

# Review: Maurice Coakley, *Ireland in the World Order: A History of Uneven Development*

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Maurice Coakley, *Ireland in the World Order: A History of Uneven Development*  
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There has been a flowering of left wing writing about Ireland in recent years but books that come from an explicitly Marxist position are less frequent. Maurice Coakley's book, *Ireland in the World Order*, is a brilliant addition to the latter category and deserves to be widely read.

The focus of the book is the historical legacy that led to the under development of Irish capitalism. This involves a challenge to two dominant forms of thinking that permeate conventional discourse.

The first sees capitalism as purely a market based system that develops autonomously once the shackles of custom are removed. Modernisation theory assumes that the growth of productivity in agriculture normally leads smoothly to a transition to investment and manufactur-

ing. This is only blocked when the internal culture or value system of a country puts a premium on traditional forms of behaviour. Once countries enter the phase of manufacturing, they start to trade and, according to the classical economist David Ricardo, find a 'comparative advantage' and begin to specialise in particular areas.

Against this benign scenario, Coakley argues that capitalism is characterised by uneven development. Far from a smooth transition, some areas of the global economy can be thrown into backwardness through their relation to others. Underdevelopment is not a natural, original state - but a product of interaction with other states and economies.

The second blind spot, that Coakley challenges, is the playing down of colonisation. The 'revisionist school' of Irish history arose as a challenge to a simplistic tale of 800 years of oppression. Sometimes, as in the case of the early Paul Bew, for example, this had a progressive dimension, as it focussed on the class divisions in the Irish nationalist 'community'. But against the backdrop of the armed conflict in the North, revisionist historians implied that Britain played a progressive role in Ireland and that violence arose from atavistic, fanatical nationalists who stoked up sectarian divisions. In this scenario, for example, the 1798 rebellion was portrayed as a sectarian war against Protestants in Wexford. If Britain was involved in some unfortunate events, it was the result of certain policy mistakes rather than its role as a colonial power.

The main part of Coakley's book is devoted to a Marxist analysis of impact of colonisation and the focus is firmly on the

underlying social relations of production and the resulting impact on literacy and legal relations. His book is the first to link this analysis to the wider Marxist literature on the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

One of the key writers in this area was Robert Brenner who locates the transition in the rise of productivity in agriculture. Brenner suggested that the Black Death in the 14th century led to a crisis of population and this in turn affected the balance of class forces in the countryside. In Eastern Europe, there were large peasant rebellions which were crushed and a 'second serfdom' took place, where even heavier demands were made on a defeated peasantry. In France, peasant resistance was more successful and a system of subsistence agriculture was established. In Britain, neither the peasants nor the lords won, and instead a compromise was achieved. Serf obligations were reduced and landlords had to rely more on renting of land and hiring of labour. This in turn created an environment where wealthier peasants sought to improve agricultural productivity. As these agrarian capitalists improved their techniques they produced surplus food for the market and 'freed up' labour for migration to the towns. Through this long drawn out process, capital was accumulated and eventually found its way into domestic industry and, later, manufacturing.

Why did a similar process not occur in Ireland?

Coakley argues that the general crisis of feudalism in the fourteenth century had a very different impact. Ireland and England were both conquered by French speaking knights in the 11th and 12th centuries. In the South and East of Ireland, they established a manorial economy, based on intensive arable agriculture. Linked to this was a substantial merchant community that arose from English settlement.

However, by the 14th century most of this broke down and the English settlement was confined to a tiny Pale.

Traditional nationalists explain this transition by asserting that the 'invaders' became more 'Irish than the Irish themselves', as if the inherent attractiveness of Irish culture won them over. Coakley, however, argues that the 14th century crisis of feudalism led to a breakdown of solidarity within the settler population as the lords sought to make greater impositions on the non-Gaelic peasantry. This led to a flight of these peasants to the Gaelic areas and the lords were then forced to make greater concessions to the Gaelic speaking pastoralists who surrounded their outposts. The decay of the manorial economy also had a detrimental effect on cities, with Dublin declining from 20,000 - 30,000 in the late thirteenth century, to below 6,000 in 1476. By the end of this period, therefore, Ireland was characterised by two economies. On one hand, there was a tiny Pale which had an arable land economy but where there were no English style yeomen - prosperous tenants who sought to improve agricultural productivity. On the other hand, there was a much larger Gaelic economy, based on pastoral farming, where there was little individual ownership of land; little use of money; and where the chiefs were unable to centralise power.

