

# The Impossible Conversation

## CONVERSATION 2: TO WHOM SHOULD WE LISTEN



NCAD GALLERY. MARCH 26, 2013

PANEL: DR. SIUN HANRAHAN, DR. AISLINN O'DONNELL, BRIAN MAGUIRE.

### BRIAN MAGUIRE

audio recording:

43' 50

It's kind of odd but I seem to have taken an academic approach to this afternoon, I'm not sure why. It must be influence. But before I go to that, I'd like to talk something about the men in Jonathan's films. First of all, when you work in a prison, you suspend judgement for the access you get. You don't go in and judge people for what they do. You have access, you have privilege; there's a price for that privilege. So political judgment is suspended when you work there and that's the first point. The second point is Fanon: 'Resistance to oppression is always justified'.

War changes its address. It's constant, it's celebrated, it's good business and it's present. And an awful lot of people have been blown up and shot dead since these people left those jails and they had nothing to do with it. I don't know why war moves around the world with such fucking ease but it does. It was here, these men did fight. I don't judge them.

Brendan Behan: 'A terrorist is a man with a small bomb'. I kind of understand that. One of these men was released, we met in the Hugh Lane Gallery, the exhibition on was called 'The Irish State', I think. I remember watching Michael Collins' painting on the wall, who done a hell of a lot more damage than the man I was with and was highly respected, you know. Half of these men's officers are in the Dail. That's the reality of the Good Friday Agreement. Anyway, that's my response.

The film is essential. It's utterly necessary that somebody convinced these men to tell their story. It's absolutely essential. Nobody else did it. Now part of what I was saying was going to be that we have faculties/institutes of criminology in every university in the State and but I've never seen any of them in prison.

47'32"

I want to go back a little bit. Oscar Wilde: 'De Profundis', 'Reading Gaol' in jail. I'm familiar with and a lover of 'Reading Gaol'. I am familiar with the respect with which De Profundis' is held. Wilde wrote at that time to the governor with increasing desperation to be released because his mental health was collapsing. The Prison Governor's notes from that time show how Wilde's increasing articulation of his despair was the very reason why the Governor felt confident in rejecting his appeal. He came out and died. You see, in listening and talking there are two different positions and at times they could well not be in the same universe. Articulation does not guarantee understanding.

I made a film work twenty years ago titled 'Prejudicial Portraits'. It contains a voice over (Jena Moxley) the text of which is taken from the Rules for the Prison, 1947. Professor John A. Murphy responded to the work by saying that he felt the Rules were a 'benevolent paternalism'. I think this is very important. These rules lasted for about fifty years. The paternalism, I'll return to that later.

The Whitaker Report was published in 1985. He said that in his initial research he could find nothing in the Department of Justice, in Stephen's Green, which showed what a prisoner experienced. Nothing. So, what I'm saying is that nobody spoke to the prisoners, and no one listened to them, for the length that this state

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has been in place. They were treated as children. *Seen and not heard*. Murphy's paternalism. Certainly, it jars with the tabloid description of prisoners, that they are treated as children, but that was how it was. The spirit of the times was in those rules and there were rules for the killing of a man, the beating of a man, there were rules for the taking of a baby from a mother but there were also rules for the protection of the prisoner.

In another place, in another country, in France, Foucault appeared after the '68 trouble and he evolved three principles. The first was that one's writing in a university comes from your own experience. Now in an art school that's kind of normal. But in universities it's not the case where people tend to write about each other's views but not their own. The second thing is what he looked at. He looked at power and power structures in societies and he looked at mental institutions. He looked at prisons. How he looked at them relates to the first point - he stood outside the prison gate with questionnaires and enlisted the families to distribute and have them filled out. So he went to the prisoners even though he couldn't go in and when the men were released they went to his apartment and continued the dialogue. And from that a new way of perceiving prisons came into place.

51'20"

He didn't take it into political action because he felt that the responsibility of the university was to research not to take action, not to become an activist but to remain as a researcher. My point about Foucault is that he spoke to prisoners and he listened to them. When I started working in the prisons, I suppose it must be... heading for thirty years ago, '85, when I used to meet a released man, we used to have to operate anti-surveillance methods so that we wouldn't be seen by anyone. And over time that relaxed but actually it's back again. If you teach in an Irish prison, if you talk to someone in a supermarket who has been released, you can lose your job and I understand people have. At least that was two years ago, it may have changed since, but that was the rule then. So about speaking with prisoners and listening to them, we have rules against it here. In the prison we were supposed to limit our conversation to the subject and the conversation was monitored. Now, as all life is within Art, the limitation envisaged was ineffective.

