

CHAPTER 8

Shit protests, and the “Dirty Strike” of Irish Republican prisoners in British jails, 1976-81

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This paper comes at two angles – shit as protest and shit in prisons.

In what I shall narrate, shit and shitting are beset by markers of violence.

And the whole is narrated against the necessary backdrop of centuries of British colonial oppression in Ireland.

1. The mobilisation of shit in private and public protests

Let us start with the question of shit in protests viewed at a general level. It operates at the level of both the metaphorical and the actual. And equally the personal and the societal.

For instance, if you don't like someone, or you think they are a shit, or you have been treated shittily, you can post them a package of fresh shit delivered by post by a number of private companies currently operating online. They offer a choice of shit from pigs, donkeys, horses, cows, elephants and lamas (although, apparently and paradoxically, not human). Seemingly perfectly legal. And anonymous, or so ShitExpress claims, although their customer e-mail list was recently hacked.¹

Mobilising shit at the level of a whole society: After the economic crisis of December 2001 in Argentina, there was an upwelling of new forms of protest. In particular, a new way of



Fig. 1: French farmers spray the front of the Agence de L'Eau building in Garonne with slurry, 2014.

protest known as the *Mierdazo*. It consisted of inviting the whole society dissatisfied with the social, political and economic situation, to save, carry and throw their own excrement, or that of a friend, family member or pet, at the gates of the National Congress at the time when MPs were debating the national budget.² In an extension of this, in Mar del Plata, trucks full of shit were unloaded in front of the banks by people who had lost their savings.

In 2014 a day of protest by farmers against President Macron's economic policies involved the dumping of big piles – hundreds of tons – of animal shit and rotting vegetables outside government buildings all across France, including the spraying of a government agency building with high-pressure slurry. Shit protests are a stock in trade among French farmers [Fig. 1].³

In 2013 in the township of Khayelitsha near Cape Town, South Africa, there was a shit protest dealing with the social actuality of shit issues. Activists organised several months of protests over the inadequacy of toilet facilities in the township. Residents were refusing to use portable toilets, saying that they were demeaning – if you have ever used one, you know how this can be. In one study 1,000 people had access to only 12 public toilet cabins. They were demanding to have flush toilets, and some continued to use the old bucket system. In fact, after protests in 2010, the Democratic Alliance government had provided a number of flush toilets. But they did not enclose them. So people had to sit and shit in public, a further cause for scandal.⁴



Fig. 2: Public toilets located in full public view [AFP]

According to the BBC, in June 2013 180 people were arrested, some carrying bags of human shit. Despite the arrests, bags of human shit were dumped in government offices – collected from the portable toilets – portaloos – that had been provided for them. On 9 June people dumped shit at Cape Town International Airport. They were arrested, and under the Civil Aviation Act they faced 30 years in jail. Shit was also dumped on the N2 highway, and I was told that people were also throwing shit at passing cars on their way to the international airport. As a result the government was obliged to close the N2 highway that leads to the airport.

These protests were dubbed “Poo Wars” by the press. But this makes light of very serious issue. Bad sanitation – raw sewage in the community – pollutes waterways, encourages rats, spreads diarrhoeal disease, and also stinks. Children are especially vulnerable.

2. Shit and shitting in prisons

This brings us to the general question of shit in the context of prisons

Throughout history shitting and prison have been intimately bonded.

From the Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi, the outspoken critic of Pope Boniface VIII, who, according to Italian playwright Dario Fo, for many years endured imprisonment chained in his own shit.⁵ Through to the atrocious photographs of torture and humiliation that came out of the Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq War. Guards pissing on prisoners. Prisoners smeared with faeces. A photo of a naked prisoner with shit daubed on his face.⁶

For the purposes of this paper we home in on **the act of shitting** in prison.

