

**The Politics of Death:
A Sociological Analysis of Revolutionary
Communication**

by
Michael Jay Blain

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Revolutionary Communication

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**THE POLITICS OF DEATH:
A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF REVOLUTIONARY
COMMUNICATION**

by

Michael Jay Blain

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Colorado
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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The circumstances that influenced this project were complex. Any attempt at a complete enumeration of all sources and influences would be folly. In a work of this sort, of course, the emphasis is given to intellectual debts of a formal kind. But as anyone who writes knows, the motivations and conditions involved in the formation of intellectual works are much more complex than formal references in the text imply. This one was born, first of all, of the peculiar set of private and public circumstances that influenced university students in the late Sixties, especially those of us with radical, political interests. This experience was centrally conditioned by the highest hopes and fantasies of a life renewed, the frustrations of the “war” and racism, the unresponsiveness of the power structure to our demands, and the final, at times deadly resolve of political violence. Should it surprise anyone that the failures experienced would ultimately turn our attention from the promises of new life and rebirth—“love,” to an apocalyptic gloom.

This work must be viewed as an attempt to uplift a lowered head, to rebuild a sense of destiny from a sundown of false hopes. Its intention is to take a critical, sociological gaze at the symbolic structure of revolutionary communications. The aim is to interrogate this structure and perhaps, exhaust its meaning in pointed, analytical debate.

Now to give recognition to all those influences along the way. I would like to acknowledge all my teachers, but especially the following: Professors Ray P. Cuzzort, Elise Boulding, Kenneth Boulding, John Bramsen, Howard Higman, Edward Rose, Harry Aron, Lucille Colby, Manuel Ramirez, III, Fred Templeton, James Downton, Keith Davis, Peter Ossorio, Richard Jessor, and Forest Williams. All of these individuals have influenced my intellectual development directly and fundamentally. But there have been others. I would like to also acknowledge the expert assistance of Vann Perry, my computer programmer, methodologist, and close friend. Thanks must also be extended to those intellectual companions who have been a constant source of motivation and dialectic in the development of my work and ideas. Over long hours of debate and many bottles of wine, we pushed ourselves to the limits and contradictions of our thought. I count the following as being the most important: Jerry Horton, John Burgermeister, Michael Kirby, Joe Weiner, Stan Sadava, Tim McGrath and David Graham. Special mention should also be made of the invaluable services of Dorothy Carson, who has that practical wisdom

and know-how to get the job done. Finally, special recognition goes to my family who have “put up with it all.” Without their financial and emotional support, this work would not have been possible. I would like to dedicate this work to my sons, Jay Blain and Josh Blain.

Of Self-Overcoming

That is your entire will, you wisest men; it is a will to power; and that is so even when you talk of good and evil and of the assessment of values.

You want to create the world before which you can kneel: this is your ultimate hope and intoxication.

The ignorant, to be sure, the people—they are like a river down which a boat swims: and in the boat, solemn and disguised, sit the assessments of value.

You put your will and your values upon the river of becoming; what the people believe to be good and evil betrays to me an ancient will to power.

It was you, wisest men, who put such passengers in this boat and gave them splendor and proud names—you and your ruling will!

Now the river bears your boat along: it has to bear it. It is of small account if the breaking wave foams and angrily opposes its keel.

It is not the river that is your danger and the end of your good and evil, you wisest men, it is that will itself, the will to power, the unexhausted, procreating life-will.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra

CHAPTER I THE QUESTION

Political discourse is saturated with symbols that imply the order of the living and the dead. The significance of this struck me while reading a critical review by Conor Cruise O'Brien of the Irish political situation and the tradition of the Irish Republican Army.

According to the official ideology from Tone and Pearse, the sense of Irish history lies in breaking the connection with England, "the never failing source of our political evils," according to Tone; and according to Pearse, "While Ireland holds these bones (the bones of the patriot dead) Ireland unfree shall never be at peace."¹

Later, in the same review, O'Brien elaborates by arguing that the Republican mandate is "a very curious thing" and for the following reason: "it derives from 'the dead generations,' the patriot dead." And further,

...they unconsciously impart a strange twist to the Burkeian concept of "partnership" (between an imagined past and an imagined future against the real present).²

In search of a new strategy as a member of the Irish Parliament, O'Brien communicates a sense of weariness at the "inflammatory" statements of Tone and Pearse which have authorized so much "blood sacrifice" over the years. He argues that the "patriot bones" have been used to sustain a particular view of Irish history which, in turn, has warranted "the ferocious campaign waged by the Provisional IRA." He questions the

¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Ireland: Dying for Bones," *The New York Review of Books*, XIX, Nos. 11 and 12 (January 25, 1973), 36. For a similar kind of effort see Octavio Paz, *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*, trans. from the Spanish by Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1972). For a sympathetic account of the Russian revolutionary tradition, see Robert Payne, *The Fortress* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).

