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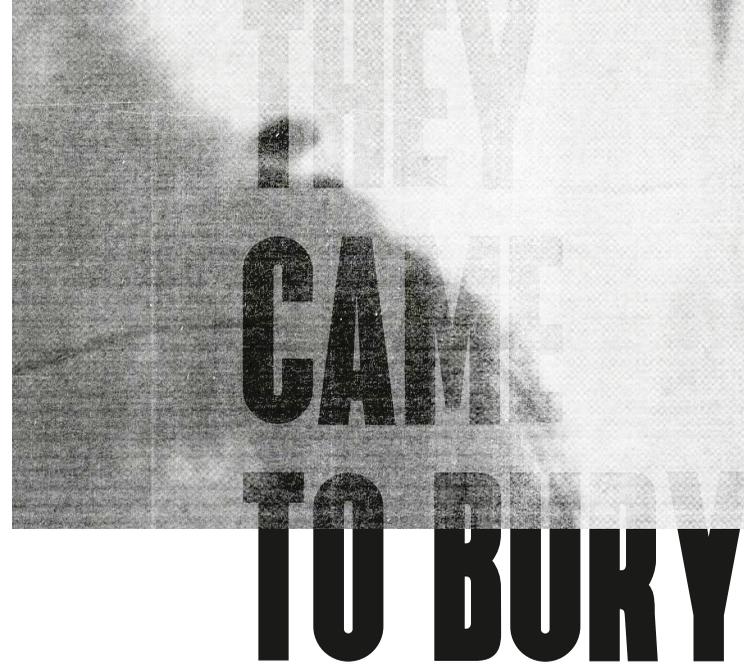
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They Came to Bury James Connolly

Kieran Allen

Any left-wing analysis of partition in Ireland must start with the writings of James Connolly. His prediction that it would bring about a ‘carnival of reaction’ has, tragically, been more than fulfilled. From its creation in 1921 to the abolition of Unionist rule in Stormont in 1972, Northern Ireland was a one-party state. The only opposition bill that was ever passed in its parliament was the Wild Bird Protection Act, presumably because birds could not be designated Protestant or Catholic. In more recent decades, Stormont has been restored as a consociational regime which locks in Unionist and nationalist identities, leading to public rows between the ‘two sides’ and private agreements on implementing a pro-business agenda. Southern Ireland equally conforms to Connolly’s prediction. Unusually in European terms, it has never had a social democratic government but has been run for a hundred years by more or less identical right-wing parties.

Behind Connolly’s insight lay a deep understanding that arose from his commitment to revolutionary socialism and anti-imperialism. Yet this wider legacy has been undermined by two distinct traditions which underplay his Marxism. The first was the Irish nationalist tradition which used his involvement in the 1916 Rebellion to induct him into the pantheon of republican heroes while thoroughly obliterating



his revolutionary socialism. When Eamonn de Valera rhetorically asked himself which of the 1916 leaders lay closest to his own views, he replied that he would ‘stand side by side with James Connolly’. His own comrade in the Irish Citizen Army, Countess Markievicz, produced a pamphlet after his execution titled, *James Connolly and Catholic Doctrine*. It suggested that ‘socialism was what he stood for but it was the socialism of James Connolly and of nobody else’. In other words, no foreign influences there.

The second attempt to bury Connolly came from academics who had links with the Workers Party but then gravitated towards a greater sympathy for Unionism. These deployed an aura of sophistication, drawing on the writing of Althusser, to debunk the crude understanding of Connolly. For a brief period in the 1980s, the trio of Henry Patterson, Paul Bew, and Peter Gibbon were dubbed ‘Orange Marxists.’ Their declared aim was to bury the influence that Connolly had on the Irish left and develop a more ‘realistic’ strategy based on a detailed analysis of internal class forces. Ultimately, their project fell apart and Bew became an adviser to the former Unionist leader David Trimble. Appropriately enough, he now heads the Centenary Advisory Historical Committee that has been sponsored by the Tory government. Yet despite their demise, the legacy of the Orange Marxists sometimes lives on in a dismissal of the

‘crude’, ‘unsophisticated’ Connolly. This article will first summarise Connolly’s views on the national question and then examine the so-called Orange Marxist critique.

Connolly’s approach to the national question differed considerably from the nationalists. Shortly after his arrival in Ireland he proclaimed his disdain for simple-minded nationalists who just wanted either political independence or Home Rule:

Ireland without her people is nothing to me, and the man who is bubbling over with love and enthusiasm for ‘Ireland’, and can yet pass unmoved through our streets and witness all the wrong and the suffering, the shame and the degradation wrought upon the people of Ireland, aye, wrought by Irishmen upon Irishmen and women, without burning to end it, is, in my opinion, a fraud and a liar in his heart, no matter how he loves that combination of chemical elements which he is pleased to call ‘Ireland’.

