

Book Review

The Ghost Limb: Alternative Protestants and the Spirit of 1798

Claire Mitchell

Beyond The Pale Books

Jim Larmour

134

Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight?

Who Blushes at the name?

When cowards mock the patriot's fate,

Who hangs his head in shame?

The above poem was originally published anonymously. The author, a Protestant scholar named John Kells Ingram, only put his own name to it in 1900, having feared previously for the safety of his children.

These lines really get to the heart of Clair Mitchell's book – the rewriting of history to airbrush the role of radical Protestants from the rebellion of 1798 and to obscure the unbroken thread of radicalism, dissent and rejection of unionism that persists within the Protestant community today.

In a state obsessed with tribal head counts based on one's perceived religion, it is always a source of frustration to be lumped into the Unionist category just because you

were born a Protestant. It suits the sectarian narrative that Protestant = Unionist, Catholic = Nationalist when the situation has always been more complex, more fluid.

The growing band who increasingly identify with neither camp is now estimated at 27 percent, according to the latest NI Life and Times Survey, but what of them? Where do they fit in the traditional headcount referenced above?

The Northern state seeks to exclude them, and it would be safe to assume that many, if not the majority, come from a Protestant background.

Rotten Prods, Lundy's, Dissenters, Radicals, and quite a few more colourful names have been used to describe Protestants who reject Unionism. I've certainly been called a few colourful names in my time, as has the author, and these terms are hardly meant as a compliment.

Personally, I prefer Dissenter but that's just me. I wear it as my badge of honour. Claire Mitchell uses the term "Alternative Protestants" which I hadn't heard until reading her fascinating book.

Precious little has been written about dissenting Protestants historically, but in the space of a year or so, two excellent books have come along; see also Susan McKay's – Northern Protestants – On Shifting Ground – Blackstaff Press 2021 (review IMR 31).

Rebellion and beyond

Mitchell's early chapters trace the story of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and its aftermath, bringing the subsequent history of these events up to date in the same towns, fields, and graveyards of the present day.

In these chapters we hear of dates being changed on headstones after the rebellion so as not to link participants with 1798; we hear of families completely unaware of their relative's radical past and indeed whole towns and villages airbrushed out of history because of their involvement in rebellion.

Although the author states in the introduction that she doesn't want to over romanticise the period, the book does fall into over romanisation from time to time, which is probably inevitable given Mitchell's passion for the subject.

Presbyterianism was the dissenting religion during the eighteenth century and harsh laws ensured that Presbyterians were often discriminated against in the same manner as were Catholics. One result was that thirty or so Presbyterian Ministers played leading roles in the United Irish Rebellion of 1798, including its most famous leaders, Henry Joy McCracken, James "Jemmy" Hope and Wolfe Tone. Inspired by the ideals of liberty and freedom from the French and American Revolutions and particularly by Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*,

the United Irishmen sought to build a new state that would allow all to live with dignity regardless of their religion.

Lenin once noted how great revolutionaries get vilified in their lifetime only to be turned into harmless icons when they die (a process that he himself was subjected to by Stalin). This was done to James Connolly by his conservative successors, and it was also done to Henry Joy McCracken in Belfast. As it embraces modern forms of gentrification, Belfast is now full of symbolic reminders of the United Irishmen – where they lived and where they met. A new hotel or theme pub seems to pop up out of nowhere, with a statue to McCracken standing outside the pub only a hundred metres or so from where he was hung for treason. Going against this trend, Mitchell's book doesn't seek to cash in on the celebrity of dead revolutionaries. Instead, it brings their principles back to life, reminding people of the radical ideals for which they lived and died. It also paints a vivid picture of lesser-known heroes like Mary Ann McCracken campaigning in Belfast for suffrage and against slavery and offers a few wonderful lines on the houses in Belfast that lit a candle in the window around a little paper mobile to celebrate the storming of the Bastille in Paris. This is all well worth reading; however, it is the second half of the book I found the more interesting, particularly the closing chapters.

Protestant Dissent

The final section entitled – *Political Activism* - contains discussions with protestants who have become active in trade unions and socialist politics, feminism, green politics, and LGBTQ+ rights in recent years. A good example is Stephen – a socialist and trade unionist who grew up in Newtownards, a town always perceived as staunchly Unionist and the place where Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson drilled their paramilitary 3rd Force in 1985 in opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In Stephen's own words, 'What happens when you live here, is that Unionist history is just thrown across the place, like a great big soggy wet blanket, and everybody has to live beneath it, kind of crawling around, trying to make sense of who the hell they are. Suddenly you go, I can't sit here any longer pretending this is all right, it's not good enough any longer'.

