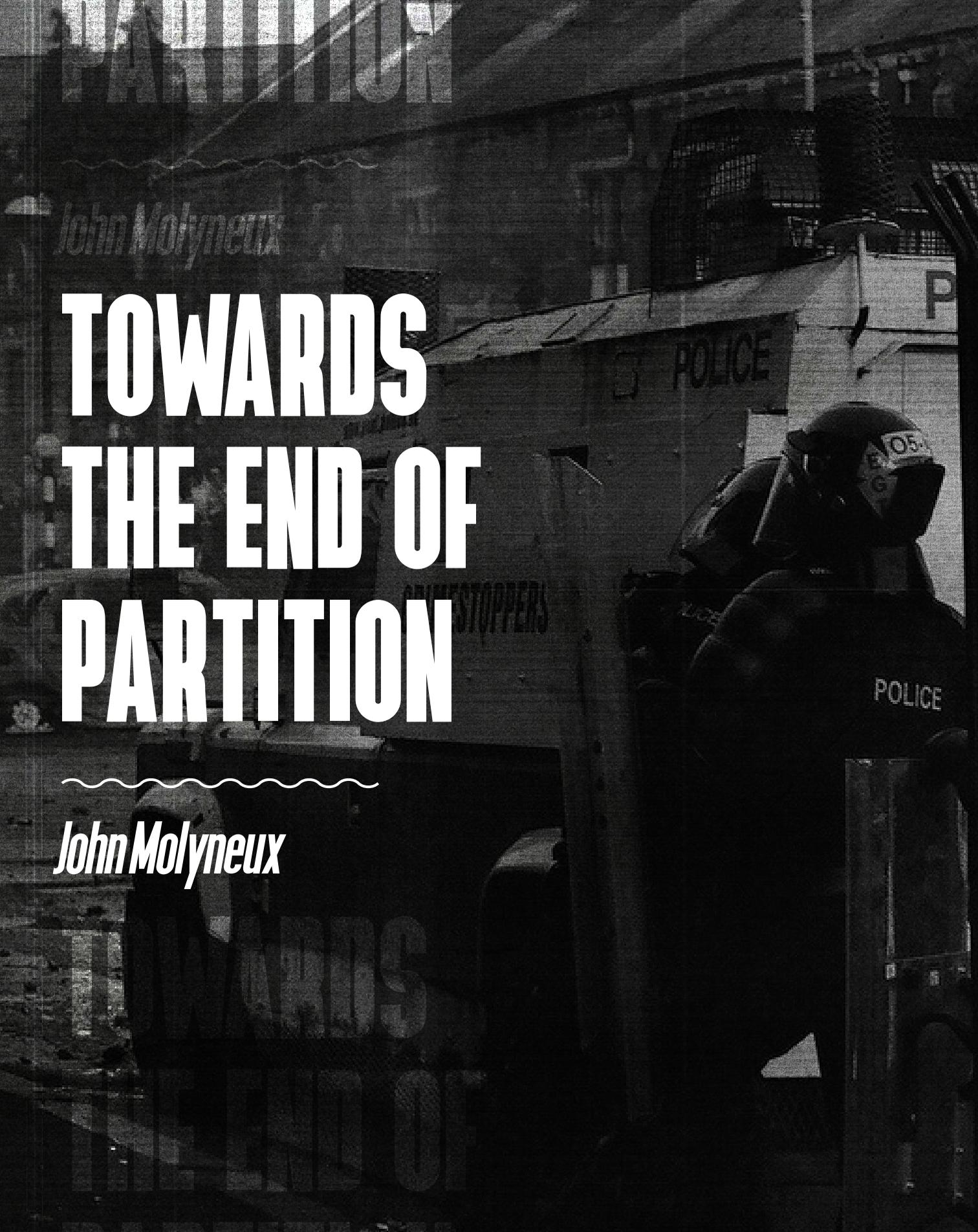


PARTITION

John Molyneux

TOWARDS THE END OF PARTITION

John Molyneux



EDITORIAL



This is a Special Issue of Irish Marxist Review to mark the centenary of the partition of Ireland on 1 May 1921. It includes five articles offering socialist analyses of different aspects of that unfortunate event: Kieran Allen on ‘They Came to Bury Connolly’, which rebuts those who have attempted to reject or dispose of Connolly’s socialist opposition to partition; Eamonn McCann on ‘The Economic Roots of Partition’; Goretti Horgan on ‘The Impact of Partition on Women in the North’; Fearghal Mac Bhloscaidh on ‘Collins, De Valera, and Partition’; and Mike Milotte on ‘Communists and Partition’ (drawing on original research into the Comintern archives).

All of these articles are written from the common perspective that partition was imposed on Ireland by the British state to shore up its imperial interests and that it has served only, as Connolly famously predicted, to bring about a ‘carnival of reaction’ on both sides of the border.

But as Marxists and revolutionaries today our concern with partition is far from being purely historical, important as the understanding of history always is. Rather the ending of partition is becoming an increasingly pressing and urgent issue in contemporary politics. Indeed it is fair to say that at no point in the last hundred years has the reunification of Ireland looked as realistically realisable a goal—as opposed to a correct but abstract principle—as it does now. It is therefore a question on which socialists

need to be equipped with a well worked-out position as a basis for vigorous political intervention.

The starting point has to be complete opposition to partition and support for the reunification of Ireland and *therefore* support for the holding of a border poll and for voting YES in such a poll. Socialists should emphatically reject the conservative idea that a border poll should be opposed because it would be ‘divisive’ or ‘stir up sectarianism’. Let’s be clear: it is not that a border poll will cause divisions or create sectarianism; rather a border poll will be contentious or controversial precisely because sectarian division is so entrenched already and precisely because partition has itself been a major factor in reinforcing that sectarianism.