This class anger was combined, however, with a belief that socialists could not simply abstain from the national question. Prior to his arrival in Belfast, socialists tended to take different stances, with most of those from a Protestant background supporting the union while those who came from a Catholic background backed Home Rule. One’s identity shaped one’s response to the empire, while, as a socialist, one united on economic issues. Connolly regarded this abstention as cowardly and insisted that all socialists—no matter where they came from—should oppose empire and advocate independence. Against the Tories and Unionists, he argued that socialists should defend measures to grant Home Rule, inadequate as it might be. However, they should do so from a distinct position.

They should oppose the ‘union of classes’ which was inherent in nationalist politics, and by this Connolly meant calls for national unity that cut across the class divide. He pointed out that when people revolted against oppression, they rarely confined themselves to one injustice, and so a revolt

against empire would widen out into a full-scale cry for liberation. It is ridiculous, he wrote, to ‘talk of revolting against British rule and refuse to recognise the fact that our way to freedom can only be hewn by the strong hand of labour and that labour revolts against oppression of all kinds’. Attempts to bring the privileged into a national movement could only come at the expense of restraining the poor. To illustrate the fallacy of the all-class movement approach, Connolly wrote his masterpiece, *Labour and Irish History*. By looking at the different revolts in Irish history, Connolly sought to show that the wealthier elements of Irish society were more frightened of the poor than they were hostile to British rule, and that when they led a fight against the empire, they did so timidly and with an eye to maintaining a garrison that protected their interests. Given this class dynamic, Connolly argued that the fight for national freedom needed to culminate in the establishment of a socialist republic.

It may be pleaded that the ideal of a Socialist Republic, implying, as it does, a complete political and economic revolution would be sure to alienate all our middle-class and aristocratic supporters, who would dread the loss of their property and privileges.

What does this objection mean? That we must conciliate the privileged classes in Ireland! But you can only disarm their hostility by assuring them that in a free Ireland their privileges will not be interfered with. That is to say, you must guarantee that when Ireland is free of foreign domination, the green-coated Irish soldiers will guard the fraudulent gains of capitalist and landlord from ‘the thin hands of the poor’ just as remorselessly and just as effectually as the scarlet-coated emissaries of England do today. On no other basis will the classes unite with you. Do you expect the masses to fight for this ideal?

While these views represented his general orientation, his appointment as a union organiser in Belfast forced him to confront the reality of working-class division as sectarian rioting became more common. In July 1912, for example, 3,000 workers were expelled from their jobs in Belfast after Carson stoked up his violent opposition to Home Rule. Connolly’s approach

was to regard Orangeism as a reactionary and sectarian ideology—even when held by thousands of Protestant workers. In an article written in 1913, he reported on how a union excursion was attacked by shipyard workers because the Irish Transport and General Workers had their headquarters in Dublin ‘and [were] therefore what is known in Belfast as Fenians’. Sectarian hostility translated into a wider opposition to left-wing ideas so that even socialists who did not support Home Rule were prevented from holding meetings in any ‘exclusively Orange district’. Far from ducking the issue of Home Rule, Connolly denounced the ‘political ruffianism of Edward Carson’ which had ‘broken whatever class solidarity ever existed in the city’. Recognising that his own position would arouse ‘passions immensely more bitter’ than had ever been met by socialists in Dublin, he still concluded that ‘a real socialist movement cannot be built by temporising in front of a dying cause as that of the Orange ascendancy, even though in the paroxysms of its death it assumes the appearance of health’.

Here Connolly was drawing a distinction between an *ideology* held by many workers and their *interests*. Workers could support ideas propagated by their rulers even when these ran contrary to their interests, and socialists had to challenge them, no matter how unpopular that might be. Connolly’s central point was that by dividing workers and aligning some of them behind the Tory party, Orangeism was an anti-working-class ideology. An analogy from today might be how US socialists respond to the fact that some white workers attack the Black Lives Matter movement and support Trump. Generally, they oppose any form of white supremacism, even if a substantial number of workers in some states adhere to such views. They see this ideology as the primary cause of division between black and white workers.

Connolly’s reference to the ‘paroxysms of death’ of the Orange ideology proved to be false. He predicted also that Home Rule would be implemented and a united working class could then emerge. By 1914, however, after the leaders of Ireland’s nationalist movement agreed to partition, Connolly had a dark sense of foreboding. The division of Ireland would bring about the aforementioned ‘carnival of reaction’

and he suggested that

filled with the belief that they were after defeating the Imperial Government and the Nationalists combined, the Orangemen would have scant regards for the rights of the minority left at their mercy. Such a scheme would destroy the Labour movement by disrupting it. It would perpetuate in a form aggravated in evil the discords now prevalent and help the Home Rule and Orange capitalists and clerics to keep their rallying cries before the public as the political watchwords of the day. In short, it would make division more intense and confusion of ideas and parties more confounded.

