Peace Protest as Simulacrum

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On 9 February 1996, the Irish Republican Army bombed its way out of the ceasefire which had given peace to Ireland for seventeen months. All over the country, this dramatic event triggered a sequence of actions which departed in many ways from conventional protests. They did so, first of all, by the exuberance of symbols they produced. Books for peace were signed. Candelit rallies were held. On 14 February, a students' rally at Queen's University Belfast lasted 17 minutes to represent the seventeen months of peace. A minute's silence was respected at workplaces throughout Ireland. The white peace ribbon was launched, to be worn by all lovers of peace. Numerous cards and letters, containing half a million signatures, were sent to the *No More Violence Campaign*. Peace vigils were organised in many places. Bells were rung at peace marches and in some cases white pigeons were released. Peace advertisements, in the names of local dignitaries, were purchased and published in Derry newspapers. In Derry again, white paper doves were distributed to be worn by participants at rallies. In Dublin, a huge table was erected on O'Connell bridge designed to urge all parties in the conflict to sit down at the negotiating table. Well over one million people participated, in one way or another, in this sequence of protests. Close to fifty separate occurrences of collective protest were actually recorded during these two weeks.

tations of armies in which maximum energy is applied to overcome the opponent. To use von Clausewitz's expression, war is politics by another means.

Peace protests related not to the reality of the Northern Irish conflict, but to its symbolism. They did so in a very direct way. The bombs which exploded in London to mark the end of the ceasefire were *just* that: a signal, a way of communicating the end of the ceasefire. The IRA did not follow up this act by a campaign of armed action, either in Britain or Northern Ireland. The end of the ceasefire had been symbolised and signalled. And then, nothing happened for a long while and we were confronted with a *phony war* which was also a *phony peace*. The peace protest did not refer to a return to the armed conflict, but to the sign and, beyond that, the possibility of its return. Peace protests no longer related to real occurences but, fundamentally, to other signs. The signalling character of IRA activity was reinforced when, more than two months later, a small bomb detonated in an empty house in London. This armed action did not, paradoxically, indicate the start of a renewed armed campaign but signalled the ever-present possibility of such a campaign. It meant that such a course of action remained on the agenda of the IRA and that they had retained their capacity to walk this path again. A few days later, another bomb was placed under Hammersmith Bridge in London, but failed to detonate. It was implied by some commentators that the bomb was placed there but deliberately made not to explode. Others intimated that the IRA intended a *spectacular* display. In both cases, the explosions were functioning as signs within a system of signs.

Once protest is used to signify protest, once it has become its own sign, the need to protest no longer exists; it will suffice to signal that one is protesting, without having to engage into the actual sequence of protesting. Protests exhaust themselves in their very act of signalling. As simulacra, they lose any content and do not aim at any precise target. They simply relate to a general longing for peace which, as such, cannot sustain enduring collective action. Actual relations of

Signalling protest

Such protests gave a strong symbolic expression of disapproval and dissatisfaction at a turn of events, which came as a total surprise. They expressed and signified a general desire for peace. They were venting a feeling of anger and frustration. But there was nothing behind such signs of protest, no vital force. These actions were simply signalling that protest was taking place: they had been effectively transformed into signs. The sign of protest stood for the protest itself; it looked like the protest itself, but loosely so. It had become a representation and an approximation, what Jean Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum*.[1] The approximate copy had replaced that which it stood for and which had now been erased, occulted from the world. The sign had replaced the real thing, and the latter had simply waned.

The protests reacted to the ending of the ceasefire and the threat of renewed violence. The peace symbols mirrored each other, pointing at each other in an endless chain: church bells, candlelights, paper doves, white ribbons, etc. Ultimately, of course, the peace protests were targeting the end of the ceasefire and, beyond that, the long-lasting armed conflict. An intense and bloody battle has, for more than twenty-five years, been conducted by paramilitary organisations and the British Army. Such a struggle can certainly not be perceived as merely symbolic. At the same time, none of the parties in the conflict has any illusions about its ability to "win the war"; they have all conceded the impossibility of a military solution to the Northern Irish conflict. The armed conflict has become in this way an element in a large struggle, which is both political and symbolic. It serves to signal resolve and determination, to increase political pressure, to position oneself, to play on international opinion. These armed actions now operate as the means of a symbolic struggle. They no longer make sense as straightforward acts of war, as confron-

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1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Paris: Galilée, 1981

power or tangible stakes in the confrontation were absent in these protests. Nobody lost or won, simply because these actions did not participate to an actual conflict or confrontation of wills. It was not possible to determine if the protest had proved successful or not, if it had achieved its goals, for the latter remained diffuse and lacked specificity. The absence of a subsequent armed campaign by the IRA did not point to the effectiveness of the movement or to its failure. The protests did not belong to strategic moves and they were not sited in power relations. If by power one means the application of resources and energy to achieve one's goal, then power was not being exercised in these protests. They exuded no great sense of opposition, of struggle. Resources were being used in these protests simply to signify protest. Ultimately, this kind of simulated protest developed because a demand existed for it: a demand for an expression of protest which fell short of an actual protest, a protest without a clear target or stake, without power relations and strategic moves.

Implosion

Baudrillard points to an intriguing feature of *simulations*: they absorb a high level of real energy, but this energy is never externalised, never given back. In the same way, the peace protests which occured at this time did not display a high level of energy. New organisations were created for this purpose and old ones were revived. Large masses of people were involved. Yet all this energy produced rather subdued rallies, candlelit marches, parades of people adorned with white ribbons and paper doves. At no stage did one observe an *energizing* of the protests. Baudrillard uses the term *implosion* to refer to such a situation. Implosion indicates a bursting of force which is directed inwards. In other words, the energy which was absorbed by this form of collective action was not externalised and, instead, was compressed inside. This compression and bursting inwards broke down internal barriers and boundaries. The boundary which structured them and, in a fundamental way constituted them,

was eradicated. The peace rallies managed to include both those who protested against the end of the ceasefire and those at whom the protest was loosely directed. War is, after all, usually pursued in the name of peace. Members of Sinn Fein openly participated to many of these peace protests and denounced the lack of progress in the negotiations. A suspected high-ranking IRA member conspicuously wore the peace ribbon. The very people at whom the peace protest was directed were able, quite comfortably, to join in these rallies, perform the relevant symbolic acts and demand peace. This ambivalence displayed the indetermination of the aims associated with such actions and the rather loose and diffuse targeting which characterised them. The offenders and those protesting at the end of the ceasefire were brought together in the very act of protesting at the end of the ceasefire. The energy which had gone into such protests did not and could not come out: it simply burst in and was dissipated.

The fickleness of peace protests

The sequence of peace protests we have been analysing provides quite a clear example of what Baudrillard calls simulacrum. They display the four main features which mark such a simulation:

such protests have been transformed into signs, and the copy comes to replace the protest of reference

they are inserted within a system of signs, in which they cease to refer to an external reality and respond, instead, to other signs

they fail to retain the consistency of collective action and cease to operate as effective and substantial protests

they experience an implosion, in which the divergent poles come into contact: the energy which has been absorbed simply breaks down the internal barriers

and boundaries according to which the phenomenon of protest was structured.

Once the peace protests had been constructed into signs, into simulacra, they could only exhaust themselves and quickly disappear. They will emerge again, triggered by some other signs to which they relate. This has been, so far, the story of the peace movement in Ireland.