Chapter 4: The Irish bourgeois revolution

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Nations are the creation of a the bourgeois epoch.

In the Communist Manifesto we find their emergence described as follows:

The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralised means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralisation. Independent, or but loosely connected, provinces with separate interests, laws, governments and systems of taxation, become lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class interest, one frontier and one customs tariff. (Communist Manifesto, Progress, Moscow, 1969, p.48).

The creation of the ?nation-state? and nationalist ideology are thus necessary elements of the bourgeoisie?s programme for its own development. The nation-state becomes a key means, a market reservoir, for intensifying and concentrating the accumulation of capital. Thus, for Marx and Engels the ?nation? only has meaning within a definite historical epoch, that of capitalist dominance.

Lenin defended this analysis of the nation-state slogan as specific to the epoch of the ?final victory of capitalism over feudalism?:

What should be understood by that term?the self-determination of nations? Should the answer be sought in legal definitions deduced from all sorts of general concepts of law? Or is it rather to be sought in a historico-economic study of the national movements? Throughout the world the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked with national movements. For the complete victory of commodity production the bourgeoisie must capture the home market? Unity and unimpeded development are of the most important conditions for genuinely free and extensive commerce on a scale commensurate with modern capitalism? Therefore, the tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied. The most profound economic factors drive towards this goal, and, therefore, for the whole of Western Europe, nay, for the entire civilised world the national state is typical and normal for the capitalist period. (Lenin, The Right of Nations to Self Determination, Progress, Moscow, 1976, pp 7-9).

Nation-states with more than one language were possible also but were not so well adapted to the requirements of a developing capitalism; so that a common language did not in itself necessarily mark out a nation and certainly did not create nations. Historically underlying the development of national movements for self-determination is always the tendency of capitalistic development to concentrate and unify as explained in the Communist Manifesto. Such development may in fact be transplanted into the colonies of capitalist nations and in the epoch of progressive capitalism was even capable of stimulating, as in the United States, economic independence from the former colonial power.

Increasingly, as colonial powers came to carve up the entire globe, the possibility of national bourgeoisies
developing in the colonies as effective rivals in the world market was excluded. Thus a dependent or mainly commercial bourgeoisie, tended to predominate in imperialised nations. Necessarily, however, a bourgeoisie emerges in the colony, even if weakly developed. Inevitably it aspires to have the advantages of a national state, even though it may be incapable of or unwilling to struggle for self-determination.

Increasingly in the 20th century, weak colonial or semi-colonial bourgeois classes were unwilling to struggle against imperialism for the national democratic programme?land to the tiller, universal suffrage, Constituent Assembly, civil liberties etc. Sections of the petty-bourgeoisie of town or country, however, took up the fight for such a programme, often securing the revolutionary support of masses of peasants or workers?as recently in Zimbabwe, and Nicaragua. What is significant, however, is that the programmatic heart of those struggles never goes beyond the framework on an independent bourgeois nation state, a framework which can neither fundamentally alter national economic dependence on imperialism nor solve the problems of the working class or peasantry.

Socialists seeking to develop such mass struggle to its fullest potential, that is to give it the goals of working class power and socialism, need nevertheless to distinguish the bourgeois-democratic and the proletarian tasks, even when they are effectively combined in the heat of popular struggle. Such an understanding is the key to effective tactics, but it demands a deep-going and historical understanding of national-democratic movements.

James Connolly?s failure in this task, therefore, cannot be unconnected to his conception of the nation and nationalism. Failing to see the nation as the specific creation of the bourgeois epoch, he increasingly lost sight of the inherent bourgeois class character, and therefore the limits, of the revolutionary nationalist movement which roused the Irish labouring masses against British imperialism. As events after Connolly?s death were to show, mass revolt under the revolutionary nationalist banner only succeeded in installing the bourgeoisie in power in an independent Free State in which the back of the working class was broken by Partition. Neither republicanism nor republican socialism to this day have overcome this confusion about the nation and the limits of the national struggle.

For him the nation was something that existed across all the epochs of Irish history?an essentially metaphysical and un-Marxist idea. He implies that a communal and democratic nation exists long before the bourgeois epoch. This, he argues, is the basis of the national question and independence struggle:

Its real origin and inner meaning lay in the circumstances that the the two opposing nations held fundamentally different ideas upon the vital question of property in land?But, whereas, in the majority of countries now called civilised, such primitive Communism had almost entirely disappeared before the dawn of history and had at no time acquired a higher status than that conferred by the social sanction of unlettered and uneducated tribes, in Ireland the system formed part of the well defined social organisations of a nation of scholars and students, recognised by Chief and Tanist, Brehon and Bard, as the inspiring principle of their collective life, and the basis of their national system of jurisprudence. (Erin?én?es Hope, New Books, 1972, p.6) .

Thus, for Connolly, exceptional circumstances led to the establishment of an Irish nation-state prior to its subversion by English private property. In forging a putative link between the Irish Septs of medieval times and the urban proletariat of his own day, Connolly effectively ignores the reality of a bourgeois nationalist tradition:

As the Irish septs of the past were accounted Irish or English according as they rejected or accepted the native or foreign social order, as they measured their oppression or freedom by their loss or recovery of the collective ownership of their lands, so the Irish toilers henceforward will base their fight for freedom, not
upon the winning or losing the right to talk in an Irish parliament, but upon their progress towards the mastery of those factories, workshops and farms upon which a people?s bread and liberties depend. As we have again and again pointed out, the Irish question is a social question, the whole age-long fight of the Irish people against their oppressors resolves itself, in the last analysis, into a fight for the mastery of the means of life, the sources of production in Ireland. (Labour in Irish History, New Books, 1973, pp 134-135).

