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The Irish Idea: James Connolly's Political Thought

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James Connolly is by most measures a canonical figure. He is widely recognized as a founder of the national and labor movements in Ireland: an organizer, agitator, journalist, trade union leader, and, ultimately, republican martyr. Yet his status as a political thinker has been curiously diminished and overlooked. Seeking to rectify this neglect, I undertake in this article a historical reconstruction of Connolly's political thought, demonstrating that he was, contrary to the anti-intellectual anachronism of leading Irish historians, a complicated and innovative republican theorist. In the first section, I draw out Connolly's understanding of colonialism and its relationship to both historical development and revolutionary subjectivity, pointing to the universalist and teleological dimensions of his thought, as well its boundaries. Second, I focus on Connolly's fraught but productive encounter with Irish nationalism and the cultural flourishing it drove, reconstructing his strenuous efforts to cast the Irish nation and the proletariat as synonymous. Third, I probe the conceptual substance of his socialist republicanism, elucidating the centrality of two republican doctrines—popular sovereignty and freedom as nondomination—to Connolly's thinking. Last but not least, I map the political and intellectual antecedence of Connolly's decision to partake in the Easter Rising of 1916, his final act.

To begin with, the apparent puzzle: why exactly has James Connolly, treated seriously by scholars as a historical actor in many other respects, been so disregarded as an intellectual figure? Two culprits present themselves. One is the “anti-intellectual strain” in Irish historiography identified by Richard Bourke.¹ Such an aversion to intellectual history abounds in the work of the Irish Revolution's leading historians: Roy Foster and Diarmaid Ferriter. In his groundbreaking work *Vivid Faces*, for example, Foster aims to sketch the attitudes and *mentalities* of figures of the revolutionary period, passing over consideration of ideas in general and political thought in particular. If this might

¹ Richard Bourke, “Reflections on the Political Thought of the Irish Revolution,” *Transactions of the RSH* 27 (2017), 175–91, at 185. Such an attitude has at times been part and parcel of attempts to diagnose revolutionary pathologies in service of demonological, antirepublican political projects. See, for instance, Ruth Dudley-Edwards, *James Connolly* (Dublin, 1981).

charitably be read as implicitly underestimating the ideational seriousness of Connolly and his comrades, Ferriter has—more severely—explicitly denied the presence of textured and serious “ideological debate” in the revolutionary period, going so far as to suggest that scholars in search of such intellectual histories “are misguided in projecting later preoccupations on to a generation that were not republican theorists and saw no reason to be.”² The charge might well be reversed. Ferriter projects his own anachronism onto would-be intellectual historians of the revolution, imposing on the past his ideal type of the theorist as high intellectual—a standard against which Irish republicans are then unfavorably measured. Such condescension, which denies the capacity of particular historical actors for political *thought* and complex ideological deliberation, is a scholarly fate to which many anticolonial revolutionaries have been condemned, and our second culprit.

In this connection, though, Ireland presents as something of a historiographical paradox. While Frantz Fanon and Ho Chi Minh, say, are increasingly taken seriously as intellectual figures, the revolutions in which they were involved in Algeria and Vietnam are still too often, as the Palestinian scholars Karma Nabulsi and Abdel Razzaq Takriti have pointed out, reduced as an object of study to wars, viewed relatively narrowly through the lenses of political violence, imperial intervention, and counterinsurgency.³ For Ireland, something like the opposite has pertained. Historians now almost invariably study “the Irish Revolution” as its own phenomenon, in all its social, political, and cultural richness, but tend—with some honorable recent exceptions—to elide the intellectual contributions of its leaders.⁴ Yet the kernel is there, even in the seemingly anti-intellectual histories: Foster concluded *Vivid Faces* by writing, “to ‘know the dream’ of the revolutionaries, it may help to strip back the layers of matryology and posthumous rationalization, to get back before hindsight into that enclosed self-referencing, hectic world where people lived before 1916 ... to see how a generation developed, interacted and decided to make a revolution.”⁵ A more thoroughgoing history of the revolution’s political thought, then, seems the logical extension of these shifts in the scholarly landscape. Connolly must surely figure prominently in this picture.

Whilst remaining attentive to the facts of Connolly’s political biography and other salient contexts, my concern in this article is therefore twofold: first, to map the structure of Connolly’s thought, and second, to draw out the thinkers, texts, and traditions he drew on and combined to arrive at his own conceptual innovations.⁶ Close and

² Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913–1923* (London, 2015), 9.

