



CONNOLLY'S HISTORY AND HIS SOCIALISM



Connolly politically unexpurgated

By Sean Matgamna

This is the fifth instalment on "Connolly's historiography" in our long-running series on Connolly: workersliberty.org/connolly

What did James Connolly contribute to politics in Ireland? A powerful myth, knitting together socialism and pre-1652 Gaelic-Irish society, defining socialism as the revival on a higher level of ancient Gaelic common property. Part of that myth was the idea that militant nationalism led to socialism and so was a way, perhaps, to reach the Protestant workers of north-east Ireland.

Connolly created a story. A myth, in the sense that Gramsci says Machiavelli created a myth in his account of "The Prince": "a 'live' work, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a 'myth'." A living story, combining feeling and advocacy and accounts of history.

Not long after he moved from Scotland to Ireland in mid 1896, Connolly published a three part article on Ireland in the *Labour Leader*, the Independent Labour Party weekly edited by Keir Hardie. All three parts had one title: Ireland for the Irish. It was a play on an idea pushed by The Clarion and Robert Blatchford: "Britain for the British" (also the title of a popular book by Blatchford), which in turn was a play on the popular cry: India for the Indians. Blatchford, who ran *The Clarion* newspaper and the Clarion Cycling Clubs, was a deeply chauvinist Englishman who led a strand of British socialism and semi-socialism into backing Britain in the Boer war.

Of course, "Ireland for the Irish" was

different from "Britain for the British". With small variations, Connolly's text would be republished repeatedly in subsequent decades as a pamphlet, *Erin's Hope: The End And The Means*. The last edition seen through the press by Connolly himself would come out in 1909, and its account would be reprinted in *Labour In Irish History* (1910, but serialised earlier in *Workers' Republic*) and in *The Reconquest of Ireland* (1915).

Here Connolly set out his basic idea of Irish history and of the roots, as he conceived of them, of future socialism contained in that history. It was the history of only one of the two peoples inhabiting the island. In later versions Connolly wove in the Protestant Irish, but the basic story was that of the Gaelic Irish alone. In *The Reconquest of Ireland* Connolly [made out](#) that the Protestant settlers from Scotland were, or mostly, ne'er-do-wells and criminals; if true, it would mean that they broke the unjust laws, and would scarcely weigh with socialists.

Ireland communist until the 1650s

Connolly found in Gaelic-Irish history a form of agrarian communism that had refused to go down before the invading "English" social system for 500 years after the Norman-English conquest, and had survived in Ireland until 250 years before the date at which Connolly was writing (and in the highlands of Scotland until 1745). In Ireland, capitalism was therefore an alien social system, the "English system", imposed along with foreign conquest in the 1640s.

The long, long conflict between conquerors and conquered had not been a mere political conflict, but one between Irish common tribal property in land, destroyed by the Conquest, and English feudal individual ownership in land. Connolly dated the change^[1]

from one to the other to the Cromwellian conquest at the end of the 1640s and beginning of the 1650s, and the dispersal of the Irish tribes.

The socialist revolution would be the reconquest of Ireland, i.e. the restoration of ancient tribal ownership on a higher level. There are books of history and books embodying historical myth. In *Erin's Hope: The New Evangel*, in *Labour In Irish History*, in *The Reconquest of Ireland*, and in passing in articles, Connolly proposed the rooting of socialism and of Irish nationalism in a mythical version of Irish history.

The working class and socialism

That drive to root socialism in Irish history was there from the very beginning of Connolly's activity in Ireland. His advocacy of this version of socialism in Ireland presupposed his nationalism, a nationalism that excluded (though he said it did not) the proletariat of modern advanced industry in Ireland, in the north-east.

That raised another problem for a Marxist. Marxism called itself scientific socialism. For that Marxism, socialism was not only a good idea; it was being created by capitalism, which produced, wrote Frederick Engels, "the invading socialist society". Industry was being amalgamated, reorganised, by capitalist society; so, in America, was agriculture. So was the working class, which would have to make the transition from capitalism to socialism, which in Connolly's understanding then it would do by seizing industry and thereafter running it.

That meant for Marxists that socialism could only come out of advanced capitalism and that it could not come from pre-capitalist societies or underdeveloped capitalism. The Socialist International looked to Germany, which had modern industry and a mass socialist party.

