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Who Clamours For Attention - And Who Cares ? Hunger Strikes In France From 1972 To 1992*

Year 1996 was famous in France because of the protest of many undocumented migrants asking for their regularisation. Their protest movement climaxed with the break in of the police into the church Saint-Bernard⁶² on the 23rd of August. As I have shown in other works (Siméant, 1994, 1995), hunger strikes have been, since the early 70's, the main way of protesting for undocumented migrants. But of course, other social agents use this means, both in political and non political actions.

Hunger strike could, as other means of protest (marching, rioting, etc.) be considered through the «body technique» it implies (Mauss, 1993). But besides, and not like these, it doesn't rely and takes its power on showing strength or number⁶³, but on showing painful bodies⁶⁴. What can therefore reveal the study of such a means?

In fact considering hunger strikes raises different problems.

The first one is the lack of academic works about hunger strikes⁶⁵. Three reasons can be underlined. As far as political science is concerned, the fact

** I thank Dominique Memmi and Françoise De Barros for their stimulating reading. This paper draws heavily on my «L'efficacité politique des corps souffrants : le recours aux grèves de la faim en France», forthcoming in *Sociétés Contemporaines*, Paris, in late 1997.

62. Before this movement, as I have shown in a doctoral dissertation on undocumented migrants' mobilisations until 1992 in France (Siméant, 1995), the main undocumented migrants' movements were led in 1972-73, 1980 and 1991-1992. In terms of number, the 1996 movement is not the main movement of undocumented. The 1991-1992 included nearly 1500 persons on hunger strikes in more than 40 French towns, i.e. the highest number of hunger strikes ever observed in France outside of prisons. The movement of 1972-1973 saw the succession of about 30 collective hunger strikes in the whole country.

63. Michel Offerlé distinguishes three forms of publicising actions : number, science and virtue, even if he recognises the limits between them are not always clear (Offerlé : 1994, 112 ; Fillieule, 1996 : 39-40).

64. In hunger strikes, the question of showing pain is in fact as important as the risk of death : there is only one case of death from hunger strike outside of prisons in France.

65. There is only one book in French social sciences that is dedicated to hunger strikes *in general* (Collectif, 1984), and also a recent contribution to a collective work (Roux, 1997). Some psychoanalytic books sometimes deal with the topic, in France (Nassikas, 1990) or abroad (Orbach, 1986). James Healy conducts an ethical reflection about hunger strikes

that hunger strikes are considered as individual, and therefore non-political, actions whereas politics are understood as the ability to build collectiveness (I think on the contrary that this statement should be qualified, for it makes hunger strikes a quasi experimental phenomenon in order to think the distinction about collective and individual action : protests are not collective or individual *per se*, but some of them succeed in mobilising supports and getting collective whereas others don't). Moreover, these strikes are very often considered as pathologic, linked to the hysterical or anorexic psychology of the strikers. Lastly, hunger strikes are supposed to be rather unusual phenomena, if we except big protest movements as the one I was referring to. But this is not the case : hunger strikes in fact are a relatively routinized and frequent means of protest, as we will see.

A second obstacle lays is the difficulty to access empirical data on hunger strikes. as frequent but random phenomenons, hunger strikes are hard to study, from an ethnographical or statistical point of view.

Third problem : the hunger strike, as we will see further, is so full of connotations (just think about what I was saying about the qualification of the hunger striker as a «hysterical» person) that they sometimes lead to uncontrolled scientific metaphors or intellectual associations.

Fourth problem, which in fact (even if the sociology of social movements and collective tends to turn into an autonomous field) is a general sociological problem : how can one make the link between what people are and what people do (here people subjected to some forms of domination⁶⁶ on the one hand, and hunger strikes on the other hand), if we keep in mind that in the sociology of mobilisation, one can't totally infer the choice of the means of collective action (and even the choice of a means of

(Healy, 1984). The Anglo-Saxon literature about Irish hunger strikes is more substantial (Givant, 1982 ; Wilson, 1985 ; O'Maley, 1990), and, in France, one may note some medical doctoral (Mangeon, 1982 ; Carricano, 1987 ; Pons-Moureu, 1988) or criminology dissertations (Casile, 1989).

⁶⁶. Beyond the diversity of hunger strikes, one can't ignore the frequency of the association between minorities or people subjected to some forms of domination (women, national minorities and colonised people, migrants - undocumented or not -, prisoners and their spouses, isolate persons endangered by some administrative decisions) and a way if acting that seems to present some affinities with what they are, particularly in the way they consider their body and in the way their bodies are considered, just as if populations that are very often socially considered only as «biological bodies» engaged their body in protesting. It is not by chance that the two protest groups who began to use hunger strikes as a systematic political means in the beginning of the 20th century were the Irish nationalists and the British suffragettes. On the question of domination and particularly its embodiment, see Bourdieu (1976, 1977, 1990).

individual action, for hunger strikes can be individual or collective) from the social characteristics of the social agents who resort to it ?

