

**A LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION OF  
CONFLICT  
IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

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## ABSTRACT

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### **A LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION OF CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the power of Lacanian theory to bring to light the unconscious dynamics at work in the formation of ethno-national political identities. I begin by identifying the need for a Lacanian approach to communal identity. I then apply Lacanian psychoanalysis to interviews I have carried out into republicans and loyalists in Belfast, Northern Ireland, highlighting what it is both communities are in denial of as they constitute their self-interpretations. I point out how such denial helps sustain or reproduce relations of domination. I conclude that Lacanian psychoanalysis enhances our understanding and study of inter-religious and ethno-national conflicts and can be readily applied in conflict management.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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## INTRODUCTION

At core, the conflict in Northern Ireland is not about religion or political insecurity over sovereignty or boundaries per se. Instead it is about two communities trying to expand their economic, political, cultural and religious sense of self. Thus, the conflict is best understood as resulting from the interplay of the imaginary, symbolic and real at the heart of subjectivity. How people construct their communal identity or interpret themselves is mainly unconscious and the rationalisations this involves is the key to analysis of the conflict. The institutionalisation of rationalisations involved in the interplay of these three orders reinforces communal division and prolongs antagonism. Interests become a focus of violent conflict when one's own aggression is rationalised as attack by the other and neuroses are poorly handled.

I begin by presenting a brief examination of the literature on the republican and loyalists communities in Northern Ireland. This literature review suggests that there is a need to go beyond an examination of how people simply positively interpret themselves to a more critical and searching examination of the unconscious dynamics in the constitution of political identities. I then present an outline of Lacanian psychoanalysis and my research methodology. In my section on findings, I attempt to identify some typical republican and loyalist communal meanings and their rationalisations that contribute to the reproduction of relations of domination. In my conclusion I point out the relevance of Lacanian analysis to the management of ethno-national conflicts. I end with a series of recommendations.

## THE LITERATURE

My reading of the general literature on Northern Ireland makes it clear that there is a gap regarding a serious exploration of the self-interpretation of republicans, and to a lesser degree, of loyalists. Those materials that have the most relevance for the present research are works that highlight in some way the community dimension of the conflict and the role of the republican and loyalist communities in particular. Among these are McGarry and O'Leary (1995), Ruane and Todd (1996), O'Connor's (1993) and McKay (2000). These works are more thorough in this regard than anything that has gone before on the Catholic or Protestant communities. McGarry and O'Leary's work has the added value of showing us the shortcomings of the narrower political science approach, which fails to account for the deeper meanings of political identity. Particular conceptual categories which Ruane and Todd use such as oppositional differences, the cultural, religious and political treatment of the conflict and the redemptive resolution of the conflict make them highly relevant. O'Connor's work is relevant on the grounds that while it deals exclusively and highly effectively with the Catholic community, its journalistic approach also

enables us to identify the need for a strong methodology in an examination of political identity. The same can be said of McKay in relation to the Protestant community.

It is clear that the narrower political science approach to the communities, the broader political science approach and the journalistic approach are all somewhat lacking in their capacity to explain the dynamics of the conflict (Millar, A. 1999). The manner in which the literature approaches the conflict is flawed and so poses a significant problem for socio-political research and for conflict management. Many writers on Northern Ireland assume that the communities there work out of their historical world-view in a predictable and coherent way, but it is my belief that an agreed interpretation of the Northern Ireland conflict, let alone the validity of this world-view, is not something that readily impinges on people's lives in any real functional sense. The conflict does not arise solely out of an intellectual understanding or misunderstanding of reality which, once explained and accepted side by side with a healthy degree of dissensus, can give rise to political change that can lead to the resolution of conflict. What goes on in people's heads at an intellectual level, no matter how "right" we get it, is neither a reflection of reality nor a cure for conflict. It is a cerebral approach to the problem of conflict which itself is anything but cerebral. People remain complex speaking subjects who oftentimes live in a conceptual jumble shaped by their evolving experience and prone to contradiction. Many of the dynamics of the conflict remain unconscious as people scramble to make sense of their communal self.

