

Sociology Working Papers

Paper Number 2007-03

The Rationality of Self-Inflicted Sufferings:
Hunger Strikes by Irish Republicans, 1916—1923

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The Rationality of Self-Inflicted Suffering: Hunger strikes by Irish Republicans, 1916-1923

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The hunger strike is a strange weapon from the perspective of rational choice. Physical suffering—possibly even death—is inflicted on oneself, rather than on the opponent. The technique can be conceived as a paradoxical inversion of hostage-taking or kidnapping, analyzed by Elster (2004). With kidnapping, A threatens to kill a victim B in order to force concessions from the target C; sometimes the victim is also the target. With a hunger strike, the perpetrator is the victim: A threatens to kill A in order to force concessions. Hunger strikes also resemble self-immolation where someone attempts to kill him or herself—without harming others—as an act of protest (Biggs 2005). Why would it be rational to threaten oneself with physical suffering?

To answer this question, this paper focuses on one country over a few years. From 1916 to 1923, about 10,000 Irish Republican prisoners went on hunger strike (counting multiple hunger strikes by the same individual multiple times). Five starved to death, and one died from forcible feeding. The total number is impressive; as far as I know this is not matched by any comparable episode. Hunger strikes by Republicans continued in Eire in the 1930s and 1940s, and in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s; the most famous occurred in 1981, when ten members of the Irish Republican Army starved to death (Beresford 1987). These later episodes involved far fewer individuals. That is one reason to focus on the first episode, which provides greater scope for comparison.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins with historical background on the two civil wars and on the course of hunger strikes from 1916 to 1923. The second section presents a model of the hunger strike as a multi-move game. The efficacy of the hunger strike is predicated on the government's fear of the prisoner's death; this fear is explained in the third section. The next section examines the prisoner's decision to go on hunger strike. The government's response is considered in the fifth section. The prisoner's ultimate decision, whether to die or to surrender, is then considered. The final section interrogates the significance of religion.

1. Historical background

What happened in Ireland from 1916 to 1923 falls under the broad heading of 'organized violence' (Elster 2004). There were two distinct phases of conflict. In the first phase (sometimes called the 'Anglo-Irish war'), Irish Republicans fought the British government in Westminster, which governed Ireland from Dublin Castle. Foreshadowed by the Easter Rising in 1916, the conflict began in earnest in 1919. Members of Sinn Fein elected to Westminster declared Ireland's independence and formed their own assembly (the Dail); the Irish Volunteers (soon known as the Irish Republican Army) began killing police. This gradually escalated into guerilla warfare against the British Army as well as the Royal Irish Constabulary. After eighteenth months, the conflict ended in 1921 with a truce. The British government and Sinn Fein signed a Treaty, creating an Irish Free State (excluding most of Ulster) with its capital in Dublin. Because the new state formally maintained symbolic

allegiance to the King, this began a second phase of conflict (the ‘Irish civil war’). Both Sinn Fein and the IRA split in two. Those who accepted the Treaty formed a new state; anti-Treaty Republicans fought to overthrow the state. A confused war began in 1922; anti-Treaty Republicans admitted defeat eleven months later, in 1923. The two phases of conflict provide a useful dimension of comparison. Ironically the government in the second phase was composed largely of former prisoners, including a minister who had been on hunger strike! In the context of the bloody twentieth century, these two ‘wars’ were characterized by a low level of violence. The first phase of conflict war killed about 1100 of the warring parties, and a few hundred civilians (Hopkinson 2002, pp. 201-2). The second phase killed a few thousand (Hopkinson 1998, p. 273).

Fasting as a means of coercion was an ancient tradition in Ireland (as in India). Irish nationalism renewed interest in the Gaelic past, and the tradition of fasting was dramatized by Yeats in *The King’s Threshold* (1904). The significance of this cultural inheritance is unclear. What is certain is that Irish Republicans borrowed the technique of hunger striking—within prison—from the women’s suffrage movement. Hundreds of women (and some men) in the United Kingdom went on hunger strike from 1909 to 1914, though none died. This included at least a dozen women in Ireland.¹ Two activists in the Irish labor movement (also opposed to British rule) used the technique when imprisoned during the lockout of 1913. An Irish pacifist used it in 1915, when imprisoned for making speeches against recruitment.

Irish Republicans began hunger striking after the Easter Rising, when two or three thousand were interned in England and Wales. In 1916 there were a handful of hunger strikes, contesting punishments imposed by the prison authorities. The technique was adopted in earnest in 1917. Forty prisoners on hunger strike were forcibly fed, and this procedure killed Thomas Ashe. Over the next two and a half years, hundreds of prisoners went on hunger strike; almost all gained concessions, often release. This had two important consequences for the course of the conflict. The technique effectively destroyed the British policy of mass internment. The release of prisoners demoralized the armed forces, and so contributed to an outbreak of extrajudicial killings and destruction which further escalated the war. When 12 prisoners from Cork went on hunger strike in August 1920, the British government refused to concede. Terence MacSwiney, Mayor of Cork, starved to death, along with Michael Fitzgerald and Joseph Murphy; the remainder were ordered to end their hunger strike. This ended the technique in the Anglo-Irish war.

The technique was taken up by anti-Treaty Republicans soon after the Irish civil war broke out in 1922.² There were about a dozen hunger strikes, mainly by women—including two sisters of Terence MacSwiney. All were released. In October 1923, after the cessation of armed hostilities, there was a mass hunger strike by about 7800 Republican prisoners.³ The

¹ Healy (1985, p. 100) counts 22 women on hunger strike in Irish prisons, 1912-14, compared to 12 in Owens (1984).

² There was one hunger strike on the other side: by a member of the IRA who accepted the Treaty, imprisoned by anti-Treaty Republicans during the confused period of maneuvering before the outbreak of war.

³ A reliable figure for the total number may be impossible to ascertain. Healy (1982b, p. 214) cites separate figures for nine places of detention, summing to 7843; most of the figures are

government refused to concede, and many of the hunger strikers soon gave up. Denis Barry and Andrew O’Sullivan starved to death, before the hunger strike was officially called off.

Research on hunger strikes must overcome a double methodological problem of selection on dependent variables. First, hunger strikes ending in death naturally attract far more attention than those ending with one side or the other backing down. While Terence MacSwiney, in particular, has a revered place in Irish history (and an excellent biography: Costello 1995), it is harder to find precise information on the many hundreds of hunger strikers who won their release. As Healy (1982b, p. 25) asks: “Have historians no market for reports and comments on the way most strikers have ended their protest without dying?” Healy (1982b, pp. 29-31) provides the only list that aims to be comprehensive, based on published sources. Basic information (like the number of prisoners involved) is lacking in many cases. Irish newspapers and official records will be used in future research. Even with a comprehensive database of all hunger strikes, a second problem awaits: we also want to know about the prisoners who did not go on hunger strike. At this preliminary stage of research, I have ignored this problem (apart from collecting sporadic figures on the total number of prisoners). Because there is a well-defined population of ‘cases at risk’ (Republican prisoners) and because official records would have been kept, this is a promising avenue for future systematic investigation.

