

The Northern Irish hunger strikers as cultural icons

Erja Simuna

MA, is a PhD student at the Department of History, University of Oulu, Finland. Her doctoral dissertation examines how differing political, sociological and cultural environments affect media coverage. Her main research areas are historical image research, intercultural communication and the history of Northern Ireland.

Abstract:

The aim of this article is to discuss hunger strikers as cultural icons. Fasting is a non-violent way of communicating a message or achieving a goal. It is a process that includes and reveals poignant cultural values, and can be regarded as a symbolic gesture. It is also a phenomenon recognised by many cultures. As the nature of this recognition can vary between different cultures, wider cross-cultural aspects of iconicity can be reached.

This article examines the 1981 Northern Irish hunger strike to find out what iconic attributes are connected with the hunger strikers. A special focus is given to the role of international news media as an intensifier of iconicity.

Keywords: #hunger strike, #iconicity, #news, #cross-cultural; #Irish

Introduction

A smiling portrait (image 1) of Bobby Sands, an Irish republican prisoner and a hunger striker, has become an icon for the Northern Irish conflict. The image is an icon, not only in Sands' own community, but also worldwide.



Image 1. The portrait of Bobby Sands published in *Le Figaro*, May 6, 1981.

Bobby Sands died as a result of a hunger strike while imprisoned at the Maze prison, in Northern Ireland, in May 1981. His death marked the first of a series of hunger strike deaths in Northern Ireland. Altogether ten prisoners died during the protest. This article aims to briefly discuss the iconic status of the hunger strikers: how the iconicity was built up and what kinds of meanings it connoted. The article will also briefly survey how international newspapers mediated iconic meanings. The examples studied in this article were published by a selection of international newspapers¹ (see References). The examples are intentionally simplified in order to showcase the diversity that can be related to the question of iconicity. They are primarily treated as possibilities rather than as exact truths.

Before examining hunger striking as a cultural icon, some definitional terms are needed. The definition of a cultural icon in this article is loosely based on the definition provided by many experts (e.g. Parker 2012, 12-13). An icon is a symbol. It is a metaphorical representation of a certain meaning. This article focuses on persons as icons. In other words, an icon can be a person linked to a certain idea. The second key definition here is the one of an icon as a cultural manifestation. It is easily recognised and represents cultural norms and values. In this case, I am focusing on hunger strikers as icons that reflect values held by a culture (or a nation). In regard to this article, a cultural icon is a distinct and durable representative of the phenomenon in question. It resides in the collective memories of (different) communities, and upholds a narrative formed by the communities.

The methodological premise for this article is imagology. It is primarily concerned with how mental images – and thus icons – become recognisable. They are seen as properties of their contexts. The fundamental supposition is that there is a cultural difference, a sense in which one nation is perceived to be different from the rest. We know most foreign cultures by reputation only. We have images of specific national characters even though we may not have any personal knowledge of assessing how typical those characters are. We recognize certain attributes as being typical for certain nations (Leersen 2007, 17). These ethnic or national stereotypes and commonplaces are studied in the field of imagology. Imagol-

ogy as a method is primarily comparatist. Therefore, it is well adapted to research that focuses on different interpretations.

Brief background

The mid 1970's was the bloodiest time of the Northern Ireland conflict. The British government altered and tightened legislation on several occasions during this period. As a result, prisoners convicted of the same crimes in different periods were treated differently, some having 'Special Category Status', akin to be treated as political prisoners – having the right, for example, to wear their own clothes – and others being treated as ordinary criminals. After several years of protesting, the Irish republican prisoners launched a series of hunger strikes in order to restore the 'political prisoner' status of the prisoners.