Ruane and Todd confirm my own belief—outlined earlier—that the conflict in Northern Ireland is not so much about territory and sovereignty as about (communal) identity, i.e. how people identify with others. People use ideologies—complex conceptual systems developed from meanings in daily life—as a ready-made set of assumptions to justify their actions although, as the Ruane and Todd note, these "seldom accurately reflect the ambiguous, mixed, often contradictory beliefs of ordinary people" (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 6). There is clearly a need to go beyond ideology.

As McGarry and O'Leary point out, as information is normally gathered through surveys which basically serve as cues to predictable answers, this prejudices the process of gathering information regarding what people feel or believe (McGarry, J. and O'Leary, B. 1995). Even if opinion poll data is an adequate source of what people *think* is the source of conflict (and this is itself questionable), it is not a valid indication of the source of conflict as the divergent views among interviewees themselves often indicate. A purely rational approach to nationalist or unionist thinking does not do the participants in the conflict sufficient justice. Lionel Shriver, reviewing the work of the Opsahl Commission on Northern Ireland, notes that the commission may have been given a sanitised version of both the Protestant and Catholic communities by those contributing to the commission. She argues against taking the "pervading solicitude and reasonableness" of some of the testimonies too seriously (Pollak, 1992: 422.)



Research into the Northern Ireland conflict needs to go beyond a mere photo-fit of republicans or loyalists as presented by others, opening up the whole area of unconscious desire, i.e. what they repress or deny. It is this that informs how people wish to see themselves and present themselves to others. The analysis of the conflict requires one to examine the rationalisations that political positions involve rather than counter-arguments to these positions. There is a communal tension as a community attempts to hold itself together as a community of shared beliefs and overlooks its internal deadlock, the real. Issues can change substantially over time but the conflict can remain intense unless one gets down to the dynamics that underlie externals—dynamics which have their roots in internal lack and paranoia. Lacanian psychoanalysis helps explain how the desire for domination, dependence, and rivalry over jouissance are at the root of the constitution of the self—and these are underpinned by illusion and idealisation. It has much to contribute to an examination of the dynamics of division and conflict. Antagonisms and conflict arise as people deal with or fail to deal with their inner conflict or lack.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

I interviewed 20 republicans in Belfast in 1995 for this research and used McKay (2000) to supplement interviews relating to Protestants, which were carried out under my supervision in Belfast in 2000 (Kimbly, 2000). Republican interviews lasted 2-3 hours on average. Several of my republican interviewees had been involved in the IRA in the past. I focus on slips of the tongue, blockages, silences and other verbal gestures as a means to ascertaining what it is that republicans and loyalists are in denial of. The list of types of slips of the tongue that I developed for this study (Millar, 1999) should enable others to confirm or legitimate a particular interpretation. I outline these below:

- a cut, e.g. “there was, there wasn’t”
- a trace, i.e. where the text jumps in an effort to cover up material from the unconscious
- a mistake, i.e. when a person intends to use one word but inadvertently uses another without realising it
- hesitation, e.g. “eh”
- memory block, i.e. where a person cannot recall a word
- jokes, i.e. when someone trivialises the meaning of an utterance in order to hide or reveal another meaning
- a personal meaning, i.e. where a word or phrase is used in a sense other than the ordinary sense of the word
- obsessional repetitions, e.g. “you know what I mean”
- silence, i.e. when the interviewee refuses to finish a clause
- brief stops, i.e. between two words
- negation, e.g. “It’s not that I don’t like television”

- dead-end, i.e. where a clause is left incomplete and the speaker moves on to another subject
- repetition, e.g. of word or phrase
- verbal inability, e.g. “the, the, the, the, the, the methods”
- breakage, i.e. where a word is cut and only partly articulated
- a retake, i.e. where something is re-said with a slight, but significant change in meaning
- an absence, i.e. where the linguistic structure indicates that something has been omitted.

I also consistently applied the psychoanalytic tools developed by Jacques Lacan—of negation, projection and splitting—to ascertain what these reveal about the type of denial involved in interviewees’ accounts of life in Belfast. The application of a Lacanian framework in the present research enables the writer to unravel the deeper meanings that interviewees present. Lacanian analysis asks certain key questions which allow us to see what is really going on. In the case of the interviewees’ utterances, for example, one needs to ask what it is the subject wishes to say at a conscious level, what rationalisations or denial this involves and what the subject’s unconscious motivations are.

