

# From Ramle Prison to the World

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On the first day of March in 1981 Bobby Sands, imprisoned in the Long Kesh for links to the armed resistance to the British occupation of Northern Ireland, began a hunger strike. For seventeen days he was able to keep a diary. The first entry begins with two lines that have become immortal:

“I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul.”

In 1976 Margaret Thatcher's government had introduced a policy of 'criminalisation' that denied the right of Irish Republicans sentenced for participation in armed struggle to be treated as political prisoners. Where we draw the lines around what we define as political is often every bit as significant as the contestation within the borders of what we accept as political.

When Bobby Sands died after 66 days without food Thatcher dismissed him as a criminal. But in Belfast more than a hundred thousand people thronged the route to his funeral. Bobby Sands, and the nine other men that died after him, were not the first to use the hunger strike to demand that the British state recognise their dissent as political. In 1909 Marion Dunlop, an activist in the struggle for the right of women to vote, was arrested after throwing stones through the window of 10 Downing Street. She immediately went on hunger strike in protest at the state's refusal to recognise her as a political prisoner. The hunger strike quickly became a standard tactic for women jailed in Britain in the course of the struggle for the right to vote. The state's response was to force-feed hunger strikers – a practice that had long been used against people deemed insane. The allegation of madness is another tactic widely used to set limits to the political.

Neither madness nor criminality are concepts that have ever been stable or immune to influence from the power relations of the day. Today a fisherman in a village on the West Coast may be, in terms of the law, a poacher – which is to say a criminal. But if his father was a fisherman, as was his grandfather, but the right to fish is now reserved, in law, for a corporation its highly unlikely that his community will see him as a criminal when he comes home with his catch. In fact in the popular view it may very well be the corporation, and its allies in the political elite that are seen as a criminal.

But just as it is sometimes necessary to contest the way in which madness and criminality are used to circumscribe the limits of the political it is also necessary to recognise that there are such things as madness and criminality and that there are moments in political projects, including struggles for justice, when a clear distance has to be staked out from practices within those struggles. It was, for instance, entirely necessary for the United Democratic Front to denounce the outright thuggery into which the Mandela United Football Club had descended. But when an aspiration for justice is, in itself, presented as mad or criminal it's clear that an attempt is being made to normalise injustice by policing the limits of the political – the sphere of authorised contestation.

Today in South Africa the state and, also, some NGOs, use criminalisation to police the boundaries of the political. There are other strategies too. It is regularly claimed that what appears to be popular dissent is actually a result of malicious conspiracy. This claim is often, as was the case before and during apartheid too, racialised in so far as it is assumed that there must be white agency covertly manipulating black dissent. But the default strategy to contain the political, a strategy pursued with equal enthusiasm by the state and many NGOs, is its reduction to matters of 'service delivery'. This means, for example, that the profoundly and enduringly political questions around the way in which we structure and manage our cities gets reduced to the mere question of the pace at which the state builds new townships. There is no space within the service delivery discourse to raise the fact that these places are townships, which are by definition designed as ghettos for the subordinated, and that they are even further from the cities, and made up of houses that are inferior, in every respect, to the townships built under apartheid. People who do raise these questions have repeatedly been treated as criminals or agents of conspiracy.

The reduction of the political to the technocratic is a global phenomenon – and one that is currently being vigorously contested, from the right and the left, in Greece. But while the reduction of the political to the technocratic functions to set limits to the political the mobilisation of the language of criminality and madness function to eviscerate it altogether. Palestine has become a global symbol of a space where the right to the political, to the shared posing of questions of justice, has been rendered illegitimate, even incomprehensible, by a ruthless and racist state acting with backing of the most powerful forces in the world.

The lie on which the state of Israel was founded – the non-existence of Palestinian people – continues, in a new form, by an insistence that the Palestinian struggle is animated by all manner of perversity but not, not ever, by a demand for justice. Palestinians are allowed, within certain limits, to exist as bodies in certain places but not as participants in the political.

The presentation of political Islam as essentially insane in the mainstream Western media has been central to this. There is no doubt that there are currents within political Islam that must be opposed as directly and resolutely as any other form of oppression. It's equally clear that some of these currents have drawn much of their power from alliances with elites in the West. But Islam has no monopoly on being invoked to sanctify the very acts that all major religions consider to be evil. There are currents in contemporary forms of politicised Christianity, Hinduism or Judaism that are entirely perverse. But the difference accorded in certain circles to the fact that Bobby Sands announced his hunger strike via a Catholic priest, and began his diary with an invocation of his God, and the fact that some, although certainly not all, Palestinian activists express their political concerns through an Islamic language is instructive.

In February this year Hana Shalabi was arrested on the West Bank. Her brother was killed by the Israeli army in 2005 and in late 2009 she was detained for 25 months without a trial or having charges brought against her. She was released when 1 027 pro-Palestinian prisoners were exchanged for one captured Israeli soldier. Sometimes inequality, the practice of giving a different weight to the lives of different people, imagined to be different types of people, can be turned into a simple ratio of relative value. She was arrested again in February this year and went on hunger strike in protest against being held without any charge being brought against her. After she had refused food for 43 days the Israeli state relented and she was released and exiled to the Gaza strip, which in a sense, is another kind of prison.

Palestinian activists say that 2 500 prisoners have joined the hunger strike. The primary demand of the women and men refusing food is an end to the practice of detention without trial – a practice that is always central to the strategies used by authoritarian regimes to circumscribe the boundaries of the political. It allows state's to hold people for what they think and who they know rather than on the basis of what they have done. The Israeli state has responded to protests in support of the hunger strikers with the same grammar of oppression that we have come to know, again, under the ANC – teargas, rubber bullets and water canons.

On Thursday last week Thaer Halahleh was able to smuggle a letter to his two-year-old daughter out of the Ramle prison hospital. Written on the threshold of what could be the end of one man's presence in this world it ends by looking forward not to the garden of heaven that Western propaganda has presented as the inspiration for all militancy mediated through Islam but to the garden of a better world.

"Lamar my love: that day will come, and I will make it up to you for everything, and tell you the whole story, and your days that will follow will be more beautiful, so let your days pass now and wear your prettiest clothes, run and then run again in the gardens of your long life, go forward and forward for nothing is behind you but the past, and this is your voice I hear all the time as a melody of freedom."

In the last entry in his diary, Bobby Sands, who was also a father wrote, "If they aren't able to destroy the desire for freedom, they won't break you." The time when our state, and the party that governs it, could be said to have any credible right to speak for the desire for freedom that animated our own struggles against oppression has passed. But no party or state owns that struggle and our moral obligation, along with holding to the desire for our own collective freedom amidst the morass of doublespeak, plunder, patronage and repression into which the ANC had descended, is to mobilise its moral force in support of all people whose claim to justice is denied. After all people across the world, including in Palestine, stood with our struggle when our yearning for justice was dismissed as criminality, communism, terrorism, treason and all the rest. We need to find a way to send a letter back to Ramle prison, a letter that says we are with the struggle for justice for the Palestinian people.

\* An international daylong hunger strike has been called in solidarity with hunger strikers in Israeli prisons for Thursday 17 May 2012.11

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