from powerful political stakeholders. As I will show in the following, it is in relation to this specific socio-culture of trauma in Catholic West Belfast, largely dominated by Irish Republicanism, that both Dónal’s difficulties in describing himself as ‘Irish’ as well as his attempts to activate a transcending ‘trauma’ discourse for *all* victims in Northern Ireland need to be seen.

This argument is developed in three steps: first, I characterise Dónal’s profound difficulty describing himself in terms of ethnicity, which became apparent over the course of our encounters. I show how he experienced himself as caught ‘between all stools’ in that he could not identify with what he felt strongest about – being ‘Irish’ – because of Republican violence conducted in the name of the ‘Irish’ people. Not feeling ‘British’ either, he came to call himself ‘European’, although this label sadly lacked any personal depth. Second, I suggest that Dónal’s difficulties should be interpreted less in terms of an individualised failure to psychologically cope with traumatic experiences but rather as resulting from Dónal’s socio-cultural position ‘between the lines’: his way of handling traumatic experiences did not match the hegemonic Republican trauma narrative but instead hung ‘between its lines’ of empowered meanings. Thereby *de facto* establishing a counter-narrative, Dónal also positioned himself ‘between the (front-)lines’ of meaningful power. This awkward position led to encounters characterised, at best, by incomprehension and, at worst, by threatening silence and repudiation. Third, I conclude that Dónal’s persistent inability to socio-culturally integrate his traumatic experiences needs to be interpreted against the politicised background of this specific socio-culture of trauma rather than misconceived as simply rooted in the personal failures of a sensitive man. I use the term ‘meta-trauma’ to refer to this socio-culturally conditioned ‘second’ trauma of persistently failing to

integrate one's own traumatic experiences – a term intended both as a description of the specific socio-cultural place of such an affliction and as a means of integrating and possibly overcoming it.

### **Between All Stools: Dónal and his personal troubles with Irishness**

From early on in the interviews with Dónal, it became clear that he lacked a sense of self-evident, stable and continual Irishness comparable to that expressed by many of my other informants. Instead, our meetings often leaned towards presently making sense of past experiences in terms of Dónal's ethnic identity. Eventually, this resulted in an overall shift between two positions, which Dónal came to see as alternatives, while I conceived them rather as complementary sides of the same configuration. Before addressing this disagreement, I will first refer to some of Dónal's more straightforward experiences that formed the backdrop for his personal troubles with Irishness.

Dónal grew up in Belfast in the 1950s and 1960s in a family in which Irishness was hardly ever an issue:

“My father was a trade unionist. He wasn't a classic Irish Nationalist as such (...). So even though I was brought up in a *Catholic home*,<sup>4</sup> I wasn't brought up in an *Irish Nationalist home*. You know, the home environment wasn't particularly Nationalistic or Irish-ish. I don't know how to describe it, but can you get the point (...)? That my home wasn't decorated with Tricolours; we didn't have like pictures of [the Irish Socialist and a leader in the 1916 Easter Rising] James Connolly; or we didn't discuss, you know, ‘the British has been really bad’ or ‘the police has been really bad’; it was none of that. ‘Cause my father recognised that even though the police were anti-Catholic in many cases, you needed police in any state. (...) I wouldn't have been brought up with the kind of *romanticism* a lot of people might have been brought up with, of Irishness. You know, of the Irish language, of the Irish culture and so on. We had very little of that at home. (...) *Nothing, nothing particularly Irish in our house!*”

Years later at the onset of the Troubles in 1969, Dónal was in his mid-teens and, as he told me, had up to that time ‘never had any sense at all, whatsoever’ of any local trouble. For example, in order to get to his Catholic grammar school, Dónal had, since the mid-1960s, taken the bus down Falls Road every day and then walked across Protestant West Belfast wearing a school uniform clearly indicating that he was a pupil at a Catholic school and hence probably also a Catholic. Yet, as Dónal insisted, ‘I don't remember *ever* [having] a problem, *ever!*’ But then, after the summer of 1969, there was one occasion:

“I was actually walking back from school across the other way, back to the Falls. And I remember somebody; he didn't actually stop me, but he looked at me as I walked across. And because the Troubles had broken out, I was conscious of it. And he didn't really do anything. He just kind of stared at me. (...) I don't even think he said anything. He was young, but he was bigger than me. And I thought, ‘This guy knows I'm a Catholic.’ And that was the first time I really kind of thought about it. Hadn't really been aware of it up to that point. (...) And I just ran. He didn't chase me or anything. I just got that fear. And I thought, ‘I'm not gonna go this way anymore, too risky.’ So I went into town and came out again instead of coming across. (...) You know, routes that I felt were safe. So that was my kind of *first* feelings of change, awareness of change.”

