The Discourse of Conflict

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Warren Hately
Abstract

This dissertation deals with two problems central to contemporary philosophy: the unacknowledged bias of structuralist theory towards linguistic signs and the lack of a coherent theorisation of social conflict. In order to address these conundrums, I reconcile Saussurean and Peircean semiotics and then use Ruthrof's corporeal pragmatics to break from the verbocentric idea of language as a closed system, showing instead that verbal meanings originate from the body, its senses and its imagination, as informed by the deixis of individual communities. With the transformation of linguistic semiotics into corporeality, Foucault’s notion of discourse and the neglected category of discursive practice are then reworked to show how statements based on nonverbal signs might function discursively.

The culmination of the 1970s Northern Irish prison war in the events of the 1981 hunger strikes offers a study that unites the focus upon nonverbal discourses with the examination of conflict. In exploring the ways in which republican hunger strikers struggled for legitimacy with the prison authorities, I am able to show how previous notions of conflict, especially Lyotard’s différend, are thrown into disrepute by a corporeal perspective recognising the intersemiotic and heterosemiotic character of communication. The availability of diverse semiotic media such as the visual, the haptic, the proximic, etc., offers positions in which conflicts may be regulated without ending in the stalemate that Lyotard describes. The division of semio-discursive phenomena into verbal and nonverbal
elements, and the tracing of the effects that these elements have upon ideational and pragmatic planes of action, also reveal a variety of strategies related to conflict that are superposable upon other instances. As a result, the thesis suggests that the role of political violence in politics and the meanings associated with the taking of life can be approached from a new angle.
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Sin é.

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Introduction

What is at stake in the following analysis is a concern with two central problems in contemporary philosophy and the subsequent development of a theory capable of linking and illuminating them both on the same terms. On the one hand, in structuralist and post-structuralist theory we have the existence of a deep bias towards accounts of the world in which language-like models control the field. On the other, there are shortcomings in the way that social conflict has previously been addressed in only the shallowest sense. Although verbocentrism itself is the belief that most problems, including philosophical ones, are ultimately reducible to the level of language, it is certainly accurate to say that conflict is a matter that potentially yields to an analysis in terms of communication. However, while verbocentrism conflates all communicative acts with issues of language, it then stalls at certain problems fundamental to this approach (the ‘philosophy of language’).

Consequently, social conflict, which should be understood as an agonistic exchange between individuals or groups of social actors, is instead derailed by a profusion of issues that complicate the world when it is divided up in terms of language acts between speakers and hearers.

It is this bias towards language that must be critiqued, not the relevance of communication to the study of the social world in which conflict occurs. However, we can only successfully elaborate a theory of conflict in terms of a communicative semiotic when we dispense with the privileged
position that language holds in the structuralist account. Due in part to the revolutionary perspective offered by corporeal pragmatics, once we are able to excise the predominance of the language model from our semiotic analysis of communication, we rapidly make progress towards a position in which a theory of conflict emerges that tackles the issue of communication pursued, not just at the level of language, but, the scope widened, where the interaction of actors is posed in terms of each attempting to attain goals and fulfill agendas of their own, despite the agonistic attitudes and actions of opponents. That the workings of social power are the foundation of this analysis is as obvious as it is crucial, especially to a study attempting to view conflict as something other than an impasse, as offered by Lyotard’s différend, or in terms of the crude economy of winners and losers that presents itself as common sense in an everyday reading.

The situation in the north of Ireland between the late 1960s and the present day offers an example of conflict *par excellence*. By focusing on such a case study, we are exposed to the unfortunate richness of conflict and the numerous media across which it occurs. It requires extreme discernment and consideration of vast amounts of archival material in order to be able to make sense, to discern some kind of reality, beneath the warring representations in the Northern Ireland state. In the Six Counties, at least until recently, conflict has pervaded almost every part of daily life. Of necessity, students of the Troubles move very quickly from a focus on the language of conflict to a broader, more practical stance in which the role of nonverbal elements play
an equal part. While for many, the propaganda war in which the various sides have battled for control of representational power is the initial window into an understanding of the Troubles, the physical realities of sectarianism and political violence do not permit such a focus to remain alone unchallenged.

It is the very enormity and complexity of the Troubles that make them a suitable focus for a study such as this, yet it is in this richness that problems for the commentator reside. The Troubles do not have ‘reasons’ in any ordinary sense, nor do they have any kind of simple explanation. Yet the temptation to describe complex phenomena by way of oversimplifications, recurrent within some branches of philosophy, also often rules in the study of history, especially when confronted by case studies of such emotion and difficulty. What I dare to call the ‘over-writing’ on the subject leads to the same phenomenon that we can witness in many areas of life, which is that it is easy for people to confuse an everyday understanding of the subject with a deep, close-reading of its archive. As a result, the conflict between Northern Ireland’s various parties remains one of those subjects upon which people are surprisingly unstinting in their comments, without at the same time having even the casual expertise of being able to name the six counties that make up the northern partition. Perhaps it seems too casual a statement, yet the simplicity of this observation cuts to the heart of much of the public discussion in Northern Ireland’s recent history.

In saying such a thing, the purpose is not to divide off the subject for only a qualified elite. Instead, this observation elaborates two points: first, that
much of the enmity in the north has actually been worsened by the conflictual
debate that has been convened to resolve it; and second, that to perpetuate
yet another description along such conventional lines will only add to this
situation that seemingly mystifies that which is observed. What is needed is
not another history, nor a list of excess and atrocities, nor an attribution of
blame; neither a reconciliation with the submerged facts of the past nor a
facilitation of the myth-making of today: instead, we require an analysis of the
conflict that describes its mechanisms, its blueprint, or relational schemata,
only so that they can then be applied to other specific instances of conflict –
not just those issuing from Northern Ireland but hopefully in all areas of life
where conflict takes root.

Northern Ireland is a rich ground for the study of conflict because of the
many fields in which conflict operates. The linguistic level is itself vast, giving
rise to a whole web of discourses that is frequently viewed as mere
propaganda, instead of as a network that systematically constructs individual
nodes of conflict. It is commonly seen that conflict operates at the level of
identity, with the fragmentation of the community dividing along religious,
ethnic, linguistic, political, educational, loyalist, class and economic lines.
However, to this polymorphous mass we must add the various ways in which
conflict manifests where we cannot isolate an identity, a persona or a
speaking position by virtue of social effects that are at one and the same time
vast and intangible, present neither as particular utterances nor as concrete
texts. The study of this field of semio-discursive phenomena – a field that we
can simplify immediately as the sum total of verbal and nonverbal actions and reactions that have physical, tangible effects in the world – forms one of the cornerstones of the present study.

The conflict in Northern Ireland is never simply a matter of sides even though it is a pragmatic approach to divide the subject in this way. Those who view the conflict as entirely sectarian are at a loss to explain the anti-religious tendencies of some socialist brands of militant republicanism, as well as the generally irreligious character of certain loyalist groups. At the same time, religion is inherent to the conflict, though it is more often because of the ideational force of historical discourses than the reality of a particularly devout Catholic or Protestant present. These complexities are typical to any analysis that requires an entire society to be taken into consideration. As is identified with the brief discussion of Halliday (see Chapter Three), the semiotic investigation of society requires the analyst to go beyond mere linguistic descriptions, since the complexity of modern life is such that our examples are frequently limited if we cannot discuss things in a manner other than as marks and utterances.

To have a society such as the closed world of Northern Ireland, shot through with conflict on a scale unimaginable to members of more homogeneous cultures, is to reveal conflict at its most vivid. In order to embrace the fullness of the material, we must move beyond the realm of language and into that of behaviour, action, spatial arrangements and nonverbal signs. Furthermore, because individual events in Northern Ireland
frequently turn out for the worst, so we are also presented with case studies that reveal the ultimate expression of the functioning of power. Violence and murder are social phenomena that have hitherto lacked a clear theorisation in their own terms. If a rigorous theory of conflict is to be formulated, then such ultimate significatory acts must be included.

In order to focus this approach that highlights the bodily origin of all meanings – as is argued, contrary to the main structuralist (and post-structuralist) view, by corporeal pragmatics – and to reinforce a perspective that includes entirely nonverbal behaviour in the scope of what can be considered discursive, this dissertation concentrates upon the history of conflict within Northern Ireland’s The Maze prison, between republican (Provisional IRA and Irish National Liberation Army) prisoners and representatives of the British-sanctioned state. Such a move narrows down the enormous totality of the Troubles of Northern Ireland to a single coherent conflict in which can be found, in isolation and in miniature, many of the same power relations that underpin the entire state. As the articulation of a semio-discursive theory of conflict, the analysis of the prison struggle in the H-Blocks is an example of a theoretical framework, itself intentionally superposable upon other instances of social conflict.

From this semio-discursive perspective that surpasses Halliday’s social semiotics and absorbs both Foucault’s work on the analysis of linguistic discourses and the notion of nonverbal signs found in Ruthrofian corporeal pragmatics, the verbocentric view that meaning coheres exclusively around
language, and that an understanding of social conflict is therefore only possible by means of literary analysis, is completely dispelled. Once it can be appreciated that linguistic signifiers are entirely dependent upon nonverbal signs for meaning, it can be quickly shown that the signs we read as social subjects do not originate from one monolithic register. Instead, meaning is ‘intersemiotic,’ drawn from across a terrain of sometimes-contradictory (or ‘heterosemiotic’) sensory media that contribute to our overall picture of the world. Consequently, if we understand discourse as the behaviour of subjects who happen to use words as their most prevalent form of communication, but who also construe meanings through a variety of other registers, then this alternate theory of discourse requires its own solid theorisation before anything can be said about the matter of conflict.

The dominant structuralist argument is that language is a closed system, and that verbal signifiers themselves are the source of all meaning. In opposition to this perspective, corporeal pragmatics views language as completely parasitic upon the meanings found in nonverbal signs. Rather than referring to an endless chain of signs as is argued by structuralism, linguistic signs instead always refer to the body’s nonverbal sense readings and thereby contribute to the individual subject’s rapid projection of mental frames, in which human beings carry out fantasy acts that ‘imagine’ the scenes or objects to which verbal signs refer. Nonverbal signs are themselves formed by bodily experiences, the interpretation of which is guided by the various communities that intrude upon the child’s learning processes. The
assertions of corporeal pragmatics are validated by the function of
metaphors, which almost always invoke nonverbal readings in order to make
sense. To say ‘as dark as night,’ ‘as cold as ice,’ or to call a man a ‘bull,’ or
say he acts like one, however indirect, refer emphatically to nonverbal
registers such as the gaze, the sense of touch, or the imagination. In such a
situation, linguistic signs are merely the medium by which we make such
meanings politely communicable.

The only metaphor that defies this schema is ironically the one that
causes so many problems in contemporary analysis and supports the
continuation of verbocentric theory. The metaphor of something being ‘like
language’ paradoxically obscures its own metaphoricity, enabling a slippage
in which it becomes possible for verbocentric subjects to think of language in
terms of itself at all times, until even the most nonsensical notions about the
world being exclusively linguistic are not only defended but become
canonical. We encounter this temptation to explain away the world by means
of language on a daily basis, and many of these construals have been taken
on board in more serious discussions until the framing concept of language
dictsates how we view film, music, visual art, the worlds inside our heads and
also the courses of our daily lives. Verbocentrism at this extreme
superimposes the linguistic functions of grammar, lexicon and syntax upon
nonverbal phenomena that do not obey such rules and that cannot possibly
be adequately described by such means. This tyranny of language occurs not
just with the meanings of our senses, but is also applied to modes of
behaviour and physical action that are not ordinarily regarded as having
communication potential at all, even when they are very obviously
‘meaningful.’

Although it is not the first time that structuralist theory has been
challenged, the focus of this dissertation takes Ruthrof’s critique of
verbocentrism beyond the level of signs, exploring how corporeal pragmatics
may be extended into a theory of discourse while at the same time being
made to serve the explicit, practical purpose of theorising social conflict.
Bourdieu has many of the same problems with structuralist approaches to the
analysis of society, to which he compares the problems of Chomsky’s
‘universal grammar,’ in the way that both disciplines divide the communicative
field, for structuralists between langue and parole and, for Chomskyites,
between ‘competence’ and ‘performance.’ Bourdieu’s objections to the social
project of structuralism manifest on two main levels. The first is his concern
with structuralism’s diluted political emphasis. To reduce social analysis “to
the function of communication,” Bourdieu argues, “is to ignore the structural
ambivalence which predisposes [signs] to fulfill a political function of
domination in and through performance of the communication function”
(1977, 14). Second, as an analysis of the structure of signs, Saussure’s
method operates “at the expense” of examining “their practical functions,
which are never reducible, as structuralism tacitly assumes, to functions of
communication or knowledge” (Bourdieu 1977, 24).

However, despite the general utility of Bourdieu’s views, and the fact
that Bourdieu’s ‘theory of practice,’ at least at first glance, seems synergetic
to present aims, the current thesis works within the margins of structuralist
theory for several reasons. First, Bourdieu’s solution to the difficulties
identified is to imagine the social world as a series of competing economies
based upon material, cultural and symbolic capitals, etc. Within this
perspective, Bourdieu’s stance on signification is not entirely dissimilar to that
of Austin’s speech act theory. As a consequence, while Bourdieu outlines the
social character and function of individual communicative acts more
succinctly than structuralist versions, and even though, as Thompson argues,
unlike Austin, Bourdieu understands the interaction of communicating agents
as an implicitly social phenomenon grounded in each agent’s community-
determined corpus of tacit instructions, Bourdieu’s dismissal of semiotics as a
whole is shallow and he fails to provide a unique theory of communication in
its own right. Bourdieu’s economies do not offer any guarantee of accuracy
beyond their effectiveness as metaphors for a system of relations that
themselves remains unmapped in their specificity. As Frow states, insofar as
Bourdieu’s theory of cultural economy “causally equates socioeconomic
position with the subject positions encoded in discourse, it is inadequate to
theorise the process in which agents are produced and reproduced as
subjects in the very act of producing significations” (1986, 75).

While it is understood that Bourdieu’s analysis is intentionally turned
against the sort of reductive, categorising epistemology seemingly
fundamental to linguistic study, when Foucault offers an alternative, non-

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reductive, open-ended but implicitly directional outline for how communication and power operate symbiotically within the whole of society, the otherwise alluring aspects of Bourdieu’s arguments pale. In looking back at Foucault’s writings we find the startling picture of a theorist transfixed by methodological problems, paradoxes stemming mainly from the implicit verbocentrism fundamental to the Saussurean philosophy of language; a writer frustrated yet at the same time fully active despite standing beholden to problems that as yet lacked a theory to articulate them. Foucault’s acknowledgement of the nonverbal, and the clear inability of structuralism to handle it, runs throughout his work. In the early *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes, “To be brief, then, let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorise’ the monuments of the past, transform them into documents, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say” (1972, 7). Despite his own widespread problems with the language model, Jean-François Lyotard adds, “The historian must break with the monopoly over history granted to the cognitive regimen of phrases, and he or she must venture forth by lending his or her ear to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge” (1988, 57).

Foucault’s work on discourse serves as one of the means by which a new type of knowledge emerges. In so doing, semio-discursive theory and corporeal semiotics fulfill the criteria that Foucault described but never realised himself, his outline of which merits reproduction in full.
One would try to show whether the political behaviour of a society, a
group, or a class is not shot through with a particular, describably
discursive practice. This positivity would obviously not coincide either
with the practical theories of the period or with the economic
determinations: it would define the elements in politics that can
become an object of enunciation, the forms that this enunciation may
take, the concepts that one employed in it, and the strategic choices
that one made in it. Instead of analysing this knowledge – which is
always possible – in the direction of the episteme that it can give rise
to, one would analyse it in the direction of behaviour, struggles,
conflicts, decisions, and tactics. One would thus reveal a body of
political knowledge that is not some kind of secondary theorising about
a practice, nor the application of a theory . . . it would try to explain the
formation of a discursive practice and a body of revolutionary
knowledge that are expressed in behaviour and strategies, which give
rise to a theory of society, and which operate the interference and
mutual transformation of that behaviour and those strategies.
(1972, 194-5)

The study of the protests of republican prisoners in the H-Blocks from the
mid-70s to 1981 tracks exactly the rise of such a revolutionary form of
knowledge concerning the body, and offers as well the elaboration of a
discursive practice designed to counter the situation in which prison
authorities held the inmates suspended in a state seemingly beyond access
to power and discourse.

In Northern Ireland in 1972, moves had been taken to depoliticise the
internment of suspects without trial “by shifting the authorisation of internment
orders from the executive government to the courts. This transfer signalled
the gradual reorganisation of the judicial system into a counterinsurgency
apparatus” (Feldman 1991, 86). Commissions set up by the government had
found that “the primary cause for the inability of the policing and judicial
systems to obtain conviction against ‘terrorists’” was the Common Law
system itself (Feldman 1991, 87). Laws meant for ‘normal’ citizens frequently
provided loopholes when dealing with political violence. British Brigadier
Kitson would become famous for arguing in his book, Low Intensity
Operations, that in some cases “the law should be used as just another
weapon in the government’s arsenal, and in this case it becomes little more
than a propaganda cover for the disposal of unwanted members of the public”
(Kitson, qtd. in Adams 2000, 67). As Simon Adams asserts, many republicans
believed that Kitson’s philosophy lay at the heart of the post-1975 policy.
Their views were reinforced by the establishment of ‘Diplock’ courts, where
most prisoners “were tried by single-judge courts without any juries” (Sands
1998, 18).¹

The post-1975 British policy for dealing with republican and loyalist
paramilitaries was called Ulsterisation, normalisation and criminalisation. It
involved the building of a new prison, the H-Blocks, formally known as Her
Majesty’s Prison, The Maze. The new system “saw IRA suspects trundled
along a sort of conveyor belt that began with arrest and lengthy questioning in
new RUC interrogation centres where confessions would be extracted, often
amid claims of brutality.” The next step was in the Diplock courts, and then
the H-Blocks were the last stage, where “[paramilitary] prisoners were to be
treated in the same way as thieves and rapists” (Moloney 2002, 145). Under
the ‘conveyor belt’ system of interrogation and the Diplock courts, “the burden
of proof was shifted onto the accused and by 1980 it was accepted that
around eighty per cent of convictions arising out of the Troubles were on the

¹ The case of Bobby Sands and three others illustrates the climate of the times well, when
each received 14 years gaol for possessing the same gun (Beresford 1994, 63).
basis of confessions.” In many cases, “the methods by which these
confessions were obtained gave rise to very well-substantiated charges of
brutality by the security forces” (Coogan 2002, 69).

In November 1977, thirty solicitors working in the Diplock Courts wrote
to the Secretary of State to say that “ill treatment of suspects by police
officers, with the object of obtaining confessions, is now common practice”
(qtd. in Coogan 2002, 151). On paper, the justification for the hard
interrogation procedures was to gain intelligence on terrorist operations in
order to save lives. However, as one-time Provisional IRA Chief of Staff Seán
MacStiofáin notes, “An extremely important point about the whole procedure
is that it is a way of getting confessions. As a method of getting detailed
military intelligence, such a technique, which deliberately impairs the
prisoner’s ability to remember details accurately, is quite obviously counter-
productive” (1975, 198). Various independent bodies such as Amnesty
International and the International Red Cross have since condemned the
British security practices of this period, but the benefits of hindsight and the
consignment of much that occurred under the Thatcher and Major
governments to history has allowed the present day government to distance
itself from such behaviour.

In July 1978, the Catholic Primate of All-Ireland, Cardinal Tomas Ó
Fiaich, wrote:

The authorities refuse to admit that these prisoners are in a different
category from the ordinary, yet everything about their trials and family
backgrounds indicates that they are different. They were sentenced by
special courts without juries. The vast majority were convicted by
allegedly voluntary confessions which are now placed under grave suspicion by the recent report of Amnesty International. Many were very youthful and came from families which had never been in trouble with the law. (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 172)

Cardinal Ó Fiaich observed that the growth of the prison population from 500 men to 3,000 could not be explained, “unless a new type of prisoner had emerged” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 173). He “claimed that conditions in the Maze Prison were ‘unfit for animals’ and that the paramilitaries were not ordinary prisoners” (Dixon 2001, 181-2). As an IRA policy statement released from within Long Kesh at the time of the removal of special category status wrote: “We have no doubt that there will now be a hysterical campaign mounted by the NIO which will claim that all prisoners are thugs and criminals. So be it. We are confident that the people to whom that propaganda is directed are capable of recognising just who the real thugs are” (qtd. in Coogan 2002, 82). The statement prefigured everything that was to come in just two sentences: “We are prepared to die for the right to retain political status. Those who try to take it away must be fully prepared to pay the same price” (qtd. in Coogan 2002, 82).

In order to deal with the richness of the source material, especially in instances where many sources overlap and sometimes contradict each other, key writers and specific books widely recognised as the definitive and authoritative accounts in the field have been used in preference to lesser known works. Given the emotionality of the issue and the way in which individual biases frequently creep into otherwise standard accounts, I have decided that it is best to rely for quotation upon a minimum of key texts.
Nonetheless, an enormous archive of material has been collected and sifted in order to present the most accurate picture possible in matters relating to the case study. The vast majority of these minimalist sources add little to the central thesis regarding the discourse of conflict, even if they do echo the major voices of the key texts and provide a crucial contextualisation of the overall conflict.

As a result, the numerous articles and press clippings that in part inform my reading of the subject go unacknowledged in the bibliography, as such cataloguing would elevate their status in direct opposition to their usefulness in support of the argument. If as a result, certain sources seem to predominate, it is only because their comments are largely seen as canonical by the readership and community of writers on the Troubles. Additionally, I have attempted to separate out citations from a number of my own comments that seem pertinent but which do not merit inclusion in the body of the argument. For this reason the author-date style deals with ordinary literary references, and footnotes rather than endnotes are made available to clarify certain points where necessary, but at a length that would otherwise interrupt the narrative flow.

A whole range of non-structuralist writings on the subject of conflict – which includes the views of political scientists, Quakers and other well-wishers, exponents of business and managerial theory, hostage negotiators and psychologists schooled in transactional analyses – do not come under the scope of this study for two main reasons. First, the aim of the present
project is to work from within structuralist theory, and thus these other approaches to peace and conflict, which are often not grounded in any particularly rigorous methodologies, are not considered relevant. Second, the majority of writings on the subject of conflict resolution are bound by two shortcomings: one aspect is that they do nothing to describe conflict as a discursive phenomenon, nor do they cast any light on how or why conflict takes place; furthermore, the popular psychological view, itself based upon an extremely reductive opinion of human motivation, is geared towards resolution of conflict only in the sense of either an imprecise and generally vague wish for ‘peace,’\(^2\) or instead a rationalisation of market-place forces aimed to resolve disputes for the purpose of maximising productivity – a perspective in which human needs and meanings have little consequence.

Because conflict has frequently been neglected as a subject of analysis in the past, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive literary review of structuralist writings on the subject. Those authors who appear in the initial stages of the dissertation are presented only to outline the various approaches formulated thus far in the structuralist heuristic of society as a system of complex signs. Consequently, the contribution of this dissertation is three-fold. First, it offers a semio-discursive approach to the analysis of

\(^2\) For which we have Simon Adams’s observation, in reference to the famous Peace People of Northern Ireland: “Of course, so defined, everyone wanted peace: ordinary people, the churches, the British government, loyalist paramilitaries, the IRA and local milkmen were all committed to the idea of peace in Northern Ireland. But what kind of peace? At what price? On whose terms? Whether the Peace People wanted to acknowledge it or not, peace, in any meaningful sense, was going to have to be a political rather than a moral process” (2000, 157-8).
conflict, thereby filling the gap left unaddressed by contemporary accounts of power, meaning and social life. Second, the dissertation contributes to contemporary philosophy by tracing the effects of corporeal semiotics within a field of tangible phenomena, as well as revising Foucault’s theory of discourse to account for nonverbal elements. In this formulation, a critique of the underlying structuralist bias towards accounts that privilege linguistic explanations is inevitable. Third, the dissertation represents a major effort to conceptualise the Northern Ireland conflict in terms of an archive made up of not just spoken and written utterances, but also actions, practices, habits, absences, material objects and occupied spaces.

Chapter One, ‘Previous Approaches,’ gives an overview of some different efforts by Rawls, Habermas, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Austin and Searle, which either deal with conflict itself or provide theoretical frameworks upon which differing theories of conflict can be articulated. Some of the problems that inhere to these accounts are discussed, particularly in the case of works derived from the structuralist philosophy of language. Special care is paid to the critique of the work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas in order to underscore the critically pragmatic thrust of this thesis, which is that, in order to resist charges of idealism and retain a social function, philosophical works must always have a practical dimension beyond the limits of whatever theory is proposed.

Chapter Two, simply titled ‘Verbocentrism,’ deals at length with the central problems of the philosophy of language. It also unpacks further how
verbocentrism, the tendency to apply an implicitly linguistic model to social phenomena that do not readily submit to such analysis, runs throughout the work of the majority of the theorists previously discussed. From such a perspective, some of the possible reasons for the absence of a dynamic, deeply analytic theory of social conflict in modern thought are explored. Central to this discussion is the realisation that, in order to revitalise structuralist and post-structuralist theory and retain the many positive aspects offered by thinkers of the linguistic turn, the very foundational suppositions of structuralism vis-à-vis language need to be revised. Lyotard’s notion of the différend receives special attention here as the previous best articulation of linguistic conflict, and in the case study, the broad background of the prison protest is outlined, which includes a dedicated effort to foreshadow some of the various ways in which a purely linguistic account of conflict falls very far short of the level of insight required in order to provide a tangible and useful theory.

Chapter Three, ‘The Semiotic Subject,’ continues to narrow the focus on structuralist and post-structuralist theory, exploring the problems posed to semiotics by the unacknowledged linguistic bias underlying it. Halliday’s attempted construction of a social theory of semiotics is explored in light of these difficulties, and the ramifications of verbocentrism are extended to show how the recent deployment of semiotic theory in the analysis of film, music, architecture and other media is entirely predicated upon a misapplication of Saussure’s own original theories. Chapter Three clearly highlights the need
for a revision of semiotics in order to account for nonverbal readings, so as to
make these otherwise credible pursuits free from the performative
contradictions that have hitherto made nonsense of their arguments. In order
to further illustrate the failure of verbocentric accounts to adequately describe
conflict, Halliday’s idea of ‘anti-languages’ is explored and critiqued so as to
further the idea of linguistic conflict as nothing but a surface description of an
as yet untheorised deep agonistic social structure.

In Chapter Four, ‘Corporeal Pragmatics and the Nonverbal Subject,’ a
lengthy discussion ensues that outlines key distinctions between Saussurean
and Peircean semiotics, focused particularly on the category of the sign.
Thereafter, the idea of what it means for the body to be reinstated as the
source of meaning and for it to be said that language is parasitic upon such
meanings is explored, first through an examination and dismissal of cognitive
linguistics as typified by Lakoff and Johnson’s *Philosophy in the Flesh*, and
then via a detailed introduction to Ruthrof’s corporeal pragmatics. An
exploration of the events of the infamous 1970s Blanket protest in The Maze
prison further outlines various ways in which previous accounts of meaning
and conflict are insubstantial and unhelpful, when what is required in such
examples is a lucid analysis of the material phenomena of the conflict so as
to reveal the inter-relatedness of verbal and nonverbal meanings, and the
tangible and less tangible effects that they have upon the world.

Chapter Five, ‘Discourse as Practice,’ brings together the previous
argument about verbal and nonverbal signs and lifts it to the level of
discourse. Foucault’s work in discourse analysis is revisited at length and a case is made for the way in which Foucault’s theories concerning meaning and power reveal a central dissatisfaction with the standard structuralist account. It is then shown that, illuminated by corporeal pragmatics, Foucault’s vague category of ‘discursive practice’ may be reinvigorated so as to expand the original frame of what can and cannot be considered discursive, and therefore possessed of meanings, in a social sense. The H-Blocks’ Dirty protest is offered as an illustration of how both verbal and nonverbal meanings can be utilised to articulate a discursive position even in situations of seeming disempowerment. The consequences of such a theory in explicit instances of conflict are also examined at length.

In Chapter Six, ‘Death Sentences,’ an argument is made for how the various components of corporeal pragmatics and discourse as practice, as well as an understanding of discourse as having effects upon ideational and pragmatic planes of action, contribute to a ‘semio-discursive’ theory that is finally able to deal with the full spectrum of conflict, whether as verbal arguments between speakers and hearers, physical contests between actors, or the characteristically conflictual material practice of politics at both local and global levels. The case study chronology culminates in the hunger strikes of 1981, presenting the final case for the supercession of the différend as an appropriate description of conflict. In the republican inmates’ pursuit of political legitimacy through fasting to the death, and with the response of the state through the formal apparatus that swung into action at their demands,
semio-discursive theory permits a return to the discussion of conflict as an exchange, as communication – whatever the material consequences, however fatal the results – free at last of any verbocentric trappings disguising the interaction of the opposing sides in terms of language or exclusively verbal meanings.

The final chapter, ‘The Discourse of Conflict,’ concludes the argument about the semio-discursive approach to conflict by reasserting that acts of social significance occur across a spectrum that ranges from spoken words to the point-blank execution of a human being. An attempt is then made to tease out of the previous, specific discussion of the H-Blocks protest, the characteristics of a general approach to conflict analysis that finds application in other areas of dispute, on interpersonal as well as at international levels, also capable of addressing the issues of territorialisation and Irish sovereignty that lie, well to the background, of many of the more immediately identifiable causes of the Troubles.
1. Previous Approaches

Whether conflict is political, social or interpersonal, it forms part of the basis for what it means to be a person living in the world. The management of conflict is perhaps the most crucial principle of social life. Yet throughout the history of philosophy, conflict lies dormant at the heart of all other affairs. It has rarely been made the explicit object of study. We must presume that on all levels, conflict has hitherto proven to be one of the most difficult and frustrating areas of study. If not, then we are at a loss to explain how little actual theoretical work exists on the subject. However, questions of conflict are, by dint of social reality, questions about the very functioning of society. Thus while there is not a lot of writing dealing clearly with the subject of conflict, this does not mean that conflict itself has gone completely neglected throughout the years. Any writers who have focused upon social ills and upheavals, on inequity and violence, warfare and poverty or historical change, have by and large also been writing about conflict. It is therefore the case that writing on conflict is most commonly something that has to be teased out of the writings on other subjects. There are relatively few case studies as clear as Northern Ireland’s Troubles, where social analysis and conflict analysis are so tightly interwoven.

Thus any review of the various theories of conflict must actually take into account the key contemporary approaches to the wider scale study of society. In each case, conflict analysis is first and foremost dependent upon
constructing a coherent social ontology. It is an important caveat to state that were it not possible to draw out of the writings about society a general perspective that alludes to a theory of conflict, it simply would not be possible to offer any sources for writers previously having worked in the field of conflict unless one was satisfied to consider only Lyotard's *Phrases in Dispute* or to draw on the mostly analytically impoverished social psychology texts to do with conflict resolution as it relates to managerial and corporate office politics. While even these latter texts deal with conflict in at least one way that a portion of the working population genuinely experiences it, these 'self-help,' 'pop' psychology books are so informed by particular norms and values relating to the practices of consumer capitalism and normative morality that they are useless to a study that seeks to go beyond ordinary descriptions in developing nothing less than a non-verbocentric, semiological theory of conflict applicable to a wide range of levels. Thus to go anywhere on the subject of conflict, this study begins with a handful of relatively recent theorists and examines what they have to say, explicitly or implicitly, on the subject of modern society.

What is most important at this stage is to attempt to outline several key approaches to social inquiry, and the authors chosen represent mostly different traditions and the other, more distant writers from whom their theories are descended. Thus we have Rawls who exemplifies the notion of the social contract, and as such can be seen as the inheritor of the ideas of a school of political thought stretching back to Hobbes and Locke. Austin and
Searle represent speech act theory, and through them we are able to explore the possibilities that this manner of interpretation offers for the examination of conflict and society. From structuralism and post-structuralism we consider separately the ideas of Habermas, Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault. These writers allow us to jointly sift theories of argumentation, discourse analysis and semiotics. Once we are able to identify and combine some of the most cogent points in these various writings, what remains is an incomplete social ontology that, by virtue of its gaps, clearly reveals what matters have gone untheorised and must be addressed if the task of developing a useful theory of conflict is to be achieved. Therefore it must be said that in many instances, as often proves the case when covering new theoretical territory, the writings of contemporaries are useful as much for what they do not say as for what they do say.

In many ways the work of American lawyer John Rawls is theoretically less rigorous than most of the other authors mentioned hereafter. It could be argued that his work is more informed by the American democratic tradition than any particular strain of philosophy, even though his work contains clear ties to Hobbes and Locke and also to Kant. It is unfortunate for Rawls that his life’s work is included in the present collection, since it is largely because of the shortcomings of *A Theory of Justice* that his views are interesting in the first place. More explicitly than most writers, Rawls’s focus is a theory of society. Importantly, it is an ideal society with which Rawls is concerned. As such, Rawls focuses on how “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions.”
He believes that “Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of the society as a whole cannot override.” Rawls also stands against utilitarianism, for his definition of “justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others” (1999, 3). Rawls believes that the concept of justice is a transhistorical truth that is a “pre-requisite for a viable human community” (1999, 5). He extends to institutions an almost Althusserian role, yet he shies away from interpreting these roles as either repressive or ideological. Instead, justice is found in “the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (Rawls 1999, 6). Rawls’s idealistic account is problematic. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes: “Different and incompatible conceptions of justice are closely linked to different and incompatible conceptions of practical rationality” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 6).

The basic thrust of A Theory of Justice is how justice issues from ‘fairness,’ and in what way thinkers can conceive of such a thing as a perfectly fair, perfectly just society. In order to do so, Rawls offers the ‘veil of ignorance’ as a theoretical tool, which is the necessary, hypothetically unknowing state of mind in which any person might find themselves able to formulate the correct principles that could then be used to develop a model of the perfect just society. Apparently, “among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets
and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like.” Rawls “even assume[s] that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological properties” (1999, 11). The veil of ignorance places the formulating subject into the ‘original position,’ derived by Rawls from Kant’s categorical imperative. The original position is one of supposed equality, because it represents “the appropriate initial status quo that insures that the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair” (Rawls 1999, 15). Belief in the fairness and flawlessness of the original position underlies the entirety of Rawls’ theories. The measure of fairness for Rawls is that individuals placed into the original position are then able to make choices regarding social institutions and the distribution of (‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’) assets free of bias or self-interest. These ‘goods,’ as Rawls describes them, are “rights, liberties, and opportunities, and income and wealth” (1999, 79).

Rawls believes that two principles of justice are likely to be formed in the original position. The first principle is that “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.” The second principle supposes that “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (Rawls 1999, 53). “Assuming the framework of institutions required by equal liberty and fair equality of opportunity, the higher expectations of those better situated are just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the
least advantaged members of society” (Rawls 1999, 65). Through such formulations Rawls describes an equitable society that yet avoids the trappings of socialism, which is entirely predictable since socialism is anathema to both the constitutional democratic and social contract backgrounds that Rawls typifies. It comes as no surprise to say that justice-as-fairness is a contract theory. By Rawls’s admission it is “a cooperative venture for mutual advantage” (1999, 73). He argues that the two principles that are arrived at within the original position articulate a social reality in which men are led “to act together so as to produce a greater sum of benefits” with “certain recognised claims to a share in the proceeds. What a person does depends on what the public rules say he will be entitled to, and what a person is entitled to depends on what he does” (Rawls 1999, 73-4).

Rawls’s idealism contaminates not just his theoretical imaginings of society but also the ‘natures’ of the subjects who populate it. Walzer observes that “John Rawls’s rational decision-makers in the original position are denied any knowledge of their actual interests and so of their past competition or co-operation.” Whatever the merits or flaws of contract theory, “the assumption that they [Rawls’s subjects] are not adventurers or risk-takers probably serves the same purpose as a benign story” as in other mythologies, such as the role of nature, whereby the common interest of men and women is explained (Honderich 1995, 164). Although there are other criticisms that can be levelled at justice-as-fairness, it is the way in which Rawls’s idealisation of his imaginary subjects works in tandem with that of democracy itself that cuts
through almost everything he discusses. Nevertheless Rawls takes for granted that persons in the original position have a limited but specific knowledge of the “nature of men” and the operation of the society, according to which they will formulate their conceptions of justice. Part of the reason that Rawls imagines his hypothetical subjects getting along is because they are rendered homogeneous by the veil of ignorance. He states, “It is clear that since the differences among the parties are unknown to them, and everyone is equally rational and similarly situated, each is convinced by the same arguments” (Rawls 1999, 120). Likewise, Rawls makes the absence of envy an additional feature in his definition of rationality, because “envy tends to make everyone worse off” (1999, 124). Yet it is his own understanding of men and society that Rawls assumes, for it is only in the model that he imagines that such well-behaved subjects could cohabit with equally benevolent and unmoderated social institutions.

Due to the enforced passivity and homogeneity of Rawls’s subjects, which he believes “eliminates the conditions that give rise to disruptive attitudes,” conflictual behaviour is something that the overall theory does not really take into account (1999, 125). Rawls’s social model possesses no

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3 Rawls’s valourisation of constitutional democracy occurs despite his own concession that in reality it is an all but impossible task for perfect procedural justice to coincide with legislative justice, resulting in perfectly just institutions. Ironically, if the original position was to work properly and its assumption be proven correct, the fact that behind the veil of ignorance every subject comes to essentially the same conclusions and exhibits the same values means that it would be impossible for a democratic government to ever form, since there would be no one to sit in the place of the Opposition.

4 Rawls also identifies a “psychological principle that those whose liberties are protected by and who benefit from a just constitution will, other things equal, acquire an allegiance to it over time” (1999, 192). Unfortunately this is also the case for unjust institutions, since self-preservation and self-interest are both involved.
mechanisms for enforcing the status quo. Yet we are reminded of Hobbes’s statement that “covenants, without the sword, are but words;” and in Rawls we see an interesting rhetorical manoeuvre that attempts to overcome what is otherwise a legitimate criticism – that justice-as-fairness, as a theory of ideal society, does not deal with conflict at all. Rather than recognise that there must be some safeguard that forcibly asserts public order, manifesting in the state and repressive institutions such as the police or secret service – to combat such threats as when a person’s religious or free political beliefs dictate to them that it is equally just to cause havoc and public disorder in the attainment of his or her ends – Rawls redefines the conventional understanding of the ‘State’ in order for it not to seem a contradiction for that enforcement to imply that public affairs are more important than equal liberty of conscience.

Rawls instead sees the state as “the association consisting of equal citizens.” As such, “It does not concern itself with philosophical or religious doctrine but regulates individuals’ pursuit of their moral and spiritual interests in accordance with principles to which they themselves would agree in an initial situation of equality.” Thus, having agreed to certain principles while in the original position, the state does nothing more than enforce strict adherence to those principles, even if it is retroactively. “By exercising its powers in this way the government acts as the citizen’s agent and satisfies the demands of their public conception of justice” (Rawls 1999, 186). If in concrete instances the state appears to be acting repressively, it is not. Rawls
believes that a state, functioning in this manner, is no more repressive than were the individual subjects in the original position, hypothetically excluding a wide range of situations and possibilities that existed (at the time) as nothing more than mental abstractions.

Rawls’s theory of justice-as-fairness should be extremely useful to the analysis of conflict, and yet it falls dreadfully short. Habermas criticises Rawls on the basis of Rawls’s formulations and offers his own heuristic in the place of the original position. Like any rigorous critique should, Habermas’s concerns about Rawls’s ideas focus on the theoretical aspects of justice-as-fairness, such as the validity and workability of the original position and the veil of ignorance. Habermas’s own theory of argumentation is designed to address these points. However, there is a much more basic level at which Rawls needs to be taken to task and upon which criticism of his theory should be based. It needs to be acknowledged that, as clever as it is as a work of conceptual theory, Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* has absolutely no applicable use because it does not deal in any way with the realities of social life nor of conflict. Indeed, one of the mechanics that underpin justice-as-fairness is that it is based entirely on “the presumption of strict compliance” which arrives at “a certain ideal conception” (Rawls 1999, 309). Strict compliance theory excludes the possibility of most instances of conflict from the social engineering hypothesised. Instead, “The discussion of these problems belongs to the partial compliance part of non-ideal theory. It includes, among other things, the theory of punishment and compensatory justice, just war and
conscientious objection, civil disobedience and militant resistance” (Rawls 1999, 309). On violence, he refuses to “discuss this mode of protest, along with militant action and resistance, as a tactic for transforming or even overturning an unjust and corrupt system” (Rawls 1999, 319). He offers no guide except to acknowledge that the use of violence represents the “final expression of one’s case” (Rawls 1999, 321).

In real situations, people are not so ready to put aside their prejudices and conditions and argue for commonly shared principles, without retaining (and if challenged, trying to defend and rationalise) their deviations from idealised ‘objective’ positions. “Existing societies are of course seldom well-ordered in this sense, for what is just and unjust is usually in dispute” (Rawls 1999, 5). Yet Rawls continues to refer to “a society in which (1) everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and (2) the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles” (Rawls 1999, 4). Yet actually imagining the social institutions of his perfectly just society is also beyond the scope of Rawls’s theory of justice. Such unaccountability ultimately reinforces the edificatory aspects of Rawls’s work since he offers neither plausibility nor proof. Where “underlying agreement is lacking, the majority principle becomes more difficult to justify because it is less probable that just policies will be followed. There may, however, be no procedures that can be relied upon once distrust and enmity pervade society” which sadly must be said to be a normal state of affairs (Rawls 1999, 203). “Men’s sense of outrage however irrational will set
boundaries upon what is politically attainable; and popular views will affect the strategies of enforcement within these limits. But questions of strategy are not to be confused with those of justice” (Rawls 1999, 203). Thus Rawls washes his hands of the possible/actual/doable (the ‘pragmatic’) agenda in favour of an abstract idealism.

As mentioned, Rawls’s views on society are informed by social contract theory, which traces its origins back to writers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The social contract “is a philosophical fiction developed by early modern theorists to show how political obligation rests on individual consent” (Honderich 1995, 163). Contract theory acknowledges that any form of social organisation is better for men and women than the animalistic ‘natural’ state of existence that would otherwise be their lot. Contract theory is often used to argue that even the rule of tyrants is preferable to the alternatives. Such talk is obviously fanciful. Contract theory is an idealism that conceives of human society in metaphoric terms. Without order, human beings would still exist in societies, however base and uncivil. Thus contract theory is not really about a choice for subjects between order and chaos, but between competing methods for hypothesising the distribution of maximum benefits for mutual gain. This imaginary perspective allows Rawls to posit what the ideal circumstances are in which men and women might come together to construct a just society.

Rawls finds it “reasonable to assume that even in a well-ordered society the coercive powers of government are to some degree necessary for
the stability of social co-operation.” Without an authority to enforce rules and procedures, Rawls acknowledges the likelihood that “suspicion that others are not honouring their duties and obligations is increased by the fact that . . . it is particularly easy to find excuses for breaking them.” Thus the enforcement of public order “removes the grounds for thinking that others are not complying with the rules” (Rawls 1999, 211). Because he deals with an idealisation, Rawls does not cater for circumstances in which it is civil power itself that is corrupt, nor where citizens rebel violently for reasons other than immediate personal gain. Yet Arendt reminds that support for the government “is never unquestioning, and as far as reliability is concerned it cannot match the indeed ‘unquestioning obedience’ that an act of violence can exact” (Arendt 1969, 40-1).

Jürgen Habermas is a pragmatic philosopher in the Kantian tradition of ethics and moral philosophy. He considers what is ‘just’ over what is ‘right’ (considering the former to be somewhat more objective), but “This is not to say that ethical deliberation is irrational or exhibits no general structures of its own.” Habermas’s view on ethics in general is that “When serious questions of value arise, deliberation on who one is, and who one wants to be, yields ethical advice concerning the good life.” However, Habermas does not believe that, when contrasted to the complexities of modern life, classical ethics is able to answer questions of happiness and “virtue, character and ethos, community and tradition” once and for all (1990, viii). Habermas steps forward in much the same manner as Rawls does (and part of Moral
Consciousness and Communicative Action is a response to Rawls. If the plurality of modern life makes it impossible to posit or privilege any one ‘lifeform’ (way of living), Habermas nonetheless believes that this does not preclude a theorist from forming a general theory of justice. Habermas refers to his overall project as ‘discourse ethics,’ but of main concern is the specific device of ‘communicative action,’ designed to facilitate consensus and resolve disagreements among active participants. Whereas Rawls offers the original position and the veil of ignorance to guide such deliberations, Habermas offers communicative action as a social theory in which consent may be manufactured and disputes arbitrated.

Communicative action “is governed by binding consensual norms, which define reciprocal expectations about behaviour and which must be understood and recognised by at least two acting subjects” (Habermas 1971, 92). These subjects represent an ‘unrestricted communication community’ (an idea of Apel’s developed from Peirce and Mead) that includes all those who participate, whether by regular means or through performative contradictions (such as participating in a disagreement about the validity and effectiveness of arguments in general). Habermas’s system is social if for no other reason than it involves a community of speakers and hearers (addressors and addressees) in order to function. In viewing communication as a social act, Habermas draws partially from the great body of work on speech genres and speech act theory. He goes to great pains to assert that communicative
action can never be carried out as a purely abstract solo mental exercise.\(^5\) Habermas states that “understanding what is said to one requires participation in a communicative action” (1990, 24). The speaker communicates with a hearer about something that the speaker means. When language is used to communicate something in a speech act, three relations are involved according to Habermas: a) an expression of the speaker’s intention; b) the expression of the establishment of an interpersonal relationship between speaker and hearer; c) an expression about something in the world. “In addition, any attempt to clarify the meaning of a linguistic utterance reveals a fourth, linguistic relation, namely that between a given utterance and the set of all utterances possible within the same language” (1990, 24-5).

Habermas finds that within the society of speakers and hearers, social norms are the binding mechanism that motivates individuals into action. For Habermas, values (morals) that are shared by a society emerge out of consensus and are “enforced through sanctions. Their meaning is objectified in ordinary language communication” (1971, 92). Habermas contrasts communicative action with normative theory, which focuses on the social function of the obligatory or compulsive aspects of speech (in which social norms and taboos find articulation). Habermas does not see normativity as entirely negative since the same principles that order society and motivate

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\(^5\) While others (such as Lyotard) acknowledge idiolects and mute individuals, Habermas does not (though in the last instance, Habermas does at least consider the implications of those who refuse to enter into communicative action).
individuals, because of the underlying regulative and obligatory nature of norms, can be employed in the production of a just society, and they do not always have to do so prohibitively. For example, Habermas describes how a speaker can motivate another not because of the validity of the claim or the threat of punishment, but because the speaker poses as a guaranteur who attempts to redeem the claim that the hearer has accepted. “In the case of claims to truth or rightness, the speaker can redeem his guarantee discursively, that is, by adducing reasons; in the case of claims to truthfulness he does so through consistent behaviour” (Habermas 1990, 59). An obligation between speaker and hearer is thereby immediately assumed. Orders and directives oblige the hearer; promises and announcements oblige the speaker. Such agreements and contracts are mutually obliging, and Habermas infers that the inter-relatedness of obligations form the basis for social order. It is a framework subtly different from contract theory. The speaker “creates a binding/bonding effect between speaker and hearer that makes the continuation of their interaction possible” (Habermas 1990, 59).

Therefore it is action (practices, or consistent behaviour) that reinforces the social currency of norms. Behaviour that is performed the most frequently is the standard, and it is according to this standard that all other behaviour is judged. Thus to Habermas, the ordinary subject exists in a lifeworld “in which unproblematic cultural givens of cognitive, expressive or moral origin are interwoven with one another” by consistent performances (1990, 107). Duties are bound up in and reinforced by habitual behaviour so
that they seem normal, self-evident parts of everyday life. Yet to the participant in moral argumentation who is wise to the “normative power of the factual,” morals and behaviour become mere choices among a plethora of ways in which to attain the best quality of life (Habermas 1990, 107-8). Sadly, alternatives to compliance (i.e., disobedience and action for selfish gain) are admitted by Habermas but go unexplored, which is disappointing given it is a theory of argumentation that he ultimately proposes. Although recognised as artificial, the guiding power of normative behaviour is seen by Habermas as crucial to the functioning of society. Social beings hold certain expectations regarding the validity of norms, and their social expectations and the regulative behaviour to which they subscribe in order to make these expectations hold underwrite the integrative material of the social fabric.

Habermas’s belief is that normativity can be made to serve in the interest of the public if only those norms are supported which benefit everyone. To ensure that these expectations are acceptable to all participants, Habermas reworks Kant’s categorical imperative in accordance with his own thoughts on communicative action to come up with a new formulation of the ‘universalising principle.’

Habermas asserts, “Kant deals only with problems of right or just action. To him, moral judgements serve to explain how conflicts of action can be settled on the basis of rationally motivated agreement” (1990, 196). To achieve this agreement, Kant formulates the ‘categorical imperative,’ a guiding principle that steers actions and decisions that can only be performed
where the rule can be applied universally. Rawls's original position is an echo of Kant’s famous proposal, and Habermas’s version is a direct challenge to Rawls’s account. Habermasian discourse ethics replace the categorical imperative, postulating “only those norms may claim to be valid that could meet with the consent of all affected in their role as participants in a practical discourse” (1990, 197). To universalise discourse ethics, Habermas then states, “For a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects of its general observance for the satisfaction of each person’s particular interests must be acceptable to all” (1990, 197). The ties between Habermas’s reformulation of the categorical imperative and the dispute-settling mechanisms of communicative action become clearer. Kant’s notion of ‘sensus communis,’ “a form of understanding that we share with a community,” lies at the heart of communicative action (Ruthrof 1999, 6).

Habermas asserts that a “bridging principle is needed for practical discourse [oriented to agreement]” to be achieved. “This bridging principle, which makes consensus possible, ensures that only those norms are accepted as valid that express a general will. As Kant noted time and again, moral norms must be suitable for expression as ‘universal laws’” (Habermas 1990, 63).

Habermas clearly believes that his theory of argumentation is the very best method for guiding individuals towards the reaching of consensus. For Habermas, social interaction is implicitly linguistic, and thus it is through a linguistic ‘game’ that communicative action takes effect. In spelling out how regulated argumentation takes place, he performs an interesting rhetorical
manoeuvre designed to prove irrefutably that the theory of argumentation is and can only be the correct method for settling disputes and formulating ideal norms upon which to base social interactions. Habermas draws upon Apel’s notion of the performative contradiction to show that anyone who enters into discourse in order to refute the validity of argumentation as a means of consensus reaching in fact only validates argumentation by way of his or her refutation. Habermas signals that such behaviour adheres to the principle of fallibilism. Habermas paraphrases Apel, stating “any subject capable of speech and action necessarily makes substantive normative presuppositions as soon as the subject engages in any discourses with the intention of critically examining a hypothetical claim to validity” (1990, 85). Apel addresses this definition to sceptics, to make them “aware that no sooner does he [the sceptic] object (and defend his objection) then he commits himself to an ‘argumentation game’ and thus to presuppositions that entangle him in a performative contradiction” (Habermas 1990, 85). Communicative action therefore “makes possible a kind of understanding that is based on claims to validity and thus furnishes the only real alternative to exerting influence on one another in more or less coercive ways” (Habermas 1990, 19). Thus, only arbitration that is a form of mediation is considered by him.

With surprisingly Rawlsian overtones, Habermas accounts only for consensual actions. What he terms “Means-ends relations” – or “purposive-rational action,” in which the subject makes analytic and strategic choices that seek the greatest personal benefits without compromise or necessarily taking
others into account – Habermas excludes from contention (1971, 96). He writes that while in “strategic action one actor seeks to influence the behaviour of another by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification in order to cause the interaction to continue,” the situation in communicative action is that “one actor seeks rationally to motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect of the offer contained in his speech act” (Habermas 1990, 58). Because participants in an argument must choose to become involved in the artificial framework of this ideal speech situation, they must acknowledge that “the structure of their communication rules out all external or internal coercion other than the forces of the better argument and thereby also neutralises all motives other than that of the cooperative search for truth” (Habermas 1990, 88-9). The first inkling that like Rawls, Habermas also presents an idealisation is confirmed.6 How can one establish a theory of argumentation, disagreement and resolution that does not take into account the possibility of resistance of all kinds? Habermas’s response is classic Rawls: “I must prove that my moral principle is not just a reflection of the prejudices of adult, white, well-educated Western males today. This is the most difficult part of ethics, a part that I cannot expound on in this paper” (1990, 197). Furthermore, “Any ethics that is at once deontological, cognitivist, formalist, and Universalist ends up with a relatively narrow conception of morality that is uncompromisingly abstract”

6 Habermas acknowledges that moral sceptics make the understandable claim that “it is often impossible to reach a consensus on questions of moral principle, despite the best intentions of all concerned” (1990, 76).
The greatest disappointment of communicative action is not that Habermas cannot provide exhaustive proofs for the universalising project. His arguments are convincing, and Universalism, while naïve, encourages a leap of faith. However, the main problem is that Habermas’s methodology does not hold up in anything but the most ideal cases. Communicative action no longer offers useful guidelines nor satisfactory conclusions the moment that the social players cease to be cooperative. There is little that is more unhelpful than a theory that incorporates conflict that only allows for the very best (and least typical) picture to emerge. Communicative action becomes a laboratory event that cannot function as a real social practice. Habermas thus undermines his own pragmatism by appearing (much as he accuses Rawls) divorced from the practical realities of everyday life. This idealism shines through in Habermas’ description of argumentation, where:

the success-orientation of competitors is assimilated into a form of communication in which action oriented toward reaching understanding is continued by other means. In argumentation, proponents and exponents engage in a competition with arguments in order to convince one another, that is, in order to reach a consensus.

(1990, 160)

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Habermas enthusiastically defends his work against ‘ethical cognitivists’ and any claims that he is guilty of the ‘ethnocentric fallacy’ by proposing a principle of universalism for his theory. However, although Universalism depends on a rigorous proof, Habermas avoids putting any such expectations upon his philosophy. Instead he redefines the traditional role of philosophy, isolating it further from any attempt to reach the sorts of evidential proofs that is expected of science. He writes, “such striving for knowledge on the part of the philosopher is no less fallible than anything else that has ever been exposed to the gruelling and cleansing process of scientific discussion and has stood up, at least for the time being” (Habermas 1990, 119). Certainly, philosophy may become refreshed (naïve and self-confident), as is the case with anyone relieved of a responsibility (which they could not fulfill) or the obligations of the burden of truth, yet Habermas is ultimately unable to prove his claims to Universalism.
Yet a whole slew of presuppositions about the nature, perspectives, morality and thinking of the arguers are made here. Communicative actions fails to address the more common sentiments of parties locked in conflict, who often place greater importance on the validation of their rightness through popular rather than philosophical means (a greater importance on the validation of their rightness rather than a striving for ‘objective truth’). In such cases, a cheaper, easier way to effect such a status is found in physical force or dissimulation – purposive-rational action, as Habermas calls it.

There are two direct, everyday challenges to communicative action that Habermas’ theories are unable to take on board. First is the efficacy of physical violence over rational decision taking. Despite being nonverbal, uncooperative and seemingly non-communicative, physical violence counter-argues very effectively without any performative contradictions. As Arendt notes, it is a “simple fact that no substitute for this final arbiter . . . has yet appeared on the political scene” (1969, 5). The violent act cuts through language games whereby to enter into argument is to validate the primacy of argumentation. The second challenge to communicative action is found in silence. Habermas acknowledges that one of the last refuges of the sceptic is to not argue at all, denying communication and at the same time undercutting the conditions necessary for the petit-justification of the principle of argumentation (that arguing against it entails a performative contradiction). As far as Habermas is concerned, the sceptic “cannot [completely] drop out of

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8 The notion of ‘being silenced’ has taken on an unfortunately narrow, monolithic meaning in recent years that has turned the majority of cultural analysts away from the powerful possibilities of the strategy of refusing to enter into discourse.
the communicative practice of everyday life, to the presuppositions of which he remains bound. And these in turn are at least partly identical with the presuppositions of argumentation” inasmuch as social life is, to Habermas, a linguistic experience (1990, 101). Yet Habermas does not imagine subjects for whom being ‘mute’ is a real condition of existence, whether by physical or political means. Likewise Habermas identifies the formulation “Having excluded persons A, B, C, . . . from the discussion by silencing them or by foisting our interpretation on them, we were able to convince ourselves that N is justified” as non-sensical and a performative contradiction (1990, 91). Yet in less crass terms, this is exactly the sort of silencing that takes place in real-world situations dominated by means-ends rather than consensual relations. In order to enlighten the subject of conflict, theories that confront the reality of power relations are crucial.

The title of Michel Foucault’s professorial chair of ‘History of Systems of Thought’ spells out, however obscurely, the acclaimed theorist’s special interests. The broad sweep of Foucault’s theories remain extremely relevant in contemporary theory and much of the recent work done in ‘new’ historico-discursive analysis would not be possible without the foundation that Foucault provides. Of particular interest to an examination of conflict are the works that were completed by Foucault in the first half of his career. *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, along with various collections of essays

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9 “In a word, the sceptic may reject morality, but he cannot reject the ethical substance (*Sittlichkeit*) of the life circumstances in which he spends his waking hours, not unless he is willing to take refuge in suicide or serious mental illness” (Habermas 1990, 100).
and interviews, form a coherent system that has a vital bearing on an analytic, societal description of antagonistic forces. Foucault radicalises and expands our understanding of the significance of context, bringing a focus upon ‘statements’ (utterances and practices) as manifestations of political power and social forces that actively construct the experience of the individual subject as a member of society. Foucault engages in historical analysis from a position hitherto unapproached by more conventional historians. His analysis “does not question things said as to what they are hiding, what they were ‘really’ saying, in spite of themselves, the unspoken element that they contain, the proliferation of thoughts, images, or fantasies that inhabit them” (Foucault 1972, 109). Foucault is instead much more concerned with the context in which these statements emerge (and the context to which, in their emergence, these statements also contribute) and “what it means to them to have appeared when and where they did – they and no others” (1972, 109).

To come to grips with statements, it is to the moment of the first emergence (what he calls their ‘historical irruption’) of individual statements that Foucault’s attention is turned, “However banal it may be, however unimportant its consequences may appear to be, however quickly it may be forgotten after its appearance” (1972, 28). For Foucault’s purposes there are very few things that cannot be viewed as a statement, though his focus at first seems persistently linguistic, oftentimes counter-intuitively so. However, Foucault is wonderfully broad and, some argue, woefully vague in his definitions, but he views the statement as difficult to define since it “is always
an event that neither the language (langue) nor the meaning can quite exhaust” (1972, 28). Foucault offers three areas in which statements escape the narrowness of strict definition.