Connolly proposed two ways to address the rupture between the ideology of Protestant workers and their class interests. First, he called for special propaganda ‘for the conversion to socialism of Orangemen’ with special emphasis on challenging the myth that the Orange Order stood for civil and religious liberty. However, forging workers’ unity was not simply a matter of words. He encouraged Catholic and Protestant workers to fight alongside each other in their day-to-day economic battles. While openly opposing Orangeism, Connolly’s union, the ITGWU, recruited workers from the Larne aluminium plant even though the town was a bastion for these ideas. He did so because of its reputation for militancy. However, while Connolly often had a syndicalist outlook which assumed that economic unity translated into political unity, he also had a vision of what type of Ireland might attract Protestant workers. There had to be a break from an economic policy based on low wages to attract foreign capital:

When the Sinn Feiner speaks to men who are fighting against low wages and tells them that the Sinn Fein body has promised lots of Irish labour at low wages to any foreign capitalist who wished to establish in Ireland, what wonder if they come to believe that a change from

Toryism to Sinn Féinism would simply be a change from the devil they know to the devil they do not.

From this brief excursion into the writings of James Connolly, it should be clear what he saw as his legacy for the Irish left. There was, firstly, an invitation to combine a revolutionary socialist outlook with a militant rejection of imperialism. Far from socialists waiting, standing aside, or seeing a fight against empire as a distraction from economic battles, they needed to engage in that struggle and offer a distinct perspective. Second, there was a suggestion that the national question would not be solved within a capitalist framework but would need a radical transformation of society. This, however, did not mean that Connolly was indifferent to any change short of socialism. Connolly was for a workers' republic, but that did not stop him from supporting Home Rule despite the fact it would be limited and decidedly not socialist. Sometimes Connolly came at his wider argument by linking the cause of political freedom to economic freedom, suggesting that undoing the conquest involved a break with an economic system imposed by the empire. More substantially, however, Connolly posed the question of radical transformation as a way of overcoming working-class division. By suggesting that partition would bring about a 'carnival of reaction', he implied that its undoing involved a challenge to both states.

This legacy would indicate that socialists who belong to the Connolly tradition are not neutral on the question of the break-up of the union with Britain. Nor is support for that break-up *contingent* on it being done exclusively on a socialist basis. Rather, the best way to overcome partition is by promoting a policy that openly asserts the need to abolish both states which are products of partition. It should not be a matter of inviting Protestant workers into a pre-existing Southern state but of creating a new and more radical Ireland from which all workers benefit. Linked to this approach there is also in Connolly a fundamental opposition to the idea of Orangeism. Far from adopting a neutral stance between republicanism and Orangeism, Connolly defined the latter as inherently reactionary because of its support

for monarchy, ascendancy, and empire. It was not a matter of evenly balancing between two traditions but of pointing to the one that he perceived as the cause of division. In this sense, there is a thoroughly modern ring to his arguments. Few radicals today, for example, would suggest a 'balance' between racist and Black nationalist views but would rather point to racism as the cause of divisions.

The impact of Connolly's ideas on the Irish left has varied over time and with the different tempos of the Northern struggle. In the early period, which was dominated by the civil rights agitation from 1968 to 1972, Connolly was viewed as the main touchstone of Irish radicalism. Thousands of people sported a metallic badge with his image, and songs projecting alternative versions of him as 'the hero of the working man' or a 'brave son of Ireland' were popular. There was an instinctive recognition that the battle against the Stormont regime would also involve a challenge to the Southern state. In the words of one historian, Ireland looked like a 'boiling volcano' with even the political correspondent of the *Irish Times* declaring that 'something deep was stirring in the whole of Ireland'. The then President of Sinn Féin, Tomás Mac Giolla, put matters succinctly when he stated that 'we are witnessing what we hope is the beginning of the disintegration of two old and corrupt parties'. This period also saw the birth of a new left with individuals such as Bernadette Devlin, Eamonn McCann, and Michael Farrell becoming household names. In his book *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, and in his more general writings, Michael Farrell located himself firmly within the Connolly tradition, arguing that 'the border must go because it is a relic of imperialism and in order to root out imperialism, we have to root out the neo-imperialist set up in the South and the neo-colonial one in the North'. In a similar vein, Farrell also argued that 'only the concept of a socialist republic can ever reconcile Protestant workers, who rightly have a very deep seated fear of a Roman Catholic republic, to the ending of the border'.