Meaning a break with that view, Antonio Gramsci hailed the Russian Revolution of 1917 as "the Revolution against 'Capital'". It wasn't so. What the Bolsheviks did in 1917 was prove that the workers could take power in conditions which were not ripe for socialism. The workers took power from their base of being concentrated in giant factories, dotted within a sea of backward agriculture. (Serfdom had been abolished only in 1861.)

None of the Bolsheviks thought that this victory could be a socialist revolution as distinct from a workers' revolution: the society was painfully unripe for socialism. They thought their revolution doomed unless it more or less immediately spread to societies they saw as ripe for socialism, Germany for example. But the spread was blocked by the right wing of German social democracy, whose politics during the World War Connolly had shared, though he also praised Karl Liebknecht, the right wing's enemy and future victim. The idea of building socialism in backward Russia alone did not emerge from Stalin and Bukharin until late in 1924.

Unless the revolution spread, "all the old crap" – Marx's words, cited by Trotsky in reference to Russia in the 1930s – would come back and prevail – privileges, development of classes, all that was in pre-socialist society. As indeed it did in Russia.

Ireland, linked to British capitalism, was – but only via that link – "ripe" for socialism. An Ireland considered as an independent economy, relying only on itself, was in no way ripe for socialism. Still less so an Ireland whose industrialised segment had been partitioned out.

Worse. It was plain from the resistance to all-Ireland Home Rule in 1912-14 (and in 1893, or in 1886) that independent Ireland would not include the industrial north-east. In fact, Irish independence in isolation and self-con-

tained socialism in Ireland were simply not possible in any Marxist conception of socialism. Connolly himself had understood that at some points.

Connolly gave Ireland not the working-class socialism he had advocated all his life, outside Ireland at least, and sometimes advocated even after late August 1914, when he, an erstwhile opponent of all imperialisms, became an advocate and apologist for one of the great imperialisms, Germany – not that working-class socialism, but a populism that was many things to many people.

In his *Labour in Irish History* Connolly did not work with a Marxist definition of the working class distinct from the peasantry. He amalgamated workers and peasants as “labour”, the labouring people, including the peasants, who had of course been oppressed and treated monstrously through the history Connolly dealt with.

The connection to militarism

Connolly had belonged to a socialist group, the De Leonites, who made an a-historical fetish out of Marx’s time-and-circumstances-bound idea that peaceful socialist change might be possible in Britain or in the USA, which at that time had no heavy European-style state machine. Connolly moved all the way from that to Blanquist insurrection in Dublin, an insurrection based not primarily on social circumstances, but on the readiness and equipment of the insurrectionists. He travelled to the far end of IRB insurrectionism.

That insurrectionist turn, too, became part of the hybrid myth, along with the nationalism at its centre. It morphed into the idea that militant nationalism and militarism would somehow become socialism and thus reach the Protestant working class. For generations of revolutionaries, that would be their guide. Connolly became a wild – socialistic – card in the Republican and nationalist martyrology.

James Connolly contributed to Irish history by being military commander of the 1916 Rising and joining the canon of Irish republicanism by his death before a British Army firing squad on the morning of 12 May 1916. That gave the socialists a hero and a martyr to claim – in the iconography of Irish nationalism. Sean O’Casey, first secretary of the Irish Citizen Army, would sum it up like this: “Irish Labour lost a Leader. A well-known author has declared that Connolly was the first martyr for Irish Socialism; but Connolly was no more an Irish Socialist martyr than Robert Emmett, P H Pearse, or Theobald Wolfe Tone”.

The truth about Irish clan society

Connolly believed that until the mid-17th century Cromwellian conquests Ireland had had, not the primitive communism known everywhere at the dawn of history, but a worked-out system, enshrined in laws. He identified historical Gaelic tribalism with an idealised ver-

sion of that pre-history.

There are two questions about Connolly’s history: Is it true? Does what is true lead where he thinks it leads?

Connolly’s history shows gross illusions in Irish clan society. The clans – many, many hundreds of them – had collective ownership of their land. But that Irish society was extremely aristocratic and bound by tradition. Every class from slaves to royals existed in that society. In the period, before 1500, for instance, when a hybridisation of the Irish-Norman-English nobility had occurred, the English took to the Irish custom of coyne and livery. They billeted their soldiers on the Irish farmers. In France later this custom was called dragooning (dragonnades). It was used to break intransigent Jews and Protestants after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Serfdom was formally abolished in Ireland only in 1604 or 1605, long after it had ceased in England. The abolition was used as a device against Hugh O’Neill by the new English masters of Ireland, to curb his growing control of the North.