What I limit myself to doing on the basis of the present research is to posit features in the self-interpretation of republicans and loyalists in Belfast, which I argue are of general importance and significance. Principal among these features are the expressions of denial in relation to jealousy, guilt, sectarianism, internal differences, the nature of oppression and violence. There is also the pleasure sought in pain, including the desire for victimhood, a desire to remain on top of others, and a desire for failure. While these results are not statistically representative it is my contention that they allow for the development of a theoretical reconstruction of communal constitution which is to be judged in terms of its capacity for insight, explanatory powers and empirical adequacy as tested in future research.

### ***Lacanian psychoanalysis***

Building on Lacanian psychoanalysis, I apply Lacan’s insights—in part as developed by Žižek—in exploring the place of the imaginary, symbolic and real orders in the political identities of republicans and loyalists. The challenge is in large part to determine the effect of the real on loyalists and republicans in an effort to encourage them to redefine themselves in an attempt to free themselves from neurotic behaviour. In this context a key question is what acts can transform the spectral dimension that sustains their identity, the “undead ghosts that haunt the living subject, the secret history of traumatic fantasies transmitted “between the lines”, through the lacks and distortions of the explicit symbolic texture of his or her identity.” (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 124). I briefly outline Lacan’s imaginary, symbolic and real orders below.

**The imaginary order.** For Lacan, all imaginary relations involve idealisation and illusion, covering up lack and disarray. Others always appear to have the totality and stability that the individual desires. Idealisation and illusion have many important consequences for relations with others. Firstly, as the individual comes to believe that any change in the other would threaten its view of itself because it knows itself through the other, the ego's desire to be like the other gradually becomes a desire to dominate the other. This is the source of human aggression. Thus, Lacan notes, "It is in a fundamental rivalry...that the constitution of the human world as such takes place" (Fink, 1997: 51). Secondly, if the individual tries to control others, he/she is also controlled by what he/she thinks others want for her/him because the individual is caught up in an identification with the other. The individual is therefore subordinate to her/his image and to others generally. Thus, the ego is in a constant paranoid relation with the other. Violence arises from this paranoia. Violence is the result of "paranoid justifications of our own insecurity, which we project as aggressivity emanating from the others we control" (Wilden, 1972: 481). The fear of losing control usually sparks violence off. So, anxiety, jealousy, fear, aggression—these are the effects of the imaginary order.

**The symbolic order.** Entering into the cultural register of group exchange, the subject is tied into such areas as tradition, authority, the law, religion, morality, ideals, nationalisms, ideologies. The unconscious is constituted with accession to language or the symbolic. Conscious thought or ego thinking for Lacan is little more than rationalisation, for the ego's job is to block or reject the unconscious in an effort to produce order where the subject experiences lack and fragmentation. Rationalisation aims to create explanations which are in keeping with the ego's ideal self-image, repressing what the ego finds unpleasurable. Thus, the key to who individuals and communities really are is in the unconscious or, as Lacan calls this, "the censored chapter" (Lacan, 1993: 50). Rationalisations require analysis if we are to understand the unconscious dynamics of community identity.

**The real order.** The real lies outside the world of symbolisation. According to Žižek, the real is what is constitutive of the subject or political identity. The real can be mental or material trauma, a moment of pain. The real is inscribed as a symbol of fundamental lack, the gap that Lacan claims is at the heart of subjectivity. A "totally contingent encounter—a casual remark by a friend, an incident we witness—evokes the memory of untold repressed trauma and shatters our self-delusion" (Žižek, 1991: 196), putting us in touch with the real. Slips of the tongue also indicate the real. Fantasies of wholeness cover up or suture the gap that is the real. Fantasy regulates access to jouissance or surplus enjoyment. The excitement or jouissance which the subject derives from the fundamental fantasy of wholeness may involve pain or suffering. The unconscious wants to enjoy jouissance, even seeking pleasure in suffering, which builds on the desire for death.

## **A LACANIAN ANALYSIS OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONFLICT**

Psychoanalysis reveals that Belfast republicans and loyalists or Catholics and Protestants unconsciously sustain and reproduce relations of domination with each

other. I first consider the analysis of republicans, and then examine the case of loyalists.