Raising such a question brings one to consider the concept of "action repertoire" shaped by Tilly (1984). The interest of this concept in the study of collective action is to avoid the division between strategy and identity, for the question of repertoires, as a solidified set of action modes, suspends the interrogation on «interests». It brings to the fore the logics that inform the action process, and condenses dimensions of meaning as well as expressive (Siméant, 1993) or strategic dimensions. This concept solves many of the problems raised by collective action theorists. Because this notion is linked to a model in which the accumulated experience of actors combines with the strategies of authorities, making a limited set of actions more practical, attractive and frequent than many means which could in principle, serve the same interests (Tilly, 1984 : 99), it allows the observer not to consider the way people protest as transhistorical and detached from their different protagonists.

Nevertheless, using this concept sometimes brings one to consider the repertoire or the means in the repertoire as a set of such routinized and objectivized practices, that in the end the question of the link between a means of acting and the social actors who resort to it tends to be forgotten or eluded. If we could go on using the musical metaphor, the fact of knowing the repertoire of a given period does not always allow to understand why such musician chose such work in the repertoire. But as soon as one considers the link between one category of social actors and one means (undocumented immigrants and hunger strikes, workers and demonstrations, etc.), one can perceive how resorting to some means is linked to specific sets of meanings and social dispositions - and not only to lacks of resources and calculations (if anyway these two dimensions could be considered separately).

In the very case of hunger strikes, thinking about the meaning of showing painful bodies also enables to distinguish two, although often mixed, things : *the significance of showing painful bodies for the audience*, on one hand, *and the bodily and practical commitment to such a means by individuals who are likely to be more or less socially disposed to resorting to hunger strikes*. These two dimensions in fact are not equivalent.

Understanding hunger strikes therefore means understanding a form of violence that is never a simply physical violence (anyway there are always signs and meanings even in the most physical forms of violence). Hunger striking is deeply linked to the social identity of persons, because the body - and therefore the suffering body in a hunger strike - is by

definition linked to the social identity of protesters. One can in consequence expect that the more persons are *socially considered as bodies*, the more they will be disposed to commit themselves physically to protesting, first because the practical experience of their body will help to engage in the hunger strike, and second because body language is often the language chosen by those whose words have no social power. Hunger strikes seem to express an idea of the social value of persons (or rather the lack of there of) *as bodies* (destined to work an / or reproduction, or having no juridical status, such as undocumented immigrants⁶⁷).

But we also know that some hunger strikes are designed by persons who do not lack political and social resources such as moral authority or fame. It is therefore necessary to qualify the assumption of a link between resorting to a hunger strike and the individuals' dominated status. It seems that in such cases, the problem is not so much to restore a threatened or denied social identity, as to expose publicly the *singularity* of an «important» person and therefore the hazard they face death⁶⁸.

This economy of the «bodies in pain» is not only limited to the question of the virtue and of suffering but is also mediated by the question of the *number*. The study of hunger strikes proves that the more persons are considered as bodies and / or negligible quantities, or perceives themselves in this way in a given social game, the more they will tend, when they can, to protest in group, even by such an apparently individual means as the hunger strike.

By relying on a quantitative analysis of hunger strikes in France, I will try to isolate different kinds of links between hunger strikes and the social backgrounds of those who resort to it, focusing particularly on the very hunger strikes that underlie a presentation of the social identities of actors. Then I will study different forms of links between protesters and their bodies, likely to explain how hunger strikes can be efficient means

⁶⁷. One should consider the construction of a whole segment of the political and legal western order through the distinction of the physical body of the power holder on one hand and his mystical / political - and undying - body on the other hand (Kantorowicz, 1957 ; Paravicini Bagliani, 1997).

⁶⁸. Which brings about very different forms of hunger striking in fact if one considers their length and the physical commitment required. For instance, when the «Abbé Pierre» (a very famous priest) decided in the spring of 1991 to fast amongst undocumented migrants who where on a hunger strike, he «only» fasted three days but on the other hand he didn't even take his drugs against Alzheimer's disease, whereas the undocumented had been fasting for three weeks while drinking hot tea with sugar, which is the rather usual way of hunger striking for the undocumented.

considering some audiences more or less disposed to pay attention to such means.

(...)

1. About Some Dispositions And Identities Likely To Lead To Hunger Striking

The variety of the forms of hunger strikes deserves an analysis, yet to be made, of all its conditions of efficiency and possibility. More particularly, one can think that resorting to a hunger strike has to do with the changing conjunction of three different factors, with different temporalities : first the transformation of a means first used in private conflicts and then adapted to other situations⁶⁹, second the development of a new principle of legitimacy, the politics of mercy, based on the suffering of the protesters (Boltanski, 1993), and then the political investment of ascetic dispositions, furthered by certain kinds of socialisations⁷⁰. These three aspects can therefore lead to ways of resorting to body suffering which express very different social identities.

