

## “All hail the mob!”

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I was ten years old in 1966, when Ireland celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising. The atmosphere of jubilation, the triumphalism, the cosy relationship between the church and the state created, what I'd call, a naive nationalist narrative, uncomplicated, for example, by the role of labour in the revolution, by James Connolly's communism or by any of the later revisionist critiques of Pearse and the other leaders. The commemoration was, in fact, a powerful martyrology that turned the head of a ten year old. In those days boys played Cowboys and Indians after school. But in 1966 we played Irish and English instead, and though we were all happy to die for Ireland numerous times we made sure that the other side died more often. One of my friends was an actual English boy, and even he resented the fact that we always wanted him to play the enemy. He wanted to be on the Irish side too. For some bizarre reason, despite defeat and the execution of the leaders, we saw the Irish as the victors – such was the atavism of the time.

I was selected from my class of eight pupils in our tiny primary school, to give the commemorative reading of the Proclamation Of The Republic on Easter Monday 1966. I learned it by heart, moved by the rhetoric which was, in effect, my first experience of political poetry, aside from the ballads and songs of rebellion that everyone knew in those days. I was a child, with no experience of literature: it carried me with it. I was ready, at ten, to fight for Ireland.

I delivered my reading before a crowd that included our much-loved family doctor who, during the War of Independence, had fought in a flying column and had taken part in the famous Kilmichael ambush. At parties he would sing the famous song:

Whilst we honour in song and in story  
The memory of Pearse and McBride,  
Whose names are illumined in glory  
With martyrs who long since have died,  
Forget not the Boys of Kilmichael,  
Those brave lads so gallant and true,  
Who fought 'neath the green flag of Erin  
To conquer the red white and blue.

As it happens, Kilmichael is probably the most controversial engagement of the entire War of Independence with claims by some historians that

the commandant of the column executed wounded British prisoners. Subsequently, the British would burn Cork City in revenge.

The Proclamation that Pearse read from the steps of the General Post Office on Easter Monday 1916 declared “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies”. The text derives, of course, from an anti-colonialist narrative of “possession by the foreigner”, so “ownership of Ireland” is to be glossed simply as a proclamation against foreign control. But a young boy, the son of a man who owned a mere eleven acres of land (4.4 hectares), read it differently. To me and people like me it was a proclamation of equity if not equality. I read it together with the promise that the republic would guarantee “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens [...] cherishing all of the children of the nation equally” (*Proclamation of the Republic*, 1916).

But what sort of a nation was, in fact, created by the rebellion and the famous victory over the forces of imperialism? In the immediate aftermath of the War of Independence and Civil War, the economy of the country was in a weak state with very high unemployment levels. This crisis was an opportunity for the new Irish government to distinguish itself from the British colonial administration – memories of the Great Famine of 1845-1852 still haunted the people. But ominously, the response was brutal austerity for the poor and tax breaks for big farmers and industrialists; the re-introduction of the seven day working week for agricultural labourers after the government had assisted the ranchers in breaking a labourer’s strike; and huge wage and pension reductions. Then the harvests of 1923 and 1924 collapsed. Between austerity and the failed harvests the result was something very close to famine<sup>1</sup>. There was widespread malnutrition, particularly in the west, where at least 10 deaths from starvation were recorded. The responsibility of British government policy in Ireland in creating the conditions for the Great Famine was a major plank in the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Free State, so this hunger was particularly shameful, and, unfortunately, an omen of things to come. Far from being governed on behalf of the people, it seemed the priority of the new state would be the protection of a new Catholic elite which had risen to replace the old Protestant one. It was a change of confession rather than of politics.

The new state had laid down its markers. In the struggle between labour and capital, the state would favour capital. In the struggle for survival there was always the boat to England or America and malnutrition and even starvation were still weapons of domination in the class war. Anyone examining the history of the years from 2008 to the present would note the striking similarities – austerity, wage and social welfare cuts, anti-labour legislation, tax reductions for big business, evictions and repossessions. There were no banks to be

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <<http://irishhistorypodcast.ie/1925-irelands-forgotten-famine/>> (05/2018).

bailed out in 1925, of course. But the trivial concept of an economy as a set of household accounts held sway then as now, and the government sought to balance the books and minimise debt. In addition, as Conor McCabe points out in his book *The Sins Of the Fathers* (2014 [2011]), the Irish economy was managed as an outlier of the British one, to the benefit of a class of middlemen (traditionally called *gombeen* men) who were extremely influential in the new political dispensation. McCabe calls this class the *compradors*, in a nod to the role of subaltern enablers of colonial exploitation in Latin America.