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<sup>4</sup> Italics in quotations refer to Dónal's own emphasis.

This event was soon to be followed by another incident that exemplified ‘a fundamental change’ for Dónal. He recalled that there was a pupil at his school who was a cadet in the parachute regiment of the British Army. One day his class mates:

“pushed him in the toilet block, and they attacked him. He was a pupil at the school, in the classes that they were in. And up until this point in time, you know, when the army first arrived in Belfast, they were welcomed on the streets in [Catholic] West Belfast, particularly around the Falls; cups of tea, whatever they wanted. It was only when the government changed tactics and started to oppress that things changed. And he wasn’t even *servicing* in the army; he was only *a cadet!* And these guys all attacked him. (...) I remember the incident very well, vividly. ‘Cause I remember thinking, ‘But these guys were all playing football last week! What’s different?’ And I hadn’t really appreciated the importance of the changes that were going on. So to me that was like a *fundamental change* that happened. Suddenly, somebody that they were playing with, somebody that had been part of their team was suddenly no longer part of the team, was an enemy! Somebody who had actually done nothing on an individual basis to deserve the attack was being attacked!”

In the months to come, the issue of taking sides became ever more important. After the summer of 1969, as Dónal remembered:

“There was a fear of attack by Protestants because there had been attacks on parts of Catholic West Belfast in Bombay Street and all the famous places, Conway Street and so on, by parts of the police and Protestant mobs. And there was a fear in Catholic areas that this could happen again. So there was a whole defence mechanism based around, you know, local vigilante-type arrangements. (...) So every area formed what was called ‘Citizens’ Defence Committees’.”

These committees used burnt-out vehicles, mounts of rubbish, pieces of concrete and other materials to barricade their local areas and then policed these barriers day and night. However, when the British Army imposed internment (i.e. imprisonment without trial) in August 1971, ‘there was a feeling that Citizens’ Defence Committees, barricades, barriers wasn’t going to be enough. You needed to fight back with guns’. What followed were the beginnings of a recruitment drive for young people to join the Provisional IRA. As Dónal recalled, he once became part of this recruitment drive himself when ‘the young people in our area were all called to a meeting in the house of a known Republican sympathiser’. So Dónal went, and while the whole issue was presented by an adult ‘in a very, you know, reasonable, rational way’, it was enough for Dónal to realise that this was ‘a recruitment drive for something that I didn’t want to be involved with’. Dónal left after the meeting and did not get involved.

However, he did become increasingly involved with playing Irish music, and this was partly related to the Troubles as well. Before the Troubles, the town centre was Belfast’s entertainment hub with its dancehalls and pubs featuring live music. Dónal recalled, ‘You would have had very, very little in your local area’. Yet once the bombing started, people tended to associate in their local areas. This led to a huge growth in local entertainment as well as in shebeens (i.e. illegal drinking dens). It was in such shebeens and social clubs in West Belfast that Dónal ended up performing with Irish folk bands.

In these places, Dónal remembered, ‘you would have been expected to do rebel music. That’s what people wanted! And if you didn’t want that, you were stuck with it anyway because everybody else wanted it!’ Hence, Dónal and his mates often performed songs that he would have

preferred not to sing. But ‘the thing was if you didn’t play those places you were very restricted as to where you could play, and you would probably not have earned very much money. So it was an economic decision, but it went against all my principles’. A typical night progressed as follows:

“Certainly the first half, you would do *better-quality* material. I mean there is some very beautiful rebel material. It’s not necessarily all blood-and-guts, you know. Some of it is superb, you know? And stuff that I would quite happily do anywhere, where people weren’t offended by that. But in the first half, you would have done all your best material. Maybe traditional music, and whatever was going. Trying to get people to listen, you know? ‘Cause anybody can get up and do rebel music once a crowd have got the blood up. Because it doesn’t matter. They all sing with you anyway. So they drown you out. But if you want to distinguish you[rself] from the next band, you had to play your best material in the first half. So that’s generally what you did. And the second half didn’t matter. You just started playing the rebel stuff. And as the night progressively went on, you played more and more outrageous [stuff], in my opinion, ‘cause more blood-and-guts towards the end of the night. And you really got into the very heavy stuff. So people would be on their feet, standing on their tables, jumping up and down. Roaring and rambling, and smashing their bottles on the floor. That kind of thing. Quite *scary*, actually. You know – oh, it is. Imagine a crowd of people standing on their tables, shaking their bottles whenever you give a particular song. Puh! It’s *abhorrent!* You know, and you’re rising all these people *up!* God, when they leave the place, what are they gonna do? That’s the sort of thing. I always kind of wonder. Like, what happened after they (...) It’s very scary, thinking those thoughts, you know!”