But whatever the hunger strikes and the kind of claims they support, they are inevitably linked to the protesters' resources, dispositions and know-hows, partly determined by specific situations and institutional belongings. These resources and dispositions are one of the effects, and at the same time one of the reasons, of their position in such or such part of the social space.

Therefore, if resorting to hunger strike, in the case of the least politicised and most individual conflicts, has so much to do with the social identity of protesters, it doesn't mean that political hunger strikes do not engage the social identity of protesters too ; but they do through more complex mediations.

Such a statement leads one to qualify the «culturalist hypothesis» according to which some social groups, through a culture that would be specific to them, would be more disposed to believe in the efficiency of hunger strikes and therefore to "practice" them. In fact, such an analysis often seem

⁶⁹. Eugen Weber (1983) explains a comparable process in the 19th century about an other means, the "charivari", first practised as a purely «social» means sanctioning private deviancies, and then extended to more political claims before disappearing.

⁷⁰. On an interesting reflexion about this problem during the French Revolution, see Outram (1989).

convincing in the *political uses*⁷¹ of hunger strikes : we know that IRA activists' hunger strikes are linked to a culture of sacrifice that sweeps through Irish history. In a similar way, the Ghandian fast has clearly to do with the way fasting is an encouraged practice in Hinduism.

But if some «cultural» aspects seem to explain the appropriation and the success of hunger strikes, the currently generalised resort to hunger strikes leads one to relativize some culturalist hypotheses which only seem to bring an answer to the question. For instance, I was once tempted to believe that practising Ramadan (Muslim fasting) was likely to explain the important resort to hunger strike by undocumented migrants from North Africa and Turkey. But then I noticed that hunger strike is a classical means of all undocumented migrants in the world, *whatever their religion or «culture»* (Zairians are not Muslims, neither are Chicanos or Haitians in refugee camps in the south of the US...). Insofar most of religions in the world to all intents and purposes praise the "control" of the body if not the fast, one could always find «cultural reasons» accounting for the resort to hunger strikes.

So we won't consider here the strikers' culture as a set of collective representations *leading* to hunger strike, but the more precise question, observed at the individuals' level, of their socialisation, which makes them likely to resort to hunger strikes, regardless of the way they talk about or justify this practice.

One can therefore make the assumption that the religious socialisation of some activists is likely to favour such a means of protest, particularly when it entails ascetic dispositions, as was the case with Iranian Shiite students in the 70s. An equivalent of such religious socialisation could be found in the fascination for suffering of many non-violent Christian - and particularly catholic- activists in France. My empirical research has proved the importance of the population of left-wing Christians in the individual resort to hunger strikes in France, even when these strikes only bear on industrial disputes. One could take the example of many hunger strikes in the social and medical sector where many left-wing Christians work. One could also take the example of this ancient hunger striker, who shows how political, religious and professional socialisations and ascetic dispositions are mixed at the same time :

Before contacting him, we just had read in the papers that Pierre had gone on a hunger strike to protest sanctions

⁷¹. All claims can virtually be politicized, but some are considered as political without having to explain they should be.

against trade unionists who had participated in the lockey of the managers of a power station. At the beginning of the interview, Pierre is reluctant to talk, as we've had his contact through his previous trade union, the CGT (The communist linked trade union), of whom he's not a member anymore, for he was accused of being not radical enough. In fact, although he was a CGT representative during the hunger strike, and has been a car-carrying member of this trade union for 10 years, he's not a typical CGT man, which will be the surprise of the interview, for we had contacted him in order to find a kind of work hunger strike that would not «as usual» be a left-wing Christian profile. Pierre was born in 1948, which, as he explains means he was 20 during the social movement of May 68. He was brought up in a Catholic family and comes from Brittany, a part of France where Catholicism prevails. He seems to want to talk about his «stubborn nature», which led his parents to send him to a catholic boarding school to be «knocked» and where he revolted against religious institutions. His father was a worker and his mother an employee. At the end of the 60s, he was employed as a worker in the north suburbs of Paris and was a militant in the extreme left-wing, particularly active in teaching immigrants to read and write. He also fought against slums in the suburbs. He was close to the PSU⁷², he belonged to the CFDT⁷³ and then was expelled from it for «leftism» at the beginning of the 70s. He obtained a job at this state-owned power station in 1976 and then joined the CGT, the dominant trade union there. when asked a question about possible physical after-effects of his hunger strike, he explains that he was used to controlling his body by long mountain hikes where he sometimes didn't eat for 15 hours. (Interview, June, 2, 1997).