The idea of Irish tribalism, or of the often out-of-use laws that had reflected it, as socialism, was sheer nonsense, and harmful nonsense in advocating socialism to the Protestant workers of the north-east.

But Connolly maintained:

“The Irish system was thus on a par with those conceptions of social rights and duties which we find the ruling classes today denouncing so fiercely as ‘Socialistic’. It was apparently inspired by the democratic principle that property was intended to serve the people, and not by the principle so universally acted upon today, viz., that the people have no other function in existing than to be the bond-slaves of those who by force or by fraud have managed to possess themselves of property”.

“They did not, indeed, regard all forms of productive property as belonging to the community; but when we remember that the land alone was at that time of importance, all other forms of property being insignificant by comparison, we see that they were as Socialistic as the industrial development of their time would allow”.

Whatever the legalities it went by, the description was a gross falsification of ancient Gaelic society. At the Norman invasion, the Gaelic clansman had the choice of becoming serfs.

Connolly and the landowning peasants

In 1896 Connolly was writing eleven years after the Ashbourne Act had pushed on the redistribution of Ireland’s land by way of the state putting up the cost of buying out the landlords, a principle set out at the time of the Disestablishment Act in 1869. The British ruling class was engaged in making an Irish revolution from above. From the social point of view, the winning of Dublin government in 1921-22 would be an afterthought. Ireland was being

not so much “reconquered” as surrendered piecemeal, under duress, under the political control of the old conquerors, and to a segment of the population, the farmers.

There was no reason, when Connolly wrote, to think that this surrender of landownership was not what the Irish tenants wanted. Quite the opposite. On this, one of Connolly’s mentors, John Leslie, had quoted Charles J Kickham, the one-time “Head Centre” of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and a novelist and songwriter (“She Lived Beside the Anner”). Asked whether the Irish people were attached to the land, Kickham replied: “They would go to hell for it”. He was probably not exaggerating.

Even if Connolly’s account of distant Irish history were faultless, it is not clear what bearing that could have on this reality of his time or on a very powerful trend that would end only with the complete redistribution of the land as the private property of peasant owners. By the time of Connolly’s return to Ireland from the USA in 1910, the redistribution had essentially already happened.

Connolly’s political conclusions were more akin to, say, the Russian populism of the 1870s and after, or the Bulgarian populists led by Stamboliyski in the 20th century, than to anything commonly found in Marxism in the 1890s. Connolly was aware of this, and he knew that he was ignoring the generally accepted Marxist ideas of what was involved in the land redistribution.

“Those who believe in the strange theory that the progress of the human race has been in some strange manner pre-ordained to pass through the various stages of communism, chattel-slavery, feudalism and wage-slavery as a preparation for the higher ordered

society of the future, who teach that since society has walked along certain lines it might not under altered circumstances have reached the same high goal along totally different lines, will of course regard the Irish adherence to clan ownership at such a comparatively recent date as the seventeenth century as an evidence of retarded economic development, and therefore a real hindrance to progress. But the sympathetic student of history, who believes in the possibility of a people by political intuition anticipating the lessons afterwards revealed to them in the sad school of experience, will be more inclined to join with the ardent Irish patriot in his lavish expressions of admiration for the sagacity of his Celtic forefathers who foreshadowed in the democratic organisation of the Irish clan the more perfect organisation of the society of the future”.

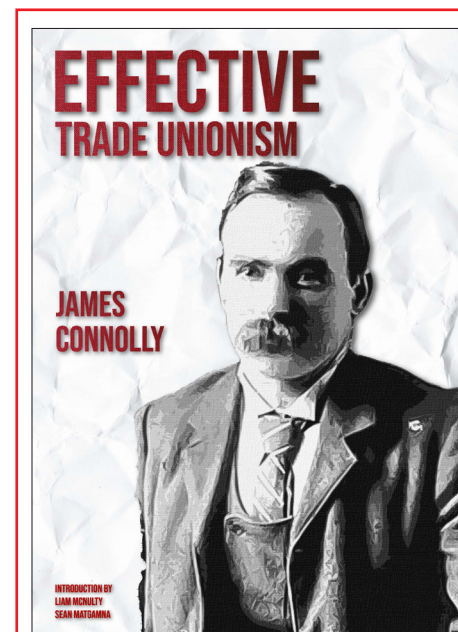
This was Connolly at his worst. And it was sheer nonsense.