2. The hunger strike as a game

A hunger strike can be conceptualized as a multi-move game with two players, prisoner (P) and government (G).⁴ Figure 1a depicts the structure of the game in extensive form. The prisoner moves first, deciding whether to begin a hunger strike.⁵ If a hunger strike commences, then the government moves next, deciding whether to concede victory to the prisoner. If the government refuses to concede, then the prisoner has the final move, deciding whether to surrender or to die. Of course this representation ignores the temporal duration of a hunger strike: more realistically we could model this as a stochastic game, with the state of the prisoner’s health diminishing at each iteration. Moreover, in reality each side has a wider range of actions: the prisoner can calibrate the demand to make it more or less difficult for the government to offer a concession; the government can choose whether to subject the prisoner to forcible feeding. These complications will be discussed in subsequent sections. For the moment, however, let us remain with a tractable, and necessarily simple, game. This captures the essential logic of the interaction between the two sides, in which there are four outcomes: no hunger strike, concession by the government, surrender by the prisoner, and death.

What are the payoff functions for each side? The government clearly prefers the absence of a hunger strike or surrender by the prisoner over making a concession or letting the

rounded to the nearest ten or hundred, and so they are obviously approximate. Fallon (1987, p. 88) gives a total of only 5000.

⁴ The analysis applies equally to hunger strikes outside prison.

⁵ This assumes that the government has no opportunity to thwart a hunger strike before it begins—as an employer can thwart a strike (Biggs 2002)—by offering pre-emptive concessions. This assumption seems to be supported by information on hunger strikes by Irish Republicans in this period.

prisoner die. The government's dilemma, if a hunger strike begins, is that concession and death are both negative outcomes. The prisoner clearly prefers avoiding a hunger strike over a hunger strike that ends in surrender, and clearly prefers winning a concession over ending with surrender. Within these parameters, however, there is more than one plausible payoff function. Figure 1b defines different types of player, with distinct payoff functions. The payoffs are presented as integers, with zero being the absence of a hunger strike, though the analysis depends only on the ordinal payoff. Three types of prisoner are considered. The *bluffing* prisoner is willing to endure temporary starvation in order to gain a concession, but prefers surrender to death. The *sacrificial* prisoner prefers death to surrender or to no hunger strike, but prefers a concession to death. The *resolute* prisoner falls between these extremes, preferring death to surrender (like the sacrificial type) but preferring no hunger strike to death (like the bluffing type). None of the three actually ranks death as the preferred outcome. This point was made by a Jesuit theologian, defending MacSwiney from the charge of suicide: "no hunger-striker aims at death. He aims at escaping from unjust detention, and, to do this, is willing to run the risk of death, ... of which he has no desire, not even as a means" (quoted in O'Gorman 1993, p. 115). These three types are not exhaustive. The 'normal' prisoner is surely unwilling to endure temporary starvation even if it ends in concession. This is the least interesting in theory, though surely the most common in reality, because a prisoner of this type will never choose to initiate a hunger strike. The payoff functions for the government can be confined to two types.⁶ *Conciliatory* means that the government is averse to death, treating this as the worst outcome (as it is for the bluffing prisoner). *Intransigent* means that the government reluctantly prefers death to concession.

If we confine attention to three types of prisoner and two types of government, there are six elementary variants of the game. These can be condensed into the strategic form, where the prisoner has three strategies: either do nothing, or go on hunger strike and then surrender unless a concession is forthcoming, or go on hunger strike and then die unless a concession is forthcoming. Figure 2a clarifies the mapping of strategies onto outcomes. Figure 2b shows the payoff matrices for the six elementary games. Dominated strategies are shaded, with lighter shading for weakly dominated strategies. The sacrificial prisoner will go on hunger strike and die unless offered a concession. The intransigent government will refuse to offer any concession. By contrast, there is no dominant strategy for a bluffing or resolute prisoner or for a conciliatory government. Nash equilibria are boldly underlined. Multiple equilibria are found in two games, with a conciliatory government. In the game with a bluffing prisoner, one equilibrium is formed by a weakly dominated strategy; this would be eliminated by the 'trembling hand' criterion. In the game with a resolute prisoner, there are no grounds for selecting either equilibrium. Indeed, this resembles the game of chicken.⁷ The prisoner 'swerves' by not going on hunger strike; the government 'swerves' by offering a concession.

⁶ The payoffs show that the government prefers no hunger strike to a hunger strike ending with surrender. This is plausible because the latter disrupts prison routine and attracts unwanted publicity. Anyway, this ranking is irrelevant to the analysis, because the government cannot influence the decision to initiate a hunger strike.

⁷ Once the weakly dominated strategy is discarded, the two-by-two matrix differs from chicken in two minor respects. Two payoffs for each side are equal where in chicken they are

What creates the fundamental uncertainty of a hunger strike is that neither side knows for sure what type it is playing against; this is a game with incomplete information. For simplicity we will assume that each side knows its own type. (It would, however, be possible to assume that the prisoner is not certain about his own payoff function; not until the final move will he discover whether he prefers death to surrender.) Figure 3 translates this into a single game with imperfect information. Nature (N) makes the first two moves, determining the type of prisoner and government. For clarity, the resolute type of prisoner is excluded. The four elementary games appear as subtrees. Information sets are depicted by dotted lines. For example, a sacrificial prisoner does not know the government's type, and therefore makes his first move without knowing which of the two nodes (labeled P_s) he is situated at. Likewise an intransigent government knows only that it is at situated at one of two nodes (labeled G_i). [I'm sorry that Microsoft Word has spoilt the kinked lines connecting G_i and connecting G_c .]

Half of the terminal nodes should never be reached by rational players, because they could only be the product of (strictly or weakly) dominated strategies. These nodes are shaded in Figure 3. We can turn this around to ask what sort of inferences can be made from observing the outcome. It is not possible to identify the types of *both* players, but it is possible to narrow down the set of possibilities. Here we include the resolute type as well. If there is no hunger strike, then we know that the prisoner was not sacrificial. If a hunger strike ends in death, then the prisoner was not bluffing; he was either sacrificial or resolute. If it ends in surrender, then the prisoner was bluffing. If it ends with concession, then the government was conciliatory. The revelation of the opponent's type can give rise to regret: a realization that the strategy was mistaken *ex post*. (These are terminal nodes whose outcome in the corresponding elementary game cannot be a Nash equilibrium.) A conciliatory government after the prisoner's death would regret that it had not offered a concession. A resolute or bluffing prisoner after the government's refusal to concede would regret that he had begun a hunger strike.

