

The Semiotics of Martyrdom.

“[In] epochs of revolutionary crisis [people] anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire ...” (Marx 1852)

This is how Marx introduced his analysis of the 1848 Revolution in France, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” the definitive work in which Marx described the formation of political subjects.

Marx used a dramaturgical metaphor in which individual figures - ‘historical personages’ - don the costumes of a hero from the past or from mythology. Others, who share the same attitudes and aspirations identify with the historical allusion, and recognise the actor as speaking for them. The “world-historic personage” together with the supporting group then play their role in a drama in which the players improvise on a known script as the narrative unfolds. Marx is pointing to political subjects in the form of some prominent person acting as a corporate individual, to speak on behalf of a group which is thereby constituted as a political agent.

This semiotic aspect of Marx’s political thinking is frequently overlooked with an emphasis on Marx’s ideas about the economic conditions for the formation of social subjects. The semiotic process of formation of social agencies allows for a wide variety of conditions of life to contribute to group formation, mediated through the literature and national mythology of the time.

Marx used this metaphor to ridicule the various non-proletarian players, and in reference to the proletariat and the coming revolution he stipulated:

“The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past.”

The oppressed cannot take their imagery from the past, but how *are* the oppressed to become subjects *in their own right*, rather than making up the cannon fodder for “world-historic personages” from the privileged elite? How can the voiceless find their own voice? Marx insisted that communism grows through practical criticism of existing social conditions, not from building castles in the sky, so the “poetry of the future” must be generated by those who suffer and resist these social conditions. Thus, for the oppressed masses it is their *martyrs* and other heroes of the class struggle who must take the place of the personages and their mythological alter egos. Martyrdom is the only vehicle open to the oppressed which is able to summon up consciousness of existing wrongs and emergent ideals which are not yet legitimated.

Because Marx never formulated a theory of semiotics, we will use Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics to review the conditions which determine whether a martyr will die in vain, or on the contrary, be remembered as the stimulus for a new social movement taking up critique of existing social conditions on a mass scale.

People function as signs for ideas. According to Peirce there are three ways in which a sign is connected with the object it refers to: the *icon* which represents its object physical

resemblance, such as the archetypal victim of an injustice; the *symbol*, which represents the object by convention, that is, in the theoretical or expert register; the *index* represents the object by physical connection, that is, other people who recognise the martyr as a fellow-sufferer of the condition validated by an expert and say “Me, too!” A sign points to an object for an *interpretant* or target audience. A sign without an interpretant is meaningless.

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What circumstances determined that Clarrie O’Shea’s¹ imprisonment would trigger a general strike and destroy the “penal powers,” while Craig Johnson² would serve out his time with very little to show for it? How did Cindy Sheehan³ stimulate a resurgence of the anti-war movement where others had failed?

Under what conditions does a victim become a martyr, someone whose suffering under the *normal* and lawful social arrangements is so widely and acutely felt to be an injustice that it triggers a social movement which *destroys* those arrangements?

To begin with, there has to be a real possibility⁴ for a social movement, even if one does not yet exist. And the social arrangement in question must already be to some extent “unreal.” But a martyr does not weigh up her chances before doing what she has to do. For the martyr, the law *is* unreal and deserves to perish⁵ ..., but this may prove to be just subjective. How can the martyr’s view prove to be the reality?

Three things are necessary.

The Martyr as Icon

FIRSTLY, the subject must present to the world as someone that people can recognise and identify with. “There but for the grace of God go I.” People have to be able to see themselves (or a loved one) in the person of the martyr, and want to, almost *enjoy*, seeing themselves in the martyr. The martyr must be an *attractive* person, someone in whom people identify what is best in themselves. It is however the *moral character* of the subject which is most important in determining their role as a martyr. It *helps* to be personally attractive, but it’s *necessary* to be a saint. When **Malcolm X** declared “Black is beautiful” he had the character to carry it off.

When we talk of the subject being sympathetic and attractive, it is the *act* of martyrdom which is at issue, not the subject’s entire character as such. And the act of martyrdom transforms the subject’s personality which is afterwards viewed only through the lens of

¹ Clarrie O’Shea was the Victorian Secretary of the Tramways Union who on 15 May 1969 who was jailed for refusing to pay a fine imposed under anti-union laws. A general strike got under way and 48 hours later an anonymous donor paid the fine, but the laws were never again used and later repealed.

² Craig Johnson was jailed for 9 months in 2001 for a “walk through” by union officials of the offices of a labour hire firm in Melbourne. The campaign to release him was ineffective, and he served out his time.

³ Cindy Sheehan’s son was killed in action in Iraq in 2004 and Cindy became a tireless anti-war campaigner, attracting national attention across the US.

⁴ Hegel’s Logic, §147.