An agrarian socialism?

For Connolly, Irish socialism was not something that would come out of advanced capitalism, not even by the roundabout route which Marx sketched, of peasant revolution in Ireland triggering workers’ revolution in Britain, which in turn would open the way for socialism in Ireland. For Connolly, socialism was a way by which Ireland could largely avoid capitalism. This is the relevance of Connolly’s account of Ireland’s past in this, its first outing; it is the model of the Irish agrarian-socialist future. Connolly may have been influenced by the Russian populists, some of whom – the Social Revolutionaries – were then members of the Socialist International. In any case, his arguments paralleled theirs.

“There are two things necessary for the maintenance of life in Ireland, as in every other country. They are land and labour. Possessed of these two essentials, the human race has at its command all the factors requisite for the wellbeing of the species. From the earth labour extracts alike its foods and the mineral wealth with which it contrives to construct and adorn its habitations and prepare its raiment. Therefore the possession of the soil is everywhere the first requisite of life. Granting this as a proposition too self-evident to need any elaborate demonstration, we at once arrive at the conclusion that since the soil is so necessary to our existence the first care of every well-regulated community ought to be to preserve the use of that soil and the right to freely share in its fruits to every member of the community, present or prospective, born or unborn. The moment when the land of a country passes from the care of the community as a public trust, and from being the common property of the entire people becomes the private property of individuals, marks the beginning of slavery for that people and of oppression for that country”.

Ignoring the implications for capitalist development of the peasant landown-



Aiming to replace capitalism with socialism, James Connolly’s organising and ideas evolved considerably. One idea he clung to from the turn of the century to his death was industrial unionism, workers’ solidarity across grades and trades, and sympathetic strikes. That is how he saw his work in the Irish Transport Union. 64 pages £5

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ership which already existed and was spreading, and of the elements of Irish capitalism (mainly small-scale capitalism) that already dominated even the nationalist parts of the island, Connolly argued that capitalist industry could not develop in Ireland. Capitalism was a foreign plant that could not root itself in the country. Irish independence was one country alone, and not or only marginally part of a world division of labour.

Evidently, Connolly's socialism was an agrarian socialism; his idea of a future Ireland, an independent agrarian republic. His ideal seems to be the ideal which De Valera was to be much mocked for enunciating: a world of homesteads from which would come "athletic youths and comely maidens".

How, if say Britain was showing chances of a higher life, would the athletic youths and comely maidens be got to choose to live in the agrarian republic? Vast thousands of the town and country labourers of independent Ireland flocked to jobs in England, when they became available, and in the British Army. Some of them sang a parody of the armed forces song, as I heard my father sing it:

*Bless them all, bless them all
The long and the short and the tall.
Bless De Valera and Sean McEntee
Who gave us black bread and a half
ounce of tea
So we're saying goodbye to them all
And back to the boys we won't crawl.*

Capitalist industry impossible in Ireland?

"To establish industry successfully today in any country requires at least two things, neither of which Ireland possesses and one of which she can never possess. The first is the possession of the wherewithal to purchase machinery and raw material for the equipment of her factories, and the second is customers to purchase the goods when they are manufactured... Tell me how poor Ireland, exhausted and drained of her life-blood at every pore, with a population almost wholly agricultural and unused to mechanical pursuits, is to establish new factories, and where she is to find the customers to keep them going. She cannot create new markets. This world is only limited after all, and the nations of Europe are pushing their way into its remote corners so rapidly that in a few years time, at most, the entire world will have been exhausted as a market for their wares."

Not only was the industrialisation of Ireland impossible; it was undesirable. It would be "to cover the green fields of Erin with huge, ugly factories, with chimneys belching forth volumes of poisonous smoke and coating the island with a sooty desolation". Moreover: "The agriculture of Ireland can no longer compete with the scientifically equipped farmers of America..." Connolly makes trends within the world economy, the intensity of competition, the difficulties of late-industrialising countries, into absolutes.