It is certainly a strange event: first, because on the one hand it is linked to the gesture of writing or to the articulation of speech, and also on the other hand it opens up to itself a residual existence in the field of memory, or in the materiality of manuscripts, books, or any other form of recording; secondly, because, like every event, it is unique, yet subject to repetition, transformation, and reactivation; thirdly, because it is linked not only to the situations that provoke it, and to the consequences that it gives rise to, but at the same time, and in accordance with a quite different modality, to the statements that precede and follow it. (1972, 28)

In these observations, Foucault reveals the complexity of his project as well as its central paradox: he wishes to develop a theory of society that addresses the social force of ideas contained in linguistic meanings, yet Foucault cannot ignore the way in which spoken or written utterances themselves defy reliable analysis.

Foucault later abandons any attempt to revitalise the term ‘episteme’ to capture the sense of a cultural body of meanings and ideas. To name something is to give it definition and fixed borders, and exactly these qualities are contradicted by Foucault’s own theories of how meaning and discursive ideas function socially. In the Archaeology, Foucault uses the term because it allows him to articulate the object of his study to which he applies his analysis of discourses (the episteme later becomes absorbed into Foucault’s focus upon ‘historical systems of thought’). “By episteme,” Foucault writes, “we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and
possibly formalised systems” (1972, 191). As it is used here, the idea of the fixed term ‘episteme’ is much the same as that of the social ontology or framework that has been examined in each writer’s work thus far, though Foucault’s pursuit of historical systems of thought embraces the multi-strandedness of social life more thoroughly.

Epistemology studies “the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences . . . when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities” (Foucault 1972, 191). ‘Sciences’ for Foucault implies not just common sciences but all the formalised schools of learning that emerge from academia and form the basis of discourses in a culture. The *Archaeology of Knowledge* is a dense, obfuscative text, frequently misinterpreted and guessed at rather than explained. At the same time, it is also extremely rigorous and well ordered, yet this does little to ease the reader’s assimilation of the rules for discursive formations. In Habermas’s evaluation, Foucault seeks “to uncover the contingent beginnings of discourse formations, to analyse the multiplicity of factual histories of derivation, and to dissolve the illusion of identity, especially the putative identity of the history-writing subject himself” (1987, 250).

Foucault’s view of discourse is at once different and more complicated than that of Habermas. For Foucault, discourse is part of the very fabric of society, inescapable and all encompassing. Individual social subjects are immersed in a web of discursive relations that alternatively construct and convey the very experience of what it is to be socialised. As such, Foucault’s
focus inevitably falls, as must any social analysis aimed at the examination of conflict, upon the force and power relations that underwrite social life. In

*Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elaborates upon this observation:

> power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (1991, 27)

Foucault’s discourse analysis unites a concern for the functional aspects of communication with the political analysis of social power. Thus Foucault asks, in any given situation “who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language (*langue*)?”

On one side of the equation Foucault examines the positions of authority that are empowered by certain discourses. Writing of dominant discourse as a whole, Foucault asks, “Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true?” (1972, 50). However, “We must,” Foucault writes, “also describe the institutional *sites* from which the doctor [policeman, nationalist, etc.,] makes his discourse, and from which this discourse derives its legitimate source and point of application” (1972, 51). In other words, Foucault identifies how entrenched social institutions privilege particular language uses and thus a specific way of looking at the world. On the other side of this relation is the subject, for whom, in various contexts, only certain positions are made available for him or her to occupy. Foucault therefore represents a spectrum of relations that
exist between the positions occupied by subjects and institutions across which social reality is produced.¹⁰

In order to be able to describe the specific process that permits certain discourses to operate in the support of social power, Foucault becomes concerned with the rules according to which discursive formations are formed and how they function. Foucault writes, “the archaeological description of discourses is deployed in the dimension of a general history; it seeks to discover that whole domain of institutions, economic processes, and social relations on which a discursive formation can be articulated.” Furthermore, what archaeology attempts to reveal “is the particular level in which history can give place to definite types of discourse, which have their own type of historicity, and which are related to a whole set of various historicities” (Foucault 1972, 165). In order to achieve these ends, archaeology determines how the rules of formation for each discourse are connected to social institutions, norms and governing practices (Foucault 1972, 162). It attempts to identify particular forces at work. When he speaks of “rules of formation,” Foucault means “what must be related, in a particular discursive practice, for such and such an enunciation to be made, for such and such a concept to be used, for such and such a strategy to be organised” (1972, 74). However, these rules are not formal equations in any sense; rather they are suggestive, for in the rules for formation “what we discover is neither a configuration, nor a form, but a group of rules that are immanent in a practice,

¹⁰ Despite being theoretically influenced by Althusser, Foucault prefers to speak of “authorities of delimitation” rather than Repressive or Ideological State Apparatuses.
and define it in its specificity," which is to say that discourses have available to themselves certain relational possibilities, innumerable combinations of which may be employed (Foucault 1972, 46).

No one discourse obeys any one particular formula. Instead, the various forms in which discourses manifest (by which ideas are connected to social institutions, subjects, customs and practices) exist as a spectrum of possibilities. Thus, “instead of reconstructing chains of inference (as one often does in the history of the sciences or of philosophy), instead of drawing up tables of differences (as the linguists do),” the rules of formation merely “describe systems of dispersion” (Foucault 1972, 37). It is a complicated notion to take on board. Foucault writes that:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation . . . The conditions to which the elements of this division (objects, mode of statement, concepts, thematic choices) are subjected we shall call the rules of formation. The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division. (1972, 38)

Accordingly, Foucault defines discourses themselves as groups of statements that belong to a single system of formation (1972, 107). He then writes, “To define a system of formation in its specific individuality is therefore to characterise a discourse or a group of statements by the regularity of a practice” (Foucault 1972, 74).

Foucault’s archaeology is therefore aimed at dissecting discourses and
how they function “in order to discover the domain of existence and functioning of a discursive practice” (1972, 165). Consequently, Foucault arrives at a position vaguely similar to Habermas’s, where discursivity is ultimately reducible to a form of social behaviour.¹¹ However, Foucault comes to this point in thrall to a central paradox. On the one hand his theory of discourse analysis embraces meaning in its totality, so that discourse is the entirety of communication rather than a special case or special use, as Habermas would have it. However, at the same time it is partly because Foucault is so constricted by conventional accounts of language that he consistently overlooks the simple brilliance of the point he himself has made.

Foucault conceives of discursive practice as the bottom line in the historical analysis of systems of thought and forms of power. A ‘discursive practice’ is the material, physical, behavioural way that ideas circulate in the interests of social power. Yet Foucault’s examples are persistently linguistic when it comes to his description of discourses, their function and effects. This verbocentrism carries through despite Foucault talking about statements to the point where the term barely resembles regular definitions of the word, since for Foucault almost anything (taken to its logical conclusion, even whole

¹¹ In order to consider the “ontogenesis of a decentred understanding of the world that is structurally rooted in action oriented toward reaching understanding” Habermas recognises that he must “introduce discourse as a third stage of interaction” (Habermas 1990, 156). In this understanding, discourse is something external; to be taken up or not to be taken up as the actor (speaker or hearer) chooses. It is not terribly helpful to view discourse as so separate from other communication acts. Foucault’s theory of discourse is far more potent by rendering discursivity as the matrix in which all interactions are suspended. However, the distinction between Foucault and Habermas’s use of the term is that the Habermasian view of discourse never loses sight of the fact that to speak is to act, in the sense that something (speech) is ‘done.’ It is a useful point of view to retain, even though Habermas’s perspective commits him to thinking of discourse in terms of ‘entering into discourse’ (whereas Foucault argues that we have no choice, that we are always already in it).
texts) can be considered as ‘statements.’ That Foucault does so is entirely understandable, since what underlies his real concern is physically identifiable units of meaning, be they slender or broad in content and scope. Instead, it is the prime shortcoming for Foucault that, apart from the central contradiction of the whole archaeology, Foucault has been unable to shake off linguistic presuppositions about discourse.\textsuperscript{12} Foucault frequently turns to discuss things that are non-discursive, yet by his own exposition the theory of discourse is so broad that nothing escapes inclusion within the domain of discursive formations.

For Foucault everything is discursive – everything is in some way tied to discourse or forms part of a discursive practice. Nevertheless it is his idea of a discursive practice that proves persistently attractive in the examination of conflict, coupled with his astute writings on the correlation between discourse, power and knowledge. Mostly because of the slippage involved in defining statements, Lemke argues that Foucault’s “failure to engage with linguistic analyses of discourse limits its usefulness” (1995, 29), whereas it is equally possible to hold the exact opposite opinion. Rendered as discursive practices, Foucault’s study of discourse allows for much more than mere utterances to be included in the scope of a study of power, meaning and social practice. With the definition of statements being so broad and all inclusive, and if we take Foucault’s mention of discourse as practice to its

\textsuperscript{12} It is frequently argued that in setting out to expose and critique the unacknowledged ideological presuppositions of various aspects of human knowledge, Foucault has done so from a particular context and according to a particular ideologically informed rationale. While this is assuredly the case, such criticisms have unfortunately overshadowed much that is insightful in \textit{The Archaeology of Knowledge}. 
logical limits, we are offered the first insight into an open-ended semiotic theorem in which discourses and the non-linguistic practices that convey them may be analysed side-by-side and with the same tools. As Foucault states, “we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call archive” (Foucault 1972, 128). Few theoretical perspectives successfully offer such a deep and wide-reaching analysis of society. With unpacking, Foucault’s work allows us to rigorously examine social behaviour and utterances, considering the whole of society as an archive of meanings that may be sifted to uncover the conflictual relations that underpin many aspects of social life.

Given what has been said about Foucault, it might seem that Lyotard’s theory of the ‘différend’ allows us to take our investigation of conflict one step further. After all, Lyotard’s work on the différend represents the ultimate, most direct confrontation between contemporary theory and the analysis of political conflict. As such, Lyotard’s différend encapsulates all that is strongest in the ability of post-structuralist theory to tackle such difficult issues. At the same time, Lyotard’s writing also alerts us to the key weakness in all of the work to the present that deals with the problem of conflict. In Derrida there are similar problems despite the perspicacity of his work on ‘différance.’ Both writers – Lyotard with his formalist background and Derrida with his phenomenological
heritage – are concerned wholly with questions of language. Even the society that they presumably wish to enlighten comes a distant second to a preoccupation with phrases (for Lyotard) and signs (for Derrida). It begs the question that, if this focus on language is so unappetising, why they should be mentioned at all? Yet the reason is fairly simple: “Much of the theoretical literature of the late twentieth century has been affected in one way or another by writers who have explored questions concerning differentiation” (Ruthrof 2000, 72). The influence of writers like Lyotard and Derrida is so far reaching that they must be included only if, to paraphrase Foucault’s comment on discursive unities, we do so to allow other ideas to then emerge which erase their initial suggestions. With Lyotard the notion of the différend addresses the phenomenon of conflict so directly that it is our primary concern. Derrida himself offers very little to a direct analysis of conflict but returns in Chapter Two in the discussion of the linguistic turn.

Lyotard starts with a fairly simple picture, that he “would like to call a différend the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim” (1988, 9). It is not just the ability to speak that is threatened, but also the ability to make ‘sense’ or meaning through speech. “The différend,” Lyotard writes, “is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be” (1988, 13). The imbalance that is described by the term différend is not coincidental, but comes about directly through a conflict “between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a
rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy” (Lyotard 1988, xi). Slowly the structure expands, showing us that Lyotard’s idea of conflict and inequity is not just a conflict of force but of social power. Like Foucault, Lyotard acknowledges the social currency of certain ways of talking, and that positions of authority are often embedded within particular language practices. The différend “shows itself when the adjudication of a dispute is conducted in the language of one party, while the injustice suffered by the other party is excluded by the juridical discourse” (Ruthrof 1997, 193). Via the différend Lyotard describes “a structural asymmetry resulting from the difference between what needs to be said and what cannot be said, between language control and linguistic disadvantage, between discursive power and powerlessness” (Ruthrof 1997, 198).

In Habermas, “communication free from domination is an ideal which we stipulate in order to engage in social negotiation at all” (Ruthrof 1997, 193). In Lyotard, everything about communication and interaction is ‘agonistic.’ Speakers and hearers “communicate stubbornly in the face of the inevitable structural hostility which attaches to all speech” (Ruthrof 1997, 193). Taking into account the différend, Lyotard’s view is that injustice is the unavoidable result of all interaction since “discursive power is always asymmetrically distributed” (Ruthrof 2000, 73). Consequently, Lyotard writes that “the conflict, though, is not between humans or between any other entities; rather, these result from phrases” (1988, 137). Lyotard believes that
conflict arises from the communicational incompatibility of different regimens (genres) of discourse – and this agonistics is a fundamental principle of language as a result of the ineradicable heterogeneity of phrases and genres of discourse (Ruthrof 1997, 188). Each genre of discourse produces its own meaning of an object of discussion. When a tribunal (any decision-making authority) articulates its judgements, it does so through a particular discourse genre that always immediately wrongs other incompatible regimens (Lyotard 1988, part 196). According to Lyotard, different phrase regimens group together in modalities\(^\text{13}\) that centre on what is ‘at stake.’ Different stakes can be found in different discourses such as religion, economics, logic, etc., and it is their differing stakes that mean that these discourses are perpetually in conflict. It is at the level of the phrase – the individual utterance, to move unfortunately away from Foucault’s broad notion of the statement – where discourses conflict over the mode of linking (Lyotard 1988, part 218).

By focusing entirely on phrases in dispute, Lyotard does away with the anthropomorphism and the overconcern with intentionality that plague many other writings on the subject of conflict. Although there are, coincidentally, individual people who carry out and personify these linguistic conflicts, their behaviour is incidental to the systemic processes of conflict upon which Lyotard is focused. By linking the concern for phrases with social processes, Lyotard shows that conflict between phrases is also a struggle over how phrases are deployed – persuasively, argumentatively, refutingly, pleadingly, etc. Consequently, Lyotard’s différence “is particularly well suited to a critique

\(^{13}\) For which it is more helpful to substitute Foucault’s term ‘discursive formations.’
of textual violence committed on cultures and continents in the pursuit of various forms of domination” (Ruthrof 1997, 183). As noted, Lyotard identifies how discourses such as religion and economics are “not just distinct but fundamentally hostile to each other” and thus are responsible for the general agonistics of society (Ruthrof 1997, 186). However Lyotard argues that the phrase regimens of politics exist at a meta-level in relation to all other discourses. Politics exists as a “parasitic realisation of the agonistics existing between different genres” and is “nothing less than the linkage of the ‘multiplicity of genres’ itself” (Ruthrof 1997, 186). According to this interpretation, to Lyotard everything that is political emerges from the clash of incompatible discourses. It is a gloomy picture that Lyotard paints for reconciliation. Political settlements are never really achievable since the worldviews possessed by opposing parties are informed by their particular discursive beliefs, and a différend is the inevitable result of interaction between these views.

To make clear the ramifications of the différend for socio-political analysis, Lyotard returns frequently to the notion of a tribunal and the sorts of différends it activates in order to show the direct link between the inherent agonistics of phrase universes and the effects of repression and cleavage that result in society. While the tribunal is an abstraction, it is easy to imagine the sorts of juridical organisations that typify the unwitting repression that the theory of the différend describes. The Diplock Courts of Northern Ireland, for instance, appear to be an expression of Lyotard’s tribunal par excellence. The
application of juridical rulings marries the employment of phrases with the performative aspects of phrase use. To find someone ‘guilty’ is at the same time to create a real situation of imprisonment or punishment, and not just to merely pronounce words. Lyotard writes:

> It cannot be otherwise since the tribunal that determines what a litigation is, which demands justice, and which thereby forgets, represses, and reactivates différends, must pronounce the sentence it passes, and must, first of all, found its authority upon the rules of a genre of discourse. (1988, 141)

Even the vengeful or retaliatory tribunal (such as the sort that comes to power after the removal of the original corrupt or hated authority) is incapable of justice, according to Lyotard. The new tribunal can only “create new wrongs, since they would regulate (or think they were regulating) différends as if they were litigations” (Lyotard 1988, 140). In serving their own cause, the new tribunal only wrongs other groups, since Lyotard argues that consensus is not possible with the différend without finding a shared discourse to which both parties can submit.

Although he does not directly address conflict, J. L. Austin’s focus on the functional nature of language has greatly influenced philosophy, linguistics and literary theory. The Harvard lectures that were later compiled into Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words* form the basis for ‘speech act theory.’ Austin explores various categories of failure and success, happiness and unhappiness, truth and falsity, use and misuse in language, often but not exclusively focusing on the character of language is it occurs between actors (speakers and hearers). Austin avoids metaphysics altogether to exclusively
consider language use as performative behaviour. Moving away from a concern with cognition, and instead focusing on how language is used, reveals speech act theory as a pragmatic exercise. However, although he deals with the interactive character of social language behaviour, it would be more helpful if Austin could formulate rules for argumentation as he does for other forms of interaction. Habermas, undeniably (even if minimally) influenced by speech act theory, does offer a theory of argumentation, yet it does not fulfill the needs of practicality as previously outlined. Therefore, falling back on Austin, his work only allows us to take the analysis of language use within society so far. Nevertheless, his concerns remain important for two basic reasons. First, while not satisfactorily dealing with linguistic conflict, Austin does offer the two categories of ‘illocution’ and ‘perlocution,’ which give some insights into the roles of individuals in conflict. Second, because speech act theory forms the foundation for so much else that has been written, its general terms frequently appear and thus require definition.

The basis of speech act theory is the locutionary act, which Austin defines as “roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense” (1962, 109). The success of the performative aspect of language use is assessed on whether the action implied by the speech act is achieved – whether it is happy or unhappy, as Austin terms it – rather than if it is valid or not, as one finds in propositional claims to truth. Austin
acknowledges that actors may intend to produce results that do not happen, and likewise that they may receive a result that was unintended. Within this focus, Austin divides locutions into two types: illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. Illocutionary acts are those such as “informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc., i.e., utterances which have a certain (conventional) force” (1962, 109). The perlocutionary act is “what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading” (Austin 1962, 109). Austin provides an overview in the following summary:

Thus we distinguished the locutionary act (and within the phonetic, the phatic, and the rhetic acts) which has a meaning; the illocutionary act which has a certain force in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is the achieving of certain effects by saying [or doing] something. (1962, 121)

Illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are entirely linguistic phenomena even though Austin acknowledges that certain actions sometimes accompany the performance of each.

Illocutions and perlocutions are connected to each other in a number of ways. First, “Unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed” (Austin 1962, 116). The effect needs to be achievable, and “the effect amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution” (Austin 1962, 117). Second, the illocutionary act ‘takes effect’ only by changing objects rather than subjects. Austin cites naming as an example of an illocutionary act that limits and defines the potential of future acts surrounding an object.14

14 To refer back to Lyotard’s tribunal, many might argue that the criminal must first be transformed into an ‘object’ before the illocutionary act of naming him or her ‘guilty’ can occur.
Third, in illocutions and perlocutions we must note the distinction between one party giving an order and the other party obeying. While illocutionary acts may convey orders, perlocutionary acts define the response of the addressee. Austin defines these three relations between illocutions and perlocutions as i) securing uptake, ii) taking effect and iii) inviting response. Thus while illocutionary acts are bound up in the effects, they are distinct from producing the effects characteristic of the perlocutionary act (Austin 1962, 118). Through these definitions it can be seen that what Austin has to say ties in quite well with the earlier consideration of practical discourse. The clarification that illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are inherently performative in nature and linked to effects fits with the potential glimpsed in Foucault for reading behaviour along discursive lines. American theorist John Searle takes the basic assumptions of Austin’s speech acts further to argue that “The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act” (1970, 16). Foucault develops a not dissimilar approach in the focus on acts of formulation (see Chapter Five).

At first glance Searle appears sympathetic to a view of language as something that is ‘done,’ à la practical discourse. There is something to be said for escaping the narrow semio-economics of the Saussurean sign as currency of meaning, though not Searle’s rejection of semiotics as a whole. However, Foucault’s loosely defined statements offer greater possibilities
than Searle’s speech acts exactly because Foucault’s category is so broad and does not necessarily tie itself in to performances by speakers or hearers. In having widened the focus from the sign to the act of formulation itself, Searle likewise broadens the definition of what is thought of as the rules for language use, taking them beyond mere syntactic or semantic possibilities. Like many linguists, Searle gives the example of a game of chess in order to illustrate his point. However, in this example, Searle’s interest is not just limited to the various possibilities for the movement of pieces. The notion of ‘rules’ also encompasses, for instance, the ‘aim of the game,’ rules for conduct, location of play, deportment of the players, adherence to certain conventions, etc. They also preclude the performance of the ‘game’ (the acting out of the potential of the rules) in inappropriate conditions (as Searle suggests, as part of a religious ceremony), or with improper aims (seeking to throw the game), or using an incorrect board or pieces. Through this metaphor Searle opens up the analysis of speech acts to a wider scope, taking us further into the sort of socially contextual understanding that finds such force in Foucault’s writings. Of particular interest here is how, through an explication of the rules for speech acts, Searle draws attention to the tacit though perhaps unconscious recognition of rules by speakers and hearers.  

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15 Searle’s distinction is that when certain conditions of language are evoked in illocutionary acts, it is not that they (the acts) themselves magically bring about certain consequences; rather, it is that the performers in the speech act recognise when certain conditions have been met. Promising does not cause the object of the ‘promise’ to spring into being. Instead, when addressee recognise that certain conventions of the promise have been met, it can then be acted upon and be said to have been made.
Regrettably, Austin and Searle do not present their theories unproblematically. Criticisms of Austin are relatively straightforward. It is commonly held that he does not make the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions clear. The moment that the successful achievement of results becomes a factor in whether or not a certain speech act can be said to be ‘happily’ illocutionary or perlocutionary, an element of perpetual uncertainty hovers over the distinction. Austin, like Searle, becomes overly caught up in issues of intentionality, requiring analysts to have an almost psychic understanding of the motivations of their subjects in order to be able to draw any illocutionary or perlocutionary conclusions at all. Again, both writers also suffer from the impossibility of the task of exhaustively mapping the phenomena they study. Austin’s numerous categories daub a pseudo-scientific layer upon his theories that may once have been customary in properly rigorous philosophy, but now the numerous types and classifications appear not only inadequate but also unnecessary. Again, not to stand in any way against academic rigour, nonetheless a greater utility is found in the general sweeps of categories that Foucault describes, rather than trying to catalogue every type of utterance or performance ever made.

Searle encounters his own difficulties in trying to establish a “list of conditions for the performance of a certain illocutionary act.” He states, “I am going to deal only with a simple and idealised case” (1970, 56). In the study of promises, Searle excludes all sorts of “marginal, fringe, and partially defective promises. This approach has the consequence that counter-
examples can be produced of ordinary uses of the word ‘promise’ which does not fit the analysis” (1970, 55). He then performs an extraordinary manoeuvre, arguing that the existence of counter-examples “does not ‘refute’ the analysis, rather they require an explanation of why and how they depart from the paradigm cases of promise making” (Searle 1970, 55). Searle shifts the ‘blame’ for incompatibility onto the choice of counter-examples, rather than examining his paradigm and the choices he has made vis-a-vis exclusions and inclusions. The result is a somewhat Procrustean vision, excluding a whole range of counter-phenomena in order to arrive at a neat theory without contradictions. As we have encountered them elsewhere, such idealisations are unsatisfactory.
2. Verbocentrism

The writers considered previously represent a certain continuity in the study of society and language. Yet these writers do not always explicitly concern themselves with conflict. Several of the writers mentioned make the study of conflict or dispute their prime focus, yet this leaves others who do not take into account conflict except in the most peripheral sense. As has been stated previously, the dearth of analytic writing on conflict is puzzling. However, whether it is on an interpersonal or a cultural level, conflict is always social. As such there are two consequences. First, in order to study conflict it is necessary to establish a theoretical framework that deals with the context in which the conflict takes place. With such being the case, the writers that have so far been studied exemplify particular and distinct approaches to the study of society. These writers base their work upon certain presuppositions about society that it is necessary to identify clearly, even if it is only to dismiss their suggestions once they have been made.

Second, in order to write about society, any theoretical knowledge must forward a particular theory of subjectivity in order to discuss the behaviour of individuals within society. From this perspective it becomes increasingly clear that in order to discuss conflict at all, a roundabout route must be taken that involves postulating a working ontology upon which to base judgements and analysis. A fully realised social theory must then not only be able to accommodate a description of phenomena occurring at the
level of social norms and customs, institutions and social groups; such a social theory also necessitates a particular idea of how subjects are constructed and experience their own subjectivity within the social environment. Among the writers previously considered, theories of subjectivity are implicit in all of their works, and for the most part it is a particular fascination with theories of language that dominate their assumptions about subjectivity. The individual’s experience of language is so crucial to these theories of subjectivity that the subject and his or her construction in language, as the indivisible social unit, is the foundation for everything else that is said about society. Thus, rather than a ‘top-down’ approach in which a lens is applied to society in order to reveal greater and greater degrees of detail, a ‘bottom-up’ analysis explores the ways in which individuals form various groups, many of which overlap or fill the same purpose, in accord or in conflict. A society is the sum total of these groupings and the relations that exist between them.

A foundational analysis more closely reveals the ways in which individuals and groups constitute and contribute to the overall social context, which includes the various meanings implicated in this process when individuals find themselves in conflict with each other. Thus we sift the various approaches of Habermas and Lyotard, Foucault and others, in order to precisely identify their presuppositions, and then, from these first rules, dismiss what seems flawed and collect up what appear as the most cogent observations, thereby constructing a functioning though somewhat potted
social ontology with which to work. Given the lack of writing on the subject of conflict it is understandable that conflict itself is one major theoretical gap that remains to be filled. While a coherent theory of conflict represents the apex or end product of the present undertaking, in order for such a theoretical function to be produced at all, various other gaps in the ontology offered by this gathering of writers need to be considered.

The vulnerability of any form of study lies in the assumptions that the researchers bring to their interpretation of the subject matter and the conclusions that they reach as a result of these biases. In Habermas, Lyotard and others, one major difficulty is the pivotal (though relatively unacknowledged) role that language plays in their formulations. Although language is admittedly a far from explicit concern to Rawls (beyond it being the medium in which his imaginary formulations are carried out), for every other writer, language holds an importance that so underlines their work that it is difficult to isolate and measure. Much has been written about the phenomenon described as the ‘linguistic turn,’ which is the “Collective designation for a range of otherwise quite disparate trends in twentieth-century thought” (Honderich 1995, 492). The linguistic turn represents “the realisation that language itself needs to be carefully understood before we can deal with the phenomena it describes.” Thus, “In its extreme form, the linguistic turn suggests that all philosophical problems, including those of meaning, are linguistic problems” (Ruthrof 2000, 6).
The consequence of the linguistic turn is that questions of language intrude on other questions of philosophy, obscuring social and philosophical issues behind a fog of linguistic concerns. As a linguistic bias, verbocentrism requires that ordinary philosophical phenomena be analysed in terms of the language by which we understand it, leading quite frequently to explorations that fail to touch upon the actual subject matter by virtue of having to go through the detour of language analysis. It is the predominance of verbocentrism in contemporary thought that derails the study of conflict because the project of describing, analysing and elaborating conflict has been sidetracked by the concerns of linguistics. What is frequently encountered instead is a slippage between a philosophical concern with real world phenomena and an over-concern with studying the linguistic representation or manifestation of those same phenomena. Habermas's communicative action exemplifies such movement, tackling conflict by constructing fragile and elaborate rules for a language game that crumbles in the face of nonverbal definitions.

It has previously been said that in order to write about conflict, theorists need to first establish how they conceive of the functioning of society and the interpersonal relationships within which conflict manifests. Therefore, if we take on board the notion of the linguistic turn, what we can track is a transformation of the project of describing social reality into something more: the analysis of how society and the subject are constructed through language to the exclusion of any other competing models of explanation. In such terms,
various writers can be seen as describing their worldviews in competition with others, each seeking to hit upon the formula that best captures a theory of society and the subject. As Lucy writes, “There is something critical at stake, then – something critically political, fundamentally ethical at stake – between competing theories of language that contest an understanding of the world” (1995, 7). Thus the role of language and the differing degrees of political importance that it is given in dominant theories contribute to the sophistication and elaboration of various social critiques. We can see this clearly in the various concerns of Rawls and Habermas, in Austin and Lyotard and so on. At the core of things, however, it is ironically an over concern with issues of language, and a particular methodological approach stemming from a faith in language-like models, that hinders the issue of conflict ever being much considered by successful writers such as these. The moment that everything is reduced to the level of language, analysis is set upon a singular path that must exclude other questions about non-linguistic phenomena that seem otherwise crucial to the understanding of conflict.

Furthermore, quite apart from this competition with words having overwhelmed and made the analysis of conflict impotent, a purely linguistic account of the world and the things in it is completely unsatisfactory on its own terms. Although it can be argued that in many instances writers of the linguistic turn have not successfully reduced theories about the world to the absolute level of language anyway, the main thrust of the argument here is that the verbocentric analysis of society, by virtue of being locked in to a
language-only model, is forced to defend certain presumptions that otherwise fly in the face of a good deal of our common-sense observations about the world. What can be found time and time again is the failure of the language view – words as the primary status of meaning, and their relation to the world being after the fashion of grammar and language-like rules – to adequately describe exactly what goes on in the life of individual subjects and the worlds that they share. The moment we are confronted with meaning-laden phenomena (the sound of gunfire or a car backfiring, both of which make us flinch) that defy a verbocentric explanation (that words alone are the origin of meaning), a weakness is exposed for which the structuralist theory of language cannot account. However, once we pare back the exclusive focus on language to look at society as a collaboration of not just utterances but nonverbal performances, we begin to not only be able to say something exciting about conflict, but about the world as a whole as well.

We can trace the rise of verbocentrism in each of the theorists that have been considered so far. As the main progenitor of speech act theory, Austin is in some ways the most illustrious and yet most problematic of these figures. In Austin’s work there are two key problems that bear relevance to this study: first is the very obviously verbocentric nature of the explorations that Austin offers; the second difficulty is Austin’s complete lack of a political focus, something that Derrida also identifies. Writing in the decade after the Second World War, Austin concerned himself with microscopic issues of language at a time when the world was settling down from a period of conflict.
and upheaval into a new ‘cold’ war of diplomacy and propaganda. While it is no crime to eschew politics for theory, it is admittedly less helpful and less contributive to the world at large to do so. Although it is a view informed by its own particular ideology, there is wide support for the perspective that theory free of immediate relevance becomes what Habermas describes as ‘edificatory’ – the writer constructs theories and their definitions for no reason other than self-satisfaction and abstract mental exercise. If it is a theory’s utility that is most valued, philosophical work finds full satisfaction when it can be redeemed within a politically rich context. Furthermore, it is by being politically informed that philosophy – frequently charged with being remote, amoral and abstruse – is able to claim a (non-normative) moral imperative. Philosophy can only find a morality in providing usefulness to current affairs both on the level of individual lived experience and for society as a whole.

On the count of linguistic bias there can be little doubt. While Austin permits some divergence from verbocentric modelling by acknowledging the performative aspect of language use (that speech is something that people do), much of this slack is reeled back by Searle, who takes it “to be an analytic truth about language that whatever can be meant can be said” (1970, 17). This ‘principle of expressibility’ directly clashes with the notion of extra-linguistic permanence, where some elements important in the making of meaning are found in nonverbal forms. Since Searle argues that communication itself is completely dependent upon, first, a subject existing to be communicated about and second, that this subject is communicable in
words, it is not surprising that he excludes any possibility for there being a surplus meaning outside of spoken or written language. For Searle, communication always takes place through the interpretations of communicative signs (marks of any type in any medium) as they pertain to the performance of a speech act. Human beings, Searle argues, as a species capable of speech, transform everything they see or encounter into speech acts even if that transformation occurs only in the person’s imagination.

Because Searle’s argument can be reduced to such a basis, it can be refuted at the same level without recourse to the many twists and turns of analytic logic he himself performs in order to guarantee his arrival at the conclusions he sets out to prove. If communication always takes place as real or interpretive speech acts, Searle is at a loss to explain the sorts of sense we make of conflictual nonverbal signs such as gunfire, aggressive posturing or, for instance, the physical pain caused by a blow to the head. The denial of any sort of extra-linguistic meaning reveals a severe deficit in Searle’s conception of how human beings interact communicatively. While Austin cannot be held to account for the misapplications to which Searle places Austin’s work, Searle’s exclusion of the nonverbal on the same terms points to a system-wide and general inadequacy with this branch of language theory.

Habermas’s view of society is clearly influenced by a linguistic perspective and, as the name suggests, his theory of communicative action revolves around discourse. Informed by pragmatics and hermeneutics which
“accord a higher position to acting and speaking than to knowing” (Habermas 1990, 9), Habermas develops an idea of society in which “Individuals acquire and sustain their identity by appropriating traditions, belonging to social groups, and taking part in socialising interactions” (1990, 102). While at first there is little reason to quarrel with Habermas’s idea of how the subject is constructed in association with these symbolic structures of the ‘lifeworld’ – they otherwise fit well with a Foucauldian or general semiotic perspective on society – it is the way that Habermas views these structures (cultural tradition, social integration and socialisation) as functions of language that is problematic. While language may be the prime means by which we communicate, social reality must be more than just various overlapping language acts.

Bourdieu, commenting on Charles Bally’s observations, remarks on “the tendency to intellectualism implied in observing language from the standpoint of the listening subject rather than that of the speaking subject” that condemns researchers “to see all practice as a spectacle” contained in the language itself (1977, 1). The rituals, practices, ceremonies, past-times and rule-guided recreational behaviour of daily life have nonverbal components that are frequently overlooked (or worse, tacitly acknowledged and then ignored in favour of a linguistic analysis of utterances). It is confusing that Habermas totalises the importance of language when he also acknowledges Rorty’s observation that “Saying things is not always saying how things are” (Rorty 1979, 371). Yet it is this acknowledgement – that fully
consumated language use makes social reality malleable – that reinforces Habermas’s psychological and hermeneutic view that it is in the human development of language that all social reality has its origins.

In studying the role of language in human society, many theorists turn to the development of language in children as a comparison. Habermas incorporates Selman and Kohlberg’s perspectives in order to speak of the development of language in children and thus theorise how as adults, we negotiate the world linguistically. This methodological shift is also used to imply that, in looking at the child as the unrefined and earlier version of the adult, we may draw comparisons about how society has developed from equally simple, less sophisticated origins. Habermas covers some interesting terrain by pursuing this method even if it is difficult to completely agree with his conclusions. It is somewhat misguided to conceive of the child as a kind of prehistoric ancestor to the adult, as if with the passage of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, the child will mature without deviation into the adult that such an analysis predicts.

Applying this model to the level of society assumes that the present day is somehow prefigured, destined to rise inevitably out of its earlier, more base forms, no matter what historico-cultural factors might otherwise play a part in that development. To argue so means that one must also imagine a future society that is guaranteed to develop, if only present day social subjects strive in the proper way. In the form of such logic, if social evolution is a series of predictable links on a chain, then our present day society must
have occupied the same position for earlier civilisations in its turn as the future civilisation holds for us now. If this is the case, to look at the real world around us, we are either now dwelling in a perfect society (in which case our social critiques, despite appearances, lack a purpose) or else, if the predictability of its development but not the perfection of it remains true, all human cultures are condemned from their earliest moment to be dystopias where the myth of progress is a cruel hoax.

It is Habermas's faith in language as a model for personal and thus social development that skews his observations in this case. He presumes that the predictability of language development in children indicates a similar predictability in the development and advancement of society, yet there is little evidence to support such conjecture. However, if we can remove Habermas's presumptions about linear evolution and get outside the linguistic model to speak about the structures that form the subjects that, in a circular fashion, form the basis for a social network, it should be possible to draw conclusions about society by looking at the sorts of subjects it produces. It is not an unreasonable conclusion to draw since it is this process that justifies the present attempt to uncover what presuppositions the writers of the linguistic turn hold about subjectivity. Furthermore, by identifying their fealty to language and isolating the observations about subjectivity and society that such an approach obliges the writers to make, we are thereby able to directly identify the specific ways in which adherence to verbocentric views limits the writers' ability to deal adequately with the thorny issue of conflict. If the study
of conflict hinges upon a full understanding of the subject, it stands to reason that whatever element is missing from the verbocentric account of subjectivity is the same factor that has so far gone unaccounted for in the study of conflict.

This suspicion that a linguistic account fails to incorporate all the details of subjectivity we require rears its head again when we consider Habermas’s strict categorisation of communicative modes, stemming from his analysis of the development of language in children. Habermas concludes that when the child masters the “relationship between speaker and hearer” he or she “is able to distinguish saying from doing. At that point the child differentiates between acts of seeking understanding with a hearer – that is, speech acts and their equivalent – and acts that have an impact on physical or social objects” (Habermas 1990, 144). At this stage Habermas ceases to consider the second category of acts. While it is true that in Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action he is concerned with a theory of argumentation and that, intuitively at least, it seems reasonable to exclude what Halliday calls the pragmatic function, by doing so Habermas excludes an area of communication with two important consequences. First, “acts that have an impact on physical and social objects” lend themselves most readily to slippage into forms of communication that problematise a strictly language-oriented explanation. Second, this category of acts contains diverse phenomena in both linguistic and non-linguistic domains, many of which easily problematise the comparatively simpler examination of language acts.
carried out between consensual speakers and hearers. Even though a theory of argumentation obviously centres on human interaction, Habermas reveals more of his tendency to exclude factors that complicate his central linguistic focus.

Habermas then breaks language use down even further, arguing that in consensual discussions people relate to the world on three levels, focusing upon the representation of states of affairs, the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, and the manifestation of lived experiences. To put it another way, Habermasian subjects use interactive language situations to describe how things are in the world, to maintain the bonds of friendship and familiarity with other subjects, and to communicate the subjective experiences of their own lives. Thus informed, in this equation individual speakers have “the choice between a cognitive, an interactive, and an expressive mode of language use. To these modes correspond three different classes of speech acts – the constative, the regulative, and the representative – which permit the speaker to concentrate, in terms of universal validity claims, on issues of truth, justice, or taste (i.e., personal expression)” (Habermas 1990, 137).

From this rationale emerge three basic attitudes, “each entailing a different perspective on the world” (Habermas 1990, 137).

In argumentation aimed at reaching consensus, these three levels may be considered separately and each tested for validity claims along the lines of the truthfulness of states of affairs, the justness of interpersonal relationships and the taste or personal expression of personal experiences. While these
three criteria appear to be unusual results to arrive at when viewing the
categories that Habermas describes, the very notion of validity claims is
informed by a particular point of view in which things in the world either are or
are not the case. That things may be true or false and not subjective, and the
assertion that where such conditions apply they do so universally, is the
legacy of particularly language-entrenched schools of thought from the past.
While Habermas softens the focus on truth-claims, making truth only one of
the three criteria that can be judged, he reinforces the emphasis in favour of
language-oriented theory.

Foucault’s linguistic presumptions are at one and the same time tacit
and diffuse within his writings. At least in Foucault’s earlier, more finitely
methodological works, everything is about the text. “Knowledge,” Foucault
writes, “is to be found not only in demonstrations” but also in “fiction, reflexion,
narrative accounts, institutional regulations, and political decisions” (1972,
183-4). In the analysis of discourse “One shows how the different texts with
which one is dealing refer to one another, organise themselves into a single
figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may
be common to a whole period” (Foucault 1972, 188). The analysis of
statements and discursive formations “determines the principle according to
which only the ‘signifying’ groups that were enunciated could appear”
(Foucault 1972, 118). Therefore in studying the archive, discourse analysis:

substitutes for the diversity of the things said a sort of great, uniform
text, which has never before been articulated, and which reveals for
the first time what men ‘really meant’ not only in their words and texts,
their discourses and their writings, but also in the institutions, practices,
techniques, and objects that they produced. (Foucault 1972, 118)

What emerges from these beginnings is how textual sources cast light upon the backdrop of social relations that in turn produce the archive of social texts.

At first sight Foucault appears to have texts stand in the place of the subject in terms of the production of social reality. Yet the interchangeability of texts and subjects in Foucault’s schema is not actually a different approach. Instead, Foucault makes explicit how in language-oriented theories, the linguistic subject is a literary subject – an object to be read, interpreted, translated; their meanings to be made clear in terms of the words that construct them. Consequently, society is therefore an archive for Foucault: a body of written and spoken source materials that includes human subjects and the marks they leave behind as signifiers and sources of information for an historical period. However, while Foucault begins with a study of the archive, he then immediately opens up his analysis to ‘discursive practices’ – the behaviours and social conventions that are informed by discourses and which in turn form and perpetuate them. In so doing, he begins to stray from the conventional structuralist account of language.

Even though he does not make the theoretical break that his own conclusions seem to demand, Foucault’s writing reveals a fundamental dissatisfaction with contemporary linguistic explanations of subjectivity. The inadequacy of a purely linguistic description is revealed in the rules that Foucault uncovers for discourse. His revolutionary observations describe
society as founded in discursive relations whose only rules are a wide range of possibilities for action rather than select or pre-defined modes of activity. If discursive relations enjoy rules or a structure of behaviour that is permanent, it is only found in this constant availability of various modes of dispersion and deployment. Thus in studying specific utterances as components or representatives of a particular discourse, “In order to account for the choices that were made out of all those that could have been made (and those alone), one must describe the specific authorities that guided one’s choice,” which Foucault grandiloquently describes as “the economy of the discursive constellation” (1972, 66). Therefore, “if there really is a unity, it does not lie in the visible, horizontal coherence of the elements formed; it resides, well anterior to their formation, in the system that makes possible and governs that formation” (Foucault 1972, 72).

Foucault looks for the motivating source that ratifies and sustains or suppresses and excludes discourses. The moment that he asks these questions his study turns towards questions of social power that bring his theories forward a great deal in their utility to the study of society and politics, and particularly to the study of conflict. Because of the shift of emphasis away from linguistic definitions of discourse to one concentrating on power relations, Foucault consequently reaches a position in the Archaeology where he acknowledges that his description of discourse is “itself still inadequate” (1972, 43). This inadequacy stems from the fact that his analysis has not been reduced to the most basic level possible, since, at least in a
conventional description, what must then be described are the social factors that editorialise discourses. Foucault writes: “Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed” (1972, 54-5). In other words, the individual subject is not the originary force behind discourse, but is instead suspended in a network of discursive nodes that permit diverse and even contradictory connections. Foucault is thus forced to explain the social currency of discourses in a way in which subjects can reckon it, and to do this, his enquiries lead inevitably towards an examination of social power and away from a purely linguistic account.

In writing on Foucault, Habermas describes power as “as the interaction of warring parties, as the decentred network of bodily, face-to-face confrontations, and ultimately as the productive presentation and subjectivising subjugation of a bodily opponent” (1987, 255). Habermas is also correct that Foucault discusses power as “that by which the subject has an effect on objects in successful actions” (1987, 274). It is in these terms that Foucault’s perspective proves so enlightening and where the oft-neglected consideration of power as manifest in concrete physical practices (such as in torture and imprisonment, which themselves can be understood as nonverbal discourses) is explored. However in the most immediate sense, Foucault’s archaeology – and the genealogical method which supersedes it – uncovers
neither origins nor oppositions, but instead focuses on the constant shifting, kaleidoscopic structures which form and dissolve in the interests of power. It is Foucault’s famous observation that “Power comes from below,” and yet this attribution is too often truncated. More importantly, Foucault observes that “there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled at the root of power relations” as commonplace interpretation so often has it. Instead, “One must suppose rather that the manifold relations of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole” (Foucault 1976, 93-4).

Foucault’s definition of power springs from certain realisations about the limitedness of a completely linguistic explanation of how society functions

16 Ironically, many of the difficulties encountered by the British in their management of the Northern Ireland problem during the 1960s, 70s and 80s can be seen to flow from the residual effects of a colonial, Imperial mindset. Despite attempts to employ the apparatuses typical to Foucault’s description of the post-sovereign nation state (such as the emphasis on surveillance, discipline and the machinery of subjectivation), especially in the context of the prison conflict, these efforts have been undermined by the periodic resurgence of a particularly Unionist perspective which harkens back to an ideology of ‘Britain and Empire’ in which Protestants are seen as the ruling elite and Catholics their subservient subjects. (In the Maze, this undermining manifests in the behaviour of loyalist wardens who re-impose antagonism between ‘traditional’ Protestant/Catholic identities despite the presence of the normalising, identity-effacing machinery of the ultra-modern gaol.)

It is really only after the Good Friday Agreement of 1995 and the succession of the Blair government that the British and the republicans have erased the historical links to the past where an autocratic ‘sovereign-and-subject’ model predominated, thereby falling into line with Foucault’s observation of the modern functioning of power. In exchange for indulging the British in their attempts to distance the ‘new’ Britain from the ‘old’ Britain (and its proven record of atrocities and bad civil management in Ireland), the historical baggage of Sinn Féin as a democratic party born of the ‘Armalite and ballot box’ strategy has also been left behind. Recent Protestant/Unionist unease stems mostly from the exclusion that they have experienced within this revisionary project. Since the Unionist identity is predicated upon the ‘Britain and Empire’ link that has been abandoned by ‘Blair’s Britain,’ the only path offered to Unionists towards a new beginning requires their abandonment of the trappings of Unionism and thus their own self-identity.
(a limitedness that he unfortunately does not openly extend to the study of subjectivity). Foucault discovers that discourses do not function exactly like signification in the Saussurean scheme because the relation between discourse and meaning is not the same as the signifier’s relation to the signified. Instead, discourses represent “various strategic possibilities that permit the activation of incompatible themes, or, again, the establishment of the same theme in different groups of statements” (Foucault 1972, 37). For Foucault, discourse is a cryptic, almost hidden trace. Discourse analysis reveals this peculiarity, what was ‘really meant,’ “because each discourse contains the power to say something other than what it actually says, and thus to embrace a plurality of meanings: a plethora of the 'signified' in relation to a single ‘signifier’” (1972, 118). His dissatisfaction with the ordinary Saussurean account of signification is clear, since Foucault’s description of discourse’s many meaning goes beyond mere multi-accentuality and into a view of signification that is really only properly addressed by the notion of intersemiosis, as outlined by Ruthrof within the framework of corporeal pragmatics. But like intersemiosis, the idea that the overall meaning of an object is often construed via a cross-referencing among different levels of meaning, Foucault’s belief that discourse is a ‘plethora’ of significations stemming from a single source does not comfortably sit within a theoretical schema that acknowledges language as the one and only medium of meaning.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Foucault’s conception of power is
quite different and incompatible with Lyotard’s work on the différend. Foucault’s theories sit uncomfortably within the conventional account of language, whereas Lyotard’s entire work is actively predicated upon the structuralist approach. With their competing descriptions of power, Foucault raises the spectre of the medieval and pre-Modern sovereign only to dispel this figure and the type of power relations it represents. Lyotard’s formulations, however, are inextricably caught up in this opposition between ruler and ruled, oppressor and victim. Yet despite these oppositions, Lyotard’s différend remains useful even with the resoundingly linguistic focus that it implies. In a fashion, it is exactly because of Lyotard’s entrapment within a verbocentric rationale as well as the fact that he, beyond the others mentioned, addresses the notion of conflict so directly that his work proves so useful.

Unfortunately, Lyotard’s is a case study in how not to go about the analysis of conflict. It excludes any possibility for an objective middle ground and offers no emancipatory level at which the interlaced strands of discursive conflict can be untangled. The problems with Lyotard’s grounding in the Saussurean tradition sabotage the efficacy of his theoretical notion of the différend, and conversely the way in which the différend stymies any path towards an understanding of conflict that is not completely antagonistic relates back to the linguistic orientation of the work. While it is appreciated that the shifting value of verbal signifiers means that there is rarely any such thing as an unbiased or unmotivated statement, this holds true only while the
subjects understand conflict as linguistic. Without retreating to an essentialist fantasy, it is still possible to say that there are forums in which conflict occurs that are decidedly more concrete than the linguistic plane.

In writing on the différend, Lyotard is concerned with an emphatically linguistic dissection of social relations. At the same time, this dissection is an explicitly political exercise. Lyotard tries to show how ‘reality’ (or social reality, at least) is entirely built upon our linguistic reckoning of the world. It is thus language that is employed persuasively, misleadingly, arbitrarily or dominantly to conquer unruly subjects and anaesthetise them to their victimhood. The différend, which describes a state of antagonism between an aggressor and a victim, captures the sense of disempowerment experienced by silenced or oppressed speakers when confronted by a superior governing authority that regulates what can or cannot be said or, worse yet, what can or cannot be considered true. Unfortunately Lyotard describes such a closed system that there is no resolution once parties are caught in a différend. “The civil war of ‘language’ with itself is what is always at play in one as in the other. The only difference lies in the manner of instituting the litigations to regulate the différends” (Lyotard 1988, 141).

The manner of regulating différends is what Lyotard considers to be the cornerstone of a true theory of justice. As he confirms, “By declaring such and such a phrase permitted, such and such a phrase prohibited, and such and such a phrase obligatory, authority subjects them, whatever their heterogeneity might be, to a single set of stakes, justice” (Lyotard 1988, 143).
Lyotard’s intention is to assert that the discourse genre of justice is a mediating genre, accessible to others, that erases the power imbalance between speaker and hearer. Yet even the notion of justice is open to interpretation. As has been discussed earlier, a shift in the terms of the différend does not make for any greater degree of fairness. Authority, whoever owns it, always implies a bias or self-interest. Agonistic relations which take place entirely within language and which adhere completely to a theory of signification that does not account for pluralities offers very little recourse for arbitration.

Lyotard offers us nothing less than a description of the world in which different self-interested factions vie for supremacy within the arena of reference. To control how things are named and described is to control how things are. To Lyotard, the world is “a system of cross-references” (1988, 33). Reality can only be described “through recourse to chronological, topographical, toponymic, and anthroponymic systems” that provide “the means to verify the reality of the referent” (Lyotard 1988, 33). According to Lyotard, once something is named and defined, the referent becomes a given. Naming is thus a political strategy that transforms and controls social reality through definition. Lyotard implies that such nominative networks produce stronger referents. Therefore, naming everything (deictics) produces a stronger, less debatable reality than the ‘weak’ referents/reality produced only by ‘sense’ relations. In this line of reasoning, Lyotard takes verbocentrism to the extreme. As Ruthrof states, “such a linguistically
constituted reality would be extremely flimsy” (1992, 121).

Ruthrof argues that Lyotard’s argument needs to go from the purely linguistic and into the semiotic. While language occupies perhaps the most dominant position, all other forms of expression must be factored into the revised semiotic phrase universe. Lyotard even raises the spectre of ‘extra-linguistic permanence’ – a sort of meaning external to the linguistic process – yet he does nothing to address it. Lyotard is seemingly deaf to the various nonverbal systems of meaning that he excludes. As far as acknowledging semiotics and the nonverbal, “‘A wink, a shrugging of the shoulder,’ he says, ‘can be phrases.’ This amounts to the collapse at one stroke of the semiotics of gesture, proximic, kinetic, tactile, olfactory, visual and aural sign systems onto the plane of language. We are dealing here with a form of linguistic imperialism” (Ruthrof 1997, 186). Ruthrof quite rightly argues:

what would a non-linguistic sentence look like? What sort of grammar would have to be envisaged to make it function in a network of non-linguistic sentences? And if these quasi-sentences are something quite distinct from the verbal, is it not misleading to continue the linguistic metaphor? (1997, 187)

Thus when we consider something like the conflict between two communities over the telling of history, all manner of aspects of social reality that do not manifest in language are ignored in favour of examining the struggle in terms of litigation over names, places and dates and their subsequent referents. The community that controls access to, use and meanings of the referents enjoys social dominance.

This struggle over definitions is the basis for a very shallow political
critique. What is worse is that it offers no path towards any sort of resolution. According to such a view, agonistics continue *ad infinitum* without closure. The only sort of peace that is afforded by this view is when the normative phrasing of the state controls and obliges disempowered citizens to the degree that they are not only divested of the means to formulate oppositional statements but become absorbed within a false homogeneity. Thus Lyotard cites the idea of civic or nationalist discourse in which there is always a divide between who can be identified as ‘we’ in either addressor or addressee states. An inequality exists between he or she who speaks the obligation (thereby producing ‘citizenship’) and he or she who is thus obligated. Obligation conceals the “dissymmetry of the obligation” (Lyotard 1988, 143). As a result of Lyotard’s focus, the only observation we are left with of any real use is how myth functions as “the mimetic instrument par excellence,” possessing an “identificatory force” for communities threatened with dislocation or decoherence (Lacove-Labanthe qtd. in Lyotard 1988, 152).

Jacques Derrida’s writings offer further examples of how linguistic-oriented theories become entangled in their own presuppositions so as to be ultimately powerless to tackle questions of conflict. Ironically, these problems hold true for Derrida for the complete opposite reasons than for Lyotard in that, rather than adhering tightly to the closed relationship between signifier and signified, Derrida makes the impossibility of closure or a fixed end to the loop of signification his central tenet. Derrida’s work on différance (a French neologism meaning both to ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’) aims to show how the
Saussurean notion of the chain of signification results in it being impossible to ever arrive at a position of *logos* or transcendental meaning. Universal truth or concrete meaning is not possible. Différance “puts off until ‘later’ what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible” (Derrida 1973, 129). Derrida writes, “When we cannot take hold of or show the thing . . . we go through the detour of signs” (1973, 138). Thus “Whether it is a question of verbal or written signs . . . the movement of signs defers the moment of encountering the thing itself, the moment at which we could lay hold of it, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, have a present intuition of it” (Derrida 1973, 138).

Therefore, like Heidegger, Derrida sees signs not just as stand-ins for things and ideas in the world, but also as links in an ongoing chain. Différance entails Peirce’s idea of the ‘interpretant’ – the ‘mental effort’ or interstitial sign used to decipher a previous sign (Silverman 1983, 15) – taken to the extreme. “We ordinarily say that a sign is put in place of the thing itself, the present thing – ‘thing’ holding here for the sense as well as the referent” (Derrida 1973, 138). Yet Derrida argues, “Différance can no longer be understood according to the concept of ‘sign,’ which has always been taken to mean the representation of a presence and has been constituted in a system (of thought or language)” (1973, 138). Derrida nonetheless continues to talk of signs, but contrary to Lyotard who is locked into the agonistic relation between differing signifieds based on the same signifier, Derrida’s différance means that the sign “can refer to the whole complex of its
meanings at once, for it is immediately and irreducibly multivalent" (1973, 137). If we accept that the sign refers to meanings which are in conflict but that, in an invisible struggle for dominance, only a single meaning is able to surface and appear (submerging others), we are forced to examine the structures of the system that allow for such constraint to occur. The single greatest difficulty that is encountered with reading Derrida is that his references are almost exclusively to the system of language as a stand-in for the subject's experience of social processes as if the two are synonymous, a verbocentric move common to most of the writers of the linguistic turn.

The continual limitation of analysis to the field of language is obviously part of the problem with applying Derridean principles to the analysis of conflict. Forced to remain within the boundaries of what has been said before about language and meaning, neither Derrida nor Lyotard are able to offer any sort of way out of the closed circuit of language. Derrida observes:

Since language . . . has not fallen from the sky, it is clear that the differences have been produced; they are the effects produced, but effects that do not have as their cause a subject or substance, a thing in general, or a being that is somewhere present and itself escapes the play of difference. (1973, 141)

This line of reasoning leads Derrida to talk about ‘effects’ while denying there is an origin or ‘cause.’ Thus, a fancy piece of footwork: “I have tried to indicate a way out of the closure imposed by this system, namely, by means of the ‘trace’” (Derrida 1973, 141). The trace is that which connects past, present and future signs to each other. It is the mark of their sense and their connection. Yet to follow Derrida’s reasoning, the trace cannot offer any
sense of origin or ultimate definition for a sign because différance is the measure (of space, of time, of difference) between describable things, rather than a measure of the things themselves. Thus the trace shows a way out of measuring things in terms of signs but does not actually indicate any way out of the discussion of signification that goes beyond the realm of language.

There is a good reason for this lack of exteriority, which is that the moment one aspect of the structuralist description of semiosis is disobeyed, the entire schema collapses. As a post-structuralist, Derrida is seen as playing with the structuralist view of language, but while he turns certain ideas upon their heads he never actually steps beyond the framing logos that sees all meaning as ultimately reducible to the level of language. Only a perspective that views verbal signs as the surface effect of deeper meaning-making structures can escape from the closed system of language and the eternal process of sign referring to sign ad absurdum. Yet Derrida does not question Saussure when he writes, “Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system” (Saussure, qtd. in Derrida 1973, 140).

In holding such beliefs, Derrida is therefore forced to argue that there is no meaning outside language. Thus, “Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences” (Derrida 1973, 140). These observations are deeply flawed. Taken together, Lyotard and
Derrida allow powerful insights as much for what they fail to address as for what they do say. “The double perspective of différance as the deep principle of differentiation among signs and agonistics as the fundamentally conflictual character of signs in discourse genres provides a frame for the exploration of specific instances of the heterogeneity of signs” (Ruthrof 2000, 73). It is in the heterogeneity of signs that the first steps towards the development of a critical theory of conflict are taken. Conflicts between signs that cannot be adequately theorised within the structuralist framework call into question the efficacy of the conventional account. As a consequence, the verbocentric presumptions of structuralist theorists about the role and characteristics of social subjects also demand interrogation.

Therefore, what can be traced between the majority of these theorists and their writing is a singular dependence upon one particular view of language. While there are varying degrees to which each writer focuses this dependence, on the whole it seems that language and the primacy of the relation between signifier and signified posited by Saussure remain entrenched even in instances where it seems that we can tease, out of the text, the author’s desire to do more. The notion of the linguistic turn captures how modern thought has been deformed by the assumptions at the base of the Saussurean philosophy of language. Yet Saussure is not the villain of this piece. Saussure’s contribution to philosophy and the fact that semiotics would have been impossible without his work is undeniable. It is Saussure who establishes very clearly that his theories are only suitable for an account of
language and that this is not the be-all and end-all to an analysis of meaning. It is, rather, the eagerness of critics to apply Saussure’s semiotics beyond the scope of that for which it was originally intended that have led to widespread problems.

These difficulties occupy two main vectors: first, that it is misguided to use a theory of language to analyse phenomena that are not purely (or actually) linguistic (in the analysis of film or music, for instance); and second, that while language is the dominant mode of communication among social subjects, the analysis of society along semiotic lines does not conform with the conditions Saussure lays down for it. Saussure makes it very clear that in the study of signs, the further one wanders from examples that are strictly linguistic in nature, the less readily do the formulations of semiotics hold unproblematically true. It is in the wake of the linguistic turn that the line between language as the means by which many of our social meanings are construed, and language as, therefore, the predominating factor in our makeup as social beings, has become blurred. Taken to its extreme, the assumptions predicated by such beliefs suggest “that there is no such thing as an extra-linguistic or prediscursive reality and everything we can think and imagine is already language” (Ruthrof 2000, 109).