The Tudor monarchy in London sought to build a centralised state in the British Isles and adopted a policy of 'surrender and re-grant' to get Gaelic chiefs to accept English laws on land ownership. The chiefs were willing to follow such a policy as it freed them from wider clan restrictions. The Tudors also increased their use of mercenaries to boost their power. But despite these changes they were unable to fundamentally alter the social relations of a Gaelic pastoralist economy. The chiefs

may have wished to gain greater autonomy from clan relationships but were bound into a system of alliances and subject to pressure from other elements of Gaelic society. As tensions grew in Europe between Spain and England, the Northern clan chiefs went into open rebellion and this spread throughout the island in the nine year war between 1594 and 1600. The Elizabethan and Cromwellian conquests represented not only a defeat for the clan chieftains but the forcible imposition of new property relations and a new legal code by a rising colonial power.

The longer term effects of this conquest meant that Ireland developed in different ways to Scotland and Wales. A third of its population were lost in the wars of conquest. Catholic ownership of land declined from 80 percent in 1600 to just 14 percent in 1703. Greater restrictions were imposed on Irish involvement in global trade and this led to the wiping out of older urban merchant populations. Crucially, the type of agrarian capitalism that Brenner had pointed to never occurred. No 'yeoman' class of rich peasants emerged as a buffer between a landed gentry and poorer peasants. The English conquerors could integrate the local elite in the Pale and the landed aristocracy into their power structures - but that was as far as it went. In Scotland and Wales by contrast, there was far longer time frame to integrate local elites and sub-elites and give them a cut in the growing colonial trade. The Penal laws, which restricted the leasing of land and prevented the 'free' buying and selling of land, created a significant obstacle. It meant there was no incentive for capital investment to raise productivity. Moreover the decline of the Irish population meant that surviving peasants had greater leverage and were able to maintain communal forms of living and work sharing. In brief, capitalist relations in agriculture did not

develop.

Coakley goes to great lengths to give a 'non-reductionist' version of Marxism, emphasising the interaction of literacy and legality in the emergence of early capitalism. Sometimes, there is a slight tendency to downplay the sheer economic dislocation and the export of potential capital to Britain. The focus on English attempts to establish a 'hegemonic' relationship via local elites to the wider population is also somewhat over done as the main instrument of rule was brute force. Nevertheless, Coakley provides a good explanation of the long term effects of colonialism on Irish development.

Moreover, Coakley does not assume that there was an original Irish nation that lay in waiting - ready to be awoken by a few brave fighters. He sees national separatism as arising from the interaction between the spread of mass literacy and education - which resulted from the growth of capitalist relations - and the experience of uneven development. In particular, the Great Famine of 1847 revealed the contradiction in Irish society as the landed aristocracy engaged in a strategy of maximising surplus extraction - without any attempt to re-cycle that wealth into sustained development. In its aftermath, the rise of the Land League paved the way of for a movement that would eventually challenge for Irish independence. It might be argued that the United Irishmen- with its explicitly bourgeois leadership- had created a nationalist discourse earlier but Coakley's overall point about how nationalism arose from an experience of uneven development still stands.

The most interesting section of the book is titled 'Legacies of uneven development', and here there are some ambiguities. But first it is best to acknowledge a fundamental agreement in approach - namely that there is a legacy of coloni-

sation that the Irish left have to grapple with. This legacy has two main elements.

The first is the question of development itself. No serious left wing force can emerge in Ireland that avoids the social memory of conquest and dispossession. Evoking those memories and turning them against the appalling concessions that the Irish state grants to multi-nationals must be a vital element of the armoury of the left. After the jailing of the Rossport Five, for example Socialist Worker produced a very popular placard, 'Michael Davitt fought the Landlords: Now we fight the corporations'. We did that because we understand the importance of social memory in a country that had been colonised.