⁵ Hegel’s Logic, §24n(2)

their martyrdom. It is not the character of **Rosa Parks**⁶ which is really at issue: isn't it clear that she was a strong and courageous woman with a powerful sense of injustice, that in Montgomery in 1955, she should refuse to give up her seat on the bus when ordered to do so? Every Black person in the country must have *wanted* to do that. Claudette Colvin had done the same thing only 9 months earlier, but 15 years old and pregnant, the NAACP hesitated to make her the face of their campaign.

Now **Ronald Ryan**⁷ was not someone who could be called "attractive"; a small-time criminal, imprisoned for shop-breaking and weapons offences, but with no previous history of violence before his attempted escape; he was the icon of the kind of person who ought to be rehabilitated, not hung, as, despite a huge protest, he was.

It is interesting to recall that only a few years before Ryan shot a warder while escaping, **Kevin Simmonds**⁸ had become a public hero. Simmonds had escaped, broke into another prison and bashed a warder to death, and then eluded police for 37 days. In the process, a fan club, anonymous wall-posters, marriage proposals and sympathetic tabloid headlines followed his exploits, and he was eventually convicted of manslaughter rather than murder by a sympathetic jury. Simmonds is remembered as 'good looking and charismatic'. Everyone (except screws) loves an escapee. Simmonds and his accomplice were subsequently (and somewhat unsurprisingly) treated with brutality by prison warders till Simmonds eventually took his own life, but their case was central to the prison reforms of the 1970s.

It is obvious enough that a young, reasonably attractive, former air hostess, like **Cornelia Rau**⁹, kidnapped and incarcerated by immigration officials, is more likely to trigger outrage against arbitrary detention powers of the Department of Immigration than the thousands of middle eastern families who languished in detention. The *lack* of sympathy that Australians tend to feel towards poor people arriving on our shores in leaky boats is legendary. Perhaps the ease with which antipathy overrides sympathy in such cases is a displaced feeling of guilt? Australians are after all, an entire nation of poor people who arrived in leaky boats and subsequently did quite well. One must be mindful of such perverse responses to suffering. Contrast the warm welcome given to Bosnian refugees flown in on government aircraft in May 1999, with the mistreatment of Afghani and Iraqi refugees fleeing the Taliban and Saddam Hussein to see how governments can manage perceptions; with a cynical and reactionary government in power, opportunities for a negative reaction are everywhere. **Kay Nesbit**¹⁰, tragically disfigured by a shotgun blast when she innocently answered the door, survived with an awfully disfigured face to

⁶ Rosa Parks, at age 42, in Alabama on 1 December 1955, "tired of giving in," refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger. Several people had done this before, but Rosa Parks' action stimulated the Montgomery bus boycott and she became the icon of resistance to racial segregation.

⁷ Ronald Ryan, a petty criminal who killed a guard during a prison escape, and the last person to be legally executed in Australia in 1967. His hanging set off widespread protests leading to the abolition of the death penalty not long afterwards.

⁸ Kevin Simmonds, with Leslie Newcombe escaped from Long Bay gaol. Simmonds committed suicide in 1966.

⁹ Cornelia Rau, German citizen and Australian permanent resident, unlawfully detained for 10 months in 2004-05 under the Australia's mandatory detention program. Her case initiated a government inquiry which expanded to investigate over 200 other cases of suspected unlawful detention by the Australian government, leading ultimately to a change in the law.

¹⁰ Kay Nesbit was cruelly disfigured when shot in the face by a man who was subsequently released after 7 years in prison. Kay remains a tireless advocate for victims of crime.

become a relentless advocate for victims of crime. Her case demonstrated that looks are not everything; Kay is an effective martyr *despite* her disfigurement, rather than *because* of it.

And it's not just the subject's character, but *who* they are, their "story." **Craig Johnson** is a handsome enough fellow, even charismatic, but a "run through" which scared a bunch of female office staff out of their wits is just something not very many people can see themselves doing or could empathise with, and the union had not prepared people to be able to empathise. On the contrary. Kevin Simmonds (in 1959) got more sympathy for bashing a screw to death, than Johnson did (in 2002) for scaring some office workers.

Heather Osland¹¹ served out 9½ years in prison for *murdering* her husband. But it was her only means of escape after 13½ years being beaten and terrorised. Many people could easily sympathise with Heather's act, and Heather remains an exemplary advocate for abused women. Probably the reason that she was not successful in getting justice for herself until 9½ years after her imprisonment, was that her husband had so hurt her. After those years in prison and time to collect her wits, her friends and her strength, she has become a fine icon and symbol for battered wives who fight back, and will eventually get the law and her own sentence overturned.

Clearly it is not a question of violence or non-violence; like almost all military heroes, martyrs can be violent, so long as people can empathise with their violent act, and it can be seen as proportional to the injustice met, appropriate to the context, and expressing a legitimate feeling.