While – as Dónal put it – these nights ‘were bad enough’, ‘other nights were worse’ when the IRA would suddenly appear on stage wearing balaclavas and brandishing guns because they were going to make a statement, and ‘you had no idea they were gonna be there’:

“Most of them would have been masked, but the person making the speech might not have been masked. They may have been, you know, one of the political people [of Sinn Féin] as opposed to an actual [volunteer] (...) And they would have been reading out, ‘This is what you have to do. And here is what we’re doing.’ You know what I mean? Urging people to support them. (...) And, I mean, you were preaching to a group of people who were feeling that way *anyway!* It wasn’t a difficult thing to do. And every time, ‘Oh yeah,’ roared and stamping their feet. Quite a *frightening* thing to be in it, you know? Imagine if you were back in the Third Reich, you know? And standing there, and you got all of this stuff happening, and you don’t wanna *be* there, but you are *there!* And you are not gonna be different, you gonna be banging the bottles as well and stamping your feet. (...) You’re standing on the stage, there is *no way* you gonna be sitting and saying, ‘I don’t wanna be here!’ You gonna be saying, ‘*Yeah!*’ You know, of course you are. You are only a human being.”

After years of being involved in these events, Dónal chose not to play in the clubs anymore because he was not comfortable with such political enthusiasm. He was then part of another Irish folk band that:

“played all over Northern Ireland at that time. In fact, we made a point of trying to stay away from West Belfast. It was hard work because the biggest opportunities were in West Belfast. But by and large, we worked outside that. (...) Just to get away from being connected with the rebel thing.”

While Dónal thus managed to personally ‘get away from being connected’, his overall sense of ethnic identity did not cease to be affected by the persisting link between Irishness and ‘the rebel thing’.

For the greater part of our series of interviews, Dónal hence described himself as having ‘this identity crisis for a long time,’ being ‘very torn’ between wanting to be Irish and being unable to identify with this identity because Irishness had become so closely associated with Republican violence. As Dónal put it in one of numerous variations:

“I recognise that I was born a Catholic and brought up as a Catholic. And I suppose, there’s an expectation that I would automatically identify with an Irish culture. (...) While I was young, I went to the Gaeltacht [Irish-speaking areas], learnt Irish at school, very strongly had those – strong affiliations with the language and music [through these Gaeltacht stays]. And *still* would have that! The actual identity of that with who I am, it didn’t square up because of really the violence that occurred since 1969. And that was a formative time for me because I was fifteen, sixteen. And I just, I’m not a violent person, and I can’t, I couldn’t connect the idea of being Irish with the violence of the IRA, irrespective of any justification; none of it ever justified itself to me. And so for people to declare themselves ‘Irish’ and kill people for it, you know, I just couldn’t square that. So for me, I still have a *real* problem with it. I suppose underneath it all, I would *love* to say to people, ‘I have a *real strong Irish identity!*’ I mean, I have a strong affiliation with Irishness. But because, for me, it’s been spoiled, tainted, ruined almost by the Troubles, I have a real problem *saying it!* (...) So I’m left in a very difficult position because I *want* to be Irish, but I’ve got a problem with all the violence. And that’s really made it very difficult for me to overcome that. And I *don’t* feel British at all! So what I *chose* to call myself was ‘*European.*’ I don’t *really feel that* [Dónal laughs sadly] terribly strongly. But I feel that describes me better than – I can’t call myself Irish, at the moment.”

As Dónal thus clarified for me (and himself) on several occasions, ‘If you had to be at war to be Irish, I didn’t want that’, even though ‘at the core it’s sad that I can’t identify with, I suppose, what I feel strongest about’. Yet Dónal simply did not ‘wanna be lumped in with all that lot’ who were ‘killing people in my name’.