### **Republicans**

Republicans unconsciously enjoy Catholic sectarianism. However, Catholic sectarianism is also the object of republican unconscious self-hatred because sectarianism is that repressed thing within republican identity that threatens the ideal republican self which is built around the notion of an inclusive Ireland for Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter—in opposition to perceived ethnic loyalism. For its part, in the republican unconscious, perceived Protestant sectarianism is a form of domination which republicans accept and unconsciously desire and enjoy. Perceived Protestant sectarianism is what threatens and legitimates republican ideology. It threatens it by killing the dream of unity which Protestants generally resist, and legitimates it by serving as the focus of unconscious republican opposition. Thus that which republican ideology publicly condemns—partition and sectarianism—republicans unconsciously enjoy. They recognise partition through adherence to the Good Friday agreement, and yet also condemn it. With such intense sectarian division, it is the perception of how Protestants are thought to see Catholics that informs the Catholic community's rivalry with the Protestant community even more than their actual experience of suffering at their hands. Protestants are meant to wake up to their bitterness and to their Irishness. However, the repressed sectarianism in the Catholic self-interpretation guarantees the non-satisfaction of Catholics' conscious desires. In this sense, unconsciously, republicans are Irish unionists: their exclusion of Protestants guarantees the union.

Republicans, and perhaps the Catholic community in general, unconsciously enjoy domination, i.e. they like to be dominated. It is clear that the general self-interpretation of interviewees as second class citizens who are the victims of Protestant bigotry is a view that brings with it a certain pleasure or *jouissance* that makes the perpetuation of the cleavage in Northern Irish society desirable. Indeed, not only is there a pleasure in being seen as the victim community, there is also a desire for this status and the type of pain this engenders. It is this that enables interviewees to believe they are in control of, or on top of, the other and that they are superior to the other. Writing on the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, Maurice Hayes points out that minorities become insular, defensive and develop a culture of victimhood in which they become relatively secure and “perversely happy” (Hayes, 1995: 311). He also wisely remarks that judging the reaction of some Catholics to the resolution of housing discrimination in Dungannon “people are often happier with their grievances than with their relief” (Hayes, 1995: 85). Pain in some sense defines people, shaping their identity. When republicans say that all unionists want is to keep Catholics out of the corridors of power in Belfast, this is an expression of the unconscious desire for suffering. This is what Catholics want—exclusion.

The Catholic community coheres around that which they perceive others as having stolen from them or as being capable of stealing from them. The unconscious dy-

namics of the republican hunger strike of 1981 demonstrate this—be this in the form of the high moral ground which republicans felt the British were capable of robbing from them, or of political status for prisoners which republicans once had and “the Brits” were said to have removed. Indeed, in the Catholic community’s interpretation of the hunger strike the emphasis has been on the assertion that the ten men did not take their own lives: instead, the British were said to have taken the lives of ten innocent men, victims of British aggression and intransigence. This was the ultimate robbery in the Catholic community’s perception. Given this, it could be argued that neither prisoners’ rights nor the deaths of the ten men were as significant as the unconscious desire to snatch back *jouissance*—the high moral ground—from the British master by shaming the British. Consequently, for republicans, and for Sinn Féin in particular, holding on to the high moral ground gained in 1981, for fear of future robbery, helps keep the movement together. This unconscious attraction to the British “other” is what enables them to deal with their unconscious shame and guilt in relation to the deaths of the hunger strikers and to deaths as a result of republican violence in the wider community. In this context, insofar as it is believed by some republicans that at the end of the hunger strike the British gave republicans what they wanted and that republicans did not win concessions or rights, the (perceived) failure of the hunger strike is publicly rationalised as triumph.

Rivalry with the Protestant community is another example of that around which the Catholic community coheres: Catholics envy Protestants the media limelight and the position of victimhood which they feel belong to Catholics. Of course, the perceived loss of the 26 counties also contributes to the Catholic and republican sense of community. Republicans get caught up in a rivalry with “the Brits”, which they recognise, and with Protestants, which they tend to deny. Both are viewed as robbers of Catholic *jouissance*. However, what Catholics primarily work out of is rivalry with and hatred for Protestants, much of which is unconscious.