52'52"

The strict paternalism of the 1950's was smashed by the violence in Irish prisons in the early 80's. There was daily fighting. When the warders came to work in Portlaoise, in the early 80's, they came to fight and the political prisoners fought them. That was stopped by talks, maybe not quickly enough because it lasted a number of years, and there a man was assassinated on the quays here as part of all that. This fighting was replaced by a system of dialogue and discussion in the prison and Portlaoise Prison became the safest prison in Ireland. There was hardly a blow struck in twenty years in a prison, which is just unheard of. But that was because there was dialogue; there was representation.

54'00"

I would just like to speak of Dessie O'Hare. He made a film on suicide with Joe Comerford and two other men from E1 Landing. Tommy McMahon who painted every step of the stages of imprisonment from being weighed, from all the things that happen you till you reach your cell. John Carmody, using photography and drawing, showed the process of acceptance of imprisonment; his work was shown in EV+A. Eddie Cahill showed us the essential image of a prisoner as seen by the State - no mouth, no eyes. Almost a graphic of what was said here this evening. Jimmy Leonard articulates the value of art in changing one's own life. Jonathan Cummins provides a structure and a platform to a group of men to discuss their imprisonment. He listens. So the question here is who listens to whom. He listens. The Hugh Lane listens. This is their third show in twenty-five years from Portlaoise Prison. The NCAD listens. It's been engaged for the same amount of time.

55'28"

The Good Friday Agreement is a political dialogical process. We all know it. The skills the Good Friday Agreement brought to the Department of Foreign Affairs are used in ganglands in Afghanistan and in Haiti but not in Dublin 8, not in Drimnagh and not in Crumlin. Twenty young people are dead in this area and that this is more acceptable to the late Minister for Justice, Brian Lenihan, than talking to the feuding gangs' leaders. He said you can't do it, because to do it you'd have to talk to them and this indicates respect and we can't show that. Do you remember hearing that about Martin McGuinness? We must talk to everyone. We give these men new sentences, we congratulate ourselves with headlines, and more people die. The government have a policy of not listening. Our responsibility here is as an educational institution.

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We have a duty to listen.

My interest in recidivism is really based on the possibility of a man's life if he continues going back into prison compared with what would happen if he didn't. It's a no-brainer. I know an awful lot of men that have been in and out jail. Very few of them have anything. Crime's about as rewarding a career as that of an artist.

In the US, the research: (because they used to have education in prisons in the US) first of all of those prisoners who acquire PhDs, none came back; of those with Masters, two percent of them returned to jail; and BAs, seven percent; diploma twenty percent; the average one was around forty percent. Those are figures for Texas. You see, they're clear.

There is a belief among prisoners that effective education interferes with the business of the Department of Justice by causing them to lose customers and that's why it's all been stopped.

58'30"

The difference between the paternalism which provides primary school education in prisons and a third level structure is that the higher education engages with the full autonomy of the student, it's by its nature collaborative, it suits adults.

I think we must talk to everybody and in my own work the excitement in which I felt working on the landings in Long Kesh with the UVF and the UDA was very real. I was meeting the other – the very people I avoided on the streets all my life. It was a delight, that's all I can say and I got hounded for doing it. People didn't understand. I've no problem about it.

59'44"

This College, I'm assuming you know that from '85 to 2010, NCAD put artists and filmmakers in Portlaoise Prison and ran a third level course. The basis of teaching in that course was dialogue. I'm basically saying if we lock up adults and treat them as children it's no surprise that they come out angry. I think as educators we did our best to be of benefit to the prison population but it doesn't stop prison being an abomination. Just one example: a young mother can keep her baby for 6 months in Ireland; in Spain it's 5 years in a custom-built crèche environment. In southern Europe private family visits are the norm not here in Ireland. I made a painting in the 80's of visiting conditions in the overcrowded Cork city prison. The drawing for the painting resembled an earlier work of Monaghan battery hens. I really don't know any other word to describe it. There is humanity in it. There is humanity amongst the guards and the senior officers and there's some, who just want systems and machines and don't want to deal with people at all. In the Irish Prison Service, this view was in charge in the past 10 years.

There is some ground for hoping that it will change.

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## AISLINN O'DONNELL

Mary Immaculate College (University of Limerick).

### STRONG DEMOCRACY, THE REPUBLIC AND OUR INSTITUTIONS

**That's a slave's life - to be forbidden to speak one's mind.'**  
Jocasta speaking to Polyneices in Euripides' *The Phoenician Woman*.

**'The man who exercises power is wise only insofar as there exists someone who can use parrhēsia to criticise him, thereby putting some limit to his power, to his command.'**  
Michel Foucault *Fearless Speech* (2001: 29)

In the first Conversation, Ann Louise Gilligan spoke of the need to break the silence and asked us whether to be deprived of freedom ought also mean to be deprived of voice. This presentation pursues this question.