Thus far we have confined attention to a single hunger strike; its outcome terminates the game. In reality, the hunger strike is merely a single stage in a repeated game. The government maintains continuity across multiple games. Even on the other side, in some cases the same prisoner repeats the game. Repetition makes reputation important. This will not be elaborated formally, but it is worth sketching some implications. Because the outcome of the game reveals something about the player's type, the other side can use this information in future moves. Once a prisoner has surrendered, he has revealed himself as a bluffer. This should eliminate any chance of concession in the future, which in turn removes the rationale for going on hunger strike. Likewise, once a government has granted concessions, it has revealed itself as conciliatory. This will encourage bluffing and resolute types to go on hunger strike in future rounds. Because players can look backward, they should also look forward—and act with a view to creating a favorable reputation. This is not significant for the individual prisoner: dying proves that he is not bluffing, but it will also obviate repetition. (This would

unequal. If the prisoner 'swerves' (by not going on hunger strike), then neither the government nor the prisoner cares whether the government 'swerves' (by playing a strategy of concession) or not (by playing a strategy of refusing), because in this case the government's strategy is unobservable.

be relevant were we to conceptualize the player as an enduring organization rather than an individual.) Reputation is very important for the government, however. Even if the government's payoffs are conciliatory at each stage, it might decide that the long-term costs of this reputation outweigh the short-term costs of intransigence. Even if a single concession is better than a single death, a large number of concessions might be worse than a single death.

The next section considers why the government treats the death of a hunger striker as a negative outcome. Subsequent sections examine the three moves in turn. These also cover stratagems to alter the logic of the game. Section five shows how the government's type changed over time. Section six makes some inferences about the types of prisoners.

3. The shadow of death: the government's dilemma

A hunger strike is defined by the threat—or at least possibility—of death.⁸ Although this outcome is rare, it overshadows the decisions of both sides. The model of interaction sketched above takes it for granted that the government (whether intransigent or conciliatory) views the prisoner's death as a negative outcome. Our first task is to explain why the government would prefer to avoid the death of a prisoner. In the context of a civil war, when prisoners are associated with violent insurgency, why not treat the hunger strike as a welcome saving of the costs of incarceration or an economical method of execution? Unless the government wants to keep prisoners alive, the hunger strike becomes a useless weapon, simply an inefficient method of committing suicide.

The British state had no prior experience of a hunger striker dying in prison.⁹ Nevertheless, it clearly wanted to avoid the deaths of suffragettes, trade unionists, and pacifists alike. From the outset, it treated Irish Republicans in the same way. The accidental death of Ashe in 1917 apparently affirmed the government's judgment. His funeral brought Dublin to a standstill, and attracted a crowd estimated between thirty and forty thousand (Kee 1972, p. 608). "The circumstances of his death have made 100,000 Sinn Feiners out of 100,000 constitutional nationalists," opined the London *Daily Express* (quoted in Kee 1972, p. 608). The death of a hunger striker was invariably feared by the government and its allies. The Irish Free State was no different from the British government. But I have yet to find an example of this fear being explained. During MacSwiney's hunger strike, the British Home Office commented cryptically that "the detention of a prisoner during a protracted hunger strike until his death was subversive of prison discipline and administration" (quoted in Costello 1995, p. 171). When Mary MacSwiney was on hunger strike, the Archbishop of Dublin (who supported the Irish Free State) wrote confidentially to the President: "I have little sympathy for this lady and politically none ... [but] I consider allowing her to die would

⁸ As pointed out above, there are hunger strikes (perhaps we should call these 'token' hunger strikes) whose duration is explicitly limited. In such case there is no threat of death. As far as I know, none of the hunger strikes in this period had this character.

⁹ That other trade unionist who went on hunger strike in 1913, James Byrne, died within days of his release. Strangely enough, this death quickly faded into obscurity (Healy 1981, p. 46; *Irish Times*, 1 November 2003).

be a thoroughly unwise policy” (quoted in Fallon 1987, p. 78). Again, he felt no need to explain why.

In another paper (Biggs 2003b), I have explored why protesters can harm the state by provoking it to employ violence against them or even by inflicting violence on themselves; I call this ‘communicative suffering.’ This suffering can be effective in various ways: by signaling commitment or injustice, or by evoking the emotions of anger or shame. My previous research focuses on non-violent social movements; the discussion here will highlight the peculiarities of this technique in the context of civil war. The government wants to minimize support for the insurgents and maximize its own support. Clearly it fears that the death of a hunger striker will enhance the former and erode the latter. We can usefully distinguish three separate publics. One was moderate Irish nationalists, who could be won over by either the British Government or the Republicans, and then either by the Irish Free State or anti-Treaty Republicans. Before the Treaty, another audience was the British public, whose support the British government required in order to fight the rebellion. A third audience was the American public, disproportionately influenced by those of Irish descent. This latter mattered to the British government especially during the First World War, when the policy of the United States held enormous significance. How would the death of a hunger striker alienate public opinion?

Letting a prisoner die enables him to signal the extent of his conviction in the justice of the cause. If you can prove that you would rather die than accept the existing situation, then that provides a credible signal that the situation is intolerable. Although Republicans could argue that British rule and then the Treaty of 1921 were illegitimate, the argument would be more compelling if they could show that they were willing to die for it. “Death is the proof a skeptical world demands of a man’s love for justice,” as Frank Gallagher (1928, p. 77, cf. p. 106) observed while on hunger strike. In the context of civil war, of course, there are already many deaths: those killed in the course of fighting or those captured and executed. But these deaths are more ambiguous than the death of a hunger striker. Insurgents predominantly rely on techniques such as assassinations and ambushes, which minimize the risk of being killed. Therefore the state can denounce them as ‘cowardly.’ (This was echoed by the Catholic Church and even some Republican sympathizers during the initial stages of the Anglo-Irish war.) Even a prisoner who faces execution has not clearly chosen death. Going to one’s execution with stoic resolve—like the martyrs of 1916—may be impressive, but surely less impressive than choosing to die by a painfully slow process of starvation.

Letting a prisoner die also provides an unfortunate synecdoche for historical injustice.¹⁰ The death of an imprisoned Republican exemplified centuries of British oppression in Ireland (even for the Free State, which Republicans denounced as pro-British). It stirred ‘memories’

¹⁰ Synecdoche is close to what I previously identified as ‘anger’ (Biggs 2003). There are two differences. First, I envisage an effect that endures longer than a burst of anger, discharged for example in rioting after a funeral. Second, I consider this to involve cognition as well as emotion. It has the potential to convert someone to the cause, whereas I confined the effect of anger to existing adherents.

of past atrocities, however irrelevant from a rational perspective.¹¹ Again, the death of a hunger striker is more potent than other kinds of death. What is crucial is the asymmetry: the prisoner dies without harming anyone else, as a completely innocent victim (unlike, for example, a prisoner who is killed after attacking a prison guard). Asymmetry would be attenuated if the prisoner had been implicated in violence against government forces, like prisoners who were executed. Ashe had been sentenced to death for his part in the Easter Rising (he commanded a unit that killed eleven members of the RIC), but his sentence had been commuted and he had been released. At the time of his hunger strike, he was convicted for “causing disaffection,” with a sentence of only one year. Although MacSwiney commanded the IRA in Cork, the extent of his military activity was one failed ambush (Hopkinson 2002, p. 105). He was in prison for possessing a government cipher (sentenced to two years); this was naturally seen as a trumped up charge. We would predict that the government should have less to fear if the hunger striker could be portrayed as a killer. Certainly the government was more concerned about the prospect of MacSwiney’s death than that of the eleven prisoners in Cork who were on hunger strike at the same time, who had been accused—though not convicted—of crimes including killing a British soldier and possessing an incendiary device. Whether this was due to the relative ‘innocence’ of MacSwiney, or simply to his greater prominence as Mayor, is not clear.