Other forms of socialisation, and particularly the secondary socialisation that some total institutions perform, can in the same way encourage to

⁷². The "Parti Socialiste Unifié" was a small party which was one of the most important «think tanks» of the non-communist left in the 70s. It was composed of both left wing Christians and non Christian leftists.

⁷³. The CFDT stemmed from Christian trade unionism. It very quickly became the big non communist left reformist trade union in France, whereas the CFTC (from which the CFDT was a split) kept its Christian definition.

resort to hunger strikes. For instance, members of the Basque independence movement have very often a previous experience of being in prison, which has familiarised them with a whole set of «violence against the self», often the only ones that can be used in the carceral universe. So it is not by chance that hunger striking in prison often goes with a whole set of other body-degradation techniques (outside of forms of prison marking such as tattooing, one can think of very common practices of mutilation, or in an even more extreme level the case of the «dirty campaign» led by Irish political prisoners in 1981⁷⁴). This is also a striking aspect with undocumented migrants⁷⁵ : many of them have a previous experience of prison, either in the country they originate from when they are asylum seekers or political activists (Turks in particular), or in France in the case of migrants protesting deportation after having been in jail for certain offences.

Moreover, and as far as the specifically political socialisation of the protesters is concerned, one can very often observe, among the strikers, and even in the case of individual hunger strikes, the possession of a certain number of political know-hows and resources ; if they are not always likely to favour resorting to body suffering, they are nevertheless indicative of a «voice» (Hirschman, 1970) propension linked to the individuals' high idea of his social function. Beyond the three persons interviewed who had resorted to hunger strikes in industrial disputes, all had political know-how⁷⁶, and all needed in the interview to recall a certain number of conflicts they had, all their life long, with political, religious or even professional institutions. Even the poorest of the three persons, a woman born into a working class family with no superior education and who had learnt to be a social nurse on the job, was a town councillor for 15 years, the two others having had more important political experiences. Each of them had a job that allowed them to magnify the cause they defended. Indissolubly, they magnified their status and the way they presented themselves as *independent from organisations and sensitive to person-to-person*

⁷⁴. They refused to wear their jail uniforms anymore and dressed themselves only with their blankets ; then they did not to wash anymore, and covered the walls of their cells with their excrements.

⁷⁵. Even when they haven't been to jail, the undocumented migrants' relationship to a certain number of state and para-state institutions is likely to favour resorting to hunger strikes (Siméant, 1993).

⁷⁶. Jacques Roux observes similar features about these hunger strikers he qualifies as «especially ordinary» individuals, between amateur and professionals (Roux, 1997 : 133).

*relationships*⁷⁷. One of the interviewed persons works in the social-medical sector and talks many times about her selflessness and compassion for the abandoned old people she has to care for, the other, a former trade union official, says he is in retrospect rather critical about the political beliefs he once had, for they led to «totalitarianism» ; he was expelled from CFDT in the 70s and from CGT in the 90s. The last one, the daughter of Spanish republicans, works in a mutualist-owned newspaper with a militant connotation and defines herself as «always having been revolted against injustice». Before the hunger strike she did, she wore a yellow star at work to claim her opposition to the way the new management treated her. What is very striking too is that the last two persons have not enjoyed the support of the main trade union at their work (the CGT), whereas they were members or even official of it (the latter having already proved his independence towards the trade-union federation however).

In these three cases, chosen for their very typical nature, the primary and secondary socialisation (in terms of profession, of relations to religion, politics, institutions and «voice») of individuals had consequently a lot to do with resorting to hunger strike.

Yet, even if we don't take into account the belonging to some social groups (health and welfare sector, intellectual petty-bourgeoisie) more particularly disposed to resort to a form of protest that favours the use of moral categories and the encouragement of subjectivity, all individuals don't find themselves in *situations* that are likely to lead to a hunger strike. It seems then that resorting to a hunger-strike can be explained by an identity shaping interaction between the individual and the institution⁷⁸, individuals find themselves all the more in some given institutional and professional situations since they have the dispositions that permit it, whereas at the same time such dispositions and situations will favour some practices - and if the cases rises, some forms of protest - rather than others. For instance, the moral responsibility the manager of a centre for young handicapped persons or a militant documentary filmmaker attribute to themselves helps their ability to question negative institutional decisions that harm them, whereas at the same time such negative decisions very often occur because of the irritation such an attitude provokes, as such an

⁷⁷. It is expressed by the way the three insist on the personalised side of the conflict they had against an institution : a «petty chief», a «liquidator», a «perverse»...

⁷⁸. In this regard, we agree in many respects with the book Maryvonne David-Jougneau (1989) dedicated to the conflicting interactions between isolated individuals and institutions, which also deals, even if it's not her central concern, with several cases of hunger strikes.

attitude consists in refusing to consider work relationships as only work relationships.