I am currently translating the autobiography of the Italian revolutionary communist Antonio Negri. On the day that he was first imprisoned, the warder told him "This is your room" and led him into a cell five metres by five, with a small bed, a rusty iron sink, and a bucket to one side. He was confronted immediately with the issue of how you, as an individual, shit and piss in prison. Latterly I asked him to write more about this most philosophical of moments, but sadly he died before he was able to do so.⁷

If we turn to the United States, with its huge carceral populations, the discussion is open and frank. In the video "Pooping in Prison" a heavily built African-American prisoner named Herc explains: Drape a towel over your knees. Keep your boots on. Run the flush water to cover the sound of your shit. And keep a pointed propelling pencil in your boots as a dagger in case someone comes and tries to physically attack you.⁸

Prison is a regime of the body. It is, and always has been, a system of corporeal governance. Shitting, pissing and the daily ordering of bowel movements are central to that routine. Foucault, that most prolific of writers on the psycho-social, has much to say about prison and disciplinary regimes, but curiously not about shit. I have trawled through *Discipline and Punish*⁹ and found nothing, even though he speaks intimately of the policing of every aspect of bodily governance and the "marvels" invented over the centuries by prison reformers. Perhaps, I do not know, he felt that the ground had already been covered by French psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte in his *History of Shit*.¹⁰ Or perhaps for him, like for so many others, shit was the unspeakable.

In particular, a crucial aspect is the performance – the public or private enactment – of the shitting moment. Remember that all prisons have an architecture that has been consciously designed by somebody. It is a ritualised scenography of humiliation. One prisoner describes a detention centre in Oklahoma where there is a single toilet pan in the middle of the room, with no divider, located in full view of a large number of guys on the block, where you have to sit to do your business.¹¹ We might mention in passing that this is the reverse optic of another scenario of prison architecture, Jeremy Bentham's famous panopticon.

Thus another prisoner explains that when he first arrived in prison, "I didn't shit for two weeks". But then, in the end, you submit to the regime, because "when you've got to go, you've got to go".

We can also add that **governance of the arsehole** is also fundamental to prison life. Anal rape – whether by guards or by other inmates – is stock in trade in the prison business. In 2004, a major general in the US Army wrote of a detainee in Abu Ghraib prison having been sodomized with "a chemical light and perhaps a broomstick". And of course intimate and sometimes violent body searches are an everyday reality.

Abject subjects

I have found that in thinking about these matters the terms "abjection" and "abject subjects" are useful.

In Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*¹² the abject refers to the human reaction (for instance horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the

distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The distancing of oneself, whether from the animal, or from the mother, is what establishes selfhood.

It is through the abjection of the not-me that the boundaries of the body/self/system in question can be instated.

Now, shit is a very well defined other. It is both part of us and simultaneously not part of us. Our separation from our shit is a fundamental moment of establishing selfhood, establishing identity. As we grow up and become socialised, our shit is expelled into otherness. It is thrown away – abject, in the literal Latin meaning of the term.

Indeed, if you go into the very roots of the word “shit”, it takes you through the Proto-Germanic *skit-, and then back to a Proto-Indo-European root *skei, “to cut, or to split”. It appears that the notion is precisely that of “separation” from the body.

By way of a reversal, we can argue that a **moment of subversion** is the **embracing of that object**. Reconnecting with one’s shit is powerfully political moment, and that is the subject of the second half of this paper.

3. To Ireland, and to the matter in hand

In Northern Ireland, after the 1971 introduction of *internment without trial*, Irish Republican prisoners succeeded – by a hunger strike of 40 prisoners – in gaining “special status”. In other words, a status more or less as prisoners of war.¹³ In 1976 the British government sought to end the political status of paramilitary prisoners. Political prisoners, they declared, would be forced to wear prison clothing. The IRA leadership in prison then called for a campaign of assassination of prison officers, which went ahead for the next five years.¹⁴

Ciaran Nugent was in prison serving a 3-year sentence for having hijacked a van. He was the first of the prisoners to be subjected to, and to resist, this new “criminalisation” regime. He declared his refusal to wear prison clothing, and chose to wear only a prison blanket instead. In the prisons, following Nugent’s example, up to 300 IRA and INLA prisoners refused to wear prison clothing, and either went naked or made improvised clothing out of blankets. This became known as the “Blanket Protest”.

This was not some whimsical fancy. It was a harsh choice. A full year later the prisoners were again protesting about the bitterly cold conditions.

Naked and freezing. In the H Blocks, as the prisoners reported in *Republican News*:

“It is so cold that we are unable to walk on the concrete cell floor in our bare feet; the water in the drinking container has frozen, and my filthy foam mattress upon the ground is wet with the snow that comes through the window during the night. [RN, 20 January 1979, p. 5]

Now, there was an additional aspect to the Blanket Protest. Namely the “Dirty Protest”, or the “Shit Protest”, a campaign that was to gain a measure of international notoriety.

