Martin Lundqvist

Memetic Social Resilience? Analysing Memes about Political Violence in Present-Day Belfast, Northern Ireland

Abstract: This study is concerned with how contemporary Belfast riots are represented in digital culture, with a specific focus on how social resilience is discursively cultivated (or hindered) through memes about said political violence. While a substantial amount has already been written about everyday practices in post-conflict Belfast, less is known about how digital narratives represent and make sense of the recent outbursts of sectarian violence there, and what the implications of these narratives are for the discursive cultivation of social resilience in the city. This is problematic as it is increasingly acknowledged by social resilience scholars that digital practices may be both a driver of disinformation and polarisation, as well as a tool for building more socially resilient societies. Furthermore, given that memes are one of the dominant digital communication practices of the day it is urgent that we explore social resilience from this analytical perspective. The findings demonstrate that memes about political violence may be both destructive and productive of the discursive cultivation of social resilience in Belfast.

Keywords: memes, social resilience, riots, political violence, Belfast

The indie band "Casual Riots" hails from Belfast, Northern Ireland. They make guitar-heavy pop songs primarily about the usual themes of love and heartache: nothing out of the ordinary, that is. Their name, however, stands out and firmly anchors them in contemporary Belfast, where the notion of "recreational rioting" has become a part of everyday vernacular. As such, the city has experienced many lengthy and destructive episodes of rioting during its post-conflict phase, most recently in 2021 when tensions triggered by Brexit and the so-called "Northern Ireland Protocol" escalated into ten days of intense rioting, resulting in clashes between police and unionist youth, the setting ablaze of a public bus in the Shankill neighbourhood of West Belfast, and Molotov cocktails being thrown at (and over) a peace wall in West Belfast. These riots were a response to the Northern Ireland Protocol, which was part of the Brexit agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The protocol was a contentious issue for many people (primarily unionists) in Northern Ireland, as it had implications for trade and the movement of goods between Northern Ireland and the rest of

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the United Kingdom and, on a symbolic level, it unsettled Northern Ireland's status as a part of the UK (*The Spectator* 2021).

Another major episode of rioting in Belfast took place in 2012 to 2013 and is commonly known as "the flag protests". These protests (which at times escalated into full-blown rioting) lasted for roughly three months and were provoked by the decision to take down the Union Jack from Belfast city hall: Or rather, to only fly it on certain holidays throughout the year (see Reilly 2021). Prior to this decision, the flag was flown all year round. The decision triggered parts of the unionist community in Belfast, who felt that their symbolic connection to the UK was being imposed upon, and thus they took to the streets to voice their discontent. These lengthy riots were fiercely debated on social media platforms such as Reddit, Twitter and Facebook (see Reilly 2021). In these often-heated debates, arguments were not only verbal, but also visual and humorous. In fact, the flag protests have given rise to one of the most widespread memes from Belfast, namely the Belfast Bigot meme (see Know Your Meme). This meme references a video clip from a riot at Belfast City Hall where a unionist woman peers through a broken window at the building and shrieks with a high-pitched voice "No Surrender". This high-pitched shriek has become frivolously remixed, and it appears, *inter alia*, in memes which build upon original video footage from classic movies such as *The Shining*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Jaws*.

This study is concerned with how the previously mentioned 2021 and 2012 to 2013 Belfast riots are represented in digital culture, with a specific focus on how social resilience is discursively cultivated (or hindered) through memes about said political violence. While a substantial amount has already been written about everyday practices in post-conflict Belfast (e.g., McAtackney 2011; Marijan 2017) less is known about how digital narratives represent and make sense of the recent outbursts of sectarian violence there and what the implications of these narratives are for the discursive cultivation of social resilience in the city. This is problematic as it is increasingly acknowledged by social resilience scholars that digital practices may be both a driver of disinformation and polarisation, as well as a tool for building more socially resilient societies (see Dulić and Kostić 2021, 32; Buzzanell 2010). Furthermore, given that memes are one of the dominant digital communication practices of the day (see Wiggins 2019; Moretensen and Neumayer 2021) it is urgent that we explore social resilience from this analytical perspective. The present study addresses these lacunae through an in-depth exploration of how the recent Belfast riots are represented in memes. In essence, the study seeks to answer the following research question: How are memes about political violence discursively situated vis-à-vis the cultivation of social resilience in Belfast, Northern Ireland? After presenting the theoretical framework of this study, which stands on two legs, namely memes and social resilience, I give a

brief account of the political context of Northern Ireland, situating it in its post-conflict predicament. I then outline the methods for collecting and analysing the data of this study. Finally, I present the analysis and findings of the study, exploring the discursive relationship between memes about political violence and social resilience.