Grand political designs in the shape of a united Ireland and grievances over economic and cultural discrimination are not entirely where it is at for the Catholic community. Beating “the Brits” or the unionists by snatching back *jouissance* appears to be more significant for republicans than particular issues and their consequences for the republican community. By unconsciously following British strategy, republicans reproduce the conditions for domination. Their opposition invites reprisals. One can conclude that republicans hear British voices when they kill. They kill for the British gaze, the British other, not for the republican cause. In this way they snatch back *jouissance* by an attack in Downing Street or a bomb alert at Aintree racing course. This quells republican anxiety. The British voice says, “I am doing the killing”. The republican “I” is, thus, a British other.

Republicans run from perceptions of their own immorality, the shame felt over IRA violence, their hatred of Protestants, their bigotry, their unconscious belief that they lack a political rationale, their obsession with “the Brits”, their desire for suffering and conflict, and their lies. The nodal bone in the throat which defines republicans is whether or not you accept lies—lies about dehumanisation, about Catholic lack

of sectarianism, that “touts” were not tortured, that the IRA never killed Protestants, that republicans don’t pass on prejudices, that they don’t kill, that they respect Protestants, that the republican cause is just and self-legitimizing. Republicans find unconscious enjoyment in victimhood, sectarianism, and the sensationalisation of Catholic suffering and in mirroring the master as in the republican criminalisation of “the Brits”, which mirrors the British criminalisation of republicans.

Republicans want what is prohibited. When republicans feel that what they want is no longer prohibited, they do not in effect want it any more, or at least they want it to a much lesser degree: if the British conclude they have no strategic interest in Northern Ireland and that they are open to eventual withdrawal, then republicans generally lose interest in the struggle for freedom.

For republicans, *jouissance* comes in the form of thwarting the British master: as they oppose Britain and the unionists over reform in the Royal Ulster Constabulary and demilitarisation, they overlook the consequences of the offer of unity by consent of the people of Ireland north and south separately and in so doing they buy into the prolongation of British rule in Ireland. It could therefore be argued that mainstream republicans in the Sinn Fein block have lost their nationalist vision. Indeed, it could be argued that Sinn Fein appears willing to settle for unity by the consent principle, which falls well short of their traditional principles, precisely because they unconsciously desire failure. Republicans unconsciously engineer life in such a way as to never quite get what it is they want. The likelihood of unity is slim. It is probable that the chances of the majority of people in Northern Ireland voting for a united Ireland in the foreseeable future is unlikely, given that not only the vast majority of Protestants oppose it, but also 28% of nationalists say they are happy with the union. Besides, no matter what the British give republicans, the fight will go on, as some of our interviewees let slip (Millar, 1999: 301.) The fight is driven by the need to oppose Britain and the unionists rather than by any desire for satisfaction in terms of the realisation of ideals.

There are several typical republican rationalisations in the republican self-interpretation, each of which helps maintain the perception of the Protestant threat. These rationalisations often involve ideological disidentification. A list of these follows:

- the non-sectarian or anti-sectarian republican is a rationalisation of Catholic sectarianism
- the perception of Protestants as bitter is a rationalisation of Catholic guilt or shame
- the innocent Catholic is a rationalisation of the Catholic desire to dominate the other
- republican unity is a rationalisation of fragmentation and dissension
- victimhood is a rationalisation of the desire to control the other
- IRA triumph and pride is a rationalisation of shame and failure

- the suffering Catholic is a rationalisation of the desire for suffering.

### **Loyalists**

My analysis would suggest that there are several typical Protestant rationalisations which underpin the positive Protestant self-interpretation. Thus, the Protestant giver is a rationalisation of Protestant aggression; the suffering Protestant is a rationalisation of Protestant domination; the decent Protestant is a rationalisation of sectarianism; the respectable Protestant is a rationalisation of violence; the nice Protestant is a rationalisation of political motivation.