When reflecting extensively again on his position during our last interview, Dónal suddenly came to realise that his identity crisis did not actually consist in his Irishness being ruined by the Troubles but rather in being forced to answer a question that was important to others but not for him:

“I think this is what happens. This is really *the nub of it*. I think people *presume* that you need to have an identity, which is associated with, you know, a culture: Irishness or Britishness or something. So it’s *other people* that I respond to when they say to me, ‘What are you?’ ‘Cause I don’t think about it. (...) I mean all the forms that you fill in as well say, ‘Are you Irish or British or what are you?’ You have to tick boxes if you fill in an application form, and you have to say what you are. So whether you liked it or not, you were confronted by something that to me wasn’t important. It is important to other people but not important to me. So I suppose what I’ve been saying is, it’s a crisis for me because if I have to answer a question, ‘Are you Irish, are you British?’ I have to answer the question! ‘Where were you born?’ ‘Were you born in Britain; were you born in Ireland?’ I’ve got to answer the question! So you are confronted by it because other people presume that it is important or *need to count it* for some reason. Because they need to know how many Irish people, how many British people they’ve got in their work force or how many Catholics, how many Protestants they have. These things to me are not important. But I am confronted by them because other people expect me to have an answer. So, you know, it’s a crisis in that sense. I’m only realising that having this discussion because you go down to the core of it. (...) I’m just being confronted by these things, ‘Shit, what am I? I don’t wanna be Irish. I am certainly not feeling British, ah, ah, ah [Dónal acts out his decision] ‘European,’ that’s the easiest thing to tick.’ (...) To prevent them putting me in a box that I don’t wanna be in. And I don’t wanna be described by somebody else as being either on their side or against them because

here that's what it means: if you are Irish you are against this; if you're British against that. And I don't want that!"

During our last interview, Dónal developed this as a new position whereas I interpreted it as an additional facet of his complex identity in which, to my mind, two things came together: First, Dónal actually did have a strong affiliation with Irishness even though this identity 'associated with, you know, a culture' might indeed have been much less important for him than for other people, who nevertheless made him self-classify in such terms. Second, the growing ethnicisation in the course of the Troubles had become highly problematic for Dónal given that the label 'Irish' had accumulated so many violent political implications because of 'the armed struggle' waged by Irish Republicanism. And as Dónal strongly rejected these implications, he could no longer unproblematically call himself 'Irish'.

### **Between the Lines: dissenting from the Republican socio-culture of trauma**

In a way, it is tempting to individualise Dónal's troubles with Irishness and interpret (if not dismiss) them as symptoms of a purely personal failure to cope with traumatic experiences. As we will see below, this was actually one of the more benign reactions with which Dónal was confronted in interactions with significant others. However, I suggest conceiving these difficulties as socio-cultural, indicating a profound mismatch between the hegemonic structures within the specific socio-culture of trauma in Catholic West Belfast and dissenting attempts by individuals such as Dónal to come to terms with pain and suffering.

During numerous encounters in Catholic West Belfast, it became quite clear to me that the local socio-culture of trauma was generally dominated by trauma narratives couched in terms of Irish Nationalism and, especially, Republicanism. Despite profound internal disagreements – most importantly, perhaps, regarding the legitimacy of violence – there was a core structure to this Nationalist and Republican trauma narrative, at least during the twentieth century, which can be characterised as follows: The island of Ireland is the historical homeland of one nation, the Irish people. After centuries of oppression by an external agent, the British state, this nation should have been granted its entire territory in accordance with the principles of national self-determination. Yet, the Irish national revolution in 1918–1921 has remained incomplete. What became 'Northern Ireland' was artificially retained by the United Kingdom and subsequently developed into a place where Catholics were treated like second-class citizens and exposed to waves of sectarian violence by the local Protestant majority and its state apparatus. However, partition and local sectarian discrimination ultimately were not the fault of local Protestants but of the British state, in whose imperialist interest it was to retain control over this part of the island. For this purpose, the British state fostered the sectarian divide by granting privileges to local Protestants. It was ultimately the oppressive British state that was responsible for age-old discrimination against victimised Irish Catholics and hence for their collective trauma.<sup>5</sup> In the Republican heartland of Catholic West Belfast, I often heard this trauma narrative accompanied by an honestly regretful insistence that, ultimately, the Republican 'armed struggle' had become the only option given that lawful protest

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed discussions about the various strands within Irish Nationalism and Republicanism, see Rumpf and Hepburn 1977, Cronin 1980, Bean 1994, McGarry and O'Leary 1995: chapters 1–2, and Patterson 1997.

like the civil rights movement was ineffectual, as the law-makers were in fact also the law-breakers and unwilling to reform.