It is for similar reasons that it is always a dangerous thing to go on hunger strike. Self-harm does not generate sympathy if it is not understandable; life has to be understood to have become unbearable. A hunger strike says "Life is unbearable and I would rather die," but there has to be the conditions for the unbearability of life to be recognisable. Gandhi said that "Fasting unto death is the last and most potent weapon in the armoury of *satyagraha*," but should only be used against someone who shares the underlying aim.

Bobby Sands¹² was a hero to Irish republicans for whom he was in every way an icon, and he not only led a large group of hunger-strikers in H-block, but inspired many others to follow him in other ways. But Margaret Thatcher was unmoved by the prospect of Irish republican prisoners dying in British prisons. Perhaps most Tory voters already saw the IRA as fanatics, and a hunger strike could not make them change their minds in just 6 months. Altogether 10 Irish hunger strikers starved to death. Although it is doubtful how many British voters were persuaded, it is clear that the hunger strikers galvanised Irish republicans for a protracted fight to the death which ultimately led to success for their movement. The Irish hunger strikers were true martyrs for the republican cause; they inspired others to fight, and probably knew that they would die without reprieve from Margaret Thatcher.

¹¹ Heather Osland, in 1991, conspired with her son to kill her abusive husband. She was sentenced to 14½ years and the government refused a plea for mercy. Her story remains a test case for the continuing struggle to get the 'battered woman syndrome' recognised as a defence in murder trials.

¹² Bobby Sands, IRA prisoner who led a hunger strike beginning on 1 March 1981, protesting the removal of Special Category Status. On 9 April, he was elected to Parliament representing Fermanagh and South Tyrone in a by-election. He died of starvation on 5 May 1981.

Martyrdom may be a call to arms, rather than a cry for help, depending on who is the audience or *interpretant*. But whether the martyr wants to prove that an injustice is being done, or rally force against injustice, he has to be prepared for the possibility that there will be no eleventh hour reprieve. It took more than 30 years from when the first young Spanish conscripts applied for recognition as conscientious objectors (*insumisos*) in 1971 until the law was eventually repealed in 2003 when more than 50% of all conscripts were conscientious objectors. Over 1,000 *insumisos* had been imprisoned over that period. But in the end they won, and it is unlikely that Spain will ever again consider military conscription.

On the subject of self-harm, the same kind of rules that apply to ‘cruel and unusual punishment’ also apply to *self-inflicted* punishment. If you’re going on hunger strike, then having your lips sewn together (like the **asylum-seekers** in Australia in February 2000) is actually the least of your problems; it is symbolic. But what kind of signal does it send to someone who does not already sympathise with you? It says “I am a really crazy person.” The psychological damage done by these detention centres was an outrage and most educated people understood this; the lip-sewing did catch media attention, but it did not necessarily generate *public sympathy*, even though it very effectively spurred on the refugees’ supporters to fight even harder.

It is important here to note that the issue of the presentation of an attractive image of the martyr is *not* a question simply of the role of the media and their needs. The media is just one, albeit important, arena of struggle in society; relations within the media do not belong to a different world from relations in other institutions of capitalist society. The role of the martyr as icon is a universal human relation, not a property of the mass media. The mass media were *not* sympathetic to conscientious objectors in 1966 Australia, but the image of young schoolteacher, **Bill White**¹³, being dragged from his classroom by a policeman for refusing to fight in a war was really hard to hold in the “violent protestor” frame. One of the differences made by modern electronic media is that the subject themselves usually has the opportunity, and indeed obligation, to tell their own story to the mass of the population.

The Martyr as Symbol

SECONDLY there has to be a narrative (theory, discourse, etc.) into which the subject can be inserted, which makes sense of the subject’s suffering and in which everyone can see an explanation of *their own* suffering or potential suffering or injustice.

And a narrative is context-dependent. It is easier to martyr oneself fighting anti-worker laws if you have a Minister for Labour who is a notorious union-basher. Immigration officials failing an economic migrant from Silesia on the dictation test might have seemed plausible, but it made a mockery of the idea to try to cast **Egon Kisch**¹⁴ as an illiterate. This explains why many illustrious dissidents from the Soviet bloc countries

¹³ Bill White refused a notice to attend an army induction centre in Sydney in July 1966, having applied for exemption as a conscientious objector. He was arrested while teaching, in front of his class. The photograph of his arrest became iconic.

¹⁴ Egon Kisch was a Czechoslovakian Jewish writer and official for the Comintern, a noted anti-fascist and widely respected investigative journalist and renowned intellectual. Ham-fisted attempts by the Australian government to exclude him from visiting Australia for a conference in 1934, by giving him a dictation test in Gaelic, exposed the government to ridicule.

totally lost their way when they came to the West; without a police apparatus trying to stop them saying what they said, what they said didn't make a lot of sense.