It can be understood then that the opposition between «strategist» reasoning (hunger strike is the means of protest of those who have no other means) and culturalist or individuals' socialisation-centred reasonings has no ground to be maintained⁷⁹ : it is because people are what they socially are, in a given social position that already presupposes a certain kind of socialisation, that they may be faced to specific strategic choices.

Considering resorting to hunger strikes through the question of individual identities, produced by certain kinds of socialisation and particularly of an interaction process between individuals and institutions, therefore allows one to think about the efficiency of hunger strikes through the related question of the *audiences*, and particularly some audiences more or less willing to pay attention to hunger strikes.

2. Hunger Strikers Facing «Well Disposed» Audiences

That hunger strike in the twentieth century may be an often efficient means makes it necessary to understand the reason of this efficiency, i.e. the ability of hunger strikes to move a certain number of witnesses more or less *disposed to be moved*. It seems that there is here a way of considering the relationship people have to the body not directly through the bodies but through *what the image of suffering bodies, and particularly some individuals conceived as suffering bodies even regardless of the question of hunger strikes (migrants being here the exemplary case of it), can call up to the mind of audiences more or less likely to pay attention to hunger strikes*. The relationship of the strikers to their audience must therefore be considered as one of the means of the efficiency of hunger strikes, which are not only linked to the emergence of democracy and the mass-media⁸⁰.

⁷⁹. Hunger striking can be considered as a solution at the same time because one could hardly stop the economic production process (because not enjoying the support of big organisations and / or being economically replaceable as being an undocumented migrant), but also for instance because working in professions with no strong strikes traditions (medical social sector) or in which physical strength is another way of expressing the identity of protesters, as it happens in the contrary in the workers' world (Sommier, 1996).

⁸⁰. How could one express otherwise Trotskyist activists resorting to hunger strikes in the goulag in the 30s ? Moreover, one often forgets the «audience» is not an indistinct block and that hunger strikers have very often a very clear idea of *what will likely move a certain number of persons likely to transmit a claim towards a wider audience through the mass*

We will consider this question through two aspects. The first is the one of hunger strikes in industrial conflicts, which is the most evident case of an adequacy between the strikers and their audience's dispositions. The second one deals with more political hunger strikes, which raises the question of the sensitivity of certain militants, and especially left-wing militants, to the resort to hunger strikes. I will consider this case through the example of undocumented migrants' hunger strikes on which I have more particularly worked.

a. Some cases of hunger strikes in industrial conflicts

When the very first audience of the hunger strikers is their professional environment, the fact that some audiences are socially more or less disposed to pay attention to hunger strikes can't be distinguished from the socialisation of the strikers themselves : by definition the social characteristics of the audience and the strikers are fairly close. It is therefore not very strange that one finds so many hunger strikes in the health, welfare and education sector, for its population is sensitive to such a means and at the same time likely to produce potential hunger strikers, able to de-singularize and generalise decisions that concerns them. Moreover, hunger strikers are aware of the double way in which hunger strikes adjust both, to their own situations («I had no choice») and to their audience («I knew it would make things change»). It allows for a rather instrumental relationship to hunger striking, considered as a strategic action, and this in two regards. First a hunger strike very often occurs after all the possible means to solve problems (contacting mass-media, classical strike, trying to negotiate with the incriminated authority, letters, etc.) have been exhausted. Second the hunger striker *knows* that the hunger strike is going to «move» and menace the adversary, at the same time because of the efficiency of the publicization of suffering and also because it allows to make someone out as the guilty party and to mobilise external supports :

«We succeeded in having FR3 [a TV channel], we had worked on the cameraman, he filmed me from above, I looked very unhappy, whereas the boss was filmed from below (...) we were very organised, we had Le Monde, TVs... (...) The advantage of hunger striking is that you take quickly the initiative, the guy you face looks like a bastard, it was very clear.» (Interview, June, 2, 1997)

media. Such a way of relying on third parties from the resourceless populations has been underlined by Lipsky (1970).

and also because of the peculiar sensitivity to such a means of some professional communities :

«So the staff was striking to obtain the withdrawal of the sanctions against the 10 who had been dismissed, the pressure got heavier (...) our room for manoeuvre was small, with the staff we said we had to save what could be saved if not the job, I very well knew I would be sacrificed, we fought, we made a press conference, all the 10 were reinstated but me (...) We all met one evening and asked ourselves what are we doing ? The idea came nearly... We had used all the classical means (...) They had been reinstated but I was leaving and we knew that after me it would be them, they would do with these women [the staff in fact had 9 women and one man] the same things they had done with me and therefore the staff was very worried (...) It was even simpler [to dismiss the rest of the staff] if I was not here anymore (...) So we meet in this café wondering what we should do, and either I stopped and I left the pals coping alone with the direction or either we would go on but how ? (...) We said unanimously we have to go we have to go on a hunger strike it's the only solution, so I said of course if there's a hunger strike I will participate (...) we are in a health environment [a mutualist magazine] and our arguments have no effect (...) Our means is on one side visibility and on the other side in this health environment playing this card... all the same they are sensitive left-wing persons (...) women on a hunger strike (...) we played this desperate trump as an ultimate but not hopeless means, a means that would frighten them as a personal issue (...)» (Interview, June, 3, 1997)