Despite the pervasiveness of how views on language have come to dominate contemporary modes of semiotic enquiry, it is a relatively simple task to show how theories that view everything as linguistic fall short when applied to explicitly non-linguistic cases. Equally immediate are the
shortcomings of any theory designed to deal solely with instances of language, since in the study of certain contexts, the linguistic elements of social phenomena are oftentimes only a minor part. In striving to apply the work of verbocentric theorists to the matter of conflict, their formulations have to be teased out in order to discern the theory of society upon which their work is predicated. Yet social theories that abound with a constant return to the level of utterances are at their most fragile when applied to circumstances not immediately relevant to the study of language. In order to do so regardless, such writers must contort their perspective so as to reinstate the importance of language-like models to phenomena that really must be acknowledged as entirely non-linguistic. In such a situation, two realities are exposed as false: first, the appropriateness of speaking about the grammar or semantics of practices whose verbality is only metaphoric; and second, that in the semiotic theory as it stands, it can be successfully applied to any social situation.

It is a testimony to the fertile ground of the context that, in existing studies of Northern Ireland and the prison situation specifically, so much insightful data has been produced with such limited tools. Although at its most basic level of articulation Saussurean semiotics deals adequately (but not completely) with incidences of speech in social contexts, the case study of the micro-society within Northern Ireland’s Maze prison quickly dispels any sort of confidence in a present day semiotic analysis. It is the case that too much of what the analyst must confront obeys language-like rules only when those
rules are forcibly imposed, or else when the specifically metaphoric character of semiotic comparisons to language in nonverbal phenomena is forgotten. In looking at the H-Blocks of the Maze prison at Long Kesh, particularly focusing on the struggles between republican prisoners and the prison authorities during the 1970s and 80s, time and again we are confronted with events that do not readily submit to a linguistic study. To explore how present analysis falls short of a full explication of the prison conflict is to indicate a need for the revision of the foundations upon which social semiotics is based.

At the most basic level, the experience of confinement itself is an experience of the body in which words are relegated to the level of history and biography. Words themselves are meaningless in the prisoner's transfixion by the punitive technology of the prison. In the words of dead PIRA hunger striker Bobby Sands: “The depression, the beatings, the cold – what is there? I said to myself. Look out the window and concentration camp screams at you” (Sands 1998, 37). The direct correlation between Sands’s communication of his experience and the appeal to the senses that his words convey clearly illustrate the primacy of the body’s experience in the H-Blocks – a primacy that does not demote words to the level of mere description but actually highlights the fact that words have only ever served this function. To

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17 The situation was much the same at Armagh Women’s Prison, with female paramilitary prisoners imprisoned and receiving similar treatment as the male prisoners in the H-Blocks. Via ‘comms’ (notes smuggled out on rolled up cigarette papers often secreted inside the courier’s body) the male and female prison leaderships maintained contact so that in each stage of the prison conflict they acted in unison. Accounts of the Dirty Protest and the Hunger Strikes frequently overlook the actions of Mairead Farrell and others, who engaged on the same level and at the same intensity as their male counterparts. However, because this is an account of specifically the conflict that occurred within the Maze, the use hereafter of male pronouns is appropriate.
ascribe to them greater degrees of meaning, social power and originary force than this is to commit to a verbocentric fallacy. Bodily experience and the primacy of the senses are the recurring elements that undermine pre-existing analyses of the prison conflict, the majority of which – if they do not simply write a biography or a history – revert constantly to the sort of linguistic analysis whose ability to explore the full sweep of the prison struggle is illusory.

In the greater social context of Northern Ireland, conflict stems from the intersection of the republican cause to rid Ireland of invaders and establish a unified thirty-two county state, and the British response, purportedly in the name of law and order, to these guerilla insurgents.\(^{18}\) The specific origins of the prison struggle can be found in the abolition of ‘special category’ status by the British at the recommendation of the Gardiner Report of 1975. By the time of the report, “there were 1,119 prisoners with ‘political status’ incarcerated in Northern Ireland” (Feldman 1991, 151). What the Gardiner Report recognised was what the ruling British authorities of Northern Ireland had begun to suspect for some time: that even when their members were imprisoned, paramilitary groupings on both sides of the conflict drew legitimacy from prisoner-of-war status. The continued treatment of the prisoners in this manner amounted to an acknowledgment by the British that it really was a war that was being fought in Northern Ireland – the denial of which lay at the heart of their foreign policy since the first shots were fired in the conflict. It

\(^{18}\) That each of these elements has their own origins, causes, ideologies and internal conflicts doesn’t bear exploration in the present study, which focuses exclusively on the stages of conflict within the H-Blocks.
was believed that paramilitary groups thrived in this atmosphere of apparent
sanction, paradoxically recognised by the government that many of them
opposed. Almost worse was the fact that the atrocities committed by pro-state
loyalist gangs appeared to be condoned by the extension of honourable
prisoner status to them as well, which thus reflected back upon the British and
Northern Irish authorities.

The government’s response to the enculturation of the paramilitaries
manifested in the recommendations of the Gardiner Report, which apart from
the abolition of special category status included the building of the Maze
prison, known in paramilitary parlance as the H-Blocks (Coogan 2002, 72).
The Maze was central to the plan to end special category status and to
reorganise paramilitary imprisonment along lines to once and for all end the
summer camp atmosphere created by pre-fabricated Nissen huts and
prisoners spending the day smoking and playing football (Dillon 1992, 61).
The popular image of the Second World War’s German POW stalags (the
idea of which undoubtedly masked a terrible reality) and the nationalist and
heroic parallels that this connection implied had to be reworked. The general
belief was that “the Provisional IRA thrived on the propaganda derived from
an internationally held view – that political prisoners represented an
indictment of British policy in Ireland” (Dillon 1992, 61). From the huts of Long
Kesh the inmates could see the H-Blocks being built but were unconcerned.
As Feldman notes, “For most paramilitaries, the compounds and the H-Blocks
belonged to the same undifferentiated penal system. They were unprepared
both as individuals and as an organisation for the radical transformation of the prison situation and its new psychological, political impact on inmates” (Feldman 1991, 152).

Dillon describes the experience of visiting loyalist gunman Michael Stone, imprisoned in the Maze in Belfast. Dillon provides insight into a fascinating circus: a kaleidoscopic place where no sight of the actual prison is ever revealed and where visitors are driven between buildings in a blacked-out van rather than be allowed to walk (1992, 3). A similar narrative appears in Simon Adams’s Exit Wounds, describing his visits to long-term republican prisoners in the H-Blocks. As the informal name implies, the prison was arranged as a series of H-formations, with the area for the warders and examinations in the centre and individual cells along each side. Prisoners were transferred gradually to the cells, going from a camp in which up to forty men shared a hut, to an isolated space, each man individuated and alone. It was only later, and partly in response to the government’s harsh security policies, that it was discovered that they had not built enough cells. Throughout the late 70s and the 1980s republican prisoners were imprisoned in pairs. It is easy enough to theorise that the fellowship of even solitary pairs of prisoners forged links of solidarity that undermined the effectiveness of the punitive technology of the gaol and enabled the impetus to build for the prisoners’ future counter-deployment of their own bodies against the prison apparatus.

The shared experience of arrest and imprisonment engendered a
certain solidarity among inmates, even between prisoners from opposing sides. It was “an ironic paradox,” O’Malley writes, since:

the more successful they [the security forces] were in apprehending and prosecuting suspected members of the IRA, the more the prison population swelled. And the more the prison population swelled, the more pervasive was the impact of the prison culture, its ethos of solidarity and camaraderie, of isolation and deprivation breeding a separate community. (1990, 106-7)

Furthermore, “The principle of having a growing population of prisoners with a political status conflicted with British plans to criminalise the paramilitaries and depict them as thugs” (Dillon 1992, 61). From 1975 onward, the security forces stepped up the action of the conveyor-belt system. In association with ‘police primacy,’ where the British army stepped back into a supporting role to allow the RUC to return to action as the main forces of law and order, the authorities “sought to depoliticise paramilitary activity and to foreground the police and the judiciary as the central intervention forces against paramilitary violence” (Feldman 1991, 115). Then, rather than transferring prisoners to the legitimating machinery of the ‘cages,’ the cellular arrangement of the Maze and the treatment of prisoners as ODCs (‘ordinary decent criminals,’ as the denomination goes) reinforced the criminalising aspects of arrest, sentencing and internment.

Feldman observes that “Arrest functions as a passageway to violent death or as the corridor opens up paramilitary praxis to a self-reflexive framing of power, agency, and the body [sic]” (1991, 108). The experience of imprisonment is an initiatory rite for members of all paramilitary communities, helping to forge the subject’s self-identification as a fighter for a cause. If, as
O’Malley observes, the prison presents its subjects with new forms of culture, then part of this transferral involves the re-education of subjects into a new system of semiosis guided by the values and norms of the paramilitary community. If the symbolic function of arrest is as the first significatory rite through which subjects of ‘ordinary’ society are transferred to their new community, after 1975, the British method for controlling arrest and subsequent interrogation procedures can be interpreted as an attempt to hijack the paramilitaries’ indoctrinating power and subvert it to the purposes of the state. Only a small part of this process can be considered linguistic, and it is towards these linguistic elements that verbocentric analysis gravitates. Yet in order to uncover the broad spectrum across which conflict occurs we must look to all the sources involved.

The interrogation of the arrested subject yields the most obvious example of direct conflict. Interrogators and prisoner are metonymic stand-ins for the opposition between authorised and ‘illegitimate’ cultures. Yet despite the myriad elements that the practice of interrogation implies, to semioticians such as Feldman, interrogation is about the application of language and force in the production of ‘truth.’ “The interrogators construct a coincidence between pain and memory in order to make transgressive action and knowledge visible through language. Instrumental torture is a method for mimetically reproducing the imputed past in the present of the body.” Consequently, “The prisoner’s confession is the interrogators’ violence reaudited and redoubled as truth” (Feldman 1991, 136). In such an
interpretation, the meanings of the body are only unvoiced utterances and, if there is violence, the interrogators’ violence is a kind of writing. The comparisons are nonsensical. The desire to see language in the conflict forces the analysis to operate at a level of metaphor unfortunately abstracted from the phenomena it describes. Thus:

Violence encodes the body into a textual apparatus for the production of texts. Power is based on the proliferation of texts, textual doubles, textual substitutes, and transcriptions. There is no opposition between violence and discourse, language and silence. The silence of the prisoner, like his body, is a discourse, a code that overlays and stores the discourse of the confession. (Feldman 1991, 136)

Feldman’s analysis overlooks Foucault’s simple observation that “The ceremony of punishment, then, is an exercise of ‘terror’” (Foucault 1991, 49).

In the exercise of threat and response and the extraction of information, words are again only the currency by which nonverbal experiences can be measured. To describe interrogation as a textual exercise is to overlook the subject’s bodily experience. It is, after all, the vulnerability of the body, its pain receptors and the mind’s feelings that are threatened and which generate a response. Without the nonverbal level and the possibility of concrete consequences there would be no motivation to confess and interrogation would be unsuccessful. As Foucault notes, “The search for truth through judicial torture was certainly a way of obtaining evidence, the most serious of all – the confession of the guilty person; but it was also the battle, and this victory of one adversary over the other, that ‘produced’ truth according to a ritual.” The word game of interrogation was only one level. “In torture employed to extract a confession, there was an element of the
investigation; there was also an element of the duel” (Foucault 1991, 41). The eventual development of IRA anti-interrogation training reveals a tacit acknowledgement by the participants “that if IRA volunteers stayed silent and avoided creating any relationship with their interrogators, they would survive the experience” and would also avoid revealing information about IRA operations (Moloney 2002, 109). This counter-tactic recognises the link between violence and confession. While imprisoned, the inmate is helpless to avoid the violence. However, the failure of the violence to produce a speech act reflects back upon the interrogator, calling upon him to carry through on his threats or else pull back and desist.

With internment and imprisonment the subject is marked as a criminal. In the case of republican prisoners, they resisted this classification, but their struggle was not simply a différend where the ‘terrorist’ saw him or herself as a ‘freedom fighter’ but the government saw otherwise. As we shall see in the

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19 The testimony of men brought in for interrogation during the Internment policy of the early 70s and who were released without charge reveals that even innocent suspects were frequently threatened with their family member’s or their own murder or sexual assault, or having their names and addresses given to loyalist (or republican) paramilitary groups. Coogan (2002) refers to the findings of the Compton report in 1971 where the five principal allegations of hooding, white noise torture, enforced postures, and sleep and food and drink deprivation were upheld. Ironically, the 1972 Parker Report “concluded that the Five Techniques were justified given the special circumstances of Northern Ireland, but that they should be officially reintroduced and regulated by formal legislation” (Feldman 1991, 111).

Suspects known to be members of paramilitary groups have been threatened with gelding and also taken into Army helicopters blindfolded. Once on board, the helicopter has hovered within six feet of the ground so that the suspect could be threatened and finally thrown out of the vehicle. A Protestant UDA member’s testimony confirms the extremes used in the interrogation of suspected paramilitary prisoners:

I remember one story where a guy suspected of IRA terrorism jumped out of a window and killed himself. Now I hate the IRA. Some of the Republican politicians said the soldiers done it. I said, ‘A lot of piss, he was trying to escape, didn’t know he was so high up and killed himself.’ After I had been taken in for interrogation a couple of times I said to myself maybe he did get thrown out the fucking window. If a Catholic said to me such and such had happened to him while being interrogated I would honestly believe it. I would believe him before I’d believe the security forces if they were denying it. It’s as bad as that. (Feldman 1991, 134)
discussion of the Blanket protest (see Chapter Four), the prison uniform that
replaced the previous access to civilian clothing was one locus of conflict that
completely defies a linguistic explanation. The republicans refused to be
‘marked men,’ recognising that although there was nothing that they could do
to avoid being named criminals, they could at least resist the uniform that
would make them appear as such. In a similarly non-linguistic way, the
architecture of the H-Blocks (‘The Maze’ on both real and metaphoric levels)
defies an easy semiotic analysis. The H-Blocks beg the sort of description
that Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.*
Foucault identifies the ‘Panopticon’ as the metaphoric model of power-
knowledge that manifests in the state monopoly over the powers of
surveillance, and the totalisation of the gaze that this implies finds full
articulation in the development of the prison. Similarly, in the H-Blocks
everything is designed to frustrate the senses of the prisoner and deny him
full control over his body, and yet the same structures that facilitate the
subject’s observation also reinforce the prison authorities’ control over the
space that he occupies. A standard linguistic explanation is lost amid such
complex relations.

In this slippage between language as the main system of our
communication and language as the total system of codification, the social

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20 Foucault writes: “The scaffold, where the body of the tortured criminal had been exposed to
the ritually manifested force of the sovereign, the punitive theatre in which the representation
of punishment was permanently available to the social body, was replaced by a great
enclosed, complex and hierarchised structure that was integrated into the very body of the
state apparatus” (1991, 115-6).
subject becomes a linguistic subject who in turn becomes the subject of a general semiotic theory. In one sense, this transformation is greatly desired. When it takes onboard the sorts of views that Foucault and others have popularised about discursivity and the conflict of signs, semiotics becomes a powerful tool for analysis. However, in order to capitalise on the revolutionary potential that a fully consumate social semiotics offers, we must first do away with not just the verbocentric orientation that contemporary semiotics possesses and denies, but also the belief in what has thus far been called the linguistic subject – language as the total codifying system in which social subjects are produced. Thus we turn specifically to contemporary semiotics as the arena in which we hope that the linguistic subject will be surpassed by a more complete kind of subject, one representative of not just the social spectrum out of which his or her subjectivity arises, but also describable according to some means beyond the paucity of the standard language account. In so doing, the overall project moves one step closer to be able to define the ‘semio-discursive’ subject, the understanding of which needs to be developed before it is possible to do anything with the dilemma of social and interpersonal conflict.
3. The Semiotic Subject

The shortcomings of language theory in dealing adequately with social complexities, and the hitherto failure of conflict analysis, share the same frequent problem. In all cases, whether we are dealing with Rawls attempting to solve the problems of justice in society, Habermas in building a useful theory of argumentation by which disputes may be regulated, or Saussure and later semioticians for whom language plays the central role in understanding meaning, theories are regularly established only on the grounds of exclusion. In each instance an ontology is formulated by having factors that challenge, complicate or undermine the central model excluded. Rawls ignores everything that does not belong to total compliance theory. Therefore any sort of civil disobedience, not to mention outright criminality or violence, does not factor into his theories concerning justice and the ideal society. As much as he is critical of Rawls, Habermas only considers instances of argumentation, language use and dispute settling that could occur as a laboratory experiment. Ironically, Habermas falls victim to the very edification to which he is so opposed, because his excellent analysis does not carry over into real speech and conflict situations.

Similarly, the history of semiotics and linguistics is marred by instances where rules are established only upon the grounds that certain subjects (most notably instances of conflict) are quietly taken out of consideration. Searle gives a very clear example of how conflict is excluded from theoretical
formulations when, on speakers and reference, he writes, "I assume here and
throughout that input and output conditions are satisfied. The fact that a
speaker might be unable to satisfy a condition because, e.g., his jaw is
paralysed is irrelevant" (1970, 87). However, it is not simply being reductive to
say that in a verbal différend, one group’s disempowerment may be akin to
having a paralysed jaw (or even, that in the exercise of power, one group may
purposefully break another’s jaw in order to have total speaking privileges).
Idealised theories not only elide the difficulties which complicate or show
explanations to be flawed; very often the factors excluded by an idealised
theory are not mere ‘problems’ but very real political and ethical conundrums,
and individual theories, in failing to address such points, are exposed for
lacking social utility and general relevance, as well as being analytically
narrow in scope and perspective.

In writing about Chomsky’s work, Halliday articulates a concern that is
also a critical point for the critique of contemporary semiotics. He writes:

The great thing Chomsky achieved was that he was the first to show
that natural language could be brought within the scope of
formalisation; that you could in fact study natural language as a formal
system. The cost of this was a very high degree of idealisation;
obviously, he had to leave out of consideration a great many of those
variations and those distinctions that precisely interest those of us who
are concerned with the sociological study of language. (1978, 37-8)

Yet Halliday and his colleagues “cannot operate with this degree and this kind
of idealisation. We accept a much lower level of formalisation; instead of
rejecting what is messy, we accept the mess and build it into the theory”
(1978, 38). The embracement of this ‘mess’ and the rich complexity of social
factors is therefore a crucial element in any specialised theory. There is little point in doing what others have done: to critique present theories for offering only piecemeal solutions to age old problems and then obscure behind edificatory walls how the new commentary possesses some of the same flaws redesigned.

Despite the relatively broad wash of theories that have been considered thus far, it is primarily with semiotics and the structuralist philosophy of language that the present study is concerned. This focus is largely due to the belief that despite considerable problems in the theoretical foundations of social semiotics, it is this discipline that offers the greatest potential for providing the sort of rigorous analysis that the examination of conflict requires. As has been previously introduced, much of present day semiotics is descended from the Saussurean view of language, because of which there is a strong argument that semiotics is consequently based upon a false premise. So powerful and so seemingly applicable are Saussure’s notions of the sign as part signifier, part signified, and of signification as a differential relations between signs (that we only understand signs by recourse to other signs) that contemporary semiotics attempts to maintain this observation at its theoretical core even when it cannot do so unproblematically.

As the name suggests, Saussure’s philosophy of language is explicitly concerned with the phenomena of speech and writing. The verbal sign (or the written sign as a mark or indicator of the verbal sign) is Saussure’s focus
because he acknowledges that the further one drifts away from strictly
denotative signification, the more problematic the relationship between
signifier and signified and the words by which we make sense of their
meaning becomes. Because of his concern with this drift, and because he
does not offer any fixed rules for more open-ended signs, when Saussure
stresses that language – a semiological system – is the ideal and most
appropriate object of study for semiotics, he performs a familiar move by
excluding many areas of possible investigation because they problematise
the working theory he proposes. Saussurean semiotics is basically not
designed to deal with anything except words. Other areas of study such as
psychoanalysis and literary and cinematic criticism, etc., have therefore been
able to use Saussure’s work “only by ignoring his strictures about
unmotivated signs, and by giving an equal place to languages in which the
signifier and signified are more intimately affiliated” (Silverman 1983, 8). In
other words, the linguistic model is quite frequently applied to non-linguistic
schemata.

As a consequence, “The logocentricity of Saussure’s model” has
gradually become “a general feature of semiotics; it is the common
assumption of most semioticians that language constitutes the signifying
system par excellence, and that it is only by means of linguistic signs that
other signs become meaningful” (Silverman 1983, 5). Contemporary
semiotics now embraces a broad study of meaning, and many areas hitherto
unexamined by dominant methods of linguistic critique have become ongoing
concerns since, after all, they contain and convey meaning as well. By pursuing these subjects in a semiotic mode of enquiry, researchers in such areas chose to live with a contradiction that cannot be dispelled as long as the verbocentric nature of Saussure’s claims remain uncontested: semiotics excludes non-linguistic signs as considerations, and yet in order to use Saussure’s compelling theories, these additional disciplines have forced a kinship with language that even Saussure acknowledges is not there.

Saussure’s warnings about drift have been lost in the general rush to open new and fascinating fields to study. As a consequence, the main Saussurean approach, an explicitly linguistic one, is now frequently deployed in the analysis of images, symbols, public monuments and moving (and thus open-ended and narrativist) pictures. Such is the utility of semiotics that even abstractions such as music and bodily behaviour have come under its scope. To do so unproblematically, new studies overlook the linguistic emphasis of ‘original’ semiotics; and they do this by attempting to assert language models for significatory systems (visual, aural, et al) that are clearly not linguistic at all. As Bourdieu notes, “To treat a work of plastic art as a discourse intended to be interpreted, decoded, by reference to a transcendent code analogous to the Saussurean ‘langue’ is to forget that artistic production is always also . . . a mimesis, a sort of symbolic gymnastics” that defies restriction to an exclusively linguistic dimension (1977, 1-2).

In turn, these possibilities lead theorists to consider an entirely semiotic analysis of society, since social behaviour, norms and morals, institutional
and ideological controls all convey meaning and are therefore valid objects for a study of signs. To deal with the complexities of social systems, the microscopic scale of the sign has proven only partly adequate. Thus in social semiotics the focus has shifted to discourse, itself a vehicle for meaning that is both an accumulation and a deployment of signs. As Lemke explains, semiotics first encounters the notion of discourse in the writings of Bakhtin, whose view of discourse is dialogical in that it is a consideration of statements that are “always speaking against the background of what others have said or written in other times or places.” Bakhtin “describes the struggle to make a word or utterance one’s own, to place it in a new context as a new social event, so that its meanings are as much our own as another’s” (Lemke 1995, 23). Yet the view of discourse that predominates in semiotics represents a halfway measure between the ancestor-figure of Bakhtin and his notion of ‘heteroglossia’ (now more frequently referred to as ‘intertextuality’) and the full sweep of Foucault’s work on discursive formations.

Consequently, the semiotic take on discourse is caught between a loyalty to linguistic forms of meaning (discourse as utterances) and the majesty of Foucault’s position that views discourse as a grand social totality in which subjects are immersed and constantly remade anew. In a similar pattern, the notion of discourse with which contemporary semiotics works tends to orient itself to familiar patterns of speaking and writing while at the same time acknowledging but never being able to embrace the vast spectrum of other forms of signification that are not strictly linguistic. Thus, as one voice
of normative semiotics, Lemke defines discourse as “what we mean by saying and doing.” To Lemke, discourse “deploys the meaning-making resources of our communities: the grammar and lexicon of a language, the conventions of gesture and depiction, the symbolic and functional values of actions, the typical patterns of action that other members of our community will recognise and respond to” (1995, 19).

Discourse is usually perceived as speech or writing. In such an interpretation, by concentrating on discourse, semioticians are able to return to a linguistic focus in the study of meaning. However, the complex, variegated operations of discursivity challenge the ability of social semiotics to completely adhere to the linguistic assumptions upon which the theory is supposedly based. Foucault’s theory of discourse is so dense and tangled that even while a great deal of what he has to say on the subject has become fundamental to contemporary semiotics, the discipline as a whole stops short of embracing the entirety of Foucault’s views on the subject. Paradoxically, there is a movement within the discipline towards a greater confrontation between discursivity and society, which is the same relation that forms the cornerstone of Foucault’s writings. Much of his work ties discourse to a wider analysis of social context. However, Foucault’s theories do not sit as comfortably within the structuralist account of signification as they might, and because of these difficulties and the verbocentric position that contemporary semiotics tries to maintain, a tension remains between these two positions.
Yet as Lemke writes, “The social theory” of semiotics “must also be a critical theory; it must describe social processes in ways that show how power is exercised” (1995, 20). As the communicative vehicle for social power, discourse has become the main focus because it “functions ideologically in society to support and legitimate the exercise of power, and to naturalise unjust social relations, making them seem the inevitable consequence of common sense necessity” (Lemke 1995, 20). As a result of this new politicisation, contemporary semiotics recognises that “Every utterance, every text, represents a political act because it cannot ignore the polarisation of the community” (Lemke 1995, 38). Moreover, “The whole content of the communication (and not just the language used) is unconsciously modified by the structure of the relationship between the speakers,” in which we constantly find inscribed the role of power (Bourdieu 1977, 26). Thus if signs are the prime unit of meaning, discourses become super-signs which yield not only meanings but reveal ideologies, moral orientations, tacit social codes and political positions. However at the same time, the fundamentally verbocentric presumptions that remain within semiotics encourage its advocates to demand a more sleek, user-friendly and thus linguistic explanation of discourse – a narrower vision than Foucault’s – with the resulting idealisation and boundary drawing that have been identified as hampering other theories in their ability to adequately engage with their own subject matter.
As stated, semiotics is only designed to describe the meaning-making processes occurring within uses of language. Therefore contemporary semiotics is concerned with ‘meaning-making processes’ while relying entirely upon a linguistic explanation for a guide to how these processes take place. “It is much easier, however, to observe in a general way that language and social life are inextricably linked than it is to develop this observation in a rigorous and compelling way” (Thompson, qtd. in Bourdieu 1991, 1). When we use language there are meanings involved, but we must look at deeper structures in order to connect the specific meaning with the manner of its use. Given how broad the scope of semiotics is claimed to be, with the freedom to investigate semiosis as it occurs in visual appearances, spatio-temporal characteristics, gesture, montage and melange, phonic signification and sensual (aural, haptic, olfactory, gustatory, etc.) signs, it is stunning to see that time after time it is mostly linguistic examples of meaning that are offered. As well, a further consequence of verbocentrism is that a broad range of nonverbal signification is often collapsed into the field of utterances and discussed according to models of linguistic signification instead of according to a theory more appropriate for nonverbal signs.

The analysis of conflict needs to be supported by a theoretical apparatus that shows the promise of being up to the task. However, despite identifying contemporary semiotics as one of the analytic frameworks best suited to the study of social phenomena, the argument thus far has been that semiotics falls short. The main reason for this judgement is that contemporary
semiotics is based on an understanding of signification that is entirely too grounded in a linguistic appraisal of meaning. Compounding this problem is that semiotics attempts to incorporate almost everything that has been said about discourse, even when these alternate views disagree. The result is a middle ground in which the definition of discourse is somewhat abstruse, because it attempts to reconcile conflicting positions while at the same time being restricted so that it cannot fully embrace the rigorously analytic character of discourse as writers such as Foucault formulate it. Thus contemporary semiotics is itself conflicted, soldiering on despite inadequacies, attempting to ignore the self-avowed theoretical incompatibilities that cluster at its base. Only by reconstructing the initial principles of semiotics is it possible for it to become emancipated and thus able to fill the role required, which is that of a truly revolutionary analytic theory capable of taking on complicated issues such as conflict and its resolution. Without such an advance, semioticians must remain satisfied at working around the edges of such important dilemmas, or otherwise be sidetracked by edificatory exercises which seem to satisfy the requirements of an enlightened postmodern theory but in fact contribute little to the progress of human thought on issues central to the difficulties of social life and personal existence.

At the present instance, what is most important is that semiotic theory be revivified to the degree that it can take on board the analysis of conflict without ending up at the impasse of the différend. Lyotard’s exploration of the
différend is a significant achievement. It marks a watershed moment in the history of a particular system of thought – namely the contemporary concern with issues of culture and how power and ideas are circulated by speech acts and discourses. However, we cannot ultimately be satisfied with an analysis of conflict that leads us to the conclusion that agonistic relations dominate the whole of social reality and that whenever we have an interaction between members of different speech (or sign) communities, oppression and exclusion are the only result. If it were actually the case, such a conclusion would have to suffice and Lyotard’s différend would remain as an apt and accurate description of this state of affairs, whether it was liked or not. However, there is ample evidence to show that sometimes members of different communities interact without difficulties. Since Lyotard argues for agonistics as a universal condition, any instance of its absence refutes the original argument. Thus, rather than a theory that offers only a gloomy prognosis for the negotiation of conflict, we require one with a potential for resolution. Furthermore, the theory must also describe phenomena as they actually occur, accounting for the différends that sometimes arise and yet also outlining the conditions under which différends may be avoided despite the absence of a neutralising, mediating discourse. We require a theory that continues the ages long journey towards a fully realised understanding of culture and social interactions even if it is only to further that advance by a single step.

Nor is such a goal new. Similar desires inform the work of semiotician Michael Halliday, as evidenced by his *Language as Social Semiotic*.
Halliday’s position on language acquisition dovetails nicely with Ruthrof’s corporeal pragmatics, and the overall purpose of the text is to capture the entirety of culture within a semiotic frame. Unfortunately, Halliday’s social semiotics falls victim to exactly the sort of verbocentric misdirection that has become so dominant. As disappointing as this shortcoming may be, in Halliday’s efforts the seeds of the sort of theory that the analysis of conflict requires can be identified. Whatever Halliday’s shortcomings – and it can be anticipated that many may argue against there being any shortcomings at all, given the vigour of Halliday’s arguments and the entrenchedness of contemporary verbocentric beliefs – in his formulations there is a kinship with the present project since both seek to describe social life as a totality, coherent within a single theoretical framework that needs no corroboration or correlation with other schools of thought.

That Halliday’s point of entry into social analysis is language is as obvious as it is baffling, given the priority we should also accord other sign systems. He supports what corporeal pragmatics has to say about the development of language, writing that:

Language arises in the life of the individual through an ongoing exchange of meanings with significant others. A child creates, first his child tongue, then his mother tongue, in interaction with that little coterie of people who constitute his meaning group. In this sense, language is a product of the social process. (Halliday 1978, 1)

The child begins with what Lyotard might identify as an idiolect since only he or she understands it. In a haphazard manner the child learns to activate basic verbal signs that are meaningless to adults, and indeed, according to
our understanding of linguistic signs as empty, we can safely say that the sounds themselves do not possess any intrinsic meaning at all. Nevertheless, they are meaningful to the child and, over time, parents and those who are close (i.e., those who are within the immediate, intimate sign community) identify the child’s intentionality in a hit and miss manner, assisted by interpretations of inflection, facial expression, posture and gesture.

According to Halliday, the child then learns that people react in accordance with his or her communicative acts. Halliday writes that children can be seen “creating a meaning potential from [their] own vocal resources in which the meanings relate quite specifically to a certain set of functions” while the signifiers themselves are completely arbitrary, conditional and meaningless (1978, 53). The child “learns for instance that language can be used in a regulatory function, to get people to do what he [or she] wants” (Halliday 1978, 53). From this point onward, the child’s learning is aimed at making the process between the child’s meanings (intentions, desires, etc.) and the enlightenment of those around the child more efficient. Consequently, Halliday writes that it is as if “the child . . . shrugs his shoulders and says, look, this is just too much work creating the whole of human language again from the start; why don’t I settle for the readymade language that I hear around me?” (1978, 53).

“A child learning language,” Halliday argues, “is at the same time learning other things through language – building up a picture of the reality that is around him and inside him” (1978, 1). Halliday unquestioningly asserts
that language is the primary means by which the child is developed as a social being. Although a lot of social codes are tacit or implied, Halliday argues that more often than not it is to the level of utterances that our attentions are fixed when we consider the child’s instruction by the family and the school. These social groups help the child “to adopt its ‘culture,’ its modes of thought and action, its beliefs and values” (Halliday 1978, 9). However, Bourdieu argues that “As soon as one moves from the structure of language to the function it fulfils, that is, to the uses agents actually make of it, one sees that mere knowledge of the code gives only very imperfect mastery of the linguistic interactions really taking place” (1977, 25). When Bourdieu describes linguistic exchanges as “situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies,” his focus is not so much on the meanings inherent to the language used, but rather the “way that every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce” (Thompson, qtd. in Bourdieu 1991, 2).

For Halliday, the enculturation of “the social reality that is encoded in language” functions in two main ways: “language as a means of reflecting on things, and language as a means of acting on things” (1978, 2). Halliday calls the first function of language the ‘ideational,’ or “language as expressing the speaker's experience of the external world, and of his own internal world, that of his own consciousness” (1978, 45). The active function, which leads down the path to the consideration of ‘language as use,’ he calls the ‘pragmatic’ or
simply the ‘doing’ function. In articulating the ideational and pragmatic uses of language Halliday contributes enormously to the current argument without himself having reached any truly useful conclusions (see Chapter Six). While Halliday acknowledges that “it is possible to talk about the uses of language, by which I would understand simply the selection of options within the linguistic system in the context of actual situation types: use in its informal everyday sense,” and that “use is a valuable concept,” he also sees that “we can’t really enumerate the uses of language in a very systematic way” (1978, 46).

In Halliday’s acknowledgement there is an echo of Foucault that is subtly important. Halliday’s inability to found a theory of discourse on language use because it is impossible to exhaustively categorise each type of language act (as much as it has already been attempted in speech act theory) is not of great concern, even though such a failure is a shortcoming to more ‘scientific’ approaches to language. Halliday’s observation about language use remains valid. After all, it can be seen in many theoretical frameworks that, despite strict typologies (such as for Austin), specific behaviour types sometimes occupy several distinct categories. Ruthrof captures this dilemma best when he writes, on the methodology of language theorists in the past, that it “has to do with the temptation to explain what is complex by simple analogies. And indeed the procedure seems to work as long as we stay within a range of uncomplicated examples” (2000, 140). As
has already been suggested, a frequent response to dilemmas of this type is the exclusion of those elements that problematise the overall plan.

As long as we remain on the plane of language, distinguishing between words-as-ideas and words that actually ‘do’ things is not very helpful – and Halliday is very much wedded to his linguistic roots. The explanation that Halliday offers for the role of language in culture reveals exactly the same sort of conflict that has been discussed previously between verbocentric assumptions and the subsequent obligation for theorists to assert that ‘everything’ is therefore language. As a result, in defining social semiotics, Halliday writes, “A social reality (or a ‘culture’) is itself an edifice of meanings – a semiotic construct. In this perspective, language is one of the semiotic systems that constitutes a culture; one that is distinctive in that it also serves as an encoding system for many (though not all) of the others” (1978, 2). Halliday sees language “as communication, though I would rather say that I see language as a meaning potential. It is a form of human semiotic . . . I see the linguistic system as a component – an essential component – of the social system” (1978, 51). On the one hand, semiotics embraces the richness of society as a plurality of meaning systems. Conversely, adherence to this view almost forces writers to assert not only language’s dominance over all these other systems, but that language is actually a schema for how these other systems operate. This sort of argument reveals verbocentrism and its internal conflict at its clearest.
However, we have already done away with any belief that haptic, visual, gustatory, etc., registers behave according to language rules such as grammar. Such beliefs spring forward uncontested when verbocentric explanations of the world predominate. Verbocentrism isn’t limited to considerations of language *per se*. Instead, verbocentrism is a way of thinking according to which everything becomes related to language-like models. Since one of the primary objectives of structuralism is to enlighten thinkers about the question of subjectivity, when language rules are seen as the governing structures of social relations then subject formation becomes understood as a linguistic operation. How language and the subject are mutually implied in a semiotic account bears consideration. Halliday writes that “the new subject of sociolinguistics that has come into prominence lately is a recognition of the fact that language and society – or, as we prefer to think of it, language and social man – is a unified conception, and needs to be understood and investigated as a whole” (1978, 12). Halliday’s subject who exists in society as a speaking, listening agent, whose every meaning is posed in terms of verbal signs, is still a linguistic subject. While semiotics in fact attempts to propose a ‘semiotic’ subject, such is the effect of verbocentrism that this category never really emerges in any meaningful way since it is only the specifically linguistic aspects of semiosis that are considered, rather than meaning-making in its more diverse forms. Until now, such other forms have gone largely untheorised.
In a system where language is envisioned as playing the dominant role, there is little room for the body in its fairly narrow semiotic definition of subjectivity. In semiotics we “read and write meanings” only, and “Ultimately we do it by the lexical, grammatical and semantic means at our disposal” (Lemke 1995, 38). The possibilities for types of signification beyond the verbal are reduced to a vague acknowledgement of inflection (“in speech we also have the resources of sound. e.g. of a sneering or a mocking accent”) and the visual character of signs (“in general we also have the resources of other, especially visual, semiotic systems: caricatures, ‘scare quotes,’ etc.”) (Lemke 1995, 38-9). Despite iconicity, meaning making is limited in this conventional view to what the subject can say (with inflection) or write (or, perhaps, ‘mark’). This perspective that explains and relates everything in terms of language leads us, if we allow it, to draw all sorts of conclusions and make all manner of absurd distinctions about the behaviour of human beings that simply do not stand up to analysis. If everything that a man or woman does comes down to their linguistic construction and understanding of the world, then we are inclined to conclude that we may, as Lemke has outlined, discern in everything a grammar, a lexicon, a range of thematic choices and distinct vocabularies. Yet this is not the case. It is in error that we are led to reduce human experience to the level of language. Despite the way we sometimes articulate them, our feelings and our sense-relations with the world do not obey a grammar, nor do they contain an established syntax.
Such verbocentrism encourages us to perform nonsensical reversals so that, if we take for example such crucial human capacities as the expression of love or, through violence, the expression of worse feelings, behaviour itself becomes understood according to various types of linguistic operations. Therefore in the logic of such arguments, it is said that while this does not “mean,” for instance “that violence is just linguistic, that it occurs only in words;” instead “it means that violence isn’t just a 'special' effect but rather a function of ‘man’ as a ‘talking animal’ who names, classifies, divides, marks off space, puts down limits, and outlines borders” (Lucy 1995, 6). Taken to its extreme, in the end it becomes human beings’ linguistic capacities against which our sense of the world is measured, and viewing human beings as primarily language-using beings, it is our language capacity that becomes the origin for everything else in our make-up.

In contemporary theory, language has become the great mediator of our life experience, despite the widely acknowledged linguistic problems of representation and the origin – that statements and words are not the thing (life) itself, but merely the communication of it. Most users understand this distinction, that saying something is not necessarily saying how something is, and yet the idea of language has wriggled into such a position of dominance that our adherence to verbocentric biases are commonplace and unquestioning. If we are to get back to the basics of what it means to be biologically concrete and distinct entities negotiating environments filled with the same, we must reinstate the body as the prime source of meaning. If
anything, such a position allows a greater appreciation for the post-
structuralist focus upon the constructedness of social experiences while
stopping short of the previously obligatory observation that the world is
‘nothing but words.’ Therefore what is “required is a broadly social semiotics
which includes the linguistic as its most powerful sign system yet allows also
for gustatory, visual, haptic, aural, and other kinds of signification to which we
resort of necessity” (Ruthrof 1997, 187-8). We must also show how language,
as the greatest (or most motile) of these systems, is entirely parasitic on
other, bodily forms of signification.

Despite the view of corporeal pragmatics regarding the emptiness of
language, throughout semiotics runs the widely held belief that social and
linguistic analysis are close-knit, if not actually the same thing. Halliday’s
focus on the development of language – studying the ways in which social
identity is constructed and how social meanings are first learnt by children in
their acclimatisation with the language of the adult world – bears out these
observations about the dominance of language in the semiotic model. At no
point is any real attention paid to the many nonverbal ways in which children
are socialised and individuated. In general these aspects of socialisation go
almost completely unmentioned, yet few would argue against the
fundamental importance of a mother’s nurturing or a father’s presence. These
events are more than just the satisfaction of the child’s requirements
according to some psychological register of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mental health. It is
impossible to boil down to a few statements exactly what meanings are
expressed and conveyed through nonverbal routines of affection; but even if these meanings are nothing more than the sense that one belongs, is close to, and has an identity as part of a social group, this reality alone is a sturdy argument against a purely linguistic description of enculturation. Ironically, it is also the entirely affectionate discourse between parent and child that argues most conclusively against Lyotard’s assertions of the universally agonistic predisposition of language, and the same instance weighs rather heavily against the description of the formation of the linguistic subject. One might even expect a few shallow concessions to the nonverbal, as was seen earlier with Lemke – acknowledgement of such trivialities as body language or intonation – yet in Halliday’s description these do not materialise either, despite vague recognition of ‘other’ meaning systems. So we are left with the socialisation of subjects into something like a Lacanian ‘symbolic order,’ which we must now argue is a verbocentric fantasy.

It is the occasional merits of language analysis that support the dominance of the practice as a whole. There is still much to be said for Halliday’s investigation into dialects, for instance. He writes that they “are both a direct manifestation of social hierarchy and also a symbolic expression of it” (Halliday 1978, 113). It is observations like this that make it seem so possible to describe social complexities according to the linguistic phenomena that they produce, even though all the problems remain with such an approach as have been described. Nevertheless, in the consideration of dialect Halliday is found at his most effective, since the socio-
economic origins he uncovers for the dialects of different groups most succinctly marries the linguistic and societal elements of his study. When Halliday considers “the child who speaks a nonstandard dialect,” he concludes that the child “is not under any linguistic disadvantage at all. His [or her] disadvantage is a social one.” Having thought as such, Halliday then acknowledges that “they are in some sense linguistic – they have to do with language,” but not as vocabulary or dialectical problems, but instead as “differences of interpretation, evaluation, orientation, on the part of the children and of their mothers” and presumably their fathers too (1978, 105). Therefore, Halliday observes that the problems manifest in language but are not themselves simply the product of language misuse or inaccessibility. There is something else at work.

Halliday specifically considers the instance of children whose dialectic differences are the product of socio-economic factors such as inequality and poverty (with a focus on the rural instead of the urban). He identifies how in such cases, certain classes of children are socialised into less complex, less rich understandings of the same speech signifiers as their better-off classmates. Among these poorer children, the articulation of certain verbal signifiers is less sophisticated than those formed among wealthier urban children. “We can interpret the codes, from a linguistic point of view, as differences of orientation within the total semiotic potential. There is evidence in Bernstein’s work that different social groups or subcultures place a high value on different orders of meaning” and, to go one step further, certain uses
of language enjoy pre-eminence over others and are thus accorded a particular status (Halliday 1978, 106). In such analysis Halliday’s conclusions are entirely compatible with the corporeal pragmatics of Ruthrof even though Halliday does not allow for an explanation of language as empty and dependent upon nonverbal signs.

Incorporating the core foci of Ruthrof’s corporeal pragmatics into Halliday’s case study brings heightened results, mutually beneficial to the work of both theorists. Halliday’s explanation of Bernstein’s observation of social inequality in language use among different classes of children is enriched when we acknowledge that it is a question of how complicated the child’s socialisation into language use has been that then determines the depth of meaning associated with certain signifiers. Conversely, the social dimension in Ruthrof’s corporeal pragmatics becomes clear when it can show how the socialisation process – seeding the child with a language predicated upon nonverbal signs – is the major contributing factor to a wide range of important social effects such as socio-economic inequality, class structures and problems within the education system. There is even a certain foreshadowing of Ruthrofian terms in Halliday’s work. For instance, Halliday acknowledges that “any utterance in the adult language operates on more than one level of meaning at once” which accords well with a description of ‘intersemiosis’ (see Chapter Four) (1978, 56).

Furthermore, Halliday writes, “Whereas a logical semantics may be a monosystem, a social semantics is and must be a polysystem, a set or sets of
options in meaning, each of which is referable to a given social context, situation type or domain” for which we can read Ruthrof’s ‘heterosemiosis’ (1978, 79). Unfortunately however, Halliday does not make the leap to an entirely multi-system, non-verbocentric description of meaning. While he states that “we regard the semantic system as being itself the projection (encoding, realisation) of some higher level of extralinguistic meaning,” Halliday’s notion of what counts as extra-linguistic is equally satisfied by a super-linguistic explanation as a nonverbal one (which is to say, meaning as the sum of all possible utterances in a culture rather than the direct corollary between a specific signifier and its signified) (1978, 79).

Halliday believes that his sociosemiotic perspective successfully “attempts to explain the semiotic of the social structure, in its aspects both of persistence and of change, including the semantics of social class, of the power system, of hierarchy and of social conflict” (1978, 126). However, Halliday’s use of the word ‘semantic’ is a direct signifier of his attempt to use language as a model for the analysis of social relations. While social classes may change over time, there is nothing beyond the writer’s desire to be metaphoric to really suggest that anything in the study of the semantic transformations of language informs the study of class. The persistence of such linguistic themes in the study of non-linguistic phenomena is the familiar trademark of verbocentrism. Halliday’s work is shot through with such tendencies, which is unfortunate, since – once the suitability of linguistic models is questioned – this practice actually obscures more than it reveals.
Therefore, as long as Halliday persists that language and not bodily experience is the locus for subjection he is only able to report on such phenomena at a step one removed from the corporeal reality. While subjects may convey and even betray their experience of the social, of class, power and conflict through language, the language event is not the same as the lived bodily experience. Language only represents that experience. The shortcomings of Halliday’s social semiotics are a near miss. What is required is a progressive semiotic theory that overturns previous assumptions about the function of language in social meanings, reconstructing a theoretical base on a more diverse understanding of possible sign types.

Despite raising the subject of conflict, Halliday never addresses it in an explicit form. By dint of his over-reliance on a linguistic schema he is unable to do so. Halliday’s observations about conflict mostly come as secondary effects of discussing “language in use,” which he pursues “Partly in order to approach this question of how it is that ordinary everyday language transmits the essential patterns of the culture: systems of knowledge, value systems, the social structure and much else besides.” To understand language in use, Halliday argues that we have to look at “what the speaker says against the background of what he might have said but did not” (1978, 52). Of greater immediate interest to the study of conflict is to explore not what may or may not have been said but what may or may not have been ‘done.’ Whereas an analysis that focuses upon utterances raises important questions concerning the function of power and sanction in society, to study discourse as
something that is performed reveals a wider range of social behaviour of which speaking is but one aspect. To analyse how social forces mobilise to permit or contain the actions of social beings is to broaden the scope of the study, including discursive formations while at the same time opening up to analysis vast areas of social performance that have hitherto been explored in only the most passing sense. It is only corporeal pragmatics that is able to escape the closed circuit of language by means of the identification of nonverbal signs as the deep structure of linguistic signification; and it is only upon such a basis that a useful theory of conflict can be established. Once we are able to appreciate the intersemiotic character of meaning making processes and then understand how these nonverbal signs can be equally discursive, we begin to take a position whereby conflict can be properly addressed.

Halliday takes his work on dialects and their social implications further in the study of what he terms ‘antilanguages;’ and in so doing, he neatly presents an example of the way in which language-oriented analysis appears to touch on the experience of conflict without actually doing so. Halliday writes that the antilanguage issues from an ‘antisociety,’ which “is a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it.” Furthermore, “An antilanguage is not only parallel to an antisociety; it is in fact generated by it” (Halliday 1978, 164). When Halliday speaks of dialects as constituting and constituted by the social hierarchy, there is little cause for disagreement with a perspective informed by corporeal pragmatics. However
the seamless shift towards a notion of antilanguages takes the verbocentric trend a little too far. In the relationship between the antilanguage and the antisociety, Halliday performs a similar imaginative leap as has been discussed previously.

By arguing, quite rightly, that societies are edifices of meaning, but stating that these meanings are not simply intersemiotic but clearly linguistic, the correlation between language and society is such that society itself becomes quasi-linguistic. It is this tendency that Halliday obeys in his discussion of antisocieties that seems to take the power and agency of language too far. It’s not terribly far-fetched to say that the employment of an antilanguage “is the acting out of a distinct social structure; and this social structure is, in turn, the bearer of an alternative social morality” (Halliday 1978, 167). The study of imprisonment in Northern Ireland shows quite openly how the Gaelic language has been used by Irish nationalists and republicans alike to create “an alternative reality: the process is one not of construction but of reconstruction” (Halliday 1978, 170). However such analysis does nothing to prove that conflict on the plane of language constructs social reality, nor does it reveal anything about the physical experience of conflict for ordinary subjects.

It is not widely understood that even though Gaelic is technically the national language of Ireland, by the 1970s Gaelic fluency had hit an all time low in the North of Ireland. Unlike in Éire, where successive nationalist governments had systematically restored the Gaelic signage in streets and
towns across the country, in Northern Ireland the Anglo-centrism of the nineteenth century remained. The traditional names of towns and cities (such as Dóire/Derry and Béal Feirste/Belfast) were suppressed as part of the campaign that saw active discrimination against Gaelic speaking take place along with the removal of Irish signs by the civil authorities. After centuries of obsolescence, Gaelic was spoken by only a low percentage of older people, and for younger generations it was taught only as a non-compulsory subject in a small number of Catholic schools. In a society monopolised by the English language, Gaelic had been made impractical and irrelevant. However, Gaelic language, along with the importance of things like the Gaelic Athletics Association and traditional folk music and dance groups formed practices around which a resilient Irish republican identity could yet be forged.

The development of Irish Gaelic and its tactical deployment within the Northern Ireland prison system is directly linked to republican identities such as Bobby Sands and Brendan ‘Bik’ McFarlane. A one time Provisional IRA member notes, “There were four guys, Tom Boyd, Sid Walsh, Jackie McMullen, and Bobby Sands, who were fluent Gaelic speakers in the whole prison at the start. And from those four guys it went out and out. Within two years everything that was said out the door was in Gaelic” (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 212). Similarly, an Irish National Liberation Army member observes that:

Before he [Sands] came onto the wing the morale of the wing was very

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21 As well as the maintenance of bans on emblems of Irish sovereignty such as the Irish tricolor, the national flag of the neighbouring Republic and generally agreed-upon symbol of a united Ireland.
low. We had taken a fair bit of hassle from the warders. Sands and McFarlane immediately organised Gaelic lessons, sing-songs, story tellings, and lectures through the doors. Bobby Sands was the man who gave the Irish lessons, sung songs, told stories. He was like an old-time seanachie [story teller].

“The Gaelic was part of a whole education program that Bobby Sands initiated, and it was all done from the head and by shouting out the doors”

(ex-PIRA member, qtd. in Feldman 1991, 213).

The rationale behind the education programme was fairly simple. Sands “was the main advocate of cultural separatism,” a H-Blocks inmate notes. “The jails proved that when you become culturally separate it breaks the enemy, that it builds walls they can’t cross and people within those walls”

(qtd. in Feldman 1991, 213). An INLA member states:

You see guys come in for interrogation and they’re as English as the English, except they claim to be Irish. They have a lot in common with the police; they break down and become informers. If they had the culture and the Gaelic stronger, they could hold out. If you don’t have any culture, how are you different from the Brits?  (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 132)

Such observations reinforce the currency of Halliday’s belief in the connection between antilanguages and antisocieties.

Halliday offers his own examples of gaol-oriented, sub-cultural language differentiation leading to the creation of an alternate way of life. His example of the Polish prison dialect and the republicans’ reconstruction of

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22 Ironically, Sands’s Gaelic fluency was the result of being imprisoned in Long Kesh prison camp prior to the development of the H-Blocks of Her Majesty’s Prison, The Maze, on the same site. Sands and various other famous republicans (Gerry Adams amongst them) took advantage of the ‘Prisoner of War’ camp approach used by the British government prior to the development of the harsher ‘criminalisation, normalisation, Ulsterisation’ policy of the late 70s to spend time in the Gaeltacht house – a Nissen hut set aside for prisoners where only Gaelic was spoken. It was, all sources agree, an excellent means of becoming fluent in the language within a very short time.
themselves as Gaelic speakers share parallels, mostly in the employment of an alternate vocabulary and grammar for prisoners to mark themselves as different. For the Gaelic-speaking prisoners, they were able to access cultural forms and practices that reinforced their separateness from the British at every step. In the Northern Irish case, the prisoners also used Gaelic to get in touch with political and ideological concepts from their far historical past, some of which would later be impetuses behind the republican hunger strikes of the early 80s. For example *cealachan* was the expression of a grievance in the *bríthem* (Brehon) laws of pre-Anglo-Norman Ireland. To assert the grievance the plaintiff sat outside the alleged wrongdoer’s house and refused to eat (and sometimes drink). Public figures such as the tribal chieftain usually had a bench set specifically outside his dwelling in order to accommodate such lawsuits. In the ancient society, strictures about hospitality and the treatment of guests were so strong that the shame accompanying the act of seemingly allowing a guest to starve (since they were on the accused’s property) was expected to spur the alleged wrongdoer into a gesture of recompense.

An ex-PIRA member states: “*cealachan* had a whole moral import to it that it wasn’t a hunger strike as a protest weapon; it was a legal assertion of your rights. The hunger strike was a legitimate and moral means for asserting

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23 In the most extreme accounts, the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the 12th century is the starting point for the intrusion of the English into Irish affairs. The English were of course themselves a conquered nation at the time.

24 Republican prisoners in urgent circumstances have sometimes employed a ‘thirst strike’ since the deprivation of fluids produces a physical response in the subject within a matter of days. Seán MacStiofáin details his own thirst strike in his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*. Edinburgh: R&R Clarke, 1975.
those rights, and it had legal precedents dating back to antiquity” (Feldman 1991, 214). In Halliday’s view, the employment of language to differentiate the prisoner from his or her carceral surroundings amounts to the reconstruction of a separate, ‘anti’ society. The republican inmates viewed the reclamation of the Gaelic language as an act of resistance against the prison authorities, and long before the extremes of hunger striking were considered, the inmates explored various ways – such as the Blanket (Chapter Four) and No Wash or ‘Dirty’ protests (Chapter Five) – to further that resistance. In Cardinal Tomas Ó Fiaich’s controversial visit to the Maze during the republicans’ Dirty protest, the cardinal said, “they maintain their sanity by studying Irish. It was an indication of the triumph of the human spirit over adverse material surroundings to notice Irish words, phrases and songs being shouted down from cell to cell and then written on each cell with the remnants of toothpaste tubes” (O’Malley 1990, 172 and Coogan 2002, 171).

In a verbocentric account, language becomes a battleground in which various societies of meaning struggle for supremacy. Bobby Sands’s writings serve as a diary of these running battles.

‘Gaelic classes,’ I said it again. I sounded rather odd. But then it was odd, considering that it meant standing at the cell door listening to your mate, the teacher, shouting the lesson for the day at the top of his voice from the other end of the wing when the screws happened to be away for their dinner or tea. (Sands 1998, 30)

Sands’s writings convey how it was not just Gaelic but shouting, a method for the delivery of words that resists the smothering effect of the cell, which were counters to an otherwise hostile environment. “It was normal to shout if
anyone knew what was going on. It let everyone else know. There was nothing as nerve-wracking or as frightening as sitting naked behind a closed door not knowing what was going on when danger was lurking" (Sands 1998, 31).

In a struggle over definitions or the choice of language used to utter them, conflict can be reduced to the level of language. Reducing social conflict to the level of verbal signs is exactly what lies at the heart of Halliday's shift towards antilanguages and antisocieties. However, focusing on the history of the Maze, a verbocentric analysis ignores the fact that the adoption of Gaelic is only the recourse of the prisoners. The warders themselves do not respond with manipulations of English in order to ensnare and confound their bilingual subjects. Instead their response is etched in moments of physical abuse mute except for screams of pain, and more passively in the deployment of the cell wherein all the subject's senses and the mental states that issue from them are open to manipulation. Confinement and isolation do not easily submit to a linguistic description (except as a written account that we read afterwards, such as in Sands's example, his testimony living on when the prison conditions have led to his permanent silence through death). The experience of space and captivity can only be rendered in language – it is not itself linguistic – because the experience centres on the body (with the inhabitation of a limited space, the tactile register replacing the visual in darkness, the claustrophobic feelings of enclosure and the individuation of the body through solitary confinement).
Halliday writes that in the study of societies and their anti-version, it is “not the distance between the two realities but the tension between them that is significant” (1978, 171). When Halliday writes about antilanguages actively constructing the reality for its speakers by implying and demanding conformity to alternative social structures embedded in the anti-speech, he is not far removed from Foucault’s position regarding the construction of the subject by discourse. In both cases, discourse (or speech, to Halliday) actively forms the object with which it is concerned. However, it is the erasure of the distinction between what it is to be a speaking subject and what it is to be in a world filled with utterances that allows Halliday to draw a direct connection between antilanguages and their societies. Despite being partly constructed out of verbalisations, societies are not just languages, nor are they entirely linguistic. Just as the senses of touch and taste lack a grammar or the possibility of syntax, simply because societies depend upon verbal communication does not mean that there is nothing in them exterior to language. Ruthrof is familiar with such slippage, observing that “All theorists of language come up against the problem of ‘exteriority,’ as Michel Foucault calls it – frames that have a bearing on what language is and how it functions” (2000, 99). One point that can be made with certainty is that society cannot be analysed according to linguistic rules in isolation, nor upon a base of semiotics exclusively grounded in a theory of linguistic signs.

The adoption of a new register of words by one side therefore serves quite a different purpose than embarking upon a linguistic conflict. Sands
observes that the warders “didn’t like Gaelic being shouted about the wing or its use in conversations.” The prisoners’ self-separation and sense of themselves constructed through Gaelic “alienated them [the warders], made them feel foreign and even embarrassed them. They didn’t know what was being said. They suspected that every word was about them and they weren’t too far wrong” (Sands 1998, 31). Furthermore, a PIRA inmate comments, “There was something magic about listening to these guys waffling away with each other in a tongue that was once ours, that identified us as somebody separate.” Despite the common hurdle, “thinking about the effort, that you couldn’t learn another language,” competence in Gaelic quickly “became something practical.”

Going on a visit if you couldn’t get up close to a guy and whisper a message to him you were beat. Whereas with Gaelic you could shout right across the visiting room and he would have got it! The way it was put then it was in the interest of everybody. It was a concrete way forward here, if everybody started to take lessons. (Feldman 1991, 211)

Gaelic therefore functioned as a practice opposing the restrictive machinery of the prison. Yet this definition falls more into line with Halliday’s ‘language as use’ than indicating anything special about the character of language in conflict with language.

A purely linguistic account is insufficient, yet Feldman’s analysis points to a clear belief that the use of Gaelic in the prison effected changes even when they were metaphoric rather than material.

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25 One republican inmate recalls a prison guard politely asking what the Gaelic term was for ‘warden,’ to which he was promptly answered ‘faoileán’ (seagull). For a short while the wardens went about referring to themselves as such until the ruse became apparent.
By shifting the prison into a new semiological order in which the cell door suddenly and ‘magically’ becomes *doiris* [a door], the prisoners journeyed to a mythic-historical locale that had been made accessible to them by the grammar and etymologies of Gaelic. Every object, every component of the defiled body and the prison, once transposed into Gaelic, was no longer linked solely to the determinations of captivity, but it also secretly participated in a historicity with anchorages that transcended both the time and place of imprisonment. (Feldman 1991, 216)

However, this colourful description cannot be used to say that Gaelic itself contributed to some sort of defense against the prison order at the level of utterance versus utterance, even if that is Feldman's inference.