Connolly spelled it all out, more or less as it came to pass: "If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle [...] England would still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers, through the whole array of commercial and individualistic institutions she has planted in this country" (Connolly 1897). Certainly, the subaltern state of mind continued to rule, arguably to the present day, though with different masters.

Thus, in late '20s and '30s, four of my mother's five siblings were forced to leave Ireland to seek work. The fifth followed after the war in the same circumstances. The two sisters became nurses, a profession barred to them in Ireland as children of poor parents who had no connections in the church. The hospitals were all run by the Church, as were the schools, such social welfare services as existed, homes for abandoned women and girls, industrial schools, borstals. The police, judiciary and medical profession collaborated in keeping the Church supplied with suitable patients, prisoners and paupers for this paragon of disciplinary systems. It was hard to escape the Church if you were poor.

My mother's three brothers joined the Royal Navy by the simple expedient of walking into a recruiting office in the "Treaty Port"<sup>2</sup> of Cobh. Their ancestors before them had gone the same road, because Cork Harbour was a major naval port in the British Empire, and a significant waypoint in Britain's colonial trade especially to the West Indies. The country they left behind was a closed one, Catholic in character even if it was, by and large, tolerant of other religions as long as they kept their heads down; dominated by the Catholic hierarchy and the political parties that paid homage to them; poor, under-industrialised and inward-looking.

Most significantly it lacked a strong left – unlike other European countries that had militant trade unions and where socialist or communist parties had considerable influence and sometimes achieved power. The Irish Labour Party made the great mistake of stepping aside in 1918 until the national question was

<sup>2</sup> The ports of Berehaven, Cobh (formerly Queenstown) and Lough Swilly were retained by the British government under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. As deepwater harbours they were regarded as central to the defence of Britain's North Atlantic trade and the Western Approaches.

resolved, and consequently the contribution of labour to the struggle was largely subsumed into the catholic nationalism of the Free State<sup>3</sup>. After the War of Independence the party remained small and the population most affected by post-colonial austerity was never properly politicised. Unionisation was partial, and Catholic “social teaching” (from the Papal Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, 1891) was often the basis of the party’s policies<sup>4</sup> – a compromised position from the outset.

In any event, the role of labour and the left in the struggle for independence was, unsurprisingly, never part of the history curriculum. We were not taught, for example, that one of the first general strikes in Europe occurred in Ireland in 1918, or that many of the Irish Volunteers (later the IRA) were themselves members of left-wing organisations and trade unions. Nor was the rebellion ever placed within the wider international context.

That context is remarkable and is worth recapitulating briefly. The post-war world was a ferment of ideologies. Just in 1919, for example, the year in which Dáil Eireann<sup>5</sup> met for the first time, there was an anarchist uprising in Buenos Aires; the Freikorps carried out their first actions against the Spartacist uprising in Germany and murdered Rosa Luxembourg; Winston Churchill sent tanks to suppress a strike in Glasgow leading to Scotland’s “Black Friday”; a general strike in Seattle brought 65,000 workers out; the first Communist International took place; revolution broke out in Egypt; the Shanghai workers strike against colonialism won against the pro-Japanese government; Benito Mussolini founded the Fascist Party; the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic was established and suppressed; the American Communist party was founded; and Hitler gave his first public speech. That first Dáil was elected by a suffrage that for the first time included women, albeit those over 30. And, incidentally, Ho Ch Minh was drinking with the Sinn Féin delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. There is also a considerable record of “intercourse” between Sinn Féin and the Bolsheviks<sup>6</sup>.

In other words, the stated intention of the 1916 rebels to take advantage of the global historical crisis in imperialism represented by the Great War, was indeed far-sighted. There was exactly such a crisis: the world was in turmoil, anti-imperialism was on the rise, the left was emboldened by the success of the Bolsheviks, the presence on the streets of Europe of men who had fought in the trenches and women who had done their work in their absence made for a volatile atmosphere. Our little piece of anti-imperialist struggle was taking place in a vast global struggle against imperialism and capitalism but this context was entirely missing from the teaching of history in Ireland. In 1966,

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.labour.ie/centenary/story/foundations.html>> (05/2018).

