

Why are Symbols and Emblems Important?

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1. We seem to spend a disproportionate amount of time in Northern Ireland displaying and arguing over symbols, over which flags to use outside an official building or whether people should be allowed to wear a poppy or a black ribbon at work or the content of a new mural. For many people such debates seem to be a waste of energy. On the other hand debates over symbols are also ways of talking about some fundamental issues. The Irish Tricolour and the Union Flag are not simply pieces of cloth they represent a whole range of beliefs and identities given to them by people. If we are to start exploring how we deal with disputes over symbols it is worth exploring how they work. What follows is a brief over-view.
2. Symbols are in and of themselves meaning-less! It is human beings that give them meaning. Symbols do not have innate meanings it is the activities of human beings that provides meaning. **Example:** Fire can be used to signify life or death? It is people that provide the context in which different meanings are conveyed
3. Symbols are multi-vocal, multi-referential, multidimensional or polysemic. That is, they have layers of meaning. They do not communicate a single proposition, but rather a collection of propositions, ideas and emotions. Different people will invoke different meanings in the same symbol. A person can see a number of meanings in the same symbol and different people can see very different meanings in the same symbol. **Example:** The Red Hand of Ulster can be a Loyalist emblem, a GAA badge, or the crest of the O'Neill family?
4. The context in which a symbol is used is all-important. The same symbol used in different places, or in the context of other symbols, can have its meaning shifted. **Example:** Think of the Union Flag wrapped around Linford Christie's shoulders at the Olympics, or held by a member of the BNP, or up a lamppost in Sandy Row or up a flag pole in Dublin during the visit of a UK Prime Minister, or in the corner of the Australian flag, or on the cover of a Sex Pistols album. In each context the same symbols suggests different meanings.
5. The meanings of symbols are not static. They can change, sometimes dramatically, over time, depending upon how and who uses them. **Example:** The Swastika has been used as a Buddhist symbol but is reversed to mean the Nazis. The celebration of Guy Fawkes Day in England was once a sectarian event, with a Catholic being burnt on a bonfire, now it either stands for the saving a democratic principles or has lost any overt political meaning all together.
6. Symbols can be used to represent, invoke or imagine a diverse community. Because symbols have layers of meaning and different meanings for different

peoples they can be used to represent a diverse group of people who may share almost nothing in common. This of course is what Nations and communities are all about. Symbols therefore condense identities. **Example:** Few countries are as diverse as the US. There are as many languages and political beliefs in the US as exist under the sun, but the flag can work for all these people because of the breadth of meaning that exists within the flag. Many would define it around the concept of *freedom* but the notion of freedom can mean different things to different people.

7. When representing large diverse communities like nations symbols work best when they are ill defined! As soon as a politician or group within a community attempt to *over*-define the symbol they inevitably begin to exclude those who have a different understanding of the meaning of the flag. The result is either a struggle over meaning or one of the groups' stops using the flag. **Example:** Many British people find using their flag difficult because of the way it has been routinely defined by the right (i.e. Tory Party Conferences or England football fans). Alternatively, when the Union flag is closely associated with the Protestant Crown or with Loyalist Paramilitaries then it becomes exclusionary. Similarly the Irish Tricolour used in Northern Ireland is viewed by many as representing the IRA even though one third of the flag is Orange!
8. Symbols can evoke great emotion and help drive people to dramatic deeds. The meanings people give to symbols can be very ordinary but they can also be highly emotive. **Example:** How many people claim that they would die for their flag or the holy cross? Consider the debates in the United States about whether under free speech it is legitimate to burn the national flag.
9. The more a flag or emblem becomes associated with the identities of particular groups of people the higher the potential for it drawing upon an emotive response from those people. **Example:** Those who use a symbol to define themselves in a very exclusive way are likely to see any attack on that symbol as an attack upon them. This helps explain why disputes over parade routes can be so emotional, they are, in part, about what individuals are.
10. Those with power, particularly those in official positions, are in a better position to define the meanings of symbols than those with less power. They can therefore use symbols to legitimise their position. That power can be either derived from having an official position, from popularity or from the ability to propagate ideas through the control of the media and other institutions. **Example:** Heads of state are in a particularly strong position to define and redefine symbols. In Northern Ireland, in spite of the divisions, the first and Deputy First Minister are in a good position to define and redefine new and old symbols.
11. The defining and redefining of symbols is usually done through rituals. However, large ~~gather~~ gatherings of ordinary people (another kind of ritual) can act as powerful moments at which symbols can be used against officials. **Example:** Western democracies are replete with ritual events at which symbols are used. All legislative assemblies and public buildings usually have some sort of ritual and symbolic forms of communication associated with

them. The funeral of Lady Diana provided a fine example of a moment of struggle between the 'official' and the 'popular' in terms of the meanings for a nation. During the ritual, Earl Spencer was able to give the Queen a lecture on family values!