The prisoners defiled their cells with faeces\(^\text{26}\) and words, but only the former directly contributed to the prisoners’ struggle against the warders. Feldman writes dramatically:

> Through the Gaelic and scatological writing, the cell became a historical membrane that secreted a record of prison experience and knowledge. The cell ceased to separate, to desocialise inmates. Through the sedimentation of its many strata – interrogation white, H-Block feces, Gaelic graffiti – it had become an archaeological artifact, a place for the storage and the liberation of memory. (1991, 217)

One inmate describes how when prisoners were shifted around, some cells “were like a big book.” He notes, “You got a whole new vocabulary that you didn’t have before. You were expanding your Gaelic every time you were moved. And you would add your Gaelic on the wall for the next guy who was getting all that combined. There was *scéal* [news] and whole stories written on the walls in Gaelic” (Feldman 1991, 211).

However much the cell and the prisoner’s experience were combined with Gaelic, the cell served not so much as a site whereby the prisoner was

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\(^{26}\) For more on the scatological conflict of the Dirty protest, see Chapter Five.
armed with a vocabulary anathema to the reigning order, but instead it can be understood as a meditative, restorative space, reclaimed via the identity-forming power of enculturated words and an embrace of the repulsiveness of the faecality despised by the prison order. Bobby Sands had termed the phrase ‘Breaker’s Yard’ to describe the purpose of the H-Blocks. However, by the republicans’ tactics, the cell was transformed from a space in which identities (and thus psychologies) were broken, into a dramatically abject space in which men hardened themselves beyond anything the prison regime itself could muster, thereby becoming weapons – the only weapons they could make – to turn against the system. Language played its part in this process: not by initiating a verbal conflict, but by offering a cultural practice around which prisoners could organise and fashion their self-identity.

While Feldman’s account clearly identifies the deployment of language as a means of resistance, the consequences of such transposition does not occur on any abstract, linguistic level. Through Gaelic, prisoners effectively renamed their surroundings, grafting new meaning onto the oppressive mechanisms that previously yielded to no other interpretation, but these meanings alone did not venture into conflict since the prisoners’ meanings were largely ignored and unchallenged by the brutalising hierarchy. The effect was instead one of morale-boosting, creating solidarity and group identity, casting into relief the stark divisions between the prisoners and the apparatuses of the Northern Ireland state that they hated (of which the prison was only one system among many that represented, to the prisoners, what
was a foreign regime). Through the resistant practices that they learnt in gaol, republican inmates connected the normalising, criminalising techniques of the prison with those of the wider society. Father Brian McCreesh, the brother of deceased hunger striker Raymond McCreesh, sums up the sort of conclusions the prisoners reached: “I think a lot of us who live in the Six Counties, occupied Ireland, have a very deep sense of identity with prisoners because we all feel like prisoners and this little statelet to which we belong is for us a prison” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 268). McCreesh adds, “the agents of the British government, the whole Unionist population are out prison warders, our prison guards” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 269).

Feldman describes the use of Gaelic by Irish republican prisoners as a semiotic conflict, drawing upon the notion of agonistics introduced by Lyotard and also the idea of the sign as the site of struggle forwarded by Voloshinov. Feldman cites an opposition between the imperialising function of English and the residual, radicalising power of Irish Gaelic. At individual instances of language struggle, an implicitly moral and political conflict takes place. “Gaelic,” Feldman writes, “inextricably tied to the mobility and transcendence of the disembodied voice, the solidarity of collective vocality, as well as deep historical resonances, overcame the semiotics of captivity” (Feldman 1991, 216). Language and the ‘voice’ are the means by which oppression is resisted, but as is common in semiotic analyses that slide into linguistic analyses too easily, what is forgotten is that the cited ‘voice’ is in fact only metaphoric, and often metonymic as well. Halliday also overlooks this
distinction, attributing to speech and writing power that springs not from language but from the individual’s ability to effect changes on his or her surroundings by dint of a wide range of factors, among which language use is only one characteristic means of the social subject.

Thus in the end, the example of Gaelic use by prisoners does not point to a linguistic struggle at all. The conflict does not occur on the plane of language. Instead, the identity forming function of language serves, among other measures, to give the prisoners the motivation and strength to prosecute their campaign on a more pragmatic level. As presaged, what was learnt by prisoners in the H-Blocks about language led directly to their eventual abandonment of language games altogether in favour of an irrefutable argument made without words. In the hunger strikes (see Chapter Six) self-sacrificed bodies became highly visible units of a tacit discourse that the British could not ignore. These corpses-as-texts were a public spectacle that demanded a response and interpretation from the British authorities. Hunger striking was employed exactly because the linguistic conflict that had occurred at that point, not between the prisoners and the warders, but between representatives of the inmates and the governors of the system, had been so fraught with subterfuge, double meanings and bluff that communication and resolution was impossible. It was in fact the prison authority’s direct refusal to engage in dialogue with the prisoners, knowing that by doing so the prisoners may have claimed power of their own, that led Bobby Sands’s PIRA and INLA hunger strikers to their final drastic act.
The hunger strikes were still a battle over representations, yet it was life and death and not language that were the medium. Yet at present, to describe the processes of the hunger strike in terms of ‘arguments’ and ‘texts’ appears nonsensical, given that what has been challenged thus far is the tendency of semiotic analyses to describe what is not linguistic as if it were. However, this friction is because of the lingering verbocentric assertion that meaning and thus communication can only take place via verbal signs. It is not the case, and we should not confuse communication with the adherence to language-like laws. After all we can glean meanings from the order ‘Stop!’ without any sort of grammar being at work, and the same can be said for the red light at traffic intersections. We need to not only overturn verbocentrism by turning to a full explication of the role of nonverbal meanings in communication, but overturn for once and all the idea that discourses can only be engaged in through linguistic signs.
4. Corporeal Pragmatics and the Nonverbal Subject

At the heart of the problems with contemporary semiotics lies Saussure’s failure to adequately deal with the function of symbols. Although Saussure is the ‘father’ of semiotics, in recent times the legacy of Charles Sanders Peirce has led to an acknowledgement that the American theorist, working in obscurity prior to Saussure, already addressed the problem of the relation between verbal signs and symbols that so plagues Saussure’s formulations. On the one hand Peirce’s contribution to clearing up Saussure’s dilemma is fairly straightforward. However, there are also certain fundamental theoretical assumptions present in Peirce’s work that establish an understanding of language and its position in relation to human society that is quite different from that taken by Saussure. Since some of Peirce’s arguments contradict Saussure, contemporary semiotics has so far been unable to incorporate both perspectives and remain coherent. Nonetheless, Peirce’s perspective is crucial to a reworking of present day semiotics.

In the formation and functioning of meanings, Peirce’s view of signification is implicitly social because he recognises the role of the community in the subject’s acquisition of language as well as the meanings associated with specific signs. “For Peirce, the role of the community consists largely in the affirmation of what it finds acceptable and in the rejection of what it cannot” (Ruthrof 2000, 171). In this perspective can be found a view of

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27 Peirce’s publications only come about as a result of the efforts of his students, who compiled Peirce’s lectures into a series of books after the lecturer’s death.
society as normative that predates contemporary writings on discourse by three-quarters of a century. Indeed, in Peirce “the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a community” since he acknowledges the role of social groups in approving the meanings of semiotic acts, with the consequence that certain meanings enjoy a dominance within normative social groups (Peirce, qtd. in Silverman 1983, 17). It is in Peirce’s understanding of the important role that semiotics plays in daily life that we find the most incisive early articulation of the idea of a semiotic subjectivity – a subjectivity that is inextricably caught up in the shared meanings of the society or culture from which the subject emerges. The notion of ‘approved’ meanings – normativity to Habermas and dominant discourse to Foucault – is automatically implicated in everything that Peirce says about social meanings once the notion of community is accepted as crucial to the understanding of semiosis.

Peirce’s ‘abductive reasoning’ means “that we are involved in a community-steered process of projecting holistic frames for individual readings against the hard facts of bumping into the world,” whether those hard facts are corporeal (physical) or social realities. Peirce recognises that the individual’s readings of the world are subjective because the language used to describe the world is only an interpretation guided by the community. As Peirce’s semiotic subjects, “We are always already in an interpretive ‘spiral,’ unable to step outside to a position from which to judge whether we are right or wrong. As long as we roughly follow the semiosis sanctioned by
the community, we feel at home” (Ruthrof 2000, 171). Meaning making is a social act because we are all socialised entities who “have direct experience, but indirect knowledge of reality” (Silverman 1983, 16). Silverman writes rather forlornly of experience and knowledge that “The former teaches us that there is a world of things, but gives us no intellectual access to them, while the latter supplies only means of knowing those things, but no way of verifying our knowledge” (1983, 16). However, it is not quite as drastic as that. Ruthrof writes that “Peirce rigorously distinguishes between the fact of our experience of the world and the sort of knowledge that we are able to have about that experience . . . Experience is direct, knowledge is semiotic – that is, the result of interacting signs about such experiences” (2000, 171).

In order to remind us that semiotics is not just an abstract principle but the primary means by which we are in the world as subjects, Peirce writes:

our access to and knowledge of ourselves is subject to the same semiotic restrictions as our access to and knowledge of the external world. In other words, we are cognitively available to ourselves and others only in the guise of signifiers, such as proper names and first-person pronouns, or visual images, and consequently are for all intents and purposes synonymous with those signifiers. (qtd. in Silverman 1983, 18)

It is important to underline that to Peirce, all knowledge – everything we can possibly know – is semiotic. Semiotics is therefore not a fringe theory but the central principle of our daily lives. At the same time, his observations should not be taken as license to wave away our knowledge of the world as completely unprovable. Through the senses (particularly along tactile, proximic and gyroscopic registers) we engage with the world in very ‘real’
terms, though it can certainly be shown that the world accessible through our fingertips is not always as coherent as we might believe. The fact that all signs are reducible to bodily meanings does not dispel what has long been accepted under Saussure, which is that meanings are never “complete, static or properly defined. Rather, they are tentative and always open to infinite regress” (Ruthrof 2000, 171-2).

Given that he developed his own ideas about signs prior to and in isolation from Saussure, Peirce’s definition of the sign is somewhat different to that of the conventional structuralist account. Peirce writes that a sign:

is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground. (qtd. in Silverman 1983, 14)

On the one hand, the interpretant might be considered akin to the differential relation between signs as formulated by Saussure and radicalised by Derrida. On the other hand, Silverman defines the interpretant as “the ‘mental effort’ or ‘thought’ generated by the relation between the other two terms” (1983, 15). To Silverman the interpretant is “virtually synonymous with the signified” since she views the interpretant as the idea generated from exposure to a sign (1983, 15).

However, because Peirce differs from Saussure in that he is not completely reliant on a model of signification in which the rules of language dictate the form, Peirce’s interpretant is actually less like Saussure’s ‘signified’
and more like Kant’s *Anschauung*, for which Ruthrof’s translation ‘lookings-at’ is preferred over the more frequent substitutions of ‘idea’ or ‘intuition’ (Ruthrof 2001, 1). Understanding the interpretant in such a way reveals its kinship with the act of visualisation (or else the subject’s fantatisation of the visual scene), though eventually all the senses must be drawn upon. As such, the subject’s act of encountering signs generates a mental projection, schema or blueprint that exists already within the consciousness because of the community-guided process of semiosis. Because of the emphasis on mental projection, the process Peirce describes is thus distinct from any idea of linguistic signs being understood only by means of other linguistic signs. While Peirce acknowledges that “there is an infinite regression here” and that “the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again,” when meaning is reducible to sense readings rather than just verbal signs we are no longer cut off from direct knowledge of our experience to the same degree (qtd. in Silverman 1983, 15).

Counter to Saussure’s notion of the universal sign as signifier and signified, Peirce proposes three divisions of signs: the icon, the index and the symbol are the three main sign types, though he offers alternative names and sub-categories for each. Icons are predominantly visual signs where the sign that represents the thing is mostly identical to the thing itself. Thus photographs, maps, portraits and live visual sightings are all instances of icons. Indices are a type of sign where reference is used, with one thing
directly indicating another thing, or else some manner of mark is used in order to instruct and guide interpretation of the sign. Examples of indices include topographic maps, scientific formulae, diagrams, directions and traffic signs. The category of the symbol is the third kind of sign and the most arbitrary, corresponding closely to the type of signs with which Saussure was exclusively involved. Language in general, whether spoken or written, best fits with Peirce’s definition of the symbol.

Although Peirce and Saussure say different things in different ways, the ground that Peirce covers in his study of symbols roughly coincides with Saussure’s discussion of the general character of verbal signs. Thus the other types, the icon and the index, cover territory that Saussure excludes from his immediate study. Unlike Saussure, Peirce does not invest symbols with any inherent meaning, arguing that they are in fact next to meaningless. Contemporary semiotics, in attempting to blend Peirce’s observations with Saussure’s, tries to capture Peirce’s argument by asserting that as a field of study, it “no longer considers words as such to have meanings.” Instead, “Words have meaning potential, a range of possible meanings that we abstract from all their actual uses” (Lemke 1995, 42). Such observations still fall short of Ruthrof’s assertion that “words and linguistic expressions in their customary syntactic sequence are no more than an arbitrarily agreed-upon set of markers for speaking and writing. By themselves they are meaningless schemata. In this sense language is empty and makes no sense at all” (2000, 21).
Central to Peirce’s insight is that language is accorded a pivotal role in social affairs only by dint of being the prime means of communicative exchange between social subjects. To Peirce, language is far from the be-all and end-all of signification. Peirce can be seen as offering a wider and more comprehensive basis for a theory of signs given that there is hardly any type of signification to which this triad of signs cannot be applied. However, Peirce does not make direct reference to nonverbal signs apart from those of the visual field. Furthermore, Peirce’s insistence that “The only way of directly communicating an idea is by means of an icon” and that “every assertion must contain an icon or set of icons, or else must contain signs whose meaning is only explicable by icons” is a problematic point in Peirce’s general theory (qtd. in Silverman 1983, 20-21). As Deleuze notes, “Peirce’s strength, when he invented semiotics, was to conceive of signs on the basis of images and their combinations, not as a function of determinants which were already linguistic” (1989, 30). However, although the dominance of icons – which we must take to mean visual representation – contests the Saussurean dependence upon language, and while it is a step closer to the position taken in corporeal pragmatics, to state that all signification comes down to images is to exclude an enormous range of bodily meanings.

Thus far two extremes have been identified in the attribution of meaning in communication. By far the most common misunderstanding is that of verbocentrism, typified by Saussurean semiotics, which views language as a signifying system of such importance that all other meanings are excluded,
forgotten or denied. Peirce, however, sees the representative power of the icon as the most important communication medium and accords it a position of primacy in his own semiotics. In contradistinction to either of these positions, corporeal pragmatics puts the body at the centre of meaning-making processes and views language use as parasitic upon the nonverbal meanings that are generated through bodily experience. Ruthrof’s insights are so far-reaching that it is difficult to at first grasp their significance. Since it is only by slippage that the verbocentrism of the linguistic turn has taken hold, it seems implausible, first, that verbocentrism itself exists (that the verbal is so central to the foundations of structuralism), and second, that a criticism tackling the very foundation of contemporary semiotics is adequately equipped to offer alternative formulations in turn. Yet corporeal pragmatics encourages us to reconsider entrenched views on meaning, communication, and the supposed construction of the world through language; and, taken even further, Ruthrofian theory offers startling possibilities for the study of conflict for the reason that, in stripping back our presuppositions about language and highlighting the role that it plays in culture, the direct correlation between language and power become even clearer. Since all conflicts occur as differences in the interpretation of social reality (as either how it is or how one wishes it to be), semiotic theory, which has interpretation at its centre, must be revised in order to deal with non-verbocentric accounts of conflict.

Moving from the social level to the level of the individual meaning event, corporeal pragmatics offers further revelations when it is used to
reconsider the traditionally agonistic relation between parties in conflict over the control of signs (meanings, interpretations, disputes). When it is possible to ‘get outside’ of language in a manner that has not been offered before, we can view the correlation between material facts and their encoded meanings as a pragmatic exercise that yields to discursive strategies and counter-strategies. As such, we are happily forced to concede that the dominant locked-in description of conflict that is articulated by writers such as Lyotard and Habermas overlooks ways in which conflict may in fact be more fluid than has been previously thought. For these reasons and others, corporeal pragmatics is an exciting and revolutionary theory of signification that assists the present project of conflict analysis by eliminating the semio-linguistic subject and reconstructing in its place the idea of a corporeal subject that lends itself equally well to a semiotic or semio-discursive interpretation.

However, there is a considerable degree of conjecture to negotiate in establishing what it means for the body to be reinstated as the source of meaning. In contemporary scholarship, placing the body within the context of philosophy and language studies has been a somewhat popular alternative for writers wishing to challenge the monolithic character of dominant ideas. Since the 1960s, and particularly in continental feminist and post-structuralist thought, focusing upon the role of the body has been an emotive but not terribly effective means of challenging orthodoxies. Sadly, ‘the body’ has frequently acted as little more than a buzzword in contemporary cultural studies, and this is mostly due to the inherent verbocentrism of present day
semiotics and the fact that the role of the body in interaction with linguistic
schemata has gone largely untheorised. Theories of the body have generally
sought to find a place contiguous with the dominant view of language,
resulting in a base level incompatibility between their radical intentions and
the conservative, deeply flawed structuralist suppositions. At the same time,
in the parallel field of cognitive science, which includes the linguistic and
philosophical writings drawn from it, a new focus on the body has emerged. It
is important to outline the approach of cognitive linguists to the subject of the
body so as to make Ruthrof’s corporeal pragmatics clearer and to also further
distinguish and highlight Ruthrof’s unique contribution to the debate.

In recent times, Lakoff and Johnson’s *Philosophy in the Flesh* has
attracted perhaps the greatest attention in the field of cognitive linguistics,
cultivating a significant shock value intended perhaps to compensate for the
work’s lack of erudition. The book’s subtitle, *The Embodied Mind and Its
Challenge to Western Thought*, gives a clear indication of the grandiose
scope of Lakoff and Johnson’s claims. Unfortunately, like much of what has
been written in the field prior to the development of corporeal pragmatics, a
mix of serious foundational errors and a slippage within the writers’ own
definitional economy means that *Philosophy in the Flesh* is not the radical,
breakthrough text that many might hope. Lakoff and Johnson begin their
treatise with three statements that are the foundation for their arguments
about the embodiment of human reason. First, they state, “The mind is
inherently embodied;” second, that “Thought is mostly unconscious,” and
third, “Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 3). From the very outset these pronouncements give cause for worry, though fears that begin as intuitions are quickly nurtured so that it is not long before the central presumptions of the authors can be identified.

With the first statement no real fault can be found even if in philosophy, writers have long since learnt to steer clear of calling anything inherent. Nevertheless, since Lakoff and Johnson are concerned primarily with a physical description of the mind, its neuro-chemical and motor processes, it is easy to agree that if one wishes to call the brain ‘the mind,’ then it is certainly embodied. More problematic is the assertion that “thought is mostly unconscious,” since this comment presages an argument in which much of the complexity of human thought can be explained away rather than rigorously accounted for, since it can be said that thought processes occur almost entirely unconsciously and thus cannot be studied or measured. That “abstract concepts are largely metaphorical” is only problematic in that it seems to put a limit upon what can considered as a metaphor. That we understand things in terms of other things is a hallmark of structuralist semiotics and thus hardly revolutionary. Compared to the treatment of metaphor by corporeal pragmatics, the authors’ greatest risk is that they potentially do not go far enough in their radical account.

Thus in three sentences the authors set up a theoretical framework that conveys a strong essentialist basis and that does not account for culture in any direct way. Their statements suggest a weak attitude to theoretical
rigour since they adopt a position in regards to meaning that it seems, by dint of the metaphoricity of concepts not being a general condition, will have certain disclaimers or conditional instances where their argument cannot be carried through. Conversely, when Lakoff and Johnson do deal with the subject of metaphors, they attempt to map them extensively in a nod to the scientific method that they claim to represent. However, the scientific justification for their work “is, of course, arrived at through scientific investigation, including sophisticated techniques and a heavy dose of theoretical abstraction [my italics]” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 103). That this latter comment is thrown in rather unproblematically is cause for worry and completely undermines the various instances of pseudo-science that litter the work.

As becomes clearer in the breakdown of Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptions of the mind, the unconscious, and reason as metaphor, the scientific method via which the authors attempt to prove their argument suffers most of all from a failure to define what is actually meant by ‘reason.’ Probably due to their backgrounds in linguistics, at each point that Lakoff and Johnson are required to provide evidence of the embodiment of reason, they instead offer examples of language use. Since it cannot be accepted on faith that human language capabilities are anything but a flower on the surface of a deeper, more vast network of relations, from the very beginning the authors never have much hope of convincing their readership, simply because their emphasis is skewed. They never pose any coherent argument about reason
even if that is their intention. Furthermore, even if they do intend to show that language use is embodied, their arguments to that effect are inconsistent.

The authors have a strong biological materialist position when it comes to their discussion of the human mind. They conceive of the modern mind as having evolved from a simpler version much as suggested by evolutionary science, so that the present day human aptitude for “abstract reason builds on and makes use of forms of perceptual and motor inference present in ‘lower’ animals.” Consequently Lakoff and Johnson view it that “Reason is thus not an essence that separates us from other animals; rather, it places us on a continuum, with them” (1999, 4). Although such a statement might have been shocking four hundred years ago, in today’s field most non-religious disciplines continue to uncover more evidence of humans’ similarity to animals rather than their differences. The push towards erasing the artificial barriers of distinction that have been raised in the past between humans and animals is largely a scientific drive. The radical import of Lakoff and Johnson’s pronouncement falls short because in postmodernity, such bio-scientific presumptions underwrite daily social life. Almost as if in response to increasing everyday sophistication, and running counter-point to the decline in religious fancy worldwide, the discourse of ‘man as animal’ has become a part of popular culture in recent years if for no other reason than as a global excuse for particular types of aberrant social behaviour. It is fair to say that the scientific notion of human beings and animals sharing many of the same characteristics is not particularly upsetting for many people, at least those
who’s sense of self is not based imaginary stories or mythic origins.

Lakoff and Johnson nonetheless use this basis to argue that in humans, as “higher” animals, reason “arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience . . . the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment” (1999, 4). Furthermore, “Real people have embodied minds whose conceptual systems arise from, are shaped by, and are given meaning through living human bodies” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 6). At first consideration these comments definitely seem contrary to the structuralist account of meaning making, even coming close to the position taken by corporeal pragmatics, reinstating the body as the prime locus of meaning-making. However, Lakoff and Johnson are not arguing, as corporeal pragmatics does, that our bodily meanings (derived from our senses and the imaginative powers of our minds) are the deep structure of meaning to which linguistic signs apply themselves in an entirely dependent way. Instead, their inference is that our bodies, completely on their own and without reference to any outside influence (excluding not just culture but also simple physical environmental triggers such as rain and sunshine and day and night), are the determining factor behind the meanings we make. The moment that the authors go beyond the body and its senses and attempt to ascribe agency to the physiological structures underlying them, their argument slips into a naturalistic, essentialist mode and becomes unsupportable. Such a perspective eschews any social determination in the meanings we make and in the ways that we use them. The horse is therefore
put before the cart in exactly the way we wouldn’t want it.

To a picture in which the physiological structures of the brain and the body’s senses exclusively determine the meanings we make, Lakoff and Johnson add the observation that all forms of society that exist in the world are underwritten by our biological structures. To the authors, it is the commonality of human bodies that means that only a narrow range of social forms out of all possible and imagined ones actually exist. If people see the world the same way, have the same brain structures and thus the same orders of meaning, the way in which they set themselves up socially is likely to be much the same, with a certain variance thrown in for environment and climate factors, economies and traditions based on particular regional flora and fauna etc. Lakoff and Johnson indicate the body as the point of origin for certain central ideas recurring across cultures, and in the discussion of abstract thought as metaphoric, they go on to argue that, barring one or two examples, the metaphors they list for abstract ideas are also largely universal.

Of course, the grounds for this argument are so shaky that they worry any experienced reader as to how such ideas could be proposed in the first place. Quite apart from it taking the existence of only a handful of unique social forms to destroy the coherence and unity of Lakoff and Johnson’s suggestion (the practice of bigamy in some cultures instead of the biological pairing of breeding ‘mates,’ mono- versus pantheism, differing attitudes to the aged and aging, the size and proximity to which one keeps one’s extended family, etc.), the very fact that we can imagine social forms that do not exist –
and that according to the authors everything we can conceive is governed by the structures of our minds – means that they must nevertheless be possible even if we cannot account for them or put them into action. The failure to account for the wild extremes of human imagination and a priori reasoning is just one area in which Philosophy in the Flesh differs from corporeal pragmatics, in which the capacity for fantasy projections is central to the very processes of thought.

From forms of society to types of social interaction, the authors go on to explain how reason operates in the embodied mind when it comes to social behaviour. The explanation suffers from a similar problem of reversal as outlined above. Lakoff and Johnson argue that “the very properties of concepts are created as a result of the way the brain and body are structured and the way they function in interpersonal relations and in the physical world” (1999, 37). Thus the argument goes that we interact in the world according to the ways our brains allow us. However, it seems more plausible that, as the products of an evolutionary refining process, our brains and thus our minds have been shaped so as to accommodate the sorts of factors already existing in the world. In such a way, whether in natural selection or sheer adaptability, the species’ ability to survive is heightened by the reaction of our brains to the stimulus that it receives. This alternative explanation thus entails a model of human behaviour where we interact with the world and each other to the best of our abilities, hopefully adapting to new ways and getting better at our interactions as time passes. Lakoff and Johnson’s explanation offers a quite
different and far more uncomfortable picture, wherein the set and static nature of human consciousness allows for only one particular mode of operation that may or may not be compatible with the hard facts of the world at any given instance. In this sense, humans are evolutionary on neither a geological time scale nor within individual lifetimes. In such a theory, humans are thus broken biological machines capable of only a very unreliable relation with our world and the other equally non-adaptive units in it.

Such an understanding is the only means by which we can make sense of Lakoff and Johnson’s argument as to how humans make decisions and reason through difficult situations. In the authors’ equation, the many complexities involved in negotiating the world of social relations are dealt with by ‘prototypes,’ which are learning-based, decision-making systems hardwired into the brain at the neural level and reinforced by concomitant experience. They state that “prototype-based reasoning constitutes a large proportion of the actual reasoning that we do.” Furthermore, prototypes “are used in drawing inferences about category members in the absence of any special contextual information.” Thus experience and stimuli are sorted into particular categories that are arranged in a computational manner just like a flow-chart. Thus for instance, “Social stereotypes are used to make snap judgements, usually about people” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 19). While it might seem to offer an explanation for the hasty nature of many subjects’ decision-making processes, by and large it is difficult to hold with what the authors proffer. If what Lakoff and Johnson say is so, and that human
subjects are universal in their sharing of neural structures and, furthermore, if cultural codes make not a lot of difference to how people reason, then how is it that within the same random selection of people, or even within the same community, people do not make the same judgements every time but instead act differently and make different decisions?

Although the plausibility of the authors’ account is in no way enhanced by it, our understanding of how such conclusions can be reached is assisted by looking at the second opening statement that they make. In viewing thought as mostly unconscious, the authors have the means at their disposal to sweep away the need to explain much about neural processes, since the unconscious is largely impervious to detailed study. The whole thrust of their argument is hedged on the premise that the “existence of the cognitive unconscious . . . [is] a fact fundamental to all conceptions of cognitive science” in which Lakoff and Johnson include themselves (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 12). “All aspects of thought and language, conscious or unconscious, are thus cognitive. This includes phonology, grammar, conceptual systems, the mental lexicon, and all unconscious inferences of any sort” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 11). If Lakoff and Johnson are claiming these processes are unconscious, and they claim that “Most of these structures and operations have been found to be unconscious” (1999, 11), then they would be at odds to explain what takes place when a listener must interpret a ‘broken’ or cross-cultural inference that cannot be processed rapidly.
In such instances, the listener is forced to slow down and consciously pick apart the individual signifiers in order to construct sense. Yet the authors argue, “to understand even the simplest utterance, we must perform these and other incredibly complex forms of thought automatically and without noticeable effort below the level of consciousness.” Furthermore, the processes of cognition “are inaccessible to conscious awareness and control” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999,11). Lakoff and Johnson talk about cognition as largely unconscious, yet many of the processes that occur in a biological description of cognition are not thoughts at all (the firing of neurones, the passage of the electrical current throughout the nervous system, the neuro-chemical behaviour of brain cells, etc.). Rather than cognition being unconscious, it can be argued instead that mental processes are of two kinds: exceedingly rapid mental projections; and largely mechanical physical processes crucial to the functioning of the brain that are not themselves actually redeemable as thoughts. This is the position taken also by corporeal pragmatics, where thought processes occur so rapidly that we have only a ‘sense’ of their happening – it is their speed rather then their submersion (depth) that makes them seemingly inaccessible to analysis. Yet in instances of cross-cultural contact, which are themselves “somewhat analogous to a pedagogical relationship, in which the master must bring to the state of explicitness, for the purposes of transmission, the unconscious schemes of his practice,” processes of cognition are slowed and their structures yield to analysis instead of remaining unknowable and partitioned within the
unconscious (Bourdieu 1977, 18).

Another area in which Lakoff and Johnson take the originary power of the body too far can be found in their explanation of the workings of complex metaphors (as made up of primarily body-grounded metaphors), which completely overshadows other well-established theories such as discourse analysis. With complex forms of reason being grounded in complex metaphors that can be traced back to the body, there is no room for the consideration of the social inculcation of ideas and myth in the form of ideology or through discourses. Lakoff and Johnson fail to account for how it is that in using metaphors, individual subjects learn to connect one image or sense-reading with another, a process that is generally considered to be socially-guided but with a rich framework that allows for myriad novel metaphors to enter the language via literature and everyday speech. By making the body the source, for Lakoff and Johnson every person arrives more or less at the same complex metaphors independently – a state of affairs that somewhat challenges credibility.

Besides which, the authors acknowledge that certain metaphors function only in certain places (“Love Is A Journey” in America, for instance). Once the spectre of culture has been raised it throws yet another problematic into the workings of the cognitive machine. The authors acknowledge that “When we speak of [the brain as] ‘neural circuitry,’ we are, of course, using an important metaphor to conceptualise neural structure in electronic terms” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 103). Even though the “circuitry metaphor is used
by the neuroscience community at large” – or perhaps because of this fact – the understanding of the embodied mind may prove to be nothing more than a concept, perhaps even a concept that ‘works’ (reflecting the embodied experience), yet does not gel with material facts. The moment that a consideration of culture is allowed in, the constructedness of everything, including complex metaphors such as the brain as circuitry, must be admitted. It is another instance of the metaphoricity of metaphors being taken for granted.

The focus on the embodied mind operating according to complex metaphors is a prime example of the difficulty raised earlier, which is that throughout the discussion of the embodied function of reason, Lakoff and Johnson resort to examples of language as evidence for their points. On pages 40 and 41, the authors cite examples of studies linking physical motion and language use, and take this as evidence of the “direct embodiment of reason” (1999, 43). This is perplexingly not the case. Yet “it is eminently plausible,” Lakoff and Johnson write, “that reason has grown out of the sensory and motor systems and that it still uses those systems or structures developed from them. This explains why we have the kinds of concepts we have and why our concepts have the properties they have” (1999, 43).

The authors define concepts as “neural structures that allow us to mentally characterise our categories and reason about them” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 19), yet because the scientific neural mapping technique upon which so much of their propositions stand has not yet actually been perfected
well enough to prove anything, the writers unsurprisingly revert to a linguistic understanding of concepts. Thus when they talk about 'reason,' they consistently cite incidences of the linguistic construction of the world. Not only does this move reveal the verbocentric perspective from which the authors operate, but if they were to try another angle and state instead that the body is the definitional locus for linguistic meanings then they would at least then be in agreement with corporeal pragmatics, while remaining controversial compared to the Saussurean structuralist heritage.

Speaking of Lakoff’s prior work with Mark Turner, Ruthrof writes, “One suspects at this point that the authors are not clear about the metaphysical position they wish to hold and what role significatory practices such as language play in their ontology” (1997, 162). In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, this indiscriminateness seems to have continued. The slippage between definitions of reason and of language use is constant. The authors don’t shed much light on the workings of reason in the end, having offered nothing more than yet another language-oriented, non-rigorous pseudo-science to the vast body of Western philosophical thought. Even if viewed as a contribution to a corporeal theory of language, their claims are a lot less radical if all they are saying is that the use of language is much more metaphorical (in an everyday sense) than was previously acknowledged. Corporeal pragmatics incorporates this statement and much more besides without falling prey to the traps Lakoff and Johnson set for themselves. Added to this their serious interpretive difficulties with the ideas of Universalism, transcendental
knowledge and *a priori* reasoning, misreadings of Kant and the authors’ alleged attack on the whole history of philosophy while mysteriously failing to address any of the key claims of twentieth century European structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, the reader emerges from *Philosophy in the Flesh* either convinced by the authors’ rhetoric and interpellated into a discussion dependent on a degree of shared ignorance, or instead left with many questions about the body, reason and language use frustratingly unanswered.

Lakoff and Johnson’s account fails to move the debate since it ultimately refers back to a set position on language despite pretences concerning the physical embodiment of thought. Ruthrof argues that only by starting with challenging assumptions about language can a place be made for the body instead of language as the source of our experience of reality. As he observes, “The idea that we experience the world as differentiated only because of language is a wild prejudice. If this were so, we would be the only organism capable of making fine distinctions in our environment, an unlikely scenario given the split-second and spatially acute performances of other animals.” At its heart, corporeal pragmatics asserts that “We are in the world as a totality, not just as sentences” (Ruthrof 2000, 34). Corporeal pragmatics therefore equates being in the world with the experience of being in our bodies. Ruthrof writes, “without the body there would be no perceptual world, and without a perceptual world, language would have nothing to do” (2000, 127). Thus, our bodies’ experiences form the basis for the meanings we later
communicate through linguistic signifiers.

When we speak of the body, it is not to focus upon mute flesh. To consider the basis of bodily experience free of language, we are forced to open ourselves up to the myriad ways that we encounter stimuli in the world, with the result that we turn to the senses. A verbocentric understanding of signification still presses us to understand our senses in terms of language. Lyotard, for instance, states that one phrase that cannot be fully comprehended by anyone else but the addressor is “My teeth hurt!” He argues that while the body is a physical reality, it is also “a set of symptoms [symptoms made up of phrases] read and treated on the basis of an Idea of the good body” (Lyotard 1988, 83). Thus Zettel asks, “How can you verify that it is a lived experience? You are the exclusive addressee of this pain. It is like the voice of God: ‘You can’t hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed’” (qtd. in Lyotard 1988, 83). The pressure to reinstate language as the schema for bodily experience gives rise to absurdist arguments, and notions such as the idiolect – a special case dealing with language when it is understood by only one person – become extended to accommodate extraneous situations.

Verbocentric thinking bends itself backwards to describe a sense reading such as pain as if it were verbal when it clearly is not. While it can be agreed that toothache conveys meaning and is perhaps even communicable by nonverbal means (smashing in the addressee’s teeth as well, for instance), the idiolect of the senses is not available to verbal signifiers in anything
except a rough approximation. This is no different a case to the usual language act which presents verbal signs in the absence of the objects themselves. However, with physical experiences and sensations we are hard pressed to define a grammar, a syntax, a precise vocabulary, synonyms and antonyms, etc., and grammatologists are equally unable to define what constitutes a statement in the idiolect of pain. Clever arguments exist to encourage us to acknowledge the validity of the idiolect. Lyotard writes that “if your lived experience is not communicable, you cannot testify that it exists; if it is communicable, you cannot say that you are the only one able to testify that it exists” (1988, 83-4). Yet this sort of sense only holds validity when we acknowledge that language is a closed circle and that we require external validation in order to satisfy truth conditions. As vulgar a counter-argument as it may be, any truly pained person knows that their experience is real without corroboration. If we communicate our pain it is to beg assistance, to seek sympathy, to win support, or for various other socio-cultural reasons. The pain itself is a sense reading – what Ruthrof refers to as a nonverbal sign.

So when we speak of bodily meanings, we are referring to sense-readings of the world. Just as language is the most economic means of communicating information, the eyes are the most direct of the senses.28 We tend to accord vision a greater truth-value than we do any of the other senses. Perhaps it is for reasons such as these that Peirce insists that icons (visual signs) are the determining factor in semiosis. However, in recent years

28 It could be argued that our prime sense is touch if it were not for the fact that we put ourselves at risk in order to fully embrace the world through touch, whereas our eyes generally keep us safe.
too much focus has been given to ideas of ‘the gaze,’ as if sight (in close partnership with language) is an inherently masculine apparatus that transforms the world in the act of looking. It is not our eyes that shape the world, but the sense we make of what we see; and if we do damage the world we do so by communicating our impressions of it and acting upon them. In corporeal pragmatics, the visual is just one of many diverse ways in which we experience our world. For instance, “Bodily extension in space and the body’s kinetic scope function as first base for spatial representation” (Ruthrof 2000, 11). The traditional notion of the ‘five senses’ captures only a part of the full range of our perceptual and quasi-perceptual experiences.

Our bodily experiences are more than just the sum of our visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory and haptic capacities. We also have a sense of balance and a sense of proximity or distance from other objects. We feel gravity’s hold. As an extension of our bodies we feel heat or cold and pain or pleasure. As we delve deeper into our sensoria (and thus our minds) we have a sense of time and place, and these lead to other ‘feelings’ that are not normally accorded the property of being senses at all. We order the world according to the relevance and sense of importance that things hold for us, so that we react differently to gunfire on television than when it is in the street outside. To the degree that they are hormonal or bio-chemical, we have emotions that also affect our readings of the world. Thus when Ruthrof speaks about recognising the body’s role in language, his focus upon the body is mostly in ‘quasi-perceptual’ terms as a locus for the senses. However, along with the
body, the gaze and the senses, Ruthrof recognises the crucial, overarching operation of the mind in acts of mental projection.

Ruthrof writes, “Both the imaginative variation of objects and the realisation of their adumbralonal aspects in phenomenological reduction are derived from visual acts” (2000, 9). Mental projection is a fantasy act. It frequently involves imagining material that does not exist. “Appresentation, the imagining of habitual but absent aspects of reality, is a quasi-perceptual procedure” that is vital to our construal of the world (Ruthrof 2000, 9).

Likewise when we encounter signs that refer to things not present, the rapid projection of mental frames allows us to negotiate implied semiotic terrains. Bourdieu draws a distinct line between the social conditions of the community and “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations” that it entails, for which the ability to fantasise is absolutely crucial (1977, 78).

Thus in mental projection we come to nothing less than the idea of our imagination – our ability to fantasise hypothetical spatio-sensual and emotional constructions – as the overseer of our minds and our senses. In our human ability to project, rationalise and imagine, our senses and the meanings we make of them are unified. It is only a small step further to imagine how the facility of language allows us to communicate these experiences via arbitrary yet community-distinct vocabularies of verbal signs.

“According to Searle,” Ruthrof writes, “to operate at the level of semantics we have to have something in addition to the formal symbols. Understanding a language, he says, involves having mental states which
provide syntax with meaning” (2000, 35). Likewise from Heidegger, corporeal pragmatics cements the view “that understanding and interpretation are not restricted to language but underlie both language and nonverbal ways of grasping the world” (Ruthrof 2000, 46). The trap of conflating acts of reason with acts of meaning making must be carefully avoided in corporeal pragmatics just as it must be in conventional theories of language. However, while our imaginations are not the sum of our rational capacity, mental projection is crucial if we are to have any sort of transcendental knowledge; and we must possess this ability to construct hypothetical schemata if we are to have any hope of negotiating the conflicting and crowded signifiers of everyday life. Therefore, in such an understanding our linguistic capacity becomes just another device by which our minds make sense of the world. Language is subordinate to and dependent upon the nonverbal readings of our senses. Indeed, “language is parasitic on nonverbal signification in an even more crucial sense: language needs nonverbal mental projections to mean at all” (Ruthrof 2000, 25).

Thus we come to the central tenet of corporeal pragmatics, that “nonverbal signs are the deep structure of language and meaning is the event of an association of nonverbal and linguistic signs” (Ruthrof 2000, 1). Contrary to everything that has been inherited from structuralism, we are reminded that:

sounds do not form an independent matrix of differential relations that ‘mean’ on their own. Rather, they mean because they form the material, phonemic matrix that is systematically related to a second, nonverbal matrix of mental ‘maps.’ And meaningful utterances are the
result of relating the two according to social rules. (Ruthrof 2000, 87)

Verbal signs are translated semantically into units of meaning. This process “allows us to imagine a three-dimensional world, which in turn we use as a more complex set of signs on which we can construct more abstract signs. It is at this level that we speak of a work’s ideational content, its ideology, its message, its ideological motivation, and perhaps its metaphysics” (Ruthrof 2000, 76). Thus the density and complexity of the ideas that we are able to construct on this basis surpass the relative paucity offered by the structuralist conviction that meanings “are the result of the differential relations between terms” (Ruthrof 2000, 23). Corporeal pragmatics does not make any claims that the signifieds resulting from nonverbal fantasies are any more stable than the understanding of signs in conventional theory. Nevertheless, in profusion these signifiers allow us to maintain a relatively stable relationship with our environment.

Ruthrof argues that there is no inherent meaning in language, and he explains that “what the expression ‘there is no meaning in language’ suggests is that linguistic signifiers even in standard grammatical order are in themselves no more than empty grids or sound patterns which attain meaning only under very specific circumstances” (2000, 25). These circumstances are the combination of linguistic signs with nonverbal readings. Sense-readings originate from the body and the appresentational mind, and in the discussion so far it might seem possible to think that corporeal pragmatics steps away from the post-structuralist understanding of the social constructedness of
meanings, since agency seems to be given over entirely to the body. This is not the case. Nonverbal meanings do not refer to “a set of unmediated data, but rather a fabric of nonverbal signs out of which cultures weave the world the way they see it. When this happens, language is no longer empty but directed” (Ruthrof 2000, 31). Despite having been removed from its central position as the sum and total of meaning, corporeal pragmatics still acknowledges that language holds a primary role in the development of culture and the normative character of day-to-day life.

Culture plays an enormous part in making sense of the body’s experiences of the world through haptic, olfactory, gustatory and other media. “If we had not learned from earliest childhood, perhaps to some extent even prenatally, how to associate linguistic sounds with nonverbal materials, we would have no meaning” (Ruthrof 2000, 30). As seen in the discussion of Habermas and Halliday, a link is often either discreetly or overtly implied between the development of human society and the development of language faculties in children. That both explanations imply a cultural dimension is usually the reason for this mirroring, and so might seem the case with Ruthrof’s argument in The Body in Language. However, when Ruthrof considers the acquisition and development of language in young children, he specifically compares this to how he imagines human beings first came to employ language. Because Ruthrof does not think of society as a collection of linguistic meanings nor of the child as essentially a linguistic subject, he does not attempt to force a parallel between social and individual development.
Instead, the comparison is drawn between the specific first instance of a child’s language use and the first language use of our earliest ancestors. In this case, both are examples of entities that evolve into language users for particular reasons: children, because of the community-guided process of teaching them how to communicate experiences with specific utterances; and in primitive humans, because language use allowed communication to take place on an increasingly sophisticated level. Consequently the view of natural languages in pre-history and their benefit to us now is because they evolved “as economising grids covering existing rudimentary forms of reading the world and of communication” (Ruthrof 2000, 128).

Ruthrof’s explanation of language harkens back to his argument that language is not the only form of significant meaning making; it is instead viewed as the dominant form among many alternatives, mostly by reason of its efficacy in communicating complex ideas according to a set of formal rules (grammar being just one of these conventions). The community’s contribution to this process is largely found in the solidity of these rules. The community can be understood as made up of members who hold a particular set of shared meanings as a symbolic order or worldview – this includes linguistic meanings, but also unwritten codes, norms of behaviour, rituals, customs, etc. Bourdieu resurrects the Aristotelian term ‘habitus’ in order to convey this idea of social rules informing how language is used, though his term refers

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29 These are, of course, the same reasons in different guises.
30 “The material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition” (Bourdieu 1977, 72).
more to the conventions of social acts involving language. He says little about from where linguistic signs draw their meaning.

To utilise Ruthrof’s theory effectively, our notion of community and culture must be fluid, since we are able to apply the notion of community-guided meanings to all sorts of situations, moving up and down a scale that acknowledges not just demarcations of size but also class, geography, gender, ethnicity, etc. “A community, then, can vary considerably in size and social character, as well as gender stratification, and still be conceived as a rule-providing mechanism for the speaking and fantasising subject” (Ruthrof 2000, 133). In postmodernity, we can also argue that after adolescence, the subject potentially moves through a series of communities, each one interpelling the subject to be shaped by the codes and conventions of the social organisations of which he or she becomes a part. Thus the impact of the peer group, the university, school or workplace becomes analysable in terms of an instruction in the means of connecting verbal signifiers with nonverbal signs, which itself is reflected in new modes of behaviour, performances, customs and rituals, and so on.

Therefore there are two main ways in which new members of a sign community are instructed. The first deals with learning specific meanings of words, memorising the correct connection between the arbitrary verbal signifier and the nonverbal meaning to which it correlates. Those struggling to overturn the conventional structuralist account of signification experience a dilemma at this point. On the one hand the explanation offered by corporeal
pragmatics leads to conclusions that differ from those given by dominant theories that are entrenched and difficult to reject. Yet on the other hand it is not really saying anything new to acknowledge that instruction functions in this way. Any parent of a young child knows that this is the case, pointing to a chicken and making absurd noises. Ruthrof anticipates this dilemma and shows how even for Merleau-Ponty, the conclusions of corporeal pragmatics are a no-brainer: “As for the meaning of the word, I learn it as I learn to use a tool, by seeing it used in the context of a certain situation” (qtd. in Ruthrof 2000, 12).

The guiding process whereby infants come to identify specific signifiers with particular meanings is entirely cultural. In this process the children simply learn to associate a range of words with particular phenomena that they experience bodily. Later, they learn the written marks for these words too, but before then the child is already immersed in another aspect of the communal function, which is to learn how to combine certain sounds so as to produce meanings that are coherent to other members of the same community, much in the same method that Halliday proposes. In such a manner, children do not only learn the most typical pathways for predicting the world and its relations, they also learn general principles that allow them to construct fantasies “from the most realist reflection of physical reality to their most bizarre transformations” (Ruthrof 2000, 133). The development of future utterances

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31 The development of the child’s ability to deceive – a classic stage in almost any theory of childhood development – can be seen as the application of this capacity in an early manifestation.
that communicate new experiences and the creative arts of writing such as poetry and drama would be impossible without this facility to play with language, and these artforms exist as solid evidence arguing against any theory of language in which the ability to conceive of that which does not exist goes unexplained.

The community’s second role revolves around ‘deixis,’ which is the instruction of the subject to use verbal signifiers (tied to nonverbal meanings) in the appropriate fashion for the culture. The more arbitrary that signs are, the more detailed and formal the rules for their use need to be, and this information is communicated by cultural codes. However, even with fairly straightforward signifiers, whenever “something is understood in terms of something else, none of the signifieds so produced is stable. And yet we understand, at least tentatively, what speakers in our semiotic community are on about” (Ruthrof 2000, 47). Deixis is the mechanism that guides our ability to communicate complex meanings in the verbal signifiers that relate to our nonverbal experiences. Ruthrof observes that implicit deixis appears as common sense to native speakers of a language (2000, 49). However, to say that the conventions of one means of communication are ‘implicit’ is not to say that it occurs without the guidance of norms.

If the use of language is guided by communal use – and use is best defined by the linking procedures forged between linguistic schemata and nonverbal meanings – then there is no such thing as implicit meaning. If implicit meaning was possible it would be open to all, but this is not the case.
“Implicit deixis is deeply cultural. It is the result of pedagogy from the minute we are born into the community” (Ruthrof 2000, 49). In its simplest articulation, corporeal pragmatics holds that “we communicate meanings; that they somehow relate to the world we live in; that language coheres as a system; that language is not a private affair but that we are taught how to use it; and that our sensory readings have something to do with the way we express ourselves” (Ruthrof 2000, 20). Those sense readings are shared by virtue of our common human physiognomy, and the word associations are shared because of our individual communal ties.

The corporeal pragmatic understanding of culture and the importance it holds in the language learning process challenges structuralism by acknowledging that each community – for which we can substitute cultures, nations, ethnicities and, most importantly, language groupings – speaks in a different way. Whether it is in differences between competence in modes of language use (something with which Halliday is concerned), or that competing vocabularies are available to individual children, we encounter a fundamental incompatibility with the Saussurean view. A child for whom English and Gaelic are options performs word substitutions intuitively (as long as we accept that intuitions are nothing more than an unconscious, intersemiotic knowledge so vast or beyond our ability to grasp that it defies our efforts to articulate it). Yet between speakers in different communities “there is no meaning in the differential relations between signifiers and their explanation via other signifiers” (Ruthrof 2000, 23). Speakers of English
visiting Éire see street signs in an uncial font and know that it is a language. Yet even though this implies a system of related signifiers the tourists remain outside the language (a feat formerly believed to be impossible) because the signifiers are meaningless to them.

This reality is completely incompatible with the structuralist account of language. When in adulthood we learn a language we do our own policing – we become our own community – and the resources we draw upon to acquire a new sign system stand in for the community’s instruction in the rules of formulation for the new language. As Ruthrof observes, “The very ‘same’ item in two cultures, the ‘same’ reference in analytical terms, has a different meaning by virtue of a different cultural speech stance, a culture’s implicit deixis or hidden cultural modalities” (2000, 59). Non-native and self-taught foreign language speakers experience this disequilibrium constantly, whether it is finding out that ‘change’ is a verb that also refers to a loose collection of coins, or that in some places it is appropriate to call an old woman seanmháthair (grandmother) despite her not being a blood relative. Meaning-making acts are controlled by culture “to the degree that we have learned to respond to the sounds of linguistic expressions in such a way that we produce typical and largely shared fantasies about the world” (Ruthrof 2000, 116). This process is what gives cultures their cohesion and sense of identity. Where this enculturation has not been complete, we are left partially outside the chains of signification.

Thus far we have concluded that language use, meaning association
and communal instruction are tightly interwoven. In the simplest sense, the community authorises certain interpretations of signs and their use as legitimate, implying the exclusion of other readings. Close communication takes place where speakers interact more or less in keeping with these shared and therefore sanctioned interpretations. However to look at how the meanings of words are tied to particular bodily readings and how those signs are combined into sensical utterances according to rule-guided performances is to take our analysis only halfway. Previously it has been acknowledged that contemporary semiotics is at its most potent when it asserts that the normative and legitimising character of social communication lends itself to an analysis of not only meanings but also how social forces and interpersonal and institutional power are imbricated in the shaping of the individual’s experience of reality. In essence this acknowledges that when we study them at the level of a social population, cultures are inherently normative.

Diverse forces vie for the power to shape individuals’ perceptions and behaviour, whether it is the support for a particular political point of view or economic apparatus, or adherence to concepts along religious, ethical or gendered lines. In contemporary semiotics these motivating ideas are understood as discourses. The totality of what Foucault has to say on discourse has not been taken up by semiotics mostly due to reasons that have already been outlined: semiotics still labours under the difficulty of, first, embracing several different contingent understandings of discourse (with the resulting loss of rigour that this entails), and second, that the semiotic
adherence to a Saussurean view of language makes it difficult to take on board ideas which themselves are not completely founded upon this same view. However, it is only by embracing the rich totality of discourse as it is defined by Foucault that we are able to use the category of discourse to analyse conflict at the level of social groups or communities.

Corporeal pragmatics has several direct implications for the study of discourse. It views discourse as ideas or concepts in the Kantian sense, being social rules that direct the combination of empty linguistic schemata with nonverbal signs (Ruthrof 2000, 134). Prior to corporeal pragmatics, what has emerged in the analysis of discourse “is a semiotic picture in which not information but the imposition of power is the primary function of language” (Ruthrof 2000, 138). Ruthrof writes:

As the framing space for signs or as the mechanism that tells a speaker how to fill the empty language grid with nonverbal signs, the community appears as the prison guard of meanings. The result is what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘subjectification,’ the formation and fixing of subjectivity from the outside. This is a death sentence for ‘subjectivation,’ the emancipatory process of self-positing of subjectivity. (2000, 137-8)

We should acknowledge that it is possible to have a less all-consumingly sinister view of discourse. A degree of balance is required. As a framing mechanism for meaning events, the community allows both communication and oppression. The agonistics proposed by Lyotard are useful when we examine instances of strictly linguistic conflict, but it is unnecessary to proclaim that all communication is agonistic just because conflict often occurs. If all it takes to contradict Lyotard is a few instances where
communication is not agonistic, then we are hard pressed not to discount this argument altogether.

It is important that any account of discourse is able to describe the conflict that sometimes underwrites the relations between individual subjects and between communities. However, as it stands, it appears that neither the différend nor a semiotic definition of discourse is by itself able to grant the insights desired. Both of these devices operate exclusively at the level of language. Although Foucault talks of discourse as a form of behaviour, he does not pursue a full explication of the potential analysis that this insight can allow (see Chapter Five). From the perspective of corporeal pragmatics, in the standard definitions of discourse, it cannot be said to carry “meaning if discourse is described in linguistic terms as no more than language as social practice.” Instead it should be said that it is “the relation between discourse and non-linguistic sign systems, which gradually shifts along historical trajectories, that allows the event of meaning to occur in each instance” (Ruthrof 1997, 168). Therefore, if discourse refers to the world and it does so based upon nonverbal meanings, and if in overturning the verbocentric beliefs of structuralism we no longer accept that we are locked into a purely linguistic chain of signification, then we need to know exactly what the mechanisms of semiosis are and what prospects they offer us for an alternative explanation of meaning-making so as to yield a more emancipatory perspective on conflict. In order to speak of conflict between discourses, whether verbal or nonverbal, we need to explore how conflict occurs at the level of nonverbal
signs.

Ruthrof offers the two categories of ‘intersemiosis’ and ‘heterosemiosis’ as the means by which we can struggle towards an understanding of conflict that does not leave us completely impotent. Through intersemiosis we can track the way that Peirce’s interpretant and Saussure’s differential relations, while they seem to imply a similar process (and thus a similar impasse), are not the same. In Saussure we have identified the argument that verbal signs are the dominant form of meaning and that they are only understood by relation to other verbal signs. As Derrida points out, this leads to a situation in which meaning might be said to reside not in the words themselves but in the relation between signs. However Peirce argues that when we encounter a sign we understand it only by constructing a sort of meta-sign, its interpretant, by which we draw relations and distinctions that form another interpretant, and that this process goes on \textit{ad infinitum}.

Whereas Saussure confirms that signification occurs between linguistic units, Peirce’s theory is predicated upon the basis of three distinct orders of signs – the icon, the index and the symbol, thereby defying the structuralist conjecture that semiotics is a closed system.

While not directly acknowledging nonverbal registers other than the gaze, Peirce’s triad fits better with corporeal pragmatics than the Saussurean sign, which leaves no room for signification outside language whatsoever. For Ruthrof, intersemiosis takes place when we understand a sign by referring to another sign, but the important distinction here is that those signs originate
from different registers of verbal and nonverbal meaning. Thus in a blackened room we substitute eyesight for touch. A beautiful flower is appreciated for its scent. We express our fondness for a person that we see via an embrace. A fine meal can taste as good as it looks, and so on. Thus it holds true that these signs, themselves never completely stable, are understood only by reference to other signs; and yet at the same time, while we remain caught up in an ongoing process of sign substitution, we are not trapped within the same medium. This free substitution of media is the definitive character of intersemiosis. We substitute the visual for the haptic or the olfactory or the gustatory, and if we cannot communicate by one means (if we are deafened, for instance) we have recourse to other methods (gesture, writing, display, etc.).

Heterosemiosis takes the principle of intersemiosis and inverts it. Whereas intersemiosis establishes the idea of signs in different systems contributing to the same general meaning or ‘object,’ heterosemiosis deals with signs that “are different in kind and in terms of level of abstraction, in terms of materiality, ideality and intentionality” (Ruthrof 2000, 76). Writers often speak of meanings that are contradictory, or discourses that contain contradictions, and yet this observation is rarely developed as anything other than a feeling or an intuition. In the theory of heterosemiosis, corporeal pragmatics allows for the juxtapositions and contradictory readings that inhere in the articulation of the meaning event. If through intersemiosis we ‘mean’ across diverse media, heterosemiosis shows how those meanings are
not always stable or coherent. Thus at the level of everyday life where very few signs are as clear cut and solitary as in academic examples, complex signs convey meanings to our various senses.

Daily life is fraught with instances of having to negotiate scapes of conflicting signs. This is true for instances of conflict as well. A smiling man who initiates a handshake with an obscenity, or who feigns a playful attack, calls upon our nonverbal reserves. We discriminate between the signs that mean one thing (the visual resonance of the smile, body posture and the handshake) with signs of other types that mean other things (interpreting the curse words, seeing the grimace or feeling the rough handling of horseplay). We discern and act upon these readings depending upon our backgrounds. If the smiling man is a friend we make allowances. If he is trying to sell us a car we think him a boor. If he wears an authoritative uniform, responses vary depending on how individual communities guide their members in the event of such occurrences. Likewise the location and socio-historical context play their own parts. Persons from a foreign culture can be expected to react in their own distinct manner to such seemingly unusual treatment.

Similarly, when members of different communities encounter complex signs, their interpretations differ according to the cultural codes of their particular backgrounds and their individual expectations. English soldiers helicoptered into Crossmaglen, Northern Ireland, react with anger or caution to see the notorious 'Sniper At Work' street sign in the middle of the town's main road. Within the red-bordered triangle is the silhouette of a balaclava-
clad man with an Armalite rifle. The sign itself is compounded by the marks within its borders as well as the meaning it incorporates by its context, that it is condoned, located in the heart of a Catholic, staunchly republican township. A republican, on seeing the same sign, encounters feelings of communal identity, reassurance and safety, that he or she is ‘watched over’ by protectors, and a chain of historically informed signifiers are triggered by the sign’s message, not the least of them resulting in an acknowledgement of the sense of black humour and irony at play. A non-republican Catholic is likely to draw his or her own, very different conclusions based upon these signifiers. Nothing is set, even between two remarkably similar individuals.

In such instances, conventional semiotic theory views these divergent interpretations as an instance of multiaccentuality. Corporeal pragmatics does nothing to overthrow this established understanding. It recognises that differing interpretations imply the existence and operation of separate communities, each with their own distinct codes that guide their members in the correct construction of meanings. However, differing interpretations of the same signs are never simply a case of individual difference. While in any one example the individual’s meanings may stray from that sanctioned by his or her community, in general the importance of the community as the arbiter of meanings and of the rightness or wrongness of political causes is crucial if we are to do anything about the problems of conflict. As we understand it, heterosemiosis is the possibility that complex signs may yield different meanings to different readings at one and the same time. It adds to our
appreciation of the instability of signifiers while at the same time opening our
eyes to the intersemiotic manner in which we read signifiers outside of
language.

