

Perhaps the most striking feature of Northern Irish society is the vast array of political symbols, which range from a flag flying outside a government building to a mural painting on a gable wall. Such features tend to attract much international attention as it is seen as exclusively Northern Irish, and an innate aspect of both Protestant and Catholic traditions. Outsiders often regard these Northern Irish features as tribal and barbaric by nature, however symbols command a great deal of respect and influence from every society right across the globe.

Symbols **convey a deep and almost instinctive meaning to people.** Whether it is seen as embodying violence and oppression (as is usually the opinion of its given opponents) or as a rallying point, **symbols make up the very fabric of identity**, be it religious, ideological or cultural. **Symbols can be regarded as one of the most basic systems of human expression.**

Essentially symbols offer an identity to a particular group which wishes to identify with whichever culture that symbol represents. However a symbol may also represent a group **which wishes to differentiate itself from other groups.** Such a blunt and simple form of representation may easily lead to misunderstanding and controversy between two cultures which see themselves as locked in a struggle with one another, and whose sometimes mutual misunderstanding develops into a deep mistrust and entrenched views of the other culture's symbols.

Evidently, national flags, anthems and symbols are, more often than not, seen as being intrinsically militant by nature, and therefore provoke very strong emotions for those who identify with it and those who oppose it. However, the widespread use of a flag may well be seen by some as distasteful as it may be regarded as being too right-wing, rekindling a political element which has torn Europe apart in two world wars, and represents nothing but oppression and mass genocide to many. It is in this context that a national symbol may be seen as hi-jacked by an unsavoury element of a community. Where does one draw the line between patriotism and nationalism, or nationalism and fascism? The basic answer is that political points of view vary greatly on this subject and use such semantic ambiguity to suit their own means, by abusing the confusion of the situation.

The cases of Sweden and America may be briefly assessed to illustrate national symbols. Sweden, being one of the most liberal and accommodating countries in the world, has a very interesting tradition with regards to flags, as the Swedish people fly their flag widely, be it on government buildings or at a summer cottage. The Swedish right-wing party's attempts to enhance their own support by encouraging the widespread use of the national flag had precious little effect, due to the fact that the national flag is a highly respected and valued symbol to the common citizen.

It appears that some cultures simply value these symbols because they relate to some quality in the culture and the personalities of the people. Or perhaps it becomes a self-perpetuating learned behaviour because it is a pervasive part of the culture in which young people are growing up. (Bryson and McCartney, 1994 p22)

Equally in the United States, there is a very strong attachment by the local culture to the national flag, with the very national anthem, The Star Spangled

Banner, being in honour to the national flag. As in Sweden, there appears to be very little evidence which would lead one to believe that either country mentioned is under threat from any other power, however a unique sense of independence and patriotism is an almost inbred feature of the Scandinavian countries.

Symbols are a mere front, a cover, under which lies its very life-source, it's people, who in turn, rally to it as their most pure expression of identity. Thereby the flag is more than just a colourful piece of cloth, it is a living thing whose ageless existence speaks a thousand words, offers guidance and comfort, and serves as a reminder of the fears and hopes of one's ancestors.

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REPUBLICAN SYMBOLS



THE RED HAND OF ULSTER. The Red Hand of Ulster is the official seal of the O'Neill family. It is believed to originate from a mythical tale wherein two chieftains (capo clan) were racing across a stretch of water in a bid (tentativo) to be the first to reach the land and claim it as his own. When one chieftain realised that his foe would touch the land first, he cut off his hand and threw it onto the shore, thereby claiming the land before his adversary reached it. The Red Hand is one of the only emblems in Northern Ireland used by both communities in Northern Ireland although it is more associated with the Protestant community. Catholics see it as representing the nine counties of Ulster while Protestants see it as representing the six counties of Northern Ireland. The Red Hand of Ulster appears on many murals and flags.



THE HARP. This ancient instrument has long symbolised the island of Ireland. Its Nationalist origins come from when Owen Roe O'Neill, a Gaelic Chieftain, adopted a green flag incorporating the harp. Being seen as a threat to the English invaders, playing the harp was banned, despite remaining on the royal insignia as representing Ireland in the growing British Empire. It was revived in Belfast in 1792, and was the prime symbol of the United Irishmen. The symbol of the harp also represents loyalist Irishmen when it is surmounted by a crown and it is used in this form on, for example, the cap badges of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.