From the literature it is clear that there was no particular “politics of shit” in play here. The action was driven by circumstances. Rather, as Tim Pat Coogan reports in his book *The IRA*,¹⁵ at the start of 1978 prison guards were in the habit of kicking prisoners slops back into their cells. This led to a prisoners’ refusal to “slop out” (the obligation to put their chamber pots outside).

The book *Ten Men Dead* by David Beresford¹⁶ adds further detail: In March 1978, as a result of attacks by prison officers, some prisoners refused to leave their cells to shower or use the lavatory. The “No Wash” protest had begun. And the prisoners started slopping out by throwing the contents of their pots through the spy holes and windows,

the warders sometimes throwing it back. The openings were then blocked, so the prisoners resorted to pouring the urine out through cracks and dispersing the excrement by smearing it on the walls. The Dirty Protest was under way.

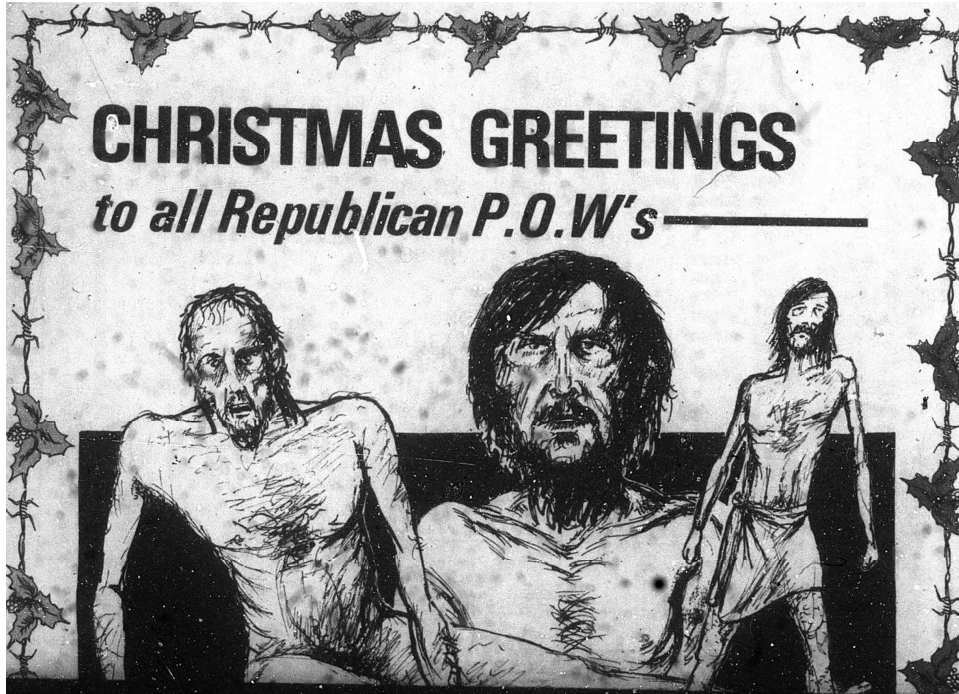


Fig. 2: Blanket protest, Long Kesh, 1978. *Republican News*.

In short: No washing; no slopping out; a refusal to wear prison clothing; and spreading their shit on the walls of their cells. As Coogan described it, the prison cells became filthy maggot-infested caves, in which young men stood naked except for a prison blanket.



Fig. 3: Hugh Rooney and Freddie Toal, Dirty Protest, Long Kesh, 1980 [BBC].

In a further development, in February 1980, they were joined in this tactic by women Republican prisoners in Armagh Jail, who were protesting at their own prison conditions. Thirty-two IRA prisoners at Northern Ireland's women's jail, in the county

of Armagh, went on a dirty protest after several had been beaten in scuffles with warders.¹⁷ What was notable here was that the shit smearing was accompanied by menstrual blood, a fact that prompted particular revulsion from Coogan.



Fig. 4. Mairéad Farrell, Dirty Protest, Armagh Jail, 1981.