Of course, this «discursive awareness» (Giddens, 1987), of the efficiency of resorting to hunger strike is not observed in all social and work environments. It rather characterises intellectual and health-welfare, middle-class, and petty-bourgeoisie. However, even when it is not consciously perceived and expressed, the efficiency of resorting to hunger strikes seems to appear as something obvious in the chaotic career between some individuals and institutions. Even the interviewed persons who comes from lower classes (employee, workers' daughter), and probably the one in the three who was least a strategist as she did her strike and talked about it (confessing innocently having eaten during her strike), explained as if it

was evident that «one day (she) got up and decided to go on a hunger strike». Even this woman would finally find an audience willing to join their ordinary indignation to her case, just as if resorting to hunger strike was like a practical adaptation to an anticipated audience. And this former hunger striker explains the way the people who lived near the institution she was striking against came to support her, to use their showers, she also comments on the many visits of anonymous persons with whom she's still in contact, some of them having in the past also gone on hunger strikes against other administrative and institutional decisions likely to disrupt or even destroy identities (such as a «little lady who had been «considered» as a sect», a «very nice sir who had lost the custody of his son»). This informal association of the indignations, which very often occurs between ex-hunger strikers, seems to be an exemplary expression of this way «common people» broken by heartless machines⁸¹ are likely to protest.

b. An audience willing to be moved by hunger strikes : the case of undocumented migrants' hunger strikes

However, it is probably in political matters that the perception of the efficiency of resorting to hunger strike is most theorised about. The denunciation of resorting to hunger strike as a «petty bourgeois» means in communist and some Leninist left-wing milieus at the beginning of the 70s (as the undocumented migrants' mobilisations resorted a lot to it), has to be considered seriously, for this denunciation at the same time is linked to the practical sociology of political actors, it nearly sounds as a jealous «perception» of how efficient this means could be and therefore devalued more classical means such as strikes or demonstrations. In fact, the way hunger strikes are considered fairly clearly reveals the cleavage between communist and non-communist left in the 70s in France.

It is not by chance that the academic interest for bodies, very often linked to the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1975) appears so often as an equivalent of the fascination for suffering bodies, and bodies in general, if a whole part of the non-communist left, both Christian and non Christian, which committed itself in the post-68 movements. As I have shown in another work (Siméant, 1995), this fascination is linked to three things. The first one is the relationship some French activists have with social suffering

⁸¹. It is probably not by chance that this woman says, when asked a question about her political preferences, that she only imagined voting for the Front National (the extreme-right French party) if she had to vote once again in her life.

(theirs and the others). The second one is more precisely linked, as far as undocumented migrants are concerned, to the representation of the immigrant as a «super proletariat», suffering, silent workforce body, which refers at the same time to the objective position of many immigrants in the economy, but also to the representation many support militants make themselves from migrants. The third one is linked to the state production and attribution of identities (Noiriel, 1991). Resorting to hunger strike in the case of undocumented migrants doesn't mean their supports *drive* undocumented migrants to go on hunger strikes, but more precisely that undocumented migrants know and *perceive* how much using such a means will mobilise, on all senses, their support.

This reference to a suffering and theatricalised body is thus omnipresent in undocumented migrants' hunger strikes. For their French supports, not only does it have to do with a fascination for suffering but also with a praising of subjectivity in politics, a praising of individuals that the Leninist tendency would in the contrary consider as a typically «hysterical» and petty-bourgeois deviancy. It is not surprising therefore that undocumented migrants' hunger strikes were nearly always accompanied by «agit-prop» theatre. From the very beginning of the 70s, undocumented migrants' mobilisations were always associated to theatre plays dealing with the topic of the immigrants' suffering, as happened again in the 1996 movement. In this very case, one of the very supports of the «sans-papiers de Saint-Bernard» was the stage director Ariane Mnouchkine, in the Cartoucherie de Vincennes.

This sensitivity takes two different forms which correspond rather well to these two different parts of the non-communist left in France, i.e. intellectual and atheistic petty-bourgeoisie on one side, and left-wing Christians on the other side. Nothing better expresses this very spontaneist and indeed avant-garde sensitivity of some French activists to bodies in general and hunger strikes in particular, than this piece of interview of a French activist who took part in the mobilisations of undocumented Mauritians, and talks about his former theatre experience :

«Before 68 (...) I was in theatre, not street theatre and not popular theatre either (...), and the big question that passionated us at that time was the work on bodies. And it's true that thinking about the body, and then finding myself supporting people who didn't eat, who used their bodies as their main media for protesting, was not by chance. And this work on the body, this reflection on the work on bodies as a

means of expression, not a doctor- or producer-used body, it was something like the actor as a king.» (Interview, December, 11th, 1994).

