

Review article

The Primordial Lie

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Socio-ideological Fantasy and the Northern Ireland Conflict: The Other Side.

By Adrian Millar. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006. 218pp, £60.00. ISBN: 0719066964 hb.

The killing of two British soldiers outside antrim barracks on March 7th this year by the Real IRA served to remind us that the conflict in Northern Ireland is far from over. With the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the gradual moves towards decommissioning, culminating in the announcement by the IRA Army Council in July 2005 that the armed struggle had come to an end, it had seemed that Britain's longest war was finally moving towards a resolution. Adrian Millar's book, therefore, is a timely reminder that the conflict not only continued after the Good Friday Agreement but in some areas escalated and, far from representing the solution to 'the Irish problem', the Agreement might not even be the new beginning it was heralded to be. The challenge now facing the communities at large, writes Millar, 'is to do the work that the signatories to the Good Friday Agreement failed to do, and deal with the substance that structures antagonism and division there, namely the unconscious' (p. 2). For Millar, it is only when we start to deal with the unconscious desire invested in the reproduction of social antagonisms that we can seriously begin to talk in terms of conflict resolution. It is here, then, that Lacanian psychoanalysis has a particular purchase on the situation insofar as Lacan locates aggression and conflict at the very heart of the subject and inter-subjective relations. The Lacanian emphasis on the inherent aggressivity and rivalry between subject and Other makes it a particularly powerful tool for the analysis of conflict and an understanding of how to resolve it.

The great strength of Millar's book is that it draws on interviews with former IRA members and loyalist supporters rather than speeches, texts or interviews with the respective leadership of each community. (Millar interviewed 25 people in total, 20 republicans and five loyalists. The asymmetry in the sample is reflected in the analysis itself, with three chapters devoted to the republican interviews and only one chapter to loyalism.) This is not

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the first time interviews have been conducted but, whereas in the past researchers have bemoaned the lack of reliability of such material, from an analytic perspective it is precisely the ‘ambiguous, mixed and contradictory beliefs’ (p. 5) expressed in the interviews and lacking in the official statements of the republican or loyalist communities that give us insight into the unconscious processes at work in the conflict. As Millar rather nicely puts it, the problem has not been with the quality of the interviews but with ‘the quality of the reading’ (p. 20). Millar’s analysis of the transcripts, therefore, does not look for the articulation of coherent ideological positions but focuses on their parapraxes, jokes, silences and hesitations, as he adopts the time-honoured but potentially problematic practice of reading the opposite into what his interviewees say. While I found the overall analysis extremely illuminating and useful, there are a number of methodological issues raised by Millar’s approach. Millar says that he is utilizing ‘a Lacanian theory of slips of the tongue, which enable the analyst to identify meanings other than the intended meanings’ (p. 8). Now if this means that we are looking for hidden or latent meanings, then this is a more traditional Freudian approach than Lacanian, which would trace the relations between signifiers, or follow the path of the signifier. Furthermore, the emphasis on defence mechanisms, projection and splitting (in the sense of good and bad objects rather than the Lacanian sense of a constitutive division) in the analysis also seems to be a rather more eclectic psychoanalytic approach to the material than a strictly Lacanian one. For example, one of the key analytical concepts that Millar employs is that of ‘rationalisation’, which is not, as far as I am aware, a Lacanian concept at all. Let me give just one example from the conclusion where Millar writes: ‘Peace and war can both be built on illusions as both are sustained by rationalisations. When rationalisations predominate the likelihood of sustained violent conflict increases’ (p. 201).