The break with Connolly

This strand of Connollyite politics persists in Irish society as a vague rebellious spirit that often resurfaces on occasions of mass resistance. During a

water-charges protest in 2014, for example, thousands listened with rapt attention to the singer Damian Dempsey deliver ‘The Ballad of James Connolly’. It was a deeply symbolic moment as Dempsey stood on a podium outside the GPO, the focal point of the 1916 Rising, connecting that rebellion to a present-day fight against water charges. And it is precisely because it is a living tradition that Connolly’s ideas have come in for explicit criticism.

There is a wider context to the attacks on the Connolly tradition. After the Bloody Sunday murders in 1972, there was a huge upsurge in opposition to the British Army, with tens of thousands involved in the burning of the British Embassy. The Southern political establishment were very fearful but got ahead of the anger by calling a ‘national day of mourning’ for the Bloody Sunday victims. Later, however, they set out systematically to turn the population towards a concern with the security and peace of their own state. They used a terrible car bombing in Dublin organised by loyalist paramilitaries and British intelligence to frighten people and to present the IRA as a threat to their security. The guerrilla army tactics also played into the hands of the Southern establishment—car bombings in city centre streets were viewed with disgust. The Southern population had—and still has—an historic memory of a ‘War of Independence’, but by the 1970s, there was a massive difference between their experience and that of those living in the Catholic ghettos of the North. In Belfast

or Derry, many people disliked the IRA tactics, but they still excused or continued to support them because they saw how the British Army were oppressing their areas. In the South it was very different, and so the car bombs helped to alienate people from the struggle. The Provos refused to recognise this elementary fact—and resorted to moralistic attacks on ‘the free state mentality’. The difference in experience between Southern workers and Northern nationalists could never, however, be overcome by moralism.

This shift in the political atmosphere in the South was echoed and amplified by intellectuals who had previously been associated with the left. The main target of their attacks was the Connollyite tradition. The most dramatic volte-face came from Conor Cruise O’Brien, who had previously praised Connolly’s role in the 1916 Rebellion and was identified with opposition to the US war in Vietnam. In 1969 he was still praising ‘the courage, determination and tactical skill of the Bogsiders’ for establishing a no-go area for the RUC. By 1972, however, in his influential book *States of Ireland*, he was claiming that left-wingers who used ‘language and gestures which are subjectively revolutionary, but have appeal only within one sectarian community, are objectively [using] the language and gestures of sectarian civil war’. As violence increased in Northern Ireland, O’Brien located its source in an emotional, irrational form of Catholic nationalism which pervaded Ireland. This ‘holy nationalism’,

he claimed, was built on the cult of martyrs of the 1916 Rebellion and transmitted from generation to generation through memory, tradition, and myths. It led to an implicit support for a sectarian and fascistic IRA campaign.

O’Brien became a leading ideologue in the Irish Labour Party and helped to shift it into a coalition government with Fine Gael in 1973. He acknowledged that Connolly’s call for a workers’ republic became ‘the accepted corpus of doctrine for the revolutionary left in Ireland’ and set out to dismantle that influence. His main charge was that Connolly had written Protestant workers out of Irish history and supported the use of force to incorporate them into a united Ireland. The evidence he produced was patchy but O’Brien wanted to appear as an iconoclast who was tearing down the martyrs of 1916. His attacks on the Connollyite tradition had a vague radical tinge as they appeared to offer a challenge to the dominant role of Catholicism and the anti-communist ethos of the Provisional IRA at the time. This had a certain appeal for centre-left activists of the Labour Party who supported the Southern state’s efforts to crush the ‘fascist’ tendencies in Irish republicanism. Given the supposedly irrational and dangerous ambivalence inherent in Irish nationalism, O’Brien, however, went further and advocated censorship for any republican sentiment. As a government minister he became the main advocate of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, which banned any republican voices from Irish radio and television. Despite

his original left veneer, O'Brien was essentially arguing from a conservative perspective, equating the nationalism of the oppressed with an irrational emotion. If a similar argument was applied to the Vietnamese during their conflict with the US, then the cause of all their suffering was an 'irrational' nationalist tradition that abhorred domination by foreign forces. O'Brien's point of contrast with these 'holy nationalisms' was Western liberal democracy, unblemished by violence, inspired by Enlightenment ideas, and thoroughly rational in its domination of non-European countries.