12. It is useful to view symbols as containing a stock of symbolic *capital*. Because the symbol invokes emotion and can drive people to do things they are effectively 'political currency' with which you can obtain legitimacy for activities. **Example:** A President can stand on a rostrum with the Presidential crest on it and a US flag behind and utilise the symbolic capital of democratic legitimacy and national loyalty to send men to their deaths on the other side of the world. How many of those soldiers do it because they understand the politics of what they are doing? Leaders of countries frequently draw upon a sense of loyalty to gain support in a time of war – when the Army is viewed as representing the nation. An army marches on its symbolic capital just as much as its stomach! As a further example, Nelson Mandela was very adept, at the Rugby World Cup Final, at using the symbolic capital of South African rugby shirt amongst white South Africans as part of new nation building in South Africa.
13. Symbolic capital can be utilised by a range of people if they are seen as legitimate representatives of the symbols. **Example:** The relationship between an elected political figure and a national flag is a problematic one. They maybe the legitimate spokes person for the country and use the flag when abroad, but in domestic politics it can reduce the symbolic capital of a flag by suggesting divisions amongst the people. This becomes most stark when an opposition group decides to use a different flag! A good example of this has been the use by Australian Aborigines of their own flag in opposition to the Australian national flag.
14. The debates over flags and emblems are more than just peripheral to politics they can act as a proxy for fundamental political discussions and activities.

A Basic Model for Symbolic Politics

15. It is possible to set out a very simple model of symbolic conflict and how the symbolic capital is used (see Harrison 1995). Symbols are:
 - **Invented/created.** At some point someone has to design/construct/use a symbol and attempt to give it value (symbolic capital). **Examples:** The Irish Tricolour, the Union Jack, the South African flag, the Poppy, the green ribbon, the white ribbon etc. etc. etc.
 - **More or less valued.** Symbols can have their value increased or decreased. People will undertake strategies to increase the value of a symbol. That strategy may include giving one symbol a value over another. Sometimes using a symbol too much makes it less sacred! **Example:** If the First and Deputy first Minister increasingly use the symbol for the Assembly its status and value would rise. After the 1970s the Northern Ireland flag tended to get used more than the Union Jack flag at Loyalist events.

- **Appropriated.** A symbol with existing capital can be appropriated. Symbols can be utilised by more than one group and be competed over. Sometimes popular symbols are appropriated and then controlled by the state. Sometimes popular use of a symbol takes it away from the state or politicians. **Example:** There have been battles of ownership over The Red Hand of Ulster, Cuchulainn, St. Patrick.
- **Destroyed.** Symbols can be destroyed or banned as other political groups expand. It is crucial to understand what space exists in the public sphere for the display of symbols. **Examples:** Religion often provides the best examples. The most obvious recent example is the Taliban's restrictions on all other belief systems in Afghanistan. But Hindu's and Muslims in India, Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, Christians and Muslims in Southern Spain, Christians and other Christians across Europe have attempted to destroy or restrict the symbols of others. As Marxism has come and gone in Russia it has removed religious symbols and then itself been removed from the public sphere.

16. The above strategies are ideal types. Groups may well be using a combination of strategies at the same time. **Example:** Loyalists in Northern Ireland maybe giving value to the Northern Ireland flag over the use of the Union flag by using them on flag poles whilst still defending the Union flag when officials threaten not to use it over a police station.
17. Strategies work within groups and between groups. **Example:** The attempt to develop Ulster Scots is a strategy for increasing community consciousness within the Protestant community but also works in a valuation contest in official contexts for funding.

Conclusions

18. There is a complex hierarchy of manipulation involved in symbolic politics. The use of symbols should not be seen as peripheral to political debates but actually as a fundamental part of peoples emotional attachment, as individuals, to politics.
19. None of this knowledge about how symbols work in and of itself solves disputes over symbols. However, what it does offer is a chance to look at the dynamics of these disputes and to explore the effects of certain strategies in dealing with the disputes. **Example:** For a new flag for Northern Ireland to become popular it is not enough just to use it in various places, it must be placed within a valuation strategy and those in political power must be seen to utilise it. If all government Ministers were to use it then it would provide it with a great impetus and over time would increase its value and importance. In other words, work needs to be undertaken to increase its symbolic capital. To do this care needs to be taken in not only what it looks like, but how it is defined by those in political power. Also, its relationship with the Union flag and Irish Tricolour on formal occasions would be very important.

20. The creation of new symbols requires the exploration of the strategies of invention and appropriation. Dealing with existing symbols requires that one examines strategies of valuation and destruction.

Brief Bibliography

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