It goes without saying that this Republican trauma narrative was by no means the only way in which experiences of suffering were represented within the local socio-culture of trauma. In fact, Dónal's case shows that alternative readings existed. Yet, I contend that this briefly sketched Republican discourse was hegemonic in that it was the loudest and in that it was most powerfully backed by those with guns.<sup>6</sup>

Dónal's personal way of making sense of traumatic experiences thus did not take place in a vacuum. The mere fact that his reading of local violence and suffering did not match the hegemonic Republican discourse meant that he was effectively reading 'between the lines' of empowered meanings: whereas the Republican trauma narrative emphasised the collective suffering of a victimised community due to political oppression, Dónal highlighted the individual suffering of victims from all communities, 'irrespective of any justification'. Whilst Republicans weighed individual suffering differently in ascribing victimhood only to Irish Catholic victims of discrimination and conceptualised casualties on the other side as a deplorable but necessary result of war. Dónal insisted that 'all of us have been impaired, we are all painted shades of the victim colour'. In short, in contradistinction to the hegemonic Republican trauma discourse, Dónal activated an alternative morality that emphasised the universal pain of personal suffering rather than the political injustice of collective victimhood.

Yet in so doing, Dónal also *de facto* established a *counter*-narrative, which unintentionally positioned him 'between the frontlines' of political power that were intelligible, relevant, and meaningful to most local actors (or rather, the lines that most locals appeared to publicly toe and thereby reproduced). Without intending to do so, Dónal became a dissenter merely by deviating from the hegemonic Irish Republican reading within the socio-culture of trauma in Catholic West Belfast. As such, Dónal's dissenting view constituted, at best, an irritation and, at worst, a threat simply because it did not adhere to the well-established political categories of friend and foe. This was to have immediate consequences for Dónal's encounters with other locals, whose responses ranged from incomprehension to repudiation to threatening silence.

When reflecting on our interview situation, Dónal repeatedly mentioned that he did not know how many people there were like him as this was not a topic about which he normally spoke with others. Apart from me, Dónal seemed to have discussed the issue only with his wife and mother-in-law. However, these encounters had not been very productive given that – as Dónal put it – 'my wife doesn't really understand it and thinks I'm a coward':

“I can't talk to my wife about it because she doesn't *understand!* Because she doesn't have that same difficulty. I mean, she understands a *little* but can't *really*; just thinks I'm being – I don't know what she thinks I'm being [Dónal laughs sadly]. She doesn't *really* identify with me on that point.”

This was the case, Dónal explained, because his wife was strongly Republican and hence felt 'comfortable with that culture and that identity. She has no problem with it. It's me that has the

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Julia Eckert for rightly pointing out that the extent to which certain trauma narratives become hegemonic is not only dependent upon the question of who has the guns but also on the respective capacities of such narratives to mobilise collective action: the stronger the emphasis on collective victimhood, the greater the intrinsic probability for a trauma narrative to capture and activate the hearts and minds of its target population as a whole and thus to become hegemonic.

problem'. While his wife's reactions appears to have been characterised by benevolent incomprehension, Dónal's discussions with his mother-in-law turned more confrontational:

"I've had a row with her about it. She can't *believe* that I would hold a totally different view. *How can I? What?* You know, it's almost as if it's shock for her to believe that a Catholic with a Nationalist [community] background *doesn't* support the armed struggle. 'But look what they did to us!' is what they usually think. 'Look at what they did to *us!* Burnt mother out of her house twice!' [i.e. in the 1920s and again in 1969] And then this and then that, and look at this, you know. 'And you're telling me you can't support?' You know, there's *no* comprehension there, you know."

Though Dónal had engaged in a few conversations about his traumatised Irishness, he generally kept quiet and had done so for many years, as he felt 'silenced' by Republicans:

"The freedom of speech is very truncated. In the early part of the Troubles, anybody that tried to speak their own mind was very quickly silenced. (...) I think *some* were killed. But I mean most people would have been sent away, removed from the area. You know, 'If you're not one of us, you're out. You're not part of the group any longer.' And that, to some extent, to a large extent, *did* happen. And people were *afraid* to speak out. You know, they were *terrified*. Because people had guns and you didn't. And if you were to speak out, they might come and shoot you."

Dónal himself felt terrified to speak out, as he feared having 'a discussion with the local militia, where you didn't agree'. Dónal was well aware that he might be exaggerating the actual situation and that some people would argue that nothing would have happened. But, as Dónal stressed, 'it was nevertheless my feeling. And the perception that you might get killed as a result of speaking out is enough to stop you speaking out. So it doesn't actually matter whether or not it really would have happened'.