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/irish-labour-party-social-democracy-welfare-state-church>> (05/2018).

<sup>5</sup> Dáil Eireann translates as The Parliament of Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> <<http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/ref/collection/russian/id/765>> (05/2018).

it simply did not come up. The narrative of the Easter Rising and War of Independence we were presented with was one of national struggle isolated from other forces, tiny Ireland struggling alone against the might of empire, occasionally assisted by "gallant allies in Europe" as the Proclamation had it – the Spanish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the French in the eighteenth and the Germans in the twentieth – all watched over by a benign and paternal pope who wished only the best for his faithful Irish flock. These interventions from abroad were always depicted as the result of assiduous diplomacy by Irish rebels, and never as an offshoot of whatever global conflict was taking place at the time. We were not encouraged to admire the French Revolution, for example, even though the revolutionaries twice sent expeditions to Ireland to assist the United Irishmen. The anti-clericalism of the revolution made it untouchable in our confessional state. Wolfe Tone, who was the United Irishman *par excellence* was an uncomfortable hero, not least because he was protestant.

In the years after 1966 when the Troubles in Northern Ireland broke out, the nationalist narrative underwent significant and necessary revisions, but for most of the population of Ireland the Rising and the war that followed it retain the aura of heroism. Nothing in the revisionist armoury has shaken the popular belief that whatever their personal failings, those who fought and those who lent them the assistance of safe houses etc were involved in a titanic struggle. Ordinary people will still point out places where fighting took place, or name their ancestors who took part. It is said that the state qua state harbours a sub-surface embarrassment at the memory of its violent birth best expressed in the recent re-evaluation of "peaceful constitutionalist" John Redmond (who nevertheless encouraged his supporters to volunteer to fight in the bloodbath that was World War I), but if so it is not reflected in the opinions of ordinary people, for whom Redmond is at best an irrelevance by contrast with people like Pearse or later Collins and de Valera.

The persistence of that sense of pride partly accounts for the valorisation by the Left of significant phrases from the declaration – such as the ones I've already quoted – and has given energy to the street protest movements that have sprung up in answer to austerity policies. In particular, in a return of the repressed, the ghost of James Connolly has begun to haunt Irish politics again.

I think I can safely say that the nationalist narrative was so effective that young people of my generation were surprised to discover that we had a socialist past. However, that late-won knowledge of a social history of the rebellion and war has been instrumentalised to good effect by the most recent generation of political activists. In particular, it has been used in polemics against the Irish Labour Party, which has always shunned class-politics and socialism and which, recently, in a rapprochement with the Right, formed coalition governments with both major parties, helping to prop up governments hell-bent on austerity, resetting wage gains, reducing pensions, limiting workers rights and privatising everything left in national ownership. Emigration returned on a huge scale after the

crash of 2008 – 80,000 people left each year for several years. My own two sons have taken the same road as my uncles and aunts to live and work in England.

Labour provided plenty of ammunition for its detractors. In opposition it was a fierce critic of austerity and fought the election by demonising the European Central Bank for having imposed it. But the election slogan “Labour’s Way or Frankfurt’s Way” would return to haunt them as junior partners in government to right-wing Fine Gael when it agreed to measure after measure that made people’s lives worse. It was soundly punished for its strategy. In May 2017, for example, it was languishing at around 5% in the polls and 3% among working class and unemployed people<sup>7</sup>, and this is in no small part due to the blending of socialist history with the national narrative. The Labour Party claims James Connolly as a founding member<sup>8</sup>, leaving itself open to the contrast between its perceived willingness to cooperate with the Right and Connolly’s militancy.

More importantly, Connolly’s radical socialism is mobilised against the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism with its argument that “there is no alternative” to brutal austerity and the destruction of the social state. The tens of thousands of people who march in the so-called “anti-water charge” protests, which are really anti-austerity protests, are called “a mob” and a “rabble” by every media outlet in the country. According to the establishment, these protests are haunted by a “sinister fringe”<sup>9</sup> intent on overthrowing the state – Trotskyists<sup>10</sup> and such like nightmarish monsters. The unstated implication is that a mob of peasants could never understand the great game that is politics; the peasant is better advised to leave such matters to the brilliant minds of his betters. On the other hand, the peasant rightly objects that his “betters” have bankrupted the country and driven his children to emigrate, meanwhile increasing their wealth during a recession<sup>11</sup>.