His idealised Irish nation therefore includes the modern labour movement, the 18th century revolutionary nationalists and even a 12th century landlord, Laurence O?Toole, Abbot of Glendalough and Archbishop of Dublin, who was chief witness to treaties such as at Windsor between Irish Chiefs and Henry II:

When the revolutionary nationalists threw in their lot with the Irish Land League and made the land struggle the basis of their warfare, they were not only placing themselves in touch once more with those inexhaustible quarries of material interests from which all the great Irish statesmen from Laurence O?Toole to Wolfe Tone drew the stones upon which they built their edifice of a militant Irish patriotic organisation, but they were also, consciously or unconsciously, placing themselves in accord with the principles which underlie and inspire the modern movement of labour. (Labour in Irish History, pp 131-132).

The ?national struggle? he therefore defines as having the same class content across all the epochs?the conflict of communal property with private property in the means of production. By defining the national struggle in these terms, the identity of interest between native capitalism and Irish nationalism is ignored. The class interest of the proletariat is falsely equated with a narrow national interest. Consequently, he envisaged a strategic fusion of socialism and nationalism.

The Irish bourgeoisie is denied at any phase in Irish history. Connolly is forced to re-define revolutionary bourgeois figures, such as Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken and Robert Emmet as leaders of the Irish plebeian masses. These alone are seen as continuing the fight throughout all the ages? against feudal-capitalist and alien private property in the 1000-year journey to a classless society. No progressive content is discerned in the campaigns and programmes of constitutional nationalist leaders such as Grattan or O?Connell at any time, merely writing them off as heretics to the social struggles of the ?real Irish?.

In his most important work, Labour in Irish History, Connolly re-scripts the drama of Ireland?s bourgeois-democratic revolution and re-casts the actors. His over-arching concern is to demonstrate that genuine Irish separatism took its inspiration from the collective interests of the toiling and propertyless masses at all times. This leads him to overlook the bourgeois character and limits of, most notably, the United Irishmen of Tone, Emmet etc., and to dress them in the garb of precursors of socialism.

Failure to acknowledge an indigenous Irish feudalism is followed by a refusal to recognise the emergence of an indigenous capitalist interest. The most that is conceded is that the implanted capitalism became ?disloyal? to British rule because of legislation restricting trade in the 18th century:

Already by the outbreak of the Williamite war in the generation succeeding Cromwell, the industries of the North of Ireland had so far developed that the ?Prentice Boys? of Derry were the dominating factor in determining the attitude of that city towards the contending English kings, and, with the close of that war, industries developed so quickly in the country as to become a menace to the capitalists of England who accordingly petitioned the King of England to restrict and fetter their growth, which they accordingly did. With the passing of this restrictive legislation against Irish industries, Irish capitalism became discontented and disloyal without, as a whole, the power or courage to be revolutionary. It was a re-staging of the ever-recurring drama of English invasion and Anglo-Irish disaffection, with the usual economic background. We have pointed out in a previous chapter how each generation of English adventurers settling upon the soil as owners, resented the coming of the next generation, and that their so-called Irish patriotism was simply
inspired by the fear that they would be dispossessed in their turn as they had dispossessed others. What applies to the land-owning ?patriots? applies also to the manufacturers. The Protestant capitalists, with the help of the English, Dutch and other adventurers, dispossessed the native Catholics and became prosperous; as their commerce grew it became a serious rival to that of England, and accordingly the English capitalists compelled legislation against it, and immediately the erstwhile ?English Garrison in Ireland? became an Irish ?patriot? party. (Labour in Irish History, p.51).

Here we find the emerging class of manufacturing capitalists in Ireland assimilated to the ?ever-recurring? and ?false? patriotism of landowning colons, i.e Anglo-Norman landlords. Certainly Irish capitalism was slow to reach revolutionary conclusions. The point is, however, that viewed historically the developing bourgeoisie of the 18th century in Ireland represented the interests of a new, capitalist mode of production which was necessarily pitched into opposition against feudal and semi-feudal?and colonial?barriers wherever it met them. To portray it in the same terms as the land-holding aristocracy of the previous century is to miss the point that the aristocracy had quite opposite interests to the rising class of capitalists, had no interest in creating a home market, no interest in national independence, no desire for democracy or a Republic, or religious freedom. Moreover, across the continent of Europe in that period it was precisely the bourgeoisie which originated such slogans. The Irish capitalist class may have been, indeed was, at a greater disadvantage but it was nonetheless the rise of this class which provided the conditions for a modern movement for a democratic revolution. It was their rise, too, which created the appetite for the ideas beamed out from the American and French revolutionary ferments 1776-82, 1789-93.

Although forced to acknowledge the existence of capitalism in Ireland as early as the 17th century, Connolly was unable to understand its revolutionary and progressive character in that epoch because of his conception of a superior communal mode of production ruled by a democracy of the toilers. In his Introduction, he makes explicit his unusual focus on labour as the subject of history, as ?making? Irish history:

This book does not aspire to be a history of labour in Ireland; it is rather a record of labour in Irish history. For that reason the plan of the book has precluded any attempt to deal in detail with the growth, development or decay of industry in Ireland, except as it affected our general argument. That argument called for an explanation of the position of labour in the great epochs of our modern history, and with the attitude of Irish leaders to the hopes, aspirations and necessities of those who live by labour. (Labour in Irish History, p.124).