Plainly Connolly had in mind a very primitive and minimalist independent Ireland. The only desirable option was agrarian production for use, and the trading by the government of the surplus farm produce to gain industrial commodities. "The only hope that now remains is to abandon competition altogether as a rule of life, to organise agriculture as a public service under the control of the boards of management elected by the agricultural population and responsible to them and to the nation at large, and with all the mechanical and scientific aids to agriculture the entire resources of the nation can place at their disposal. Let the produce of the Irish soil go first to feed the Irish people, and, after a sufficient store has been retained to ensure of that being accomplished, let the surplus be exchanged with other countries in return for those manufactured goods Ireland needs but does not herself produce".

Ignoring the trend before his eyes, Connolly saw the future of Ireland as agriculture on socially-owned land.

"The days of small farms, like small capitalists, are gone, and wherever they are found today they find it impossible to compete with the improved machinery and mammoth farms of America and Australia". Connolly considers peasant proprietary to be "even if practicable... of very questionable justice. To make the land of a country the property of a class is to my mind equally iniquitous whether that class number a few hundreds of a few hundred thousands... The private ownership of land by the landlord class is an injustice to the whole community, but the creation of a peasant proprietary would only tend to stereotype and consecrate that

injustice..." He called "for the nationalisation of land in the hands of an Irish state".

Class struggle on the land

He was quite clear about the class struggle in the countryside. "The capitalist farmer, driven to the wall by the stress of competition, seeks in vain to maintain his foothold in life by an unceasing struggle with the lord of the soil on one hand and a ruthless oppression of the labourer on the other..."

But he fulminated against big landlords as if they were the only owners, and as if their ownership alone were an outrage to all the others. "The moment when the land of a country passes from the care of the community as a public trust, and from being the common property of the entire people becomes the private property of individuals, marks the beginning of slavery for that people and of oppression for that country. With the land held as the property of individuals there are immediately created two antagonistic classes in society, one holding the land and demanding from the other a rent to live upon it..."

Home Rule was no solution. It would only "create in Ireland a host of place-hunters and Government officials, who, secure in the enjoyment of a good income themselves, would have always acted as a barrier between the people and their oppressors... Home Rule is simply a mockery of Irish national aspirations". And a republic would not be.

Irish revolution and British revolution

Connolly argued for separation of Ireland from Britain on grounds of "race" (which word in that context carried a different meaning then from now). "The national and racial characteristics of the English and Irish people are different, their political history and traditions are antagonistic, the economical development of the one is not on a par with the other, and, finally, although they have been in the closest contact for 700 years yet the Celtic Irishman is today as much of an insoluble problem to even the most friendly of the English as on the day when the two countries were first joined in unholy wedlock".

Here Connolly was explicitly nationalist. He immediately went on to make a bow in the direction of the old ideas of Marx and the Social Democratic Federation that an agrarian revolution in Ireland would impact mightily on England.

"No Irish revolutionist worth his salt would refuse to lend a hand to the Social Democracy of England in the effort to uproot the social system of which the British Empire is the crown and apex, and in like manner no English Social Democrat fails to realise clearly that the crash which would betoken the fall of the ruling classes in Ireland would sound the tocsin for the revolt of the disinherited in England"

But Connolly had changed Marx's

idea considerably. The proposition was now that a socialist revolution in Ireland would impact greatly on the working class of England. Of course; but everything concrete and specific in Marx's idea of the linkage of Irish and British politics had been lost.

For Marx, the linkage hinged on the landlords in Ireland being the same class as in Britain, often the same people, and the interpenetration of the landlord class with the bourgeoisie. The revolution that Ireland could experience would be a bourgeois revolution. It was surely ripe for nothing more. If the British working class took power in society, then Ireland might very well be an underdeveloped agrarian appendage of British socialism, freely deciding for itself. Connolly substituted an Irish agrarian-socialist revolution for Marx's Irish bourgeois revolution; and he depicted that agrarian-socialist revolution as self-sufficient and nation-bound, at least at first.