The real affinity that links resorting to, or supporting, hunger strikes on one side, and many intellectual and public sector middle class activists' dispositions, has therefore to be underlined. However a slight difference has to be pointed out between this spontaneist, body-liking and individualistic sensitivity on one side, which would rather characterise atheistic intellectual petty-bourgeoisie, and on the other side an analogous but more sympathetic and suffering-fascinated sensitivity, which would more characterise left-wing Christians. We will take as an example of this sensitivity this activist who had been campaigning for undocumented migrants for more than twenty years, and who describes the two hunger strikes he had supported in his life as major times in his life, as moments of brotherhood, commitment and «being here». Such an embodiment of commitment is here reinforced by the fact of supports and strikers not speaking the same language : and therefore, the only way of being here with silent immigrants is to commit oneself physically, by sheer presence :

«And this is the most beautiful Christmas I've ever had in my life [The first hunger strike occurred during the Christmas holiday in 1972]. As I was saying before, I think that events of such a magnitude and extent probably don't happen so often in a man's life. And miracle, the day after Christmas day, in the early afternoon, the official decision of the government arrived : they [the hunger strikers] were not to be deported anymore. We won the case. (...) During the strike [of 1992], I was there nearly all day long, I'm retired, it didn't bother me. (And what did you do all day long ?) I was by their side. And they appreciated it. Talking was difficult, for very few spoke French. We were trying to learn a little bit of alphabet , I don't know... I... I was there. That was all. I was welcoming people who were showing up.» (Interview, October, 17th, 1992.)

If the case of the undocumented migrants' supports is the most striking example of the way resorting to hunger strikes fits with the social dispositions of audiences and protesters' social dispositions, this could nevertheless also be considered in other situations.

This of course does not exclude that the encounter between some audiences and some hunger strikers may not occur or may occur badly : the case of

failing hunger strikes, barely, ironically or not paid attention to, proves on the contrary that a minimum of adequation is necessary between the audiences' and strikers' social dispositions, so that a good reception of hunger strikes can happen.

As a conclusion, I would like to insist on the importance of not considering the identities shown in hunger strikes in an overly essentialist way, whereas some characters very often observed in hunger strikes could lead to such a position. I refer in fact to the idea that hunger strikes would be a typically feminine or «hysterical» means⁸². Such an assertion underlines the idea that the passiveness of hunger striking and the resort to the nearly domestic - or anyway considered as such - register of the *blackmail*, are supposedly feminine features, by opposition to the world of «real» violence, «real politics» and possible negotiation (whereas hunger strikes rather bear on non-negotiable issues - or rather are presented as such for they deal with the very social identity of protesters).

If we don't subscribe to such an essentialist position, it is however true that the very heavy connotation associated to this means of protest, shows anyway that hunger strikes probably correspond to a state of the *social* - and therefore, among other things, *gender* - division of political work, which leads the dominated to have the only opportunity of protesting in the register that is assigned to them, a domestic and often considered as «moral» register, which in opposition shows the means they wouldn't be allowed to use.

ESTIMATING THE FORMS OF RESORTING TO HUNGER STRIKE IN FRANCE⁸³ : METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

⁸². Georges Duby (1984) considers as a possible origin of hunger strikes the way in which young women who were obliged to marry someone they didn't like protested by not eating anymore in the Middle Ages. Hunger strikes are a typical means in prisons, which are single-sex universes. English suffragettes initiate resorting to hunger strikes, etc. And we could multiply such examples.

⁸³. Notwithstanding jails for the quantitative side of the analysis. Even if I can reasonably hope that the press coverage of hunger strikes outside of jails has something to do with reality (which was confirmed in the cases of the undocumented migrants by the parallel consultation of activists' archives), this hope has to be abandoned about jail hunger strikes. Moreover, it was not possible to obtain further information about hunger strikes in jail. It therefore made preferable to abandon what wouldn't have allowed any comparison with the other hunger strikes, on which I had no more information.