Now the fact is that, for much of the duration of this protest, the only available images were the crude black and white drawings of the men in their blankets made by the prisoners themselves. Until eventually the BBC was able to film and photograph the strikers – two years and seven months into their protest – and those images immediately went public and created an iconic image akin to that of Christian martyrdom.¹⁸

Protest in Parliament

By way of an aside, in a campaign in support of the striking prisoners, Republican sympathisers in London collected a quantity of shit and went and threw it from the public gallery into the House of Commons. This included a dog turd, some horse shit from the police stables on Bow Road, and one human turd.¹⁹

Hunger strikes

Our focus in this paper has been on excrement. However, it would be ridiculous to describe the Dirty Protest without also describing the utterly harrowing circumstances that developed at the same time, with Republican prisoners deciding – twice – to embark on hunger strikes in support of their demands. By 1981 their hunger strikes had resulted in the deaths of Bobby Sands and nine other hunger strikers. *Ten Men Dead*, as in the title of Beresford's book – and that book is a horrifying read.

There is no doubt that these epic struggles produced tangible results. On the one hand, a huge growth in support for the Republican movement. And on the other, by 1983 many elements of the prisoners' core demands had been phased back in.

As regards the tactic of the Dirty Protest, the dirty protests did not end in Long Kesh. In May 2011, in Maghaberry Prison in Co Antrim, an estimated 30 Republican prisoners

embarked on a shit protest. Their protest was in opposition to humiliating strip searches, including anal probes. They wanted that regime to be replaced by the use of BOSS scanner devices.²⁰



Fig. 6: Cleaning of the cells, requiring steam and ammonia.

We may ask why these shit and piss struggles are effective. They are a massive problem for prison authorities. They are legally obliged to maintain cleanliness, and thus have to employ specialist cleaning companies. In 2012 the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that almost half a million pounds had been spent cleaning the cells of dissident republicans in the dirty protest.²¹ And at the public level, they are thoroughly subversive of societal norms of decent and civilised human behaviour. In passing I would add that here the critical categories developed by Giorgio Agamben in his *Homo sacer* can be usefully engaged. Naked man, bare life, inclusion within and exclusion from citizenship, and what does it mean to be human. But for all the scandal and revulsion that the Dirty Protests engendered, at ground level they were not designed to that end; they were not “a politics of shit” but rather a simple and logical next step requiring to be taken.

To conclude, it remains only to say that one of the ironies of this question is that there exists a good and even-handed account of the Dirty Protests online. The history is spelled out, and is impressive. It is only when you get to the end that you realise that the posting is in fact an advertisement placed by a commercial company called “CleanSafe”. I quote:

CleanSafe are experts in the complete sanitation of areas contaminated by bodily fluids and can be on your site within two hours to get your facility back up to code with minimal disruption.²²

The logic of capital, always ready with the recuperation of forms of struggle to its own ends.



Fig. 6: Blanket protest, gable-end mural, Clowney Street, Belfast.

*For the men and women who were willing to give their lives for freedom.
May they never be forgotten.*

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<https://www.sendshit.co.uk/>
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3. French farmers spray slurry over Emmanuel Macron's residence:
https://youtu.be/ka_Uv8MNQ8s
4. Khayelitsha, 2014: Steven Robins, "Poo wars as matter out of place: 'Toilets for Africa' in Cape Town", *Anthropology Today*, vol. 30, issue 1, February 2014, pp. 1–3. Thanks to Elizabeth Hull for this reference. See:
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15. Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA*, HarperCollins, London, 2000, p. 488.
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17. Former Republican prisoner Poilin Quinn tells the full story of the women’s protests in Armagh Jail. The dirty strike developed into a hunger strike (1 December 1980) by three women prisoners, Mairéad Farrell, Mary Doyle and Mairéad Nugent. It lasted for nineteen days. See: <https://youtu.be/ezpoPzmuZCk>
Coogan’s account is as follows: “...and the fact that that in addition to faeces, the women’s menstrual blood was smeared on the walls, which I found particularly nauseating”. *op. cit.*, p. 491.
18. The BBC video: “They have been living in these unbelievable conditions for two years and seven months... The smell is indescribable.” *Newsnight* 1980. With cleaners constantly at work using a mixture of steam and ammonia. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p078l4nb>
19. A rather fine coprological specimen which, dare I say, I produced myself. But that is a story for another time.
There is a song written about this event, penned by Irish Republican prisoners in Long Kesh.
The honourable gentlemen were seated in the House
Quite serene and tranquil, all was quiet as a mouse
Then from somewhere in the gallery an angry shout there rung,
And down upon their noble heads showered bags of horses’ dung
20. BOSS (Body Orifice Security Scanner) machines. See: <https://www.wg-plc.com/product/boss-iii-body-orifice-security-scanner>
21. Cost of Maghaberry dirty strike: *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Nov 2012.
22. Cleansafe: <https://thesafegroup.co.uk/blog/what-is-a-dirty-protest>