In *Semantics and the Body*, Ruthrof concentrates on the
heterosemiotic character of metaphor in an attempt to forward the central
theorem of corporeal pragmatics, that language is an empty syntactic grid that
attains meaning only when it is filled by nonverbal signs. Ruthrof intends for
his theory to satisfy the need for a “more radical position” than semiotics, “one
which regards metaphor as the sort of language schema which intensifies our
imagination of possible connections across diverse semiotic domains” (1997,
165). While metaphor itself is not central to the argument concerning conflict,
the corporeal pragmatic description of metaphor very clearly highlights the
everyday function of heterosemiosis. For, as Ruthrof writes, “metaphor
appears to exaggerate the heterogenous links between linguistic and non-
linguistic signs which we perform whenever the event of meaning occurs”
(1997, 145). Ruthrof takes Lakoff and Johnson’s observations about
metaphor further and more sensibly when he says that “the meaning of
metaphors, more conspicuously so than any other meaning, resides at the
level of non-verbal semiosis” (1997, 146).

The recognition of resemblance between the two terms of a metaphor
is a process of non-linguistic semiosis. This process occurs by either forging a
connection homosemiotically (emphasising the likeness between two signs in
the same system) or heterosemiotically (emphasising the difference between
signs in related sign systems). Thus, encountering a metaphor we substitute the visual for the tactile, the proximic for the visual and so on. The linguistic structures of metaphor "act as directional schemata for the actual work to be performed: the non-verbal significatory exploration of its possible projections of part of a 'world'" (Ruthrof 1997, 167). Metaphors are tacit instructions for how to substitute and switch sense-readings for each other. The analysis of metaphor offers us a way into the closed system of language from the outside, and once we are able to see how language can function as instructional schemata for the substitution of heterosemiotic sense readings, ideas such as the différend begin to lose their consistency and conviction.

It has been established already that a différend only occurs in communication when we accept that language is a closed system. Yet when we consider the possibilities offered by intersemiosis for cementing our reading of signs by supplementary sign systems, it seems very plausible that whether our meaning occurs on the level of language or in the representational abilities of the sense of touch, two different interpretations of a sign are still locked into a conflict in which there is no possibility for arbitration. When one party to this conflict enjoys social power at the expense of the other, the différend is reinscribed. What we seem to have then is a semiotic différend, which behaves much as the linguistic différend did, except now the conflict between winner and loser is no longer on the plane of verbal signs. However, we can see that the focus on signs as the site of struggle needn't be locked into the dichotomy of the différend where one side enjoys
validity, dominance, mastery and access to meaning while the other suffers invalidity, inferiority, weakness and meaninglessness.

Although différends do occur (especially where a verbocentric understanding of signification dominates that does not offer recourse to supplementary sign systems), the conflict they entail does not entirely want for resolution. Because nonverbal signs are intersemiotic – they can ‘mean’ across several media (speech, touch, sight, etc) at once – and often heterosemiotic as well, contradictory and in fact conflicting meanings can be conveyed all within the same significatory package. Indeed, in real practice social subjects negotiate scapes of contradictory signs all the time. One could argue that daily life is characterised by the constant navigation of such conflicting schemata. This need to negotiate meanings is why it is so crucial to understand the focus on ‘fantasisation’ or mental projection, and to understand why people are able to imagine possibilities and consequences at an incredible rate, especially between the moment of encountering aberrant signs and having to react with a sufficient or appropriate response. The very fact that we do manage in such intersemiotic terrain is the clearest indication that it is so.

The heterosemiotic character of signs offers a path towards an understanding of the semiotics of captivity that allow for a useful interpretation going far beyond the level of language conflict. In considering the re-adoption of the Gaelic language by members of the republican community imprisoned in the H-Blocks during the 1970s and 1980s, it has been shown that the
structuralist theory of language is neither suitable for an exploration of the experience of penal subjection nor for a description of how language functions in this specific instance as a technique for countering the individuating, subjectifying procedures of the gaol. Gaelic was deployed in the H-Blocks to enable the prisoners to produce contrary mechanisms for their own subjectivation. Empowered as Gaelic speakers, the inmates reclaimed a unique identity with historical linkages that legitimated their struggle and tied everything that they did and that happened to them to the history of their country, of which their language was emblematic. In so doing, the prisoners became metonymic representatives of their country’s fate, with what was happening to them synonymous with the history of Ireland’s subjection. The acquisition of language in its familiar role as survival mechanism functioned within the Maze prison to accord the republican prisoners the strength that they otherwise lacked. What has been frequently overlooked in previous analyses of the prison situation is how Gaelic, despite it being a language and all the apparent relevance that a linguistic exploration of this struggle entails, to the republicans Gaelic was first and foremost a cultural trait through which they identified themselves in contradistinction to the penalising authorities.

Although the use of Gaelic did not come to factor in any sort of linguistic struggle within the prison – though as a tactic for countering the transparency-inducing techniques of the gaol, it proved highly effective in encoding the prisoners’ conversations and communiqués – in some senses it is not completely accurate to say that there was no language struggle in the
Maze. After all, in the revision by corporeal pragmatics of the position of language among other signifying systems, language has not been discounted altogether. As the communication method *par excellence*, it is inevitable that language was one plane among many upon which the struggle between the different sides was carried out. However, in this analysis even the negotiations between the prisoners and their representatives with the wardens, prison authorities and ultimately the criminalising powers of the Northern Ireland state does not fall neatly into the sort of conflict that can be reduced to the level of utterances and différends. Instead, on both sides the verbal negotiations were just one among numerous strategies by which each side hoped to gain superiority over the other. Until we are able to appreciate the way that other systems of signification still entail meaning, particularly the uses to which the prisoners turned their bodies against the objectifying apparatuses of the Maze, we are unable to fully explicate a vivid general picture of the entirety of the prison conflict.

Over time the focus in the gaol came to rest upon the prisoners' bodies. That the bodies of inmates became the primary means by which the prison authorities exerted their mastery is unmistakeable. The experience of imprisonment itself is the imposition of a penalty upon a person and their bodily freedom. However, in tandem with this recognition must also come the appreciation that over time, the republican inmates themselves began to see their bodies as the prime means by which they could become active rather than objectified by their experiences in the prison. Later (see Chapter Five),
we will be able to discuss how the prisoners’ bodies became the medium through which a complex dialogue, itself only partly articulated in language, was enacted. However, in order to show how communication can take place in a situation of conflict without language, it must be established that meaning is present even when verbal signs are not. The prisoners only came to think of their resistant actions as a means of communication at a much later stage.

First and foremost, the prisoners were caught in an entirely nonverbal semiotic whereupon they set out to overturn the interpretation of their captivity that had been foisted upon them, and in so doing assert their own power and political perspective despite the smothering methods of their adversaries.

Although the utilisation of Gaelic was never abandoned by the republicans, it became clear to them even before the ‘cultural separatism’ movement had established itself that of more immediate importance was establishing a practice, revolutionary to the modes and customs of the prison, that resisted the domineering powers of the gaol and allowed the republicans to demonstrate their refusal to submit and their refusal to cooperate with the meanings with which the prison authorities attempted to permanently associate them. The need for such a practice arose at the very first instance. The significations of the gaol were obvious to them upon their first arrival, either as newly imprisoned inmates brought from the outside or otherwise as previous internees having come from the concentration camp at Long Kesh.32

32 Although it is acknowledged that “Catholics rarely use the term ‘Maze Prison,’ preferring to call it ‘Long Kesh,’” I have separated the distinctive usage of Long Kesh in order to clearly denote the “internment camp reminiscent of Second World War prisoner-of-war camps” that rested on the site prior to 1972 (Dillon 1992, 2).
Feldman focuses particularly upon how “The transformation of the rites of induction [to the prison] into a terrain of political warfare and the objectifying effects of hierarchical observation are the dominant ‘themes’ in the accounts of prisoners” (1991, 157). For Feldman, the prisoners’ entry into the Maze marked the beginning of a new penological order. The British policy of criminalisation set out to purposefully distinguish the experience of imprisonment in the H-Blocks from everything that had come before, so that the advanced design and procedures of the H-Blocks carceral signalled an immediate change from previous approaches. The signifying mechanisms of the gaol were completely geared towards showing and exhibiting this switch in everything that the prisoners experienced.

The initial rite of the H-Blocks was two-fold: first the prisoners were forcibly cleaned and powdered with astringent chemicals; having had their original clothing removed, the inmates were then offered an orange prison jumpsuit. “The paramilitaries perceived the uniform as a physical stigma that fixed the paramilitary firmly into the criminal population of the prison and irrevocably subordinated him to prison hierarchies” (Feldman 1991, 155). The prison uniform was the first step in the prison’s individuation of the prisoner through a process that ironically involved systematically removing the visible signs of the prisoner’s identity. Only by erasing the signs tied to the personal meanings of the inmate could the prison regime begin to inscribe the new meanings conveyed by the government’s criminalisation policy: namely the depiction of republican prisoners as ordinary prisoners convicted of criminal
offenses in the pursuit of an illegitimate cause. Within the carceral apparatus the prison uniform marked out the inmate, isolating him in his criminality, branding him as a subject of the prison’s authority.

These “identity-fixing events” for the prisoners and the wardens were “a performance that establish[ed] the total gauge of discipline in the institution” and set out the rules for the relation between the inmates and the wardens intended by the prison (Feldman 1991, 155). Feldman writes of the induction as “an unavoidable rite of defilement for the new inmate, who is stripped of many of the outward components of his preinstitutional identity.” As is intended, “In many instances the new inmate, once bereft of these identity components, has very few resources left with which to counter this massive socialising onslaught” (Feldman 1991, 155).

The first IRA men to enter the H-Blocks encountered a regime that refused to recognise any social unit larger than the individual inmate. The depoliticisation of the paramilitary’s formal penal status conversely meant his extreme individualisation and a refusal on the part of the prison administration to recognise his organisational affiliation. (Feldman 1991, 152)

One of the first republican prisoners 33 encountered these measures and instinctively refused to put on the prison uniform. The practice soon spread until the majority of republican inmates had gone ‘on the blanket,’ resorting to the only method of concealing their decency available to them: the obligatory two blankets and two towels accorded them under the new system. 34 The blanket protest drew “its inspiration from the tradition going back more than 100 years when Fenian (Republican) prisoners went naked rather than wear

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33 Ciarán Nugent, PIRA, convicted for hijacking a van (Coogan 2002, 93).
34 Many prisoners were reportedly denied the second towel (Sands 1998).
a prison uniform that would mark them as criminals” (O’Malley 1990, 21). The prisoners’ “denial of the elementary modes of penal objectification meant that the prisoners disrupted the penal regime at the margins of its central rite of ideological reproduction” (Feldman 1991, 157).

The wardens were physically unable to dress the prisoners in the uniforms and force them to remain dressed, and thus the Blanket protest began. Things would rapidly progress in the silent war between the revenge of the wardens and the responses of the prisoners until the No Wash protest was inevitable (see Chapter Five), during which the blanket clad prisoners not only grew their hair and beards long, but eventually came to live with the consequences of their own unattended bodily functions (hence the ‘No Wash’ became popularised as the ‘Dirty’ protest instead). The most amazing detail in all of this was that the protest went on with the most committed prisoners living in such conditions for five years. In return for refusing to wear the prison uniform, the wardens denied access to exercise and visitations (since they were unbending about the requirement for the uniform to be worn outside of the cells) as well as recreational facilities, reading materials (except for the bible) and all personal items.

So began the “routine of surviving on a concrete floor from 8:30 am to 8:30 pm each day with no mattress, bed or reading material” (Coogan 2002, 93–4). Eventually some prisoners even had their bibles removed, and in

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35 Nugent himself “is vehement that he never intended to go on the dirt protest but simply to follow the general IRA policy of protesting by refusing to wear the prison uniform” (Coogan 2002, 93).

36 Exaggerating what was already the style amongst republican paramilitaries of the late 70s.
general it is agreed that the prison diet began to suffer at the guards’ orders. Tim Pat Coogan reports that on a visit to the striking prisoners, he remarked that “they are very thin” to the senior NIO civil servant in charge of the prison administration. “The senior civil servant pointed out helpfully that lots of people paid large sums of money to get their weight off” (Coogan 2002, 210). An INLA member, active on the blanket protest, notes, “There was one wing on our block H3, and at that time they were down about to their skin and bones for not eating. They were getting very thin. Eventually the prison doctor had to order for them to get more food” (Feldman 1991, 170). It is worth noting that the prisoners’ starvation was the result of deprivation, not choice, and prefigured the hunger strikes by a number of years.

The wardens developed various means by which the prisoners could be terrorised under what, on paper at least, appeared legitimate means. Since a uniform was required each time a prisoner requested to leave his cell – such as for going to the toilet or the showers – refusal to bend to this rule justified a beating. Furthermore, a focus upon hygiene and medical examinations, along with body cavity searches to look for contraband (among prisoners who had been denied any contact with the outside world for their refusal to dress), enabled the authorities to discipline prisoners further for seemingly official reasons, and often by official means. A PIRA man reports:

Right from the very beginning searches were very important to them for attacking you, for making you feel vulnerable. Although they knew you couldn’t get anything in when you were naked, under twenty-four-hour lockup and had no visits. You had no contact with anybody or anything. Still and all they were coming in strip-searching. It was very clear then strip-searching wasn’t a method for finding anything; it was
an opportunity for them to do whatever they were going to do on you. (Feldman 1991, 158)

“The prison doctor who stood beside the examination table verifying imaginary lice infestations in order to sanction violent decontamination was a figurehead,” representative of the modernness of the penitentiary and guarantor of the clinical objectivity and therefore benevolence of the system. “The doctor provided a medical legitimation for collective violence in the wake of the almost total delegitimation and dysfunction of the rehabilitative paradigm of the prison” (Feldman 1991, 190).

Wing-shifts and forced washes (increasingly common once the Dirty protest had begun) provided additional justification for methodical abuse, yet every instance was almost satirically accompanied by the filling out of forms and the collation of rosters. “This lice doctor we called ‘Mengele’,” one inmate recalls, “the doctor would be standing there in a white coat and two jumped-up screws [wardens] beside him pretending to be orderlies.” Even during clearly excessive bouts of violence, “That formality had to be filled” (PIRA member, qtd. in Feldman 1991, 189). Another ex-PIRA member quotes a warden’s term of “corrective medicine” for the pouring of boiling water directly onto naked prisoners – a practice seemingly of the guards’ own initiative.

The advent of various practices of decontamination accelerated the retrograde transformation of administration into a ceremonial camoufâgé for cathartic and cyclical violence. The wing shifts and forced washes were manufactured events that reinforced social solidarity and institutional identity among the prison guards.37 (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 189-90)

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37 Curiously, the prison wardens referred to themselves as “the mechanical bears.”
Given the intermingling of hygiene and violence, the Dirty protest was an unforeseen though inevitable development.

According to Peirce’s observation, semiotics is not an abstract methodology but a description of the principal means by which subjects interact with and make sense of the world. Because it is the entirety of the prisoner’s world, the cell crystallises the central maxim of corporeal pragmatics that all semiotic terrain is ultimately reducible to the subject’s experience of the world of the senses. In this sense then, the prison cell – the indivisible unit of the H-Blocks – is a semiotic matrix. On the one hand the cell reduces the subject’s experience of the world to a bare minimum, yet this reduction highlights how intersemiosis functions in the subject’s negotiation of his confines. The cell represents an example, beyond comparison, of the semiotic conflict between a superior and an inferior force. In considering the subject’s total enclosure within a penitential space, the cell is the arena for a confrontation between the meaning systems of the prisoner and the prison. Because the cell holds the prisoner in the prison’s power, semiotically the cell represents the clearest example possible of the subject having meanings forced upon him.

Coogan cites how “The authorities (it was claimed) attempted to break the [prisoners’] defiance psychologically as well as physically, by giving the warders detailed information about an individual prisoner and his family, so that they would become dismayed by the seeming omnipotence of the State” (Coogan 2002, 22). As another republican prisoner notes, in the ‘Breaker’s
Yard’:

They'll get you in and individualise you and isolate you within the prisons. They'll divorce you from your structures and divorce you from your roots. They'll turn out apathetic people who'll be doing nothing but watching the gate for their day of release, and when they do get that day of release all that's going to be in their heads, 'I'm not going back in there.' (Feldman 1991, 161)

Prison cells “are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible” (Foucault 1991, 200). In such circumstances, in the H-Blocks struggle it can be observed that the cell is not just a space in which the prisoner's freedom is taken from him, but also a space in which an exacting force is exercised upon the prisoner to various ends.

In Foucault's seminal *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, the author makes a convincing argument for viewing the penal apparatuses of the state as a means by which criminality is no longer punished but actively produced. Although the argument holds in only some senses, Foucault’s work on prisons opens up a passageway by means of which we are able to question established ideas about criminality and the benignity of the state’s management of transgressors. In the study of conflict in Northern Ireland’s Maze prison, such a perspective is especially crucial since so much of what is taken for granted as normal punitive practice appears, at first glance at least, to have been overturned in favour of the political momentum occurring outside the prison context. Through Foucault’s observations, the view of corporeal pragmatics that puts the body at the centre of all issues of meaning gains support from an established source. The difficulties with the
conventional structuralist account of meaning-making that have already been cited in Foucault’s theory of discourse and social power that have seemed, until now, fairly minimal, come to the fore in Foucault’s deliberations over the gaol, since almost everything that Foucault has to say about the operation of the prison returns to his idea of a ‘discursive practice’ – a category in which a conventional definition of language sits only uncomfortably.

Foucault draws an explicit connection between the experience of the corporeal subject and the non-linguistic practices of social subjection that obey discourse-like rules. The full elaboration of the way in which Foucault’s theory of discourse may be ported over to a perspective that accounts for a semiotic, non-linguistic, entirely socio-behavioural theory of ideas obeying discourse-like rules must wait a moment longer (see Chapter Five). Just as the notion of the semiotics of captivity that were introduced in Chapter Two was unable to be addressed until the present moment due to the introduction of corporeal pragmatics, the idea of language acquisition discussed in Chapter Three and the current discussion of nonverbal technologies of the body as counter-discursive can only really be properly addressed once we are able to merge the notion of intersemiotic communication (from which the verbocentric understanding of communication as ‘language only’ has been expunged) with Foucauldian discourse theory. Instead, by way of entry into this stream of ideas we can turn to how Foucault’s discussion of carceral technologies directly supports the view of the cell as a locus for the elimination and imposition of intersemiotic orders of meaning.
The penalised subject’s transfixon by the power of the prison authorities barely requires justification it is so obvious. More subtle is the appreciation that the cell establishes the subject’s visibility, but also his or her invisibility to the other objects of the prison. Thus, “this invisibility is a guarantee of order” (Foucault 1991, 200). Foucault also notes that in the subject’s solitary confinement, “Secrecy is imperative, and so too is autonomy, at least in relation to this technique of punishment: it must have its own functioning, its own rules, its own techniques, its own knowledge; it must fix its own norms, decide its own results” (1991, 129). In such a regime, the power of the gaze and the theories that presume its chief importance find full articulation. In this argument, everything that the prison governor has in his or her control hinges on the mastery of the powers of surveillance – both for the sake of the wardens’ omnivoyance and the reduction of the prisoners to a blinded state.\footnote{Feldman observes the frequently non-functioning cameras and the use of ‘dummy’ cameras in RUC interrogation centres as an acute metaphor of this relation. “The blinded cameras are a symbol of total enclosure. The cameras are mere effigies and a patently redundant technology because the entire edifice of the interrogation centre is itself a massive lens, an infinite optic of power reproducing itself in a series of recursive magnifications that feed off the visibility of the body” (Feldman 1991, 126).} Despite the reality of the body’s material subjection by walls and a locked door, and that by being at the wardens’ mercy the prisoner is entirely dependent upon them for his biological survival – in which case the harnessing of the full powers of life, death and biology by the prison authority overwhelms even the most insightful focus upon surveillance and the control of visual systems as the metaphor for the operations of the prison – the popular focus on observation as the prime penological apparatus is not
without merit.

The power of the gaze and its impact upon the prisoners is undeniable. In studying the linguistic means by which republican inmates resist the controls of the prison, the shouting of Gaelic and the cryptological function of language have been revealed as material practices designed to directly counter, not a conflict waged on the plane of language, but the technologies of the prison by means of which prisoners are obscured (confined, made insensible) and their every communication monitored (every utterance scrutinised, in a metaphoric sense). Likewise it is undeniable that an unerring focus on visibility, exposure and transparency surrounds the object of the prison gaze. In the refusal to wear the prison uniform, the inmates went unclothed, naked beneath their regulation blankets. As long as they determined to reject the uniform, authority had it that the prisoners would remain weak and exposed, literally and metaphorically vulnerable to the examinations of their warders. Given such circumstances – and as others have observed – the progression of the prison conflict to the point where the inmates caked themselves in filth and body hair can be seen as an inevitable consequence of the prisoners’ perpetual visibility. Utilising the only techniques available to them, the prisoners clothed themselves anew in forms repugnant to the hyper-sanitising order of the prison.

If an approach is desired that focuses upon the body and its senses as the deep structure of meaning, and which takes an alternate path from those others that place language at the centre of their formulations, it is gratifying to
‘see’ the visual sense accorded a prime position in the accounts of Foucault and others. However, Foucault’s recurrent focus on surveillance – which begins with brilliant insights too numerous to mention – and those semioticians powerfully influenced by his work, drift with the metaphor of the gaze much in the same manner as those verbocentric writers previously analysed drift in their employment of language as a metaphor for all types of signification. Foucault does not acknowledge that the gaze is just one of several major ‘styles’ that can be used to describe the power relations in postmodernity. Instead, he focuses upon the model of the Panopticon (itself a metaphor, despite Bentham’s invention) to posit the existence of a ‘surveillance society.’

In so doing, Foucault progresses from talking only about gaols and the gaze until he makes the generalisation that the Panoptic relation – whereby the subject comes to construe him or herself as constantly observed and thus, through self-monitoring, becomes the means of his or her own subjection – operates throughout the whole of society. Foucault commits this fallacy while at the same time showing clearly that the gaze is just a metaphor for social controls and that there are in fact many more ‘styles’ of behaviour than just surveillance:

Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralisation of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a
whole technique of forces and bodies. (1991, 217)

Rather than simply accepting that surveillance is the universal model for power relations in modernity, it needs to be shown that the gaze, just like linguistic communication, is one means among many through which the semiotics of captivity manifest.

The cell enables a lot more than just the total individuation and subjection of the prisoner – though it also certainly achieves such ends in the most efficient manner possible. The cell isolates the subject and inscribes him into a position where he is absolutely powerless and at the mercy of the prison authority, not metaphorically, but as a physical reality. Although this situation represents the actualisation of a power relation without equal, it is at one and the same time entirely semiotic. Despite an overconcern with the metaphors of surveillance, Foucault still manages to show how the subject’s capture and isolation by the prison is a relation of knowledge as well as power, though of course to Foucault power always implies a field of knowledge, however transient. While it may seem fanciful, having argued that the bottom line of the body’s capture and individuation by the prison is too often obscured by focusing upon either linguistics or surveillance, to return to thinking of the subject’s body as a kind of text upon which a semiotic conflict takes place, by doing so we are reminded yet again of Peirce’s understanding of semiotics as, not an abstract epistemology, but as the fundamental way that one encounters the world and forms knowledge about it. With the link between that knowledge and the flow of power that inheres in social relations,
describing the subject’s captivity as semiotic offers us a metaphor-free system according to which the subject’s experience can be described and analysed. This clarity reveals the beauty of semiotics in that, once it is rid of mystifying metaphors such as verbocentrism, semiotics is the theory by which it is most possible to analyse how knowledge and power entwine to inform the social subject’s experience of his or her own reality.

Thus it is not the complete observation that the cell facilitates but the total bodily subjection enabled by the cell’s architecture and the management of that space that lies at the heart of the semiotics of captivity. The cell’s function has always been “to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it.” In less metaphoric terms, penal architecture operates “to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them” (Foucault 1991, 172). The semiotic subject is vulnerable to every instance of the oppressor’s attempt to overwrite him with new meanings; and writing, indeed language itself, is metaphoric here because the form in which the new meanings are laid down are only casually linguistic. Everything that has been described so far in the republican prisoners’ experience of the H-Blocks – the beatings, exposure, observation and examination, delegitimation, the isolation, degradation and starvation – are the nonverbal means by which the new meanings are communicated; and they do so, not by translation into a language that is then subject to the transformations and substitutions that
Saussure describes – instead these meanings are implicit and occur as a conflict of nonverbal signs carried out in their own registers and in the practices that convey them.

Foucault’s general term for the force constraining the prisoner is ‘discipline,’ where “the constraints of the body imply a very special relation between the individual who is punished and the individual who punishes him;” and, of this governing figure, Foucault writes, “The agent of punishment must exercise a total power, which no third party can disturb; the individual to be corrected must be entirely enveloped in the power that is being exercised over him” (1991, 129). It is nothing new to state that in any aspect of life, the body is the focus for diverse forces of constraint and prohibition, for taboos and for values of proper behaviour. It is in this sense that it can be said that bodies themselves are historical figures reflecting the sensibilities of their age; but in the prison, the body is transfixed by “a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it” in specific ways (Foucault 1991, 138). Of this relation, Foucault writes:

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce the effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. (1991, 170-1)

However, Foucault’s assessment can almost be reversed. The function of the cell is certainly to make one ‘visible,’ if by this we read a metaphor that describes how the cell envelops the body and makes it vulnerable and accessible to the prison’s discipline. Although the prisoner is made visible to
the authority that wields a power over him, it is conversely the prisoner’s concealment, the secrecy that surrounds him, the way that the prison remains a threatening but mysterious apparatus to the general public, and the fact that the minutiae of the prisoner’s fate is unknown to them, that allows the cell to function thus.

Above all, the cell is the means by which the prison holds individuals in a critically uneven semiotic relationship:

fixing them in space, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in time and forces, training their bodies, coding their continuous behaviour, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation, registration and recording, constituting on them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralised. (Foucault 1991, 231)

It is not just communicability that is sterilised, but the social subject who is objectified and made impotent.

Beneath the lack of architectural relief, a political organisation of human space can be located. The preliminary process of interrogation, ‘the softening up,’ is actualised in this architecture of coercion. The isolation and the silence, the airlock gates, the surface topography that resists any imprint of human use and sanitises the fear and violence that inhabits its cells and corridors, are juridical codes. There is a relation built into the edifice between the architecture of coercion and the dynamic of confession. (Feldman 1991, 126)

The subject's body is a surface upon which his subjection is marked by the uniform he is forced to wear, the shaving of his hair, the regulation of his hygiene and the routines he is forced to obey, which includes the frequent manner in which he is forced to submit and open himself up to the prison’s examination.

Faced with such circumstances, the republican inmates of the Maze
recognised their own potential victimhood and sought to resist such positioning through the strategic use of their own bodies. Their strategy was a simple but effective one, drawn from a long line of reasoning about Irish freedom and victimhood that finds articulation in MacSwiney’s famous words: “It is not those who can inflict the most but those that can suffer the most who will conquer”\(^{39}\) (Coogan 2002, 28). O’Malley writes, “for every hardship the prisoners had inflicted on them they were prepared to inflict a hardship of at least equal severity on themselves, thus devaluing the system’s power to intimidate them. Their willingness to deprive themselves undermined the authority of the regime to do so” (1990, 22-3). The prisoners utilised a policy of passive resistance. “It was an IRA tactic not to retaliate physically; to accept the beatings, but to resist by gestures such as the refusal to squat or stand to attention when told to do so” (Coogan 2002, 22). As Coogan also acknowledges, “Prison is where society makes its sanctions stick – if it can. The encounter between the warder and the prisoners is the last testing ground” (Coogan 2002, 27). Famous PIRA member and one-time OC of the H-Blocks, Jake Jackson, states, “the battle in the H-Blocks wasn’t so much about conditions in the jail, it was two ideologies fighting each other. It was two cultures fighting each other. It was the crystallisation of the whole struggle” (O’Malley 1990, 53).

Through the prisoners’ behaviour, the struggle in the H-Blocks became

\(^{39}\) Terence MacSwiney, the inspiration for WB Yeats’ play The King’s Threshold, was the Lord Mayor of Cork who went on hunger strike and “died, after seventy-four days, during the Anglo-Irish war of 1919-21” (Coogan 1996, 269).
a means whereby republicans could continue to wage the war upon which they had previously embarked. Although “The fight [was] against the forces of the State inside the prison, instead of outside it as formerly,” the prisoners were not without weapons as long as they could continue to assert themselves through their bodies (Coogan 2002, 27). Hence Feldman’s assertion that “we must recognise the link between the reversible objectifications of the body in the violence of the interrogation” and torture within the prison “and the instrumentation of the paramilitary’s body as a conduit for military violence” (1991, 143). Although there were fatal casualties over the years in the Maze, hunger striking notwithstanding, short of murdering the prisoners there was very little the prison authorities could do in the face of the republicans’ tenacious attitude. Even against this drastic final step, which was constantly threatened upon the prisoners by some of the wardens, the prisoners had a form of self-defence. Ciarán Nugent states that republican inmates “would have been murdered in our cells only that the IRA started shooting the screws outside” (Coogan 2002, 94). Since the names of the most abusive wardens could be passed out via smuggled communiqués, a series of tacit checks and balances were put in place that resulted in a deadly game of bluff, each side seeing how far they could go before the worst possible ramifications ensued.

The default response of the prison authorities to the prisoners’ resistance was to isolate them from their support networks, undermining their sense of self and their commitment to their cause. Part of the reason that
Foucault highlights the cell’s origins in the continental monastic tradition is to focus upon the way that, like the hermit monks of the Middle Ages, the solitary prisoner is forced to observe himself and thus confront those aspects deemed illegitimate or undesireable by the reigning normative moral order. The popularity of solitary confinement as a punishment in prisons to the present day is entirely predicated upon this belief that the prisoner, forced into confrontation with himself as viewed through the lens of dominant values, will buckle under and reform, capitulate, and emerge renewed. Foucault argues that this kind of discipline, which imprisons the body but does not touch it, has the ‘soul’ as the target, for which we can substitute the less romantic notion of the subject’s ‘psychological self.’ “The expiation that once rained down upon the body,” Foucault writes, “must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (1991, 16). The cell’s “isolation of the convicts guarantees that it is possible to exercise over them, with maximum intensity, a power that will not be overthrown by any other influence; solitude is the primary condition of total submission” (Foucault 1991, 237).

Foucault argues that “A glance at the new art of punishing clearly reveals the supercession of the punitive semio-technique by a new politics of the body” (1991, 103). However, in specifically looking at the Maze, Foucault’s argument cannot be supported in its entirety since time and again, even when the prison did manage to successfully isolate the prisoner, the

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40 Despite interning prisoners in pairs, the H-Blocks possessed a separate punishment block for solitary confinement. Of this centre, Bobby Sands writes: “I couldn’t help but think of them
widespread use of methods that transgress the usual bounds of proper practice undermined the clinical, impassive and self-effacing mode of authority that Foucault identifies as a characteristic of modern penology. Unlike what has been written about the notion of a linguistic conflict, the wardens were very much aware and involved in the battle within the gaol against republican prisoners when it came to the execution of prison rules and physical discipline. Consequently, rather than imprisonment appearing as the common sense and natural consequence of social criminality as it is viewed in more conventional situations, the H-Blocks were revealed as a domineering apparatus, actively and impartially employed for the specific purpose of crushing the rebellious spirits of the republican inmates. The attitudes of the wardens, doctors and guards gave the enemy a face, at which point the prisoners’ subjection and mistreatment ceased to be nebulous and unattributable. The fact that there was a direct correlation between the imprisonment of republicans and the secret war being carried out by republican groups on the outside of the gaol meant that, having identified an enemy, the prisoners were able to posit themselves within a continuum of warfare even if it needed to be re-theorised to account for an entirely new terrain and new tactics. Having identified the technologies of domination, the prisoners set about producing a new ‘art of life’ (to use Foucault’s term, though an ‘art of war’ would be equally appropriate), one which transformed

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lying there now on the boards, in the punishment block, where they probably got another brutal beating at the hands of the sadistic screws who appropriately managed that torture centre within a torture centre” (Sands 1998, 47).
bodies and practices into weapons of resistance.

Of course, in many instances the prison authorities failed to individuate the prisoners altogether. As mentioned previously, cell rationing often resulted in prisoners being locked up in pairs. Much of the breakdown of the prison order can be attributed to this failure of the authorities to isolate the prisoners completely. The bolstering effect of the prison dyad cannot be understated.\footnote{Sources in Feldman, Coogan and others liken the emotional bonds of intimacy expressed between imprisoned couples to be on a par if not surpassing that of marriage partners.} Because of the focus on the isolation of the prisoners from their ideological support systems it seems to merit special attention. At the same time, however, even though it was a major factor in the unacknowledged failure of the Maze to successfully individuate and criminalise the republican prisoners, the function of the inmate pairings doesn’t necessarily require special attention. That inmates were often in a position to share a cell with a like-minded individual, and that such pairings multiplied the strength of the prisoners’ resolve, is nothing more than another technique among others of resisting the imposition of bodily meanings, allowing them to subvert the multiplex domineering strategies of the wardens on yet another front, according to one more nonverbal register, by thwarting the prison’s ability to reduce the group identity to the level of individual biological units. A Provisional IRA member states:

\begin{quote}
we found the thing by what one does, everybody does. If one’s getting beat, we were all getting beat. If somebody smashed a cup in the cell accidentally, that meant the screws would knock his bollocks in, as an excuse if he asked for a new cup. If somebody broke a cup the OC would say, “Right, everybody smash the cups!” Everybody smashed the cups. He wasn’t on his own; he wasn’t isolated. There was that
\end{quote}
security in numbers, that unification. Everybody acted together. (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 248)

The refusal to be identified as solitary in every instance, regardless of the physical consequences, was a powerful method of resistance. It was only during the hunger strikes that the flaws in this method were identified and exploited by the prison regime (see Chapter Six).

The same regime had plenty of mistakes by which to learn how to properly isolate and demoralise prisoners. A second factor to remember, apart from the prisoner pairings, is found in the activities of January 1979, when:

the prison administration, in an attempt to ‘isolate’ the leadership, transferred thirty-two men identified as the top IRA figures into one wing of H-Block 6. It was equivalent, in prison terms, to setting up an officers’ training academy, and the men, many of whom had served time together in the Cages, set about developing a philosophical and strategic approach. (Beresford 1994, 29)

As an ex-prison welfare officer from the H-Blocks notes, “to deliberately take out a planning group, allowing them to develop expertise and time to develop a strategy, to get their act together, and then to reintegrate them. My God, what sort of sense does that make? The most blind idiot could have predicted that would have only aggravated an already unstable situation.” The same source adds, “The whole prison situation during the time I was there was handled in such a way as to create profound disturbances and animosities that weren’t there previously” (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 224).

There is a theme that echoes in these comments, and which can be found throughout Foucault’s writing on the prison subject, where the prison
apparatus is directly attributed with the production of the subjects that it seeks to punish. While Foucault’s studies in criminology are galling to some because he transfers the blame for the criminal’s delinquency mostly from the individual to the ‘carceral society,’ Foucault’s general theorem about discourses systematically forming the object of which they speak resonates particularly clearly when the antagonistic goings-on within the H-Blocks is brought forward for consideration. To the prisoners’ minds, the government’s criminalisation policy and the consequences it had for the gaols revealed a deep disparity between the public representation of the situation in the Maze and the reality of it for prisoners. As Coogan writes, “while using ‘special’ approaches in the world of media, and ‘special’ approaches in the arena of the courts, the British Government and the Northern Ireland Office continued to deny ‘special’ status to the prisoners in the H Blocks” (Coogan 2002, 161). The prisoners’ treatment contravened the guidelines set forth by humanitarian organisations such as Amnesty International as well as instances of the Geneva Conventions. “Prison rules required an inmate to wear clothes when leaving his cell, so Nugent and the IRA and INLA men jailed after him found themselves confined to their cell twenty-four hours a day” (Beresford 1994, 26-7). On those occasions when a prisoner was released from his cell, we have Bobby Sands’s description of six men “fired over a table and the cheeks of their behinds torn apart by the screws’ hands. Comrade,” Sands exclaims, “this is sexual assault” (qtd. in Beresford 1994, 52). Cardinal Ó Fiaich’s comments from 1978 capture the transgressions of
The fact that a man refuses to wear prison uniform or to do prison work should not entail the loss of physical exercise, association with his fellow prisoners or contact with the outside world. These are basic human needs for physical and mental health, not privileges to be granted or withheld as rewards or punishments. (qtd. in Coogan 2002, 171)

Bik McFarlane notes, “If there’s anything on earth that can harden a man’s heart to such a degree – then its this devil’s tomb” (qtd. in Beresford 1994, 170).

It seems nonsensical to argue that in Northern Irish gaols, prison authorities set out directly or indirectly to produce an adversarial environment guaranteeing the heightening of the insurgency campaign being mounted by forces outside the prison, yet this is the sort of picture that analysis reveals. The experience of brutality in arrest, interrogation and imprisonment “is as socially determining and biographically significant as the experience of paramilitary violence” (Feldman 1991, 85). Therefore, it must be assumed that the transformation of prisoners was a tactic employed in the H-Blocks and designed to somehow benefit the overall project of the criminalisation policy. “If this is the case, the prison, apparently ‘failing,’ does not miss its target; on the contrary, it reaches it, in so far as it gives rise to one particular form of illegality in the midst of others, which it is able to isolate” (Foucault 1991, 276).

The confinement and subjugation of the republicans shows the system’s total mastery over its subjects. In a society in which: incarceration is the omnipresent armature, the delinquent is not outside
the law; he is, from the very outset, in the law, at the very heart of it, or at least in the midst of those mechanisms that transfer the individual imperceptibly from discipline to the law, from deviation to offense. Although it is true that prison punishes delinquency, delinquency is for the most part produced in and by incarceration that, ultimately, prison perpetuates in its turn. (Foucault 1991, 301)

The dominant argument about the beneficial effects of the criminalisation policy is largely ridiculed by the social workers and religious leaders who are intimate with the details of the cages of Long Kesh and the cells of the Maze. It is generally agreed that the normality enjoyed by less strictly observed prisoners facilitates their eventual re-entry into normal life. The “rate of return to their paramilitary organisation was tiny by comparison with that of embittered, institutionalised cell prisoners” (Coogan 2002, 74). Andy Tyrie, one-time UDA\(^{42}\) leader, writes of his erstwhile enemies, “the H Block men, they are full of hate. They want to get somebody. They come back [to active service] almost as soon as they are let out” (qtd. in Coogan 2002, 195).

Foucault identifies four key points to consider in studying the social function of the prison. First, he observes that it is important to not consider punitive mechanisms as simply repressive. Prisons are ‘productive’ in the sense that they have “a complex social function” that is tied to tangible consequences and the production of marginal subjectivities (Foucault 1991, 23). Foucault then reminds us that punishment is a political tactic and just one strategy among a field of others. Furthermore, in the way that modern prisons require the legitimating expertise of medical and psychiatric authorities, that there was once an ‘art’ where there is now a ‘science’ of incarceration, and

\(^{42}\) Ulster Defense Association – at one time the largest Protestant paramilitary group.
that the prison regime organises itself around timetables, routines, standards and strict rules for the management of time and bodies, they “make the technology of power the very principle both of the humanisation of the penal system and of the knowledge of man” (Foucault 1991, 23). Finally, Foucault also views the transformation in the modality of the prison in modern times as an indication in the changing “way in which the body itself is invested by power relations” (1991, 24). In this sense then, the cell represents in miniature the same semiotic matrix in which social subjects are suspended throughout ordinary daily life.

Although a semiotic perspective allows us to analyse a sign-by-sign account of the subjection and counter-subjectivation of the republican prisoners, without a theory of discourse congruent with a nonverbal perspective on meaning it is not possible to tease out of these individual instances the more complex, compound meanings of which they form a part. Alternatively, it can be said that the semiotics of captivity already imply the presence of certain discourses, but without integrating the theory of nonverbal signs with a theory of nonverbal discourses, we are at a loss when it comes to talking about, first, the ways in which action and counter-action imply a conflictual dialogue in the H-Blocks scenario and, second, that it is not possible to fully appreciate how the prison conflict was a conflict not just between bodies but also between orders or cultures of meaning. A semiotic analysis of the conflict between prisoners, wardens and penal architecture is only one step towards understanding the role that the prison occupied within
the British government’s counter-insurgency campaign. Foucault concatenates this observation in the instruction that we must “try to study the metamorphosis of punitive methods on the basis of a political technology of the body in which might be read a common history of power relations and object relations” (1991, 24).
5. Discourse as Practice

The previous exploration of Ruthrof’s ideas about nonverbal signs has been designed to overturn entrenched views about the relation between personal subjectivity and the linguistic construction of the world. Out of this examination comes the assertion that verbal signs are parasitic upon the deep structures of meaning, the majority of which emerge from what can be broadly described as bodily experience. As a consequence, the linguistic subject – a figure traditionally understood as a thinking, speaking subject formed from interaction with the totality of linguistically-communicated social meanings – becomes discredited as the most useful way to understand subjectivity. Having taken on board a generally semiotic picture of meaning in which the verbal is just one plane upon which signification and social life play out, it is therefore necessary to show the way towards a semiotic, perhaps even a ‘semio-discursive,’ subjectivity. In a corporeal framework, the subject is a locus for social forces and is also interactive with those forces, yet the exchange of meanings is not monolithic, occurring only at the level of utterances and written marks. The corporeal subject experiences meaning as intersemiotic and frequently heterosemiotic, occurring on many, sometimes-contradictory levels and through various media. In turn, the corporeal semiotic subject is also able to communicate via similar means.

In order to reveal the subject as not just semiotic but semio-discursive, it is necessary to show how a corporeal pragmatics perspective operates at...
the level of discourse. Thus it is necessary to revive the focus on discourse, establishing the relation between discourse and the world of signs. Furthermore, in tying together the threads of conflict analysis and corporeal pragmatics, two important elements are revealed. First, in the view of discourse it must be established how a theory of individual signs whose meanings are tied ultimately to the body function when they are organised into statements. Second, to follow the logic to which we are committed when arguments are made about the subject’s ability to ‘mean’ across different media, the chief goal must be to establish what the characteristics are of a discourse that is formed entirely of nonverbal signs. This second point, which contains in it the seed for almost everything that corporeal pragmatics can offer for the analysis and resolution of conflict, can only be addressed once the established view of discourse is itself reworked to accommodate nonverbal signs.

With the illusion of the dominance of language dispelled and the understanding of meaning opened up to the nonverbal, it is easier to examine Foucauldian discourse theory and excise from it those verbocentric themes and elements that persist, even for Foucault, around the category of the subject. Despite returning to the level of discourse, we can in no way be satisfied with a purely linguistic description of discourse or of society. If the discussion of nonverbal signs is truly taken on board then the consequences of such a belief must be followed, which therefore entails examining the intersemiotic character of discursivity. Hitherto the concern has been with
overturning verbocentrism by examining how linguistic signs are actually a communication of nonverbal signifieds. Thus in this explanation the term ‘nonverbal’ has stood in for bodily experience and corporeal senses, as well as the ability of the embodied mind to rapidly project complex mental frames. However, the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic modes can be taken a step further by distinguishing not only between verbal and bodily meanings but between the general categories of words and actions.

By considering speech as just another form of human physical behaviour it is possible to collapse the difference between two different theories: one that views discourse as an intangible, nebulous, linguistically-communicable and all-encompassing, socially-constitutive reality, and one in which communication happens in various ways, the most dominant form being speech and writing, but with all modes of communication being a reflection of bodies attempting to exert their wills upon the operation and behaviour of a greater social world (the one that exists beyond the borders of the brainpan). In some ways this re-imagining is a semantic distinction, since by re-ordering such an understanding of discourse the intention is not to sweep away what has been said on the subject but actually to add to it. However, if, in order to be theoretically coherent, corporeal pragmatics requires us to acknowledge the nonverbal character of many signs, drawing upon Peirce’s definitions of the icon, index and symbol so that we are able to talk about signs at all (since the standard account is entirely inadequate), then it is the next logical step that to be able to talk about discourse (which
itself is often thought of as some sort of meta-sign or, at the very least, a
collection of linguistic statements arranged according to rules for particular
enunciative formations), an understanding of discourse must be established
that allows Foucault’s general outline to be used without falling victim to the
basic contradictions that this schema otherwise implies.

Discourse can be moved one step away from its verbocentric origins
by suggesting that it is more useful to view it as a description of all meaning-
bearing, world-affecting behaviours than as something all pervasive yet less
tangible. If it is possible to view individual discourses as practices and
analyse behaviour along the lines that Foucault and other theorists make
possible for linguistic statements, then a double level is established upon
which corporeal pragmatics is able to operate. At the micro- or interpersonal
level there is a theory of signs that refer to the body rather than meanings
external to the world, residing in language. Such a theory lets us explore the
ramifications of personal experience in which we acknowledge for the first
time that our meanings spring primarily from these experiences (as our
readings of them are guided by our social groupings) rather than the other
way around. In such a model we reinstate ourselves, despite the ramifications
of it being a cultural theory (and that our sense of ‘ourselves’ is largely
culturally determined), as the centre of our personal semiotic cosmology. At
the macro-level, treating discourse as practice takes the same basic
relationships described in corporeal pragmatics and applies them to the level
of society and individual groups. This perspective enables a view of social
reality as constituted by a network of discourses and practices that invest social life with meanings that are themselves tied to the individual experiences of embodied subjects.

In so doing, it does not matter whether social relations are examined at the interpersonal level (such as within families, workplaces, schools, etc.) or at higher levels (the nation, the ethnic grouping, the language community, the culture). The same approach holds whether the behaviour of five people or five million is examined. Yet this is not social psychology: it is not necessary to trace social relations in order to study their internalisation by the individual subject or even really how it is that people make the sorts of decisions that they do. Foucault's observations regarding discourse analysis capture the distinction clearly:

I shall not place myself inside these dubious unities in order to study their internal configuration or their secret contradictions. I shall make use of them just long enough to ask myself what unities they form; by what right they can claim a field that specifies them in space and a continuity that individualises them in time; according to what laws they are formed; against the background of which discursive events they stand out; and whether they are not, in their accepted and quasi-institutional individuality, ultimately the surface effect of more firmly grounded unities. I shall accept the groupings that history suggests only to subject them at once to interrogation. (1972, 26)

The study of discourse is primarily concerned with exposing the mechanisms by which social power circulates to permit or constrain certain types of actions (and with them social forms, habitual practices, routines and institutions) and certain types of utterances (which includes worldviews, beliefs, modes of communication and of expression).
What this means for the study of conflict is a focus upon specific discontinuities in social and interpersonal life, since in most cases conflict occurs as a collapse in stability, safety and harmony despite differences in scale and global impact. Combining an interpersonal and a societal focus means that ideas can be explored beyond the scope originally imagined under corporeal pragmatics. It is because of this shift in perspective that the project of a semiotic, micro-and-macro analysis of society is described as a semio-discursive theory, since it finally allows for a theory of semiotics to be articulated that is not beholden to dominant expectations about language, and yet it does so without jettisoning what is critically useful from the area of discourse analysis. In order to marry the micro- and macro- levels, it is necessary to show how social behaviour, even in instances completely devoid of words, can be considered discursive once we accept the primacy of nonverbal signs.

Though it is possible to outline how the relation between the level of nonverbal signs and nonverbal discourses might function, such details remain somewhat counter-intuitive even though an understanding dependent on linguistic signs as the totality of meaning has been well and truly surpassed. The Foucauldian theory relies on particular understandings of certain discursive categories such as the ‘statement’ and, at least at first glance, it appears that a semio-discursive theory cannot easily gel with such linguistic concepts. Statements are, after all, a uniquely linguistic event defined without recourse to any sort of theory in which verbal signs are dependent upon
nonverbal meanings in order to make sense. Nevertheless, discourses and patterns of behaviour do each affect the world in much the same way. Furthermore, Foucault's primarily concern with discourse is in the way that it contributes to the formation of subjects. Due to this approach, Foucault's 'discursive subject' is somewhat more complicated than the idea of the linguistic subject. The way that Foucault's concepts go beyond the limits of the linguistic subject, while still grounded in a perspective that does not openly challenge structuralist verbocentrism, offers the chance to reconcile these two seemingly incompatible theories. Rather than trying to show how the findings of corporeal pragmatics can be made to fit with Foucault's analyses despite Foucault's own ties to the conventional perspective of the structuralist philosophy of language, it is by exploring how Foucault's own work sits uncomfortably within the structuralist account that it is possible to show the potential for a synergy between these two works. In this sense, the theory of corporeal pragmatics liberates the final remaining strictures hampering the radical effectiveness of Foucault's theory of discourse.

Despite some complications, Foucault draws a marked distinction between the study of discourses and linguistic analysis. The idea of literature (and by extension, theories of language, though Foucault practically proposes this extension and yet never follows through on it) is an artificial unity, according to Foucault. Such continuities conceal the functioning of discourses by ascribing to certain groups of ideas an artificial history with strict bounds so as to limit the social subject’s discovery of the power relations that underwrite
the initial formation of such unities. To Foucault, most of the nameable bodies of knowledge that exist in the world, including philosophy, are unified in such an obscuring manner, operating with conventions, established perspectives, ways of talking, modes of delivery, systems of authority, etc., that obscure the normative social function that runs parallel and underneath these domains. A simple analysis of language does nothing to uncover the falsity of these unities. However, “Once these immediate forms of continuity are suspended, an entire field is set free” and “the material with which one is dealing is, in its raw, neutral state, a population of events in the space of discourse in general. One is led therefore to the project of a pure description of discursive events as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it” (Foucault 1972, 26-7).

Discursive events are the statements that belong to a particular discourse. While Foucault argues that a language has an infinite number of possibilities for the deployment of statements, a discourse “is a grouping that is always finite and limited at any moment to the linguistic sequences that have been formulated” (1972, 27). In its most reductive form, a discourse is a particular way of speaking about a subject. Discourses are differentiated from each other by the strict rules that separate what can and cannot be said within each discourse and still have the statements remain true to the idea contained within the discourse. Much of The Archaeology of Knowledge is devoted to Foucault’s search for the rules according to which statements are included or excluded from specific discourses. Thus statements emerge as
the “atom of discourse,” the smallest fraction that contributes to the formation of the whole (Foucault 1972, 80). At first it seems completely incompatible to talk about discourses in the same manner as nonverbal practices when the Foucauldian definition of such things relies very heavily upon the notion of the statement. The initial concern is that if the system of language offers the rules out of which infinite performances can be made, we must define the characteristics of the system that offers infinite physical acts to be performed. Yet for Foucault, who takes up the discussion of the statement only as the latest in a long line of theorists, the specificity of the category of the statement is dealt with in such a spectacular manner that any fears are quickly allayed.

As with everything else, Foucault’s studies are exclusively concerned with language. Yet given this verbocentric focus, the approach that Foucault takes is strange and surprising. Foucault argues that if the theoretical focus is upon statements, it should be so only “to grasp other forms of regularity, other types of relations” (1972, 28). He then identifies how it is more important to understand how statements interact than it is to have a strict boundary between what is and what is not counted as a statement. Such relations are numerous:

Relations between statements (even if the author is unaware of them; even if the statements do not have the same author; even if the authors were unaware of each other’s existence); relations between groups of statements thus established (even if these groups do not concern the same, or even adjacent, fields; even if they do not possess the same formal level; even if they are not the locus of assignable exchanges); relations between statements and groups of statements and events of a quite different kind (technical, economic, social, political). To reveal in all its purity the space in which discursive events are deployed is not to undertake to re-establish it in an isolation
that nothing could overcome; it is not to close it upon itself; it is to leave oneself free to describe the interplay of relations within it and outside it. (Foucault 1972, 28-9)

After the exhaustive formality and foundational contradictions of previous language theorists, Foucault’s approach is open because, like Bourdieu, he embraces the impossibility of exhaustive explanations and thorough accounts. To those who continue to believe in such things, Foucault’s work lacks rigour. Nonetheless it is helpful to bear in mind Foucault’s statement that the division of the discursive field “cannot be regarded either as definition or as absolutely valid; it is no more than an initial approximation that must allow relations to appear that may erase the limits of this initial outline” (1972, 30).

In any event, Foucault does offer a definition for statements, but only after painstakingly showing how most definitions are not only unnecessary but also impossible. Foucault’s ‘solution’ is the only one that could work, viewed from such a perspective, and again it is his non-reliance upon notions of ultimate categorisation (recognising that such drives are entirely discursive anyway and contribute to the unity of the field of philosophy) that makes definition possible. Foucault’s solution not only undermines the grammatical definition of a statement but also leaves room for the nonverbal. He does “not think that the necessary and sufficient condition of a statement is the presence of a defined propositional structure, or that one can speak of a statement only when there is a proposition” (Foucault 1972, 80). Foucault then widens the definition of the statement to include classificatory tables,
genealogical trees, account books, etc. Such objects require a Peircean semiotic in order to be understood as signs at all, and the nonverbal interpretants required of these signs are fairly obvious. Yet none of these are sentences, even ones (such as a name in a ledger or on a family tree) that are affected by “a mere artifice of presentation . . . [where] this statement is an elliptical, abbreviated sentence, spatialised in a relatively unusual mode, that should be read as the sentence” (Foucault 1972, 82). Statements are irreducible to a grammatical definition because too often utterances that are clearly statements (“Stop! Police!”) defy conventional sentence structures.

Foucault therefore moves away from a strictly grammatical definition of statements and towards something much more like that imagined by speech act theory. He observes that “more than a statement is often required to effect a speech act: on oath, a prayer, a contract, a promise, or a demonstration usually require a certain number of distinct formulas or separate sentences” and in this scenario the importance of physical performances must also be taken into account (Foucault 1972, 83). Austin likewise acknowledges the importance of performance to the category of the statement in his discussion of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. In speech act theory, statements are a kind of non-explicit performative, illocutionary utterance that is both doing and saying something, true or false, and often happy or unhappy as well. Austin divides illocutionary verbs into five sorts: verdictives (giving a verdict); exercitatives (the exercising of powers, rights or influence); commissives (promising, undertaking or committing); behabitives (a miscellaneous group
belonging to attitudes and social behaviour such as apologising, commending, cursing and challenging); and expositives (which make plain how our utterances are to be used in argument or conversation: replying, arguing, conceding, assuming, illustrating). On perlocutions, Austin writes that they “may be either the achievement of a perlocutionary object (convince, persuade) or the production of a perlocutionary sequel.” He then makes the claim, startling in a view otherwise ignorant towards any nonverbal dimension, that “It is a characteristic of perlocutionary acts that the response achieved, or the sequel, can be achieved additionally or entirely by non-locutionary means” such as by intimidation or the use of force (Austin 119). Thus a physical action can stand in for a locutionary act in some circumstances, at least according to Austin.

The boundaries between speech and act, the two components of ‘speech act theory,’ are further blurred when we consider illocutions and perlocutions in relation to conflict. Illocutions are the performance of an act in saying something. Perlocutions are speech acts that conjure feelings or responses evoked in the addressee by the words or the speech act. Considered as elements in conflict, illocutions convey threat, anger or hostility, and perlocutions are speech acts that conjure resentment, feelings of oppression and retaliation or provocation. Austin and Searle agree that locutionary acts do not make sense on their own without understanding context (the situation in which the speech act takes place and which contributes to the possible interpretations of speakers and hearers) and the
performative nature of language use. Therefore an understanding in which illocutions and perlocutions are purely linguistic phenomena is not rich enough to adequately tackle the issue of conflict.

It is as if Austin acknowledges the somehow shallow consequences of his own theory when he writes that “there may be some things we ‘do’ in some connexion with saying something which do not seem to fall, intuitively at least, exactly into any of these roughly defined classes [such as commissives or behabitives, et al], or even seem to fall vaguely into more than one” (Austin 104-5). As evidence of this phenomenon, Austin discusses “insinuating, as when we insinuate something in or by issuing some utterance,” which he argues seems “to involve some convention, as in the illocutionary act; but we cannot say ‘I insinuate. . . .’” which makes Austin think implication is “a clever effect rather than a mere act” (1962, 104-5). After all, according to Austin, illocutions have no authority upon the receiver. One cannot say ‘I convince you’ or ‘I alarm you.’ “Further,” writes Austin, “we may entirely clear up whether someone was arguing or not without touching on the question whether he was convincing anyone or not” (1962, 104). Thus in each instance Austin observes both in actions and speech acts the distinction between setting out to achieve something and the actual doing of it. Likewise we must observe the difference between the purporting to do or to mean something and its actual performance.

The conclusion that Foucault reaches is that “When one wishes to individualise statements, one cannot therefore accept unreservedly any of the
models borrowed from grammar, logic, or ‘analysis’” (1972, 84). Instead, he considers “that there is a statement wherever one can recognise and isolate an act of formulation” (Foucault 1972, 83). Foucault qualifies this intuition by explaining that an act of formulation does not:

- refer to the material act of speaking (aloud or to oneself) or of writing (by hand or typewriter); nor does it refer to the intention of the individual who is speaking (the fact that he wants to convince someone else, to be obeyed, to discover the solution to a problem, or to communicate information); nor does it refer to the possible result of what he has said (whether he has convinced someone or aroused his suspicion; whether he was listened to and whether his orders were carried out; whether his prayer was heard). (1972, 83)

An act of formulation refers to that which has been carried out in the performance of the communicative act.

The speech act is not what took place just prior to the moment when the statement was made (in the author’s thought or intentions); it is not what might have happened, after the event itself, in its wake, and the consequences that it gave rise to; it is what occurred by the very fact that a statement was made – and precisely this statement (and no other) in specific circumstances. (Foucault 1972, 83)

Statements therefore remain an elusive unit of communication. The flexibility with which Foucault describes statements leaves the argument open for their consideration also as non-verbal signs, like that which is embodied in social behaviour or in the physical performance of an action.

“One should not be surprised, then,” Foucault writes, “if one has failed to find structural criteria of unity for the statement.” He then argues that this is because statements cannot be understood as simply ‘units.’ A statement is instead “a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space”
(Foucault 1972, 87). Ultimately the function that Foucault describes blends well with the semio-discursive argument because, when we describe the statement in this sense, we focus on it “in its actual practice, its conditions, the rules that govern it, and the field in which it operates” (1972, 87). Such a description is at odds with the conventional explanation of statements since a statement ceases to be a sign or group of signs or even merely ‘composed’ of signs. Instead, “it is that which enables such groups of signs to exist, and enables these rules or forms to become manifest” (Foucault 1972, 88).

Specifically, statements are reworked as relations that permit communication and social action. Rather than being a node in a phrase universe, the cargo of the illocutionary or perlocutionary act, the statement is re-imagined as the relation that connects the nodes, with the nodes themselves consequently left open to be described as the originary points of the discursive forces (institutions, powers, structures, divisions) that deploy statements across the whole field of what is said (or written, or done).