A more sophisticated attack on the Connolly tradition was undertaken by intellectuals associated with the Workers' Party. In 1979, Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon, and Henry Patterson published their book *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921–72*, aiming to plot a new course for Irish Marxism, which they claimed was on the 'verge of extinction'. The main culprit was the Connolly tradition, which had absorbed socialism into 'national irredentism'. Bew, Patterson, and Gibbon deployed an image of rigorous, serious Althusserian Marxism to debunk the unsophisticated Connolly. Interestingly, Althusser was also the framework for ideologues sympathetic to republicanism such as Ronnie Munck and Bill Rolston, who utilised his structuralist framework to argue that class politics could not overcome sectarianism. The relative autonomy that Althusser afforded the structures of economics, politics, and ideology allowed for a Marxism of both green and Orange varieties, that effectively conformed with the status quo. Let's look at some of the arguments of Orange Althusserians.

Their first claim was that Connolly—and the wider Marxist tradition—had failed to recognise the material basis for partition in the uneven development of Irish capitalism. Ulster had an industrial base, linked to the core regions of Britain, and had a direct interest in maintaining those links. Southern Ireland was a backward, agrarian economy whose indigenous capitalists needed protectionism to expand. Because of this economic divergence, both Protestant employers and Protestant workers developed a direct interest in partition.

There can be little doubting the different roads to economic development in the North and the South,

but acknowledging this does not imply partition was an inevitable outcome. This would be to read off political developments mechanically from a material base, which ironically, Althusser was vehemently opposed to. Moreover, there was no direct parallel between the level of industrial development and the exact contours of the six-county state. That state was constructed on a political logic, namely how to guarantee a permanent Protestant majority while being just about large enough to be viable. By mechanically reading off partition as a crude reflection of an economic base, Bew, Patterson, and Gibbon are suggesting that it was inevitable. But this ignores the political role that the Tories played in devising a strategy to defend ascendancy and empire.

The origins of the Tory love affair with Ulster Unionism date back to a mild attempt by the Liberal Party to pass a 'People's Budget' in 1909 which proposed taxes on land to fund social protection programmes. It infuriated the landed ascendancy and they used their power base in the House of Lords to veto it. In response, the Liberals introduced the Parliament Act to remove the veto over laws passed in the House of Commons. This turned the conflicts within the British ruling class into an outright conflagration. As the Liberals had the support of the Irish Home Rule Party, the Tory leader Bonar Law forged an alliance with Edward Carson. Carson was a fanatical defender of the ascendancy's role in the empire. He was, for example, an enthusiastic support of Dr Jim Jameson, an associate of Cecil Rhodes, who staged a raid on the Boer republic of Transvaal to expand the British Empire. As Carson's biographer explained, both men were inclined to 'flout the law for the good of the empire'.

The crisis within the British ruling class came to a head in 1912 when another Home Rule Bill was introduced to the British House of Commons. It was a very modest measure which gave Dublin limited powers within the empire. Carson, however, began to preach open sedition, promoting an Ulster Covenant, signed by over 218,000 people, which pledged to resist Home Rule by 'all means' and 'to refuse to recognise the authority of such a parliament'. The Tory Party tore apart the façade of parliamentary democracy and supported naked physical force

to destroy their opponents. When the Tory leader Bonar Law reviewed the mass ranks of the Ulster Volunteers, he told them explicitly that 'you hold the pass for the Empire'. In words not heard since the English Civil War, he denounced his government as

a revolutionary committee which has seized power by fraud upon despotic power. In our opposition to them, we shall not be guided by considerations which would influence us in ordinary political struggle. We shall use any means to deprive them of the power they usurped.

This rhetoric encouraged British army officers stationed in Ireland to mutiny in 1914 when asked to move against Unionists, demonstrating again that you could 'flout the law for the good of empire'. While the Liberal government was willing to send the army in to shoot down strikers in Liverpool and Llanelly in 1911, they backed off before this mutiny. The Home Rule Bill was eventually postponed due, apparently, to the outbreak of the First World War.

Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson play down the political contestation involved in the pro-imperialist mobilisations, the Curragh mutiny, and pogroms designed to intimidate the Catholic population into submission. Their focus on internal economic factors leaves aside the strategies of the British ruling class. They accord 'primacy' to internal class relations in Ireland and suggest that the British state did not have a unity of purpose. They conclude that partition arose from mainly Irish developments. This argument, however, has a distinct teleological character equating 'Ulster's' political economy with the actual Northern state which emerged. They can offer no explanation for why it needed to include a substantial Catholic minority. Bizarrely, they suggest that Belfast Catholics' attitudes to the Northern state were 'a product of a specific conjuncture of events' rather than 'an expression of a deep-seated ideological attitude'.