The narrative underpinning the subject's claim generally has to be *already* legitimate or on the verge of acceptance, or at least be a new version of an already legitimated story of suffering. So for example, there are doubtless many *fathers* grieving for their lost soldier-children, but it is hardly a surprise that it is a grieving *mother* (**Cindy Sheehan**) who succeeded in breaking through, for the narrative of the grieving mother is so well-established, while that of the grieving father is still relatively novel. Given this, **Terry Hicks**¹⁵ did exceptionally well in the slightly different role of the father standing up against the injustice done to his son by an evil foreign power with the collusion of his own cowardly government.

When the gay US politician, **Harvey Milk**, was assassinated, the lenient sentence passed on his assassin sparked the White Night Riots and gave national impetus to the "outing" movement. Over and above homophobic moral panic, several competing narratives were at work here. The narrative of vigilante-ism is widely promoted in movies from *Superman* and *Zorro* to *Falling Down* and *Taxi driver*, and provides a narrative to exonerate violent crime. In this case the defence used a medical explanation (junk food upset the assassin's state of mind). But the history of assassination of reformist political leaders in the US made his assassination and the official succour given the assassin instantly understood and believed. In a sense the assassination proved Harvey Milk's case: gays could not go on hiding from homophobic hatred any longer.

The problem of competing narratives is what Irving Goffman¹⁶ and George Lakoff¹⁷ call "framing." Successful framing is very dependent on the context in which a person *first hears* of the event; it is almost impossible to get people to change the frame once an event has been perceived in a certain frame.

The *availability* of the relevant narrative is the primary objective condition for martyrdom, objective in the sense that it does not normally emanate from the subject themselves; it exists independently, in the broader society, but in the *symbolic* register - the mythology, theology or expert discourse of the day. After centuries of abusing children, it was not until 1985 that the idea of priests sexually abusing children became sufficiently believable for a priest to be convicted in court, and a further 17 years passed before the narrative of priest-abuses-child became so plausible that those claiming to have been abused were more or less automatically believed. There is a fine line between moral panic and educating the public.

It is not sufficient that everyone has to be able to say "That person is just like me," or my loved one or a well-known folk hero, - it is *also* necessary that the *explanation* of their suffering is something which is known to be true, and/or is *vouched for* by the appropriate institutions - law courts, scientific institutes, churches as appropriate, and in addition to such institutions, the story-tellers of society, the script-writers, novelists,

¹⁵ Terry Hicks' son, David was sold to US force in Afghanistan for \$1000 in December 2001, and imprisoned in Guantanamo as a terrorist. Terry campaigned tirelessly in both Australia and the US, until the failure of the Australian government to secure his release became an election issue, when David was allowed to plead guilty in a charade of a military trial and returned home.

¹⁶ Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*.

¹⁷ Lakoff, George, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2002.

journalists, etc. This raises two issues: (1) the clarity with which *the subject is identified* in the given story or theory, and (2) the extent to which *the story itself receives acceptance*.

(1) The circumstances surrounding the suffering of the subject should not be open to multiple interpretations or muddled by suggestions that things are not as they seem. For example, **David Irving**, the “holocaust denier,” aims to make himself a martyr for the cause of anti-Semitism by first making himself a martyr for free speech. But these are too incompatible narratives. The subject’s image and their act of martyrdom has to either fit into an already-existing mould, or the work has to be done to demonstrate the validity of fitting the subject into the validating paradigm. The shocking case of “C” who was not only gang raped but shared around by several groups of Lebanese youths in Sydney was a vehicle for increasing penalties and legislating the new crime of “aggravated sexual assault in company” (something several football teams seem to have got away with since). But let us be thankful that C did not want to take up a career in right-wing politics and sought only justice. Not only did she bravely face her tormentors in court, but went on TV and presented as an exceptional character, who would always be believed. A lesser person in such a situation could have been belittled by innuendo. Opponents will always try to introduce counter-narratives to muddy the water; in this circumstance, the subject’s moral character is everything.

When **Clarrie O’Shea** refused to hand over the union books to the courts, he was carrying out the orders of his union membership and acting in concert with all the left unions who had prepared the ground for a confrontation for *months in advance*. The meaning of his act and the implications of his jailing were therefore immediately and well understood by every unionist in the country. People who were off-sick phoned in to say they were on strike, such was the clarity of the response.

(2) The validity of the narrative is determined by two things; (A) it has to fit into one of the accepted “paradigms of suffering,” and (B) it has to be validated by the appropriate ‘clergy’: figures with the authority to speak on the relevant kind of suffering.

Human needs and Justice

(A) The “paradigm of suffering,” is the set of relations and narrative which determines that the suffering subject *suffers wrongly*. For example, the honest person silenced by a morally weak repressive authority, the wife or child of the violent father, the abandoned child, the visionary who is not believed, the innovator whose idea is stolen by the powerful, the victim of industrial poisons and “cover-up” of the facts, the free spirit crushed by unfeeling authority, etc. These are universal stories of unjust suffering. The subject has to fit into some such narrative, rather than trying to create one.