³ See introductory essay in “Teach the Revolution,” in Karma Nabulsi and Abdel-Razzaq Takriti, *The Palestinian Revolution* (2016), at <http://learnpalestine.politics.ox.ac.uk> (accessed 22 Jan. 2019).

⁴ For exceptions see Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 2013); Colin Reid, “Democracy, Sovereignty and Unionist Political Thought during the Revolutionary Period in Ireland, c.1912–1922,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (2017), 255–74; Seán Donnelly, “Catholicism and Modernity in Irish Political Thought: The Case of Aodh de Blácam,” *Modern Intellectual History* 20/4 (2023), 1091–1115. For the prerevolutionary period see James Stafford, *The Case of Ireland: Commerce, Empire, and the European Order, 1750–1848* (Cambridge, 2022).

⁵ R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London, 2014), 332.

⁶ See discussion of political traditions in Sudhir Hazareesingh and Karma Nabulsi, “Using Archival Sources to Theorize about Politics,” in David Leopold and Marc Stears, eds., *Political Theory: Methods and*

careful reading of his writings has rarely been undertaken, and alone generates much insight. Given that Connolly's texts are so fractious, there may be a risk, in interpreting his thought, of falling prey to what Quentin Skinner once termed the mythology of coherence, an old impulse of intellectual historians to try and "resolve antinomies," and to impose on contradictory thinkers a systematic unity.⁷ Perry Anderson's acute observation, made of Antonio Gramsci, that "the thought of a genuinely original mind will typically exhibit—not randomly but intelligibly—significant, structural contradictions, inseparable from its creativity," rings true in the case of Connolly.⁸ My aim, then, is both to excavate Connolly's political thought and to focus on its contradictions, rather than to smooth them over. In particular, I pay "close attention to how the argument works—its key propositions, its underlying assumptions and its organising principles."⁹

What of the existing literature on Connolly? The most voluminous is political-biographical, and has typically been divided into hagiography and demonology, with politically polarized biographers such as Desmond Greaves and Ruth Dudley-Edwards united in their attempts to construct Connolly in their own political images—an Irish Lenin versus an illegitimate conspirator—in the process neglecting to tell us enough about Connolly himself, as he was.¹⁰ The same cannot be said for Donal Nevin's *James Connolly: A Full Life*, the most useful and comprehensive biography, which extensively draws on, and extracts from, Connolly's writings and letters. Nevin offers little, though, in the way of analysis or consideration of Connolly's political thought, beyond quotations and summations of his best-known writings.¹¹

The sharpest excavations of Connolly's thought and closest readings of his texts have come from literary scholars and postcolonial theorists.¹² Robert C. Young was the first to consider Connolly in this vein, writing that he was the "first leader in a colonized nation to argue for the compatibility of socialism and nationalism," prefiguring Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, and the recasting of Marxism from "the periphery."¹³ He suggests that Connolly "ought rightfully ... to be located in positions of central importance within the history of anti-colonialism and its theoretical traditions."¹⁴ Gregory

Approaches (Oxford, 2008), 150–70; my understanding of innovation and "originality" in intellectual history is drawn in significant part from Andrew Sartori's rich discussion in *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago, 2008), 19: "surely there is no moment in intellectual history that is not derivative in some fundamental sense. How would one formulate an argument or an analysis without drawing from a preexisting repertoire of concepts? As such, there seems no *prima facie* reason to treat an act of intellectual appropriation as substantially different from an act of conceptual innovation."

⁷ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002), 67–71.

⁸ Perry Anderson, *Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci* (London, 2017), 13.

⁹ Bourke, "Reflections," 185.

¹⁰ Desmond C. Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (London, 1961); Dudley-Edwards, *James Connolly*.

¹¹ Donal Nevin, *James Connolly: A Full Life* (Dublin, 2005).

¹² That the best collection of his writings to date is edited by a scholar of Edward Said is indicative. See James Connolly, *The Revolutionary and Anti-imperialist Writings of James Connolly 1893–1916*, ed. Conor McCarthy (Edinburgh, 2016); Conor McCarthy, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edward Said* (Cambridge: 2010); McCarthy, "Said: Birth of the Critic," in Bashir Abu-Manneh, ed., *After Said: Postcolonial Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, 2018), 20–36.