Signaling and synecdoche surely do not exhaust the mechanisms by which the death of a hunger striker can win sympathy for the insurgents—even from those who would not be predisposed to sympathy. When MacSwiney’s body was taken to St George’s Cathedral in Southwark, it was visited by British as well as Irish mourners, and when the coffin was taken through the streets of London, it was greeted with respectful silence (Costello 1995, pp. 226-7). Although not necessarily exhaustive, these twin mechanisms help to explain why the government would treat the death of a hunger striker as a negative outcome. There is no need to assume perfect foresight or sophisticated theory. All that matters is that actors within the government (or allied to it) comprehend that death will have negative consequences. The prisoners must also comprehend the negative consequences of their death (and comprehend the government’s comprehension!). This was expressed by Gallagher during a hunger strike in 1920: “No matter how it goes now, their prison system is smashed ... If men die it is smashed ... If men live on to political treatment or release, it is smashed” (1928, p. 40, ellipses in original; cf. p. 60). MacSwiney likewise explained that he was “reconciled to a premature grave” by “the revolution of opinion that will be thereby caused throughout the civilized world and the consequent accession of support to Ireland in her hour of need” (quoted in Costello 1995, p. 195).

4. The prisoner’s decision to initiate a hunger strike

Now we turn to the decision to go on hunger strike: what the alternatives were; whether it was ordered rather than chosen voluntarily; whether it was taken by a group; and what demands accompanied it.

¹¹ One might expect explicit reference to starvation in the great famine, but I have not seen this.

All but one of the hunger strikes in this period occurred in prison. The sole exception almost proves the rule: when Mary MacSwiney was on hunger strike in prison, the authorities refused permission for a visit from her sister Annie; the latter promptly went on hunger strike outside the prison gates (Fallon 1987, pp. 78-9). For a prisoner, what are the alternatives to a hunger strike? There were no cases of armed revolt by prisoners, though there were several audacious escapes.¹² Other forms of protest were possible, such as refusing to do prison work or barricading cells with furniture. In 1917 and 1919, these protests culminated in a hunger strike (O'Mahony 2001, p. 19; Healy 1981, p. 52).

The decision to go on hunger strike might be taken by the individual concerned; it could also be imposed by an organization, whose leaders do not have to endure its consequences. Neither Sinn Fein nor the IRA proclaimed responsibility or took credit for these acts. This is similar to self-immolation, and very different from suicidal attacks. There is no evidence that the leaders of these organizations ordered hunger strikes before 1923. Indeed, the leaders disagreed over the utility of the technique. Michael Collins, the IRA's military mastermind against the British, seems to have opposed it. The mass hunger strike of 1923 comes closest to being ordered. Outside prison, the Army Executive's Chief of Staff sent a message to all prisoners at the end of July (two and a half months before the hunger strike began), ostensibly leaving the decision to individuals but warning that any "prisoner who goes on hunger-strike should realise that he must stick it to the end ... A number of them will very probably die in the fight" (quoted in Hopkinson 1988, p. 269). The commanding officer in Mountjoy prison, Michael Kilroy, apparently ordered his men to join the hunger strike—despite a majority voting against it (Fallon 1987, p. 86). He did, however, insist that the leadership outside prison was not responsible for the decision. The Republican political leader, Eamon de Valera, apparently had no hand in the decision; he was in prison at this time, but did not to join the hunger strike.

The vast majority of individuals who went on hunger strike did not do so alone; they joined with fellow prisoners in a group effort. (I'm defining 'group' to encompass hunger strikers in the same prison; this does not include simultaneous hunger strikes in different prisons.) The mass event of 1923 involved nine groups of prisoners; the largest was 3300 at Tintown. Before this, the largest group was probably 174 prisoners in Wormwood Scrubs who went on hunger strike in April 1920, simultaneously with hunger strikes in Belfast and Cork. One might expect there to be similar pressure on a prisoner to join others on hunger strike as there is on a worker to join others on strike (cf. Biggs 2003a).¹³ There is evidence of such pressure only in the mass hunger strike of 1923. "It was agreed that the strike must be purely voluntary," admitted Peadar O'Donnell, who supported it, "but that was just words:

¹² Some prisoners in Mountjoy opposed the hunger strike in 1923 because they were digging an escape tunnel (Healy 1982b, p. 216).

¹³ Prisoners should feel a moral obligation to join only if they stand to benefit from the suffering of others (as workers stand to benefit from the sacrifice of fellow workers on strike, because any resulting improvement in the employment relationship will apply to them too). Therefore I am surprised that the pledge used in 1923 refers to an individual rather than collective benefit: "I will not take ... anything except water until *I* am unconditionally released" (quoted in Healy 1982b, p. 215, italics added).

once a group of prisoners go on hunger-strike there is a sort of moral conscription which sweeps the others into it” (quoted in Healy 1982b, pp. 215-6). Pax O’Faolain objected to the action, but joined rather than let down his companions. Austin Stack also joined despite his pessimism about the prospects of success; he recalled that “the swaying of men was ... an underground and an underhand business” (quoted in Hopkinson 1988, p. 269). That said, some prisoners refused to join the hunger strike. If there were about 12,000 prisoners in total (Hopkinson 1988, p. 268), that means that a third did not participate. The fact that many prisoners joined only reluctantly is suggested by the number of rapid defections: in Newbridge some endured only a few days, and many others gave up within a week (Healy 1982b, p. 215). Collective pressure could be conceived as forcing normal prisoners to manifest the preferences of the bluffing type. More than one prisoner disagreed with this attempt to induce a mass hunger strike, and argued for it to be restricted to a smaller number of more committed individuals (Hopkinson 1988, p. 269).

Aside from the decision to go on hunger strike, there is another decision as well: the content of the demand. There are three categories of demand. One is a demand for an adjustment in prison conditions, especially the mitigation of additional punishment. The first two hunger strikes in 1916 were of this character. For example, a prisoner went on hunger strike when not allowed to finish a letter to his wife (Healy 1981, p. 48). This kind of demand is more a matter of prison administration than government policy. Indeed, there may be no explicit or implicit threat to die. It seems that there were few hunger strikes for this demand after 1916.