Some Protestants are attracted to the forward-looking, tolerant, communitarian, purposeful, successful, self-confident Catholic they perceive—the “uninhibited” Catholic they imagine in contrast to their experience of themselves as law-abiding, conforming, moral citizens, i.e. inhibited. Catholics are presented as having an unfathomable enjoyment. Protestant divisions and deficiencies are also almost always seen in opposition to imagined Catholic strength and cohesion. This is symptomatic of the fear of the other which shapes the Protestant self. Catholics are everything that Protestants aren’t. The tendency to present Catholics as superior in some way to Protestants is a rationalisation of the desire to dominate Catholics. Beatifying Catholics and belittling Protestants is simply another unconscious means for maintaining predominant anti-Catholic discourse. One keeps the threat alive by praising Catholics and thereby unconsciously reminding Protestants that Catholics have the power to steal their goods. Thus the conceptual progressive Catholic that certain strains of new loyalism invent is more of the same traditional anti-Catholicism. Likewise, the habit of speaking kindly of one’s Catholic “neighbours” (or in the case of the Catholic community, of one’s Protestant neighbours), the other side, the other sort, the other denomination, are examples of what Žižek refers to as the ideological practice of disidentification which acts as a support to violence. The Protestant obsession with Catholic enjoyment involves an unconscious fear that others will steal what is theirs, what it is Protestants enjoy—their imagined unity, their Protestant heritage, their successes, identity, territory and culture. This fear, too, even of insiders, is what brings pleasure and serves as that which in part binds Protestants together. Thus the threat of Catholic revolt, the apocalypse (perhaps with Protestant support), is what binds Protestants together.

Much of what Protestants criticise in Catholics, particularly that which Catholics are said to enjoy, and Protestants publicly prohibit, forms the obscene underbelly of Protestant identity and the Protestant or unionist power base. Thus, while some interviewees speak of Catholics as criminals and terrorists, some Protestants remain in denial about how they enjoy loyalist violence and Protestant suffering. While they deny they are sectarian, in some cases their very sense of victimhood is partisan. Catholics are said by Protestant interviewees to revel in victim status and Protestants are said to resent their own victimhood, but all the indications are that victimhood is exactly what Protestants unconsciously enjoy. They unconsciously use victimhood, and a sense of an inferiority complex, to dominate Catholics. It is a status that they feel Catholics have stolen from them. While they consider Catholics to be

controlled by the Roman Catholic church, to be controlling, and to belong to an uncritical mass of the “pan-nationalist front” type, often Protestants themselves unconsciously enjoy control. Thus they speak of how disloyalty and identification with Catholics are punished, difference is reproved, openness is reproached, authoritarian paramilitary fiefdoms are rampant. Control is enjoyed for the imagined cohesion it guarantees in the face of real internal divisions. Thus, some Protestants speak of the inability to have a free thought in their community, of the overpowering identification with respectability, and of their wariness about speaking their minds.

The widespread self-interpretation of loyalists as “reactionary” and as “defenders” is a rationalisation of their violence and of their desire to dominate. Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests that loyalists unconsciously enjoy disloyalty. The point is not whether loyalists or unionists are disloyal or not, and David Miller for one accepts that they are (Miller, 1978), but that they are unconsciously attracted to disloyalty and that it is this identification on the part of the Protestant community in general that in part fuels the conflict by propelling Protestants into conflict with their ideal self, with the British and with the Catholic community. Being disloyal is the traumatic kernel which defines loyalism. Disloyalty is the object of conscious Protestant hatred and yet also the unconscious object of their desire. While disloyalty threatens loyalist ideology because it is symptomatic of fragmentation, it also legitimates it because it is what Catholics appear to enjoy. Catholic disloyalty is a Protestant construction. Protestants unconsciously fantasise (and hate) Catholic betrayal and disloyalty. The uninhibited Catholic, whom Protestants revere, appears thus precisely because she/he is perceived as disloyal. Protestant society requires that the individual sublimate his/her sense of disloyalty and her/his pleasure in this. Betrayal is therefore a transgression which attracts them. Their loyal identity is rooted in its opposite—unconscious disloyalty. In this sense, loyalists are British nationalists: their unconscious disloyalty guarantees the non-satisfaction of their conscious desires. The object of their unconscious desires is an ethno-national state.