*Parrhēsia* does not claim to speak the truth or to make a claim on truth, but asks what conditions must be in place, what self must be constituted, that we may come to speak truthfully and responsibly, speaking our minds.

Simone Weil once wrote that the purpose of institutions should be to make visible those who have been hitherto invisible. Following this vein of thinking, Jonathan Cummins suggested in Conversation 1 that the institutions of the Republic have never been fully formed, not because of partition, but because of the genesis of institutional and public cultures that promote fear, insularity, silencing, sanctioning, hierarchy and censorship. Indeed, in his film *The Rocky Road to Dublin* Peter Lennon remarks that for his post-revolutionary generation the only task that remained was 'heroic obedience'.

In this short talk, I do not wish to frame questions about speech or who speaks or should speak in terms of a rights discourse, but would instead like to invite us to think about the impoverishment of citizenship and human beings that occurs when clichés, stereotypes and silences obscure the singular existence and story that is each one of our lives. Historically, societies have good reason to be suspicious and wary of monolithic crude and dehumanising representations of others, no matter who those others may be. I do not wish to speak here of the wrong done to others by preventing their voice from being heard, but rather the wrong done to me, as human being and citizen, when I am forbidden to encounter the complexity of others and have to rely on crude caricatures.

Particular difficulties often seem to arise when those who are to be heard and listened to – they always already have voice but are not necessarily heard – are those who, for different reasons, have been exiled to society's margins, or beyond. I think here of my initial reactions as I sat to watch Cummins' films for the first time. My body adopted a confrontational stance as I looked at the man on the screen. My visceral history had already decided 'what' I would see and that prevented me from listening to the 'who' that was speaking, and my body visibly expressed that unconscious set of assumptions that I carried with me. As I listened, this shifted in ways that were discomfiting, but I felt unable to sustain the certainty of my previous position. Although many powerful arguments can be made for the rights of the silenced to speak, and there are many who feel silenced for many reasons in our society, here I want to suggest that we instead imagine public cultures that considers the obligation, indeed the need in its most profound sense, of institutions and citizens to listen to stories, in particular those that may be the most difficult to hear. In part, I say this is because of my own need and desire to understand. I feel wronged as a citizen and as a human being that I had been formed, in so many ways, to be ignorant of my own ignorance. My visceral prejudices had been engendered in good part through the media or selective academic storytelling, making it difficult to encounter certain others as a fellow human being.

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A monolithic 'we' tends to be pre-supposed in discussions about such matters; a 'we' that would welcome the 'other', the 'diverse', even the 'hostis' or enemy, or not, as the case may be. But I want to suggest that we begin by imaging our 'we' as diverse, not as an 'us' and 'them'. I teach philosophy at third level to student-teachers at primary level and to students on postgraduate programmes. I also teach philosophy in Portlaoise prison. So I move between these worlds and what happens in one informs my understanding of pedagogy in the other. As I reflect on the idea of free speech and fearless speech, I think of the conditions created by the men and women with whom I work in the prison, in projects outside the prison, and with student-teachers in my college. These conditions allow me to speak openly in our philosophy classes and say whatever I think, as they must come to feel they can. There is no straightforward 'me' and 'them' – our alliances shift, we have different perspectives and positions depending on the topic under discussion. Often I am pulled up short.

Conversations in the prison, for example, have pushed me to become more sensitive and responsive to the many forms of violence, structural and otherwise, that exist in our world and to become less partial, partisan and dogmatic by 'inverting and broadening my horizons' so that I might see more and sense more. It is not just I, as educator and free citizen, who continues to listen to them, even as we disagree with one another. My students in prison listen to me even at the times that I provoke them, like a Socratic gadfly, and when I question the commitments and values that they hold, even when those beliefs may have led to their imprisonment. Our shared speech is not a violent speech – it does not seek to intimidate, to manipulate or to lie. We tell stories and think about the world and our lives, just as the men in Cummins' work do. We sustain our conversations. At moments, we reach impasses – the spade has turned as Wittgenstein says – and then we begin again from a different place. We know that there are things about which we may never agree.

A conversation, in this way of thinking, does not begin with an aim of consensus, healing, resolution, mutual understanding or even empathy, although such outcomes may emerge. Rather, the commitment is to being with the other, staying with the other and sustaining a conversation through its ambivalences, misunderstandings, disagreements and silences.