The second category is the demand for recognition of special status, ‘political prisoner’ or ‘prisoner of war.’ This included a demand for improved conditions within prison, but it seems that the issue of recognition was crucial. Republicans on hunger strike began demanding recognition as political prisoners in 1917, following the example of the suffragettes. The third category is the demand for outright release. The first unambiguous demand for release occurred in 1920. In practice, the distinction between the second and third categories could be blurred. Hunger strikers who demanded recognition often won release. One group of hunger strikers who demanded recognition secretly wanted release, and in fact were disappointed when the government seemed ready to compromise (Healy 1981, p. 53). In Mountjoy in April 1923, the hunger strikers demanded either recognition or release.¹⁴

In this context, it is worth noting that the hunger strikers did not face many years of incarceration. For those who had been sentenced, the sentence was relatively short: MacSwiney was sentenced to two years. Anyway, the British government had a record of leniency: Ashe had been released just over a year after being sentenced to death for his part in the Easter Rising; Sinn Fein leaders arrested for the so-called German plot in 1918 were released a year later. The mass hunger strike in 1923 occurred after the cessation of hostilities and therefore the prisoners could expect to be released shortly by the Irish Free State.¹⁵ Even

¹⁴ How did the government evaluate recognition and release? Before 1920, the government released prisoners who demanded recognition. Apparently reversing this preference, it offered recognition before release in the Mountjoy hunger strike in April 1920.

¹⁵ A few days after the hunger strike began, the government expressed a hope that all prisoners would be released by Christmas (Fallon 1987, p. 85).

if prisoners did not face lengthy incarceration, they could still want to be released in order to rejoin the struggle outside prison (Gallagher 1928, p. 11).¹⁶ Most importantly, whether the demand is for release or recognition, the very fact of concession is a victory for the cause. The state's power is thus visibly eroded. This is especially significant for the Republicans, who denied legitimacy to the British state (in a way that suffragettes, for example, had not) and to the Irish Free State in turn.

5. The government's decision to concede or not

As we have seen, a hunger strike placed the government on the horns of a dilemma. It wanted neither to offer a concession nor to let the prisoner starve to death. In its struggle against the suffragettes, the British government had developed two stratagems to avoid either of these unpalatable options: forcible feeding, and release and rearrest. These may be conceived as methods to prolong the hunger strike, thus postponing death indefinitely.

Forcible feeding prevented the prisoner from starving to death. Less obviously, this procedure also inflicted a considerable amount of pain—especially if the prisoner resisted—and so it could become a form of torture (whether or not this was intended). Against Republicans the British government first used forcible feeding in 1917. This began on the fourth day of the hunger strike. The prisoners did not resist. The doctor was incompetent but did not deliberately try to inflict pain (Kee 1972, p. 607). After being subjected to this ordeal five times, Ashe died suddenly on the sixth day, from heart failure and congestion of the lungs. The exact cause is unclear, but it seems likely that food was accidentally forced into his lungs (as had happened with suffragettes); his physical condition had also been weakened by a prior punishment depriving him of bedding and boots. At the inquest, the jury condemned forcible feeding as “inhuman and dangerous” and urged that it be discontinued (quoted in O'Mahony 2001, p. 24).

Aside from the fact of Ashe's death, this was a severe blow to the government, because it eliminated a stratagem that had been used with some success against the suffragettes. It was not a panacea, of course, because the method's cruelty could also be exploited by the other side (just like the death of a hunger striker, though to a lesser extent). The suffragettes had done so with some success, though one might suspect that Republican prisoners—males committed to or at least associated with fatal violence—might not garner such sympathy. This remains hypothetical though, because it seems that the British government never used it again.¹⁷ Possibly it was considered for MacSwiney, but doctors recommended against it (Costello 1995, p. 169).

Another stratagem was release and rearrest, legalized by the ‘Cat and Mouse’ (Prisoner's Temporary Discharge of Ill Health) Act of 1913. Under the Act, the hunger striker would be released when her condition had weakened considerably; when she had recovered her health, she would be rearrested. In principle, this would iterate until her sentence had been completed

¹⁶ Some prisoners on hunger strike in 1919 wanted to be released before their real identities were discovered by the authorities (Healy 1981, p. 53).

¹⁷ Forcible feeding would surely also have been hindered by death threats against the doctors involved, at least if the prisoners were held in Ireland (outside Ulster). The IRA issued such threats against doctors attending hunger strikers in Cork in 1919 (Costello 1995, p. 183)

(counting only the time spent in prison). In practice, released prisoners were rearrested only if they took part in militant protest. The Act proved effective by hindering the activities of leading militants—if not in prison, they were either physically incapacitated or preoccupied with escaping recapture. It also burdened the movement with the care of hunger strikers. In Ireland the British government released the pacifist hunger striker in 1915 under this Act. It was apparently also used when Republicans were released from 1917 to 1920. (Many of the hunger strikers had not been charged, let alone convicted, which presumably rendered the law irrelevant.) It is not clear how many hunger strikers were subsequently rearrested. MacSwiney was one: after his first hunger strike in 1917 ended with release, he was rearrested four months later to complete his sentence (Mews 1989, p. 386). One suspects that the outbreak of the Anglo-Irish war in 1919 made this almost impossible. Released prisoners could avoid detection because the populace was predominantly sympathetic—at least sufficiently sympathetic to be unwilling to betray them. Even those willing to inform would have rightly feared being killed by the IRA. Moreover, as the insurgency progressed, policing broke down completely; the RIC abandoned many of its barracks throughout the country, and concentrated on fighting guerilla columns.

In Ireland, then, these stratagems eventually proved unable to postpone the dilemma. The government was deprived of forcible feeding by accident and deprived of the Cat and Mouse Act by the deteriorating security situation. It had to make a choice: was it conciliatory or intransigent?

The British government revealed that it was the conciliatory type from the beginning of the first hunger strikes by Republicans. Of course this was not admitted. A government has an incentive to pretend to be intransigent, in order to discourage bluffing and resolute types from going on hunger strike. The British government declared an end to the policy of releasing prisoners in February 1918, and repeated the announcement in Parliament in November 1919. In Mountjoy prison, the cells contained this notice: “All persons committed to prison are informed that they will not be able by willful injury to their bodily health, caused by refusal of food or in any other way, to procure their release before their discharge in the due course of law” (quoted in Gallagher 1928, p. 94). Even during the Mountjoy hunger strike in April 1920, the Viceroy pledged himself not to offer concessions (Gallagher 1928, p. 42). All this truly was cheap talk. The government was completely humiliated by the end of the Mountjoy strike. It conceded their demand for treatment as prisoners of war, only to be presented with a demand for release; when the government offered release on parole, they demanded unconditional release (Gallagher 1928, p. 88; p. 104). When released, Gallagher explicitly told the prison governor: “You know I am not coming back” (p. 114). The pretense of release and rearrest would not even allow the government to save face.

By the spring of 1920, the British government had released hundreds of Republican prisoners. The policy of internment had been destroyed. Indeed, the release of prisoners in April was so chaotic that many were released by mistake (Hopkinson 2002, p. 42). All this had serious implications for the government’s efforts to defeat the insurgency. It no longer had any sanction against Republican insurgents. Moreover, the RIC and the army were negatively affected. The army reported “loss of morale on the part of the troops and police, accompanied by a natural irritation at seeing the release of men who had been engaged in

cowardly outrages, and whose arrest had entailed untiring efforts, attended by considerable hardship and loss of life” (quoted in Hopkinson 2002, p. 52). It may not be coincidental that these forces soon adopted an unofficial policy of extrajudicial killings and destruction of property.