1 Theoretical Framework: Memes and/as Social Resilience

1.1 Memes

While representing a relatively recent digital phenomenon, the study of memes has increased rapidly in disciplines ranging from media studies, digital sociology, to cultural studies and political science. In this study, I treat memes primarily as digital communication practices which make social or political points, often through a humorous framing. This is an analytical point of view which has been firmly established in media and communication studies, where Shifman's (2013) book *Memes in Digital Culture* serves as one of the strongest proponents for this angle. Her work has been extensively built upon in media and communication studies and it is today widely regarded as canonical in the field. Shifman (2013) notes that a distinctive hallmark of the meme is its political messages which are commonly steeped in layers of humor: representing a form of "playful politics" (Mortensen and Neumeyer 2021). Memes commonly rely on popular culture references, such as images or sound from tv-shows, video games, music videos, and movies. Shifman (2013) stresses that these popular culture references establish distinct meme templates, by which other users can easily make their own versions of the same meme, thus adding further remixes to the corpus of memes (51–53). It is, furthermore, important to note that memes may be read as a digital embodiment of satire – often conveyed through irony and parody – which "combines play with social or political critique, using wit to attack particular ideas or conventions" (Day 2018, 120). In fact, such satirical "attacks" via memes may serve to build emotional support amongst digital communities, especially in times of crisis, as noted by Murru and Vicari (2021). They argue that memetic satire is particularly relevant in times of adversity "since it allows a collective narration of challenging events through an already experienced and familiar format" (2425–2426). The creative and participatory nature of memes (facilitated by their malleable templates) grants users a certain agency in the aftermath of crisis and adversity, as it allows them to remember the event in their preferred way, and

to "broadcast" it as such to selected digital publics via social media platforms (see Silvestri 2018). Thus, on the one hand, memetic memorialisation may help users find closure with a traumatic event, by giving them the ability to voice their own narrative of it. On the other hand, considering that memes frequently "travel" across digital contexts and may linger online for a long period of time it may entail that one unwillingly comes across a meme which re-ignites traumatic experiences of crises. Hence, the meme is a double-edged sword in this regard, one that can help people cope with trauma and crisis, while at the same time potentially prolonging said experiences (see Silvestri 2018).

1.2 Social Resilience

From the above discussion on crisis and trauma, the leap to resilience is short. Resilience is commonly defined as a system's ability "to deal with adverse changes and shocks" (Béné et al. 2012, 11). Shocks may be natural disasters, but can also include human-made disasters such as "economic shocks, political crises, terrorism, [and] war" (Fahlberg et al. 2020, 2). Social resilience, then, is the ability for individuals and communities to cope with, and "bounce back" from, such external shocks (see Sherrieb et al. 2010; Adger 2000). As such, social resilience highlights the creative adaptability of humans in the face of crises and our ability to "make do" under the adverse circumstances at hand. Previous studies of social resilience have suggested that this can occur, *inter alia*, through building inclusive communities in times of external stress, where co-production, the collective voicing of dissent, and collaborative governance provide means to deal with the present shock and to prepare for future ones (see Fahlberg et al. 2020; Elmqvist et al. 2019; Kim and Lim 2016). While the idea of social resilience appears normatively desirable in much of the literature, we should also keep a critical eye on the concept, as it can serve to perpetuate social inequality. Indeed, it is often the marginalised communities who are expected to be resilient, rather than the privileged (see Cretney 2014). In this regard – as aptly noted by Berry (2022, 946) – there is a risk that "to become resilient is to continue standing in the face of violent, unjust, systems". Part of the crux here is the notion of "bouncing back" (as discussed above) which has been integral to the concept of social resilience, and which presupposes a return to normalcy (i.e., the status quo) following an external shock. This entails that cultivating resilience may act as a conservative force in society, barring any progressive social change that could improve the condition of marginalised communities (see Fahlberg et al. 2020; Cretney 2014).