His concern to vindicate the honour of all the exploited propertyless classes on one side, as the ?true? nation across the ages, set against the propertied classes on the other side as the betrayers or false patriots, is a wholly un-Marxist approach to history. Its commentaries on economic and social conditions at several points merely fill in the scene, as it were, for the drama of the toilers in Irish history. Thus, he continues:

Occasionally, as when analysing the ?prosperity? of Grattan?s Parliament, and the decay of Irish trade following the Legislative Union in 1800, we have been constrained to examine the fundamental causes which make for the progress, industrially or commercially, of some nations and the retrogression of others. For this apparent digression no apology is made, and none is called for; it was impossible to present our readers with a clear historical position of labour at any given moment, without explaining the economic and political causes which contributed to make possible or necessary its attitude. (Labour in Irish History, pp 124-125).

His treatment does not systematically distinguish historical epochs and periods or analyse the development of classes in relation to the developing mode of production. The absence of such a method
allows him to intuitively insert labour? s interests as the true content of the national struggle where Marxism has classically argued that it is the struggle of the bourgeoisie for the conditions most favourable to their exploitation of labour and accumulation of capital. From this standpoint, Connolly lumps together the patriotism of the 18th century bourgeoisie with the ?Patriot Parliament? convened by King James II in 1689, and even the ?patriotism? of the Anglo-Norman landlords who joined with native Irish landlords in the 1641 rebellion, as ?ever-recurring? agents of a ?feudalism-capitalist? and ?foreign? system of private property.

His treatment of Swift, Molyneaux and Lucas, who actually prefigured the later bourgeois nationalism of the 18th century, is simply to dispatch them as mere repetitions of Sarsfield who had defended Anglo-Irish and Irish feudal property against the threat of William of Orange.

Of the trio of patriots?Swift, Molyneaux and Lucas?it may be noted that their fight was simply a repetition of the fight waged by Sarsfield and his followers in their day?a change of persons and of stage costume truly, but no change of character; a battle between the kites and the crows. (Labour in Irish History, p.21).

Molyneaux?s attack (1698) on the subjection of the Dublin Parliament of Cromwellian and Williamite interests, Swift?s ?sedition? proposal for the universal use of Irish manufactures (1720) and Lucas? claim for Ireland?s equal entitlement to England?s freedoms (1747-49) all express the development of nascent, capitalist interests in Ireland and their obstruction by English mercantilism in the 17th and 18th century. Their significance is entirely lost here as Connolly presents the transition to capitalism as just another example of English disaffection on Irish soil.

**Eighteenth Century Republicanism**

The rise of colonial bourgeois interests in Ireland under a patriotic flag is incomprehensible for Connolly, for whom Irish patriotism is inherently democratic and rooted in communal values. Instead of acknowledging that Irish patriotism is entirely consistent with the exploitation of Irish labour, Connolly feels compelled to redefine native capitalist interests as the English disease on Irish soil:

The Irish Parliament was essentially an English institution; nothing like it existed before the Norman Conquest. In that respect it was on the same footing as landlordism, capitalism, and their natural-born child?pauperism. England sent a swarm of adventurers to conquer Ireland; having partly succeeded, these adventurers established a Parliament to settle disputes amongst themselves, to contrive measures for robbing the natives, and to prevent their fellow-tyrants who had stayed in England, from claiming the spoil. But in the course of time the section of land-thieves resident in England did claim a right to supervise the doings of the adventurers in Ireland, and consequently to control their Parliament. Hence arose Poyning?s Law, and the subordination of Dublin Parliament to London Parliament. Finding this subordinate position of the Parliament enabled the English ruling class to strip the Irish workers of the fruits of their toil, the more far-seeing of the privileged class in Ireland became alarmed lest the stripping process should go too far, and leave nothing for them to fatten upon.

At once they became patriots, anxious that Ireland? which in their phraseology, meant the ruling class in Ireland? should be free from the control of the Parliament in England. (Labour in Irish History, p.21).

In this way Labour writes off the Irish bourgeoisie as a class opposed to feudal aristocracy or capable of fighting for democracy or independence at any time in Irish history. It concentrates on key political figures in Irish history and draws a line between the constitutional reformers on the one hand (Grattan who entered the Irish Parliament in 1755 and O?Connell, active from 1799 to the 1840s) and the revolutionary democrats on the other hand, Wolfe Tone (1763-98), Robert Emmet (1779-1803), and later John Mitchel
While the reformers are presented as representatives of the bourgeoisie and variously castigated for expressing anti-working class sentiments or being freethinkers, the revolutionaries are seen as instinctively representing the interests of the ?real producers?, the proletariat and peasantry. While a distinction must certainly be made between reformers and revolutionaries, Connolly was quite wrong to ascribe quasi-socialist views and motives to Tone, the United Irishmen or Emmet, or even to deny their bourgeois stamp.

Predictably dismissed, Grattan is seen by Connolly as the bourgeois archetype:

It will be seen that Mr. Grattan was the ideal capitalist statesman; his spirit was the spirit of the bourgeoisie incarnate. He cared more for the interests of property than for human rights or for the supremacy of any religion. (LIIH, p.39).