A paradigm of suffering has several components. (a) A “paradigm of need,” for example, recognition that being stateless means suffering in a specific way is necessary make sense of why a stateless Palestinian deserves our support; (b) A “paradigm of justice” is needed to show that the subject’s deprivation is unjust. For example, lack of money or education or life-experience is always understood to underlie suffering, but for the subject to be a martyr and not just a suffering person, there must be injustice implied in the deprivation, *excessive* inequality or a failure to receive what was *deserved*. So for example, an injured volunteer fire-fighter asked to pay their own medical expenses has been treated unjustly, but a youth injured while driving a speeding car might not be able to make the same

claim; being paid less than the median wage is tough, but not unjust, but a female being less than a male worker doing the same job is unjust; childbirth is painful but not unjust, but to miss out on a benefit for missing work the day you give birth is unjust.

In order to translate unjust suffering into a social movement, there has to be **(c)** an *ethic of responsibility*. An ethic of responsibility is the broad social ethos which determines which direction people look for blame when something bad happens. For example, when the city is flooded people might blame the government, various authorities or institutions (the weather bureau, the water authority, etc), or contrariwise, the victim (for failing to heed warnings, for failing to take out insurance or just for moaning about it), or big business (for environmental damage). The ethic of responsibility is deep-seated, but not uniform and homogenous, and *changing* the ethic of responsibility may be the main aim of a social movement. For example, victims of medical malpractice may want to place blame on inadequate regulation or infrastructure, but the finger of blame tends to be pointed at the individual doctor until the work is done to shift the issue into the narrative of social responsibility. The work has to be done in the casting of the martyr and in the symbolic register to change the ethic of responsibility.

Nowadays if someone is made redundant from their job, people would not automatically look to the government as the party responsible for the suffering. Unless it could be shown that some form of discrimination was involved, it would normally be the victim who was blamed. The ethic of responsibility is a direct expression of the *Zeitgeist*, and yet changing it may be the very thing that a social movement wants to achieve. Changing the *Zeitgeist* is hard work.

(d) Finally, a subject's claim of injustice pre-supposes some explanatory or causal model. Nowadays, there is a strongly medicalised explanatory model of suffering. A rape victim has suffered not because of damage to her marriageability, or an insult to her human dignity, but because of psychological trauma. Soldiers in all the wars of the past century have had to prove the existence of a "syndrome" variously called "shell shock" or "Gulf War Syndrome" to make the suffering of participating in modern warfare believable.

It should be noted as well, that the trauma the martyr has suffered also serves as a plausible explanation for their tireless political activity and uncompromising attitude, which might otherwise be perceived as fanatical.

Figures of Authority

(B) To validate the martyr's sacrifice, they need the support of the "appropriate clergy," the institutional representatives who are socially legitimated to pronounce on certain kinds of facts. For example, an asylum seeker denounced as an "illegal" needs a QC to verify that seeking asylum breaks no law, and a politician on the government side to verify the beastliness of the regime they are seeking asylum from. The battle has to be fought and won in the "symbolic register," and this means in the relevant social institutions, not just amongst the public.

Journalists, movie-makers, novelists, etc., the "official story-tellers," can go a long way towards substituting for such "expert verification" however.

But unless popular culture is already in support, or at least open to the idea, the subject needs some authority to legitimate their complaint of unjust suffering - both the suffering

and its injustice. Even when the claim of injustice is *new* and cannot be proved in law, a believable expert argument is needed to validate the claim.

The best martyr *is* themselves an authority capable of validating their claim, and can tell the story of their suffering in their own voice and be believed. In that instance, the martyr can be said to be both icon and symbol of the principle they uphold.

The greatest martyrs of our times have been such symbols-and-icons, icons of the fight against an old world and symbols of a better world to come. **Nelson Mandela** for example, led the anti-apartheid struggle for 20 years from inside prison walls. Not only was his suffering a standing call to arms to get him released, and to risk death in doing so, but he and his comrades articulated *why* apartheid was wrong and how a non-racial society could be built. **Che Guevara**, not only died at the hands of hirelings of neo-colonialism, courageously fighting neo-colonialism, but he explained with great authority why and how neo-colonialism had to be destroyed. The **Reverend Martin Luther King's** voice still rings out to this day, more than 40 years after his assassin tried to silence it. The combined icon-and-symbol is certainly the most powerful subject for martyrdom. **Cindy Sheehan** has turned out to be an exceptionally eloquent speaker, touring the US non-stop for months on end addressing meetings, appearing on TV, passionately and relentlessly advocating her cause. No spin doctor or spokesperson could ever have achieved the same result by speaking *on her behalf*. The very face of a grieving mother, when she speaks the word of antimilitarism surpasses what any orator can do.