At this point it is necessary to unpack the relationship between social resilience and resistance. Previous studies have tended to treat these as distinct: Social resilience has meant being 'adaptive' in the face of external shocks but not seeking to change the underlying systems which cause the shocks, whereas resistance has meant a commitment to changing the unjust systems in questions (see Scott 1984). Scholars have, however, recently begun to argue that we need to radicalise the concept of social resilience so that it also entails "resistance to a politics of dominion" (Berry 2022, 1). Berry also notes how solidarity with others who have experienced crises and/or violence is an important part in understanding how social resilience is cultivated (7). In a similar vein, Yue (2022) sees social resilience as inherently forward-looking. It is not just a passive adaption to the adverse circumstances at hand and returning afterwards to the status quo, but she instead treats resilience as "emergent (not emergency), iterative (not rebound) and transformative (not back to normal)" (362). Other scholars term this transformative potential "bouncing ahead" (Qamar 2023, 1). Thus, in these accounts we find that social resilience is indeed compatible with political agency and even resistance and that it is not merely about passive adaptation and a return to normalcy after crisis.

1.3 Social Resilience as a Communication Process

Even though memes have not previously been explored from the analytical vantage point of social resilience, there is a burgeoning body of work which treats the latter as a communication process. Here, scholars argue that social resilience may be cultivated through communication practices, thus distancing themselves from the idea that social resilience is an internal property of an individual or a community and instead stressing that it is "developed, sustained, and grown through discourse, interaction and material considerations" (Buzzanell 2010, 1). Figuring most prominently is Buzanell's (2010) *Communication Theory of Resilience*, which highlights how people cope with disruptive events through five interrelated communication practices: (a) crafting normalcy; (b) affirming identity anchors; (c) maintaining and using communication networks; (d) putting alternative logics to work, and (e) legitimising negative feelings while foregrounding productive action. "Crafting normalcy" entails upholding the normality of everyday life in the face of crisis, mostly through "normalcy discourse and performance" (Buzzanell 2010, 3) by which people "insisted that their lives were normal" (4). While looking in from the outside upon such a crisis might lead one to conclude that things are far from normal, from the inside, there is often significant communication work going on to ensure that a normality discourse is kept in place (4).

"Affirming identity anchors" refers to the kind of identity work that often follows in the wake of crisis, as those affected by it tend to re-affirm their identity in order to anchor themselves emotionally. Importantly, this may entail a problematic hardening of "primordial" identities (e.g., gender, tribal, racial, or otherwise) – especially when said identity is under threat by the crisis in question. But it may also mean crafting an identity anew, which draws upon "discourses of renewal" rather than on some notion of a primordial past (6).

"Maintaining and using communication networks" is rather self-explanatory, as Buzzanell (2010) notes the importance of creating and utilizing social networks during crisis, to be able to cope with it. "Putting alternative logics to work" is the communication practice of recognising that a specific system is broken to find alternative ways of operating within the given system. As such, one may build social resilience by first "recognizing the craziness" (7) of the situation, and then seek "creative responses to deal with the craziness of it all" (7). Finally, "legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action" means "reframing the situation linguistically and metaphorically to one of constrained hopefulness" (9). It involves the emotional labour of recognising that one has a right to be angry about the situation, but that ultimately backgrounding such emotions is more productive to one's long-term goals (9).

In this study, I draw on the theoretical notions discussed above when exploring whether digital communication practices (i.e., memes) about crises (i.e., riots) in Belfast contribute to discourses that are productive (or destructive) of social resilience. I employ Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience as the theoretical starting point for the study, but I also incorporate the broader meme and social resilience literature in the analysis.