Paul Murphy, of the Socialist Party and Anti-Austerity Alliance, recently paraphrased Connolly in justification of the mob. It was, he said, “the mob which had abolished religious persecution, established the value of human life, softened the horrors of war, compelled trial by jury, abolished the death penalty”<sup>12</sup>. Connolly’s actual words were:

The mob has transformed and humanised the world. It has abolished religious persecution and imposed toleration upon the bigots of all creeds; it has established the value of human life, softened the horrors of war as a preliminary to abolishing it,

<sup>7</sup> <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/poll>> (05/2018).

<sup>8</sup> <<https://www.labour.ie/centenary/story/foundations.html>> (05/2018).

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.thejournal.ie/water-charges-protests-1765120-Nov2014/>> (05/2018).

<sup>10</sup> <<https://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2014/11/11/a-td-writes-on-trotskyists-water-charges-bin-charges-this-and-that/>> (05/2018).

<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.thejournal.ie/wealth-divide-rte-david-mcwilliams-2339907-Sep2015/>> (05/2018).

<sup>12</sup> <<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/water/irish-water-crisis/protest-gardai-under-protection-from-water-mob-30766307.html>> (05/2018).

compelled trial by jury, abolished the death penalty for all offences save one, and in some countries abolished it for all; and to-day it is fighting to keep the children from the factory and mine, and put them to school. The mob, "the most blind and ruthless tyrant of all", with one sweep of its grimy, toil-worn hand, swept the stocks, the thumbscrew, the wheel, the boots of burning oil, the torturer's vice and the stake into the oblivion of history, and they who to-day would seek to view those arguments of kings, nobles, and ecclesiastics must seek them in the lumber room of the museum [...] All hail, then, to the mob, the incarnation of progress! (1910)

But even as the state persists in treating the protests as the action of a mindless or chaotic mob, it prosecutes overzealous demonstrators, most notably a boy who was fourteen at the time of the alleged crime against whom the state has brought a charge of false imprisonment, equivalent to kidnapping. The case was something of a litmus test for how far the State is prepared to go to discipline protest. But the alleged "mindlessness" of the mob seems to stand in contradiction to the alleged determination of the accused protestors to falsely imprison a minister. If the mob is truly mindless it cannot have the necessary intent to plan such a crime – unless, of course, the unlawful detention was planned by the "sinister fringe" of Trotskyists.

In fact, the "false imprisonment" merely involved preventing the leader of the Labour Party and Tánaiste (or deputy First Minister) from leaving an event she had attended in a working class area. She was safely secured in a variety of police cars for a total of two hours. As it happens neither the boy nor the other demonstrators were armed whereas each of the police cars contained an armed detective. The gravity of the charges was made clear by the judge (in the non-jury Children's Court) who, in handing down the guilty verdict on the boy, noted in passing sentence that "Ms Burton was hit on her head with a balloon, while Ms O'Connell was struck on the back and they had to push through the crowd". He said their personal liberty was restricted by the action of the crowd and in his view both were victims of an assault<sup>13</sup>. So much for a Labour Party which likes to trace its lineage from Connolly and Larkin. Connolly (founder of the Citizen Army and executed by the British for his part in the 1916 rebellion and who is said to have advised his soldiers to "hold onto their rifles"<sup>14</sup>) could be expected to take a baneful view of the concept of water-balloons as weapons in political struggle.

<sup>13</sup> <<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/courts/jobstown-teen-let-off-with-conditional-discharge-after-guilty-verdict-35150951.html>> (05/2018).

<sup>14</sup> The remark comes as part of the following, possibly apocryphal, address to his fellow Citizen Army members: "The odds are a thousand to one against us, but in the event of victory, hold onto your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached. We are out for economic as well as political liberty. Hold on to your rifles". The quotation, however, has no reliable provenance, despite being cited in various forms in numerous biographies of Connolly, and may simply express a view widely held on the revolutionary left at the time, which was ill at ease among nationalists such as Patrick Pearse.

Convicting a teenager of assault with a balloon (even one filled with water) probably represents the nadir of Ireland's decline from state to joke. It is perhaps fortunate that no leprechauns attended the protest; they are a notoriously devious group<sup>15</sup> and most probably their ranks have been infiltrated by anarchists and Trotskyites, who in the Irish political imagination, and in defiance of historical fact, cooperate comfortably in their nefarious activities.