² O'Brien, "Ireland," p. 37.

validity of their historical interpretations and policies and concludes there is a good possibility that those who espouse these views, and act in their name, are deluded.

The media of mass communication, newspapers, radio and television, constantly report events involving death and politics. We read in the newspapers about President Nixon assuring a “widow” that her husband “didn’t die in vain” while fighting the Vietnam war. This is why we must support his policy of “peace with honor.” The patriot dead are used to justify continuing the war. In another article we read of a black civil rights leader who opposes the appointment of a particular man to the position of Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The grounds for his opposition are that while this man was police chief of a major city he “contributed fuel” to the 1968 riots following the “assassination” of Martin Luther King which led to the killing of “six innocent blacks.”

In one respect these two communications are different. But they are different only superficially. Both are the same, in the sense that, death is employed in the service of communications intended to have certain political effects on an audience. It is very easy to multiply the examples of this kind of political communication. The national news recently showed Arabs running through streets with a black coffin held over their heads to signify their desire for vengeance. And again, angry Mexican protestors are filmed attacking the American Embassy in Mexico City in response to the assassination of Salvador Allende, the President of Chile, recently deposed from office by a military junta. President Nixon used the funerals for both Presidents Eisenhower and Truman as occasions for political communication. The preoccupation with death on the part of philosophers is notorious. Herbert Marcuse has equated technological society with death, and has succeeded in making this equation part of the common discourse of the New Left.³ It is a persistent theme among those who formulate criticisms of contemporary society. But the point is, these are all examples of the politics of death. They are similar in the sense that they involve symbols of death in the structure of political communications.

The question of how death conditions the political process has yet to be addressed systematically. In the context of O'Brien's search for an end to the Irish conflict, it is possible to discern a fundamental question. “How does death function in the symbolic structure of political communications?” The task of the present inquiry is to

³ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

demonstrate that what O'Brien considers a "curious thing," a "twist" peculiar to the Irish political situation, is in reality an invariant relationship, a general pattern. Politics is inextricably involved with violence and killing, bloodshed and death, and in the broadest possible sense, the order of the living and the dead.

The processes considered political include power relations between nations and the power relations among groups and classes within nations. Following Max Weber's analysis, I will focus on those political processes mediated by the modern state.⁴ His analysis dovetails with the present one in two other ways. First, he insists that an intimate relation exists "between the state and violence," hence his definition of the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."⁵ And in a second way, the present focus on the relation of death and politics is consistent with his assertion that "The decisive means for politics is violence."⁶ By violence it can safely be assumed that he implies the ultimate power of life and death over a people.

In a recent essay by Johannes Fabian a general framework for the analysis of death and dying in society has been elaborated.⁷ Following the "radical Structuralism" of Claude Levi-Strauss, he argues that death involves a dialectical structure, that death implies the universal distinction, recognized by all human beings, between the living and the dead. Fabian argues that "We can credit Levi-Strauss with vindicating the logical nature of human reactions to death or, conversely, with vindicating death as the supreme mediator of those oppositions and contradictions by means of which the human mind constructs its universe."⁸ The various significations of death and dying are to be construed processually, as symbolic transformations.

In this perspective the symbol death becomes a problematic in its own right. The task of the present analysis is to formulate the relations between the death symbolic complex and political communications, and to examine how dying and death articulates, in its

⁴ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation", H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. from the German by the editors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 77-128.

⁵ Gerth, *Max Weber*, p. 78.

⁶ Gerth, *Max Weber*, p. 121.

⁷ Johannes Fabian, "How Others Die—Reflections on the Anthropology of Death," *Social Research*, XXXIX, No. 3 (1972), pp. 543-567.

⁸ Fabian, "How Others Die," p. 560.

various forms and conditions, with the structure of actual political communications. It will demonstrate that political symbols are loaded with structures of meaning, implications, chains of associations, images, etc., that vary with respect to death and dying.