2 Context: "The Troubles" and Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

Between 1968 and 1998 Northern Ireland went through a protracted armed conflict. The conflict primarily involved the IRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) and the British Government (informally aided by Protestant paramilitary groups) and was rooted in the contentious issue of Northern Ireland's political status. The three decades of "The Troubles" were marred by sectarian violence across Northern Ireland, resulting in approximately 3,500 deaths and 47,000 injured (see Ulster University). In a crucial turning point, 1998 saw the historic signing of the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement, heralding an end to the conflict (see UCDP). Even though "The Troubles" formally ended in 1998, the Belfast of today

is, to some extent, still a divided city shaped by its violent past. This is aptly captured by Goulding and McCroy (2021), who note that the city is "divided by walls, divided by ethnicity, and even divided by the river Lagan" (539). Sectarian identifications proliferate in present-day Belfast, which is evident, among other things, in the fact that the two most popular political parties are Sinn Féin (Irish nationalist) and DUP (unionist) – both stanchly sectarian in their politics (see Hansson and Roulston 2021, 733). Non- (or less-) sectarian political alternatives do exist; however, they are still lagging far behind their sectarian counterparts in the polls.

Having said that, much has certainly improved in Northern Ireland since the peace agreement of 1998 – perhaps most notably the level of direct violence is markedly lowered, as are the activities of paramilitary groups (see Cunningham and Gregory 2014, 64). Moreover, Belfast has a thriving city-centre which is decidedly inclusive and relatively free from sectarian divisions. Here, the creative industries are currently booming, with the "biggest set in the world" (Ramsey et al. 2019) – Game of Thrones – having been shot primarily in Northern Ireland. This meant that a "small but significant number of screen production workers based permanently in NI have benefitted from a boom of opportunities to work on international productions" (Ramsey et al. 2019, 857). In this context, the critically acclaimed Netflix series *Derry Girls* has also become a global hit. The series is a humorous retelling of "The Troubles" seen through the eyes of a group of teenagers in the city Derry/Londonderry, and thus, it is an indication that many residents of Northern Ireland are indeed ready to laugh at their somewhat dark history. Still, there appears also to be a limit to such laughter, with recent events like the "Bikinis and Balaclavas" debacle[1] serving as a stark reminder that "The Troubles" remains a sensitive issue in contemporary Northern Ireland. As such it is a source of much "embarrassment" for its citizens, many of whom prefer to avoid it as a conversation matter altogether (see Mannheimer et al. 2022, 560).

3 Methods: Digital Archival Work and Analysis

This study begun with the collection of memes which address political violence in contemporary Belfast. As such, I focused on the memetic representation of the Belfast riots of 2012 to 2013 and 2021. The collection of these memes took place in

1 This refers to the social media outrage which followed when a resort in Ballymoney started offering Bikinis and Balaclavas (the latter being a visual symbol of paramilitary violence during "The Troubles") spa packages in early 2023. For more information, please see the *Guardian* (2023).

2022, i.e., after the events in question had occurred. Thus, rather than digital ethnography which entails following real-time conversations and being in direct mediated contact with digital participants (see Pink et al. 2016), the method for collecting memes in this study is more akin to digital archiving (see Beer and Burrows 2013), in that the memes were collected after the riots in question took place and I did not follow the online discussions that took place at the time of these events. I collected memes on different social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and Facebook, as they appeared there in various groups, discussion forums and pages. When looking for relevant memes, I searched the hashtag #Belfastriots on the social media platforms mentioned above. I furthermore put the phrases "Belfast Riots" and "Belfast Memes" into Google search and Reddit. Finally, I searched using the terms "Belfast" and "Northern Ireland" on web pages dedicated specifically to memes, including Know Your Meme, Memedroid, and Meme Generator. The rationale for this method of collection was to find as many relevant memes as possible, which meant exploring several different social media platforms, web pages and search engines.