At this point Foucault’s argument is not wholly incompatible with a conservative description of signs and statements. A structuralist account can argue that the relation between the speech act and Foucault’s statements operates in the same way as the time-honoured relation of the signifier to the signified. Foucault is aware of this potential to reduce the radical import of what he is saying, to do as is frequently done and hammer his theoretical structures into the holes designed to accommodate the conventional tropes of structuralist theory. For this reason he argues specifically “that one can show
that the relation of the statement to what it states is not superposable on any of these [other] relations” (Foucault 1972, 89). Statements are not something to be re-used time and time again. Each time a statement is affirmed, it is affirmed anew. The conditions of its emergence contribute to what makes each statement unique at its moment of irruption, defined by the web of factors with and within which it is continually engaged.

At the same instant, “There is no statement that does not presuppose others; there is no statement that is not surrounded by a field of coexistences, effects of series and succession, a distribution of functions and roles.” Foucault argues, “If one can speak of a statement, it is because a sentence (a proposition) figures at a definite point, with a specific position, in an enunciative network that extends beyond it” (Foucault 1972, 99). It is the unconscious verbocentrism of Foucault’s account – the last vestiges of the structuralist legacy that much of his work aims to expunge – that, at this critical juncture, holds Foucault back from the edge of a great pronouncement or series of pronouncements that, through corporeal pragmatics and semio-discursive theory, we are now ready to make. At bare minimum, the materiality of statements and the discourses according to which they are organised, as well as the intersemiotic character of signs and the meanings they convey, support the view that the practices we engage in are informed by the meanings we use to make sense of the world and thus submit to an analysis in much the same fashion as discourses are reducible in Foucauldian theory.
We are left in little doubt that statements “must have a material existence.” Foucault asks, “Could one speak of a statement if a voice had not articulated it, if a surface did not bear its signs, if it had not become embodied in a sense-perceptible element, and if it had not left some trace – if only for an instant – in someone’s memory or in some space?” (1972, 100). Again, Foucault does here what he does frequently throughout his writing: he treats elements that are not possessed of meaning according to a conventional structuralist definition as if they are interchangeable with a Saussurean definition of signs. As has been outlined previously, such slippage is a frequent feature in contemporary semiotics, and is required so as to overlook Saussure’s insistence upon the philosophy of language being exclusive to verbal signs rather than all types of signification (such as visual or imagined images). Yet Foucault’s references to extra-linguistic elements gives the sense that his particular slippage is due to a certain disquiet with the standard account rather than an imprecise, unconscious mistake.

Foucault’s comments can be read as a dissatisfaction with the ordinary limits of what may be considered to carry meaning. His writing seems to yearn for the sort of treatment that is permissible only via corporeal pragmatics, which acknowledges that linguistic meanings, while dominant, are not the deepest level at which meaning operates. In the previous commentary Foucault allows for speech and writing quite succinctly. However his reference to something that is “embodied in a sense-perceptible element” seems to fill the space that in corporeal pragmatics would be occupied by the
acknowledgement of nonverbal signs and, through them, the performance of actions motivated by chains of cultural meanings. As a consequence, despite his understanding, as conveyed by the text, remaining more or less within the standard structuralist account, Foucault still manages to allow for almost any sort of action or facet of human behaviour to be opened up to analysis. It is this recurrent vacancy, marked out only as a possibility and unfilled at the time of Foucault’s writing, which allows for Foucauldian theory to be drawn upon so heavily by semio-discursive theory.

Of even greater interest to a semio-discursive examination of conflict, Foucault describes all categories of statement as possessing a materiality that may be considered separately from their cultural meanings. Thus, in the discussion of statements stands the tacit acknowledgement that signs are not unified and monolithic but that they instead permit numerous meanings, foreshadowing the corporeal pragmatics perspective of signs as intersemiotic and potentially heterosemiotic in nature. It is a fundamental semiotic observation that the sign is the site of struggle over conflicting meanings, but through this analysis we do away with having to take the roundabout route of understanding conflict in the meanings of signs as being a difference of languages. Instead we are free to tackle the nature of social disputes at the level of the forces (communities, institutions, authorities) directly involved. Neither do we need to stick to the massified blocks standard to the usual account. Instead we are able to posit conflicts at many levels, recognising that families and societies are both ‘cultures’ on different scales. While we
can acknowledge that meanings are mostly culturally determined (in that the child is initiated into a particular regimen of knowing the world that only opens up to further mediation in maturity), there is a vast chasm between saying that our community guides us in the appropriate deixis for nonverbal signs and that cultures are themselves linguistically determined and thus all instances of cultural (even micro-cultural, or local) conflict are questions of distinct languages in dispute. This point is brought home when we add the semio-discursive thrust that reads physical actions and behaviour patterns in terms of discourses. Foucault never advances to this point despite frequent references to the specific notion of a ‘discursive practice’ – an idea that is sadly under-articulated in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and future works.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny such a leap when one isolates what Foucault has to say about statements. His description of a linguistic practice in which each statement is unique and yet subject to repetition works equally well for a description of performative behaviour: so much so that it is possible to simply replace the linguistic theme in the following comments with references to the body, for Foucault writes that the statement:

> Instead of being something said once and for all – and lost in the past like the result of a battle, a geological catastrophe, or the death of a king – the statement, as it emerges in its materiality, appears with a status, enters various networks and various fields of use, is subjected to transferences or modifications, is integrated into operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained or effaced. Thus the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or presents the realisation of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry. (1972, 105)

The statement is an object. Our interest in it is not for the sake of revealing
specific subjects who are implicated in its use. Viewed as coming from either a linguistic or a non-linguistic practice, the analysis of the statement “designates the general theme of a description that questions the already-said at the level of its existence: of the enunciative function that operates within it,” which allows for certain performances of behaviour in specific ways; “of the discursive formation,” in which utterances and actions are implicated in broader patterns of behaviour that might be said to serve a certain purpose at either a social or interpersonal level; “and the general archive system to which it belongs,” which we must understand as a history of events containing semio-discursive phenomena (verbal and nonverbal elements), focusing not just on what was said and written but also on what was done, all of which contribute to the general picture of a culture in a particular time and place. In Foucault’s own words, “Archaeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive” (1972, 131).

If discourses are practices that reflect a particular body of semio-discursive phenomena (texts, utterances, sense-readings, patterns of behaviour, habits and customs, ways of talking, etc.) then social events, which may be as grand as a civil war or as moderate as two people in an argument, may be analysed in the manner of discourse analysis. We can take the final step in establishing whether or not the semio-discursive thesis holds by looking more deeply into how statements are deployed in discourse. From such a position we should then be able to understand discourse more thoroughly in its dual function as ‘use,’ and thus understand how social
activities circulate to reproduce and naturalise certain meanings, perspectives
and attitudes that themselves contribute to the harsh realities of the world.
Foucault wishes to show that "discourses," in the form in which they can be
heard or read, are not, as one might expect, a mere intersection of things and
words: an obscure web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of
words." Neither is discourse "a slender surface of contact, or confrontation,
between a reality and a language \((\text{langue})\), the intrication of a lexicon and an
experience." The rules for discursive formations that Foucault develops lead
ultimately to seeing discourse as "the ordering of objects," and thus no longer:

- treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to
  contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form
  the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed
  of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate
  things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language
  \((\text{langue})\) and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and
describe. (1972, 48-9)

The 'more' that these objects entail is a materiality that remains even when
linguistic components have been stripped away.

In a discursive understanding, objects are multiplied by the number of
discourses in which they form a part, but this multiplication is on a purely
ideational level. When Foucault states that discourses are "practices that
systematically form the objects of which they speak," it is literally the idea of
the object that is formed. Therefore the phrase is somewhat contradictory,
since the discursive object is immaterial and separate from the materiality of
the statements that are components of the discourse that formed it. It is for
this reason that some objects may be components for more than one or even
conflicting discourses. However, while some objects are obviously material facts in a concrete sense, their materiality is as open to interpretation as is the materiality of statements. Thus we can speak of the materiality of a piece of land which is largely transhistorical and unchanging, even with transformations effected upon its surface. However we can also discuss the materiality of an act of violence that occurs in the past and echoes only in the consequences of its performance. At another level, we note the material conditions of social institutions: whether something grand like the military or the police force or the judiciary; something more finite, like the behaviour and customs of the family unit, the neighbourhood or the social club; or at the level of particular repetitive, meaningful social rituals such as the giving of hospitality, the sharing of a meal or the tacit but only semi-formalised rules of greetings between members of a certain community.

These examples are ‘objects’ in the sense that they can be spoken about or are conceived of as an idea in discourse; and on another level entirely they have varying degrees of materiality in the speech acts and physical performances – what I have called semio-discursive phenomena – that are the engines of their continuation. Thus some objects may cease to exist, at least momentarily, or like any object there may be places one can go where no evidence of their existence can be found, yet as practices their continuation is assured by their very nature. Customs, habits and social rituals exist only as ideas that manifest through performances that are themselves the physical statements that they require to exist at all. With this
we see a parallel to language’s parasitic relation to nonverbal signs. Social practices also have a meaning by dint of the actions that individuals perform in order to enact them. However, in a conventional verbocentric account of discourse, performances only enter discourse – they only exist to be talked about – when they are articulated, described or require speech; and it is often to the level of speech that analysis turns, completely ignoring the obvious physical reality that the words describe, as if the performance of the social practice is only real when it is understood in terms of the language used to describe it.

In such a sense, the performance and the idea of the performance are mutually dependent even though the physical (nonverbal) and discursive (linguistic) aspects remain separate (or are separable). Both aspects are subject to transformation or stability, change or repetition. The discursive understanding of an object may be affected by a change in physical conditions or the manner of its performance. Alternatively, the materiality of the overall object may be changed by transformations in the statements (verbalisations or performances) out of which it is constructed, those statements themselves being affected by alterations to the way in which the object is itself conceived of or treated at the level of ideas. These patterns of inter-relatedness between the discursive and physical planes and the impact that the possibility of switching between planes has for the analysis of conflict are discussed forthwith in terms of the ideational and pragmatic level of ideas (see Chapter Six). First, however, we must understand an important
relationship between these elements in the discussion of conflict.

It is crucial to the framework of semio-discursive theory to establish just how it is that ideas and practices correlate and how each affects the other. Through such an understanding we are offered the possibility of either actively limiting or encouraging the propagation of certain cultural practices. In such a way we are empowered by a particular approach to the study and resolution of conflict. However, we are not able to adequately account for conflict in the way that it happens at an undirected (which is to say non-rigorously analytical) level. This is certainly not the same thing as saying that many conflicts are not consciously impelled. However, by and large social conflicts arise out of a complex web of factors and emerge without necessarily betraying their origins through the evidence of some sort of trace. We cannot instantly glean the sole reason, if there ever is such a thing, for the conflict’s eruption; and without such a tight focus our analysis, which rests quite solidly upon the requirement of an identifiable and possibly solitary node or locus or point of conflict, we are left with a complex picture that defies resolution because we are unable to deal with the whole thing at once.

Foucault’s approach to social reality establishes a network of discursive practices that operate in such complexity that a similar impotence would likely result if it was not for his particular methodology, in which he relates historical conditions (the complex web of relations) and our access to that history via the archive (the sum of semio-discursive phenomena that remain accessible from those historical conditions). Thus Foucault reduces a dizzying complex
of relations down to the statements (texts, but also practices, customs, behaviours, etc.) of particular historical discourses, which themselves act as nodes or instances that he is then able to study. Indeed, an archival study of the past (or even the present) seems to be the only sensible solution to the complexity that social life throws up.

Foucault is often at pains to point out that in the archaeological method of discourse analysis, the archival moment (an historical instance) is important only as an extrapolated, extracted example of a discursive field, not as an object in itself to be analysed, psychologised, or given meaning. He explains that “Archaeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules” (Foucault 1972, 138-9). However, Foucault’s interest in identifying and singling-out specific discourses is tied to a recurring focus on the analysis of social power. Therefore, with particular discourses Foucault is concerned to show “why it could not be other than it was, in what respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy” (1972, 27-28).

Semio-discursive analysis is also interested to know which are the competing statements and practices, how they are excluded, in what ways they manifest externally or in a residual and thus resistant manner, and in what way subjects and groups of subjects perform reversals or otherwise find ways to challenge the dominance of mandated discourses and practices. In
the specific instance of each discursive practice, the questions proper to their analysis is to ask what it is that they represent, in whose interests they function, and to what degree they are actively exclusive of other discursive practices. As Foucault puts it, “This formation is made possible by a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation, and specification” (1972, 44). Social forces that are rarely reducible to a single entity or a fixed identity, or which can be given only the most proscriptive of characters (‘the State’), are nonetheless identifiable as trends and interests that operate semio-discursively within cultures.

Foucault writes that “Archaeology is not the search of inventions . . . neither is it concerned with the average phenomena of opinion . . . it is to uncover the regularity of a discursive practice” (1972, 144-5). From such a position we can draw conclusive observations that connect social values and norms to concrete practices that function within cultures to produce objects for specific uses. In this operation are revealed the interests of particular groups and the popularity of certain trends. This position does not have recourse to pure opinion because it does not need to, since, informed by a semio-discursive understanding of the relationship between discourses and practices, the analysis of ideas may be arrived at simply by virtue of the observation of social practices, since these practices and no others are the means by which particular values and points of view are sustained and circulated. As Foucault presages in The Archaeology of Knowledge, “there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive
practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms” (1972, 183).

Of this mutual relation we must consider further, since no definitive answer is ever given by Foucault; and yet we find this model recurring the more and more that we consider the relations between discourses and practices and between linguistic and non-linguistic signs. It is Habermas who notes that:

There is some unclarity, to begin with, regarding the problem of how discourses – scientific and non-scientific – are related to practices: whether one governs the other, whether their relationship is to be conceived as that of base to superstructure, or on the model of the circular causality, or as an interplay of structure and event. (1987, 243)

It is this irregularity that must be tackled since the relationship between pragmatic and ideational planes is the inevitable cornerstone of a theory of conflict. Furthermore, the same model of spatial relations that Habermas contemplates can be seen to recur at each theoretical level that has so far been considered.

However, it is also necessary to briefly account for the various claims that Foucault makes which argue against the uses presently being made of his work. The most direct means to subvert the semio-discursive argument that Foucault’s archaeological theory of discourse addresses a nonverbal theory of signification – and in so doing, is able to consider nonverbal social practices as discursive – has already been partly disabled since all along it has been acknowledged that, for all his advances on the main tenets of structuralism, Foucault never breaks with the conventional verbocentric account of signs even when his writing explicitly lends itself to an
incorporation of extra-linguistic signification. In such a respect Foucault’s theories must be understood in the historical context within which they were formulated. To each writer his or her specialisation: and as has been noted elsewhere, one writer, however radical, can only hope to cover a certain amount of ground in the advancement of his or her field (Hately 1998, 4).

For this reason Foucault’s *oeuvre* itself represents a series of specific discourses emerging from a particular period,\(^{43}\) and with his particular focus upon the interrogation of social traces for the relations they reveal it is not surprising that Foucault did not come up against the problems identified by the present study with the standard structuralist account of meaning. The verbocentric perspective on signs does not hinder Foucault in the pursuit of his theoretical goals, though at times, as has been noted previously, the reader seems to encounter some of Foucault’s frustration at the faux-rigour that inheres to some of these structuralist formulations. It is of course only because the semiotic analysis of conflict is not possible if we settle for the dominant verbocentric account that the present study concentrates so heavily upon the discrepancies of Saussurean semiotics. Furthermore, it seems clear that the inflexibility of the structuralist theory of signs has hindered prior works on conflict, since it is in fields informed by the linguistic turn that philosophical questions about society become questions first and foremost of language, from which point the pursuit of a theory of conflict becomes completely disempowered.

\(^{43}\) I would write *episteme* if Foucault himself had not done away with such a general term for an historico-centric knowledge.
Likewise, it is not necessary to take on here the generally insoluble observation that the archaeological and subsequent genealogical methods of discursive inquiry are “overtaken by a fate similar to that which Foucault had seen in the human sciences,” which is to say that archaeology, but particularly genealogy, “retreats into the reflectionless objectivity of a non-participatory, ascetic description of kaleidoscopically changing practices of power” and thus emerges “as precisely the presentistic, relativistic, cryptonormative illusory science that it does not want to be” (Habermas 1987, 275-6). The general paradox of Foucault’s archaeology as a pseudo-objective, externalising mode of inquiry that deconstructs the possibility of such a position in all other discourse is relatively well known. Furthermore, as is often overlooked, it was Foucault who first realised this performative contradiction. While on the one hand other theorists have been criticised who, in identifying elements which problematise their formulations, solve the incompatibility by excluding the pernicious factors, or by treating them as if they were irrelevant, on the other hand it is equally important to acknowledge when an otherwise valuable enterprise stands at risk of being discounted for reasons quite separate to the underlying purpose of the effort. Although it is usually spurious to talk of worth in any sense, it is nonetheless accurate to say that some theories have a use that can always be redeemed despite redoubtable criticisms.

In Foucault’s discourse analysis there is an enduring centre and an overall project that are both admirable and crucial to the semio-discursive
project of the examination of conflict. Although there is no ultimate position of unrivalled objectivity available from which to pronounce judgements as to the orientation of particular discourses, and furthermore that if we hold as true the observation that the moment one passes judgement of any sort on any thing one immediately assumes a position that is itself discursively produced, Foucault’s emphasis on the specificity of the statement and discourse as practice are vital contributions to contemporary theory that must not be overlooked. If in passing judgements on discourses we must judge ourselves and our presumptions as well, Foucault does at least provide a methodology by which this can be achieved, even if it does not submit to the sort of ultimate proofs that would please more empirical researchers. In such a manner we are no more free than we ever were, at least according to Foucault’s schemata, but at least via this process we come to see what Foucault himself later observes, that “individuals may be agents within society, but only once they overcome the truth-knowledge regimes of power which serve to keep subjects docile and manageable” (Hately 1998, 5).

Therefore, with only a conditional and \textit{a posteriori} ability to argue the case – an ability which nonetheless allows us to make predictions about certain orders of behaviour that are \textit{a priori} as far our ability to prove them goes – we can still account for those discrepancies that issue from Foucault and which might be raised in counter-argument to a semio-discursive theory. The most striking example of Foucault’s pre-emptive disagreement with a theory that conflates discourse and practice is found in his discussion of
discursive strategies. Therein Foucault writes that strategies are informed “by the function that the discourse under study must carry out in a field of non-discursive practices” (1972, 68). Foucault already acknowledges the discursivity of certain practices, but he does little to qualify how he distinguishes some practices as non-discursive. As an example of the latter, Foucault observes “the scarcely conceptualised, scarcely theorised, daily practice of emergent capitalism” (1972, 68).

However, since Foucault is the one who later observes that the workings of power and the subject can never be demarcated or isolated from each other (mediated by society), it seems ironic and naïve that Foucault would separate discourses and practices (of any kind) from one another. It is a semio-discursive argument that words and actions are the two main vehicles for power in society. The example Foucault cites seems exactly the sort of enormous network of interlocking discourses and practices that would benefit from an analysis according to the methods he has popularised. Instead, Foucault seems to imagine discourses as a concatenation of ideas that goes out into the play of non-discursive relations operating within the social order. Such an understanding does more to undermine Foucault’s otherwise sweeping formulations since it sets limits not only on what can be legitimately studied as discursive, but it also returns to discourse the status of origin or prime cause behind social phenomena. We are otherwise encouraged by Foucault to think of social forces and the subject’s construction within the total field of discursive relations as being a network
without distinct boundaries and a process without an identifiable beginning or end.

Besides which, as Foucault shows in his various historical inquiries, his discursive analysis already proves sufficient for the task of interrogating earlier social forms. Since it is unlikely that Foucault would concede that the contemporary society in which the daily practice of emergent capitalism takes place has some sort of special character that means that it would remain opaque to the method of enquiry enabled by his theoretical toolkit, it is a contradiction, perhaps an ill-conceived comment, for Foucault to draw a firm line between discursive and non-discursive practices. This assertion is reinforced by the observation that Foucault does not ever really map out what he means by non-discursive practices other than to point to certain areas as examples of it. It is worth noting that Foucault’s earlier comments do not distinguish between discourses and non-discursive practice; instead he considers some practices discursive and some not. Elements have already been identified in Foucault’s formulations whose presence can be explained only if it is acknowledged that Foucault is at least partially unsatisfied with the conventional linguistic account of meaning. It is also clear that Foucault permits a degree of slippage in relation to the structuralist line by wishing to account for obvious meanings tied to texts that are not strictly linguistic. Therefore it remains conceivable that had this elusive category been more thoroughly examined it may well have yielded to observations more in keeping with the central thesis advanced here: which is to say that the idea of
Discursivity as the capacity for circulating meaning lends itself equally well to a description of the operation of entirely nonverbal practices in society as it does the verbal.

Further instances of slippage appear when Foucault writes, “I had regarded the statement as a unit that could be established without difficulty, and that all I had to do was describe its possibilities and laws of combination. I now realise that I could not define the statement as a unit of a linguistic type.” Specifically, Foucault includes several categories of texts that cannot be labelled as merely linguistic when he goes on to state that:

I was dealing with an enunciative function that involved various units (these may sometimes be sentences, sometimes propositions; but they are sometimes made up of fragments of sentences, series or tables of signs, a set of propositions or equivalent formulations); and, instead of giving a 'meaning' to these units, this function relates them to a field of objects; instead of providing them with a subject, it opens up for them a number of possible subjective positions. (1972, 106)

Foucault’s definitions of non-linguistic units include material statements, but still falls short of acknowledging the enunciative function of actions. Nevertheless, when he speaks about the material ‘effects’ of discourse, this is often the identification of events that result as much from non-linguistic practices as from purely verbal discourses. Indeed, it is only by concentrating on how discourses function, starting with their enunciation (how they are articulated) and moving to their practice (how they behave in social relations), that Foucault is able to overcome the discrepancies engendered by sticking too closely to the tacit belief that questions of social power, as questions about society, are thereby questions about language.
Much of Foucault’s work is a rebellion against the trend towards greater and greater degrees of interpretation. As such, the embrace of non-linguistic means of signification seems a necessity because, by looking at how discourse functions, Foucault examines it as a form of action. In this scenario, anyone who wishes to examine discursive functions rather than perform an interpretation requires an understanding of nonverbal signs (or at least, as we see time and time again in Foucault’s writings, they need to acknowledge, even if it is at an unconscious level, that the verbocentric account of semiosis is insufficient), since it is only according to nonverbal signs that actions make sense. In the absence of words all we have are sense readings. The whole argument about interpreting non-linguistic behaviour in terms of discourse revolves around this distinction that we understand linguistic signs only in terms of bodily signifiers, and thus in the absence of language it is not that we cease to be able to make meaning of what we encounter with our senses (our eyes, our ears, our imaginations), it is instead that we perform an intersemiotic operation, substituting nonverbal signs for the linguistic signs that otherwise normally permit us to communicate in the most immediate and efficient manner. Therefore the argument is not really that practices may be understood in terms of discourse, but instead that all discourse is reducible to the level of nonverbal signs since all linguistic signifiers inevitably reference nonverbal meanings.

The accounts of journalists and writers on the H-Blocks clearly reveal the discursivity of the prison protests, tracking the escalation of hostilities
between wardens and inmates in the behaviour in the prison environment. Starting out from the initial refusal to wear the prison uniform, the prisoners eventually relented, apparently on the orders of OC Brendan Hughes, for the tactical purpose of receiving visitors. Because visiting privileges were vigorously pursued after more than two years of the inmates showing no willingness to compromise, and because the resumption of visits coincided with an increase in contraband and the passing out of secret communiqués, the wardens stepped up the ferocity and frequency of their mirror searches of the inmates’ anus. Eventually “men refused to leave their cells to wash and go to the toilet because every time they did they were ‘harassed’ by prison officers. Refusing to leave their cells was a protest in itself” (Taylor 1997, 257). Furthermore, while accepting the prison uniform for the purpose of meeting visitors from outside, “at other times [the republican prisoners] had only a towel to cover themselves. When they went to the showers they had to use this towel, so they asked for a second. When this was refused they also refused to wash, on the grounds that they should not be forced into nakedness” (Coogan 1996, 265). Taylor supports the view that a general increase in the already commonplace beatings ensued from such developments, the frustration of the prison authorities manifesting in blatantly unlawful violence.

“The blanket protest escalated, at first to the no-wash protest, when prisoners refused to leave their cells after they were denied a second towel with which to cover themselves” (O’Malley 1990, 21). Then, “the no-wash
protest became the dirty protest, when prisoners were refused buckets to slop out into after they were denied permission to use the toilets unless they wore a prison uniform” (O’Malley 1990, 22). The prisoners knew that going to the toilet in such a fashion was unfeasible because every time they left their cells they exposed themselves to new opportunities for beatings, searches and abuse. It appeared as if “At every turn the warders were out to break the prisoners and the prisoners were out to thwart the warders” (O’Malley 1990 22). However, the republican Ciarán Nugent “made a point which the other prisoners corroborated,” being that the Dirty protest was really begun by the warders. This is because “the warders started returning the blanket men’s pots half full, sometimes kicking them over the floors. So this, say the protesters, is why it became necessary to throw the faeces out of the window [and pour the urine under the doors] in the first place” (Coogan 2002, 94).

The young republican prisoners had no real ability to judge the abnormality of their predicament nor the consequences to which it would eventually lead. Moloney writes, “There had been nothing to compare with it in Irish history, and participating in the protest required special qualities and conviction on the part of the protestors” (2002, 205). Only in hindsight and by virtue of careful analysis have the full implications and subtleties of the Dirty protest even been made available for consideration. As an historical instance that makes tangible the themes of cultural, ideological and political conflict, the Dirty protest is almost without comparison. As an example that clearly illustrates the discursivity of nonverbal behaviour, the Dirty protest is
invaluable, for rarely is it shown more clearly, and in the crudest possible terms, that at the heart of conflict over desires and meanings, the body, its functions, and its meanings, play a central role.

The events leading up until the Dirty protest support the view that the body and its meanings were central to the exchanges between inmates and warders. Whereas the cell was the space – the semiotic matrix and prime machinery – within which the authorities enacted routines, and against which routines the prisoners rebelled, the body was the object-target for all of these processes: the struggle over uniforms, the forced washing, beatings and starvation, and the inmates’ bodily functions. The body was the battleground upon which the republican inmates and their warders faced each other. As the Dirty protest and the subsequent hunger strikes show, against the smothering, depersonalising effects of the cell the prisoners deployed their own bodies: and the success or failure of the prison regime to individuate and disempower their subjects was reflected by successive material changes to the prisoners’ bodies (and to a lesser degree their physical environment)44.

This situation had been the case since the very first moment that the prison and its subjects came into conflict. The previous exploration of the role that Gaelic language played in the prison struggle gives the first suggestion of this equation, where the carceral space of the cell, if it is to be thought of as “the central theatre of observation,” also became the stage upon which

44 Prisoners were frequently rotated through various cells since the consequences of the protest, particularly the smeared excrement on the walls and the organic matter rotting on the floors, required that cells could only be restored to their original conditions by extensive, machinery-intensive cleaning.
republican prisoners could play out their resistance (Feldman 1991, 175). The prisoners’ self-identities were bolstered through the historical connections forged by the adoption of Gaelic. The prisoners subverted the cell’s primary intended function of isolation, instead transforming it into a rejuvenating space for the appropriation of a counter-identity, itself nothing but a technique to fight against the psychologically and ideologically damaging methods of the prison. In such activity can be identified a relatively straight-forward conflict between a superior force, intent on inflicting or causing a change, upon an inferior force who, if we accepted the Lyotardian premise, and if it is always believed that success or failure in a conflict is a matter of possessing the greater force, we would call the victim. However, from the point of view informed by corporeal pragmatics, such an analysis must be rejected. Conflict is antagonistic, but also heterosemiotic. Both sides are empowered by a wide range of options even in such extreme circumstances as the confines of a gaol.

The conflict surrounding the prison uniform, mapped previously, bears such a tenet out. As Feldman observes:

The prisoners’ refusal to wear the uniform had been the first interruption of optical circuits. The guards responded by transforming nakedness into an obvious surrogate tool of visual degradation in place of institutional clothing. The No Wash Protest by the prisoners reclothed their naked bodies with a new and repellent surface of resistance. (1991, 175)

In the conflict surrounding the issue of prison dress, strategy and counter-strategy were employed to continue the conflict, maintaining hostilities, which suspended resolution and the tacit declaration of a winner and loser in the
struggle. In examining the overall history of conflict within the prison, everything that occurred would eventually be traced back to the escalation of this conflict over uniform into a full-fledged prison war. The determination of the prisoners to wear their own civilian clothing was, after all, one of the ‘five demands’ made of the British government during the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes. Bearing such an escalation in mind, it is possible to read in the history of conflict in the H-Blocks a deployment and counter-deployment of various techniques of repression and resistance, each side, republican and warden, set to achieve a tangible ‘victory’ over the other. Although few things in ordinary parlance are often reduced to such a simplistic level, it is nonetheless the case that in conflict such outcomes are the only, and in fact the inevitable, result.

To view conflict between antagonistic forces in such a manner is to enter into a new understanding of the opposition between sides. On the one hand, as in the conventional view, conflict represents a coming together and clash of forces. To call one side a victor and the other the victim, or to talk of oppressor and oppressed, is to recognise that the battle for superiority is the fundamental condition of conflict. It matters not whether we conceive of such an arrangement as a friendly argument between friends, one’s attempt to beguile another, or as an open combat for physical, material stakes. Entering into conflict is an exercise in power – for which can be substituted the attempt of one side to exert its will upon the world in some way so as to achieve a desired result. However, on the other hand, the conflict between warring
parties is also an exchange. As has been identified already, if our understanding of the world and the forces in it is essentially semiotic – we read and understand meanings based upon exposure to a wide range of media and sign-types, all of which issue from bodily signifieds that are accorded a certain cultural sense through the process of community-guided deixis – then conflicts between individuals and groups is never simply an attempt to achieve results but also to control the interpretation of, or even access to, specific meanings. Consequently, in the actions of conflicting parties there is a battle at the same time that there is also communication (however oppositional; whatever the frictions involved; however many obstacles block the path to mutual enlightenment).

In viewing conflict thus, a position is reached that represents an unusual return to a state of affairs that has previously been critiqued. There is a common tendency within philosophical analysis to view everything in terms of language, in which case language-like characteristics are ascribed to phenomena that are not truly, or are not at all, linguistic. As a result, when semioticians such as Feldman examine the body’s role in the power struggles of the H-Blocks, language as signifier beyond comparison (indeed the only true signifier, in a structuralist account) becomes the default metaphor in every instance. Such nonsensical passages as the following are the result:

As the beatings overlap, the capacity of the narrator to deliver information decreases radically; the beatings literally reduce him to silence, pound him into inert flesh beyond language. For the narrator, the cumulative sequence of beatings and attempted mutilations becomes a narrative of survival – a journey part language and the body and a return to language and the body that coincides with the
recitation of the oral history. The recovery of the violated body as a political artifact takes place through the storage of the body in a surrogate medium: language and memory double the effaced flesh. The body subtracted by violence is reconstituted and replotted through oral history. (Feldman 1991, 119)

As was explored in the initial critiques of Saussurean semiotics, it is not possible to speak of bodies as ‘texts’ when the very theory of signification upon which the structuralist account is based does not allow for such poetic attribution.

Yet of course, bodies are texts. However, what has previously been lacking in order to justify such a statement is an adequate theory of signification that does not depend upon language as its model for the operation of all meaning. Previously, when semiotics could clearly identify communication taking place in a nonverbal environment, such as in the transformation of a space or the expression of the self through the body, the naturalisation of the metaphor of language guaranteed that all communication was conceived of in such terms. However, as corporeal pragmatics clearly indicates, communication does not always equate to language. Meaning can be indicated by the presence of an object or triggered by an activity without using words, let alone grammar, syntax, etc. Despite his verbocentric slippage, Feldman still manages to articulate how, “If the body is an economic grid, a point of transactions, it is because it is fetishised by the exchanges between antagonistic forces that require a fixed body in order to become present to each other through a shared terrain” (1991, 177-8). This excerpt is typical of the statements that are frequently made by writers who clearly wish
to articulate the heterosemiotic communicability of the world but are hampered by the implicit limitations of the Saussurean philosophy of language.

It is a step up, then, to acknowledge that not only can communication take place without recourse to language but that discursivity itself can manifest in practices, as well as physical behaviour, habits, cultural codes, rituals and customs. The theory of discourse as practice (and its reverse, ‘practice as discourse’) makes every aspect of the world open to a semiotic mode of enquiry, whereas before such analysis could only be performed at a step one removed or, indeed, completely obscured behind the distraction of a false layer of utterances. Verbal signs remain important – they permeate almost every aspect of real life, after all – but once verbal signs are tied to the meanings of the body, the verbal statements that were once the whole of the picture fade into the general background of meanings against which we read the world and our experiences of it. In this kind of reading, everything that transpires between speakers and hearers (for which we must substitute the title ‘actors’) has the potential to reveal meanings that inform the analysis of events. When those actors are in conflict, everything that is said and done contributes or adds up to a kind of dialogue, though again to call it such is only to be metaphoric.

Foucault’s concept of the ‘archive’ is extended to its logical conclusion once the corporeal view of discourse has been likewise extended. Thereafter we are left to study, not just a library of statements and utterances (along with
the timetables, plans, maps and other things that Foucault mentions that
never sat easily within the conventional outline), but also a general history of
behaviour and actions (events), all of which tell the story of the power
struggles within a given period and give insight into the cultures involved in
those struggles. The study of written marks is enticing because it is our
primary means of recording history – it is of course this economising power of
language that has contributed to its predominance – but this is not to say that
we are entirely dependent on language regardless of our pretensions about
the nonverbal. A critic may argue that if a written archive remains the primary
means by which our history is unearthed, then we return to language analysis
the moment that we bring to bear all our tools from literary analysis to deal
with context, bias and reliability.

However, whether a book describes, in words, what is otherwise a
nonverbal account, this does not mean we are forced back into a language
game. Where we encounter discrepancies over facts, the reasons behind
these doubts remain open to analysis. If there is deception or guile, it is the
history of that deception that we gain access to semiotically. Just as before,
as Foucault argues in the initial formulation of discourse analysis, if we set out
to uncover a particular history it is not necessarily out of interest in the ‘facts’
– to trace who came to power when, or when so-and-so was killed – but to
discover, anterior to these events, the operation of particular forces and their
employment of strategies across a set time period. Besides which, when
study is allowed to go beyond the scope of books a great many sources
present themselves which might otherwise seem illegitimate to a perspective that only credits written or spoken signifiers. Particularly in the study of recent events there is a great deal of material beyond even just audio-visual versions of the same sorts of utterances. There are blueprints and photographs, legal documents and newspapers, first-hand testimonies, architecture both formal (prisons, watchtowers, cenotaphs) and informal (environmental damage, bomb craters, graves), records of fashion and music and of political movements and protests, individual memories and nightmares and of course bodies, both living and dead.

Therefore we can identify various statements from both sides in the lead up to the Dirty protest in the Maze. These statements, in which can be traced everything that we might wish to know about the prison conflict and the discourses of which they formed a part, were conveyed through the cell and the carceral body. Yet in this sense, when the body is the locus for meanings, it is never a passive force even when it is conquered and subjected. Just as Foucault observes that power is always ‘positive’ in the sense that it produces things (subjectivities, relations, points of contact), the body is never passive but always active, a source for meanings but also a means of expression, sometimes as vocalisation but more often through physical performance. Even a body that has been made mute or killed is active in the production of meaning, as evidenced by the 1981 hunger strikes (see Chapter Six). As Feldman writes, “The body as the terminal locus of power also defines the place for the redirection and reversal of power” (1991, 178). It is the body as
the determinant in the operation of power that validates its discursivity and its potential for communicating meanings with or without access to linguistic signs. It is in the body’s behaviour – the individual’s expression of that resistance – that can be located the principle of discourse as practice.

Feldman argues that in the H-Blocks “The prisoner’s body became the mimetic rite in which the violence of the guards and the counter-defilements of the prisoners were made commensurate, and this established the body as the invariant for all political valuation and exchange in the prison” (Feldman 179). All the struggles that had taken place between wardens and prisoners up until this point were not just conflicts – attempts to force transformations or seize control – but exchanges through the medium of the prisoners’ bodies. Feldman identifies “a strong analogue” between the concealment of contraband and the defilement of prison cells and the wardens’ responses. “Denied the surfaces of the inmate’s body and the interior of the inmate’s cell by fecal defilement, the prison regime extended its optic to the colon-isation of the physical interior of the prisoner with the rectal mirror search” (1991, 175).

In Bobby Sands’s journal the regular examinations are powerfully described:

Jesus, here it comes. He stepped beside me, still laughing, and hit me. Within a few seconds, in the midst of white flashes, I fell to the floor as blows rained upon me from every conceivable angle. I was dragged back up again to my feet and thrown like a side of bacon, face downwards on the table. Searching hands pulled at my arms and legs, spreading me like a pelt of leather. Someone had my head pulled back by the hair while some pervert began probing and poking my anus. (1998, 27)
Foucault describes the examination as “the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification.” He concludes, “The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of that objectification” (Foucault 1991, 187). “In it are combined the ceremony of power and form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth.” The medicalised examination is the metaphor and model for all the operations of the prison, for “The superimposition of the power relations and knowledge relations assumes in the examination all its visible brilliance” (Foucault 1991, 184-5). Sands’s testimony makes clear that in the H-Blocks, this medicalisation was invoked for the purpose of legitimacy while at the same time it existed as a kind of mocking double of the clinicism and neutrality of medical science. Sands writes that he “was on the point of screaming out when the . . . glorified screw with the white coat began to examine me, fiddling about my body, poking and probing, imitating the antics of a doctor, trying to impress the audience of screws who stood around the entrance of the cell” (1998, 48).

The correlation between torture and the abusive examination is phatic. It is not simply a case of saying that the authorities’ use of the examination was reminiscent of torture, for there is considerable testimony to show that in the interrogation centres and prison camps, all of which led to the cages of Long Kesh, actual torture was more frequent than was ever acknowledged. Ex-IRA Chief of Staff Seán MacStiofáin states, “it is nonsense to pretend that
the torture of prisoners for information can be carried out on a large scale in any campaign without the knowledge and sanction of senior officers” (1975, 71). “The interrogation techniques used against internees in 1971 at Girdwood, Hollywood and Palace barracks were so brutal that the British government was later compelled to hold an official inquiry into whether it actually constituted legalised torture” (Adams 2000, 129). There is also the evidence of Amnesty International, who in August 1978 “found that suspects detained in Castlereagh RUC detention centre had been ‘ill-treated,’” a weak euphemism for the ‘five techniques’ mentioned previously (Dixon 2001, 170). Coogan claims that the benign description of Northern Ireland’s security apparatus by Lord Diplock “has as much relevance to what actually goes on at army and RUC interrogation centres as have the proceedings at Disneyland.” By 1979, “it was generally accepted as a fact of life that torture was an integral part of the ‘conveyor belt’ system” (Coogan 2002, 150). As the rule rather than the exception of the prison experience, the use of torture completely accords with Foucault’s writing on how in contemporary times punishment has become “the most hidden part of the penal process.” It is against the modern sensibility to acknowledge either the failure of punitive techniques in general or the normalcy of prisoner abuse by those set in charge over them. “As a result, justice no longer takes public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice” (Foucault 1991, 9).

The time of the Dirty protest gave rise to many of these allegations of abuse. Chief Constable of the RUC, Sir Kenneth Newman, “was in fact
allowed to issue a statement (on June 24, 1977) on the allegations of police brutality in which he said that prisoners were injuring themselves as part of an IRA propaganda campaign against the police” (Coogan 2002, 163). Such aspersions reflect an interesting take on reality, one not as far removed from the eventual truth as might be thought. Although Newman’s testimony was completely fallacious, for those warders guarding over republican inmates recently gone ‘on the blanket,’ prisoners who soon began the process of refusing showers and actively struggling over control of their own waste, such bloody-mindedness appeared plausible. Cardinal Ó Fiaich’s condemnation of the situation on the blocks in July of 1978 describes the situation vividly. Ó Fiaich was “shocked by the inhuman conditions prevailing in the H-Blocks.” He stated that one “would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 172). Ó Fiaich goes on to state:

The nearest approach to it that I have seen was the spectacle of hundreds of homeless people living in sewer-pipes in the slums of Calcutta. The stench and filth in some of the cells, with the remains of rotten food and human excreta scattered around the walls, was almost unbearable. In two of them I was unable to speak for fear of vomiting. (qtd. in Coogan 1996, 265)

In turn, the Northern Ireland Office’s response to the cardinal’s criticisms captures a sense of complete diametric opposition.

These criminals are totally responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. It is they who have been smearing excreta on the walls and pouring urine through cell doors. It is they who by their actions are denying themselves the excellent modern facilities of the prison. It is they and they alone who are creating bad conditions out of very good conditions. (qtd. in Coogan 2002, 173)
As Coogan writes, “The British fought with order, rule book, discipline, their propaganda conveying a sense of disdain at this bizarre and repellent behaviour in the surroundings of one of the most modern prisons in Europe” (1996, 269).

The Dirty protest represented the returned, redoubled aggression of the prisoners to their keepers, not in language but at the level of the body. A verbal conflict or negotiation did not exist as an option: first because the British had a monopoly on the representations of the prison and its public perception; second because the prisoners experienced these representations of themselves and their conditions as untrue, hypocritical, domineering and embedded within an oppositional political agenda; and third, the prison simply was not the forum for the working out, in a contractual fashion, of the differences between the republicans and the state. Whether or not the prisoners were effectively ‘silenced’ by the prison regime is hardly important. It is obvious that, whatever their differences, the prison authorities were symbolically deaf to anything that the prisoners said.

The Dirty protest empowered the prisoners with a new means of expression that defied the central problem of linguistic communication (that it could be ignored) by manifesting in ways that transcended the gaoler-inmate dichotomy. Rather than attempt to enter into discourse at a level at which, by dint of their imprisonment and disempowerment, the prisoners’ voices could simply by ‘switched off,’ the republicans sought to express themselves at the level of the prison experience itself. Their communication took place by
disrupting the normal semiotics of captivity. While the authorities could play
deaf to their verbal protestations, in the no-wash and dirt strikes the
republicans challenged the power of the wardens to continue to ignore them.

The Dirty protest revealed a central incompatibility within the prison
regime: the warders could not continue to function as gaolers while allowing
the prisoners to undermine the requirements of clinicism and sterility upon
which so much of the authorities’ position was based. Either the warders
could let the gaol turn into a human sewer or they could get involved,
consequently forcing their own exposure to the prisoners’ protest. The Dirty
protest was a means for inmates’ self-expression at the level of the senses
and proximity – in other words, at the level of bodily signifieds as established
by corporeal pragmatics – upon which the whole experience of captivity was
based. The prisoners successfully achieved communication by other means,
and few were ignorant to the new, clear statements that the republicans had
made.

In every way it is possible to identify in the prisoners’ actions the rules
for the formation of discourses as set forth by Foucault, with the key
difference being that the republican inmates were not dependent upon words
for the dissemination of their meanings. The prisoners established primary,
reflexive (secondary) and discursive relations for their revolutionary practice
on the Dirt strike. At the primary level it has been noted that the Dirty protest
occurred at the points of contact between the prisoners and the gaolers (and
the everyday experience of captivity) and the mechanisms of the penal
institution (thus disrupting the routines and physical reality of the prison). At the reflexive level, the understanding perpetuated by the prisoners themselves involved viewing the Dirty protest as bringing the war between republicans and the state into the apparatus of the gaol itself. The third category, the discursive relations which determine what “discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object,” manifested nonverbally through the production of putrescence and the physical consequences that this entailed within the prison (such as the changes to the way they were treated) (Foucault 1972, 46). The elaboration of these individual factors clearly shows that, just as in the general description of discourse that we find in Foucault, the republicans were not only attempting to communicate certain ‘ideas’ through their practical discourse, but achieve concrete practical results.

The establishment of a relation in which everything in the gaol became caught up in the discursive actions of the prisoners was a primary requirement for the discourse of the Dirty protest to function at all. The protest was a reversal and a critique of the idea of cleanliness promoted by the Maze staff. In one foul move it revealed the brutality of the guards and the hypocrisy of the prison machine. Where the prison regime denied the violence and dehumanisation that formed its core, and that was otherwise masked by orderly routines of hygiene and efficiency, the prisoners’ actions revealed the constructedness of such a position. The Dirty protest was the nonverbal articulation of Bobby Sands’s question, “Who among those so-called
humanitarians who had kept their silence on the H-Blocks, who among them could put a name on this type of humiliation and torture, when men are forced by extreme torture into the position that they had to embark upon a dirt strike to highlight the inhumanity poured upon them?” (1998, 41) An ex-Prison Welfare Officer of the H-Blocks states “Humiliation was a big weapon. Prisoners were constantly propelled into an infantile role. You could see the Dirty protest as virtually resistance to toilet training in a bizarre way” (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 192).

The group action of the prisoners countered the individuating, dehumanising routines of the prison, and Gerard Hodgkins, PIRA, states, “It all just happened and there was a camaraderie that came with it and I’ve never experienced a bond like it since then” (qtd. in Taylor 1997, 258). Brendan Hughes states, “Other people were suggesting that we smear excrement on ourselves. If the first step hadn’t come about, that was the alternative – to smear ourselves with excrement. It was a step that I wasn’t prepared to take” (qtd. in Taylor 1997, 257). Prisoners instead poured urine under the doors and used stale bread to create ‘dams,’ while feces was propelled out of the windows until the windows were boarded over, denying the prisoners any sunlight at all.45 Thereafter, excrement was smeared on the walls. Some prisoners even attempted to be artistic.46 Hodgkins observes, “You were literally waking up in the morning and there were maggots in the bed with you. It just gets to the stage where you just brush them off. I think

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46 Cardinal Ó Fiaich reports walking into one cell and finding the occupant drawing palm trees into the fecal mess upon the walls.
the human spirit can become accustomed to any environment" (qtd. in Taylor 1997, 258). In their adversity, the prisoners began to concentrate their effects upon the guards, drawing them into the repellent world that they had helped to create. A PIRA member states, "We realised that the difference between us and them as far as the prison goes was that they go home at night to sleep and we didn't. Some of them couldn't even do that because when the RA was stiffing them [and] they had to move into the camp" (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 196). To this is added Coogan's comment, “In a faecal society, itself resembling a prison in many respects, the H-Block protest began to assume a repellently apt symbolism” (2002, 12).

Upon entering the H-Blocks, the republicans exhibited an almost intuitive understanding of the political potential offered by their bodies. A Provisional IRA man says, “The H-Blocks changed the whole way you thought about your body . . . From the moment we hit the H-Block we had used our bodies as a protest weapon. It came from the understanding that the Brits were using our body to break us” (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 179). Feldman notes that whether it was in the armed campaign in the Six-County statelet or within the prison:

Republican paramilitaries made no essential distinctions between these various political usages of their bodies. Either the body was extended by the technology of weaponry in the military operation or it was extended into a weapon in the interrogation centre and the prison. At each of these sites of political conflict, the paramilitaries saw their bodies as occupying and exploiting a single political and performative continuum. (1991, 143)
In Pauline McGeown’s words,⁴⁷ there was a realisation in the H-Blocks that “Talking is not enough to change the system. You must take action. What type, though, is another matter” (qtd. in Coogan 1996, 268). To the men on the dirt strike, their actions were a continued prosecution of their war against Britain and also articulated their rejection of the normalising, individuating pressures of the gaol.

Feldman asserts that the guards’ and the Northern Ireland Office’s description of the prisoners’ conditions as ‘self-inflicted’ was an “inadvertent admission that their own agency had become a function” of the prisoners’ actions. The guards were revealed as equally caught up in “the machinery of pollution that emanated from the body of the prisoner” (Feldman 1991, 195). Understandably, the guards had a very hard time during the protest. The ex-Prison Welfare Officer cited earlier notes that the average guard “would have to spend a few hours trying to get the smell off of his uniform and his body and then go back into that situation.” This state of affairs “became a daily barrier he had to overcome, both returning home and entering back into the prison.” In the end, the protest “extended into [the guards’] private lives, their bodies, their sense of cleanliness, their marital relations, and their relations to their children” (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 193). Feldman also notes:

In this proliferation of pollution, a reversal had occurred. The prison guards had sought to dominate the prisoners through the colonisation of the prisoners’ bodies. The protesting Blanketmen now determined the working conditions and private lives of the prison guards through the contagious emissions of the very bodies that were the object of domination. (1991, 195)

⁴⁷ The wife of H-Block inmate and hunger striker Pat McGeown.
In one sense the protest transcended the gaol and the layers of secrecy that surrounded their existence, yet ultimately the intended effects stopped short of the success the prisoners desired.

The reasons for the protest’s failure are difficult to state categorically, for in such a complex environment numerous factors, not all of them entirely logical, come into play. What can be most clearly identified is a shortcoming in the effectiveness of the discursive relations forged between the prisoners and their keepers and the cross purposes at which the form of the protest put them. If primary relations are the level of material effects, and secondary or reflexive relations are where the subject’s ‘sense’ of his own activity is produced, in a nonverbal discourse these relations represent ‘what has to be done,’ as well as ‘what practices are involved’ and ‘how the active subjects view their own behaviour.’ The third layer, discursive relations, rule over the primary and secondary levels and fix the gradient of power between actors. In verbal discourse these relations manifest as a common language that represents a certain authority, which in turn produces the positions that are available to the subjects and objects of the discourse. In such relations it is possible to identify the timeworn roles of expert and novice, mentor and initiate, master and slave, doctor and patient, etc., mirroring the observation that “The power of words is nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson” (Bourdieu 1991, 107). Discursive relations are primarily the relations of power that are held in place between these subject positions.

In a nonverbal discourse, discursive relations likewise fix the effects of
power between those performing the action and those who come into conflict with it. It is this power that is employed when actors wish to achieve particular effects. The Dirty protest produced some of the effects that the prisoners desired, but in general the protest created a sense of repulsion that was contrary to the outcome that had been sought. In seeking to protest their conditions, to disable the brutalisation of the guards, to legitimate their own standing as political prisoners, and to draw the attention of the outside world, the inmates entered into a contest with the prison authorities that was based upon seeing who could suffer the most. However, the cultural meanings association with the filth in which their struggle took place undermined and ultimately blocked recognition of the desirable attributes that might have otherwise bolstered their cause. However admirable and staunch the prisoners appeared, the deep, cross-cultural semiotics of the Dirty protest ultimately worked against them. The connotations of people who were willing to live with their own waste at such an intimate level were as repulsive as the filth with which the prisoners were surrounded.

The years spent ‘on the blanket’ and Dirty protests provided hard but valuable lessons that the prison movement would eventually absorb. Entering into a contest of suffering in order to force change in one’s adversary was pointless unless, in one’s martyrdom, the protestor triggered the correct cultural signifiers so as to achieve the desired result. The republicans already had on hand a ready-made guide for a form of martyrdom with complex and widely accepted connotations. A degree of such martyrdom had always been
native to the Catholic republican sensibility. It is fair to say that such thinking came together in the republican prisoners’ disturbingly successful 1981 hunger strike, where the protestors’ leadership was able to completely integrate a powerful nonverbal strategy alongside an equally effective propaganda campaign carried out both inside and outside the prison. In the hunger strikes the prisoners exhibited not only a more refined understanding of practice as discourse, they grasped the strategic effectiveness of switching between discourses deployed on the ideational as well as the pragmatic level. Such behaviour, which is the unspoken bottom line of all politics, facilitated an outcome where even if the authorities did not accede to the prisoners’ demands, the British would at least be seen as having lost the battle in the eyes of the world.
6. Death Sentences

Of all the writings that deal with the subject of conflict, very few attempt to embrace the sort of instances of conflict that occur to the average person in a common sense reading. Argumentation is one of the most obvious examples of conflict, and while it can be argued that writers such as Habermas and Lyotard attempt to deal with this issue, the ways in which their approaches are unsatisfactory have already been detailed. Argumentation represents the most common and most accessible example of social conflict since it is the type that most people, if they are lucky, will predominantly have to deal with in daily life. We can acknowledge that we are ‘lucky’ if we only have to negotiate arguments because many people tacitly understand that there are worse fates than having a conflict over definitions or over truths. Although it can be terrible to be verbally oppressed and silenced, as in the situation described by Lyotard’s différend, in general we must be honest and acknowledge that when an argument flares, as participants we carefully negotiate the situation according to two particular registers.

First, actors attempt to be ‘right,’ which is to say that we attempt to convince the other party, or, for those who claim to eschew competitiveness, we at least attempt to defend the integrity of our own worldview against the assertoric statements of others. The second balancing act is often acknowledged when we draw back from defending or off-loading our points of view to the degree that we elicit or slip into aggressive, or openly violent
behaviour. All social subjects can recognise that verbal debate easily becomes a physical contest if either party allows themselves that option, whatever the negative consequences such behaviour might bring. The moment that conflict transforms in this manner, we move into an entirely new arena. Our words, which in sedate society can be so powerful, become decidedly less so. Instead, power, as it is understood across various definitions, can switch sides dramatically. It is a simple observation to state that a clever rhetoricist can be reduced to a cowering victim through the use of force or sometimes even merely by its appearance.

Despite the ease with which violence equalises social situations, by no means is it suggested that the example of argumentation – and the fact that it has been identified as the primary subject of contemporary theorists in the discussion of conflict – represents the trend, identified elsewhere, of choosing limited examples so as to avoid complicating, and thus undermining, theories that otherwise possess shaky foundations. On the contrary, a theory that cannot be adapted to the analysis of conflict on a purely verbal plane is unsuited to the general task. Just as it is necessary to acknowledge the dominance of language as a medium of communication, so must argumentation be recognised as the first condition of conflict. However, in the same way that the dominance of language has so far been described in terms of the rich domain of nonverbal signs, so too must a theory of argumentation be superposable upon an examination of conflict in its verbal and nonverbal totality.
Whatever the assumptions a theory has at its foundation, theoretical frameworks that embrace the examination of conflict in anything other than the most impoverished sense must be able to deal with the harsh fact that arguments can frequently end in blows. It is a social reality that sometimes seems masked, perhaps because of our notions of civility and social evolution. In a similar way, academic writers are often accused of co-habitation with other professionals in an ivory tower at one step removed from the reality of daily life. While such a charge is problematic and in many instances ridiculous, it is nonetheless hard to explain how it is that the standard academic accounts of social phenomena often lack a full engagement with what other people see as the not always pleasant totality of facts.

What has been lacking from accounts of conflict thus far is an observation at one and the same time subtle and obvious: obstacles that do not yield to debate often collapse at the use of force. Our access to this realisation is diminished by the popularisation of otherwise valuable ideas such as civilisation, manners, ‘rightness,’ and the sanctity of human life. Whether we believe it is discursive or behavioural, these ideas circulate and are normalised to the degree that most us accept that the demonstration of these values is the baseline for what is required of a civil social subject. From the moment of our entry into language and the socialising routines of our family and of our culture, these values are stressed so that children will be cooperative, kind, undemanding, non-violent and polite. While on the one
hand these values are practicalities (and necessities) for any parent, it is the very way that these values ease daily life that strengthens our belief in them. That is to say, it is only the shocking unpleasantness of a spiteful child (and we recognise this also in our peers when they break away from the norms of behaviour) that makes us realise how much we really do believe in the value of civility and non-violence. So in one sense we value these ideas because they really are preferable and do work. Yet when we engage with (and bolster, reinforce and encourage in others) these values, we are acting as agents of a normative regime of ideas.

Such behaviour has effects on an ideational plane, which is to say at the level of ideas or ideology, and what social subjects frequently fail to understand is that idealisms describe only one aspect of real social life. Thus the mythic ideal of how we behave socially does not always accurately describe reality. Opposed to the ideational level is the pragmatic plane of action, a term that describes the level at which the world is changed in real, physical ways by the actions of verbal and nonverbal discourses. If acting idealistically means that one adheres to behaviour that reinforces and does not contradict particular moral or ethical values in the course of daily life, then acting pragmatically can often mean reacting to the complexities and idealisms of daily life much in the manner of Alexander with the Gordian knot. In its capacity as ‘practicality,’ pragmatic action cuts to the heart of matters, settling for solutions that are most effective in allowing the individual subject to carry out his or her goals to greatest capacity. Pragmatism can be
employed in such a way that it is therefore frequently opposed to idealism, because it does not necessarily mean that the subject holds to a defensible moral position. In the solid reality of things there are no ideas, while ideas themselves are fluid before the pursuit of goals.

It is important to understand a distinction between two different ways of understanding the ideational-pragmatic heuristic. First, in order to understand their function, it is necessary to analyse the ideational and pragmatic levels in their inert or unemployed state. In other words, at the very first instance the ideational-pragmatic approach is one free of human interference. It is a fixed relation, with the ideational being the plane of ideas not located in any materiality, and the pragmatic being the level at which physical effects play out. The ideational and pragmatic planes are the surfaces upon which discourses (verbal and nonverbal) have their effects. The distinction between the ideational and pragmatic is the same as that made between ‘ideas’ and ‘things’ in the world. In the first description, these planes have no particular prior orientation and are subject to no external motivation or manipulation. However, in the second instance, it is possible to talk about the ideational-pragmatic planes in such a way that illustrates how the very characteristics of the heuristic that have been described in an inert state may be seized upon and manipulated by individuals or groups to the benefit of a political agenda, whether on an interpersonal or international level. The very fact that the ideational is the realm of abstract ideas and the pragmatic is the level at which discourses have material effects allows for the tension between these
two levels to be made dynamic, with results that serve always in the interests of social power.

Viewed in this way, the second distinction between idealism and pragmatism is much the same as Habermas’s description, discussed previously, of consensual norm-guided action and purposive-rational action. Also noted earlier, Habermas all but excludes consideration of purposive-rational action from his theories, which amounts to a total refusal to acknowledge the functioning of pragmatism in interpersonal relations and everyday life. Excluding the option of acting upon the pragmatic plane means excluding the possibility that people might act in ways other than ideal and that they may say things other than they really ‘mean.’ Such exclusion entails sticking to the realm of discursive ideas rather than acknowledging the ‘means-ends’ relations that frequently characterise daily life. This sort of understanding does not accommodate a realistic picture of the world.

In comparing the ideational to the pragmatic level of action we can see a mirroring of the relation between discourse as a system of self-contained linguistic meanings that convey ideas that shape social reality, and corporeal pragmatics that understands utterances as just the surface effect of a deeper structure of meanings – a deeper structure that sees discourse as neither external and framing of society, nor even just all pervasive as it is for Foucault, but instead as a systemic relation between utterances and physical behaviour that makes things happen. Perhaps it is not surprising that a verbocentric theorist such as Habermas rejects consideration of the
pragmatic plane – which we can now also identify as nonverbal – in favour of remaining focused exclusively on the realm of linguistic signs. The sort of closed analysis that this verbocentrism represents still allows for interesting and insightful theories to be articulated. However, without acknowledging the pragmatic character of human behaviour, such a theory can never be tied into the concrete world of social relations since it relies on the sort of consensus that exists only as an idealism and never coheres as an actual social practice.