Recent work in political sociology has increasingly focused on the function of persuasive communication in the legitimation of political power. Murray Edelman has very successfully applied a dramaturgical perspective to political communications and exposed a structure of political ritual and myth.⁹ Investigators like Ralph Miliband have demonstrated how the means of communication are monopolized by nation states and serve, ideologically, the economic and political interests of the “business community.”¹⁰ Which goes to show that Marxists are becoming less impervious to the implications of “superstructure” these days. Miliband for one, exposes how the political policies, practices, and communications of the state in capitalist societies are ‘loaded’ with hidden ideological implications. A similar analysis can also be applied to “new class” interests in socialist societies. In this context, the question of how powerless people communicate becomes crucial. How do people who don’t control or have access to the means of communication make their views known? What is the role of violence, killing and dying, in this circumstance? What about the notion that political communications can draw persuasive force from implications of dying and death?¹¹

There are two interrelated questions that will concern us in the present inquiry:

1. “From a sociological perspective, what are the general relations of death to society, especially as they can be formulated in terms of political processes?”

2. “How does death function in the symbolic structure of revolutionary communications?”

⁹ Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal & Quiescence*, Institute for Research on Poverty Monograph Series (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1971).

¹⁰ Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society: An Analysis of the Western System of Power* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969).

¹¹ For one kind of answer to these questions, see Herbert Hirsch and David C. Perry, *Violence as Politics: A Series of Original Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973).

This thesis develops and pilot-tests an analytic framework for determining how death and politics go together and modify each other in the symbolic structure of revolutionary communications. Toward this end, Chapter II reviews existing sociological perspectives on death and politics, introduces the concept of an unconscious symbolic complex, and advances some general propositions concerning the symbolic relationships of death and politics. Chapter III presents an analysis of the theme of death in actual revolutionary communications, and distinguishes these kinds of political communications from those that uphold society. Chapter IV presents a discussion of an exploratory quantitative study of 'audience' reactions to the meanings of political symbols. Finally, Chapter V states the conclusions and general significance of this investigation.

CHAPTER II SOCIOLOGY, DEATH AND POLITICS

Sociological analyses of death, let alone death in relation to politics, have been rare. There have been some very important exceptions to this rule: nineteenth century anthropologists like Tylor, some members of the French School of symbolic sociology, the social anthropologists, and more recently, the American symbolic interactionists. Max Weber made suffering and death central to his social-psychological analysis of religion. Many of the earlier works were primarily concerned with death in relation to the religious. Curiously, the more recent studies have been focused on death and dying in medical settings. The most important discussions in this area have come from sociologists primarily concerned with symbolic process. Unfortunately, most of these studies have been concerned with the function of death and dying in social integration. The aim of the present inquiry is to distinguish the symbolic function of death and dying in revolutionary communications and social disintegration.

Time, Death/Rebirth, and the Sacred

Paradoxically, Emile Durkheim, the most profound and influential of all sociologists in the symbolist tradition, made the critique of "individual" mortality a central theme of his analysis of religion.¹ By attacking Tylor's hypothesis that the cult of the dead was at the basis of religion, he succeeded in exorcising death from his analysis. This, in spite of the fact that the data he used to support his arguments about society and religion are saturated with death symbolic content. His attitude toward death seems to be that it is incidental to an account of the social facts. In dismissing Tylor's hypothesis he concludes, "...there is nothing in these [religious] rites which show that death has the

¹ See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. from the French by Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 64-89. Also see his discussion of the basis of egoistic suicide in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. from the French by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 208-216.

slightest power of deification.”² His reasoning is probably in part due to his desire to constitute a strictly sociological perspective. But there is a certain irony in his attitude when one considers that he is alleged to have died of grief precipitated by the death of his son in the Great War.

A closer look at Durkheim's analysis of religion reveals an ambiguity and an apparent contradiction to his argument that mortality is unrelated to the religious. At the beginning of his major work on religion he makes the following point:

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred.³

This assertion is consistent with his argument against the primary significance of mortality for the religious. However, in the very next paragraph he does point to the category of death and dying in his discussion of the symbolism of passage between the two worlds. When a young man is initiated into the religious life he “dies” and “he is reborn under a new form.”