Through these methods I gathered 47 memes which were deemed relevant for this study's aims, that is, memes which directly address political violence in contemporary Belfast. Once identified, the memes were stored digitally as images, and I also kept a detailed written log of the context in which they appeared online. Here, I took notes of where and when the memes were posted (i.e., which websites they appeared on and what date they were posted), how they were received (i.e., the amount of likes/upvotes/downvotes they received as well as any salient comments that were made about them), and whether – and if so how – they were subsequently remixed. Once stored, I begun the process of analysing the memes. The analytical process entailed that I went back and forth between the theoretical framework and the empirical data (i.e., the memes) when developing the findings.

4 Findings: Cultivating Social Resilience through Memetic Humour and the Normalisation of Violence?

In this section I discuss memes about Belfast riots, exploring them from the analytical vantage point of social resilience and answering the research question:

How are memes about political violence discursively situated vis-à-vis the cultivation of social resilience in Belfast, Northern Ireland?[2]

4.1 Theme One: Making Fun of the Riots

Many of the memes that were collected for this study make fun of the political violence which is depicted in them. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023), by poking fun at the rioting they in a sense "dethrone" the political struggles depicted in the memes, making them laughable, rather than worthy of serious deliberation. Thus, the memes in this category do what memes do best. They perform a kind of "playful politics" (Mortensen and Neumayer 2021) which is at the same time humorous and ideologically potent (see Shifman 2013). This is evident in the first meme of this study[3] in which we see Father Dougal McGuire from the British sitcom *Father Ted* exclaim: "Ted, you're not going to believe it! There's riots in Belfast because of a massive infringement of human right . . . Oh wait, it's just a flag". This meme references the flag protests of 2012 to 2013, as it expresses bewilderment at how much unrest the act of removing a flag from Belfast City Hall provoked. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023), at the heart of the meme, then, lies a critique of the "banal nationalism" (Billig 2010) inherent in the strong emotional attachment to the Union Jack so common in contemporary Belfast and Northern Ireland. The meme may thus be read as laying bare the "craziness" (Buzzanell 2010, 7) of the political system in Northern Ireland and implicitly calling for alternative political logics to be put to work. As such, this meme appears to be productive of socially resilient discourse in Northern Ireland – following Buzzanell's (2010) theorisation.

The second meme of this study also makes fun of the Belfast flag protests of 2012 to 2013.[4] In this one we are presented with a creative remix of the movie poster for the Hollywood blockbuster *Taken 3* – starring actor Liam Neeson. In the fictitious poster, we see Neeson's character and his daughter in the foreground, and a photo of a "flag-less" Belfast City Hall photoshopped into the back-

2 The analytical themes discussed in this study – as well as several of the specific memes – also appear in Gusic and Lundqvist (2023). However, there they are analysed from a peace and conflict point of view, whereas in this chapter they are probed from the theoretical perspective of social resilience.

3 The meme can be viewed here: https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/000/516/164/6cf.jpg.

4 The meme can be viewed here: https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/masonry/000/514/190/d1d.png.

ground. The film has also been given a new subtitle in the remixed poster: "They Took the Fleg". This meme was widely circulated during and after the flag protests of 2012 to 2013, and as such it is featured on the Know Your Meme entry dedicated to the events (Northern Ireland Flag Protests 2012–2013). It, moreover, made rounds on the webpage Ireland Before You Die in the article "10 Things You'll Only Understand If You Are a Northerner" and on the Facebook page titled Northern Ireland Banter. The meme is similar to the Father Ted meme discussed above in its political argument, albeit with one important difference, namely, the spelling of the word "flag" as "fleg" in the subtitle of the movie. As noted by Reilly (2021) in his book on digital practices during episodes of political contention in Northern Ireland, the word "fleg" carries with it problematic, classist connotations. Supposedly, "fleg" is how Protestant working-class communities in Belfast would pronounce the word "flag". Rather than just being an innocent joke, Reilly stresses that this is a condescending imitation of how working-class Protestants (the main protagonists of the flag protests) speak, which positions them as inferior and unsophisticated (see Reilly 2021, 79–80). Hence, as argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023, 6323), this meme expresses a sense of superiority vis-à-vis the protagonists of the flag protests. It may therefore be understood as a strategy for "affirming identity anchors" (Buzzanell 2010, 6). While this may sometimes be a resilient communication strategy in the face of crisis as noted by Buzanell (2010), it is in this case also decidedly of the problematic kind, as such discourse arguably works to harden sectarian identities in Belfast. This is unlikely to help resolve the underlying issues that provoked the rioting in the first place – rather the opposite. Thus, here the meme appears antagonistic to the discursive cultivation of social resilience in Belfast, given that it pits different groups of people against one other rather than forging solidarity alliances in the face of crisis (see Berry 2022, 7).