Rationalisation, for Millar, is a defence mechanism deployed by the ego to protect itself against the experience of fragmentation and lack:

Rationalisation serves ... to camouflage what the ego wants to defend, namely its ideal self-image and it works to create explanations that are in keeping with this by covering up slips of the unconscious. The being that results from rationalisation is therefore false or fake, because it overlooks the unconscious. (p. 20)

Now there are a couple of problems with the way this notion is being formulated. Fragmentation, lack, ego-Ideal, these are indeed all Lacanian concepts, but Lacan does not talk of defence mechanisms as such and this idea of the ego defending itself against external threats sounds more like Anna Freud than Lacan. Furthermore, the idea that the ‘being’ of rationalisation is false would suggest that there is a ‘true’ being, the being of the unconscious, which is non-rationalised, whereas in Lacan the subject is always the subject of the signifier and there is no true or false being. This is not to detract from the analysis itself, which I discuss below, but as Millar’s claims are specifically for the value of Lacanian psychoanalysis, then it might be useful to clarify what is strictly Lacanian in the approach. In this sense it is surprising that he did not draw on some of the work already published utilizing Lacanian theory in qualitative research (see Parker, 2005; Georgaca, 2005). Indeed, there is now quite a large body of work using psychoanalysis for the analysis of interview transcripts, especially the various collaborative projects of Stephen Frosh (Frosh et al., 2003; Frosh and Emerson, 2005; Frosh and Young, 2008) and the work of Hollway and Jefferson

(2000), which could have been usefully considered in the methodological sections of this research.

AN ETHIC OF CHANGE

Millar argues that the choice of peace over conflict is an ethical, and I would add political, decision, and again this is where Lacanianism can help us. The ethical dimension of Lacanianism is the assumption of responsibility for one's fantasy. We cannot change and operate differently unless we accept our own lack and, more importantly, unless we learn to accept the lack in the Other. In this sense we must come to terms with, and not resolve, the fantasies that structure and determine our relations to the lack in the Other. This is the core of Millar's argument and is developed through an analysis of the republican imaginary, symbolic and real as well as in the chapter on Loyalism.

From a Lacanian perspective we cannot resolve conflicts as such. Antagonism and division are constitutive of individual and social identities and therefore, argues Millar, a theory of conflict resolution needs to talk 'of aggression, not peace, of enmity, not profound reconciliation' (p. 31). Indeed, talk of reconciliation tends to be one of the more pernicious aspects of the conflict-resolution industry, as it conspicuously fails to deal with the unconscious processes that reproduce conflict and antagonism between communities. Millar is drawing upon two key ideas here: first, Lacan's notion of the fundamental fantasy and the need for the analysand/subject to 'traverse the fundamental fantasy'; second, Slavoj Žižek's deployment of this concept through the socio-ideological fantasy that structures a subject's relation to the real of social antagonism. For Lacan, the paradigmatic example of the fundamental fantasy is the (non)sexual relationship, that is to say, the idea that there can be blissfully harmonious relations between the sexes (Lacan, 1998 [1975]). This is misguided in the sense that masculinity and femininity designate two non-complementary structures, each defined in relation to the Other. There can be no unity, that is to say, no sexual relationship, between these two positions, insofar as each relates to something other than the Other relates to in them. In short, our relationships always misfire and unless we can come to terms with that and live with the failure of our (phallic) *jouissance* then we will constantly be dissatisfied and searching for that illusory object of desire. For Žižek, of course, the socio-ideological fantasy is crucial in masking the conflict and antagonism at the root of *all* societies and facilitating our nationalist myths of organic harmonious communities before they were disrupted by the presence of the Other: the Jew, the immigrant, etc. The question then is what are the fundamental fantasies of the republican and loyalist communities that they need to traverse and come to terms with?

For Millar, the rivalry that sustains the conflict is a struggle over *jouissance*, a struggle for an access to *jouissance* and the *jouissance* stolen by the Other. But in this sense Millar seems to be suggesting that there is a fundamental difference in the relations to *jouissance* by the two communities. For the republicans, 'IRA violence liberates members of the Catholic community from obscurity. It gives them an identity and the recognition of others' (p. 84). In short, republicanism is a self-legitimizing ideology, republicans appear to have it all, they are 'fearless, brave, innocent, victims in possession of the truth and not in the slightest bigoted' (p. 143). Denial and projection are key mechanisms in sustaining this idealized self-image of the republican community and demonizing the Protestant other as

sectarian bigots. Millar is very good at teasing out the contradictions in what people say and the different rhetorical strategies that people employ to justify their beliefs, but where I would raise an issue is around his deployment of the socio-ideological fantasy and its relationship to *jouissance*.