The government’s preferences shifted within a few months, by the time that MacSwiney and eleven others from Cork were on hunger strike. Finally, in the words of Arthur Balfour, “they would not permit justice to be defeated by the threat of suicide” (quoted in Costello 1995, p. 165). As the government still intended to suppress what it saw as a ‘rebellion,’ there was no alternative. From January to September 1920, the IRA had killed over two hundred soldiers and police (Kee 1972, p. 699). After MacSwiney, Fitzgerald, and Murphy had starved to death, it was clear that intransigence was no longer a pretense. There were no more successful hunger strikes against the British.

The Irish Free State did not use either forcible feeding or release and rearrest. Its policy seems to show a similar evolution from conciliatory to intransigent. It initially released hunger strikers. These were women, however, who were not involved in military conflict. The government might well have proven intransigent at this time against military prisoners. It too attempted to demonstrate its resolve through public declarations. When it released a group of female hunger strikers, part of the agreement was that a resolution would be introduced into the Dail stating that anyone else going on hunger strike would be allowed to die (Fallon 1987, p. 85). The huge hunger strike in 1923 allowed this commitment to be tested. The government proved its intransigence by allowing two men to starve to death.

One final point can be made about the government’s type. This may be revealed not only in hunger strikes, but also by executions. These are somewhat different, because the government can choose to confine executions to those prisoners who are most closely associated with killing. Still, if a government is carrying out executions, it is not concerned to avoid a prisoner’s death at all costs. A cursory examination of the timing of executions suggests that they moved in parallel with the government’s preferences on hunger strikes. The British government executed 15 prisoners immediately following the Easter Rising. Significantly, it carried out its next execution shortly after MacSwiney, Fitzgerald, and Murphy had starved to death. Kevin Barry, captured with a gun after a fatal attack on soldiers, had been found guilty on 2 October 1920; he was executed on 1 November. The Irish Free State began executing prisoners in November 1922, while Mary MacSwiney was on hunger strike. This suggests that they treated women differently from men, because she was eventually released. The Irish government executed 77 men in total—five times as many as the British government. It also sentenced prisoners to death and suspended the sentence on condition that no further attacks occurred in the prisoner’s local area. A government thus willing to hold the lives of prisoner hostage is clearly intransigent. The last execution occurred in May 1923. Therefore the prisoners who went on hunger strike in October 1923 might reasonably have expected the government to have become conciliatory, given that the Republicans had ceased armed struggle—and that executions had ended.

6. The prisoner's decision to surrender or die

Unlike the government, the prisoner has little scope for stratagems to evade the final reckoning. The prisoner can try to prolong the hunger strike. MacSwiney purposely conserved his energy by resting in bed. He wanted to stay alive as long as possible: the government, if conciliatory, had more time to yield; if it proved intransigent, its embarrassment would be prolonged. (The same logic dictated that prisoners with health problems would not embark on a hunger strike, as death would come too soon.) It is worth pointing out that neither side knew how long someone could survive without food until the autumn of 1920. Then it became clear that a hunger striker could endure anything from nine weeks to more than thirteen weeks. Prisoners obviously have an incentive to exaggerate their decline. In 1919 some prisoners hastened their release by faking symptoms of serious illness (Healy 1981, p. 53).

Surprisingly, we also find some cases where a prisoner hastened the end by refusing water. This had been tried by the two trade unionists in 1913: James Connolly and James Byrne. Presumably Connolly was certain that the government was conciliatory, and used his thirst strike to gain speedier release—his union was in the midst of a major lockout, and he wanted to rejoin the fray. Byrne became very sick before release and died soon afterwards, which demonstrates the danger inherent in the thirst strike. (His death can be considered the inverse of Ashe's: both died after the accidental failure of a stratagem.) Eamon de Valera went on a hunger and thirst strike in 1916, to demand that extra punishment be rescinded (Healy 1981a pp. 47-8). This demand has low stakes for both sides. As far as I know, a hunger and thirst strike was subsequently attempted only once, in 1923.

Unless the government offers a concession, at some point the prisoner has to face the choice between death and surrender. As we have seen, the British government reliably granted concessions from 1917 to the spring of 1920; the Irish Free State granted concessions to women. In these cases it is not clear whether the prisoners would have died rather than surrendered. In the absence of concession, five prisoners in total starved to death. We can be certain that they were not the bluffing type. Were they resolute or sacrificial? The sacrificial type dies without regret, because he prefers death to no hunger strike. The resolute type, by contrast, would have preferred not to embark on a hunger strike; he has made a mistake *ex post* about the government's type.¹⁸

MacSwiney is the most plausible candidate for the sacrificial type. He carried a burden of guilt from the Easter Rising: he had been the leader of the Irish Volunteers in Cork, and they had taken no military action against the British. This inaction was criticized severely by other Republicans. His redemptory sacrifice was anticipated in a poem written while he was imprisoned in Reading in 1916 (Costello 1995, p. 151). He went on hunger strike immediately after his capture in 1920, before any trial. Yet the evidence suggests that he did not expect death as a certain outcome. The government had proved conciliatory in previous hunger strikes, including his own. Even after four weeks without food, MacSwiney still contemplated life in conversation with a friend: "If it was God's will that he should die he was resigned, but he had a feeling that God would let him live, and by doing so the victory over the enemies of his country would be greater" (quoted in Costello 1995, p. 179). Later in his ordeal he expressed relief that "the pain of Easter Week is properly dead at last" (quoted in Costello

¹⁸ Note that a resolute type should not publicly announce his regret.

1995, p. 151) which implies that it was his willingness to die, rather than death itself, that expunged his guilt.

The alternative to death is surrender. In only two incidents did prisoners make this decision: nine Cork prisoners after three had starved to death in the autumn of 1920, and prisoners during the mass hunger strike of 1923. In the first case, surrender was ordered from outside the prison. Arthur Griffiths, acting President of Sinn Fein, declared that “our countrymen now in Cork prison have sufficiently proved their devotion and fidelity, and that they should now, as they were prepared to die for Ireland, be prepared to live again for her” (quoted in O’Gorman 1993, p. 118). I suggested above that an organization has an incentive to avoid any implication that its members have been ordered to go on hunger strike. Conversely, it has an incentive to take responsibility when they terminate a hunger strike. Indeed, the prisoners have an incentive to represent the surrender as ordered rather than chosen.¹⁹ The hunger strike of 1923, by contrast, was apparently called off by leaders within the prisons.

Can we conclude that those who surrendered were the bluffing type? This was certainly the case for the majority of prisoners in 1923. By the fortieth day—after Barry and O’Sullivan had starved to death—only 167 out of the 7800 remained on hunger strike (Fallon 1987, p. 88). As we have seen, social pressure to join the hunger strike meant that most of the hunger strikers were bluffing. In addition, the government had been able to get some the leaders to surrender, through either deception or promises of release. This naturally weakened the resolve of the others. “I stuck it for 27 days and could have gone 27 more,” wrote a prisoner in Mountjoy, “but didn’t see any fun for the men who organized it, when they themselves had broken and were taking food” (quoted in Hopkinson 1988, p. 270). Even the resolute type could manifest the preferences of a bluffer, when others revealed themselves to be bluffers by surrendering. At the end, at least one prisoner claimed to surrender with reluctance. “Dying is so easy compared with coming off,” wrote Ernie O’Malley (quoted in Hopkinson 1988, p. 270).