It is against this background of reconstructed informational content that the interactional context of my encounters with Dónal can finally be revisited. The reconstructed background was characterised, on the one hand, by a local socio-culture of trauma strongly dominated by Republicanism and, on the other hand, by Dónal's dissenting views on suffering and victimhood, which were somewhat similar to the biomedical discourse of 'trauma'. These two sides, in their mutual interaction, led Dónal to a state of incomprehension, silence, and isolation. Based on the assumption that these content-related interpretations are sufficiently appropriate, the interactional dynamics between Dónal and me also begin to make sense: Given that Dónal felt silenced by the threat of Republican violence and insufficiently understood by significant others, he was simply not accustomed to an interactional context, in which somebody empathically asked questions about identity and suffering without already being positioned (and judging) according to local standards. This explains why Dónal did not immediately reproduce well-rehearsed positions, like many of my Nationalist/Republican informants, but rather tentatively began exploring his actual feelings and attitudes. Conversely, the fact that our encounters enabled Dónal to tell his story for the first time in his life supports the interpretation that there existed a profound mismatch between individual attempts to literally come to terms with traumatic experiences and locally hegemonic forms of trauma management, which had effectively silenced Dónal. The analysis of the informational content and interactional context in their mutual interrelatedness thus substantiates my overall

interpretation, ultimately highlighting that the extra-ordinariness of our talk itself was symptomatic of the ordinariness of the local silence that existed beyond our encounters.

### **Conclusion: the politics of meta-trauma**

In our encounters, Dónal indeed seemed like a sensitive man. Yet his troubled sense of ethnic identity and his continual difficulties in coming to terms with his traumatic experiences, to me, were not simply symptoms of a personal failure to cope psychologically. Instead, his persistent inability to integrate experiences of suffering into his personal lifeworld was to a considerable extent also socio-culturally conditioned by the very structures of this lifeworld. Given that Dónal did not neatly fit into the local socio-culture of trauma in Catholic West Belfast operating under the shadow of hegemonic Republicanism, he was made into a dissenter who, in his own perception, lacked the necessary agency to move on. I suggest the term ‘meta-trauma’ to refer to such an affliction, characterised by the socio-culturally conditioned ‘second’ trauma of persistently failing to integrate one’s own traumatic experiences within a politically hostile environment. This meta-trauma is trauma proper, i.e. psychological suffering resulting from serious threats to one’s life or physical integrity, but these perceived threats are directly related to the fact that the meta-traumatised person’s attempts to come to terms with traumatic experiences during political conflict significantly diverge from the hegemonic trauma narrative upheld by those with the guns. Meta-trauma is thus a ‘second’ trauma of silence emerging from struggles surrounding the very definition of the ‘first’ trauma. As such, the meta-trauma continuously prevents the afflicted to verbalise their painful experiences in the form of ‘trauma stories’ – a process that eminent psychiatrists such as Mollica (2006) have identified as crucial for self-healing.

Towards the end of our interaction, Dónal came to feel somewhat empowered through his final interpretation that he actually only had a crisis because he had been confronted – as he was quoted saying above – ‘by something that to me wasn’t important’, namely, by external requests to identify himself in terms of ethnicity. As I have argued, I am sceptical that this was really the whole story, as I suspect that there was also another, ambivalent side to this, namely, his desire to call himself ‘Irish’, even as he explicitly rejected this identification because of its accumulated connotations of violence.

However, taking up Dónal’s idea that relating one’s own afflictions to the positions of significant others may lead to some degree of self-empowerment, it is worth emphasising that other locals – such as his wife – did not necessarily have fewer problems than Dónal because they were more capable actors but rather because they dissented from the dominant socio-culture of trauma to a lesser extent and were thus less positioned ‘between the lines’. In other words, the extent to which individuals experienced meta-trauma also appeared to be a political issue correlated to the degree of individual deviance from the local socio-culture of trauma rather than being merely dependent upon individual capacity to cope with pain and suffering. Paradoxically, *socialising* meta-trauma as a political issue rather than *individualising* it as a personal failure to some extent allows for a reintroduction of *individual* agency and self-empowerment. Insisting on the politics of meta-trauma in (post-)conflict societies helps to specify more precisely the socio-cultural place of this affliction. It may turn out that such an insistence can also help put the phenomenon of meta-trauma itself in its place and thereby allow suffering people such as Dónal to leave at least some of their pain behind.

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