In the meantime Paul Murphy TD<sup>16</sup> and other activists have stood trial for the same protest and have been acquitted following a judge's charge to the jury that the police evidence was unreliable and they should rely on video evidence – which in fact showed that the charges were baseless and that the police were, in the judge's own words, victims of “the frailty of human memory”<sup>17</sup>. An accusation of police perjury was later made in the Dáil<sup>18</sup> but no further action has ensued to date. It should be noted that Murphy and the other activists, all well-known members of various political parties and activist groups with no criminal record and no alleged tendency to violence (other than, perhaps, water balloons) were arrested in dawn raids; the usual procedure, especially in relation to Members of Parliament, is to ask the suspect to call to the police station for questioning. But, for example, a total of six policemen were despatched to arrest Paul Murphy arriving at his house at 6.55 am when the TD was still in bed<sup>19</sup>.

And this extraordinary extension of the state's disciplinary system happens in an international context by contrast with which assault by balloon seems not only trivial but positively whimsical – the Occupy movement, the suppression of the Arab Spring, the gutting of Syriza, the rise of Podemos, but also the new kind of fascism in Brexit, and the old kind in Ukraine, Hungary, Brazil, Marine le Pen in France, not to mention the bizarre phenomenon that is Donald Trump and the alt-Right (really old fashioned fascism if not Nazism) in the USA and elsewhere.

In conclusion, I suggest that the memory of 1916 has functioned in different ways at different times. The occlusion or even elision of the Connollyite tradition was of crucial importance to the Catholic rightwing state of my boyhood, and Connolly figured in 1966 as another martyr for old Ireland, rather than as a revolutionary socialist. However, the different discourses of 21st century politics require a different James Connolly to come forth from the tomb, a Lazarus only too happy to speak the truth. Martyrdom has a bad name nowadays whereas in 1966 the martyrology was central to the narrative of self-sacrifice *pro patria*. But

<sup>15</sup> <<http://www.yourirish.com/folklore/legend-of-leprechauns>> (05/2018).

<sup>16</sup> TD or Teachta Dála means member of Parliament.

<sup>17</sup> <<https://www.rte.ie/news/courts/2017/0628/886201-jobstown/>> (05/2018).

<sup>18</sup> <<https://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/paul-murphy-accuses-gardai-of-perjury-454092.html>> (05/2018).

<sup>19</sup> <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/paul-murphy-arrest-designed-to-damage-water-charge-campaign-1.2096680>> (05/2018).



in 2016, what he had to say about the system of oppression that he struggled against is of much more pressing significance. Today he is mobilised as an activist, theorist and polemicist of the anti-capitalist movement. Thus the Easter Rebellion still resonates, and it will not be so easy for the patriarchy and the apparatus of state to modulate this new resonance – a fact tacitly acknowledged in the intense security and exclusion that surrounded the celebrations of 2016 in Ireland.

Six years ago I published a poem called "Ghost Estate" (Wall 2011), which summarised for me, in an oblique way, the history of the Irish state from its inception to the present. The "ghost estate" of the title is both the empty housing estates that littered the country after the 2008 collapse, and also a trope for the voiding of the nation state, with its rights and protections, in favour of capital. It ends on the line "first phase sold out": the "first phase" is the first republic, the one set up by the revolution, sold out to capitalism, ranchers, compradors and the subaltern enablers of corporate power. The poem has been anthologised, translated and (horror of horrors) set as an examination question in the Leaving Certificate for secondary school students, so I suppose in some sense it must reflect some scintilla of the *zeitgeist*.

"Ghost estate"

Women inherit  
the ghost estate  
their unborn children play  
invisible games  
of hide & seek  
in the scaffold frames  
*if you lived here*  
*you'd be home by now*

they fear winter  
& the missing lights  
on the unmade road  
& who they will get  
for neighbours  
if anyone comes anymore  
*if you lived here*  
*you'd be home by now*

the saurian cranes  
& concrete mixers  
the rain greying  
into the hard-core  
& the wind  
in the empty windows  
*if you lived here*  
*you'd be home by now*

the heart is open plan  
 wired for alarm  
 but we never thought  
 we'd end like this  
 the whole country  
 a builder's tip  
*if you lived here*  
*you'd be home by now*

it's all over now  
 but to fill the holes  
 nowhere to go  
 & out on the edge  
 where the boys drive  
 too fast for the road  
 that old sign says  
 first phase sold out

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