Certainly, Grattan was not a revolutionary?he was prepared to be rewarded by the Irish ?Commons? for his role in the 1778-82 period; but neither was he the ?spirit of the bourgeoisie incarnate?, or even of the developing bourgeoisie! He was initially a protégé of the aristocratic Earl of Charlemont (1728-99) and ?Grattan?s Parliament? (the House of Commons which took its popular name from him) was hardly more a Parliament of the bourgeoisie than of landowners on his account. By 1772 the English-appointed executive had directly usurped much of the power of patronage formerly in aristocratic hands. The Commons?since 1768 to be ?elected? every eight years?soon saw the rise of the reforming opposition movement. It included many lawyers, led by Henry Flood and joined by Grattan in 1775. This opposition attempted to resist the raising of Irish troops which might be used against the Americans, with whom they had sympathies. This Patriot Party?s programme sought to copy the constitutional reforms won in England, a ?free constitution? for a ?Protestant nation? within a loyal colony. In this context Grattan was a bridging figure attempting to strike a balance between the interests of the propertied classes in Ireland, the landed aristocracy, and the merchant and manufacturing capitalists.

It was the American Revolution of 1775-79 which weakened the British ?mercantilist? policy of restricting Irish trade and required the raising of the Irish Volunteers for the defence of Ireland when Britain withdrew its armed forces for the American war. The Volunteers became a force for reform against the same mercantile restrictions on Irish trade as affected the other colonies. Grattan rowed with this tide and, with Charlemont, sought reforms under the pressure of the increasingly broad-based Volunteers. Free trade, the repeal of Poyning?s Law of 1495 which made Irish Parliaments subject, and the repeal of the 1719 Statute Six of George I subordinating Irish court judgements, were reforms which could have been enforced by the creation of a permanent force out of the Volunteers. But the success of the American Revolution and the re-constitution of the English garrison in Ireland by 1783 presented a formidable challenge to the Irish propertied classes. Instead of having a showdown they accepted a temporary retreat. Indeed, from 1783 the more conservative wing?the aristocracy and conservative elements of the bourgeoisie?defected, and Grattan impotently sought to straddle the divide. But the manufacturing bourgeoisie had yet to stamp its mark on future events.

For Connolly, on the contrary, the Irish bourgeoisie may be written off by 1783. The disarming of the different corps of the Irish Volunteers?by stealth, agreement or the threat and use of force?is for him the final watershed in the separatism of native capitalism as a whole:

? the capitalist class did not feel themselves strong enough to hold the ship of state against the aristocracy on the one hand and the people on the other, they felt impelled to choose the only alternative?viz., to elect to throw in their lot with one or other of the contending parties. They chose to put their trust in the aristocracy, abandoned the populace, and as a result were deserted by the class whom they had trusted, and went down into bankruptcy and slavery with the class they had betrayed. (LIIH, p.32).
In this manner, he dispatches the Irish capitalist class in general. He redefines the whole subsequent period up to 1798 as the convergence of the workers and peasants of Catholic and Protestant religions, independent of and in opposition to indigenous capitalism and all propertied interests, under the banner of a democratic independent Republic in which the social question of the real producers would be solved. With the dissolution of the November-December 1783 convention of delegates of the Irish Volunteers, Connolly effectively ignores the subsequent evolution of the Volunteers into a more republican and revolutionary organisation which was ultimately to fuse with the United Irishmen after 1791.

He also ignores the fact that a parliamentary minority continued to operate as an opposition in Dublin’s House of Commons and that Grattan was among this opposition grouping. The scene is set for his characterisation of a straightforward regrouping of the toilers on one side and the aristocracy on the other, the age-old story: ?The working men fought, the capitalists sold out and the lawyers bluffed?. (LIIH, p.37).

The chapter on the Volunteers is closed in 1783 and the new theme of plebeian democratic republicanism is opened with the ?contemporaneous? founding of the United Irishmen?though it was another seven years before that organisation was founded. He sets out to heighten the contrast between two trends: the Volunteers in the period of the parliamentary reforms of Grattan & Co., as against the subsequent revolution and insurrection led by the United Irishmen.

For Connolly, the possibility of a revolutionary wing of the Irish bourgeoisie was incompatible with his a priori schema. The Irish capitalist class might temporarily model themselves on the French Girondins, but never on the Jacobins. For him, Jacobinism was not a political expression of the bourgeois revolution, but uniquely a manifestation of the toiling masses in their own interest.

By counterposing two supposedly contemporaneous trends in this way instead of recognising that a revolutionary bourgeois movement had yet to assert itself, within the limits and contradictions of development in a colonial Ireland, Connolly strains to deprive the period up to the Act of Union in 1800 of its bourgeois-revolutionary character, the better to deny to the bourgeoisie of his own day any claim on the aspiration for democratic, independent nationhood. His earnest intentions, however, did not cancel the dangers of re-writing history. For, in arguing that the capitalists in 1783 ?sold out? while only the ?working men fought?, he wrongly transposes the substance and goals, represented by both the Volunteers and United Irishmen, from the capitalist class, whose interests they crystalized, to the working class and tenants. The attempt to portray Irish history in these particular class terms wrongly simplifies the actual class relations of emerging capitalism. Hence national secession, secular political organisation, democracy and equality?which he recognises in the French revolution as the war-cries of revolutionary capitalism?are presented in Ireland as generic slogans of Irish labour.