To argue that Protestant workers had an *interest* in supporting partition is to confuse an immediate desire for employment and job security with a wider class consciousness and class interest. If the same method were applied to other cases, one could argue that specific groups of workers have an

interest in supporting their sector of the economy. It is undoubtedly the case, for example, that bank workers will on occasion defend the profits of banks because they think it will lead to more stable jobs. Car workers will occasionally join with their employers in opposing restrictions on the use of cars because of a narrow sectional viewpoint. They will do so because they assume that what is good for their company is good for their jobs. However, you cannot equate the immediate 'interest' of a group of workers within a capitalist economy with their wider class interests. Or rather, you can if you think that there is no possibility of an alternative to capitalism. You could then argue that there is a certain logic in workers responding to its competitive dynamic by backing employers in their own sector of the economy. However, that would also mean that developed 'class consciousness' could never exist.

Their second claim is that Connolly had a crude pre-Marxist concept of ideology, seeing it primarily as an illusion. By this, Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson mean that Connolly saw the ideology of Unionism as a 'stage managed' ruling-class fabrication. They attack him for thinking that 'Orangeism and trade union militancy were...mutually exclusive', and instead the authors argue that Orangeism and proletarian class ideology 'interpenetrated' each other. Moreover, far from workers being dominated by an alien ideology, the Unionist leadership 'had been obliged to concede a proportion of its power to the Orange section of the working class'. Protestant workers had a democratic, secular, but pro-imperialist ideology which contrasted with the industrial North and the backward agrarian South. This, it is suggested, arose from their lived experience rather than false consciousness. However, while Connolly did suggest that support for empire was promoted by the upper class, he also pointed to a certain material base for Orangeism. He noted that

at one time in the industrial world of Great Britain and Ireland the skilled labourer looked down with contempt upon the unskilled and bitterly resented his attempt to get his children taught any of the skilled trades; the feeling of the Orangemen of Ireland towards the Catholics is but a glorified representation on a big stage

of the same passions inspired by the same unworthy motives.

This suggestive remark needs some elaboration. The expansion of the industrial base around Belfast drew in many Catholic migrants from the rural hinterland, and one of the features of the uneven development of the Irish economy was a more intense competition for jobs between skilled or in situ Protestant workers and Catholic newcomers. When the older traditions of settler versus native are overlaid with competition for jobs, one can see how Orangeism could gain a certain hold. This, however, does not mean that the ruling class played no role in fomenting reactionary ideas.

Far from ‘conceding a proportion of its power to the Orange section of workers’, the early Stormont regimes were dominated by big landowners and business leaders who set out to crush left-wing ideas. Carson and J.M. Andrews, a well-connected businessman, became the president and chairman of the Ulster Unionist Labour Association. This was an organisation which played an active role in combating ‘Bolshevism, Syndicalism and Socialism’ amongst Protestant workers and was created precisely to tie Protestant workers to their Orange bosses. The UULA opposed the 1919 engineering strike, and after Labour candidates scored victories in Belfast’s municipal election in 1920, Carson deliberately targeted socialists in his infamous speech on the twelfth. He claimed that the enemy was deploying an ‘insidious method’ of ‘tacking on the Sinn Fein and Irish Republican question to the Labour question’ and so ‘these men who come posing as friends of Labour care no more about Labour than the man in the moon’. The consequence of Carson’s attack became clear when ‘rotten Prods’—or genuine trade unionists—were expelled from the Belfast shipyards alongside their Catholic workmates. One can acknowledge that Orange ideas were popular, but how could they be described as ‘democratic’ if it entailed opposition to strike leaders, union activists, and a Catholic minority?

The last major claim of the three authors is to deny the impact of British imperialism through two main strategies. The first is to use the criteria

enunciated in Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* to define a Marxist definition of imperialism. So Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson enumerate features such as export of capital, domination by finance capital, industrial cartels over which banks have a predominant influence, which Lenin argued helped to explain the drive to subject developing countries to control from a metropolis. They then show how these features did not exist in Northern Ireland. By outlining a Leninist conception of imperialism as a specific stage in global capitalism, Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson draw a sharp distinction between Marxist and nationalist concepts of imperialism. With this apparent sophistication, they can then dismiss attempts to link partition to the interests of British imperialism.

However, while appearing to adhere to Lenin’s schema, the writers miss out on its essence. If they were to apply the same checklist—such as the export of surplus capital or the role of finance in organising industrial cartels—they could equally conclude that the US was not involved in an imperialist intervention in Vietnam or Iraq. Yet Lenin’s central argument was that in an uneven world where individual corporations dominate major sectors of production, they look to individual states to protect their interests through economic and military expansion. In other words, the drive to conquer and establish territorial hegemony does not arise simply from arbitrary foreign policy decisions but is intrinsically linked to the dynamic of capitalist competition. In the modern age, Britain has aligned itself with the US to promote and protect the distinct interests of its corporations. The British state uses its credibility as a military power on a global basis to extract concessions favourable to its corporations. It cannot be seen to be beaten either by an IRA campaign or a mass movement that drives them out of Ireland.