But Newtownards has another history, a socialist history, that deserves to come to the fore. As far back as the 1790s, weavers began organising in the town for better wages; during the 1850s, tenants joined together to defend their rights and on Christmas Day in 1880, tenant farmers organised an enormous demonstration against the landlord class later represented by Carson and Craigavon.

The suffragettes were also prominent within the town while a full third of the population voted for the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) directly after partition. This is a history of worker's struggle that deserves to be recovered. And there's more. We are reminded that, as far back as 1842, a thousand people met at a place called Balds Yard to protest the Corn Laws and the Tory government. The speakers were anti sectarian, with Chartists, dissenting clergy, and the local Catholic priest all in attendance. Almost 150 years later, Stephen formed a trade union on almost the same spot. He had written to Tony Benn in the 1980's believing he was the only socialist in Newtownards, unaware of a hidden history that is brought to light vividly in this excellent book. Today the spirit of 1798 remains alive and well, growing in the tens of thousands who reject sectarianism and want to live in a better place. This book illustrates what it is to be a Northern Protestant Dissenter in the 21st Century. It is essential reading.

Book Review

Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex

Sophia Giovannitti

Verso

Sadhbh Mac Lochlainn

Working Girl is a series of personal essays which look at the art and sex industries, how they overlap and what they have in common from the perspective of Sophia Giovannitti who makes her living in both.

Giovannitti recounts her experiences in thoughtful and self-aware prose which draws the reader in. Her analysis of contemporary art (focused on themes of sex and sexuality) is interwoven with compelling recounts of her own experiences as a sex worker in New York and accompanied by her own, at times, contradictory musings on how it all ties together, what it means to her as both an artist and a sex worker, where one ends and the other begins.

I must admit I can be judgmental at times and initially, I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes as Giovannitti introduced her work. I was slightly suspicious of the author from the outset. A young woman with an extensive support network and other options decided to dip her toes into the sex industry to bypass her “near categorical hatred of work” and finance her artwork.¹ I was suspicious of her perspective as a person who may engage in sex work with a substantially lower risk than others. However, Giovannitti is quick to pull me out of my own biases and draw me into the work.

Throughout the essays, Giovannitti is clear that her experience of sex work is hers alone, she acknowledges the privileges that allow her to navigate the sex industry with more ease than others might, however, she also challenges the reader to view the sex worker not through the lens of victim or criminal, but as individuals with agency, a perspective that can sometimes get lost even among sex-positive feminists. Agency, consent, and coercion are themes that Giovannitti comes back to throughout the text. In her introduction, Giovannitti recalls her father's refusal to allow the commodification of his own artwork, instead choosing to keep it private and far from commerciality.

Offered opportunities at a young age to make money in the art world, my father instead turned to the honest work of construction, believing this would allow him to exist less subsumed by the monster of capitalism.²

However, Giovannitti shows the reader that by refusing to commodify his own art, her father was still unable to escape the pressures of capitalism. In reality, his artwork was shaped by his labour, the long hours of his job constraining his work as an artist, the tools he could afford, the energy to create, etc. Giovannitti tells us about other jobs she has worked, besides sex worker and

artist. The author makes it clear that she is not cut out, or does not want to be cut out, for the mundane rote of everyday menial jobs. You could, as she does, describe her political ideology as anti-work -

“I firmly believe that no one should have to work to live, that the imperative to sell one's labour in exchange for the fulfilment of basic survival needs is a foundational violation.”³

The coercive nature of capitalism means that none of us really have a choice, we work, or we go without. It is this coercive and un-consenting relationship between the individual and what they must do to ensure their own needs are met, that is constant within capitalism. Giovannitti comes back to this point again and again. In one example, the author talks about getting spat on and verbally abused in the context of her job as a waitress at a popular brunch restaurant compared to getting spat on and slapped as an agreed activity with a client in the context of sex work. “You can imagine in which case my hourly rate was higher; you can imagine in which case I felt more violated.”⁴ Through her writing, Giovannitti offers a nuanced and thought-provoking portrait of sex work, which focuses both on the vulnerability and the agency of those who work within the industry and allows us a better

understanding of the complex power dynamics at play. It is both deeply revealing and humanising while simultaneously holding a mirror up to the reader and asking us if we consent every day. Coercion exists everywhere but perhaps we fail to identify it in different areas of our own lives, projecting our coercion on to others instead.