He places specific stress on the question of universal franchise and the role of the ?men of no property?, assiduously portrays Tone as their champion as the basis for demarcating him from the reformers in Grattan’s Parliament. To this unsubstantiated stress he appends a promise of significant property transformations, attributed to the United Irishmen in general and Tone, Thomas Addis Emmet and Robert Emmet in particular.

We are fortunate that Marx made a detailed study of the period from the founding of the Irish Volunteers to the Act of Union. He shows the continuity in the course of events and, in notes which are considerably more detailed than Connolly’s, he also brings out the concrete phases into which the period as a whole may be divided. Early on in these studies, far from ending the history of the Irish Volunteers in 1783, he writes:

At this place, it will be interesting to anticipate the whole history of this Volunteer force, because, in fact, it
is the history of Ireland to the moment when, since 1795, on the one hand, the general popular national and constitutional movement, represented by them, stripped of its merely national character and merged into a truly revolutionary movement, and, on the other hand, the British Government changed secret intrigue for brutal force intended to bring about, and succeeded in bringing about the Union of 1800, i.e., the annihilation of Ireland as nation? (Marx & Engels, Ireland & the Irish Question, Progress, Moscow, 1978, p.173-4).

From its foundation in 1778, due to the removal of the British garrison to fight the American Revolution, until the interregnum following 1883 when the American war ended, Marx describes the Volunteers as follows:

In its first formation the Volunteers, the armed Protestantism of Ireland, embrace all vital elements of all classes? Their first object, emancipation from commercial and industrial fetters which the mere mercantile jealousy of England had thrown around them. Then national independence. Then reform of the parliament and Catholic Emancipation as one of the conditions of National Resurrection! Their official organisation and the disasters of England give them new strength but lay also the germ of their ruin, subordinating them to a weak bigot, aristocratic Whig, the Earl of Charlemont? (Ireland & the Irish Question, p.174).

In spite of the betrayal by Charlemont, when in 1783 in Dublin the Volunteer Convention expressed its demands for ?Free Trade or speedy Revolution? (Napper Tandy), the Volunteers remained important, though weakened, until 1791. Marx refers to it in this period as the ?armed and popular support of the national and reforming opposition (minority) of the House of Commons?

Unlike Connolly, Marx refers to a split between the progressive part and the ?reactionary part? of the Irish bourgeoisie after 1783: ?The aristocratic element and the reactionary part of the middle class withdrew, the popular element prevailing.?

Precisely the same elements of the radical bourgeoisie who had sustained the Volunteers were to found the Society of United Irishmen in 1791. Marx refers not only to Tone, but also to the bourgeois figures in Dublin and more especially in the industrial North-East. At the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 the reforming elements were ?feeble and dispirited? but a ?different race of men ? began to act upon the public?. He refers to John Keogh, ?a strong, rough, sagacious merchant, and men of his stamp? who, in Dublin, ?sent the Catholic nobles flying in slavish dread?. In Belfast ?Neilson, Russell, McCracken headed a Protestant party, which advocated reform but began soon to think of Republicanism? (Ireland & the Irish Question, p.175). With Tone they founded the United Irishmen in 1791. Marx continues, characterising the new wave of agitation in the 1790s as bourgeois-revolutionary, as follows:

From this moment, the movement of the Volunteers merges into that of the United Irishmen. The Catholic question becomes that of the Irish People. The question was no longer to remove the disabilities from the Catholic upper and middle classes, but to emancipate the Irish peasant, for the vast part Catholic. The question became social as to its matter, assumed French revolutionary principles, as to its form, remained national. (Ireland & the Irish Question, p.175).

The ?social? question here is the rights of the tenantry to develop their agriculture as independent producers governed by the market, freed from the parasitic control of the landlords against whom they were pitted, i.e the radical bourgeois programme for the peasantry. Marx was never ambiguous about the strictly bourgeois character of ?French political principles?!

The Volunteers and United Irishmen merged from 1791, with the former in the role of mass organisation, military and political. The movement took on a distinctly Jacobin character as reflected in a manifesto
issued by ?The Irish Jacobins of Belfast to the Public? (Ireland & the Irish Question, p.210). It was the
Presbyterian manufacturers who at this time were the leading element in the North and who openly
supported another Volunteer convention in Dungannon in February 1793. This Convention, not mentioned
in Connolly?s history, rested its support on a mass base exceeding one million. The demands it raised
were still logically connected to those of the reform period, and centred on Catholic Emancipation and
reform of the parliament. At that time, while the total population was some five million, 90
individuals?aristocrats and higher clergy?controlled the ?Commons? majority. The Volunteers and United
Irishmen still sought to work through the minority in the Commons to articulate their demands as long as
possible. Particularly noteworthy here was John P. Curran (1750-1817) who defended the United Irishmen
when repression was stepped up from 1793. Given the nature of the parliament it is clear that the
bourgeoisie lacked political power. The attempts to win reform?broaden representation in the House and
gain parliamentary independence?were driving them towards a showdown with the British state, its Dublin
executive and a reconstructed militia of yeomen led by the conservative aristocracy.

