

SYMBOLS AND FLAGS

A preparatory note for people working with community groups.

This is a very short paper about the original meaning of symbols and flags generally. Every symbol and every flag has, within this context, its own history, in which the original meaning of all symbols and flags is more or less hidden.

1. **A symbol represents an identity**, the identity of a nation, a group, a person. As such it represents at the same time the history of the nation, the group and so on because the history belongs to the identity.

All history has a common pattern: Once there was chaos. There was not an ordered state, people did not come together. There was once big havoc and in the end the wrong-doers who provoked the chaos were driven out. In these ways order and peace came, the order and peace in which we live and which is often expressed our unity around the symbol.

We nearly never realize that the symbol represents the (our) history, but at the same time the memory of it is stored, hidden, deeply in us. As soon as there are reasons to go back to the old memories, to history, time of upheavals, in time of insecurity for the nation or the group, everything represented in the symbol flares up. People become violent as they themselves did not know they were able to be , they become sentimental, they weep without knowing why and soon.

Symbols as representations of the identity of a nation or a group are of course very important. Looking at it, people are “symmetrical” parallel. They don’t fight any longer. They agree and eventually if necessary, they do everything needed to defend the group and so each other. In the same time symbols can become very dangerous, because all the violence of the origins, violence which seeks scapegoats is hidden in them. Any time if there is an occasion for it, the symbol can again provoke the violence and the scapegoating, so destroying everything and particularly innocent people.

2. **A flag is a symbol** as every other symbol. It too represents identity and by definition it represents as such in the same time the violent history of the group to which the flag belongs and which belongs to the flag. The speciality of the of the flag is that it is the symbol of the marching group, army or crowd which drives out the scapegoat (the “enemy”) and, after that feat, marches on bringing the flag to the sanctuary, to the church. The flag is in our mythological thinking, the identity of the group. Hence the fierce fighting for the flag on the battlefield and the humiliation of the opponent by burning his flag and such actions. In the flag is everything which is in the symbol, violence, the scapegoating of innocent people, the feelings of proudness because “we won” and the “others” the “baddies” are slain. As such all these feelings and actions are sentiments that are dangerous and so the flag can provoke everything too.
3. It could be very important to think, if possible in mixed groups, about these things. Which thoughts, which feelings when I see this or that flag, this or that symbol of

Irishness or Englishness and so on. It seems to me a matter of method, which in fact to establish the means by which these things happen, e.g. if the group is told about these things beforehand or only afterwards. My fantasy is that it is best to begin without further explanation.

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