Of course, the book does not just focus on sex work. Giovannitti is an artist, and her knowledge is vast and impressive. The book includes a range of art, poetry, personal essays, and other forms of expression which she references throughout and uses to build and contextualise her arguments. One of the most compelling themes is the author's study of the intersection between art and sex, artwork and sex work and the way women workers are viewed in both. Using examples like the artwork *Untitled* by Andrea Fraser, in which the artist films herself having sex with an unidentified art dealer who paid an undisclosed amount to participate in the work and have a copy of the video, Giovannitti forces the reader to ask where the line between artwork and sex work is drawn, prompting the reader to interrogate the power dynamics that exist in the art world and asks us what implications that has on the commodification of desire. Her own view is clear:

But in the end what makes Fraser's work art, and not a crime, is only that she calls it art, that she has a pre-existing, monied audience who will treat it as such, and that she has enough institutional clout to make her an unappealing legal target. I'm not criticizing, the same is true for me.⁵

She also highlights some of the basic financial dynamics of the relationship between art and sex arguing persuasively that "for all the hemming and hawing of what makes something art versus pornography, the answer is simple: the sale price. Art is just more expensive."⁶ Other works such as the 1991 artwork *Made in Heaven* by Koons highlight the difference between the male and the female experience, highlighting how female sexuality is so often weaponised against us.

Giovannitti addresses these themes in an incredibly humanising way and in so doing, captures the reader completely. Her debut is well worth a read, whether you agree with every analysis and conclusion that the author herself comes to, the journey she takes you on to get there is eye-opening and worth the time.

Endnotes

¹ Sophia Giovannitti. 2023. *Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex*. London, Verso, pg.1.

² Ibid, p.7.

³ Ibid, p.58.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p.48.

⁶ Ibid, p.118.

Book Review

What is Antiracism and Why It Means Anticapitalism

Arun Kundnani

Verso

Eamon Rafter

142

Acts of individual racist discrimination and abuse remain common but they are not the primary means through which racial domination is effected. Neoliberalism has given racial capitalism ways to organise itself without the need for explicit vocabulary or attitudes of white supremacy. Neoliberal racism operates through the hidden hand of property ownership and the iron fist of security agencies - Arun Kundnani ¹

On April 20, 1968, Enoch Powell spoke at a small meeting of Conservative Party activists in a Birmingham hotel, where he called for the remigration of a million or so Asian, African, and Caribbean people then living in the U.K. His often quoted ‘rivers of blood’ speech warned that ‘in fifteen or so years’ time, the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.’² The speech, which denounced the post-war consensus on race relations, led to demands for immediate expulsions and racist attacks in the streets. To limit any reputational damage, Powell was sacked from his position as Shadow Defence Secretary and would never again hold ministerial office.

But his views remained influential within the Conservative Party, with broad acceptance of his immigration control agenda culminating in Edward Heath's Immigration Act of 1971. This removed the right of those not born in the U.K., unless already legalised, to settle in the country. It also set the terms for British emigration policy into the future. Heath's act has never been repealed. Indeed, every leader of the major political parties has offered 'reassurance' to the public that they would continue to support strong controls on immigration ever since - implicitly meaning controls on non-white immigration. Liberals and conservatives often formally support antiracist initiatives, but they preside over societies that are themselves deeply racist. Exposing these contradictions is at the heart of Kundnani's important new book. He uses the above example to remind us that the official critique of racist incitement now championed by liberal governments, runs parallel to the development of neoliberalism with its poverty, its inequality, and its border security apparatus. While presenting a formal denunciation of racism, the political establishment continue to define Third World 'communal values' as an issue to be managed. Meanwhile, borders have increasingly become a 'new object of political contestation and an arena of racial meaning'. Brexit was a later articulation of this process, and through a historical reading, Kundnani sets out to

deconstruct the myth of liberal antiracism, arguing that genuine antiracism must be anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist.