The qualitative content of this paper is based on the direct observation of two undocumented migrants' hunger strikes at the beginning of year 1992 and on 78 interviews⁸⁴, of which 18 were conducted with French or foreign activists who had resorted to hunger strikes. The other interviews helped to understand the perception of the hunger strikes by their audience. The quantitative content is based on press data coding. I used the analytical index of the daily newspaper *Le Monde*, for it was the only source whose «hunger strike» entry permitted to fit two important criteria : first a relative exhaustiveness, second a bigger stability of this newspaper compared to others⁸⁵. In order to check the reliability of the index, I checked issues which, according to the index, contained no references to any hunger strike. Once the hunger strikes were found in the index, I coded the corresponding articles in detail, according to certain features such as the number of hunger strikers, the place where hunger strikes happened, the kind of claims, etc. This source raises many methodological issues. I didn't mean to repeat the journalistic qualifications but to give a general survey of an empirical phenomenon on which I have nearly no data. Unlike Olivier Fillieule's study of demonstrations (which are more frequent phenomena than hunger strikes), and which relies on police sources (Fillieule, 1997), it would have been impossible with the same police sources to achieve sufficient exhaustiveness about hunger strikes, for it would have meant an enormous counting in many police stations which wouldn't have concerned the whole country anyway. A way of turning these problems into an advantage consists in taking into account the limits of this source into a more general reflection about which causes a protest to be taken into account or not. The corpus of 547 hunger strikes can't therefore pretend to represent all the hunger strikes that occurred in France during this period. However, it

⁸⁴. 75 between April 1992 and December 1994 (in the context of my doctoral dissertation dedicated to undocumented migrants' mobilisations), and 3 more interviews in May/June 1997 with persons having resorted to hunger strikes in other situations.

⁸⁵. I had first made a counting of hunger strikes in the communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, which is today one of the most attentive newspapers concerning hunger strikes and small popular claims. For years 1989-1992, *L'Humanité*, gives a number of hunger strikes which is really higher than the number given by *Le Monde*. But the extension of the research period would have raised an insoluble problem if I had taken this newspaper : there are more similarities, concerning the sensitivity to some claims, between what was *Le Monde* in 1970 and what it is today than between what was *L'Humanité* at the beginning of the 70s (when its political line, as well as the one of the communist party, was hostile to a whole set of means of protest considered as «petty-bourgeois») and what it is today. Moreover, I couldn't think of using only one newspaper issue per week, as did some social movements researchers (Cf. Tilly, Kriesi, Duyvendak), for the comparison required a high number of hunger strikes, which wouldn't have been obtained in this way.

allows to distinguish different kinds of hunger strikes, and the way some of their features vary together or not (all hunger strikers don't strike in group or in a church, etc.). *My aim was not so much to estimate the real number of hunger strikes in France between 1970 and 1992 as to produce a sufficiently sizeable corpus that would allow to study correlations between some forms of hunger strikes on a large scale.* Sociological and statistical representativeness are not equivalent, and not exactly obtaining the second one doesn't mean the first one is abandoned : the aim is here to *examine different kinds of hunger strikes in order to understand what elements link some forms of hunger striking, individuals and situations, rather than obtaining a counting of hunger strikes* (even if this quantifying attempt is interesting too).

There is another aspect likely to limit the bias inherent in such a corpus : the reasons that make journalists talk or not about hunger strikes, what makes the newsworthy quality of a hunger strike deals in fact with three different aspects that don't always work simultaneously and therefore let hope one that the corpus is rather exhaustive anyway.

The first thing which causes a hunger strike to be paid attention to by the journalists is the newsworthiness of the claim, even when it is not a «big cause» : a claim that could be considered as strictly individual (someone trying to get his money back for instance) can sometimes be considered as newsworthy if the journalist has the utility, the ability or the will to requalify or generalise this affair into a «society problem» (related to slums, farmers or small shopkeepers for instance...).

The second thing is linked to the fame and social resources of the hunger striker, which can therefore lead to a good repercussion of the strike and of the claim, even when the latter is not so general.

Third, *hunger strikes*, even with non consideration about the claim, can be viewed as newsworthy, for they are relatively disruptive events in daily life, and include a growing risk, as time goes by, of death or at least grave after-effects.

It is consequently rather frequent that hunger strikers of whom one could think they were not likely to be paid attention to in the newspapers (for instance because of their possible mental disturbance, of the perceived disproportion between the object of their claiming and their lack of fame) are referred to by journalists. As these three elements don't vary the same way, they are likely to partly compensate each other. What confirms this hypothesis is that some journalists address claims to which they are sensitive, even when they know in fact that the hunger strike is not really dangerous for the strikers, as they consider their role is not to check if the

strikers «really do» a hunger strike if the problem they raise is, according to the journalists, an «important» one.

A way of bypassing the problems raised by the fact the qualification of the persons and claimings was not mine but the journalists' was to code as «political» the causes that made the biggest generalisations (even if all claimings anyway, even the most private ones, have to desingularize the way they protest (Boltanski & alii, 1984)). For instance, we find in the «political» category the following cases : Basque activists claiming independence, Senegalese students protesting police repression in their country, claims for a change of the status of conscientious objectors, supporting Jews in USSR, protesting against the Indo-Pakistani war...

Another way of limiting the effects of journalistic qualifications was on one hand to code the persons who made a hunger strike and on the other hand to code what they were striking about, in order further to combine the reasoning on the two aspects.

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