The Officer Commanding of the IRA prisoners, Bobby Sands, started his hunger strike on 1 March 1981. He was joined at one-to-two-week intervals by other prisoners. At first, the hunger strike did not attract much attention outside the prison. Then the MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone died, and Sands was nominated as a candidate for the by-election. Sands was the sole nationalist candidate against a unionist candidate. The election results were announced on 9 April 1981: Bobby Sands had been elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. This gained a lot of publicity for the prisoners. After 66 days on a hunger strike, Sands died on 5 May 1981. The hunger strike continued, and within the next few weeks, three other prisoners died. The British government's hard line against the people on hunger strike continued to generate a lot of media coverage. More publicity was generated, as the Republic of Ireland prepared for a general election in early June. The election strategy continued to be a success for the protesters: Kieran Doherty, who was also on hunger strike, was elected as an MP, along with one other protesting prisoner. As the hunger strike went on, there were a few attempts to resolve the situation, but because neither side was prepared to yield, the deaths continued. In early July, two more people on hunger strike died. Four more followed in August, bringing the total to ten. Even though the prisoners continued to receive support, the most intensive stage of the protest was over. Attempts to end the hunger strike intensified. It was recommended for the families of the men on hunger strike to authorise medical intervention. The hunger

strike was seen as being increasingly futile. On 3 October 1981, the prisoners released a statement announcing that they would end the strike (Beresford 1994, passim; O'Malley 1990, passim.).

The hunger strikers gained plenty of international attention, and in time, they became an iconic reminder of the Northern Ireland conflict. The popular opinions in different countries of the merits of hunger striking reveal interesting differences between cultures.

From a representation to an icon

In order to study the prevalent signifiers of the iconicity of the hunger strikers, I begin with examining the representations of them. Representations can reveal the meanings surrounding the phenomenon, as they communicate beyond the mere texts and visuals.

When Bobby Sands died, his status was immediately assessed by the media. For instance, the Australian newspaper, *The Age*, published a headline: 'Sands a shadowy figure, more symbol than person' (*The Age* 6.5.1981). Just hours after his death, the deceased hunger striker had become a symbol of the conflict. This status only strengthened over time. The same happened in different cultures. Therefore, it is essential to discuss why a convicted prisoner can be considered as an icon.

Death by hunger striking is the most obvious reason. Hunger striking has a long history. It is a cosmopolitan phenomenon. According to one estimate, there were more than 200 hunger strikes in 52 different countries between 1972 and 1982 (Russell 2005, 88). A hunger strike is a startling method of non-violent resistance in which participants fast as an act of protest or to provoke attention. A hunger strike aims to achieve a specific, often political, goal. In the context of Irish history and culture, hunger strikers occupy a significant place. For instance during the struggle for independence, several Irish activists received martyrdom as a result of hunger strikes. They became "a symbol of what lengths small Ireland would go to, of what pain she would bear, to assert her independence in the face of the military power of the mighty Empire" (O'Malley 1990, 26). In Ireland, hunger striking became a powerful myth. This has been deployed during decades to follow.

The depth of emotions, the underlying rationale, and the startling events created an ambiance that was hard to ignore. The Irish hunger strikers confronted people with the dilemma of how to re-

spond. Public fasting resulted in an audience becoming witness to suffering, and consequently, to trying to understand why it all happened. All this processing helped to build a popular representation of the hunger strike. Disturbing and provocative depictions reaffirmed the symbolic meaning of the event.

A group of certain features have become iconic representations of the hunger strikers. These startling attributes make them to stand out. A hunger striker is depicted as withered, yet determined. Physically, weight loss and an overgrown beard (for the males) are the most typical visual signs of the hunger striker. This unkemptness is one of the most iconic attributes connected with hunger striking. It calls attention to the suffering. Despite their physical decline, hunger strikers are usually portrayed as determined, even defiant. This contradiction underlines the reason of the hunger strike. It raises a question: why does someone kill himself (or herself) for a cause? It is a question that appeals universally. Narratives were formed: each community used the hunger strikers to confirm their own perceptions.

Several factors intensified the appeal. For instance, the hunger strikers themselves were not visible to the audience. Instead, the smiling photos became the visual representations of them. The photo of Bobby Sands (image 1) became well known in different parts of the world, not only during the hunger strike, but years and decades later. He was always depicted in the same way. On the other hand, he was also a mystery: no one was able to see him with his (her) own eyes. His appeal was more and more based on imagined features.

Locally, respected persons become visible in many ways. In the Catholic areas of Northern Ireland, the 1981 hunger strikers were portrayed on several murals. Mural painting is considered to be one of the most powerful ways of symbolic expression (Jarman 1998). The hunger strikers remained immortalised as young, healthy and happy. Later on, some of these personalised murals were replaced by more generalised representations of the hunger strikers. These unkempt blanket men appear in contrast to the former murals (Jarman 1997, 236). Anyhow, the iconicity remains. The images of the hunger strikers became icons for resistance against imperialism and nationalism. The murals are memorials that reinforce the spirit of the community. Thus, representations turn into icons.