Myths of liberal antiracism

In his account of the development of liberal antiracism, Kundnani examines the ideas of theorists such as Magnus Hirschfield, Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas and Gunnar Myrdal, tracing the emergence of the concept of racism in the post Second World War arena. Hirschfield saw racism as a failure of public reason. Racist beliefs were seen as irrational, which in turn led governments to implement racist policies. A racist was defined as a bad person, while racism was viewed as a moral failure, a departure from the normal functioning of society and a descent into extremism. Reason and education are then offered as the correct response to build tolerance and remedy these moral failings. Kundnani points out that had Hirschfield explored how racism functioned structurally in Germany's African colonies, he might have come up with a different understanding of racism as an essential feature of colonising capitalism.

Gunnar Myrdal's 'An American Dilemma', published in 1944, is cited as a key text for how liberal antiracists

would attempt to solve the issue of racism in the U.S. He defined racism as essentially a matter of misguided beliefs and values in the minds of white Americans in contrast with the embrace of egalitarian values. Change could happen by moral conversion and self-healing that included the acceptance of equality for African Americans. This, in turn, would allow the U.S. to demonstrate the superiority of its values to the world.

Kundnani highlights the characteristics of this liberal antiracism as follows:

- A focus on individual racial attitudes, feelings, and beliefs to the exclusion of social and economic structures.
- A narrowing of the question of racism to the white, black relationship.
- A faith in education and other forms of public rationality as remedies for racism.
- A belief that economic hardship makes racist prejudice more likely.
- An assumption that moral progress is guaranteed by the excellence of US core values.

- A claim that US liberalism offers a universal ethos for the world.
- A separation of domestic antiracism from international struggles against racism, colonialism, and imperialism. And above all,
- A view of liberal government institutions and ruling elites as leading the way in antiracist progress.

Racism as a structure

While liberal antiracism was being outlined in the U.S. and Europe, a radically different version was being expressed in the places that Europe had colonised, and this is a primary focus for Kundnani. He describes European colonialism as ‘a vast system of legalised pillaging enshrined by racism and upheld by cannon and cavalry’. His discussion of the Marxist confrontation of colonialism covers a lot of ground with significant analysis of the writings of M.N. Roy, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Joshua Nkrumah, Claudia Jones, Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, Stuart Hall, and A. Sivanandan. Though I cannot do justice to the detail here, it is important to reference the key themes that emerge, as racism gets collectively

defined as a key structure within imperialism and capitalism. C.L.R. James is a particularly important reference for Kundnani's analysis of racism as a structure, rather than as a set of beliefs and attitudes. James was born in Trinidad in 1901 and came to England in 1932, where he became a political activist and anti colonial organiser. Through this work, James came to see racism as a structure of generally observed social rules and policies that enabled social exploitation. This was not a denial that individual racist attitudes existed, but that they were fundamental. James argued that racial discrimination practised by the Nazis against the Jews was also practised by European colonial powers in Africa and elsewhere. Prejudice where it existed, he believed, was an effect of the structure rather than its cause.

In his 1938 book, 'The Black Jacobins', an examination of the Saint-Domingue revolution, James adapted Marx's base/superstructure analysis into a structural analysis of racism. The conclusion that Kundnani draws is that if racism is essentially structural and working at a deeper level than individual prejudice, then antiracism must involve radical collective action to transform societies rather than education to transform individual attitudes. As a Marxist, James focused on the relationship between

economic interests, cultural attitudes, and political organisation, but as Kundnani says, he also had to 'blacken' the orthodox European version of Marxism itself.

Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon were also Caribbean writers who took the relatively new concept of racism and refocused it on social structures rather than mental attitudes. These writers drew on the history of Caribbean slavery and its aftermath – and they were influential in the association of racism with structural analysis and the implications for Third World peoples. A real contribution of Kundnani's book is to restore the importance of these neglected writers to the Marxist tradition. The author highlights, for example, how Césaire, from Martinique, brought a new understanding to the structural relationships between colonialism, racism, and fascism in his 1950 book, 'Discourse on Colonialism', arguing that European fascism really began with European colonialism. When the colonisers claimed to be spreading modern liberal values to less developed people, underlying all this was a structural racism, which was denied by the apologists of contemporary liberal states.