The ideational plane upon which people hedge their arguments about human behaviour (and we can identify discourses such as humanism, humanitarianism, egalitarianism, democracy and so on) is the level of idealisms. Such idealisms work well when they are articulated between members of the same sign community, or when a particular belief is held in common between different communities (what we call 'preaching to the converted,' in common parlance). The beauty of many of our ideas about civilisation and morality is that they are shared across cultures and between members of radically different religions and ethnicities. Unfortunately, as it can also be observed, it is the all-pervasiveness of many of these ideals that strengthens their effectiveness and allows for their political deployment as covering fire for operations occurring simultaneously on the pragmatic plane – for it is to the pragmatic level that social subjects often turn the moment that their efforts at shared idealism are stymied. If this relation is true for individual subjects, it is many times over more accurate when we switch from an examination of subjects to a focus on political institutions.
Subjects come to an impasse when conflicting views on the same subject butt against each other without the hope of compromise. Against all our intuitions about the bettering of the subject, counselling or mediation, there is often very little that can be done when two people hold conflicting views on a subject. For a moment at least, Lyotard’s identification of the différend accurately describes such inertia. It requires one person to yield or adjust his or her understanding in order to create harmony; and yet when we understand that social beliefs emerge out of a lifelong conditioning process in which our understanding of signs and their connection to bodily experience is cemented, and that in that process worldviews inhere, we must draw the conclusion that the entrenchment of most people’s views is a difficult obstacle to overcome.

This observation gels with most peoples’ experience of social life and the difficulty frequently encountered interacting with people of vastly different perspective. What this description outlines is nothing more than the situation we experience when we feel that our own unique perspective is the correct one and are completely mystified how it is that another person can’t share that perspective or won’t yield to it. Our views are rarely more bolstered than when they cohere around our self-identity or our notions of community. It might be said that our argumentation is strongest and our views most entrenched when they are called to defend the very processes that are responsible for fixing our views in the first place. To challenge individual sense of self is to shake the structure upon which all other beliefs are based.
Thus we encounter the most inflexibility when we discuss religion, political views, family values and nationalism (among other things).

However, when called upon to do so, we are often at a loss to explain the flaws in the behaviour of those we defend in our self-righteous views. In most instances, this discrepancy between our beliefs and the actual reality is due to an incompatibility between the ideational and the pragmatic planes that, when identified, always materialises as apparent transgressions or instances of falsehood. For example, the dominant view of British nationhood is that Britain represents a fair society, relatively multicultural, founder of the Westminster system for constitutional democracy, and bound by a history in which it has played a part in the enlightenment and enrichment of many other nations. In wars, particularly in the Twentieth Century, Britain has had allies and has warred against relatively clear-cut instances of malevolence. In general then, the British people are able to emerge from the last hundred years with a view of their country as fair and equitable. Anything that challenges this perspective, whether it is subaltern views on the post-colonial experience or charges of wrongdoings by British authorities such as are numerous in Northern Ireland, is a challenge to the idealism of the subjects who subscribe to such views. The successful ongoing functioning of these individuals within their culture, and the stability of the sign universe in which they share meanings, depends upon their inculcated views remaining more or less accurate.
However, it is the lack of understanding of the difference between mythic ideas of the nation, civilisation, humanitarianism and so on, and their practical equivalents, that is the cause for much unease when ordinary subjects come up against the hard facts of the incompatibility of their views with historical evidence. In this way, the average person’s mistrust of politicians and disquiet at the untruthfulness of political institutions can be seen as an instinctual manifestation of a deeper level of unease that can only be explained via the acknowledgement that, particularly but not exclusively in the operation of politics, the ideational plane is a surface upon which constructed notions and mythic ideals are manipulated so as to conceal or engender particular pragmatic effects, as in the second definition of the ideational-pragmatic theorem.

In other words, political powers purposefully generate fantasy understandings of real life situations so as to win public support through deception. Yet, although words like ‘manipulation’ and ‘deception’ have very specific connotations, it is not an outraged, moralistic depiction of politics that is at issue here. As Arendt notes, “when we talk about lying . . . let us remember that the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness” (1973, 11). Instead, this manipulation is fundamental to politics, with the constructed or arbitrary relation between the ideational and pragmatic levels of action – a relation in which the ideational becomes secondary to the pragmatic – being a general characteristic of politics.
Arendt’s comments in *Crises of the Republic* bring forth the paradoxical element of deception, which is at once crucial and yet anathema to politics. She writes:

Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings. Whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance, on the one hand for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the case. (1973, 10)

Arendt’s argument concerning the role of lies in politics ties in with the semio-discursive elaboration of the separate but entwined ideational and pragmatic planes of action. Arendt writes that “the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination,” the parallel to which we can see in Ruthrof’s notion of mental projection. Arendt adds, “Without the mental freedom to deny or affirm existence . . . no action would be possible; and action is of course the very stuff politics are made of” (1973, 11). By identifying the ability to lie and the ability to act – to which correspond the plane of ideas and the plane of pragmatic or physical behaviour – as separate but connected attributes, Arendt throws light upon the fundamental social behaviour of human subjects, of which politics is the most organised and hierarchical example. At the heart of Arendt’s observations, as with the semio-discursive focus on the pragmatic and ideational, is the description of how ‘things get done’ in the world.
The difference between two people having an argument and having a fistfight underwrites this understanding of two different ways to effect change in the world of people and things. The relationship pre-figured by Clausewitz’s famous statement that “politics is war pursued by other means” also holds true in reverse, since both politics and war are activities aimed at satisfying the achievement of a desire. Clausewitz’s maxim also serves as a description of the relationships between people, for on the interpersonal level we mirror the power relations of larger social groups. When we are frustrated by incompatibilities between ourselves and other hearers, the temptation to seek a path towards the achievement of our goals is great. In instances where speakers and hearers are in dispute, operating on the pragmatic rather than the ideational level offers a solution to the powerlessness or marginalisation of the différend. On the pragmatic level our ability and our success is measured according to different criteria than on the ideational level, where the correctness of idealisms is measured by agreement or consensus (and the long-winded obsession of philosophers with truth conditions can be seen as a distraction to the real questions of pragmatic life).

Pragmatic actors are concerned almost exclusively with the achievement of their goals. Their successes are not measured by intangible or debatable criteria but by concrete changes in real social and physical situations. On the pragmatic level, success on the ideational level is irrelevant if the pragmatist holds the field. As has already been suggested, an expert arguer is bereft of resources when words no longer suffice. The man or
woman who cannot raise a cogent counter-argument is never held accountable if he or she can command complete physical control over the other actors. In a conventional understanding, tyranny is the expression of this relation whereby a speaker or lawmaker does not have to justify his or her behaviour by dint of superior force of arms. Lyotard is concerned with the silencing powers of the différend, yet ultimately worse are the silencing powers of a tyrant who brings a machinegun to a word-fight. Such a situation is the expression of conflict *par excellence* and yet we are rarely confronted with examples of this within conventional philosophy.

It is the pragmatic nature of politics that unsettles individual speakers and hearers caught up in the force of their ideational or constructed convictions who are then confronted with the evidence of the less-than-ideal behaviour of their communal authorities. As Ruthrof notes, the force of intersemiotic bonds in a culture can work together in such a way that a worldview is established of such power and righteousness that it can be the vehicle for atrocities (2000, 84). It is against the ‘nature’ of one’s community-guided inculcation into a particular order of signs to then turn and doubt the meanings that inhere to the culture. In being supplied with only limited and pre-determined signs and their interpretants, the force of such beliefs is difficult to break or to enlighten. As any historian or claimant to a particular wrongdoing can attest, even in the face of material facts the constructedness of certain objects may offer a barrier to understanding and to consensus reaching. This sort of seemingly blind adherence to a particular order of signs
is by no means an isolated occurrence. For most individuals, their ordered objectivity is in some way supported by specific regular construals that reinforce a particular understanding of the world that emanates to the benefit of their community. This adherence is as close to a ‘false consciousness’ as anything could be.

The problem thus identified is the subject’s labouring under a particular constructed view of reality that, beyond simply functioning to reassure individual subjects, works to the benefit of specific orders or classes of people within that community. In a thorough analysis this secret elite that has neither a specific population nor a coherent identity are in mind at all times, since when we speak of social power and the benefit of discursively-produced beliefs, it is this invisible demographic that we address\(^{48}\), and yet they are a convenient fiction too, because we know that society and its vectors are so vast and complex that at any one point, any one group may fill the role of the elite that our analysis carves out and upon which our concepts of social power rely. It is in fact this specific open-endedness that makes such a perspective so useful. Whether we are focused upon a moneyed elite at the heart of a nation’s capital or an historic rivalry between certain families in a rural town, the processes and roles are much the same. We note distinctions only in the resources at each party’s command and the specific effects that flow on from the behaviour of different types.

\(^{48}\) Frow quotes Marcus, writing on Engels’s observations of Manchester, “this astonishing and outlandish arrangement cannot be fully understood as the result of a plot, or even a deliberate design, although those in whose interests it works also control it. It is indeed too huge and too complex a state of organised affairs ever to have been thought up in advance, to have pre-existed as an idea” (qtd. in Frow 1986, 55).
The original point of departure for this analysis was the distinction between the ideational and pragmatic planes of action and the importance of furthering the usual perspective on ‘discourse as ideas’ to include an appreciation for how discourse also functions as a social force that is never simply natural, predetermined and complete. The relation between these two approaches is explicit. Discourse viewed purely as language limits our analysis to the realm of idealisms. When we can only ever talk of discourse as the linguistically contained ideas that people have about things in the world we are limited to understanding conflict as a dispute between heterogeneous phrase regimens. Viewing discourse as a performative mode of language use allows us to examine how discourses are used to social effect. On the one hand discourse can be used to manipulate ideological beliefs and to mask particular material realities by the ‘spin’ put upon them. We can turn to examples such as the heavily codified use of terms such as ‘terrorist’ and ‘bandit,’ or the way in which penal abuse can be obscured by frequent references to the prison as ‘modern’ or ‘state-of-the-art,’ openly rendering the reality more pleasant by virtue of the words used. On the other hand, discourses are a form of behaviour that also effect change in real ways in the world, not just in the quasi-solidity of social life but in the physical manifestation of the world as solid matter.

Therefore, discursive functions are more than just euphemisms and dysphemisms. We do not have to look very far backwards into world history to find instances where political agendas have set upon a particular form of
behaviour completely at odds with the otherwise espoused ideals of nationhood and justice. In these instances, an entirely cynical discursive apparatus swings into effect that weds pragmatic action (what needs to be done to achieve the material goal) with a compatible understanding generated upon the ideational plane that causes the two otherwise disparate realities to form one cohesive and socially acceptable whole. Politics, especially between nations, is littered with occasions where behaviour otherwise anathema to the culture has been made acceptable through the political deployment of name-calling, card stacking, bandwagon jumping and other rhetorical devices. The tautological ‘War on Terror’ is a fine example of such practice.

Actions thereby completely at odds with the discursively-produced understanding can be commenced, geared towards the achievement of a specific purpose that must be concealed or that can only by facilitated by the production of untruth. In the H-Blocks there are numerous examples of verbal meanings co-existing within a completely contradictory physical reality. The appropriation of medical examinations as an opportunity for the wardens to further punish prisoners is just one instance among many. Such a situation also submits to the notion of heterosemiosis, for the brutalised examination is nothing if not an event of contradictory verbal and nonverbal signifiers. As the republican prisoners discovered, these moments exposed the hypocrisy of the prison order, yet at the same time the ideational construction of the event, particularly in relation to the understanding of the prisoners’ experiences
perpetuated outside the gaol, was a barrier to fully grasping the pragmatic reality that underwrote it.

If the pragmatic and ideational levels of understanding can correspond in such a fashion to serve questionable political ends, then it stands to reason that a similar manipulation is possible in the service of conflict resolution. In order to comprehend how such a thing is possible we depend upon our understanding of the distinction between intersemiotic and heterosemiotic signs. To acknowledge intersemiosis is to understand how as multivalent entities we draw upon a range of sign systems in order to establish the concepts that encircle particular objects. Heterosemiosis is nothing more than an extension of this understanding, except that it allows for the possibility of a disrupted reading in which the signs of different systems contributing to an understanding of the same object may actually be in conflict. Intersemiosis and heterosemiosis are the meaning-making phenomena that underwrite the argument about the ideational and pragmatic planes of action, because without a theory of meaning that even acknowledges that meaning occurs as a result of a convergence of multiple systems (all of which inevitably draw upon bodily signifiers for their meaning), the heuristic of one level (the ideational) operating above another (the pragmatic) would be impossible.

In some senses, the distinction between ideational and pragmatic levels does not rely upon a reworked semiotics that includes Peircean and Ruthrofian contributions. As any student of economic materialism could argue, from a theoretical point of view, the ideational and the pragmatic
represent only a small degree of drift from the Marxist articulation of ideological superstructure and economic (material) base. The distinction between the ideational and pragmatic planes of action and the base-superstructure dichotomy is one of focus, but the differences are elaborated here for a double reason. First, socialist economic theory has in the past been considered relevant to the instigation of social change. Althusser extended the socialist model to account for the absence of the predicted, inevitable collapse of the capitalist system, and in so doing sparked off decades of emphasis upon ideology and the overdetermination of signification, in which we can read the first early struggles towards an acknowledgement of the plane of ideas. However, the second reason for comparing the ideational-pragmatic heuristic to economic materialism is to dispel the relational model of which it is a general example. In other words, the same formulation of base and superstructure can be found in the relation of the signified to the signifier in the structuralist account of semiotics, the only difference being that we now prefer the Peircean distinction of the interpretant (the mental effort or projection) emanating from interaction with the material sign (icon, index or symbol).

Frow’s efforts to synthesise semiotics with the Marxist insistence on a base and superstructure turns to precisely the relation between the signifier and the signified. “Against any such dichotomous conception of a ‘material’ economic base and an ‘immaterial’ superstructure, it seems important to argue that all social systems are semiotic systems producing significations
realised in material sign-vehicles” (Frow 1986, 59). However, as a non-
dogmatic Marxist, Frow acknowledges that the “distinction between the real
and the symbolic realms is not ontologically given but is a social and historical
result. The discursive is a socially constructed reality which constructs the
categories of the real and the symbolic and this distinction between them”
(1986, 58). Therefore, if to Frow’s understanding of base and superstructure
as themselves discursively produced we then connect his observation that, in
the absence of other manifest, base-superstructure models governing in daily
life we insist instead upon the relations between discourses and power as the
most relevant criterion upon which to base analyses, then a second level at
which the base-superstructure relation can be identified is in the connection
between discourses and the institutional sites and pedagogies via which they
are circulated. In this way we return to a view in which “social structure can be
thought in terms of a play of constraints, determinations, and restrictions
exercised upon each other by a range of semiotic practices and institutions”
(Frow 1986, 60).

This second formulation is therefore wholly congruent with a
Foucauldian analysis of discourse, with which Frow openly claims a kinship;
and by extension, this same analysis accords with a Ruthrofian take on signs
as long as Frow jettisons his verbocentric baggage and is able to accord that
signification itself is not a closed system. However, Frow’s adherence to the
Saussurean description of signifier and signified as a mirroring of the base-
superstructure dichotomy is problematic when, so far, this relation has been
critiqued, with the Peircean triad and the notion of a sign having an interpretant being preferred. Yet both Saussure and Peirce’s methods revolve around the view that signification is subject to infinite regression. Only corporeal pragmatics, while recognising that the meaning of signs is never stable, can show the process by which subjects with compatible or conflicting interpretations get along. Therefore, Frow’s re-assertion of the model of signifier and signified can be tolerated as long as it is accepted that when we speak of signs, we do not necessarily speak only of language but also other complex systems or registers, and that in order to do so we must acknowledge the role of bodily meanings in giving linguistic signifiers their sense.

That in Frow’s attempt to harmonise semiotics with a discursive view of ideology his lens is focused, as we would expect from a Marxist position, upon the idea of class struggle, does not mean that such a fixation is an integral characteristic of Frow’s argument. Instead, his concentration upon class struggle represents the particular pragmatic, political use in which he is interested. In this way, Frow’s perspective acknowledges the role of conflict in social life, though his work is centred on the connection between power and class (in which case ideology becomes a shorthand term for class meanings, which then come into conflict). Despite a fundamental difference between Frow’s Marxist semiotics and the heuristic of semio-discursive analysis outlined herein, these two projects can be said to hold commensurate aims. However, semio-discursive theory looks at conflict at the level of individual
subjects and the communities with which they are associated (with the obvious proviso that in corporeal pragmatics, this relationship is fundamental to the understanding of how meanings cohere in the first place). Semio-discursive theory is therefore scalable to the analysis of conflict between different sized groups. However, while it may accord with Frow’s interpretations of Marxist literary theory, in relation to the general approach of Marxism as a method of political analysis, semio-discursive analysis is incompatible in four main ways.

The first distinction between the base-superstructure and ideational-pragmatic theories is fairly obvious, which is that corporeal pragmatics is a theory of meaning, unlike material determinism that tackles the matter of individual beliefs only by way of a socio-economic analysis of society. Second, the ideational-pragmatic approach takes its lead from discursive analysis, which views society as constituted by myriad discourses and practices rather than a single overwhelming relation between a mode of production and an ensuing ideology. As Bourdieu notes, the problem with Marxist analyses is “that they tend to treat the social world as a one-dimensional space,” explaining phenomena in terms of “the economic mode of production and the class oppositions stemming from it” (Thompson, qtd. in Bourdieu 1991, 29). As a result, the ideational-pragmatic heuristic offers a greater potential for social change than Marxism if for no other reason than it works at a smaller scale than the society-wide critique that socialism demands.
Third, as obvious as it may seem, because of corporeal pragmatics, the ideational-pragmatic model eschews verbocentrism and reduces all meanings to the level of the nonverbal sign whereas materialist theories still turn to a predominantly structuralist explanation of the world on matters of language and meaning. So, whereas in a Marxist analysis ideological change occurs in a social system only when one transforms the economic base (hence the focus on overthrowing capitalism to make way for better ways of living), in a semio-discursive understanding the relation between pragmatic base and ideational superstructure is more arbitrary and operates on a smaller scale. A semio-discursive analysis of society recognises a base-superstructure relation between many tangible social processes and their ideational components, but stops short of arguing that the entirety of social life may be reduced to this level. The distinction between pragmatic and ideational levels is more successful at the level of semio-discursive phenomena (particular statements, texts, actions) and the meanings they reveal.

The fourth and most important distinction between an ideational-pragmatic perspective and one informed by the Marxist base and superstructure view is that in the latter, the relation between material facts and ideas is strictly one-way. Marxist theory argues that certain historical conditions permit only a narrow range of ideological social forms. To change social structures, the dominant mode of production must be changed. In a semio-discursive theory, given that the focus is not on economic determinism,
arguments do not centre on the mode of production and its ensuing cultural forms. While it is certainly accurate to say that specific social forms engender particular ideas, beliefs and views, semio-discursive theory also offers a top-down approach in which ideas are equally capable of transforming material circumstances. Yet this seems contradictory, if what has been argued so far is that the ideational level is somewhat subservient to operations on the pragmatic level of action. How is it possible to then say that to manipulate ideas we are able to affect social reality?

The short answer to these questions is to point back to the earlier discussion on discourse as practice (or as use), which shows how ways of speaking are simply forms of social behaviour that have effects in the world as obvious and as direct as performed, nonverbal behaviour. Thus the reason it is possible to argue that to change the way something is spoken about affects behaviour, which in turn produces material change, is because at the level of social behaviour there is no difference between ideas (as long as they are communicated) and actions (which by virtue of how they affect the world are never private). Language is not a secret affair and neither is social behaviour. Consequently, words and actions can be considered to have ‘knock on’ effects that are impossible to exhaustively trace, but which form the sum total of all speeches and behaviours in a culture, for which we frequently substitute the abbreviating term ‘society.’ Social reality is nothing more than the vast totality of linguistic and non-linguistic behavioural relations, within

49 The same might actually be argued for Marxism, since socialist political theory is itself an idea that attempts to overthrow a practice.
which individual subjects struggle with personal agendas and vested interests that relate to and derive from their particular social groupings (families, clans, neighbourhoods, etc.).

The process of capitalising upon this divided function of speech and behaviour that underlies political ‘deception’ also offers a lesson in exactly how to manipulate concrete reality via the ideational level, since in many situations it is only via the production of an entirely fantasised meaning of reality that the way is cleared for action upon the pragmatic plane. The history of propaganda in all its forms, whether international or interpersonal, is the realisation of such an equation. Although distinctions are frequently drawn between so-called ‘black’ propaganda and a somehow less dubious ‘white’ (or even ‘grey’) propaganda, the manipulation of social understandings for the purpose of a particular material effect is in operation in every case. Historians of Northern Ireland often refer to a ‘propaganda war’ between the British and republicans, taking one step closer to the open acknowledgement of all conflict as a conflict over meanings – but not just meanings, as has been stated from the very beginning. As even writers like Lyotard understand but can never acknowledge because of the power given over to metaphors of language, whenever sides find themselves in conflict over meanings, these meanings are not just an abstraction, like language, unconnected to daily life. Instead, if our meanings are ultimately derived from bodily signifiers that issue from our corporeal experience of the world, then what is always at stake is ourselves – in other words, our safety, and the continuation of our ability to
keep making meanings in the face of the aggressions and violations of others. It is for this tacit reason that verbal arguers often stop short of violence once their anger rises – they risk raising the stakes to a level that the argument itself does not demand.

In contemporary life it is a fortunate state of affairs that conflict is rarely as crucial and dramatic as a fight for life and death. In everyday life our struggle to keep making meanings is a struggle to maintain situations that we find more or less desirable. Just as the human predilection for things to be convenient represents the mutation of our native survival instinct by the comforts and luxuries of everyday postmodern life, our struggle to control meanings in our favour is usually pitched at a similarly banal level. Despite differences in scale, the relation is the same, which individual subjects quickly discover the moment that the dependable trappings of civilisation are stripped away. In a war zone, the individual still attempts to win for him or herself the best situation possible, though in such a situation the measure of what seems beneficial is a great deal less inflated. Where once we settled only for a favourite beverage and our own bed, with privation any drink and safe place to sleep become a blessing.

While it is not enough to merely offer a methodology via which conflict can be explained, a number of problems result from offering a theoretical framework for the examination of conflict geared towards its resolution. First and foremost of these difficulties is that, in most instances, conflicts are already resolved quite quickly almost every time that they occur. It is another
of the defining natural characteristics of conflict that resolution takes place as
the success or happy conclusion for one side at the expense of the other. For
the victor, conflict is quite successfully concluded when the original intention
to act is satisfied. Most conflicts resolve in this way and it is a normal matter
of our ignorance in daily life that it is easy to not be troubled by the
consequences of such achievements, especially when it is in the small way
that most conflicts play out. It is only in dramatic public conflicts that the
negative consequences for the victim or victims are immediately apparent.
Indeed, it is only in such confrontations that the other party is even likely to be
identifiable. Much of the time that we are in conflict in everyday life – and here
lies some of the reason for our ignorance of those who do not share our
victorious fate – we are in conflict against a faceless opposition, struggling
against the vagaries of the systems in which we are enmeshed as a normal
consequence of social living.

Yet as a humanitarian value, we hold onto the idea of the resolution of
conflict in such a way that a win-loss conclusion needn’t be the result. Such
an approach is generally considered one of emancipation, in which the
various conflicting threads within a complex general conflict are untangled
and their individual conditions of existence made pliable. It is also true that a
theory of conflict that does not step beyond the pragmatic character of the
win-loss resolution, and that does not attempt to at least struggle with, if not
fully realise, conflict resolution in the sense of conclusions equally satisfying
to all involved, falls short of a worthy goal. At the same time, it is an
understatement to say that it is an extremely difficult task to set out, in
advance of knowing the specific details of each individual conflict, a
framework or methodological process whereby disputes may be regulated
and conclusions reached that please all of those involved.

Such an exercise probably cannot hope to be foolproof. Nonetheless, it
must be tried. By exploring the ways that situations of conflict manifest across
an intersemiotic terrain in which a multitude of strategic choices are available
to the various antagonists, the time-honoured and partially theorised idea of
conflict as a monolithic confrontation between one force against another is
dispelled. Instead, a notion emerges in which move and counter-move are
carried out between actors in a conflict, according to those tactics with which
each side, by virtue of their social conditions, are equipped. In this picture,
conflict can be resolved in one of two ways: either the resources of one side
are exhausted by the actions of the other, with the result that a traditional win-
loss scenario results; or alternatively, the antagonists manoeuvre past each
other in the pursuit of their goals, arriving at the results that they intended
while bypassing most of the sort of disempowerment described by Lyotard’s
différend. However, to say that in this situation each side reaches the position
desired does not mean that conflict does not occur. Nor is it that, in this
process in which strategies and tactics play such an enormous part, there are
no tangible or ‘human’ costs. In actuality, the ability to bear such costs and
continue the pursuit of one’s goals forms part of the resources that each party
brings to a conflict and, depending on the situation involved, with which each 
party wages the conflict in its material form.

Yet there is a situation that appears to be a contradiction: the différend 
describes the position in which one party is oppressed by another, with the 
language of the victor being dominant while the claims of the victim cannot be 
articulated due to the principle of his or her subjection. Lyotard’s view is a 
strictly verbocentric one, describing the oppressive, silencing effect of one’s 
subjection to a ruling phrase regimen – a discourse, in which there is no room 
for the meanings of the oppressed subject. On the one hand, Lyotard’s 
différend has been dispelled, since the argument central to corporeal 
pragmatics and semio-discursive theory is that once planes of action other 
than language are admitted, conflict is no longer locked in to a direct 
confrontation. Instead, the communication of resistance may occur by other 
means (whether it is the scrawl of graffiti or a gun’s retort). An intersemiotic 
operation suggests that for language we can substitute other modes of 
expression, all of which are ultimately tied to sense readings. Thus when 
silenced the subject can communicate through gesture or touch, in writing or 
display, through actions or through the refusal to engage in otherwise 
significant actions, and so on and so forth. A heterosemiotic relation is when 
these contradictory meanings occur in one and the same event: protests 
occur in some way to disrupt the chain of interpretants normally triggered in 
the formulation of a statement of whatever sort.
However, there still seems to be situations in which we must acknowledge the operation of something like a différend, in which the complete subjection of the victim is a reality, even if it is non-linguistic, with an impasse occurring across a range of semiotic streams. In some instances it seems that one party is not only silenced by the discourse of another but is also completely restricted from pursuing communication by other means. Yet there is a conflation at work in our perception of this event that only an example of such chilling magnitude as the 1981 hunger strikes can reveal. In the Maze prison, there were individuals in exactly the sort of situation that we have described: while noting that their conflict was in no way a linguistic one, we can still observe that within the semiotic matrix of the prison the republican inmates were almost completely disempowered. Any sort of sense of the prisoners having access to representational power of their own and disseminating such discursive ideas beyond the walls of the prison appears to have been a complete fantasy. Yet, as the hunger strikers eventually came to realise, as cold-blooded as it sounds, one is never inscribed into a différend unless one allows it to be so.

The conflation that has been spoken of is of course mistaking the freedom to communicate with the freedom to keep one’s life. In order to break the différend, the prisoners had to take the same step (at a greater degree of magnitude) that verbal arguers shy away from when a disagreement is tempted towards blows. As the republican inmates of the H-Blocks showed through their actions, provided that they were willing to sacrifice their lives as
the final statement of their case, the power of the prison to silence them and their cause was limited. Furthermore, it eventuated that sacrifice by hunger strike spurred into motion a whole apparatus of prison officialdom that guaranteed that the death of the hunger striker could not remain a secret, hidden by the cell’s enclosing walls. In such a case, the différend is the verbo-centric falsehood stemming from the view that the subject exists upon a plane in which language is the origin of all meaning. When one grasps that the struggle over meanings always has the body at stake, and that the body’s biological survival is the highest stakes for which one can wage a conflict, a pragmatic line is crossed whereby the illusion of the différend is forever dispelled.

The way in which all the previous stages of the prison war between republicans and the British came together in the 1981 hunger strikes illustrates very clearly the argument that not only do practical discourses trigger a nonverbal semiotics that has effects on the way that people think and the way that the world works, but that it does so in transcendence of any of the limits put upon communication in the midst of conflict by structuralist thinkers. Ruane and Todd observe that “the hunger strikes revitalised the republican movement and broadened its base socially and politically” (1996, 113). Yet the most important aspect of the prison war was the way in which the republican movement inside and outside the gaol drew lessons from the various stages of the struggle, leading to a tacit understanding of the relation between the ideational and pragmatic planes of action that would ultimately
inform all IRA and Sinn Féin policy in the next three decades. Although the hunger strikes were the first manifestation of this new, broad spectrum approach to the republican campaign, the subsequent move into mainstream politics that the protest allowed, and the behaviour of Sinn Féin in future years, constantly adjusting its ideology in mind of practical outcomes both on the electoral stage and among its own membership,⁵⁰ all show how the underlying formula, itself an articulation of the dynamic relationship between constructed meanings and hard material facts, had its origins in the prison protest and would never have been possible without the proving ground of the 1981 hunger strikes.

The events of 1981 were actually the second attempt at forcing the government’s hand by hunger striking. In October 1980, seven men (six PIRA and one INLA) initiated the first hunger strike for the ‘five demands:’ the right to wear civilian clothes; the right to refuse the prison work demanded of ordinary criminals; free association with other prisoners; fifty per cent remission of their sentences (remission that had been taken away when they participated in the Blanket and Dirty protests); and the restoration of normal visiting, recreation and parcel rights. On December 18th the men were taken off-strike without any fatalities. It appeared that the British were cooperating, but their response amounted to nothing. The five demands remained unanswered. Those who had initiated the strike felt humiliated, and just as the

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⁵⁰ Moloney’s book, A Secret History of the IRA, is an excellent guide to the whys and wherefores of this process. Despite the debatability of some facts, Moloney’s view on the interchangeability of representations and actions is very close to an ideational-pragmatic perspective.
Dirty protest provided vital lessons in the mounting of an insurrectionary campaign within the prison, the diplomatic failure of the 1980 hunger strike was a dry run for the main event, organised the following year.

According to Ruane and Todd, the hunger strikes “were public drama of great symbolic power and emotional intensity which gained world-wide attention. The struggle between prisoners and warders, republicans and British state, was symbolically fought out on the prisoners’ emaciated bodies” (1996, 111). Yet as far as the body goes there was not actually anything symbolic about this struggle. The body was the inevitable locus for the conflict between the prisoners and the gaol administrators, and the various means by which that conflict manifested to the detriment of the prisoners’ health were certainly meaningful, but not in the slightest bit abstract. What transpired when ten men died on that protest was not significant by virtue of the way it referred to something else. Instead, the very acts of their deaths implied their own meaning, referring to themselves and nothing else. Their ultimate sacrifice told its own story. While the struggle fought out on the prisoners’ body was not symbolic, there was then at the same time a separate but concurrent battle being waged for control of the meanings associated with the republicans’ overall struggle.51

As much as the hunger strike was a battle to restore lost privileges and dignity, it was also aimed at overturning the dominance of negative

51 I hesitate to use the term ‘symbolic,’ not just because it encroaches upon Peirce’s third category of signs (to which the signs of verbal language largely belong), but because symbolism itself is a term now rendered somewhat abstract to the business of meanings and their direct association with tangible semio-discursive phenomena.
representations associated by the government with the republican cause. The spectacle and social phenomenon of the hunger strikes were the means by which the prisoners attempted to control the interpretation of their protest. In an ordinary sense, they had little access to direct communication. It has been well established the ways in which the forces of the government strove to exclude the inmates from any access to representing themselves to the outside world. In the prison war their experience was hidden. In keeping with the policy of the time, the prison regime was largely free to criminalise the plight of the prisoners. Yet in their comportment, their aims and the means by which they asserted themselves, the prisoners mobilised a surprisingly powerful attack on the British position while seemingly completely disempowered. Father Denis Faul notes of Bobby Sands, the first hunger striker, that it was “extraordinary to see this thin, emaciated-looking character in a ragged pair of trousers, bare feet, bare chest, going out, so to speak, to dialogue with the representative of the almighty British government” (qtd. in O'Malley 1990, 38-9).

Yet despite the apparent weakness of their position, the republican protestors challenged and broke through the illusion of the différend and seized a form of power for themselves that could not be directly taken away, as much as the other side attempted to do so. They were not constrained by the final barrier for fear of their own lives. Instead, it was in their very willingness to die that the prisoners manifested this power. Through the protest “They were,” Dixon notes, “able to portray the political nature of the
conflict in Northern Ireland to the outside world (criminals tend not to kill themselves on hunger strike) and also demonstrate a significant base of popular support” (2001, 186). The hunger strikes “reversed the opposition between criminality and political principle, portraying the civilising modernity of the British state – with which unionists identified – with barbarism” (Ruane 1996, 112-3). Hunger striking, says Beresford, “has a sublime quality about it; in conjunction with terrorism it offers a consummation of murder and self-sacrifice which in a sense can legitimise the violence which precedes and follows it” (1994, 38-9).

Despite transcending the ordinary mathematics of conflict, the aim of the hunger strike was not death in itself, even though, as O’Malley concedes, “Perseverance had refined their capacity to suffer, and, their mythology told them, it was those who suffered the most who would eventually conquer”⁵² (1990, 110). The hunger strikers wished to win certain rights and ensure changes in the system against which they struggled, and their means for doing so began with transforming the way in which people thought about them and their struggle. “The willingness of the prisoners to take their own lives seemed to many if not to redeem their role in the taking of the lives of others, at least to prove that they were no ordinary criminals” (Ruane 1996, 112). Their deaths were the highest stakes for which they could wage their war, and their lives were also bargaining chips to use against the British, since to die while in the charge of purportedly humane warders in the most

⁵² For one of the earliest articulations of such republican thinking, see Terence MacSwiney’s The Principles of Freedom.
modern gaol in Europe would indicate that something rotten lay at the core of Britain’s own innocent protestations.

O’Malley writes that “Hunger striking fuses elements of the legal code of ancient Ireland, of the self-denial that is the central characteristic of Irish Catholicism, and of the propensity for endurance and sacrifice that is the hallmark of militant Irish nationalism,” and as such, it could be said that to go on hunger strike came almost naturally as the next step in the war against the British (1990, 25). In Kearney’s poetic words, the republicans saw “the wire of Long Kesh transformed into crowns of thorns,” and unsurprisingly, in their efforts to stage a massive protest that would not only grant them a tangible victory but overturn the negative connotations with which they had been associated, it was to the lessons of Catholicism that they turned (1997, 112).

The hunger strike was about starvation and the risk of death, but many commentators have noted the religious overtones of the hunger strike. The imagery of Roman Catholic martyrdom was consciously portrayed in an effort to engender particular connotations, and it is to the lead hunger striker, Bobby Sands, that this development is often attributed.

Sands had been one of the originators of the ‘cultural separatism’ movement, and by dint of his time in the Nissen huts of Long Kesh he had superb command of the Gaelic language. Although Sands is a figure whose various traits have been emphasised through heroicisation – writers like Coogan and Beresford manage to ground Sands’s biography in very ordinary beginnings – he clearly had an acute sense of time and place. As Feldman
puts it, he “emerged as the paradigmatic figure of the Hunger Strike, not only because he would be the first to go on strike, but because he was fully aware of the fact that the protest demanded a social and ideological reorganisation of the Blanketmen themselves” (1991, 242).

Sands deliberately, but without any cynicism, cultivated the imagery of the good Republican death by cultivating the imagery of his own death before he even began his hunger strike. This anticipatory dissemination of his death both manipulated the Blanketmen's emotions and signified the entering of a ritual condition. In a moment of foreclosure, Sands placed himself on the other side. In doing so, he socialised the prisoners to the inevitable eschatology imbedded in hunger striking. Sands saw his death as a pedagogical event, and by visibly displaying his crossing over the life/death boundary, he was able to pull the other prisoners over that boundary with him. (Feldman 1991, 242)

While on the one hand Sands was wise to the distinction between the representations of the hunger strikes and their actual performance, he was at the same time apparently very genuine in his commitment. Of Sands’s famous diary, O’Malley observes that as the strikes progressed, “The lyrical tone of his earlier writing fades and his later writings, especially his poetry, reflect an almost pathological preoccupation with sacrifice and death as the one inescapable release” (1990, 57).

Sands, and those around him like Bik McFarlane, who oversaw the hunger strikes, were “well aware that a purely functional approach to the hunger strike would not be sufficient to maintain the ideological certitude of the individual striker once he [Sands] was isolated from his comrades in the hospital ward of the prison and subject to the interventions of medical staff, priests, and family” (Feldman 1991, 242). The manner of the performance of
the whole process of hunger striking was seized upon as exactly the means to establish and then maintain the necessary impetus to make sure that the protest had a chance of achieving results. In one sense it was a propaganda machine that went into action on behalf of Sands and the following hunger strikers, yet the protestors grasped opportunities for expression that were so diverse that they can only submit to a proper analysis by way of verbal and nonverbal discourses, and the ideational and pragmatic plane of effects to which they contribute. The republican hunger strike campaign brought together all the strategies that the prisoners had developed since their induction to the cages. They utilised every resource available to them, fashioning a tactical use for everything at their disposal, including of course their own bodies. The composition of a martyr’s aspect was only one level of the whole assault, designed not only to trigger particular sympathies outside the gaol but also to reinforce the unity of their own forces for the duration of the protest.

Ruane and Todd note, “The religious resonances were particularly emphasised; wall murals in the Catholic ghettoes portrayed the suffering of the hunger strikers in imagery that evoked the death of Christ” (1996, 111). Sands knew that whatever the outcome of the protest, as the first hunger striker his death was guaranteed. The republican movement could not afford to be shamed, and the weapon of the hunger strike was always double-edged. Beresford sums up this conundrum well: “If after killing – or sharing in a conspiracy to kill – for a cause one shows oneself willing to die for the same
cause, a value is added which is higher than that of life itself. But the obverse is also true: failure to die can discredit the cause” (1994, 39). “As Sands edged closer to what had now become his inevitable death, his stature grew. His hunger strike now fulfilled the criteria of mythology . . . He had become a hero, retaining control of his destiny even beyond death” (O’Malley 1990, 61). Feldman likewise observes, “Sands established death on the Hunger Strike as a poetic/epic figure, a ritual reenactment, a completion of a historical epoch in the Republican movement, and as the unification of the dying hunger striker with the past cultural and political traditions of a separatist and insurrectionary Ireland” (1991, 242). There is little dissent with the point of view that “The republican hunger-strikers sought to escape their actual paralysis by realigning their plight with a mythico-religious tradition of renewal-through-sacrifice,” with “Cuchulain on the one hand and Christ on the other” (Kearney 1997, 110).53

Father Denis Faul’s statement that “they taught people to imitate Christ, so the church can hardly complain when they go out and do just that,” reinforces a crucial observation (qtd. in Beresford 1994, 427). The rites of Catholicism and the communal upbringing of the republican inmates, having endured their adolescence through a time of crisis for Northern Ireland, not only guaranteed that certain orders of symbols held enormous power for

53 While most commentators agree with Kearney’s perspective, like in the statement quoted, the originary force is usually attributed more to the propaganda value of the strikers’ actions than the actual act of death by hunger strike. This emphasis undoubtedly stems from the same fixation with symbolism that echo in Ruane and Todd’s writings that we can trace back to the linguistic turn, which have the familiar consequence of masking from appreciation the more obvious causes behind the success (such as it was) of the prisoners’ protest – the solid commitment to carry through on their threats to die in the pursuit of their goals (a significatory act probably as impervious to counter-interpretation as it is possible to achieve).
them, but that the very idea of the heroic death was at the forefront of what they set out to achieve. The Christian martyr and the sacrificial outlaw were similar in that it was through their death that the actions of their lives achieved illocutionary force. As Foucault writes, in the story of the criminal, “beneath the apparent morality of the example not to be followed, a whole memory of struggles and confrontations” existed. “A convicted criminal could become after his death a sort of saint, his memory honoured and his grave respected” (1991, 67).

The attitude of the hunger strikers clearly bore results, and not entirely at the ideational level. According to a senior IRA figure, the Libyans were “very impressed with the way the hunger strikers handled themselves,” and he notes, “I think it had something to do with the martyrdom thing in Islam. Anyway that’s when the money flow restarted” that brought the resources making it possible for an escalation in the military conflict outside the gaol (Moloney 2002, 12). Support for the hunger strikers was widespread. Many ostensibly peaceful groups flourished, bringing republican and nationalist sympathisers together with a wider range of agitators concerned for civil rights and other libertarian goals. The hunger strikes crystallised the entire spectrum of grass roots politics in Northern Ireland at the time, gaining a critical momentum at the same time as contributing to an impetus in reforms at other levels. Yet although the hunger strikes became a partial platform for issues of discrimination, housing, women’s rights, education and health, and while Sinn Féin soon thereafter seized upon the role of republican protestors
in heralding the new age of community-based political agitation in the North, at all times the struggle of the hunger strikers remained at the heart of the situation. There were two direct consequences of this state of affairs.

First, the hunger strikes overturned what O'Malley calls “The old shibboleth, so smugly accepted, that only a few endorsed the actions of the men of violence” (1990, 211-2). The swell of public support, much of which came from ordinary people, middle-aged mothers, Catholics as well as a number of Protestants and dissenters, made the British position seemingly inarguable. “For many in the South and outside Ireland the hunger strikes challenged the public image of the IRA members as criminal psychopaths, portraying them instead as courageous if misguided idealists” (Ruane 1996, 113). Republicans believed, as Nobel Peace Prize winner and Amnesty International co-founder Seán MacBride writes in the Introduction to Bobby Sands’s *Writings from Prison*, that Sands’s “sacrifice, like that of those who followed him, overturned British propaganda on Ireland and had a real effect in advancing the cause of Irish freedom” (Sands 1998, 10). The second consequence was the development of Sinn Féin’s ‘Armalite and Ballot Box’ strategy in pursuing electoral politics while at the same time drawing upon the legitimacy of the hunger strikers’ deaths to maintain the military revolution at an elevated level.

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54 Taken from the famous speech at the Bodenstown Ard Fheis on October 31st, 1981, where Danny Morrison said: “Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object, if, with a ballot box in one hand and the armalite in the other, we take power in Ireland?”
Much has been made of the implication of the hunger strikers in Sinn Féin’s move away from the long-held practice of abstentionism and its redevelopment as a bona fide political party, since it was the successful election of Bobby Sands and others to the British parliament as an MP that started it all. Sands’s participation in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone election reduced the conflict to the level of a clash of personalities, each larger than life, that people could easily follow.

The sense of drama and suspense that the election and its aftermath engendered – Would Sands win? Would Mrs Thatcher respond? Would a British government allow an elected member of the British parliament to starve himself to death? – created an ambience of shared participation in the unfolding events. (O’Malley 1990, 60-1)

“During the campaign voters were urged to vote for Sands to save his life. Controversially, the SDLP withdrew from the by-election contest to avoid splitting the nationalist vote” (Dixon 2001, 184). When Sands did win, many, particularly within the republican movement, saw his victory as a validation of everything for which the prisoners stood.

Throughout the hunger strikes the British government did not let up its counter-barrage, stridently opposed to the republican movement drawing

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55 On abstentionism, Moloney writes, “one of the most hallowed principles of traditional republicanism was the refusal to recognise or take seats in either Stormont or the Dáil. It followed that any republican who betrayed this principle was implicitly recognising the Treaty and by so doing betraying the Irish people and all those IRA men and women who had laid down their lives in the fight to free Ireland . . . Abstentionism was the defining characteristic of Irish republicanism, and it was written in legal stone in the constitutions of both the IRA and Sinn Féin” (Moloney 2002, 56).

56 The strategy of contesting elections was also practiced in Éire. “In 1981, at the height of the hunger strikes, a number of republican prisoners put themselves forward in southern elections and two, Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew, were elected to the Dáil [the Irish parliament], the first Dáil seats won by republicans since 1961” (Mallie and McKittrick 1996, 21).

57 This move was controversial because the nationalist SDLP condemned violence in the pursuit of a united Ireland and therefore had not previously recognised the legitimacy of either the IRA or Sinn Féin.
credibility and, worse, legitimacy, from the events transpiring within the Maze, as well as the subsequent external political developments. “The anti-hunger strike propaganda promoted by the state, the Loyalists, the Church, and some family members of the strikers stated that the [H-Blocks PIRA] Army Council had ordered the prisoners on strike and thus could order them off the strike” (Feldman 1991, 300). However, in actuality “Both the IRA and Sinn Féin opposed the hunger strike. They believed it would not succeed in moving the British government and that the movement could not stand another defeated hunger strike” (O’Malley 1990, 72). It was up to the individual convictions of the hunger strikers themselves, their ties of loyalty to each other ultimately greater than anything else,\(^58\) the sense of kinship between them immeasurable, their sense of their own role successfully unified by the ideological strategy that Sands and others had put in place, to forge ahead regardless. The prisoners were very much at the heart of their own struggle, directing actions out of a heightened sensitivity to the interplay between what was said, at one level, and the physical reality in which only they were in a position to experience and judge.

“The British Government wanted to portray the paramilitary prisoners as criminals and/or terrorists instead of granting them political, ‘prisoner of war,’ status which might legitimise their ‘armed struggle’ in the eyes of the

\(^{58}\) An INLA prisoner testifies to the strength of feeling experienced between the prisoners, particularly the cell pairs. “The note was the list for the Hunger Strike. The cell below us, both of them put their names down. The note came to us and my cellmate put his name down. We had been together a long time. And then it came to me, and I knew at that moment that I could die if they were willing to. I was sort of convinced afterward it was taking the easy way out of the prison situation. At the time I felt I had no right to leave people in the other cells to say they could do it and I couldn’t do it” (Feldman 1991, 241).
world” (Dixon 2001, 181). In this pursuit, both sides “were impervious to the pleas for compromise, obsessed with the manipulation of the propaganda war, determined to prevail no matter what the cost. Each mimicked the other’s behaviour” (O’Malley 1990, 64). Although those pleas for compromise came mostly from family and church members who could not comprehend the stakes for which both sides were playing, by dint of their participation, the British opened themselves up to appear as “a government impervious to compassion, losing its political legitimacy by misusing its moral authority” (O’Malley 1990, 73). Sir Ian Gilmour, Lord Privy Seal and deputy to the secretary of state for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs viewed the hunger strikes as “a disaster . . . a great propaganda coup for the IRA” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 197). Beresford reports, “when young diplomats [of the British Foreign Office] are briefed on contemporary Irish history, in preparation for postings to Dublin, the hunger strike is held up as an unmitigated disaster for the Government” (1994, 429). As O’Malley observes, “the British government’s obsession with not appearing to be beaten consumed its more clever intentions. It won the contest of wills but little else. It lost the propaganda war, resuscitated an ailing IRA, and politicised militant Republicanism” (O’Malley 1990, 208).

The two parties to the conflict were caught in a double bind, though as time would tell, the impasse was by no means a différend. Routes of communication between representatives of the prisoners and the British bloomed and withered, one after the other. Head at that time of the Northern
Ireland Office, Michael Alison states of the protest that “Either it had to break the will of the government in a clear and manifest way or the government had to break the will of the nationalists in a clear and manifest way” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 199). To the general public the conflict seemed to be one of meeting or denying the prisoners’ demands, yet to do either would automatically imply a victory for one side over the other. Coogan states that the IRA and the British, “like opposing armies who mutually agree that a certain town or terrain be excluded from the war . . . should have removed the issue [of Special Category status] once and for all from controversy” (2002, 257). Yet “it was clear that Mrs. Thatcher would not only resist the prisoners’ demands . . . but might relish the chance to do the IRA serious damage by allowing the protestors to die” (Moloney 2002, 206).

For their own part, as a PIRA hunger striker acknowledges, the prisoners felt very much at the centre of the republican struggle against what they saw as the unlawful occupying powers of the Six Counties.

The Brits had attempted to isolate the prisoners as the weakest link in the Republican movement. They had tried to portray the IRA as a criminal conspiracy to the world, and the prisoners were supposed to be the symbol of that. They knew that the Irish people always very closely identified with their prisoners – that if they broke the morale of the prisoners they could break the morale of the people on the outside. We realised that it was a watershed period – that the Brits had chosen a battleground and that we from inside the prison might have to die to defeat them on it. (Feldman 1991, 222)

Furthermore, the same testimonial notes that due to the extensive political studies and the examination of the republican movement that had been performed while imprisoned, the inmates “saw the Hunger Strike as being
more than a jail issue.” The hunger strikers considered themselves part of a continuum with the movement outside – a movement that had lost focus and power. The prisoners felt that they “needed to form a base and politicise the movement. Put it into community politics, put it into politicising and then channeling the support, building a whole alternative system of politics. Show people how you deal with bureaucracy” (Feldman 1991, 222).

As these comments indicate, the republican cause was not simply a revolutionary movement geared towards national liberation. It was one of the first postmodern struggles in which can be traced the battle against a new mode of governance that has become typical of the contemporary age: that of bureaucratisation.59 On bureaucracy, Arendt writes further:

The greater the bureaucratisation of public life, the greater will be the attraction of violence. In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. (1969, 81)

Coogan states, “Lobbying, calling one’s congressman, publicising: these are methods [of resistance] I commend. The absence of the effective availability of these methods in Ireland’s six north-eastern counties led to the horrific events described” (2002, 9).

59 “Today we ought to add the latest and perhaps most formidable form of such domination: bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could properly be called the rule by Nobody. (If, in accord with traditional political thought, we identify tyranny as government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is done)” (Arendt 1969, 38-9).
Up until the hunger strikes, republican resistance was staged in terms of a conventional military campaign. With the switch in focus from the external war to the interior of the carceral, the H-Blocks themselves being like so many tiny offices indicative of the bureaucratic authority that wielded power over them, the republican struggle transformed. The violence of the paramilitary was turned seemingly inwards upon himself. Arendt paraphrases Spender’s observations of student radicals encouraging others to deliberately provoke authorities “as a strategy for ‘unmasking’ the violence of the authorities” (qtd. in Arendt 1969, 66). In such a situation the provocateur is both the victim and the assailant.

To tear the mask of hypocrisy from the face of the enemy, to unmask him and the devious machinations and manipulations that permit him to rule without using violent means, that is, to provoke action even at the risk of annihilation so that the truth may come out – these are still among the strongest motives in today’s violence. (Arendt 1969, 66)

The change in the formations of republican violence stemmed from the acknowledgement that “No government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed. Even the totalitarian ruler, whose chief instrument of rule is torture, needs a power basis – the secret police and its net of informers” (Arendt 1969, 50). Arendt goes on to say that “Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities; what it does need is legitimacy” (1969, 52).

As a PIRA member notes, “The Brits are never going to stop me and some other guys getting weapons and taking a crack at a soldier. But you’re pissing against the wind; you’re never going to go nowhere. The Hunger
Strike was the answer to all that" (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 229). Another PIRA hunger striker states, “It had built to the point inside that people were looking to years and years ahead; the Blanket wasn’t ending.” Hunger striking was considered the only way out of the impasse. However, “The outside was scared to make the logical extension of the struggle we were in. They felt fairly in control of the military campaign, but not of the Hunger Strike” (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 231). Hunger striker Pat McGeown’s wife, Pauline, gives a vivid overview of the stalemate and the sense of everyday oppression stemming from life in the ghettos of Belfast:

There is nothing that dazzling about life here, as you can see, and there is even less in the prisons. They don't think about death the way other people do. It's only my own idea of myself as a person that keeps me from suicide, and I am on the outside. The way the Provisionals see it there is no way for them to put pressure on the British except in death, or dying themselves, or doing something that they will really take note of like the tubes in London for instance. I mean what else are you going to face them with if everything else has been tried? (Coogan 2002, 89)

Despite the failure of the protest in 1980, the republican tradition of hunger striking had not been without successes in the past and it offered hope for the future. On hunger striking, Moloney writes, “As an instrument for destabilising political life in Ireland, it was beyond historical comparison” (2002, 208).

The hunger strikes were a challenge to the government’s legitimacy, to the very self-evidence of its right to rule. It confronted the British at the

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60 In 1974, sisters “Doloures and Marian Price, who had been imprisoned in England for a car bombing in London, went on hunger strike demanding the right to serve their sentences in Ireland. After fasting for 200 days, during which they were forcibly fed, the government gave in and they were repatriated” (O’Malley 1990, 28).
various points of their own identity formation, challenging the state’s myths about itself and revealing clear-cut instances in which the pragmatic reality underlying such ideational constructions were in conflict. In the process, “The prison regime, which had intended first to criminalise and then to ‘normalise’ and ‘rehabilitate’ the ‘conforming’ political prisoner, would be exposed as a machine for degradation and abuse” (Feldman 1991 236). A Sinn Féin statement argued, “For the prisoners in the H-Blocks and in Armagh women’s prison, the hunger strike is the pinnacle of the struggle to secure not only the five demands but also to establish the legitimacy and worthiness of fighting for a united Ireland” (Jim Gibney, qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 62). The hunger strike’s significance was that it set out to do so, not by outward bursts of violence (though these certainly continued on the outside), but by a practice that at least appeared to be more aligned with the peaceful protests of Gandhi and MacSwiney than with the ethos of the gunman typified by Pearse and Connolly, even though it should be acknowledged that some aspects of the republican campaign could only be achieved with the support of IRA Active Service Units (ASUs) on the outside.

In some quarters the hunger strikers’ success was used to justify an escalation of the armed campaign. As Dixon notes:

After the Hunger Strikes and Sinn Féin’s subsequent success with the ballot box, it was no longer possible to argue convincingly that there was no substantial Catholic support for the IRA and their ‘armed struggle’ which had killed so many Protestants. For unionists the publicity and interest surrounding the deaths of hunger strikers contrasted painfully with the funerals of 22 UDR and RUC men who had been killed by the IRA during the Hunger Strikes. (2001, 185)
“During the 217 days of the second hunger strike, sixty-four people died, including thirty-four civilians, and the divisions between Catholic and Protestant communities were expressed in ways that exposed the psychic undercurrents of religion and tribe,” which O’Malley believes are largely denied by the various parties to the Northern Irish conflict (1990, 7). The increase in sectarian killings by both sides, either intentional (predominantly but not exclusively among loyalists) or accidental (by the inevitable mistakes made by IRA bombers), almost threatened to overshadow the latter stages of the hunger strikes. The external IRA leadership was seemingly convinced “that the sacrificial deaths of ten men legitimised a subsequent sustained campaign of political violence (modified somewhat by an electoral strategy)” (Feldman 1991, 221). Instead, the violence brought an almost united public outcry and renewed calls for peace.

Armed violence and hunger striking were both weapons that could be used against the obscuring forces of the state. However, hunger striking was different in that it provided the IRA leadership with “impressive evidence to suggest . . . that support for the ‘cause’ increased in reaction to sacrificial suffering more than to military aggression. Hunger-strikes were better recruiters than bomb-strikes” (Kearney 1997, 111-2). However, in the eyes of the prisoners there were only minimal distinctions between these two forms of protest as modes of action. Feldman describes how “The Blanketmen viewed the 1981 Hunger Strike as a military campaign and organised it as such. For them, it was a modality of insurrectionary violence in which they deployed
their bodies as weapons” (1991, 220). The famous IRA gunman Francis Hughes, on the occasion of his joining the 1981 hunger strike:

confided how he had agonised, just after being wounded, over whether to hold on to his M14 for a final shoot-out, or abandon it and try to get away. Sometimes he had regretted the decision he had taken, but now he was being given a weapon again and this time he was going to use it to the end. (Beresford 1994, 163-4)

The strikers’ resolution to prosecute their struggle by any means was ironclad. Tom McElwee, who later died on the protest, remarked, “Every man must overcome inner conflicts” (O’Malley 1990, 112).

For the prisoners, life itself had been “deconstructed” by years “on the blanket and the dirty protest, of having endured physical deprivation to the point where their reaction to it had become existential: the physical self was something that existed outside the real self, and thus was something that could be discarded” (O’Malley 1990, 110-1). Feldman relates the testimony of a republican hunger striker who states, “We were prepared to get the Hunger Strike to go into 1985. We eventually had at least fifty guys out of a Blanket population of four hundred. Fifty guys who had cast-iron legal guarantees that their families couldn’t take them off the strike.” The enormity of the situation and the tenacity of both sides were almost beyond comprehension. The hunger strikers guaranteed the outside leadership that “We can go on indefinitely, we can keep sending coffins out of here every week if you give us a guarantee on the outside that you can sustain the level of the political campaign” (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 231). It was a proposition that intimidated almost everyone involved.
The prisoners were frustrated in their efforts on almost every other front by an opponent who was as seemingly unwilling to yield as they. The British position was one of astonishment and moral outrage at the threats coming from the prison and from men that they had consistently portrayed as murderers and thieves. All of the prisoners’ arguments, and all of those from outside sources, including the Catholic church, were met with complete scepticism. The minister of state Michael Alison said at the time:

It would be a gross abdication of responsibility for the Government to accept that those who commit (in a society where there is ample freedom to express all political views and to demonstrate within the law) criminal offences of the gravest kind in the course of a campaign of killing, maiming and terror, should receive any special form of treatment or concessions in prison. (qtd. in Coogan 2002, 282)

Prime Minister Thatcher’s interpretation of the protest is said to have been even more severe. She states:

The purpose of the privileges they claimed was not to improve prisoners’ conditions but to take power away from the prison authorities. They were also keen to establish once again, as they felt they had in 1972, that their crimes were ‘political,’ thus giving the perpetrators a kind of respectability, even nobility. This we could not allow. (qtd. in Dixon 2001, 183)

When Bobby Sands eventually died, the Northern Ireland Office statement read simply, “He took his own life by refusing food and medical treatment for sixty-six days” (O’Malley 1990, 64).

In many quarters, the intransigence of the British position is at least partially blamed for amplifying the magnitude of the hunger strikers’ determination, resulting in even more deaths than seemed inevitable. The fact that the previous year’s effort was seen to have failed because of trickery
on Britain’s behalf meant that “the prisoners started the hunger strike with the preconceived determination that they were not going to allow the British government to trick them again . . . they would continue the hunger strike, until death, in relays until such time as the British government gave categorical assurance to them” (MacBride, qtd. in Sands 1998, 19).

“Moreover, since the strikers were convinced that Britain wanted above all to win, to turn public opinion against them, to defeat the hunger strike and hence the Movement, all the government’s responses or appearances of being responsive had to be discounted” (O’Malley 1990, 86-7). In the end the prisoners were not actually capable of negotiating because every deal had to be sifted so carefully that almost nothing could pass scrutiny as being one hundred per cent reliable. In their sensitivity to the purposeful manipulation of events playing out on the ideational plane, the prisoners were almost completely paralysed.