Furthermore, his later discussions of the dual character of the sacred seem to be in contradiction with his argument that mortality is irrelevant to the religious. There he argues that two kinds of moral force can be distinguished in the realm of the sacred: one symbolizing a positive and pure force, the other, a negative and impure force. The pure forces he describes as “beneficent” and “dispensers of life and health and all the qualities which men esteem...” The impure forces, on the other hand, he describes as “evil” and “productive of disorders, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege.”⁴ In this connection, the social fact of death appears to be central to Durkheim's analysis of the sacred, and therefore, the religious in social life. Perhaps his difficulty with the role of death and dying in religion was based on an inability to confront the prospect of his own mortality.

Others in the symbolist tradition of French Sociology have been less reticent to formulate an analysis of death. The studies of Robert

² Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 81.

³ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 52.

⁴ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 455.

Hertz and Arnold van Gennep are especially significant in this respect.⁵ Three interrelated elements can be articulated in their sociological analyses of death that are relevant to a politics of death: the temporal order or continuity, the death/rebirth complex, and the sacred. In their work the symbolic transformations authorized by the order of the living and the dead function to reaffirm-immortalize, the order of the living. Periodic funeral rites serve a fundamental social need. Arnold van Gennep argued that,

During mourning, social life is suspended for all those affected by it and the length of the period increases with the closeness of social ties to the deceased (e.g., for widows, relatives), and with a higher standing of the dead person.⁶

Social order is reaffirmed through these communications. It is coded in the structure of the funeral and mourning rites. The funeral traverses the boundary created by the order of the living and the dead. Both Hertz and van Gennep assumed that mortality and death represent a direct threat to the continuity of social life. According to Hertz, society desires immortality:

Indeed society imparts its own character of permanence to the individuals who compose it: because it feels itself immortal and wants to be so, it cannot normally believe that its members above all those in whom it incarnates itself and with whom it identifies itself, should be fated to die.⁷

In the face of the contradiction of mortality, they argued, “collective representations” or “rites of passage” are elaborated to integrate the living and the dead, to reintegrate relations among the living, and to provide members of society with a sense of continuity through change. This latter relation can be formalized in terms of the structure, past/present/future, and a concern for the integration of present action

⁵ Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. from the French by Rodney and Claudia Needham (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960), pp. 27-86; Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. from the French by Monika B. Vizedom. and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1909).

⁶ van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, p. 148.

⁷ Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, p. 77.

through a synthesis of past and future. It is possible to see this formulation as dialectical in structure.

At the center of society is the dialectic of mortality and immortality. This contradiction is transformed symbolically through a world beyond death:

By recreating itself beyond death, society frees itself from external constraints and physical necessities, which here on earth, constantly hinder the flight of the collective desire. Precisely because the other world exists only in the mind, it is free of all limitations: it is—or can be—the realm of the ideal.⁸

Society demands a future beyond mortality. The immortality of the soul is isomorphic to the immortality of society. A second element of these early attempts at a sociological analysis of death is a focus on the symbolic theme of death/rebirth. This structure can best be understood in relation to the contradictions posed by mortality and the collective desire of immortality. Hertz argues there are two components to the idea of death:

The first is that death is not completed in one instantaneous act; it implies a lasting procedure which, at least in a great many instances, is considered terminated only when the dissolution of the body has ended. The second is that death is not a mere destruction but a transition as it progresses so does the rebirth; while the old body falls to ruins, a new body takes shape, with which the soul—provided the necessary rites have been performed—will enter another existence, often superior to the previous one.⁹

Death is both an end and a new beginning. The putrefaction and dissolution of the body is a sign of the rebirth of the soul in the land of the dead. The living are quite anxious to see that the soul makes this journey. They fear the souls of the dead and want to see that they are securely integrated with their ancestors in the next world. A few years later, van Gennep made the symbolic theme of death/rebirth central to his analysis of rites of passage. Ceremonies of passage, changes of status in general, are often symbolized as dying and being reborn again.

⁸ Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, p. 79.

⁹ Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, p. 48.

The final element of sociological analyses of death is its relation to the sacred. This issue is raised in two connections: in relation to the reasons for the death of a member of society, and in relation to the special status of the mourners and the dead. According to Hertz, the death of an individual is a sacrilege because the individual incarnates and gives expression to society. Death implies the intervention of negative powers and...

this is why primitive peoples do not see death as a natural phenomenon: it is always due to the action of spiritual powers, either because the deceased has brought disaster upon himself by violating some taboo or because an enemy has 'killed' him by means of spells or magical practices.¹⁰

From this two consequences flow: those individuals who are close to the person who is dead become impure and tainted, and the death must be avenged. Hertz describes how, among the Dayak of Borneo, these two issues are resolved in a single act of victimage. Human sacrifice fuses, in a single act, the fulfillment of two social motives: to avenge the death through the killing of a victim, and the purification of the impure. The blood of the victim is sprinkled on the unclean mourners to purify them of their taint and to reconcile them with the community. Later on we will consider the significance of this symbolic complex for the politics of death.