Generally speaking, the relevant narrative, with its paradigm of suffering, ethic of responsibility and explanatory model cannot be created *in toto, ex nihilo*; most components of the requisite narrative, at least, must be *available*. Here the media does play a significant part. It is the work of professional communicators - actors, journalists, writers, storytellers, and so on - in conjunction with the various experts - academics, political leaders, the clergy, and so on - to make this narrative available and place it in the consciousness of the general public.

It may be the case that the role of the subject is precisely to introduce a new understanding, a new discourse. This is a chicken-and-egg situation. It is given that the subject suffers under the existing *normal* social arrangements, which are not seen as unjust. But the subject is seen to suffer unjustly. The social movement which challenges those social arrangements only comes into being as a result of the subject's actions, but the elements must be present already to some degree.

Let us put together the conditions needed for an act of martyrdom to lead to the formation of a powerful social movement.

(a) Vladimir Propp¹⁸ defined the seven archetypal characters to be found in any traditional story, such as the villain, the hero, and so on. A conclusion which can be drawn from his observations is that, to be comprehensible, a story can have only *one* villain. There can be a hero (a.k.a. martyr), those who *help* the hero, and the hero's objective or loved one, and on the other side apart from the villain himself, you can have a *false hero*, but not a second villain. The false hero, or usurper, claims to be the hero and may act like a real hero, but whereas the villain has to be *defeated*, the false-hero only has to be *exposed*, emphasizing the hero's message by contrast; whereas the villain's

¹⁸ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*.

motivations are evil and he is the target of loathing, the false-hero has character weaknesses, even vices, but is not evil; he has to change his mind, or be neutralised, but he is not the *target*. So it is important for the subject, if she is to become a martyr and a hero, rather than a soon-forgotten victim or false-hero, to show to the world in the most unambiguous terms, *who* is responsible for the injustice done to them, the party against which all must concentrate their anger. If there are many villains, then either they are all involved in a conspiracy with the *one principal villain*, or more likely, they are parties which have been *misled* by the villain.

Martin Luther King could easily have identified multiple villains - white racists, indifferent white liberals, cowardly blacks, “Uncle Toms” - but he concentrated his condemnation on the white racists and appealed to all the others to come around and do the right thing.

(b) Having selected our hero (martyr) and villain, and assigned other subject positions appropriately, we have to decide on a basic *paradigm of justice*: on what universal principle of justice can this claim be validated? Either **Julius and Ethel Rosenberg**¹⁹ were spies who gave information needed by the Soviets to build nuclear weapons and were *war-heroes* for the Soviet Union, or they were *framed* and are victims of McCarthyism. They are martyrs either way, but whether they were martyrs for fairness in the US judicial system or martyrs of the Cold War between the USSR and the USA implies quite different appeals to justice corresponding to different interpretants.

(c) The *explanatory model* has to be in place. **Bernie Banton**²⁰ and the other asbestos victims transformed themselves from victims into heroes though their campaign for compensation from James Hardy. But they could not have done this without the scientific community confirming that exposure to asbestos causes a deadly disease of the lungs. Asbestos has been known to kill people since antiquity, but it took pressure to get the scientific study done. Nonetheless, without the science asbestos would never be banned.

(d) These elements must be combined into a *compelling drama* of good versus evil and triumph over adversity after a long and heroic struggle.

This brings us to the final element which is necessary for a martyr to bring the world into line with *their* idea of justice and reality. Firstly, the subject must be a suitable *icon* of suffering; secondly, the universal significance of their suffering must be validated as a *symbol* of injustice.

The Martyr as Index

THIRDLY, you cannot be a martyr for a cause if you are the only one who cares, if you fail to rally others to your side. The martyr must have a group or a significant number of others who can definitively prove the validity of the martyr’s claim by saying “Me too!” However sympathetic the martyr and however believable their story, unless there are others who verify that it is not fiction, then the claim is not *real*.

¹⁹ Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were members of the CPUSA tried and executed for passing atom bomb secrets to the USSR in 1953.

²⁰ Bernie Banton was an employee of James Hardie who like most of his colleagues, died of asbestosis. He was the face of the campaign to get James Hardie to accept responsibility and pay compensation. He was publicly thanked in Kevin’s Rudd’s victory speech after the election which saw the end of the Howard government.

The people who raise their hands, verifying the martyr's case and prepared to do something about it, are the *index* of the principle in question. Such people will ideally themselves become heroes of the same kind to the same cause, and to the extent that this is the case, then you have a social movement which will grow and grow.

For **Gandhi** to throw British imperialism out of India, there had to be not only public sympathy for the cause of independence but others who were prepared also to lay their lives on the line. Gandhi's role was to unify that movement, give it a single goal and make it confident of victory. As it happens, he found many martyrs like himself capable of making a movement to carry on that struggle till victory.