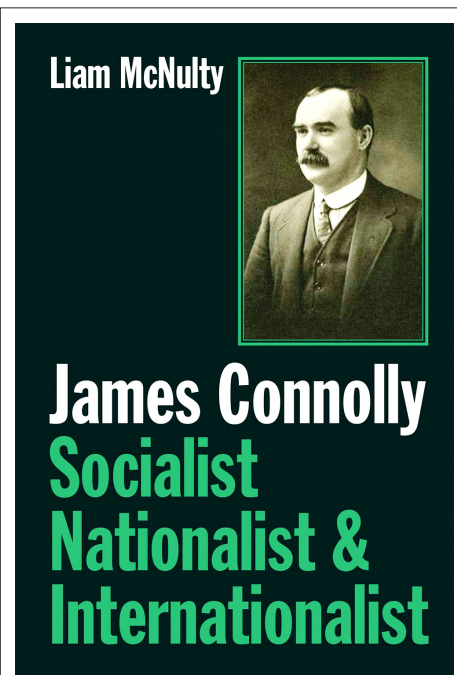
Appealing to the past of a people, and to a people's alleged traditions, Connolly conflated workers with farmers, and socialism with national liberation. That was more than an attempt to root working-class socialism in nourishing ground. It was the collapsing of what is specific to Marxist socialism into a nationalist populism. In later generations, Connolly's ideas and myths would merge with the idea that extreme militarism and nationalism – with Connolly the supposed model for it – would be viable socialist activity.

In his writings, Connolly did relate to the proletariat specifically, appealed to it, tried to organise it. On the level of his basic programmatic ideas, however, he constructed a mechanism – industrialisation closed, small farmers unviable, etc. – which, derived from making absolutes of existing economic trends, made what he did not want impossible. And, to bring about what he did want, he appealed to the traditions and "political intuition" of a (part of a) people. He combined mechanical-materialist Marxism with an idealist view of history.

Adding in the working class?

In the 1909 edition of *Erin's Hope*, Connolly's last, he made a substantial addition: "But on whom devolves the task of achieving that downfall of the ruling classes in Ireland? On the Irish people. But who are the Irish people? Is it the dividend-hunting capitalist with the phraseology of patriotism on his lips and the spoil wrung from sweated Irish toilers in his pockets; is it the scheming lawyer – most immoral of all classes; is it the slum landlord who denounces rack-renting in the country and practises it in the towns; is it any one of these sections who today dominate Irish politics? Or is it not rather the Irish Working Class -the only secure foundation on which a free nation can be reared..."

This was a clear stress and focus on the working class. But how was it achieved? By not mentioning the peasantry after having invoked "the



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Reason in Revolt

Irish people"! By 1909 that class of small bourgeois had made additional giant strides in the direction of running most of Ireland. In 1896 Connolly had ignored the burgeoning tendency towards peasant proprietary; now he "ignored" the peasantry.

When he could, plausibly or otherwise, put forward the goal of an agrarian socialist republic, the populist implications of this and of his nationalism were not so glaring. Now Connolly's nationalism, and the equation of the workers with "the people" and with their ancient "political intuition", could only, given the political realities of Ireland, lead to a conflation of the working class and the nation, not to speak of a disregard for that majority of the industrial working class, in the north-east, whose national identity was different. Connolly's idea that "the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland; the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour", lent itself to nationalist-populist subordination of the labour to the dominant nationalist (bourgeois) forces in Ireland far more than to the relationship Connolly aimed for.

Connolly's wish to make the cause of labour the cause of Ireland was another way of wishing to make the labour movement what the struggle on the land had been to the cause of Ireland; and it was a complete failure, except for those who wanted to subordinate labour and socialism to nationalism.

That whole formulation, the equation of the cause of labour and the cause of Ireland, was achieved at the cost of an internationalist approach to the majority of the Irish working class, the north-east Ulster "other Irish". Connolly, of course, included them in his scheme, but he wanted them in on terms – adherence to an identity they did not feel – which ruled out their acceptance.

Connolly had imprisoned himself in a finely spun cocoon of historical myth and fantasy that was too narrow to accommodate the actually existing Irish working class. Instead of devising a democratic program that would allow the different segments of the working class on the island, and on the two islands, to unite despite their differences of identity (as they did during the 1913-14 Dublin Labour War), Connolly locked the prospects of an all-island workers' socialist movement within the aspirations of only one of the two peoples on the island. Given the low ratio of proletarians to others in "his segment" of the country's population, this cut off the big battalions of the working

class. Instead of appealing to the Protestants to do justice by the Catholics, Connolly effectively appealed to them to abnegate their own identity and espouse another in a fashion without historical precedent.

Summing up

A detailed study of Connolly's ideas of their evolution would add nuancing and qualifications to the above, but for our purpose this will suffice. It is time to sum up.