Let’s also be clear that conservative forces and, even more so, imperialist, racist, and bigoted forces (and Loyalists and Unionist politicians and activists are all of these things) are always ‘stirred up’, enraged, provoked, etc, by demands for change that threaten their established positions—what they perceive as their entitlement. US racists in the Deep South and the Ku Klux Klan were ‘provoked’ by the Civil Rights movement and often reacted violently. The South African apartheid state was ‘provoked’ by Black resistance to apartheid and responded with deadly violence from Sharpeville to Soweto. The Israeli apartheid state responds with deadly violence on a permanent basis to any Palestinian demands for change. And indeed, in Northern Ireland itself,

both the Orange state and Loyalists on the ground responded with violence to the modest demands for democratic and civil rights in the 60s. So to accept this argument is, in reality, to accept: a) the more or less indefinite postponement of Irish unity; b) if the same logic is applied to other issues, the more or less indefinite postponement of any radical change of any kind.

Many in the Irish trade union movement and even some on the far left have bought into the notion that a border poll and even mentioning the question of the border would be divisive and sectarian until such a time arrives when it is no longer contentious, presumably because the working class as a whole has been won to socialist ideas and consciousness. This is basically just the conservative Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil position with a left gloss on it. It also means that fundamental anti-imperialist principles—opposition to British rule and self determination for the Irish people—and a basic democratic demand for a vote of the whole Irish people should be put on hold until a conservative pro-imperialist minority ceases to object. Along with all its other failings, such a position ignores the fact that the very existence of partition encourages and shores up sectarianism through the power structures and institutions it underwrites and through the illusion it promotes of Unionist ascendancy in perpetuity.

But if voicing support for a border poll is the necessary starting point, it is by no means all socialists have to say. There is also the question of how we envisage a united Ireland and how we campaign for it. Socialists do not want to pose the reunification of Ireland simply in terms of incorporating the North into the twenty-six counties as they currently stand.

Partition gave rise not only to the rotten sectarian state in the North but also to the rotten conservative, Church-dominated, corrupt state of Fianna Fáil in the South, and the addition of Fine Gael-led neoliberalism to this mix did nothing to improve it. Therefore, reunification should be campaigned for as an opportunity for a new beginning for the country as a whole: a socialist Ireland that will benefit the

mass of working people of all creeds and traditions. This will not only be good in itself but is also by far the best way to ensure victory in the border poll and to counter the ignition of sectarian tensions, much superior to simply appealing to traditional slogans and loyalties.

How this can work is well illustrated by the results of the Marriage Equality and Repeal referendums. This gave the best possible practical answer to the old Unionist canard that the unification of Ireland would subject Protestants to ‘Rome Rule’. Similarly, making reunification the occasion of establishing a new all-Ireland National Health Service, free at the point of delivery, would be a massive attraction and unifier for all working class people across the island.

Fortunately there are now numerous concrete issues with appeal on both sides of the border which also relate to the growing cohort of young people who do not necessarily identify with either of the old nationalist and Unionist traditions. These include:

- 1) Opposition to austerity and cutbacks whether imposed by Sinn Fein/DUP or any combination of FF/FG/ Labour and the Greens, and solidarity with workers’ struggles regardless of jurisdiction or community.
- 2) A unified cross-border strategy to suppress COVID. To have divergent strategies in the two jurisdictions is obviously disastrous.
- 3) Opposition to gender violence. The massive response on the streets of Dublin to the Belfast Rape Trial verdict in March 2018 was, as Eamonn McCann said at the time, ‘a demonstration not just *for* a United Ireland *but of* a united Ireland.’
- 4) Opposition to control of our bodies, education, and lives by churches or religious ideologies and outdated morality, and support for a woman’s right to choose
- 5) Anti- racism: Black Lives Matter movements occurred North and South, and there were parallel demonstrations in Belfast and Dublin. No to scapegoating migrants and refugees, North and South.
- 6) LGBTQ+ rights and pride, North and South.

- 7) Defence of the environment, from fracking to climate change, toxic mining in the Sperrins to LNG plants on the Shannon—we all have a common interest in defending the natural environment of Ireland and the planet against predatory capital North and South.

On all these issues and others which will arise in the future, we can prepare the way for winning a border poll and for a Socialist United Ireland by encouraging the maximum possible cross-border united action, solidarity, mutual support, and mobilization on all current campaigns.

Continuing on the theme of the Marxist analysis of Irish history, and making this a bumper edition, we have Brian Kelly on ‘Marx and the Fenians, Alex Day on the decline of the landless labourer, and Paul O’Brien on how the great playwright Sean O’Casey responded to the Civil War.

Also, Dave O’Farrell contributes a very timely critique of the Irish State’s response to COVID, including the rotten role of Big Pharma and the vaccine shambles.

Finally, spring 2021 is the 150th anniversary of one of the greatest struggles in international working-class history and the first, albeit short-lived, example of workers’ power, the Paris Commune, and of the birth of one of the greatest of all revolutionary socialists, Rosa Luxemburg. We mark the former with a study by Jason Dawsey of Marx’s historic and impassioned analysis of the Commune in *The Civil War in France*, and the latter with a glowing review by John Molyneux of Volume III of Luxemburg’s *Collected Works*. This in turn is one of several reviews of relevant and interesting recently published works: Giles Tremlett on *The International Brigade*, reviewed by Andy Durgan; James Loughlin on Fascism and the Far Right in Ulster, reviewed by Peter Bothwell; Sudhir Hazareesingh on Toussaint Louverture, reviewed by Joe Moore; and the *Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Post-Marxism*, reviewed by Aislinn Shanahan Daly.

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