The question might be asked: if authorities jail and murder opponents in order to repress a social movement, *how much repression* can be borne until the rate at which new fighters and new martyrs are generated, is overtaken by the destruction and intimidation of enough people to crush the social movement altogether? Is it a necessary law that repression only pours oil on the fire? Clearly not. The swift, brutal repression of the Left in Indonesia in 1965, in which several million leftists and their families were murdered, was so total that political opposition was eliminated for a whole generation. **Sudisman**²¹ was an exemplary icon and symbol for the struggle of Indonesian socialism, but hardly anyone in Indonesia knows his name today. Another modern example is the murder of the **Black Panther** leadership, which had the effect of reducing a sophisticated and progressive social movement to a current of indiscriminate gang violence. The *total* repression exercised under Fascist and Stalinist regimes, did manage to make martyrdom *foolish* for more than a generation.

It's not like that in democratic countries. But for example, wholesale expulsions can be enough to quell student activism in a University, and ruthless sackings is often an effective way for a firm to prevent their employees from unionising. So there has to be the potential for a social movement that is capable of withstanding repression and fighting back. Sometimes caution is the better part of valour ... but at some point, as Rosa Parks said: "I'm tired of giving in."

Also, it is by no means sure that martyrdom is the best form of heroism. **Gough Whitlam**²² would have done better as the *Labor hero* who triumphed over attempts to remove him, than as a *Labor martyr* whose sacking opened the way to 8 years of Liberal rule and left him remembered by many as an irresponsible prime minister. The idea that "the bad guy always wins" is a lethal prejudice with which there should never be any compromise. There is but a fine line between victim and martyr.

Further, it is not always obvious who "owns" a martyr. For example, when the right-wing appropriated Simpson²³ and his donkey for the cause of nationalism, they were evidently unaware that Simpson had been a Wobbly, a pacifist and a fervent internationalist.

²¹ Pledoi Sudisman was a member of the Central Committee of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) who was not summarily executed but put on trial after the massacre of the PKI

²² Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia, overthrown in a constitutional coup in 1975. Rather than endorsing moves towards a general strike, waited for an election in which he was trounced, thus legitimizing the coup.

²³ John (Jack) Simpson Kirkpatrick was a stretcher bearer at Gallipoli Campaign in 1915. He used a donkey to carry wounded soldiers to safety. He continued this work for three and a half weeks, often under fire, until he was killed, becoming part of the "Anzac legend". But Simpson was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, an internationalist, socialist and pacifist, belying the legend he is incorporated in.

Nationalism feeds on the martyrdom of the soldiers it sends to their death, and, if the life of those dead soldiers is to be made sense of and celebrated, they become martyrs for nationalism. Simpson may have been a Wobbly, but he wasn't going to build the OBU in the Dardenelles.

But how is that people like John Howard, who deny any connection with Australian history when it comes to genocide against the original owners of the land, want to claim ownership of martyrs who created Australia's liberal democratic traditions in the teeth of opposition from Howard's predecessors. How many people would know that **Fred Hollows**²⁴, that icon of medical philanthropy, was a New Zealand Communist?

A social movement or institution is going to be able to claim "ownership" of a martyr if it *shares the icons and symbols* of the subject. The Church can claim **Mary McKillop**²⁵ even though the Church were her principal tormentors, and governments usually succeed in claiming military heroes, even Simpson.

The martyr who is icon, symbol and by virtue of *leading* the social movement, also the index of the cause, is the most powerful representation of an idea of justice.

Who is the Interpretant?

According to Peirce, a sign indicates an object *for* someone else. This "someone else" is the interpretant, or "target audience," and there is no such thing as a sign abstracted from its interpretant. There must *be* people in the interpretant community who can sympathise with the martyr. The symbol must be part of a theory or narrative which is known and believed by the interpretant community. The cadre which constitutes the index of the claim must be connected with the interpretant community.

The question of interpretant has been touched upon in several points already, because it is really impossible to discuss the relations of icon, symbol and index without having the interpretant in mind. That's like the propaganda movies the Vietnamese produced in the 1970s: they had a great story to tell and a willing audience in the West, but they only ever addressed themselves to loyal Communists, with unfortunately comic effect in the West.

There are three main kinds of interpretant: (1) Supporters who need to be inspired and (2) potential supporters who need to be won over, or (3) potential opponents who need to be neutralised. Quite different characters and narratives are required in each case.

The Martyr as Drum Major

Timing is everything. The continuation of injustice must be unbearable. But the suffering of the subject beats the drum to which the social movement marches, and the rhythm has to be such that the movement can keep pace. A social movement can spring up very rapidly if the relevant narrative is widely available and believed, but otherwise it can take time. The role of the martyr is to crystallise the narrative by helping people cast themselves in the operative role by acting out and personalising the role of the suffering subject.