4.2 Theme Two: Normalising the Violence

In addition to making fun of the violence, another prominent theme amongst the collected memes was the normalisation of violence. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023) rather than mocking the violence, the memes in this theme position rioting as "business as usual" in Belfast (6324). As an illustrative example, the third meme of this study[5] jokes about how the Baltimore riots of 2015 were seen as

5 The meme can be viewed here: https://images7.memedroid.com/images/UPLOADED118/5542943bcfb6d.jpeg.

"unimpressive" from the point of view of Belfast residents. This meme thus puts it out there that Belfast citizen have come to expect more "spectacular" riots than what they saw in Baltimore, given their own background as residents of a decidedly "riot-y" city. This meme was first made in 2015 and posted onto the website Memedroid, where it currently (November 2023) has an 85 percent positive rating based on 1,833 individual votes. Interestingly, the meme has subsequently been further remixed and updated in 2021 in the aftermath of the Washington DC riots, when protestors attempted to storm Capitol. In this updated iteration with the title "Belfast people judging the 'riot' in Washington"[6], the judges from Belfast are even less impressed by the riots – as evidenced by the lower scores and the use of quotation marks on the word "riot" – and thus, the notion that Belfast residents are the ultimate connoisseurs of what constitutes "a good riot" is (again) imprinted upon the reader. This remix was uploaded onto Memedroid on 8 January 2021, and at the time of writing (November 2023) it has a 72 percent approval rate based on 505 individual votes.

Another example of a meme that normalises violence in Belfast can be found in the fifth meme of this study – "Welcome to Belfast"[7]. Here we are presented with a "starter pack" about life in the city, which includes images of armed paramilitaries, a march by the Orange Order[8], a contentious unionist mural, riot police, and rioting. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023) many of the starter packs about Belfast refer to rioting, thus in a sense reinforcing the stereotype about the city as a place where political violence is part of the normal state of affairs. This resonates with Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience, which emphasises "crafting normalcy" as an important part in the discursive cultivation of social resilience. Individuals and communities who experience crisis tend to communicate that their situation is normal, even when it clearly is not: as a coping mechanism. Arguably, the memetic normalisation of rioting in Belfast serves this very purpose, of normalising what is not normal in order to cope with the situation. It is quite unexpected, though, that what is normalised through these memes is the crisis/riot itself. In Buzzanell's discussion of this mechanism, she instead highlights how people communicate their maintenance of daily routines (albeit often modified) despite the crisis. What happens, then, when it is the crisis itself that is discursively rendered normal through memes? On the one hand, it may provide a sense of relief, as people feel that the crisis is nothing out

6 The meme can be viewed here: https://images7.memedroid.com/images/UPLOADED501/5ff813922392b.jpeg.

7 The meme can be viewed here: https://i.imgur.com/VcFrl7v.jpg.

8 The Orange Order is a polarising and traditionally rooted institution that stands in opposition to Irish nationalism while vigorously advocating Protestant culture.

of the ordinary – nothing to worry about. On the other hand, it may instil upon its audiences that violence is inevitable. It is conceivable that the latter notion may bar people from trying to change matters in the future, and thus such memes arguably display social resilience's conservative potential by helping people cope with the present, but at the (potential) cost of producing discourse which is defeatist in the face of crises (see Fahlberg et al. 2020; Elmqvist et al. 2019; Kim and Lim 2016). These notions are, however, merely a hypothesis at this point, as this study does not explore how people in Belfast receive these memes.