Iconic status can intensify in time. Again, the interests of the consumer play a major role in how the meaning is viewed. To a person who belongs to the same Republican community as Bobby Sands, he is still an admirable icon:

Songs have been written about Bobby Sands, films made, streets named after him. He was a poet, a revolutionary, and – in the words of singer Christy Moore – the “People’s Own MP”. His and his comrades’ sacrifices energised and inspired republicans. Bobby spoke of revenge not in terms of one side triumphing over another but said: “Our revenge will be the laughter of our children.” Rather than diminishing over the passage of time, the stature of Bobby Sands in history has only increased. (Morrison 2011)

Additionally, over time the iconicity has spread via many channels: in addition to the vast news coverage, the Irish hunger strike has inspired artistic responses (films, poetry, novels, plays, and music). What is really interesting, is that the meaning surrounding the iconicity changes depending on the standpoint of the viewer. The Irish hunger strikers still raise divisions. This complexity fulfills one essential qualification of iconicity: the impressiveness.

This case also backs up the idea of the media’s role in creating iconic status. This is briefly discussed next.

Depictions of the Irish hunger strikers in international newspapers

Fasting is an effective method of public protest. Yet it is effective only if it is backed by public support and given attention by the media. The 1981 hunger strike happened when newspapers still dominated the news world. The hunger strike was too good a story to ignore, even worldwide. Aided by the news media, the Irish hunger strikers achieved an iconic status internationally. They become sources of stereotype and prejudice. Next, I will discuss a few examples of how newspapers in different countries depicted the symbolism of the Irish hunger strike.

For *The Irish Times*, the hunger strike was an icon for a long struggle: according to the paper, the hunger strike was not won or lost, but was merely one episode in a larger battle (*The Irish Times*

10.10.1981). This reaction was, and still is, typical in Ireland. The hunger strikers are considered to be avatars in the historical battle against the British. They are identified as the antagonists against British rule. However, their participation in paramilitary organisations creates an interesting dilemma. As members of the IRA or INLA, the hunger strikers were not solely 'good' people. The iconicity therefore consists of ambiguous elements. This demonstrates that the nature of an icon is not necessarily positive. Icons can also refer to negative matters. The status of the Irish hunger strikers in England is a clear example of this.

The Times of London depicted the hunger strike as one form of violence. The hunger strike became a representation of Irishness: "Why the Irish use hunger strikes as a weapon" (*The Times* 6.5.1981). The connotation was negative. The hunger strikers symbolised the negative side of the Irish. The long and troubled history between the countries had created a need to have something to summarise the conflict. The hunger strikers became the icons for the troubled part of the relationship.

The above-mentioned examples reveal how cultural and political closeness intensify the meaning of the icon. The iconicity of the hunger strikers were used to suit the (political) relationships between the countries. It is particularly fascinating that the hunger strike was not just a local conflict. With the help of the media, the hunger strikers became recognised across cultures. In addition, the meaning of the hunger strike was different. Few examples of this variation summarise well how the cultural and political links make a difference how their iconicity is used.

The Canadian newspaper, *The Globe and Mail* depicted the meaning of the hunger strike as violent and pointless on several occasions. The hunger strikers were terrorists (*The Globe and Mail* 5.8.1981). In other words, the characterisation of the strike by the paper was strongly negative. The elements for the coverage were chosen to support this view. For instance, *The Globe and Mail* reported on the hunger strike death of Francis Hughes using a photo (image 2) of him lying wounded after a gun battle. The report itself focused on his violent past. His own death was less important. A hunger striker was an icon for violence. Hence *The Globe and Mail's* depiction of the hunger strike was similar to *The Times'* judgement.



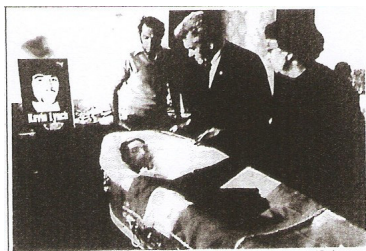
Image 2. News article published by The Globe and Mail, May 13, 1981.