These original formulations by Hertz and van Gennep reflected their concern for small, homogeneous societies, which had the effect of circumscribing the relevance of their analyses. In part this limitation is due to the impact of the newly developing discipline of ethnology. The primary responsibility, however, must be placed on the indifference of sociologists to the implications of symbolic analysis for complex, highly differentiated societies. Since Hertz's and van Gennep's original studies this basic framework has been extended to contemporary socio-political processes by at least one investigator.

The social-anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, steeped in the tradition of French Sociology, was able to see the relevance of the order of the living and the dead for complex societies.¹¹ He applied this framework to the symbolic life of Americans and demonstrated that it is equally valid in the case of complex societies. He assumed that the

¹⁰ Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, p. 77.

¹¹ W. Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

symbolic order of the living and the dead is universally significant to the constitution of human societies. From his point of view, he states

The human condition of individual mortality and the comparative immortality of our species made most of our communication and collective activities in the larger sense a vast exchange of understanding between the living and the dead.¹²

The living inherit culture from the dead generations and this is the condition that makes continuity possible. Warner makes an interesting distinction between the sacred and the secular in this regard.

...secular symbols probably more often emphasize the living present; sacred symbols appear to be more concerned with death, with the past of the species and the future of the individual.¹³

This proposition follows from Warner's distinction between "the species group" characteristics of human beings and "social life." Death is fundamental to the sacred because it relates to

That part of the environment which cannot be controlled, is not understood, on which man depends, and which arouses the deepest anxiety and fear.¹⁴

Two implications can be drawn from these assertions. First, there is a fundamental relation between temporal order and the order of the living and the dead. And second, there is an equally important relation between the dead and the sacred.

In his analysis of Memorial Day rites in Yankee City, Warner was able to link this framework to nationalist, political identifications with the modern state. He argued that Memorial Day rites represent "a modern cult of the dead, serving multiple functions: the conceptualization of common sentiments and reassurances about death, the integration of religious differences by reinforcing a sense of unity through a common identification with transcendent principles that devolve on the problems of enemies, of war and death, and the symbolic

¹² Warner, *The Living and the Dead*, p. 4.

¹³ Warner, *The Living and the Dead*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Warner, *The Living and the Dead*, p. 486.

reaffirmation of the value of “sacrifice of human life for the country.” The latter function was linked to the Christian complex of redemption through sacrifice.

In this cultural complex the symbolic structure of death/rebirth is, of course, fundamental. The war dead serve to connect the past to the future through the promulgation of patriotic images of sacrifice in the living present. Such images are rendered sacred by their relation to the dead. An especially obvious instance of this, as Warner points out, is the myth of Lincoln. In the same way, the Memorial Day parade, like the funeral procession as the final phase of the celebration, forms a ritual link between the living and the dead. Those who have died “fighting for their country” are powerful symbols that not only affirm the past, but also serve, by identifying sacrifice for the country with Christ's sacrifice, to motivate future actions of sacrifice for the nation. There is finally, an intimate relation between time, death/rebirth, and the sacred, and this applies to politics no less so than it does to the religious life of so-called “primitive” people.

Symbolic Victimage

We can now turn to a framework that integrates the best insights of the French School of symbolic analysis, social-anthropology, Georg Simmel's formal sociology, and Freudian psychoanalysis with the sociology of symbolic interaction. Using ideas derived from these various European and American sources, Hugh D. Duncan has formulated a theory and method of symbolic analysis consistent with the present concern with death and politics.¹⁵ He has developed a perspective on symbolic communication by elaborating a dramatic model of the structure and function of social action. The explication that follows briefly describes his conceptualization of social action, and then highlights those aspects of his system of thought which directly relate to the present concern for a politics of death. Duncan has facilitated our task immensely by stating his axiomatic, theoretical, and methodological propositions.¹⁶

Fundamental to his position is the axiom that “Society arises in and continues to exist through the communication of significant symbols.” This proposition suggests that how we communicate is as

¹⁵ Hugh D. Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

¹⁶ Hugh D. Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).