While this study does not explore audiences' reception of memes, we should note that the "Welcome to Belfast" starter pack (and several other memes in the larger corpus) contain violent imagery. In this specific instance, the meme shows armed paramilitaries from "The Troubles" as well as riot police in front of a burning building in what appears to be present-day Belfast. We can assume that seeing this imagery in their social media feeds will be traumatic for people who were afflicted by the violence in question, and as such the meme may cause communities in present-day Belfast to re-live the crisis of the past. This could contribute to a hardening of sectarian identities – or what Buzzanell (2010) calls "affirming identity anchors" (7). Still, the violent imagery may also be appropriated by users affected by the violence who can create their own memetic take on what happened, thus giving them agency to cope with (and possibly overcome) the trauma. For, as argued by Murru and Vicari (2021) memes allow for "a collective narration of challenging events through an already experienced and familiar format" (2425–2426). This is the inherent duality of memetic remembrance of violence: on the one hand possibly re-traumatising affected individuals and communities, and on the other hand possibly offering a way for them to "own" the violent narrative and come to a closure (see Silvestri 2018). The latter would appear to be conducive to the discursive cultivation of social resilience, as it involves 'bouncing ahead' (Qamar 2023, 1) of the crisis.

Conclusions: Memetic Social Resilience? "It's complicated"

This chapter set out to study whether – and if so how – memes may contribute to the discursive cultivation of social resilience in the face of riots in Belfast, Northern Ireland. To this end, I analysed a corpus of memes which address political violence in present-Belfast, guided by a theoretical framework which incorporates both meme studies literature and social resilience literature. The memes which make fun of the violence in Belfast may – from a meme studies perspec-

tive – not be too surprising, as one of the defining characteristics of a meme is to be humorous (see Shifman 2013). Still, probing at this quality from a social resilience point of view yielded some interesting results. Here, I found that what matters for the discursive cultivation of social resilience is how the meme in question makes fun of violence. On the one hand, I discussed memes which appear to discursively criticise the underlying causes of the crisis – or in other words "recognizing the craziness" (Buzzanell 2010, 7) of the political system in Northern Ireland – thus aligning neatly with the cultivation of social resilience. On the other hand, I analysed memes which make fun of the rioters in a sectarian manner; hence barring solidarity with "the other" community in Belfast, and as such discursively working against the cultivation of social resilience.

The memes that normalise Belfast rioting may be read as a way of "crafting normalcy" (Buzzanell 2010, 3) in the face of the highly disruptive political violence. What is interesting here, though, is that what is rendered normal through these memes is the violence itself, rather than the mundane routines and practices of which Buzzanell (2010) speaks. Thus, I asked the question of what happens when memes discursively normalise political violence: Does it lead to a defeatist resignation to rioting, or is it instead a resilient coping mechanism? Ultimately, this cannot be answered solely through studying discourse, but it must also include an audience perspective. Essentially: What meaning do audiences in Belfast make out of the kinds of memes discussed in this study, and what actions and emotions (if any) do they provoke? In particular, we need to know more about whether audiences take the memes at face value or if they are more prone to reading them as satire (see Day 2018, 120). This could be elucidated through an interview-based study in Belfast, where audiences are asked for their take on these memes.

Furthermore, I analysed memes which contain violent imagery from Northern Ireland's troubled past. I noted that such memes may on the one hand contribute to a hardening of (sectarian) identities in present-day Belfast, while on the other hand they may allow people to produce their own take on the violence of the past, and thus, in a sense, come to terms with it. This, again, illustrates how memes about political violence may be both destructive and productive of the discursive cultivation of social resilience. In essence, then: "it's complicated".

Finally, this chapter has indicated that the "radicalization" (Berry 2022) of the social resilience concept makes it adept at capturing social practices which aim at the transformation of society, rather than merely the perpetuation of the status quo. This was illustrated by the analysis of memes which challenged (or failed to challenge) the lingering sectarian identities in post-conflict Belfast. Still, this widening of the social resilience concept also comes with its own challenges, namely the risk that it loses its analytical purchase by turning into a catch-all concept

which accommodates resistance as well as passive adaptation. This crux, I argue, needs to be critically considered when/if moving forward with social resilience as an analytical lens.

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