²⁴ Fred Hollows, renowned ophthalmic surgeon who restored sight to thousands of poor and indigenous people, and initiated the charity which continues his work today. Also a member of the Australian Communist Party.

²⁵ Mary McKillop was an Australian nun who founded a school and women's refuge and an order of nuns which continued this work across the country. She was excommunicated for insubordination, but has recently been beatified.

The H-block hunger strikers began their hunger strike at intervals designed to bring about a new death from starvation every week; in the end it was 10 deaths over 20 weeks. The Thatcher government resorted to deception to persuade the last hunger striker to pull back, mistakenly thinking that they had won, thus deflating the momentum of the campaign.

Did the first conscientious objectors in Spain know that it would take 30 years and 1,000 martyrs to stop conscription? Today's suicide bombers do know that they will die and so will many who come after them before justice is found, but the hunger striker hopes that things may come to a head *before* they die.

Many struggles are won only by *many* acts of martyrdom. Great injustices take the sacrifice of many martyrs before they are put right. But we should all take this lesson from Bobby Sands: maybe one dying of hunger per week is *too* intense, too fast for the public, but the martyr and their supporters *must calculate the pace* at which public support can be won over, how long the suffering can be protracted and have a strategy which works over the dimension of time.

Don't Overdo it! The scope for martyrdom in a country where politicians care about out-voting their opponents is broader than it is under regimes which normally out-shoot their political opponents. Oppressive regimes and occupying armies are not bothered by martyrs as such - only by the force of a mass of people who are *prepared to die* to obtain justice.

This is largely the role of a martyr living under an oppressive regime: to call upon others to be ready to die, to fight and not fear death. The subject's suffering is a shared suffering. Here "expert discourse" (the founding ideas of a new nation, religious testament, inspirational utopian expositions) is not to prove that injustice has been done. People already know that, but to demonstrate that martyrdom is glorious and preferable to tolerating continued injustice.

In democratic countries, there is plenty that is worth dying for; but until someone is prepared to kill you in order to take away these freedoms, this question does not arise in reality. Any would-be hero who brings upon themselves a degree and kind of suffering which is theirs by *choice*, cannot inspire mass resistance. The subject's suffering must be seen to arise from aspirations and values shared with the masses, which most certainly include staying alive. Until the very existence of the society itself is called into question, voluntarily going to one's death in a cause is *wrong*.

The greater threat to free speech is still empty halls rather than police raids. To voluntarily choose death in such circumstances would be to enter a narrative which is seen as fit only for foreigners and religious freaks. The Army is participating in the illegal occupation of Iraq, continuing centuries of exploitation of the Arab peoples by Europeans; people are dying in Iraq resisting that occupation; Iraqis would be entitled to ask: why we do not lay down our lives to help them? So long as we do not, aren't we complicit in the war?

But the semiotics of martyrdom determine that if the subject suffers only because they have *chosen* to (rather than by simply doing what is *right*), then their self-imposed suffering must be proportional, in relation to what others can be asked to endure. There is a reciprocal relation: martyrdom calls forth the movement which later makes martyrdom understandable. People could understand you refusing to pay a fine or disclose your

source, and doing a few day's jail for it, but to set up a fortress and resist arrest arms in hand, would move you into the psychiatric register.

Conscription provides the opportunity to create martyrs whose suffering is in proportion to that of the citizens on the imperialist side of an unjust war. The young teacher who refuses military service and is dragged off to prison for the duration is every mother's son and is doing just what every young person ought to do in that situation. At a certain point, "going underground" and risking long prison terms is called for. But the same young person who goes into hiding to play "urban guerrilla" suffers from delusions, not injustice. **Ulricke Meinhof** and **Andreas Baader**²⁶ actually enjoyed a stunning level of popularity in Germany, but this was a *romantic* support, and never support which could be translated into "urban guerrilla warfare"!

There is a danger that the practice of becoming a **suicide bomber**, if it has not already, may move from being a heroic response to foreign occupation to becoming an irrational response to anomie and hopelessness. It is unlikely that very young suicide bombers have any more understanding of what they are doing than do child soldiers drafted into pointless conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." (Marx 1852)

Among the conditions under which people make history are the various components of the Zeitgeist - the available narratives, the dominant paradigms of suffering and paradigms of justice, the dominant explanatory models and the ethic of responsibility - which to a great extent determine what ideas can be expressed and understood. But wherever there is even one person who interprets the situation differently and insists on doing what is right, then there is some possibility of a social movement, even if at first only a minority. There are always internal contradictions within the Zeitgeist which open the way for plausible dissent.

Andy Blunden
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²⁶ Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, leaders of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, a.k.a the Red Army Faction, carried out urban guerilla action from the late 1960s to 1998, implicated in 34 deaths. They both died in suspicious circumstances with in prison in 1976 and 1977 respectively.