¹³ Robert C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London, 2000), 305.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

Dobbins took up this mantle to some extent, offering a relatively lengthy excavation of Connolly's thought, pointing to his agile, simultaneous interventions in the divergent contexts of Second International Marxism and Irish republicanism.¹⁵ David Lloyd's interpretation of Connolly as a "national Marxist" is especially useful.¹⁶ These contributions are crucial, if only because they make for the first fragments of scholarship which take Connolly seriously as a political thinker.¹⁷ But despite opening up productive lines of inquiry, they leave the task of historically explicating the substance and contexts of his thought unfulfilled. To take one indicative example, Dobbins suggests that Connolly only broke with the colonial teleologies of European Marxism relatively late in his political career, but this is a factual–chronological error. Dobbins misdates the article on India (discussed below) taken to evidence this shift by more than a decade: the piece was first published in 1897, but he gives the publication date as 1908. In part, such historical inexactitude is an inevitable result of the fact that there remains no comprehensive or definitive scholarly collection of Connolly's writings, meaning that even just constructing an accurate chronology of his intellectual life necessitates some archival work.¹⁸

Connolly's antinomies

Connolly thought both within and beyond the teleological schemas common among early Second International Marxists. Below, I consider his understanding of imperialism, its relationship to capitalism, and their impact on Ireland's historical development. I then show how Connolly understood Ireland through a comparative global colonial lens, and consider his attendant "stretching" of models of revolutionary subjectivity, which saw him vest historical agency beyond the metropolitan proletarian subject.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with an article entitled "Imperialism and Socialism," which Connolly penned in *Workers' Republic*, the paper of the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP), in November 1899. This text, though typically short, captures the complex and often contradictory nature of his understanding of colonialism and historical progress. It was an intervention into debates in the British labor movement about empire and the Boer War, with Connolly principally taking issue with the support of Henry Hyndman and his Social Democratic Federation (SDF) for British

¹⁵Gregory Dobbins, "Whenever Green Is Red: James Connolly and Postcolonial Theory," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1/3 (2000), 605–48. Dobbins points out that Connolly "helped transform the theoretical articulation of Marxism by adapting it into a specifically national context," and that his uniqueness lay in the "ability to think through the conjuncture." *Ibid.*, 614.

¹⁶David Lloyd, "Rethinking National Marxism: James Connolly and 'Celtic Communism,'" *Interventions* 5/3 (2003), 345–70, at 351–2.

¹⁷See also Spurgeon Thomas's brilliant article "Gramsci and James Connolly: Anticolonial Intersections," *Interventions* 5/3 (2003), 371–81, which includes an immensely useful discussion, through Edward Said, of the similar methodological challenges involved in interpreting the work of Connolly and Antonio Gramsci.

¹⁸On twentieth-century history of Connolly collections see Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh, "Introduction," in James Connolly, *The Lost Writings: James Connolly* (London, 1997), 6–12; see also the first volume of an extremely promising new project, outstanding so far in its archival rigor and historical care: Conor McCabe, ed., *The Lost and Early Writings of James Connolly 1889–1898* (Dublin, 2024).

imperialism, and seeking to demonstrate the incongruity of such support with socialist objectives. In the piece, Connolly lays out what appears to be a rather orthodox conception of capitalism's supersession, writing, "Scientific revolutionary socialism teaches us that Socialism can only be realised when Capitalism has reached its zenith of development; that consequently the advance of nations industrially developed into the capitalistic stage of industry is a thing to be highly desired."¹⁹ Industrial capitalism was necessary, he thought, again in rather typical terms, because it spawned "a revolutionary proletariat," its own gravedigger. He continued,

as colonial expansion and the conquest of new markets are necessary for the prolongation of the life of capitalism, the prevention of colonial expansion and the loss of markets to countries capitalistically developed, such as England, precipitates economic crises there, and so gives an impulse to revolutionary thought and helps to shorten the period required to help develop backward countries and thus prepare the economic conditions needed for our triumph.²⁰

Without theorizing the precise reason, Connolly here supposes the necessity of colonial expansion to capital accumulation, and in particular to the development and prolongation of metropolitan capitalism. A year earlier he had written that capitalism was the driving influence behind modern war, with every conflict underwritten by a "capitalist move for new markets ... a move capitalism must make or perish."²¹ Crucially, however, he does not anywhere suggest the necessity of colonialism for progress or development in subject countries. The particular political question around which Connolly theorizes his differences with Hyndman is whether socialists should support the victory of England or Russia in a potential imperial conflagration. For the reasons outlined above, Connolly insists on support for Russian colonial expansion in Asia at British expense, arguing that it would hasten revolutionary socialist transformation in both countries, first by inducing economic crisis and fostering an attendant revolutionary consciousness in England, and second through catalyzing the development of capitalism in Russia such that its subaltern subject would transcend its "agrarian backwardness" and attain a higher proletarian form.