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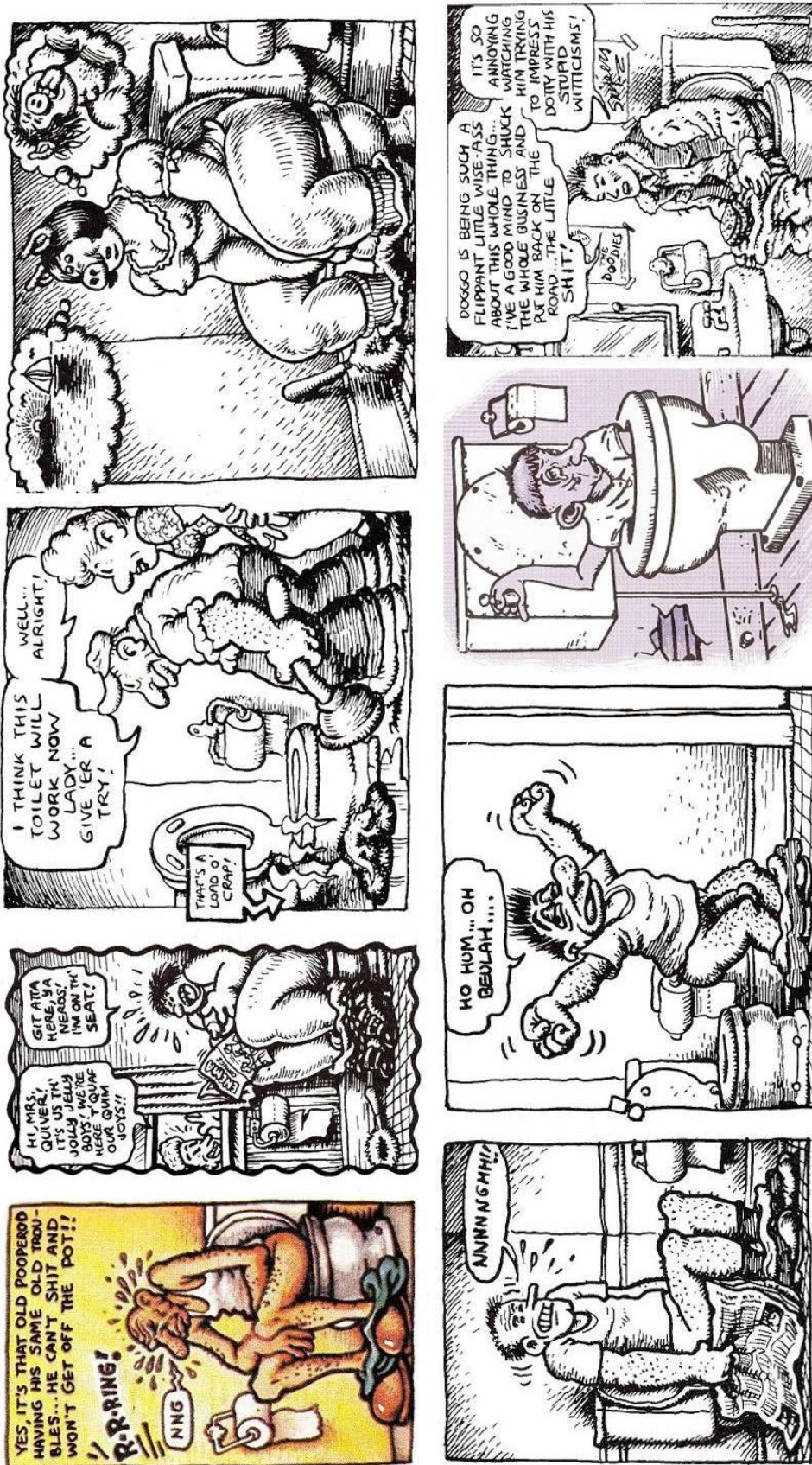


Illustration 7: Robert Crumb – Toilet thoughts – 1970s