The government?s response was to attempt to buy off the most conservative propertied element of the
Catholics while doubling their coercion against the Presbyterian bourgeoisie in the North, thus splitting the
movement and facilitating the introduction of an Act of Union as a ?final settlement?. This move towards a
Union had been brewing in 1785 in the form of Orde?s Proposals, which aimed to create a common tariff
around Britain and Ireland and to tax Ireland for the maintenance of England?s imperial navy against
French, Spanish and American rivalry. The propositions were dropped?amid a close division in the Irish
Commons and threats from Curran that if passed they would be answered not merely ?by words?. The
Proposals then merged into the ulterior plan for a Union when the determination of the Irish manufacturing
bourgeoisie was broken.

He passes over this stand-off and similarly ignores the manifest opposition of the ?bourgeoises of Dublin?
in the mayoralty ?elections? of 1790 when the manufacturing citizens of the city?s Common Council
rejected eight successive ?handed down? candidates selected by the corrupt aristocratic Privy Council,
and eventually elected their own man, Howison. In the thick of these events was Napper Tandy, whose
?Liberty Corps??made up of the plebeian ranks of the Volunteers in Dublin?Connolly singled out for praise
in the events of 1783 (LIIFH, pp 36-37). While Tandy?s followers were the Irish approximation to the sans-
culottes element in the French Revolution, it is notable that he convened a meeting of ?freemen and
freeholders? to back the election of Howison and turn the newly emboldened Dublin merchants,
manufacturers and the nascent bourgeois peasants (freehold farmers) towards a more militant
republicanism on the lines of the Northern movement. Tandy?s meeting?the substance of whose
resolution was a clear declaration in favour of independence, economic protection and the rule of the
whole citizenry, a resolution to alter the compromising attitude of previous years?was chaired by Hamilton
Rowan (1751-1834), soon to suffer coercion and imprisonment as secretary of the Dublin United Irishmen.

It was events such as these which led to the re-arming of the Volunteers, the foundation of the United
Irishmen and the Dungannon Convention of 1793. The platform was explicitly that of bourgeois democratic
revolutionaries, inspired by the French revolution in particular. The transformation taking place was not a
shift from the bourgeoisie to the workers and peasants, even though the artisans, labourers and tenantry
were a vital popular component, but the crystalizing-out of a revolutionary bourgeois republican method
instead of reliance on parliamentary reform, for the same goals. As Marx put it:

The vain attempt?in 1790-91?of the parliamentary minority against Government corruption proves on the
one hand its increase, on the other the influence of the revolution of 1789. It also shows why, at last, the
foundation of the United Irishmen in 1791, since all Parliamentary action proved futile, and the majority a
Connolly’s version of the origins and nature of the United Irishmen differs considerably in that he sees it as based on a union of workers and peasants in opposition to the aristocracy with the ?middle class? as effectively a null factor or outright betrayer.

The middle-class growing up in the midst of the national struggle, and at one time, as in 1798, through the stress of economic rivalry of England, almost forced into the position of revolutionary leaders against the despotism of their industrial competitors, have now also bowed the knee to Baal?

The Protestant workman and tenant was learning that the Pope of Rome was a very unreal and shadowy danger compared with the social power of his employer or landlord, and the Catholic tenant was awakened to a perception of the fact that under the new social order the Catholic landlord represented the Mass less than the rent roll. The times were propitious for a union of the two democracies of Ireland. They had travelled from widely different points through the valleys of disillusion and disappointment to meet at last by the unifying waters of a common suffering. (Labour in Irish History, pp 52-53).

The French Revolution, Connolly tells us, acts upon the minds of the ?Protestant workers? and their Catholic counterpart. Wolfe Tone comes to the fore in this union of these two toilers? democracies. Tone?s attitude and relation to the bourgeoisie are passed over, simply stressing his total disavowal of any role for the aristocracy and implicitly simplifying Tone?s understanding of the class dynamics of the time. Connolly, after blanking out the bourgeois interest, continues:

It will thus be seen that Tone built up his hopes upon a successful prosecution of a class war, although those who pretend to imitate him today raise up their hands in holy horror at the mere mention of the phrase (Labour in Irish History, p.54).

While he affirms the international character of the thought of the United Irishmen, its American and continental roots and ultimate hopes for a harmony of nations which must first be rooted in freedom to secede, he wrongly assumes this outlook belonged exclusively to the toiling masses??the real people of Ireland?the producers?.

He attempts to show that workers and peasants were the exclusive agents of revolution in ?98 and the subsequent 1803 Emmet conspiracy, particularly by reference to the vital role of ?weavers, tanners and shoemakers? in the Coombe district of Dublin in 1803. Most of these were deeply oppressed at the time and thousands had been unemployed in the years before the first reforms of the 1780s. They were oppressed and exploited by the rent they paid for equipment and the cost of raw materials supplied by big merchants. But in form most of them were of the artisan class, commodity producers, and despite growing attempts to organise themselves in craft unions they still saw their main hope in ending the dead weight of English mercantilism, i.e in national independence and protection. Many of them feared the very idea of industrial revolution, so that while they had definite social interests to express they were in no position to transcend the capitalist system but rather felt the need to free Irish capitalism from the shackles of landlordism and trade restrictions in the hope of improving their own situation.

Connolly presents these forces as equivalent to the industrial proletariat and attributes to them an ?internationalist? attitude to national independence. In this context, Emmet is presented as a champion of political and social emancipation of the working class without any analysis of the political, class content of his politics. He is characterised, therefore, not on the basis of his radical, bourgeois programme but on the basis of the social forces roused in his ill-fated insurrection of 1803. Connolly?s anachronistic picture of the ?working class? only compounds the error. The artisans and the 18th century labourers were not comparable to the industrial workers of a century later whose numbers, organisation and developed antagonism to the employers made them an independent class force in society.
Labour in Irish History opens a chapter on the Untied Irishmen with Wolfe Tone's most quoted words?most quoted because they have become a talisman of Irish republican socialism?.