THE SHAMROCK. Legend has it that the shamrock was used by St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, to illustrate the holy trinity, hence its widespread use on St. Patrick's day on 17 March. It is one of Ireland's national emblems, and is used by mainly by the Nationalist tradition, but is also evident within the Unionist tradition, with bodies such as the Royal Irish Rangers wearing the Shamrock every St. Patrick's day.



THE SUNBURST. This flag represents the youth wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Fianna na hÉireann literally means warriors of Ireland, taken from an ancient Celtic legend. The symbol of the sunburst can be seen on some Republican murals, highlighting the dawn of a new era.



THE CELTIC EMBLEM.



THE GREEN RIBBON. The Green Ribbon is worn in support of 'Saoirse' a REPUBLICAN ORGANISATION WHICH CAMPAIGNS ON BEHALF OF REPUBLICAN PARAMILITARY PRISONERS. In the past Saoirse lobbied (fece pressione) for the recognition of political status for Republican prisoners, demanded the release of all political prisoners of the conflict, and supported the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. It receives strong support from the USA.



THE EASTER LILY. This symbol is associated with the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, due to the seasonal decoration in churches during that period. It is worn as a flower of remembrance for those who gave their lives for the cause of Irish independence. When the Irish Republican Army (IRA) split in 1970 to form the Provisional IRA and the Official IRA both organisations continued to use a paper representation of the Easter Lily in their separate commemorations. Official IRA members wore an Easter Lily with a self-adhesive backing and hence became known as 'the Stickies', while the Provisional IRA supporters secured theirs with a traditional pin (their nickname 'the Pinheads' didn't last).



This symbol began to appear in Nationalist areas where Loyal Order marches were proving controversial. The symbol combines a representation of an Orangeman and the traffic symbol for not allowed. It is meant to represent the fact that the Orange Order is not welcome. Following the use of this symbol a Loyalist version began to appear.



NO SURRENDER.

UNIONIST SYMBOLS



RED CLENCHED FIST. The Clenched Fist is perhaps the strongest loyalist emblem in existence. It is very often seen on loyalist paramilitary murals, and is often depicted with barbed (filo uncinato) wire surrounding it, which is the official symbol of the Loyalist Prisoner's Aid group.



THE CROWN. The crown symbolises the British monarchy in Ireland. It is seen on many Loyalist murals and Orange Order banners. It is seen as the ultimate symbol of Protestantism, and allegiance is pledged to it by all who are loyal to Britain and the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland.



THE POPPY. The Remembrance Day Poppy (papavero) was initially used to commemorate the dead of World War I, in which many Irishmen, both Protestant and Catholic, died fighting. The symbol has long been the preserve (appannaggio) of the Unionist community as it is seen as unequivocally British. While it can still be the cause of controversy *it is slowly growing in popularity with Irish Nationalists who also wish to pay tribute to those who died in the two World Wars.*



They're part of the traditional clothing worn by Orange Order members while on parade

REPUBLICAN MURALS



Killing of eight IRA volunteers at Loughgall, Co. Armagh, May 1987

An active service unit of the IRA attacked an RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary - police) station in Loughgall. The SAS were waiting for them. The eight IRA men were killed, plus one civilian passer-by. The mural gives the names of the IRA volunteers, in Irish, as well as **the shields** and names of the four provinces of Ireland, Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht. A **Celtic cross** and the **sunburst** are also depicted.

Giovanni Inglese



The **Red Hand of Ulster** is a traditional symbol of the O'Neill clan, the major clan in the northern part of Ireland up to the time of the Plantation, early 17th century. The Plantation was in fact a strategic move on the part of the Elizabethans to undermine the power of the O'Neills in the area. The symbol derives from a myth of two chieftans rowing in separate boats towards a shore. Their agreement is that the one who touches the shore first may claim the land as his kingdom. The losing chieftan cut off his hand and threw it ahead of the winning boat, thus claiming the land. Thus, traditionally the symbol is that of a open and upright right hand dripping blood. It is reworked by

the Loyalist Prisoners' Association, shown wrapped in barbed wire, the ultimate insult to loyalists "whose only crime was loyalty". Sometimes it is shown as a fist, a symbol of power, in murals supporting the UFF, Ulster Freedom Fighters, the nom de guerre of the Ulster Defence Association. Here, the Red Hand has sprouted feet and dances derisively on the Irish tricolour, which also bears the initials of the IRA, Irish Republican Army. The mural is a response to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985, when the governments in Dublin and London agreed to consult each other over matters pertaining to Northern Ireland.



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