Moreover, it is not just a question of memory. When 300,000 have been forced to emigrate and where unemployment stays stubbornly at 14 percent, there is clearly an issue about the overall development of Irish society. There is a historic pattern whereby Irish capitalism can achieve temporary success but is unable to provide jobs on a sustained basis for its population. This specific failure is expressed today in a deference shown by the political elite to foreign capital, and to global finance in particular. One can read the saga of the bank bailout as both an effort to salvage Irish capital and a weak response to ECB demands to sacrifice their own population - and even their own capitalism - for the benefit of EU banks.

The other key legacy of colonisation is the partition of the country. This impacts on politics in a variety of ways - not least the manner in which it allows elites to pose as defenders of their 'community'. The institutionalisation of sectarianism in Northern Ireland creates an ideal ground for the imposition of neoliberal policies. Each attack - whether on health services cuts or through the amalgamation of schools - is framed in terms of which

community gains or loses. By inscribing sectarian division into the very structures of the state, the Protestant, Catholic and multi-national capitalists all gain from a low wage economy and, increasingly, this is used as a lever against the working class throughout the island. Moreover, partition allows the ruling class in the South to pose as representatives of the nation. In the past, they used green flag rhetoric to cement a unity around the 26 county state. Nowadays, they use a more vacuous peace rhetoric to make the same claim.

Coakley's main concentration is on economic underdevelopment and he raises the issue of how the left should relate to this particular legacy.

In the past, some of the left argued that the South was merely a 'neo-colony' and that its ruling class was only a 'comprador class' who mediated the country's subordination to foreign capital. This view totally underestimated the determination of the Irish state to foster and support the expansion of an indigenous Irish capitalist class. It fitted with a rhetoric that saw Irish republicanism as the primary vehicle for left wing advance. The IRA, it was argued, was fighting against the direct colony in the six counties and the struggle had to 'spill over' to the South by means of a left nationalist rhetoric. Today, however, the ethos of the Southern establishment has 'spilled over' into the leadership of Sinn Fein. Gone is all talk of overthrowing the Southern state and instead, the backroom talk is of a possible future coalition with Fianna Fail.

Maurice Coakley does not characterise the South as a neocolony but instead points to the 'limits of Irish independence'. He argues that Ireland currently functions as a 'bridge economy' between the US and the EU and that the Irish rich grew rich from operating as 'brokers' within the circuits of North American capital. On the

first point, he is absolutely correct. The initial success of the Celtic Tiger stemmed from a huge influx of US capital seeking markets in the EU. As the Apple case shows, US capital was offered various scams to help them avoid tax in return for a modest investment in manufacturing jobs. But it is not correct to describe Irish capitalists simply as ‘brokers’. This is to misunderstand the long-term Fianna Fail project for shaping the 26 county state, and to misread the basis of an informal alliance it forged with the trades union leaders.

Essentially, Fianna Fail was formed from those sections of the republican movement who wanted to achieve full political and economic independence for the South. They used a left wing rhetoric in the 1920s that was more radical than the modern Sinn Fein ever used. But their primary purpose was to lay the foundation for the expansion of indigenous capital. To gain control of the state, they forged a national development bloc with sections of Irish labour to defeat those who were content to accept Ireland’s role as a neo-colony of Britain. Unlike some other national liberation movements in the developing world they did not resort to state capitalist methods to foster a development strategy, preferring instead to foster private capital by means of state subsidies. In the 1930s, they deployed a strong protectionist strategy and modest state inter-

vention in the economy to create a space for native Irish capitalism. But when protectionism reached its limits, they turned to a different strategy, after 1958. Essentially, they sought to develop Irish capital by forging an alliance with multi-nationals. As long as the latter was content to use Ireland as a platform for exporting elsewhere, Fianna Fail could point to a degree of development. The relative success of this project allowed them to continue a hegemonic relationship with the leaders of Irish trade unions.

However, the historic weakness of Irish capital and the instability of the global economy have undermined this strategy. What we are witnessing today is a failure of capitalism in Ireland as whole, or to put it more precisely, the failure of a model of development based on cultivating native capital and its links with foreign capital. Irish society is paying dearly for this failure but the solution does not lie in returning to another attempt at developing either private or state led capitalism. It lies in a break with capitalism itself. Coakley seems to agree with this. He points to the inherent instability of modern global capitalism and the role that the EU plays as a protection racket for the wealthy. But his conclusions in terms of ‘asserting sovereignty’ and having Ireland play a more active role in ‘re-structuring Europe’ are far weaker than his analysis.