So, do loyalists kill to defend their interests or community? In part, yes. However, the reality is that people kill in situations of ethno-national conflict because, apart from personal conscious motivation such as the defence of community interests, they essentially want to kill on foot of their identification with the unconscious dynamics that inform the social-ideological fantasy, with rivalry over jouissance at its centre. The reason why Protestants kill Catholics is not because they are “simply Catholics”, as many Catholics claim, or pan-nationalists, or republicans as loyalists claim. Nor do loyalists kill because they listen to sectarian voices, voices of those who McKay suggests should know better—the prized subject who is supposed to know—and bury their sense of individual self and, driven by paranoia, exaggerate small grievances as McKay, paraphrasing Ignatieff (McKay, 2000: 368) suggests. It is their repressed fragmentation, self-hatred, doubts and anxieties in relation to their ideal self that propel Protestants into confrontation with Catholics (and Catholics into confrontation with Protestants on similar grounds). This then is their pain and trauma—their repressed attraction to disloyalty, their paranoia, their idealisation of self in terms of the positive Protestant stereotype, their relative lack of unity



and solidarity, their repressed shame over their relationship with the Catholic community, their sectarianism and their dependence on Britain.

## **CONCLUSION**

Opposing sides in the Northern conflict are essentially fighting over loyalty to some unencumbered Protestant or Catholic community fantasy of wholeness which drives them separately to idealise themselves. Catholics' primary unconscious belief is that they have been robbed of their *jouissance* and want it back, Protestants unconsciously fear robbery—both are rationalisations of unconscious trauma, which have their roots in the relationship with the British and Irish. It is a trauma which took root in the Reformation and Plantation, and the 1916 rising. More than access to political power, issues over sovereignty or an experience of injustice and abuse, the irrational perception of self and others affects the intensity of the conflict.

The way to break the power of the fantasy-construction that is ideology is to confront the real of our desire—our own deadlock—by confronting ourselves with the way the ideological figure of the other has been invested with our unconscious desire. The real roots of antagonisms in Northern Ireland have to do with the trauma or deadlock that Protestants and Catholics unconsciously experience in themselves. The fact that other people behave in a particular way does not explain why a subject hates or resents them. Participants to the conflict in Northern Ireland are called to recognise their paranoid constructions in order to identify the way in which the ideological figures of others are constructed to stitch up the inconsistency of one's own ideological system. Mature social relations will involve one confronting the antagonism or lack within the subject. Change requires people getting in touch with the pain etc. that hides behind the fantasy. One needs to shake up the fantasy of the loyal loyalist or liberationist republican, the respectable Protestant or harmless Catholic.

The two communities in Northern Ireland—regardless of class—need to take on board what it is that comes into consciousness but that is denied or disavowed: their bigotry, what they project onto others, their fears, rationalisations, responsibility for the pain they inflict on others, and the fictive aspects of their “characters” to be found in accounts of bravery, unity, democracy, superiority, moral rectitude, loyalty, honour and respectability. The more Protestants and Catholics acknowledge their inner incohesiveness, the less they will invest unconsciously in the other community, particularly in terms of rivalry over *jouissance*. The less they live out of positive stereotypes of self, the less their repression will be. The less they idealise others or vilify them, the better. Only such acts will transform the spectral dimension of their respective identities. As Slavoj Žižek states, “prejudice” reduction simply leaves us as victims of our so-called prejudices as it is based on the false notion of an undiscovered ideal other—as if we could decide who others really are (Žižek, 1994: 326).

## **Recommendations**

Healthy mutual respect and healthy management of neuroses can only be achieved if programmes to enable people to become aware of what motivates them at the unconscious level are implemented, particularly in the educational system. Conflict is a necessary and important aspect of identity formation. People need to speak, be heard and essentially hear themselves. People need to become more aware of their rationalisations. Differences which are oppositional can only be desensitised in this way. Structural change will not impact on the divisions and antagonisms that operate in conflict situations unless there is more fundamental change on the level of rationalisations that operate in the constitution of political identity and out of which structures develop.

Through further academic research, further development of Lacanian theory, specialised training of small numbers of people from conflict communities who can in turn run workshops that permit large segments of the population in the conflict zone to explore their issues further in the light of this research, and with professional backup in place to deal with psychological fallout, it is possible that significant change can occur in perceptions of others and self and in relations with others. In other words, the approach to the politics of ethno-national conflict needs to be holistic. From the above discussion, it is clear that the application of a Lacanian method of analysis has great potential for informing the way we understand and study other inter-religious and ethnic conflicts. It could be integrated with efficiency in peace building processes and thus deserves to be developed in the art of conflict management.

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