In comparison, some newspapers recognised the traditional meaning of the hunger strike (e.g. *The Age* 21.4.1981; *Dagens Nyheter* 6.5.1981; *Helsingin Sanomat* 6.5.1981). These newspapers portrayed the hunger strikers as icons of the larger conflict. The fate of the hunger strikers was extraordinary. In particular, in Scandinavia, where a hunger strike was not a familiar phenomenon, the hunger strikers were depicted as icons of oddity.

The Age depicted the hunger strikers as icons for guerrilla action (against the British authority). This hinted that the hunger strikers were considered by the paper as icons for fasting for a more justifiable cause. *The Age* did not share the violent hallmark with *The Times*.

All these different perceptions of the hunger strike are true in their own right. They reflect the political circumstances and the values that are dominant at each times in each particular culture. In summary, the political relations between Britain and Canada were close in the early 1980s. Therefore, the violent depiction of *The Globe and Mail* was hardly a coincidence. Meanwhile, the Australians were breaking away from the British ascendancy. (see Roberts 2006, passim) This makes the stance of *The Age* understandable. As the Scandinavian countries did not have any particular interest in the conflict, it was depicted with less intense opinion. Unfortunately, there is not enough space in this article to analyze in detail these fascinating relations. In a word, the symbolism connected with the hunger strikers changed according to the political circumstances. The political and cultural relations of each country with Britain proved to be an imperative factor. The news media reflected the political circumstances of 1981.

The (news) media play a major role in the process of someone/ something becoming iconic. Media provide information that is used to form a perception. If the perception is extraordinarily poignant, it can develop into an icon. The Irish hunger strikers have achieved that. Their appeal is based on the most fundamental collective attributes: a sense of nationalism and an ideal of devotion. Additionally, they provide a symbolic representation of iniquity (that can be construed in many ways). The hunger strikes can thus be easily used to reinforce societal opinion. It is remarkable that they have become icons of both right and wrong. The cultural context decides which one prevails in each society.



Paddy Lynch and his wife, Bridget, place a veil over their son, Kevin. —AP picture.

IRA death sparks riots

Image 3. The Front page of South China Morning Post, August 4, 1981.

Conclusion

How do certain persons become important enough that they are remembered for decades after their death? An icon is considered as an element that recaps a certain moment. To see a deceased hunger striker (image 3) is a startling experience. You don't get to see such an image very often. When you do, the personal reaction is enormous. What precisely this reaction will be is the result of a complex set of factors. The status of the Irish hunger strikers brings out all the emotions that are the basis for iconicity. The hunger strikers were, and still are, linked to a particular idea.

The strong spirit of hunger striker captivates audiences. The things that truly affect us become icons. They last in collective memories. The iconicity of the Irish hunger strikers can be treated as a manifestation of cultural diversity. The icons stand for culturally agreed meanings and values. One of the most intriguing phenomenon is the way the same figure can be a source of contradiction. The same person can be an icon for violent terrorists, as well as for determined nationalists. This variation shows how traditions play a major role in the human mind.

Icons that have derived from conflicts or wars are often connected with feelings of nationalism. They are used to highlight the sense of community. Depending on the result (to the community), the icon is used to reaffirm either the victory or the loss. The iconicity of the Irish hunger strikers entails this duality. For those who saw them as mere terrorists, they became icons of violence. For those who supported their cause, they became icons of injustice. Both views are equally right.

A hunger striker is not merely a hunger striker. Significant changes have been inspired by hunger striking. Strong values and sentiments are connected with a hunger striker. These iconic features are culture specific. The treatment of the hunger strikers as icons reveals something profound of each community. The analysis of these treatments is thus very fertile; possibilities for further research are endless.

Note

- 1 The selection of the newspapers is based on my forthcoming doctoral thesis which examines the international coverage of the 1981 hunger strike. The news-

papers examined in the research are: *The Age* (Australia), *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden), *Le Figaro* (France), *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), *Helsingin Sanomat* (Finland), *The Irish Times* (Ireland), *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Switzerland), *The New York Times* (USA), *El Pais* (Spain), *La Prensa* (Argentina), *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), *The Sowetan* (South Africa), *The Times* (Great Britain), and *Die Welt* (FRG). News and editorial material published between 1 March and 10 October, 1981 by the papers were included in the research.

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