The second strategy of the authors is to claim there was a lack of unity of purpose in British policy. However, there have always existed divisions in the ruling class about how best to advance their interests. Marx called them a ‘warring band of brothers’ by way of a reference to capitalist competition, but this also finds its expression within competing tendencies in the state. No doubt there have been sections of the British ruling class who proposed a

softer approach to Ireland, perhaps even accepting, in different periods, the possibility of Home Rule or a united Ireland or troop withdrawals. That does not, however, change the fact that the hegemonic force around the British ruling class, particularly around the Tories and powerful sections of the military, has had a consistently imperialist approach to Ireland that has invariably led them to support Unionism. Sections of the ruling class in the US disagreed on whether the invasion of Iraq was the right thing, but it did not make the invasion any less imperialist.

The focus on internal elite division leads to a familiar trope whereby Britain is presented as reluctantly stumbling into control of an empire that, at one stage, had a landmass of 13 million square miles, nearly a quarter of the planet. Thus, Sir David Canadine claims that, even in the ‘climatic years of high imperialism... traditional hostility to additional annexations remained deeply embedded in most parts of Whitehall’. Bew, Patterson, and Gibbon use a similar approach to argue that the partition of Ireland was primarily a response to internal divisions, but their methodology of focusing on internal cabinet papers exaggerates divisions within the British elite. One of the ways a ruling class develops a united strategy is by first assessing their various options, off camera. This sometimes takes the form of internal polemical debates before their arriving at a decisive course of action. Rather than examining their internal discussions, it is more useful to assess the result of their actions.

We have dealt at some length with the arguments of Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson as they offer the most explicit refutation of the Connolly position from an apparently left-wing position. In reality, the writers were gravitating to a pro-Unionist tradition, symbolised rather dramatically in the trajectory of the former Workers’ Party member Paul Bew, who became Lord Bew and now sits in the House of Lords. While Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson’s books had a limited appeal outside intellectual circles, a more popular version of their arguments had an influence on certain strata of Irish life. This did not arise from the vigour or sophistication of their argument but from the way in which it was embedded in networks that promoted a ‘revisionist’ outlook. These included two political parties, the

Labour Party and the Workers’ Party, and through them a section of the trade union leadership. It also found an audience in university history departments and, in many complex ways, through the role the Workers’ Party played, in the national broadcasting network RTE. All of this gave rise to what became colloquially known as a ‘D4 attitude’ whereby support for liberal causes was often associated with rejection of ‘atavistic’ attitudes towards the North. The more one despised republicanism and opposed any attempts to undermine or coerce Unionism, the more progressive and liberal you were.

The arguments of Fintan O’Toole illustrate the extent of the break with the Connolly tradition. O’Toole writes from a liberal or progressive tradition, but like the above-mentioned writers sees partition as ‘an inevitable product of Irish political, economic and religious division’ and suggests that the only alternative to it was ‘a bloody civil war’. The Northern state is not deemed to be the cause for the maintenance of sectarian division because, as he argued, ‘sectarian prejudice did not cause the violence. It was to a great extent the violence that caused the prejudice.’ While O’Toole acknowledges the role played by loyalist paramilitaries and the British state, the main culprit for the violence is the IRA, ‘which has functioned at times as purely a Catholic sectarian murder squad seeking slaughter of Protestant people because of their religion’. O’Toole’s particular focus has often been—like Conor Cruise O’Brien’s—on the irrational traditions of ‘inherited hatreds’ which enable individuals to maim and kill. At the core of this fanaticism is a ‘habitual view of Protestants as people who have been bribed and duped into believing they were British’. Failing to recognise the deeply felt political identity of Protestants, he claims, is itself sectarian.

The Connolly tradition today

Much of the political charge that animated these arguments came from revulsion at the IRA’s tactics. With the ending of this campaign, it has become more possible to question some of the fundamental assumptions of the left liberal approach—namely the view that British imperialism plays a marginal or absent role; or the view that partition is simply an

inevitable product of Irish division; or the description of Loyalism as a depoliticised ‘identity’ which needs to be respected. By questioning these assumptions, it is possible to restore much of the Connolly approach. There are, however, some ambiguities and confusions in this tradition, particularly as it was developed. Some of these are to be found in Connolly’s own writings, and others have been added on as socialists grappled with the Northern conflict.