The government’s public comments exacerbated the problem. Pat ‘Béag’ McGeown notes, “Whenever [Mrs Thatcher] used the term ‘This is the IRA’s last card,’ then we actually saw ourselves on the front line. We felt this air of importance that we were the front line in the struggle and that if we were to take one step back, it would be a defeat for the whole movement” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 85). When the government did initiate negotiations with the prisoners, first through MI5 and later through senior NIO officials, the conflict was so imminent that it only gave the prisoners a physical outlet in which to vent their rage and sense of moral supremacy. IRA identity Jake Jackson
Instead of criminalising the hunger strikes, they [the British] had only internationalised the struggle. Instead of marginalising the protest, they had gained it worldwide publicity. They had tested the hunger strike for evidence of brinkmanship and found only resolve. The Brits were broke [because] they had opened the lines of negotiations of their own initiative. (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 81)

At the same time, comments from people such as Michael Alison that British policy in dealing with the hunger strikers was akin to “the efforts of authorities to keep plane hijackers occupied while other plans are developed to subdue them” continued to nurture hostilities (Irish Times, 13th July 1981).

Dixon outlines a number of ways in which the Catholic and Protestant clergy, who in one strand of the negotiations were go-betweens for the prisoners and the government, were deliberately misled by the British “in an attempt to split and demoralise the [republican] movement” (2001, 167). “The prisoners accused them [the British government] of playing a cynical game of brinkmanship, waiting for one prisoner after the other to reach the dying point, hoping that this would break the morale of the other prisoners” (MacBride, qtd. in Sands 1998, 20). As Dixon observes, “The clear recognition of the political nature of the republican movement and hope that it would contest elections contrasted starkly with the attempt of the government to criminalise the IRA and normalise the conflict” (2001, 167). Thatcher, and indeed the heads of all of the major British parties, continued to roundly castigate the hunger strikers, insisting on their criminality, while “privately the government ‘encouraged dialogue’ inside the prison and urged the Foreign Office to make contact with the prisoners” (Dixon 2001, 184). The prisoners remained
unconvinced. It seemed that, particularly in the wake of republican electoral success, the British propaganda effort was aimed at presenting “a reasonable front – to be seen to be doing everything possible to resolve the dispute, short of meeting the demands” (Beresford 1994, 116).

Humphrey Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland during the hunger strikes, remembers that every document “had to be crawled over,” and that officials were “terrifyingly careful about every precise word in any statement, a comma, anything, so that there wouldn’t be any difference of view” or vulnerability (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 194). The British were knee-deep in the process of attempting to craft a verbal position completely at odds with what they were doing at a concrete level. Of course, in one sense so too were the IRA. The difference between them was that the republicans were unified in their strategy. They aimed to produce roughly the same discursive object (the freedom and status of republican prisoners) through their propaganda and the management of appearances as they did in the pursuit of the physical reality of the hunger strike. Within the British position there was an internal conflict. The rationality and civility of the outward position was undermined at every point. The only object possible for them to produce by their actions was the very one they had set out to defeat. As Bik McFarlane succinctly put it in a smuggled communication to Gerry Adams, “I still don’t think they have learned that oppression breeds resistance and further oppression – further resistance!!” McFarlane adds, “They’re the only people I know who are perfectly correct when they are entirely wrong” (qtd. in Beresford 1994, 127).
Meetings about the hunger strikes with the NIO stressed, “there was no question of ‘negotiation,’ it being [instead] an exercise in ‘clarification.’” Beresford wryly observes, “Semantics are important in the Northern Ireland context” (1994, 270). On this situation, Gerry Adams comments, “The private position was a considerable bit apart from their public position in terms of the contact as well as in the substance of what they were saying” (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 100). “Although Mrs Thatcher made much of the principle that ‘we don’t talk to terrorists,’ the realities of government do not allow for such hard and fast rules” (Beresford 1994, 40). Beresford also notes that “the Mountain Climber [the republicans’ MI5 contact] had set a strict precondition for the secret talks: if there was any public reference to these negotiations they would immediately end and the Government would deny they had taken place” (1994, 296). In order to resist the challenge to its legitimacy that the hunger strikes implied, the government could not be seen to be “in a position in which it had been overturned and defeated manifestly by the use of this kind of pressure” (O’Malley 1990, 198-9).

If the hunger strikes were ostensibly about the prisoners’ five demands, the government was not particularly concerned about their restitution. Indeed, it was made clear through a series of ‘clarifications’ that “concessions, substantial concessions perhaps, were possible” as long as the hunger strikers made sure that the protest ended without attempting to publicly claim from it a degree of victory. “Someone had to lose face and the government wasn’t about to; to the end it would maintain its position that it
would not negotiate under duress” (O’Malley 1990, 100). Of this situation, Gerry Adams notes:

There’s a duplicity of language there which again shows the hypocrisy of the British position. That they could publicly take a position that there would be no concessions until the hunger strike ended but they could privately have a position, there’ll be no concessions until the hunger strike ends but let’s work out the concessions now because we know you won’t end the hunger strike until the concessions are worked out. (qtd. in O’Malley 1990, 197)

The hunger strikers understood the reality of the situation. Given what they had achieved in terms of the representations to do with their campaign and that it was widely agreed that the government had been trounced in this contest, and added to this fact that, by the time that the impasse was acknowledged, ten of their comrades would lie dead, it was time for them to separate out the pragmatic consequences in their favour to ending the hunger strike. Yet even an ideationally satisfying understanding of their capitulation had to be produced.

The core of this concept that even the hunger strikers’ apparent surrender could be a kind of victory is found in the summation of the conflict between the republicans and Britain by Fr Brian Murphy. To Bik McFarlane, Fr Murphy said, “You are looking for a victory over them and they the same over you, which means someone loses.” Fr Murphy admitted that his interest was for “a settlement whereby the prisoners get basically what they want and the Brits don’t come under the accusing finger of surrendering to terrorism, which they won’t do anyway” (qtd. in Beresford 1994, 130). McFarlane himself understood that as long as the prisoners maintained their resolve, “then the
Brits are always the losers. However if they are prepared to continue to be losers without conceding our demands then we can only go so far” (qtd. in Beresford 1994, 273). The willingness of the British, personified by Margaret Thatcher, to let the prisoners keep dying on the fast challenged “the sheer moral force of their protest” (O’Malley 1990, 74). The hunger strike leadership came to the position where they understood that victory, such as it was, had already been achieved the moment that the British indicated that they were willing to yield at a clandestine level. It was the ongoing force of the prisoners’ representations that reflected damagingly on British statesmanship and the political image of Thatcher’s government that had led to this crossroads. The British lack of willingness to be seen as backing down was, in a sense, an entirely different struggle and one to which the prisoners, having achieved their pragmatic aims, could extend a degree of flexibility.

The hunger strike was called off on October 3rd 1981. It lasted for 217 days, during which seventy-four lives, ten of those belonging hunger strikers, were ended. At one level, ending the hunger strike was a practical decision not just because the original aims had been achieved in fact if not in name. The longer that the protest continued, the greater were the opportunities for it to backfire against the republican cause. Already the hunger strike had weathered the implicit critique and suggestion of disunity that resulted from a cooperative movement of families and priests taking action to remove hunger strikers from their fasts the moment that they lapsed into comas.61 “The

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61 The film Some Mother’s Son is an excellent if streamlined dramatisation of these developments.
prisoners were effectively robbed of the weapon of the hunger strike” (Gerry Adams, qtd. in Sands 1998, 11). Although steps had been taken to reduce the chances of such future entanglements, every time a new hunger striker was removed from the cells and placed in the prison hospital he became vulnerable to intervention, as well as the weakening strategies of the administration.62

“No formal recognition was made by the Government of the prisoners’ ‘political status.’ But then the 30,000 who gave Sands their vote in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election had already granted all the recognition that was needed” (Beresford 1994, 429). The five demands were unofficially met and were never contested again. The same privileges were automatically extended to loyalist paramilitary prisoners. “After the strike there was no sense of defeat, but it was an expensive victory, a Pyrrhic victory,” one hunger striker states. “We knew we had won but it was all too close and too personal.”

We were out of it. If our own clothes had come in to the prison six months earlier as they came after the strike, we would have lifted the roof off the fuckin’ Blocks. But when they did, ‘So what.’ We were getting our parcels but it didn’t matter. We got our remission back and just looked at them [the prison staff]. (qtd. in Feldman 1991, 256-7)

Despite their tacit victory, it was unavoidable that the prisoners experienced a

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62 “The night Bobby Sands was just . . . you never heard a sound for hours. Nobody spoke and nobody would go near the door. The way we knew he was dead, a screw came down and there was a grill at the end of the wing, and with his baton he started banging the grill slowly. Dong! – dong! – dong! – like a church bell. It was just a hollow sound. From that point on whenever someone died the screws would ring the grill and another one would walk up the wing slowly pulling a trolley behind him, saying, ‘Bring out your dead. How many do youse have for us today?’ It was like the plague” (PIRA hunger striker, qtd. in Feldman 1991, 249).
conflict between their achievements at an ideational-pragmatic level and the harrowing process they had been through in order to do so. There is nothing that can be offered to soften the reality that even though the prisoners broke through the fictional boundaries of both the différend and the circular causality of Saussure's chain of signification, it came at a heavy cost. Deceased hunger striker Raymond McCreesh's brother, Fr Brian McCreesh, states, “Raymond's death on the hunger strike was a victory at a very personal level. It was a personal victory for him as it was for all the hunger strikers. They were defeated in every other way. Yet nobody could stop them from dying – it was a victory” (qtd. in O'Malley 1990, 270).

Fr McCreesh poetically overstates both the extent of the hunger strikers’ defeat as well as their victory, though in doing so he clearly underscores the bottom line in the protest. Death, as both a significatory act par excellence and a physical reality, made a position of power available in the conflict where otherwise the prisoners were completely excluded from any relation in which the chance for agency lay. The corpse of the hunger striker was “simultaneously the bearer of political value, a communicant” and, in a metaphoric sense, “an inscribed surface, and an inscribing agency” (Feldman 1991, 235). Feldman also notes:

In turn, the corpse of the hunger striker would be one more jettisoned sacrificial fragment of state violence. The act of hunger striking purified and decriminalised the striker, but the queue of corpses emerging from behind prison walls would shake the moral legitimacy of the British state. Time after time the Republican inmates, under interrogation and in prison, had been charged by state propaganda with ‘self-inflicted’ violence. This charge would be subverted from within by a performance that diagrammed in a graphic reenactment the
procedures of the state that drove men to abjection. The hunger strike was an epic act of emancipation. Yet no other action more eloquently demonstrated the condition and image of the human body infested with the state apparatus. (1991, 236)

Death was the act required to shift what was otherwise an intransigent blockage to the realisation of the prisoners’ aims. The hunger strikers wanted the moral and political legitimacy of their cause to be recognised in direct comparison to the hypocritical criminalising and brutalising regime of their opponents. History itself shows the long-term effects of their success on the hunger strike. While the British never publicly acknowledged the prisoners’ victory, in every tangible sense the prisoners’ demands were met and, quite openly, the government had lost considerable face on the world stage. The criminalisation policy was abandoned as anything but a form of media rhetoric that sat increasingly uneasily alongside the growing recognition of the republican movement as an inevitable force in the North’s future.
Conclusion – The Discourse of Conflict

Hitherto, what has been detailed is a corporeal semiotics, the basis for a social ontology permitting the investigation of culture for the purpose of examining conflict in all its forms. We began with the exploration of the way in which the questions of philosophy to do with conflict have become beholden to a central preoccupation with language in the consideration of the role of signification in everyday affairs – a bias leading to the result that questions of philosophy have in the past automatically detoured through questions of language. In the examination of conflict viewed from a linguistic perspective, very few coherent advances have been made because of the difficulties posed by the Saussurean assertion that language is a closed system. The way in which semiotics has in recent years become extended into a general mode of enquiry about meaning and the world, in contradiction to its verbocentric roots and the original formulations that explicitly tie it to operations of language, illustrate the bind in which structuralist theory holds those who attempt to bend it towards non-linguistic purposes. The crux of the issue has therefore been that structuralist semiotics itself needs to be reconciled with competing accounts that offer possibilities for the study of conflict where structuralism does not.

While verbocentrism has been critiqued, at the same time it is acknowledged that a clear understanding of the processes of signification are crucial to the study of conflict by dint of the reason that, once prised free of an
over-dependence upon language models, semiotics is the primary means by which individual subjects make sense of the world. Conflict, as one of several key characteristics of social life on both individual and group levels, can only properly submit to an understanding informed by a suitably broadband sociological theory of meaning. Ruthrof’s corporeal pragmatics, which in association with Peirce’s work on signs has formed the basis for the revision of Saussurean semiotics, allows for an understanding of the world as comprised of signs that operate according to a variety of registers, the majority of which can be ultimately reduced to the level of the body, its sense readings, and the ability of the embodied mind to project mental frames in which the semiotic universe can be re-imagined in fantasy form.

The corporeal pragmatic theory of signs has then been incorporated into a revised Foucauldian theory of discourse. From such a position – seeing discourses as ultimately the communication of complex ideas that are themselves compound sign series based on bodily signifiers – two kinds of discourse have been identified that roughly obey the same rules for the formation of discourses as outlined by Foucault. The first kind of discourse is linguistic, meaning that it is communicated entirely by verbal or written signs. This category of discourse contains everything that was previously said about discourse despite the tendency of many writers to acknowledge an extra-linguistic dimension to their discussion of meaning and the social function of statements. However, through Foucault’s generally unexplored category of discursive practice, in conjunction with the corporeal dimension of semiotics
proposed by Ruthrof, it is possible to identify in nonverbal behaviour a second type of discourse. This second category includes instances of behaviour that are entirely nonverbal as well as those instances of discursivity noted already by Foucault and by theorists such as Austin, in which verbal elements are complemented by the addition of performances and objects that are completely non-linguistic. Due to the re-theorisation of semiotics enabled by corporeal pragmatics, these differing schemata can be integrated into a new kind of semio-discursive theory.

At this point, the effects of these two kinds of discourse are divided into two further categories, that of the ideational and the pragmatic. In no way should they be thought of as identical with the division of discourse into linguistic and non-linguistic kinds, because both verbal and practical discourse have effects on the ideational and pragmatic planes of action. The ideational is the level at which discourse has effects that manifest as ideas, norms and beliefs. While not originating entirely from linguistic sources, it is mostly by means of language and social communication that this discursive dimension circulates the constructed ideas that serve particular social functions that has loosely been described in the past as the realm of ideology. On the other hand, the pragmatic plane of action represents a generally nonverbal, practical, active form of social behaviour, informed by discursive ideas (the ideational level) while at the same time being capable of undercutting or contradicting these ideas. The pragmatic plane is the level at which statements and actions have material, concrete effects upon the world.
either through fixed, physical effects (the ordering of space, the destruction or creation of solid objects) or the continuation of modes of performance (nonverbal social habits, customs and types of behaviour).

The distinction between the ideational and pragmatic planes of action reinforces the notion of intersemiosis (that meanings can occur and be communicated along different registers) as well as heterosemiosis (that any signification made up of both verbal and nonverbal elements may contain contradictions or mutually exclusive meanings). The acknowledgement of the existence of numerous registers upon which meaning can be conveyed carries over to the division of discursive effects between ideational and pragmatic planes. In the ideational-pragmatic theory, the idea of meanings operating concurrently across different planes recurs. As a consequence, the orientation of a discourse and the tracing of its effects upon the social world can be said to be either in agreement (or unified), or instead non-unified, the dynamic tension between what is being said and what is being done resulting in a structural friction, itself easily ruptured and exposing the parties to the discourse as bound by a hypocrisy. We see such consequences most commonly in political scandals of all kinds, as well as in the social character of promises and their fulfilment (again abstractable to the political level in the study of the production of consent through rhetorical and propagandistic methods).

Individual discourses (in their full sense as arrays of statements as well as diversely nonverbal behaviour) trigger effects within the discursive field
that are both ideational and pragmatic, with only individual elements
(statements, a specific action, a physical text) submitting to the categorisation
as one type or the other. However, what the separation of the ideational and
pragmatic planes of action allows is for a critical perspective that can analyse
statements and actions for their political motivations, sensitive to the context-
dependent function and purposes of social power, capable of discerning
discrepancies between the ideas that are propagated at the ideational level
and the actions that accompany them at the level of material effects. While
the ideational and the pragmatic might be considered a division in what can
be considered discourse, alternatively it can be said that in real practice such
a neat division only rarely occurs.

Given that the underlying rules for the formation of discourses and their
operation according to various relations within enunciative modalities has
been extended out to include a corporeal, physically performative orientation,
in addition to that of the purely linguistic plane, there is therefore still really
only one kind of discourse. The main purpose that has been achieved by
underlining the differences between the verbal and the nonverbal is to
reinscribe the same distinction that Foucault himself already notes as part of
his focus on discourses of a narrower (linguistic) kind: above all, the rules for
the operation of discourses are located in the diverse possibilities for their
application rather in any particular material form. Consequently, by including
nonverbal discourses within the standard definition, the field of discursive
possibilities – which in the study of conflict is synonymous with the resources
and strategic possibilities of the antagonists – is not redefined. Instead, the inclusion of additional definitions only expands the existing understanding of discourse to include areas hitherto unappreciated by semiotics and discursive analysis. Such a broadened perspective opens the scope of study to unite these two theoretical fields into what has been previously termed ‘semio-discursive analysis.’ There are several consequences to the development of semio-discursive analysis as a methodological concern, each of which merit expansion.

First, it has been argued that, as articulated by Peirce, semiotics is the primary means by which social subjects make sense of the world around them. In the elaboration of the semio-discursive method, this crucial aspect of semiotics has been enhanced by a second observation, which is that not only does semiotics always operate in accordance with the body and its meanings, its stakes are also at all times the continuation of the body’s survival and its perpetuation into the future. The matter of conflict only highlights these bodily concerns, particularly in relation to issues of protection from harm and the maximisation of comfort; but by and large it can be safely said that the highest stakes possible for which individual subjects can find themselves in conflict is over their own survival, or in the pursuit of goals that are predicated upon a risk to the body. When subjects compete in arguments or through words alone, the primacy of the body is obscured behind a mask of utterances. The generally urbane character of most real life arguments means
that they do not frequently admit the physical reality that violent confrontation may lurk at only the distance of a single provocative statement.

At the same time, the elaboration of the semio-discursive position reveals that meaning itself comes upon a variety of tangents. While the prime position previously accorded to linguistic utterances and writing is diluted (but not completely overthrown, since it is still recognised that language is the most economic of significatory media), various other fields of meaning emerge that reveal the situation as it has always existed, and indeed has frequently been recognised, even if it could not be put into words – or even if it could only be articulated as part of a performative contradiction vis-à-vis the structuralist position. Rather than language being a closed system in which subjects are effectively trapped once the ability to communicate, or the ability to regulate judgements, breaks down, ordinary people have the option of pursuing communication or arbitration by other methods.

While visual, haptic, gustatory, proximic and olfactory sense readings are less ‘eloquent’ than words – and it is for this very reason of their difference that the relations of the linguistic model are not transferable to their employment – it is something else entirely (entirely fallacious) to state that these media lack meaning, or that they are not significant or capable of conveying information. Once we take into accord the idea of senses or ‘feelings’ at one step removed, and thereby begin to consider emotions and unconscious concepts such as the way in which the embodied mind compartmentalises, rationalises and breaks down the world in such a way as
to keep it intellectually manageable, ordering words and things so as to facilitate the rapid projection of mental frames both in an appresentational manner as well as in the service of acts of fantasy deduction, we are presented with a ‘picture’ of ourselves as meaning-making animals capable of a surprising strength and variety of ways for differentiating the world and the things and people in it. The structuralist account is comparatively impoverished, which is quite a statement given the undeniable richness of the world of utterances that we find in literature and in everyday speech.

Consequently, when we are able to re-imagine the experience of our lives in terms of a vast network of quasi-perceptual media, much of which ultimately relates back to our existence as creatures with bodies and therefore a vested interest in our own continuation, meaning itself is revealed as a vast totality; and the consideration of meaning-making acts is opened up to a diverse spectrum, with the employment of verbal statements at one end and acts of violence, perpetrated upon similarly vulnerable human subjects, at the other. In this sense we have a verbal exchange at one extreme and the point-blank execution of a human being. Such an understanding eclipses anything that structuralism and post-structuralism might have to say, not just because it sweeps away the petty consideration of mere words and, in post-structuralism, the weak attempts of writers such as Baudrillard and Laclau to radicalise their own contributions through demonstrative and theoretically empty ways, but because it returns to the study of meaning the observation at once prosaic and transcendental: meaning ends for us when we are dead,
and thus the first condition for the successful completion of meaningful acts remains the requirement of life itself. As the examination of the 1981 hunger strikes has shown, in the worst of circumstances, facing the most relentless oppression and abjectification, the tacit recognition of the primacy and worth of one's life is the final device by which one may re-enter, even if for the last time, the stream of semiosis in acts of communication relating to the social world.

The second consequence of semio-discursive analysis is, in light of what has been said about the body and about death, a re-evaluation of the validity and role of violence in social conflicts. Given that violent behaviour and the men and women associated with it are almost universally disparaged in a commonplace understanding, it seems remarkable, almost unconscionable that any sort of sensible analysis could ever suggest that violence is a valid political statement, and indeed on a par with many other kinds of political operations with which it would not normally be associated. To separate out the understanding that violent acts always imply pain, misfortune and potential death for oftentimes innocent subjects, and that in any society, real or hypothetical, such behaviour should ideally never be a native consequence of daily life, it is nevertheless the case that in order to address the issue of conflict properly, a place must always be made for the serious theoretical implications of violent acts to be considered. It is churlish, as Dixon observes, to refuse to acknowledge that violence has produced significant gains as well as losses in past political conflicts (Dixon 2001, 45).
Arendt is one writer who is not afraid to state her opinions regarding the absolute applicability of violence to the arena of politics. Perhaps influenced by the events of the Second World War, as well as the undoubted impact that student uprisings and civil protests in the United States had upon her in the 1960s, and against the backdrop of which many of her statements cohere, Arendt argues against the de-legitimated status of political violence as a valid means of expression. For Arendt, there are clear-cut instances where the violent act is the only one appropriate, for which we should also observe that it is also often the only one possible. Her view of the ideational and pragmatic consequences of violence mirror many of the conclusions that have already been drawn by the present thesis, but which now deserve to be brought forward and articulated clearly so that, not only will this paper’s position be clear, but a theory of conflict extensible to even the unpopular, anti-social and transgressive character of violent acts will for once and all (and for better or worse) be put forward.

Although it must be more than the notions about civility and propriety that circulate in postmodern societies, previously identified as partly responsible for the epistemological ignorance towards the category of violence and which inform the low regard for violence and its perpetrators, it is certainly the case that such factors are involved in the attitude of decided silence that presents itself whenever consideration of conflicts are turned towards the practicalities ensuing from violent acts. Yet if, as we have only just formalised once and for all, that in the study of meaning as intersemiotic,
embracing discourses not just as functional arrays of words but of actions too, then violence, an act rich with significations however morbid, must surely be recognised as valid.

If often emerges that, in the popular discourse of ‘man as animal’ that has been mentioned briefly before now, the potential for violence is grafted into permanent association with the notion of a person who is unable to control his temper and act according to ‘civilised,’ community-sanctioned standards (though we must also recognise that there are numerous real-world communities at one step removed from the comfortable spheres of everyday life where the preparations for violence, if not violent acts themselves, are no more extrinsic to the character of normality than the communal evening meal). Violence, then, as it is linked to rage, is considered inhuman, illogical and aberrant. It does not do, here, to philosophise as to what characteristics may or may not belong to the idea of humanity as it is conveyed by popular discourses, yet the separation of violence as a non-human trait clearly functions to cast violence in a spurious light, with the implicit sanction that this entails for those who use it.

Yet with violence, there is nothing to show that, beyond its social construction, the practice of violence is always irrational. As Arendt notes, very few people react with rage to circumstances that seem beyond their control (Arendt 1969, 64). Apart from the insane (as safe as that category can hope to be), people generally practice violence exactly when there is a chance that it may affect the outcome of events in which they are involved. In
such cases, the deliberateness and forethought of the violent act, however ill
conceived it may ultimately prove to be, is performed in a frame of mind
antithetical to that of irrationality. People act violently for the reason that it
helps them to achieve what they desire in situations where they are otherwise
disempowered. If disciplinary forces cohere to detain the violent offender, or if
the act itself proves to be less than worthwhile, these are secondary effects
and consequences separate to the initials conditions in which the act was
performed.

Violence carried out against others is never simply about venting
ambient frustration. Taken at a larger scale, few governments send their
troops into battle against a previously neutral opponent simply to give their
army something to do, or for them to let off steam. However questionable we
might feel the underlying motivations are in both acts of violence and in acts
of war – we are, after all, not discussing issues of moral rightness – such
behaviour is always engaged in for a reason, and is thus entirely rational.
That these reasons might often prove to be the very motivating circumstances
that underlie many other instances of conflict, that whether it is political or
military, power is exerted for the purpose of achieving a specific aim or
satisfying a necessary criterion, should not surprise us.

While some critics may abhor the comparison between government-
sanctioned wars and individual acts of violence, apart from the rather droll
observation that we are all in governance of our own heads (hopefully most of
the time), it is only the ideational character of beliefs pertaining to
governmentality that allows any imaginary demarcation between these two
types of pragmatic action to exist. It is in fact the case that violence appears
at its most irrational, at least to an outside perspective, when it is employed to
highlight the lies of an enemy, what we term the distinction between
operations carried out upon the ideational plane of action and their
pragmatically-aligned physical counterparts. Violence is ironically most useful
when it is able to reveal the instrinsically political character of pragmatic
actions, which is the reason – apart from certain other ‘practical’ justifications
which themselves spiral back to issues of self-protection, identified as
fundamental to the stakes of social interaction even as they strike us as
uncomfortably close to the assumptions of social contract theory – for its
widespread criminalisation, not as a punishment, for which such
consequences are hardly amazing, but that violence is specifically reduced to
the level of a criminal function that itself is tied to ideational notions of incivility
and barbarism, in times of political tyranny. One side effect of this
criminalising project is that the violence of the oppressor also avoids an open
political critique.

The third extrapolation that semio-discursive analysis enables comes
from the specific identification of the ideational and pragmatic planes of
action. As flows on from the previous discussion of violence, the division of
the effects of the discursive field between consequences on the ideational
plane and those upon the pragmatic plane reveal the central locus for a
political theorem. As much as Lyotard identifies in politics the operation of a
meta-narrative that exists above and subsumes all other phrase regimens (in a non-linguistic articulation of the same theory, we could perhaps posit that the possibility of violence is the nonverbal meta-narrative that overlies, or perhaps even underscores, all other nonverbal activities), this question of narratives has no longer been appropriate, ever since we did away with the implicit verbocentrism of Lyotard’s theory, of which this further reference to narrative is just another echo. Politics is not reducible to a genre of discourse or speech: instead it is the tension that exists between the ideational and pragmatic planes of action. If the term ‘society’ is the verbal shortcut we take when we wish to refer to the sum of all verbal and nonverbal statements in a given social grouping, then politics is the dynamic relation that exists between the effects that play out from these utterances and actions, in which, as Foucault may agree, all social subjects are perpetually suspended as agents and devices of power-knowledge regimes.

As we can see whenever we examine the substance of parliamentary pronouncements or the consequences of armed warfare on a large scale, politics and its physical expression in military terms is the actualisation of a power dynamic aimed at ‘getting things done.’ As such, when we revisit Clausewitz’s famous statement, we are reminded by its earlier mention that politics, as war pursued by other means, only describes half of this equation. Furthermore, neither halves make explicit exactly what it is that politics and war both pursue. It is rarely power for power’s sake, as much as such a conclusion seems a likely one in some instances of today’s international
political behaviour. Instead, understanding politics as the relations existing between ideational and pragmatic planes of action reveals the very constructedness of social life, extensile not just to the ordinary postmodern picture of civil subjectivity as a grey experience of alienation and despair, but instead pointing to the cynically productive functioning of power at the level of ideas of governance and nationhood.

In the history of Ireland’s post-partition Troubles we see the recurrence of certain historical tropes that suggest the existence of a formula measured, not mathematically, but figuring instead as an equation in which certain elements – armed struggle and its opponents, the monolithic character of state controls, the journey towards constitutional politics, abstentionism and its opposite, the contestation of elections, the transformation of gunmen into hardmen and thereafter into statesmen – occupy specific roles which remain constantly visible even as they transform under the passage of history, the names and dates changing while their basic social functions remain unaltered. In this sense, it seems as if history frequently repeats, in Ireland, facilitated by the complete stasis in which social life has been submerged right up until recent times, seemingly much more emphatically than elsewhere in the world. There is something there, aside from the formless equation of the rise and fall of political developments, which suggests a link to the eternal character of politics as it is advanced in the Western worldview. It is as if these recurrent features have exposed and made conspicuous certain elements that previously held as secret a general cynicism, inherent to the
operations of this model. At a distant point there is implied a critique of democracy itself, a critique that should figure as an elaborate thesis in its own right, which takes Foucault’s idea of a domain of political economy further, daring to uncover those elements that seem contradictory to the very articulation of the discourse of democracy, and yet which, as isolable elements in a field of discursive practices, can be seen at the same time as more than coincidentally crucial to the material functioning of democracy.

In such an examination it is hard to view politics as anything other than a mask for more deliberate, pragmatic actions that operate at another level of abstraction altogether. In identifying politics thus, it is necessary to tread carefully. We are not about exposing a secret cabal that directs the world from a hidden base; nor is it possible to realistically view political elites as a superclass of social subjects managing docile society exclusively for their own ends. Likewise, there are no finite social groups towards whom we can attribute such a character, nor upon which we can predicate a conspiracy that otherwise explains how it is that the fundamental character of politics itself seems to be steeped in deception. Therefore, according to the logic of Ockham, what we are left with is the uncomfortable realisation that, in having sought out the political rationalists who occupy the centre of this pragmatic apparatus, we find ourselves instead.

It is frequently the case that in social issues, particularly where members of the public come into conflict with the government, that what underwrites and makes reconciliation impossible between the two sides is a
misunderstanding as to exactly what is being contested. Ideational, and therefore idealistic notions, frequently rule in the public discussion of governmentality and the obligations of office holders towards those members of the public who appoint them. Yet governance itself is not an institution entirely based upon the ideational plane. Nationhood, whatever form it takes (and at lower levels of politics we can substitute the council, shire, committee, etc.), is a practicality that stems from the unavoidable social conditions of many people living in groups and organising around the same finite resources. Nationhood should not to be confused with the idea of ‘societies,’ around which float notions of the social contract. The emergence of specific nations is separate to the idea of social development that is conveyed by contract theory. Nationhood does not lay any particular claims to a transhistorical position on human society, its organisational capacity or its needs. The idea of nationhood refers to specific instances of historical socio-cultural formation among large groups, and as such makes no claims as to a Universalist position of knowledge. While contract theory and the development of politics, as it is articulated here, both make reference to an idea of specific pragmatic orientations, the construct of ‘the nation’ is just the topmost surface of a depth ontology that breaks down into smaller and smaller communal groupings the more refined one attempts to make one’s pronouncements.

The very existence of nationhood is therefore a political exercise posed in terms of verbal and nonverbal discourses. Its orientation is towards the
achievement of certain pragmatic realities – in a fortunate nation, these involve the general safety, wellbeing, happiness and advancement of all citizens – and for better or worse, in the pursuit of these aims the governing structure of the nation frequently produces discursive effects on the ideational plane of action that, in a more naïve analysis, might be thought of in terms of dishonesty. Viewed from such a perspective, government does not have a directionality or intentionality as it is understood in the hagiography of journalism and popular discourse. In actuality, the entirety of the democratic system forms the political machine, in which case both sides of the political divide can be seen to hold equally valid and contributive functions since the very nature of their opposition forms the base upon which the notion of democracy and its self-evident truthfulness and impartiality are based. It is also equally true for members of government as for citizens of the wider culture that all agents are implicated in the functioning of political apparatuses, however diverse their individual behaviour or roles might appear to be.

Of course, situations certainly exist (indeed they are sadly numerous) where a similar governmental apparatus operate in view of a particular vested interest. At least in the early stages of its history, the Northern Ireland statelet submits to such allegations, as do numerous other countries in the world at present. However, even in instances where a privileged elite is clearly at work (as has been identified time and again among the Protestants of 1970s Northern Ireland), it is too reductive to understand the abuse of power as
simply an annexing of power by one group within the society for the purpose of maintaining benefits. While such an analysis certainly permits a degree of factors to be identified, and while in any individual circumstances we can identify in current events the clearly self-interested behaviour of politicians, in its materiality as a manifestation of the accord between the ideational and pragmatic planes, politics is a great deal more. The difficulty in embracing this immensity is that we are forced to leave behind an analysis of politics from a populist perspective, even though such examinations are frequently accurate, in favour of a semio-discursive method that is systemic in approach.

The ontology facilitated by a semio-discursive analysis permits the investigation of politics to expose the operation of various factors, and while government may be said to represent its people, and that as contributive members of the society over which such nations loom, we are duly culpable, this is not the end of the tale. If individual, self-possessed members of a nation are bound up in the country’s workings, it should come as no surprise. When we talk of government, it is as an abstraction. Regardless of the individual intentions of party leaders or heads of state, it is neither to their psychologies nor their moralities that we appeal in our analysis. As the sum total of words and actions performed within a particular material space, societies are also equally constructed by the communities, which are involved in the process of individual employments of meanings. The way in which communal deixis informs how nonverbal signs are linked to linguistic signifiers
can be expanded so that a somewhat identity-erasing, but nonetheless useful perspective appears.

In this view, in which the nation is a macro-community constituted by micro-communities, themselves in turn consisting of individual members, all of the meanings we produce contribute to the sum total of material and ideational effects with which we have to deal. If there are conflicts between individuals or communities and the methods of the nation, it is because the system of governance and the pragmatic and ideational effects upon which it relies never issue completely from any one community. Instead, the character of the nation stems, in a state of affairs that recalls Foucault’s description of enunciative modalities, from the sum of all possible relations permitted by the tallying of its individual subscribers. Except in instances of tyranny or ethnic cleansing, no one community will ever completely agree with the actions of those who serve in the place of rulers. Instead, the character of government is influenced by the ongoing and persistent debate, carried out in actions as much as specific utterances or marks, where different communal groupings negotiate individual conflicts with one another and make places for themselves in the world.

On the one hand such a perspective seems abstract and delimiting, since it takes away a focus upon individual disputes and moralities, which are attributable to nameable identities, and instead considers politics as a vast totality in which individual subjects seem to occupy no greater place than that of statements in a textual array. However, on the other hand, this perspective
reinforces the understanding of society as an inherently political archive, with individual discourses and the communal groupings from which they originate susceptible to an analysis that works at all times to expose the interests of social power. In such an arrangement, the actions of individuals are of less concern than the movements of elements within the political apparatus that threaten the whole with disequilibrium. This type of semio-discursive analysis is at once uncompromisingly abstract while also historico-culturally specific. It returns to the study of the social functioning of discourse a viewpoint in which the conflict of ideas and the central practices that harbour them are at the forefront of analysis.

A fourth consequence of the semio-discursive method furthers the idea of the ideational-pragmatic axis as a means for dissolving conflicts, in addition to that which has already been described (by separating out the mode of political action at work in the dynamic between words and actions), by this perspective offering a position from which complex conflicts may be untangled in a manner not normally easily accomplishable. It frequently turns out that in complicated situations, more than one issues lies at the heart of a conflictual dilemma. In such cases, it is often not the insoluble character of the individual disputes that poses the problem to the overall resolution of the conflict, but in fact the realisation that the inter-relatedness of the different elements to the dispute cannot be separated out and treated individually. The notion of ideational and pragmatic planes of action streamline the emancipation of such tangled threads by interrogating the artificial unity of
discourses and attempting to separate out what each discourse has at stake versus what each discourse has as its pragmatic goal.

Ignoring for a moment examples where the tension between the ideational and the pragmatic planes has been purposefully exaggerated (since such a situation is the primary focus of the semio-discursive analytic style addressed in the main text), in instances of massified conflict, each discourse, however much it seems to rely upon and mutually support the other discourses within the conflictual array, has distinct ideational and pragmatic effects. The identification of these points, which in every instance we now see as inescapable consequences of discursivity itself, individuate the actual discourses, in the process also distilling the character of their conflict and allowing the analyst to understand them in terms of what it is that they are in dispute, who it is that opposes them, how their intended gains are to the benefit or detriment of others, and so on. In such a manner, complex issues are reducible to a spread of individual conflicts which, however much they are related or concentrate on the same atemporal moment or historical conditions, are nevertheless thereafter treatable as solitary instances of conflict for the purposes of resolving the dispute and reconciling the parties involved.

The fifth way in which semio-discursive analysis is expandable is as a general heuristic for the interrogation of social conditions and the conflicts that they present. It has been frequently implied throughout this thesis that the semio-discursive mode of enquiry is intended to be applicable to more
than just an examination of the conditions of existence between prisoners and warders in the Maze prison at a certain time in the past. While representing an instance of conflict almost beyond comparison, the prison war of the republicans serves to show how subjects or groups of subjects can perform strategic substitutions in the pursuit of an emancipatory semiotic, and in so doing, gives this theoretical approach a substance around which to cohere. It is a matter of the central usefulness of the semio-discursive approach that it is applicable to other examples of conflict upon a sliding scale of magnitude. Semio-discursive analysis views the social relations of conflict as predicated upon an exchange of meanings occurring across an intersemiotic terrain. The seizure and manipulation of the diverse semiotic modes that this implies reveals the primary path towards the emancipatory potential of the overall framework.

The analysis of conflict is therefore able to operate at multiple levels. For subjects caught in a verbal argument, semio-discursive analysis offers an heuristic in which agonistic signifiers are not locked into a closed system, by virtue of the corporeality of signs. The incompatibility of different speaker’s interpretations is not itself reconcilable while the persons in conflict are satisfied to remain in dispute upon a verbal level. While it has been said that nonverbal signs, of which physical violence is the most extreme example, cut through the différend-like relations of linguistic conflicts, it is hardly appropriate nor encouraged that speakers revert to force the moment that their illocutions falter. Instead, the semio-discursive approach reveals, in
addition to a deep explication of how discourses themselves function – a view that includes the nurturing of identity as it issues from communal groupings – various other tactics for the prosecution of one’s case. As one example, the non-response of silence has been restored to its position as a valid answer to the assertoric claims of others.

Additionally, due to the elaboration of discourse as having effects that play out across an ideational-pragmatic divide, verbal performers can purposefully engage in linguistic contests with the express purpose of engendering certain effects in lieu of the attainment of the goals which would otherwise be their target in a verbal competition. Thus, just as Searle identifies in language games the analogy of chess and expands it to include various qualities relating to the proper performance of the game that have seemingly very little to do with ‘rules’ in the conventional sense, all of which are nonetheless contextual details that make the game nonsense unless they are adhered to, so is it possible that language users can purposefully exaggerate certain elements to undermine the nature of the contest itself. Arendt, for instance, identifies how the greatest enemy to authority is laughter, since it makes ridiculous the suppositions of respect upon which authority is based.

Even in incidences of linguistic conflict that are entirely, exclusively verbal – which do not offer a manipulation of the context in which the exchanged is carried out, such as in a written letter that, despite a small degree of its own materiality, does not permit much more than the words
themselves to represent the intentions and attitudes of its author – arguers always have recourse to ways of speaking and those various intonations that have previously been the outmost limits to what a verbocentric, semiotic analysis of the character of arguments could consider (tone, inflection, ‘scare quotes,’ intertextuality, etc., not to mention in actual exchanges between live speakers and hearers, the recourse to facial expression, body language and overt gestures, as well as various ‘genres’ of performance such as sarcasm, humility, monotony, and so on and so forth).

At another level, many disputes contain elements that are more characteristic of conflict as it has been described in terms of a broad array of verbal and nonverbal discourses, which include the potential for violence as well as the possibility for other diverse strategies, such as the refusal to enter into debate, peaceful protest, martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and the physical constriction but not the physical abuse of opponents (such as we find in the experience of imprisonment). Even the most mundane argument can break down into one person violently shaking the other as if it might aid in the transmission of ideas. It is this totality of strategic options that the semio-discursive theory of conflict has been designed to address, and failure to do so would represent the futility of the entire project. Such a diverse domain of conflict has been the focus of the argument presented thus far in the main text, and therefore doesn’t warrant further elaboration here except to point out that semio-discursive analysis is predicated upon the expectation of conflict manifesting across a wide variety of levels, and thus, as an approach, semio-
discursive analysis should always remain eminently suitable to the examination of conflict in any circumstances where the dispute goes beyond words, however discreetly or overtly.

From such a situation, thinking of conflict predominantly in terms of small groups of actors, it is a ‘natural’ extension to wonder about the applicability of the semio-discursive heuristic in relation to more large-scale problems of conflict. In so doing, we not only revisit various elements of the points already made in summing up, but it is also an opportunity to return to the level of social conflict in Northern Ireland that was deemed too vast to consider during our introduction to the material, but for which the narrowed focus on the events leading up to the 1981 hunger strikes was justified by virtue of the guarantee – a guarantee Habermas would view as only valid if it is redeemed, as I shall now attempt – that whatever the theory of conflict that the overall argument developed, it would be superposable upon even much larger examples. In this assurance was the seed, not only of a theory of conflict that is able to conceive of conflict in its rich totality, but one which recognises social conflicts as made up of lesser conflicts, as expansive as such conflicts are when they relate to the size of the social groups involved.

It would be remiss of me to formulate a theory of conflict able to embrace not only words but acts of violence, to then use specific events in Northern Ireland’s recent history as a means to elaborate this theory, and then turn away from the temptation to apply these findings to the matter of the Northern Ireland debate itself. Yet it is perhaps also the test of the
functionality of identifying conflictual discourses as having their effects upon ideational as well as pragmatic planes that such a methodology is applied directly to the overarching conflict, itself now somewhat transmuted, since the events of 1995 and the Good Friday Agreement, from its origins as a quasi-sectarian debate over the rights to ownership over a specific territory. There are various excellent works pertaining to the conflict of Northern Ireland as it occurs at the level of ideas about nationhood and governmentality. Proposing solutions to the impasse over territorialisation in Ireland’s north is in fact almost something close to a sport in some academic fields, even when contenders make suggestions not informed by any particular theoretical or ontological framework.

At either end of the semio-discursive analysis of conflict, there are certain elements that are integral to the functioning of the overall method. On the one side is the recognition that linguistic meanings are ultimately derived from bodily signifiers. At the other side we have the heuristic of the ideational-pragmatic planes of actions. Between these two ends there is the theory of discourse as practice, which shows that whether verbal or nonverbal, all social behaviour is discursive and yields to an analysis along Foucauldian lines, modified somewhat by the Ruthrofian perspective on nonverbal signs. The theory of discourse as practice is the middle-point in a continuity stretching between these two ends, so that the framework for the analysis of conflict proposed in semio-discursive theory is tacitly understood as triple-tiered, with the analysis of conflict as a semiotic level, upon which is based a
discursive level, and in turn upon which is based an ideational-material abstraction, extensible to social groups or society as a whole – the very same three-level relation we find in the understanding of society as individual subjects comprising communal groups which then are formed, by the ebb and flow of history, into particular ideational constructs such as nationhood.

The entire conflict of Northern Ireland, just as with any international conflict, is analysable according to these strata. The observation of social edifices as triple-tiered structures, and the extension of this belief into an analysis of conflict reflects back upon all the points that have been recently made: that conflicts are ultimately reducible to the level of the individual bodies through which they are carried out; that to varying degrees, what is always at stake in conflicts are the integrity and survival of bodies themselves, and that even when political conflicts seem grandiose and arch over the affairs of everyday men and women, just as the hunger strikers in our case study bore the brunt of their assertions in the cost to themselves and their lives, it is in the lives of individual men and women that the more extreme effects of political conflict are measured; and furthermore, this means that violence, to the self or to others, as the means by which bodies are put at risk, must always factor into our analysis of conflict however mundane some conflicts may appear.

Furthermore, we include the observation that in social struggles violence is frequently vilified, its political character denied, which then reflects upon the constructedness of everything in politics, thus eventually throwing
into disrepute the very ideas of nationhood and citizenship upon which many conflicts are based. We then also have the perspective of complex conflicts, of which it is safe to say that the Troubles are a prime example, being themselves made up of many smaller strands of conflict. Just as the one-time extensive focus in political critiques on the notion of ‘ideology’ has largely given way to the identification of myriad discourses of which ideologies may be said to be composed, so too do great conflicts separate down into individual strands, each of which are analysable as instances of specific conflict in their own right.

Such a perspective serves the analysis of the Troubles well. As was foreshadowed at the start of this work, the conflict in Northern Ireland is obscured by a great many details, not the least of them being the sheer mass of commentary upon the subject, but particularly a confusion resulting from many elements (many individual conflicts) encroaching upon the central issues of the conflict. In this sense, then, in order to be able to discuss the main phenomenon that underwrites the Troubles (not attributing to it the status of prime cause but acknowledging that, just as much as it is the vast confusion of individual conflicts that add up to ‘the Troubles,’ there are undeniably certain issues more in the centre of it than others), we must pare back the miscellaneous threads that, while tied to the central conditions of the conflict, do not themselves yield to an analysis that reveals elements crucial to the overall debate.
At the base of the Northern Ireland conflict is an archive within an archive of verbal and nonverbal performances, and these discourses have effects that circulate as ideas, often very seriously entrenched ones, and as material practices, themselves a rich domain including everything from sectarian marching to Molotov cocktail throwing, the suppression of republican flags and emblems to the formalised political white papers, such as the amendments to the Good Friday Agreement, that are even now propelling the northern statelet into a new era of conflict. If at the level of politics and the level of (para)military warfare, there is a conflict between sides, we can identify in the material existence of Northern Ireland itself (an existence that has effects both ideational and pragmatic) the object produced by the warring of discourses. The heart of conflict resolution – in which we understand resolution to mean the avoidance of a strict win-loss equation and the general achievement of both sides in what they desire – is thus reconciling the two distinct, constructed, ideational versions held by either side of the same material object (for, whereas political conflict produces discursive copies in the ideas of objects, pragmatic actions triggered by all sides are collaborative, having cumulative effects upon same material property).

Northern Ireland – for which unionists substitute the signifier ‘Ulster,’ and nationalists, the ‘Six Counties’ – is itself the object of the conflict; and as a material space that bears the marks of its contestation, it is somewhat impervious to the liberating transformations that we might desire to work upon
it. Likewise, it must be said that in all honesty, the competing ideas about the north of Ireland held by both sides are largely fixed and inflexible. There is very little that can be said or done to change how these specific ideas, Ulster and the Six Counties, function as identity-fixing constructs for Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, even while alternative solutions can be offered that, as a methodology or an heuristic for the resolution of conflict, theoretically serve as a means of emancipating the troubles, there is nothing in these formulations that can promise an alteration in the mindsets that cling to the conflict as it currently exists. It should be remembered that these ideas that surround the practical reality of the Northern Ireland state are central objects to the communities of the North, and they therefore hold an enormous status in discourse and are major anchors for the functioning of communal deixis and the individuation of identities.

Indeed, while there are ways in which the conflict over territory in Northern Ireland can be adjudicated to a successful conclusion, it may also be argued that there are few things more likely, in the reality of daily life, to affect the way in which the future of the conflict plays out than in the gradual passage of time and the acclimatisation of the members of each side to the privileges of the positions that they have won for themselves. It is an oft-neglected adage, and in fact a central tenet to an entirely different method of conflict resolution (one tied more to common sense practicality than philosophical exposition), that violence and martyrdom rarely flourish where individual needs are met, where no one goes hungry or has feelings of
uselessness reinforced, and where no families have to watch their members suffer, be slandered or discriminated against, oppressed by the servants of supposedly lawful authorities or by self-appointed individual representatives of other classes within the society. In this view – which is in fact still reducible to an ideational-pragmatic understanding, however tacit – the fixing of material problems and the openly redeemed guarantee of even-handedness can be said to salt the otherwise fertile ground in which revolutionary tendencies flourish.

While theoretically contiguous with everything that has been proposed by the semio-discursive theory of conflict, the resolution of the dispute over Northern Ireland is not a simple one. It requires that those in power and those who lend their affirmation to the various sides in the conflict recognise the constructedness of many of the ideas upon which they depend; and even though such idealisms are central to the identities of the different groupings, and are the substance around which those identities cohere, from an historical perspective, identities and the boundaries of communal groupings are never static, however long in human lifetimes the traditions and meanings that accompany communities seem to exist. As much as a resolution to the problems of Northern Ireland are posited upon actions to be taken at some time in the future, its successful operation requires a similarly forward-thinking mindset on behalf of those involved.

Once the artificial unity of the nation state has been deconstructed, we are left with a network of economic and cultural relations laid bare by our
social excavations. Given that the physical properties of the Northern border are unlikely to change, barring some unforeseen political developments among the governments of Éire or Great Britain, the only elements that are malleable in re-imagining the Northern Irish state are those economic and cultural institutions – i.e., on a societal level, those pragmatic and ideational effects that issue from the operation of the practical discourses of the nation – upon which the idea of the nation is based. Two approaches present themselves: either both sides can re-imagine the state in such ideational and performative terms as to make it compatible for all members, the approach largely present in recent articulations by Sinn Féin of its case, and as a result of which, a degree of compromise potentially straining plausibility is required; or alternatively, in order to retain a degree of their communal self-identification and the sense of separateness that has been at both times a boon and a curse in the past conflict, the various sides must separate out their idea of the state from their ideas about themselves, and thereby produce and nurture new practices that reinforce cultural separatism but remove from it forever the undercurrent of sectarianism upon which so much of everyday life in Northern Ireland has been based.

Under this approach, the practical considerations of the nation are separated from those elements crucial to communal identity. As Kearney notes, the moment that political rivals are taken out of the pond in which they thrive in Northern Ireland, and are required to address issues that relate more to the overarching needs of the state as a socio-economic entity – and these
confrontations between the ideational and pragmatic character of the state are frequent whenever northern MPs find themselves involved in debates regarding Northern Ireland’s place in the European Community, or in social and financial matters to do with their links to Britain and to Éire – rivalry itself falters as soon as their situation is connected to inextricably linked mutual needs and the underlying, insoluble reality of them as physical, biological occupants of the same fixed stretch of land in Ireland’s north-east.

In such a way, if conflict then flares, it has the same character as those rivalries that exist elsewhere, and which are typical in democratic arrangements between colleagues of affiliated sides. Although the democratic model of the nation state is not as unproblematic as common parlance would have us believe, and that upon close examination, the occasions where rebel groups from within democratic borders have risen up to question the authority of such formulations – many of these times by force of arms – it is the mode of governance currently typical to this historical world phase (despite the numerous counter-examples of successful monarchies, tribal rulings and socialist states, among others, as well as the fact that the Executive Council proposed by the Good Friday Agreement does not strictly accord with the parliamentary style of democracy either).

Once the structural or practical elements upon which the state is based are separated from the requirements of ideationally oriented discourses (themselves equally beholden to verbal and nonverbal statements), a means becomes possible whereby the element of conflict can be removed from
social relations. All sides to the Northern Ireland conflict already have cultural activities upon which their senses of themselves are based. The specific institutions of the republicans have already been briefly raised in the discussion of the Gaelic language as a cultural tradition facilitating a particular identity, and to this language we can add Gaelic sports associations, music and dance groups, historical associations, councils and discussion forums, etc. While these cultural forms have been advanced, as in the previous example, so as to facilitate the construction of otherness, reproducing an agonistic relation in a new way, such behaviour can also be blended with other cultural practices so as to do away with the conflictual character of such assertions altogether.

Somewhat greater difficulties exist for unionist identities, as has been footnoted earlier. The predication of a great deal of unionist identity upon the link with Britain does the general population a disservice. Given that this link is itself already in a state of attrition, it is crucially important, if the unionist identity is to be maintained at least in part, that it accommodates itself to the real conditions of the current political landscape as well as excising from its formations that which is its most virulent and destructive requirement, that Protestant and unionist identities are at all times posed in terms of opposition to Catholicism and militant republicanism (especially where the links between these other groupings is exaggerated and rendered conspiratorial, if not outright demonic, as is best captured in almost any of Ian Paisley’s remarks).
It has been observed in the past, by Kearney and Dixon as well as others, that the unionist people have a less rich supply of historico-cultural forms upon which to fall back once the link to Britain is severed. Whether or not that is the case (an equally strong argument can be made for the privileging of ‘traditional’ Irish cultural forms, such as in céili [dance] and ceol [music], as well as a host of others, which denigrate unionist traditions), such a reality cannot afford to stand as an obstacle in the path of unionist citizens in the future unless it is the situation, already observable, of unionism itself becoming obsolete as a contemporary identity among young people. If this is so, as much of the Troubles themselves have ever been, conflict resolution becomes a waiting game (echoing historical themes of ‘who can suffer most’) until such a time as new conditions emerge in which progress may be achieved. Given that unionism’s decline, projected into the future, might occur simultaneously to that rise, by dint of superior birth rate, of the Catholic population that hardcore loyalists have long feared, a picture of disturbing irony is revealed.

In an ideational sense, the fixedness of the national border is itself malleable even if the physical reality is unchanging. If we imagine that international links, particularly with Britain and Éire, could be pursued upon economic as well as cultural lines, it becomes possible to deconstruct the connection between the country and the idea of nationhood itself being tied to the solidity of borders. Thus in economics we can imagine joint authorities governing trade, security arrangements, rail and sea links, customs and
immigration, fishing in regional waters, cooperative coast guard agencies and so on. In cultural terms, there are various possibilities that present themselves once the deconstruction of national borders finds articulation through the practices of social life. The expansion of recreational, tourism, cultural and educational links would disseminate but also broaden the view of the different identities on display. A strengthening of the island-wide Catholic church at the same time as a resecuring of religious links between northern Protestants with practitioners from the mainland would surpass the reality of tangible borders in many ways, especially if practical steps such as an open border policy were instituted between all the member nations of the British Isles. Some kind of tripartite political ‘Statement of Kinship’ would also suitably reinforce these developments.

In one sense, such advice already occurs within regionalist arguments about the Northern Ireland predicament, where various writers propose that if Northern Ireland was at one and the same time more autonomous from Britain and yet more closely associated as a node in a network with the political groupings that surround it, the contentious issue of nationhood and thus national identity would become less sensitive. According to such logic, in this sort of arrangement, citizens of the North would have multiple levels upon which to focus their sense of selves, and a comparison is drawn between the federal model employed by Germany, maintaining its strong regional characteristics while facilitating cooperation in the overall project of government (industry, defence, agriculture, etc.). A similar comparison is also
made between the propensity of, for example, the French and Spanish to also think of themselves as ‘Europeans’ in light of their long ideational-pragmatic associations with the continent upon which they live – the idea of which, once interrogated, also reveals its own share of inconsistencies and false unities (the inclusion or exclusion of the British Isles as part of Europe, the arrangements with Scandinavia, Switzerland’s neutrality, the arbitrary borders drawn to the east, now deconstructing as more and more once-Soviet nations join the EU), just like any other territorial construction.

The only thing that is really left to address is the role of the ‘men of violence’ who, by the nature of their actions and affiliations, are more strongly linked to the past than any other groups. As agents of how things ‘should be,’ paramilitary groups are also defenders of a sometimes mythical past, since the unity for which they strive is often a reunification with past conditions (when Ireland was unified and free, for republicans, or when Britannia ruled supreme for loyalists). Their appeals to ‘tradition’ cut two ways. First, paramilitary groups require an access to the past in order to gain or claim legitimacy. However, on the other hand, they are then bound up, indebted to and constricted by these ties. By dint of their associations, the room for negotiation and compromise is made less flexible. Any deviation from tradition leaves the group open to cries of betrayal, which itself leads to the formation of splinter groups that, ironically, often rather than hampering progress, speed it by presenting themselves as a focus for the unified abhorrence of all other parties to the conflict. The invocation of tradition lays claim to history.
Although it is empowering, the moment the invoker tries to deviate from tradition’s path, he or she finds him or herself stuck fast.

In a way, one of the great difficulties in resolving the armed struggle is the connection made (mostly by the Catholic republican paramilitaries) between ending marginalisation and seeking a united Ireland. This is of course a confusion of separate issues. In the course of the armed struggle, insistence on Irish sovereignty has caused hundreds of deaths on both sides. Whereas equality (as a practical reality) is achievable, as much as Irish unity might be a key concern for many, Ruane and Todd also show that many people would also give up claims to Irish sovereignty if it would be possible to reach a peaceful solution to the conflict. Yet for the republican movement, Irish unity is not only enshrined in the Dublin Proclamation and cemented by the subsequent deaths of the Easter Uprising revolutionaries and the hundreds more resulting from the recent conflict, but the deaths of the 1981 Hunger Strikers, upon which so much of the last few decades’ rhetoric has been based, and as powerful as they have been as vindicative family gods, these linkages continue to bind paramilitary groups like the IRA to the achievement of a Free Ireland.

Even with the Irish government repealing Articles Two and Three of its constitution (and therefore giving up the enshrined claim to sovereign possession of all thirty-two counties of Éire), the general commitment towards achieving enfranchisement through the ending of partition remains. Just as many loyalist groups remain lost in the void produced by recent political shifts,
the same can be said for a significant proportion of physical force tradition republicans. To those who base their entire political philosophy upon the indefeasibility of Ireland, any sort of compromise is a defeat. However, the solution of Sinn Féin to this dilemma reinforces everything that has been said about the suitability of the semio-discursive theory of analysis, as well as the ability of this heuristic to extend into a general political critique. The relation is so great that its discussion actually deserves a much deeper analysis than can be given here, but nevertheless, a central observation bears the argument out.

Since 1981, under Adams, Sinn Féin has led its constituents towards a greater commitment to constitutional politics while at the same time distancing itself from the Irish Republican Army, of which, media commentators are always quick to note, Sinn Féin is the political wing. In all aspects of Sinn Féin’s journey towards contesting elections and sharing power, we can clearly identify the recurrence of an explicit understanding of politics as a tension between what is said and what is done. Sinn Féin remains committed to a Free Ireland, but they have made the previously unthinkable step of adopting the ‘principle of consent,’ which states that the unification of the North with the rest of Éire will only be acceptable after the democratic agreement of the majority of citizens of both countries. In the wake of this announcement, the rise of the ‘Real’ IRA shows the increasingly marginalised position of the physical force tradition in Ireland. As a splinter group of what was itself (the Provisional IRA) a splinter group (from the Official Ograigh na hÉireann), the
‘Real’ IRA suffers the diminution of support that such an equation implies.

In the study of the transformation of Sinn Féin since its re-emergence in 1981 as a political force, just as in the examination of the events leading up to the 1981 hunger strikes, it is possible see the semio-discursive analysis of social conflict manifest as historical elaborations of its central principles – not as metaphors for how a semio-discursive perspective divides up the world in order to be able to talk about conflict at all, but as real historical processes, themselves nothing more or less than an archive of the performative statements and actions that convey them, in which we can witness the tacit employment of politics as something more than a narrative, a science or an art. In these events, what we trace instead is a full realisation of the access to power granted and in fact produced by the understanding of the dynamic between ideas and the subsequent actions that may or may not corroborate them. A theory of the body is implicit but not explicit in these circumstances, but such a successful deployment of political force would not be possible without recognising the singular status of the body and its meanings and how these relate, not to an abstract sphere of intellectualisms, but to the material circumstances of the world and the subjects who dwell in it.
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