Connolly's exposition of ancient Irish history ignored far too much, and tried to identify the whole history with an idea of a supposed Celtic communism the last remnants of which had disappeared, even by Connolly's own account, two and a half centuries earlier. He interpreted the whole history of Ireland since the Anglo-Norman conquest as the struggle of two ideas. "The Irish question has, in fact, a much deeper source than a mere difference of opinion on forms of government. Its real origin and inner meaning lay in the circumstance that the two opposing nations held fundamentally *different ideas* upon the vital question of property in land" (emphasis added).

In his argument Connolly began with a "materialist" picture of a society and made of it an idealist account of history. Far too much of real history was faded out – colonisation, the savage land-hunger of the Elizabethan adventurers, the wars of extermination which were the pioneering model for what the English settlers in America would do to the American Indians, the conflicts of religion and the European military alliances of the wars of religion...

If surviving Irish tribal practice and Bardic jurisprudence were factors here, making assimilation of the Irish more difficult, they were factors of declining importance over the ages of Anglo-Norman and English domination. And they had long disappeared. Engels thought he saw ideas from clan-based society still alive among Irish peasants in 1891, but in any case the great social struggles of the Irish masses had long been battles to become sole owners of private patches of Ireland's land.

Engels' observations, which must have influenced Connolly, spoke of both Irish and Scots highlanders as having preserved attitudes rooted in tribalism. Certainly Scotland had, in its Celtic highlands, such relations a hundred years after Connolly dates their elimination in Ireland. But by 1896 they had gone.

Connolly had no practical idea for

renewing the relations of the past to which he looked, except an appeal to national sentiment. a national sentiment which for the peasant majority was very tightly amalgamated with the sentiment that they, the Catholics, were the nation, and that their unchallenged private ownership of their own bit of Ireland was the very cause of Ireland. The cause of Ireland is the cause of the farmers; the cause of the farmers in the cause of Ireland, might justly have been carried as a slogan by the Home Rule party and the various agrarianists.

Connolly sometimes referred to the fact that the cause of the farmers had become the cause of the Catholic Irish bourgeoisie, and aspired to make the cause of Ireland now the cause of the workers. He never managed that, and it was a fantastic idea, all things considered.

Perhaps Connolly was trying to "get back behind" then-current Irish nationalism and to sap it of the energy he wanted to see applied to a socialist-nationalist-populist program? In fact, he made a cardinal and archetypal error. Trotsky defined that error thus: "We must never play with slogans that are not revolutionary by their own content but that can play a quite different role according to the political conjuncture, the relationship of forces, etc...". The Unionist upper layers in Ireland, Sir Samuel Ferguson and Standish O'Grady for example, made an attempt to create a sort of cultural equivalent in Ireland of "Tory democracy" in England, reviving Irish folklore and romance and poetry, believing that they could go back behind current realities and find common ground with the Catholic peasantry that regarded them only as foreign or foreign-imposed robbers. The nascent radical-nationalist movement appropriated that work of cultural archaeology and used it for its own purposes. Something very like that happened with Connolly too.

What Connolly's ideas could mean was shown after his death, when socialism gained great popularity in Ireland and Connolly's "Gaelic past" socialism was merged with all sorts of archaisms appealing to ancient Ireland and with Catholic social teaching critical of capitalism (and utterly condemnatory of working-class socialism) to create a variant of what Marx and Engels had defined as reactionary socialism – social criticism of existing capitalist society, combined with a desire to find a solution in a past period, real or imaginary. Thomas Carlyle had influenced

some of the Young Ireland people in the 1840s, perhaps John Mitchel, who in turn maybe influenced the young James Connolly.

That was a recoil from industrial capitalism to a vague hankering for an imaginary idealised past; its only use was to confuse and help neutralise the forces that saw socialism at the other end of capitalist development and who wanted to go not backwards but forwards, utilising the achievements of capitalism and the criticism of the reactionary socialists.

If Connolly had lived, he most likely would have fought against that tendency; dead, his ideas were easily co-opted as an important part of it. The book on Irish history circulated by British and American communists around 1920 was a backward Catholic-socialist [screed](#) by an English Catholic turned Irish, Aodh de Blácam. □

[1] Why Connolly put the date of the transition in Ireland in the 1650s is obviously the Cromwellian Conquest, but Ireland was finally conquered and unified in 1603. The final conquest, redistribution, and destruction of the Irish clan system was after the Battle of Aughrim in 1691. The Scottish clans lasted until after Culloden in 1746. In 1745 Scottish highlanders in rebellion had moved south as far as Preston. Cole and Postgate described it as the invasion of capitalist England by feudalism. □

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