Connolly’s involvement in the 1916 Rebellion has helped to construct him as occupying a common ground shared by socialists and republican traditions. This legacy has meant that he sometimes becomes the inspiration for a ‘socialist republicanism’ which maintains all the trappings of a republican organisation while speaking of the working class in general terms. This ignores the elementary fact that Connolly saw himself as a Marxist and did not join Sinn Féin, even when other left-leaning trade unionists became members. Aside from his participation in the 1916 Rebellion, there are deeper reasons why Connolly can be seen to have played this role. He broke with the dominant tradition of Second International Marxism in recognising that colonised countries did not have to wait for a long period of industrial development before challenging capitalism, but he also wrote in a period before any anti-imperialist movement had come to power. He never had the benefit of seeing how radical nationalist movements like the National Liberation Front in Algeria or Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF were transformed into ruling parties that managed capitalism once they took power; or how a section of the republican movement became Fianna Fáil and presided over a corrupt and conservative state. As a result, he sometimes tended to equate anti-imperialism with anti-capitalism, or at least imply there was an inherent dynamic to move in that direction. More specifically, he regarded the Irish bourgeoisie as a class wedded to an ‘alien’ social system and therefore to empire. He significantly underestimated how this class could change its outlook and how variant forms of Irish republicanism could become the vehicle for its rule in an independent Ireland. There is much that is of value in the republican tradition—not least its tenacity in opposing empire and its democratic ethos. Nevertheless, the tradition is encased in a nationalist

outlook that seeks its place within the conventional order of global capitalism. While some of the best elements can be recovered for the left, it is necessary to build a different tradition.

After Connolly’s execution, a strand of thinking developed on the Irish left which saw the road to fundamental change as lying through a call to ‘complete the national revolution’. When this referred to how the revolutionary process that developed between 1918 and 1922 was truncated by conservative elements and by partition, it made perfect sense. ‘Completing the national revolution’ can also mean, however, that the struggle against the Northern state becomes the lever to prise open a wider social transformation in Ireland as a whole. This is often underpinned by a view that, while the North is a direct colony, the Southern state remains a ‘neo-colony’. This characterisation was deployed by Gerry Adams when writing in his more left-wing phase. He claimed that while maintaining the symbols of political independence, [the South] is in reality a neo-colony. The British government by its direct control of a part of Ireland exerts a political influence over all of Ireland, ensuring through partition that Irish politics are neutralised and distorted with British political influence maintained.

If nothing else, Brexit showed how utterly nonsensical is this characterisation. If the twenty-six counties, according to this republican schema, are a British neo-colony, then how was it that throughout the entire Brexit crisis the Dublin ruling class sided with Brussels? If the Irish ruling class were simply a British-backed caste, why did they go against their colonial leaders? If it is claimed that the twenty-six counties are no longer a neo-colony of Britain but of the EU, this only begs the question: When exactly did that historic transfer take place? The whole ‘neo-colony’ theory severely understates how the Southern state functions as a representative for a weak but independent ruling class. Moreover, the hundred years of relative capitalist stability in the South has produced a host of issues, around which people mobilise, that are not directly linked to a national question, still less to British domination.

When young people mobilise over climate change, for example, their focus is not on ‘completing a national revolution’ but rather on dealing with a global problem and the lack of action of the Irish elite. The issues on which people struggle, therefore, cannot be simply refracted through the lens of the national question. Mass mobilisation develops around issues that confront people in their immediate lives—rather than emerging according to any pre-existing schema. The task of socialists is to politically make connections between these issues and the wider nature of Irish society which has been so shaped by two conservative states.

Shorn of some of these ambiguities, there is much to recommend in Connolly’s writings for the modern-day left. He was a worker-intellectual who wrote in a clear style, and an excellent propagandist, capable of reaching a wider audience. This is in marked contrast to a type of leftist academicism which produces supposedly sophisticated analyses that are only addressed to other academics. More importantly, Connolly was a brilliant exponent of socialist ideas—challenging those who refused to think in international terms or outlining why the drive to war was an intrinsic part of a brutal system. While he famously proposed the formation of an Irish Labour Party at the Irish Trade Union Congress in Clonmel in 1912, he did so because he thought there was a need for a broad party to represent Irish workers after the introduction of Home Rule. He never believed in a purely parliamentary strategy and always stressed the self-activity of working people. Connolly’s brilliance as a revolutionary, however, was to link the fight for Irish freedom with a plan to uproot capitalism—to strive not just for a republic, but a workers’ republic. This enabled him to see that any conventional ‘solution’ to Ireland’s national question involving partition would produce a carnival of reaction. As the issue of the border re-emerges, he provides a vision of how opposition to an Irish border must be linked to radical change on the island.

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