Millar's analysis seems to suggest that the republicans in particular are invested in violence insofar as it gives them pleasure, *jouissance*, securing their identity through the domination of the Other. In his analysis of the republican imaginary he writes, '[u]nconscious dependency keeps one in the blame-game and the belief that the only solution to one's unfilled desire is to control or subjugate the Other' (pp. 98–9). In Žižek's sense, however, the fundamental fantasy is not one of domination and subjugation of the Other in order to secure one's own identity, but of recognizing lack – *che vuoi?* What does the other want from me? What am I for the Other? In other words, what is the Other asking of me and why can't I fulfil his/her desire (Žižek, 1989, 87–129)? If the question is framed in this way I can't help wondering whether or not we would come up with a different conception of the republican imaginary.

Millar notes that one weakness of previous analyses of the Northern Ireland conflict has been the failure of authors to acknowledge 'the *jouissance* that ideology brings' (p. 153). Now, again, we may derive a certain pleasure from our ideological fantasies but ideology itself does not bring *jouissance*. Fantasy provides a scenario in which unconscious desire plays itself out; it ties unconscious desire to imaginary structures and thus covers over our *jouissance* as well as giving it a certain meaning. From a Žižekian perspective, the socio-ideological fantasy is the way in which subjects account for the theft of *jouissance* by the Other. Phallic *jouissance* (the only kind all subjects have access to), as I suggested above, is marked by the experience of failure and dissatisfaction, and fantasy arises as a way of accounting for that experience of dissatisfaction – if I am not enjoying myself then it is because someone has stolen my enjoyment from me! At one point in the analysis of republican interviews, Millar notes that an interviewees 'belief (reality) and disbelief (illusion) involve splitting' (p. 131) in order to rationalize what the interviewee knew to be true. In the Žižekian sense of the socio-ideological fantasy, both belief and disbelief are part of reality and therefore both are illusory. It is the very structure of reality itself that is ideological, as Žižek writes:

[T]he illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. (Žižek, 1989, 32)

The socio-ideological fantasy, therefore, is not an illusion we elaborate to 'rationalize' our contradictory beliefs but rather that which structures and maintains social reality itself. The socio-ideological fantasy, then, is precisely '*a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence*' (p. 21), that founding moment of conflict and antagonism. 'The function of ideology', continues Žižek, 'is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel' (p. 45). In this sense we can traverse that fantasy and transform our relationship to it, subjectivizing our trauma in some way, but we cannot, as Millar suggests at one point, 'remove it' (p. 157), as this would be to abolish social reality itself.

The issue, then, is what is this traumatic real kernel for the republican community? It is perhaps telling that Millar's chapter on the republican real is a mere five pages, while his discussion of the republican imaginary runs for 40 pages. The republican real, as Millar correctly states, is that which cannot be subjectivized and cannot be put into words, but I was unclear what exactly he thinks the republican real actually is. At one point he mentions the Protestant theft of Catholic enjoyment, specifically the pleasures of victimhood (p. 107), but victim status is a compensatory response rather than the trauma itself (see Žižek, 2000). I find this all the more surprising because in his analysis of the loyalist interviews Millar precisely identifies the mechanism of the theft of enjoyment and the fundamental fantasy that grounds the loyalist imaginary:

What Protestants clearly hate and unconsciously desire is perceived Catholic solidarity, success, strategy, *craic*, identity, victim status and disloyalty. The Protestant community, which clearly experiences itself as a socially, religiously and politically divided society, imagines that Catholics are united in all these areas and desires this solidarity for themselves even though, consciously, they pride themselves in being a diverse, independent community, supportive of individualism and conscience. (p. 167)

It is the perceived unity, solidarity and purpose of the Catholic community that the Protestants so desire; something that they have lost and was stolen from them through partition but, more importantly than this, it is the attraction and fantasy of *disloyalty* that provides the primordial lie of loyalism. Disloyalty is the traumatic kernel at the core of loyalism and it is this fundamental fantasy that the Protestant community must traverse if reconciliation is to be a meaningful process. What I did not have a sense of by the end of the book was what the equivalent traumatic kernel for the Catholic community was.

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