The surrender in 1920 is hard to equate with bluffing. After all, these men had endured 94 days of starvation. They could have concluded that the British government was intransigent within four weeks, and certainly after Fitzgerald had died on the 68th day. Another explanation is that the deaths of hunger strikers are subject to diminishing marginal returns. This was explicit in contemporary discussion. A cleric wrote to the *Cork Examiner* calling for the leaders to call off the hunger strike: “Is not their cause sufficiently vindicated in everybody’s eyes”? (quoted in Costello 1995, p. 231). The Bishop of Cork calculated that “the nation has got full value for his [MacSwiney’s] life” (quoted in O’Gorman 1993, p. 188). What this suggests is a more complicated preference ordering, where the utility of death declines with the number—and impact—of previous deaths. (Indeed, the bishop’s comment, by ignoring the other two deaths, suggests that MacSwiney’s death would outweigh any future deaths.) At some point, a further death becomes ranked lower than surrender.

This provides another explanation for the absence of hunger strikes after the British government ended its conciliatory policy. Not only did the government’s intransigence deter

¹⁹ When Gallagher (1928, p. 80) momentarily lost his resolve on hunger strike, he thought he would ask the Dail (via Michael Collins) to call it off.

bluffing and resolute prisoners; sacrificial types might have decided that the Republican cause already had enough dead ‘martyrs.’ Or perhaps they decided that the British government could be relied upon to provide such deaths by executing prisoners.

Thus far we have assumed that prisoners possessed a stable payoff function which defined their type, and that they knew their own type. But starving to death requires almost superhuman self-control, and a prisoner conceivably would not know whether he possessed it.²⁰ A prisoner who believed himself to be a resolute type might discover that he is really a bluffer. It is difficult to know whether this was common. Certainly the government attempted to weaken the resolve of prisoners by plying them with food (Costello 1995, pp. 137, 194; Gallagher 1928, pp. 54, 70). The fact that relatives were summoned to visit in the terminal stages of a hunger strike might be considered a similar stratagem, if relatives were expected to dissuade the prisoner from dying (Gallagher 1928, p. 44).

Gallagher’s (1928) remarkable diary reveals his internal conflict during the hunger strike in Mountjoy in April 1920.²¹ He describes a ‘double personality,’ one half bent on self-preservation and the other on sacrifice (e.g. p. 100). On the tenth day, he decided momentarily to surrender. What kept him resolute was shame before his fellow hunger strikers. “If there were an honorable way of escape, I should be glad” (p. 80). “I’m afraid to die, and I’m going to die because I’m afraid not to ... The papers will call me a hero and a martyr ... a miserable, frightened fool, who hadn’t the courage not to die” (p. 97, ellipses in original). The efficacy of shame might help to explain why most of the hunger strikes were in groups. A collective hunger strike would represent a pre-commitment if each individual realized that he would not want to be the first to surrender. In this hunger strike, the prisoners had pledged themselves at the outset: “I pledge myself to the honour of Ireland and the lives of my comrades not to eat or drink anything except water until all here are given prisoner of war treatment or are released” (quoted in Gallagher 1928, p. 10; compare Healy 1982b, p. 215). Collective solidarity was not only a matter of internal conscience; it also could be externally enforced. A fellow prisoner asked Gallagher whether he could accept brandy proffered by the doctor; permission was refused (Gallagher 1928, pp. 56, 72).

7. Religion

Religion is potentially important in shaping the preferences of potential hunger strikers. As with suicidal terrorism or self-immolation, there is the vexed question of suicide. Religion could also have a positive effect by valorizing sacrifice. Here we should also consider the quasi-religious sacrificial themes in Irish nationalism, which not only accentuated the government’s fear of the death of a hunger striker, but also stiffened the resolve of prisoners facing their own death.

²⁰ Most if not all of these prisoners had proved their willingness to suffer for the cause; some had experienced military action. Therefore each should have some insight into his own courage.

²¹ The circumstances of its composition need to be investigated. It is ostensibly his actual diary and in places it reads like a stream of consciousness. But it is hard to see how the latter entries, when his health had deteriorated (including a brief moment of delirium) could have been written at the time.

In the struggle against British rule, the Irish Catholic Church did not treat hunger strikes as suicide. During the Mountjoy hunger strike in 1917, the standing committee of the Irish hierarchy announced that any deaths would be the responsibility of the British government (Mews 1989, p. 393). That seems to have settled the matter officially, though an esoteric debate continued in theological journals (O’Gorman 1993). Naturally enough, the clergy concentrated their condemnation on techniques of violence that killed other people. There is some evidence, though, of clerical hostility. In Mountjoy in 1920, the chaplain refused to give absolution after the hunger strike’s ninth day, on the grounds that it was then tantamount to suicide (Gallagher 1928, p. 58). Thus Gallagher wondered whether God would condemn him if he died, though this doubt was not particularly salient in his crisis of resolve (p. 85). He was also visited by a supportive Australian priest (p. 89). During MacSwiney’s ordeal, he received daily communion from his chaplain; among his visitors were four bishops—including Bishop Cohalan of Cork—and an Australian archbishop.

The determination of whether a hunger strike was equivalent to suicide was more political than theological. Thus many prominent British Catholics took the opposite view from their Irish counterparts (O’Gorman 1993). Moreover, once the Irish Free State was established, the Irish Church’s attitude to hunger strikes became more hostile. In October 1922 the bishops in a joint pastoral denounced the Republican insurgency as an ‘unjust war’ (Hopkinson 1988, p. 182). Archbishop Byrne privately recommended the release of hunger strikers on at least two occasions, but he couched his advice in instrumental rather than moral terms; he warned that the deaths of female hunger strikers “would cause a wave of sympathy throughout the country” (quoted in Fallon 1987, p. 82). During the mass hunger strike of 1923, Bishop Dooley publicly asked the President for their release. But this hunger strike also incurred clerical condemnation. Some (though not all) prison chaplains refused to give absolution (Healy 1982b, p. 218). In one instance, parents who wanted to pray for their son on hunger strike were refused entry to their parish chapel. When Barry died, Bishop Cohalan refused to allow a Christian burial, judging this act (unlike MacSwiney’s!) as suicide. Such condemnation surely undermined the resolve of the prisoners.

Aside from direct intervention from the church, Republicans belonged to a tradition that valorized self-sacrifice, on the model of Jesus and the saints. Nationalism and religion were inseparable. This was exemplified by a poem that Ashe composed in prison, entitled ‘Let Me Carry Your Cross for Ireland Lord’ (O’Mahony 2001, pp. 12-13). “The crucifixion of Ireland is interminable,” mused Gallagher (1928, p. 41). Irish nationalism had a pantheon of martyrs who died fighting against British rule, preferably under hopeless circumstances, as in 1798 and 1803. Even if the Easter Rising was not planned as another ‘blood sacrifice,’ it was immediately interpreted in such terms. In 1920 prisoners in Mountjoy began their hunger strike on Easter Monday, to emphasize the parallel. During this hunger strike, Gallagher (1928, pp. 26, 76) often thought about Patrick Pearse, who went joyfully to his execution after the Rising. This sacrificial tradition surely helped hunger strikers to overcome the fear of death.