Frantz Fanon, who had been a student of Césaire in turn took up the argument that

146 racism was not a psychological flaw, but that colonial countries were racist, even if only a minority of whites expressed racist beliefs. He believed that military and economic oppression legitimises racist beliefs by representing indigenous people as inferior. This, then, is an element of the larger systematic oppression which operates through a deeper structure of inequality that changes over time. In the case of Algeria, Fanon saw that the structure had been established in the nineteenth century when the European settlers took over the most productive land and expelled the native population. In his books 'The Wretched of the Earth' and 'Black Skin, White Masks', Fanon exposed the ways in which racist domination was able to hide itself in economic processes like land ownership and international trade rules. There is no longer a need to constantly assert the racial supremacy of white elites, when the rigour of the economic system continues the domination without the constant need to vocalise this domination. Most significantly, Kundnani demonstrates that because liberal antiracism has nothing to say about the economic inequalities between nations brought about by imperialism, it absolves the institutions most responsible for racist practices. The radical alternative to liberal antiracism, as he points out, emerges from James,

Césaire's, and Fanon's linking racism to the structures of colonialism through the idea of structural racism.

Racial capitalism

The concept of 'racial capitalism' is also central to Kundnani's argument, as he believes that structural racism is a product of the economics of exploitation rather than the psychology of animosity, and here, he references the ideas of Martin Luther King, Jamil Al Amin, and Claudia Jones. King had argued that racism in the U.S. was a structural form of oppression that was comparable to European colonialism elsewhere. Al Amin saw the black population of the U.S. as surplus to a capitalist and racist system, defined by Kundnani as, a 'carceral, economic, police and military system of violence.' Being surplus to the needs of capitalism also means being vulnerable to violence and deportation.

The concept of racial capitalism emerged most clearly from apartheid South Africa. Cedric Robinson in the U.S. in his 1983 book 'Black Marxism', argued that all capitalism was racial capitalism and that racism had always run deep in western culture. Kundnani quotes the antiracist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore to support this, saying, 'Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it', but

also that racism changes over time with changes in economies, social structures and the challenges that are made to these systems of oppression'. Kundnani then concludes that, if this is the case, antiracism must address itself to the time and the specific system in which it finds itself. Kundnani also applies these ideas to the British context through the writings of Stuart Hall, who argues that racist attitudes derive from capitalism's international division of labour, rather than causing it. Among others things, neoliberalism was, therefore, a reaction to radical anti colonialist and antiracist challenges, as capitalism sought to regenerate the older structures of racism in new forms.

These developments reached a peak with The War on Terror which was enacted from 2001 on what Kundnani calls 'surplus populations.' He describes a series of displacements in which Muslim 'extremists' stood in for the Palestinians, who stood in for surplus populations in general, as the 'savages at the frontiers of civilization'. An essentially racist project was initiated to secure the civilized world from the menace of savage violence. Israel's colonisation of Palestine is seen here as a microcosm of the broader U.S. led imperial structure which operates as a globalised racism. Another element of this is the militarised policing of the

urban dispossessed as racial capitalism characterises them the 'undeserving poor'. Especially in the U.S. drug enforcement and mass incarceration became the weapons of 'broken windows policing' as the failure of these surplus populations to adopt neoliberal norms were met with violent attempts to contain and control them.

Racism and neoliberal borders

The conclusion of Kundnani's analysis focuses on the boundaries between super exploited workers in the global South, unfree migrant workers, and 'freer' citizen workers as the essential racist borders of neoliberalism. Through neoliberal policy making, racial capitalism has found new ways to organise itself to uphold the pressures of the market. In the 21st century this is done through the intensified brutality of racially coded bordering, incarceration, policing and war, and state militarisation, as crossing borders without authorisation transgresses the racial ordering of the neoliberal system. Put slightly differently, as 'surplus populations' are of no value to neoliberal markets, they are subject to law and order, security borders and national security.

The more the contradictions of this system are caught up in the financial, ecological and health crises of our time, the more the state deploys racist violence and ideology to preserve control.

So Kundnani's great contribution is to show how liberal antiracism has failed, as it has been co-opted by the forces of neoliberalism and how the only way, we can move beyond this is to 're-energise the alternative traditions of radical antiracism' which he so eloquently outlines in this book. This means the struggle against capitalism must also be a struggle against racism. The reenergisation he speaks of is in the tradition of socialism, but its flag, he says, is a darker red. As he definitively puts it:

'To be antiracist means working collectively with organisations to dismantle racist border policing, carceral and military infrastructures. It also requires a commitment to the international redistribution of wealth'.

¹ All quotes in italics from Arun Kundnani. 2023. *What is Antiracism and Why It Means Anti capitalism*. London & New York, Verso.

² J. Enoch Powell. 1968. *The Papers of Enoch Powell*.