Philosopher Stanley Cavell echoes Wittgenstein in saying we do not know our way about. Still, he says, 'in philosophising, perhaps only of a certain kind, there is the odd feature that two can enter unknown territories together. (This is true of playing music but not of composing. One perhaps thinks here of the history of improvisation; let's call it mutual inspiration. But then one has to think whether the point of philosophising is to create a work.' (2010, 367). Instead of certainty, consensus or outcomes, during a conversation I may find I am less sure of myself, perhaps even confused, as things are no longer what they seem, and my interlocutor is different from the way I imagined him or her. It is, perhaps, this perplexity, ambivalence and difficulty that is of most value in undoing our assumptions, and in some ways undoing ourselves.

Let us recall Barbara Dawson's words in Conversation 1. She stated that others need to be made visible simply because they exist. The fact of existence demands visibility.

In conversation, ex-Republican prisoner and ex-MLA Pat McNamee said, "It is not as simple as that, saying yes they should be allowed to appear in public or express themselves... [SILENCE] Yes, they should. I have not been asked to make that argument before. Why should people be afraid of somebody's freedom to express themselves? Why are you afraid of what somebody has to say? If you think they are a raving lunatic that nobody supports then why are you worried about what they have to say? Why have they fear? What do they fear? Are they afraid that everybody will want to go into jail? Or do they believe that giving people freedom of expression that they are going to turn everybody else into a criminal? They don't have much faith in society and people's values if that is the case. Yes, people should have freedom of expression because what do people have to fear by allowing them to express themselves and if when they express themselves they are judged to be terrible and shocking and whatever, well, people will be able to judge that for themselves. It is like, don't burn the books."

He adds, "What have people to fear from expression at the end of the day? What was that guy's portrait saying? Do you deny that he exists? That is denying the truth from yourself and trying to hide the truth to other people. It is a weak society if it cannot hear the truth. If what people are saying is repulsive to some people, you have no faith in society if you don't allow them to judge it for themselves."

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What follows are reflections by one man in prison to this question of *parrhēsia*. I asked him, “Do prisoners have a responsibility to speak and write about the institution of the prison?”

“To answer this question it is probably necessary to formulate a conception of the prison that, for reasons of simplification, accommodates two rationalisations. The first is based on the conception of the prison from the perspective of those we might consider as representative of the societal perspective. The second is based on the perspective of those we might consider as superfluous to society or maybe incongruous with its normative structure. The conception of prison from the societal perspective is reactionary rather than reflective. Prison is a necessary evil that is integral to the maintenance of security and a civilised existence. For the purposes of this question we can discount more rabid conceptions of what prison ought to be and concentrate on the suppositions of those societal perspectives that argue for the prison to be a mechanism of correction or rehabilitation of the incarcerated. The prison, from this semi-enlightened perspective, must have its punitive component; it must reduce the incarcerated to what is essentially a slave state whilst suggesting the possibility of a deeper brutality for non-conformity. There is an abundance of literature, particularly from a sociological approach, offering evidence of confirmation for rehabilitative approaches almost entirely based on the specious agreement or validation of incarcerated individuals attempting to avoid the malevolence entailed in highly skewed power relations. Rehabilitation always entails the promise of an improved material circumstance of less compliant prisoners.

Apart from careerist agendas, the end for the corrective or rehabilitative approach is the production of an individual rendered sufficiently docile as to be unproblematic in destitution or at least poverty. Therefore, rehabilitation must offer more than other prisoners but less than the impoverished in society. For this reason, literature from the societal perspective is conceptualised only from one side of a power relation. The prisoner’s voice is only heard or recognised as agreement or as error for which disagreement and non-conformity require the visitation of some ‘necessary’ evil.

It seems paradoxical to suggest that prisoners have a responsibility to speak and write about prison. First of all for whom do they speak and write? Do they speak and write for other prisoners, a dialogue of the silenced, or do they conform, feed from the crumbs off the sociologist’s table? To whom do prisoners speak and write?

The prison has a provenance that Foucault traced back to the exclusion of lepers through to the confinement of potential plague carriers and the confinement of the insane, and eventually towards its current manifestation, which has been forged in the turmoil of the industrial revolution and its exclusion of what became its human detritus. The incarcerated, with unusual exceptions, are composed of society’s residuum. Indeed, it is this reality that determines the modus operandi of the institution, the conceptualisation of the convicted as a manifestation of all that is feared and repulsive is an intended consequence of this institution; it is the cause of its creation and its *raison d’être*. How do you give authentic voice to the creatures that inhabit such a space? To suggest that they have a responsibility to speak and write about the institution that censors and silences begs the question – to whom do they owe this responsibility? Is it to some conception of society, to the mentality that says you have transgressed our law and for this we will destroy you? We will not simply take you from your life and family, reduce you to an existence as an animal, but we will silence you, we will speak for you, and when you speak again you will only speak for us.”

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