Our freedom must be had at all hazards. If the men of property will not help us they must fall; we will free ourselves by the aid of that large and respectable class of the community?the men of no property. (Labour in Irish History, p.43).

With this as the central motto, an image of Wolfe Tone as a man utterly opposed to the tradition of the reforming bourgeoisie of 1778-83 is carved out by Connolly. He is depicted as the representative of the toiling producers in pursuit of fundamentally different goals. Connolly quotes from Tone's criticisms of the 1782 Revolution? (in An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland, 1791) such that the reformers might almost appear to be the object of Tone's revolution.

But Tone's polemic is highly qualified. His own development over time from a Grattanite to a revolutionary democrat illustrates the continuity in the rising struggle of the Irish bourgeoisie. Tone refers to some of the reformers as ?leaders [who] were of high integrity and some of consummate wisdom?? Referring to the compromises of 1783, he suggests: ?The minds of men were not at that time perhaps ripe for exertions which a thousand circumstances that have since happened cry aloud for? (McDermott, Wolf Tone and His Times, Tralee, 1968, p.68). This might seem like mere tactical rhetoric during a dramatic turn of events toward more militant republicanism. However, Tone, in the self-same pamphlet, declares his allegiance to Ireland, and to the King, in whose service he would gladly spill his blood (Wolf Tone and His Times, p.70). Defence of the Catholics, moreover, was clearly limited to enfranchisement of the ?Liberal? classes on the basis of which property would be defended:

The wealthy and moderate party of their own persuasion, with the whole Protestant interest, would form a barrier against the invasion of property ? Extend the electoral franchise to such Catholics only as have a freehold of ten pounds per year [and] abolish the wretched tribe of forty-shilling freeholders. (Quoted in T. Dunne, Theobald Wolfe Tone?Colonial Outsider, Cork, 1982, p.31).

Tone had great hopes for the commercial potential of an independent Republic ?abounding in all the necessary materials for unlimited commerce? and ?teeming with inexhaustible mines of the most useful metals? (Wolf Tone and His Times, p.69). These, and not the social questions of the peasantry and the workers, were the axis of his concerns, and burning concerns they were for a bourgeois Irish Jacobin. By contrast, Connolly's method, conspicuously lacking Marx's central concern with the development of the forces of production in history, produces a pessimistic view of the possibility of Irish economic development then and a century later. He denies that it was possible even before the attempt at an Irish bourgeois revolution and again in the context of O'Connell's campaign for the Repeal of the Union.

?the Act of Union was made possible because Irish manufacture was weak, and consequently, Ireland had not an energetic capitalist class with sufficient public spirit and influence to prevent the Union ? this we are certain is the proper statement of the case. Not the loss of the Parliament destroyed Irish manufacture, but that the decline of Irish manufacture ... made possible the destruction of the Irish parliament (Labour in Irish History, p.31).

It is difficult to see how a promised repeal of the Union some time in the future could have been of any use to the starving men of Clare, especially when they knew that their fathers had been starved, evicted, tyrannised even before, just as they were after the Union. (Labour in Irish History, p.80).

Tone, moreover, in 1796, when urging the French to send as large as possible an expedition, was concerned precisely that it would be big enough to inspire ?men of a certain rank as to property [to] at once
declare themselves? (Tone’s Life, edited by William Tone, his son, Vol 2, p.197). In the same work his views as late as 1798, on the question of wholesale confiscation of the aristocracy’s land are revealing. While he observed that the gentry, ?miserable slaves?, ?had furnished their enemies with every argument for a system of confiscation?, along the lines of the radical bourgeois land reform of the French Revolution, Tone argued that it would be ?a terrible doctrine to commence with in Ireland? (Tone’s Life, Vol. 2, p.133). This weighs against even seeing Tone as the most politically advanced representative of the claims of the peasantry to the land. So, what is the meaning of his reference to the ?men of no property??

We believe it is essential to see the reference in its context. It arises in an account, in Tone’s own work (Tone’s Life, Vol. 2, p.46), of his negotiations with Delacroix, a representative of the French government, in March 1796. Delacroix doubted that it was possible to send an army on the scale required to attract the support of ?those men of some property which was so essential in framing a government? (Tone had in mind a Convention including the liberal Catholic Committee on whose behalf he had written An Argument). Delacroix proposed a provisional military government if the invasion succeeded, just in case the Irish middle class did not rally to the French forces. The strong suggestion, in the whole context as explained by Tone himself, is that the rallying of the ?men of no property? was put to Delacroix as a possibility that might further urge him on, rather than as something that was central in Tone’s own preferences. However, even if we ?read? Tone as strategically aspiring for support from the ?men of no property?, this in no way justifies a claim that his programme was defined centrally by their interests. Rather it enhances his political genius as a bourgeois revolutionary in rallying the popular masses for a bourgeois revolution.

In this respect there is probably a similarity between Tone and Robespierre who was quite ready to free French capitalism through the mobilisation of the men of little or no property, even though this caused consternation among more substantial bourgeois elements in France. But in any case, Wolfe Tone’s supposed concern with ?the men of no property? is far from being a theme, let alone a general characteristic, of his political thought. The quotation used by Connolly is the only known reference of its kind by Tone to mobilising the support of the ?men of no property?.