A deflationary comparison should be admitted here. Even without religious consolation and a deep-rooted sacrificial tradition, the militant suffragettes were able not only to endure starvation but also to physically resist forcible feeding (thus making a gruesome ordeal still

more frightful). Of course we cannot know whether any of the suffragettes would have actually starved to death, except for Emily Wilding Davison who was surely the sacrificial type (Colmore 1913). Aside from resisting forcible feeding, when in prison she threw herself off an upper floor in an attempt to injure or kill herself; she subsequently died under the hooves of the King's racehorse. In sum, the overall effect of religious belief remains tantalizingly difficult to prove.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this preliminary investigation of hunger strikes by Irish Republicans from 1916 to 1923? Conceptualizing the hunger strike as a game between two players helps us to analyze the phenomenon. This is appropriate because both prisoners and government seem to have thought strategically about their moves. For the most part, their strategies were as rational as one could expect, given the inherent uncertainty—uncertainty conceptualized here by distinguishing different ‘types’ of governments and of prisoners. Nevertheless, two major mistakes are worth noting. First, the British government appears shortsighted in pursuing a conciliatory policy for as long as it did. By the end of 1919, it was clear that this policy was allowing hunger strikers to destroy incarceration as a preventive or deterrent measure. At some point, then, the government had to shift to intransigence, and the sooner the better. Hypothetically the government could have allowed hunger strikers to die in April 1920. By delaying the inevitable, it then had to prove its intransigence with a prisoner who possessed such political prominence. Perhaps the government should have released MacSwiney without explanation, as the Irish Free State did with Mary MacSwiney, and rely on the deaths of the two other prisoners from Cork to demonstrate its intransigence. On the other side, the worst mistake was the decision to stage a mass hunger strike in 1923. This ensured that most participants were bluffers, and their premature surrender undermined those who were resolute or even sacrificial. The decision was recognized as a mistake at the time, and it was carefully avoided in future hunger strikes by Irish Republicans.

Although the hunger strike game captures the essential logic of the interaction between the two sides, it misses another important aspect: the fact that the hunger strike was usually a collective rather than solitary affair. This is the opposite from self-immolation. I have suggested that an individual might deliberately choose to act with others as a pre-commitment strategy, knowing that he could not bear the shame of being the first to surrender. Other explanations are also possible. A collective hunger strike may reduce the risk of each individual dying, because not all will have to die—and one death may suffice—before a conciliatory government realizes its mistake and offers a concession, or before the benefits of additional deaths cease to be positive, enabling the survivors to surrender with honour. These are simply hypotheses. A satisfactory explanation for the collective nature of hunger striking awaits further research.

For both sides, the hunger strike game is played under the shadow of death. To reiterate, few hunger strikers die. In this sense, the technique does not resemble suicidal attacks nor self-immolation. It is more closely comparable to techniques of civil disobedience where protesters interpose their bodies to prevent opponents from felling trees, exploding nuclear devices, or bulldozing Palestinian homes. Of course, there is a risk of being killed (as we are

reminded by the case of Rachel Corrie)—but success is not predicated on their death, nor do they expect to die. In this respect, we can reject the hypothesis that hunger striking is self-immolation in slow motion. There is no evidence that the five Republicans who starved to death would have been disappointed had the government offered a concession. They accepted death with tremendous courage, but they did not seek it. Whether they were resolute or sacrificial is almost impossible to discern, because a resolute prisoner would hardly be likely to acknowledge regret (at embarking on the hunger strike in the first place) even to himself.

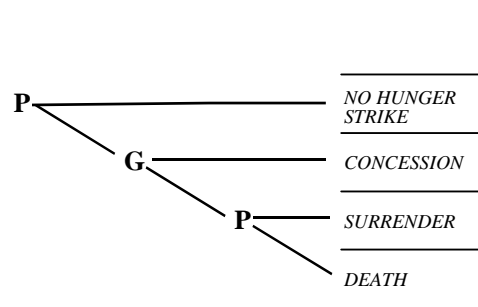
Death casts a shadow over the government's decisions too. It is interesting that no one on the government side expressed any satisfaction at the prospect of hunger strikers dying. This is not surprising when dealing with a nonviolent social movement; it is perhaps more surprising in the context of civil war, when the hunger strikers were associated directly or indirectly with deadly attacks on the government's forces. In broader perspective, these two civil wars were relatively civilized affairs. This surely goes along with the high frequency—and efficacy, certainly in the Anglo-Irish war—of hunger strikes. We could predict that hunger strikes will be employed less often where fighting is more deadly and conflict more brutal, because the government will have less to 'fear' from the death of a prisoner, and therefore is less likely to be conciliatory. This hypothesis deserves testing in future research. More specifically, I suggest that executions of prisoners should be inversely related to hunger strikes by prisoners. Aside from the government being less likely to offer concessions, the other side may have less to gain from the death of a hunger striker—if the government is already supplying exemplary victims through execution or even extrajudicial killing.

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Figure 1: Hunger strike as a game between prisoner (P) and government (G)

a. Structure of the game



b. Payoff functions by type

	Prisoner			Government	
	<i>Bluffing</i>	<i>Resolute</i>	<i>Sacrificial</i>	<i>Conciliatory</i>	<i>Intransigent</i>
<i>NO HUNGER STRIKE</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>CONCESSION</i>	2	2	2	-2	-3
<i>SURRENDER</i>	-1	-2	-2	-1	-1
<i>DEATH</i>	-2	-1	1	-3	-2

Figure 2: Elementary variants of the hunger strike game

a. Strategies and outcomes

	Government	
	concede	refuse
do nothing	NO HUNGER STRIKE	NO HUNGER STRIKE
hunger strike; surrender	CONCESSION	SURRENDER
hunger strike; die	CONCESSION	DEATH

b. Payoff matrices for three types of prisoner and two types of government

		Government			
		<i>Conciliatory</i>		<i>Intransigent</i>	
		concede	refuse	concede	refuse
	do nothing	0, 0	<u>0, 0</u>	0, 0	<u>0, 0</u>
	hunger strike; surrender	2, -2	-1, -1	2, -3	-1, -1
	hunger strike; die	<u>2, -2</u>	-2, -3	2, -3	-2, -2
<i>Resolute</i>	do nothing	0, 0	<u>0, 0</u>	0, 0	<u>0, 0</u>
	hunger strike; surrender	2, -2	-2, -1	2, -3	-2, -1
	hunger strike; die	<u>2, -2</u>	-1, -3	2, -3	-1, -2
	do nothing	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
	hunger strike; surrender	2, -2	-2, -1	2, -3	-2, -1
	hunger strike; die	<u>2, -2</u>	1, -3	2, -3	<u>1, -2</u>

Figure 3: The hunger strike as a game with imperfect information