Nineteenth Century Nationalism

Connolly’s evaluation of Daniel O’Connell, ?The Liberator?, echoes his attitude to Grattan. He sees little progressive content in Repeal of the Act of Union as a goal of the national struggle. He poses for O’Connell the stark choice between standing with the English ruling class or the Irish working class and seeks to demonstrate that because O’Connell was anti-working class and anti-socialist in the extreme?which he undoubtedly was?the Repeal agitation was purely a means of diverting the masses from their real interests.

This position derived logically from the influence of Lalor and Leslie for whom the ?legislative question? was nothing more than the outer expression of the land, labour or ?social? struggle. The dismissal of such ?merely political? slogans, incidentally, occurs also in syndicalism, another important influence in Connolly’s thought from about 1902.

Marx and Engels understood the significance of the Union and the struggle for Repeal in the opposite light. While Engels, in particular, identified the manipulative use which O’Connell made of Catholic Emancipation and later Repeal, he also believed that had the fight for them been taken up consistently they could have been won:

If O’Connell were really a man of the people, if he had sufficient courage and were not afraid of the people, i.e if he were not a double-faced Whig, but an upright, consistent democrat, then the last English soldier would have fled Ireland long since? (letter from Engels, 1843, Ireland & the Irish Question, p.45).
Engels acknowledged the importance of the Chartists in backing Repeal during the 1840s, pointing out O’Connell’s dread of such support. In contrast, Connolly appears to be suggesting in Labour in Irish History that labour and Chartism were united in opposition to O’Connell. While this was undoubtedly so in relation to its social and democratic demands, such as on the franchise, it was clearly not so in relation to Repeal. He fails to acknowledge the need for the conditional and conjunctural alliances which this imposed on the emerging working class forces. United action of Chartists in Ireland and Britain is simply counterposed to any consideration of a tactic towards the Repeal movement.

The significance of Repeal, which at its height drew hundreds of thousands together in monster meetings, is expunged by Connolly as he pursues his theme—the anti-working class nature of its leaders. He implies that the masses were deceived into endorsing Repeal partly because they accepted O’Connell’s explanation of the decay of trade as due to the Union? (LIIH, p.93).

In summary, while Engels saw the general slogans of Repeal and Catholic Emancipation as potential detonators for mass agitation and a trigger for other struggles, Connolly saw them as diversionary. To them he counterposed what he perceived as direct demands of the toiling masses. This flowed from the false premise that the latter demands were the real foundation of the Irish question anyway.

The treatment of radical republican movements in the 19th century fits into his overall populist schema. In discussing the Young Irelanders of the 1840s, he argues that the only thing that divided them all from the Repealers was what he described as a purely theoretical divergence over O’Connell’s view that Irish independence was not worth the shedding of a single drop of human blood.

The differences between Repealers and Young Irelanders as a whole are placed side by side with a more fundamental division which he prefers to emphasise between different elements within the Young Irelanders. He divides them into a private property camp and a socialistic one. On the side of private property he places Smith O’Brien and Gavan Duffy, while Lalor and John Mitchel are placed in the socialist wing—a false distinction which overlooks the petit bourgeois strivings of the rural tenantry for proprietorship, as we saw in Chapter 2.

The putschist wing of the Young Irelanders is dismissed as adherents of private property concerned only with their merely political demand for independence. Approved are the demands of the other wing, who called for land to those who work it. Connolly upholds Lalor’s view that the slogan of an independent republic amounted to nothing, even if taken up among the peasantry, because what they really wanted was land. Once again, the reason for this counterposition of agrarian demands and national democratic demands was the belief that the land or social question was the real core of the national struggle.

The sketchy treatment of the Fenians of the 1850s and 60s follows the same lines. The support Fenianism found among urban artisans and workers is strongly emphasised. Furthermore, by throwing in their lot with the Land League, he believed, these revolutionary nationalists were consciously or unconsciously placing themselves in accord with the principles which underlie and inspire the modern movement of labour. (LIIH, pp 131-132).

It is an uncritically one-sided view of Fenianism which differs significantly from Marx’s own characterisation. In a letter to Engels in 1867, he states that Fenianism is characterised by a socialistic tendency, but in a negative sense, directed against the attempt to impose pasture over tillage in Ireland and to supplant the tenants by sheep, pigs and oxen? (Letter from Marx to Engels, in Ireland & the Irish Question, p.157). Indeed, while Connolly writes ringingly of the proletarian Fenians, we find Marx?only two weeks after the correspondence cited above, writing in the aftermath of the Clerkenwell bombing, that one can?t expect London proletarians to allow themselves to be blown up in honour of the Fenian
emissaries? (Ireland & the Irish Question, p.159).

Fenian revolutionary nationalism thus escaped rigorous class analysis. He wrongly discerned in the Fenians a spontaneous growth of socialism out of the revolutionary nationalist tradition.

Despite aiming to chart a course for the Irish working class of his day, his attempt to ?deduce a socialist philosophy? from Irish history, blinded Connolly to the rich programmatic tradition of Marxism on the national question. His idealist fusion of the Irish nation and labour lead in practice to the political collapsing of the working class struggle into that of the revolutionary nationalists. It established the perspective within which he was to adapt also to obscurantist elements in what had become, by the end of the 19th century, a specifically Catholic nationalism.

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