Connolly preempts the objection that his formulations come from a *particularistic* Irish vantage point: "it may be urged that our Irish nationality plays a large part in forming this conception of international politics here set forth." But this suggestion is firmly rejected. Rather, Connolly insists, he is seeking a "common position" to which socialists can hold irrespective of race or nationality, dealing with every question "from the position of its effect upon the industrial development required to bring the Socialist movement to a head."²² This does indeed entail a kind of universality, but one constituted by historical materialism in a deterministic mode.²³

¹⁹James Connolly, "Imperialism and Socialism," *Workers' Republic*, 4 Nov. 1899.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹James Connolly, "Roots of Modern War," *Workers' Republic*, 20 Aug. 1898.

²²Connolly, "Imperialism and Socialism."

²³Of Hyndman, Connolly writes, "Our comrade quite forgets to apply that materialist philosophy of history which he himself has done so much to popularise in its Marxian form, viz., that the economic system

Connolly's thought, though, is striking for its intelligible contradictions: namely the extent to which he deviates from, contradicts, and tempers the methodological and interpretive schemas to which he proclaims fidelity. Such a dynamic manifests in this instance in an implicit (but clear) slippage away from his stated *telos* of industrial development. He moves from a particular case for urging British defeat based on the historically progressive role of Russian colonialism to stating that "we ourselves ... would welcome the humiliation of the British arms in *any one* of the conflicts in which it is at present engaged."²⁴ This iterates a more general opposition to the British Empire; that is, not merely in specific contexts where London is in conflict with "backward" powers. Indeed, Connolly was enthusiastic about all rebellions against British rule of which he was aware, and saw their fate as bound up with that of the Irish freedom struggle. The "Resolution of Sympathy with the Boer Republics," drafted by Connolly and printed in late June 1899, surveyed with satisfaction unrest unfolding across the British Empire, from the Boxers in China to the Boers in the Transvaal, and declared, "Now it only wants a native rising in India, and then would come our Irish opportunity."²⁵

Here we can see Connolly seeking to grasp Ireland's colonial condition through a relational and comparative lens. This entailed casting British imperialism, in Gregory Dobbins's words, "as a global system that maintained and was created by British capitalism," of which Ireland was a subject part.²⁶ Connolly looked to India and Egypt in particular and saw commonality with colonized peoples there facing British rule. In a particularly notable instance, he draws parallels between the suppression of an Irish peasant uprising in 1762 and contemporary British repression in colonial Burma and India, writing that the former "irresistibly recalls the present accounts ... of the punitive expeditions of the British army against the 'marauding' hill tribes or Dacoits of Burmah."²⁷ For Connolly, one consequence of placing Ireland in this comparative colonial frame was a keen identification and sharp refutation of the civilizational discourses of empire.²⁸ In July 1897, he wrote an article (by his standards lengthy) entitled "British Rule In India" in a local Irish newspaper, the *Limerick Leader*. It was twice subsequently republished with slight amendments in two parts, as "The Coming Revolt in India: Its Political and Social Causes," first the following year in *Workers' Republic*, and then in January 1908 in *The Harp*.²⁹ It was not uncommon for Connolly to republish

of any given society is the basis of all else in that society—its political superstructure included. If he did so apply it, he would realise that the political freedom of England is born of her capitalism." Ibid.

²⁴ Connolly, "Imperialism and Socialism," added emphasis.

²⁵ James Connolly, "Resolution of Sympathy with the Boer Republics," *Workers' Republic*, 30 June 1899.

²⁶ Dobbins, "Whenever Green Is Red," 615.

²⁷ James Connolly, "Labour in Irish History," in Connolly, *The Revolutionary and Anti-imperialist Writings*, 89–90.

²⁸ For wider context, beyond Europe, of and precedents for anti-imperial universalisms conceived against the claims of an imperial civilizing mission see Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, 2007); and Aydin, *The Idea of a Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 2017).

²⁹ See Nevin, *James Connolly*, 18, on publishing history. It is striking—and indicative of the lack of primary-source engagement among Connolly scholars—that some recent collections of Connolly's writings (both Harkin and McCarthy) fail to note the original 1897 publication date of this article, presuming that it

articles, but that he did so twice with this text suggests that he thought it an especially worthy intervention. In it, he argued that the impression of British rule in India advancing civilization and modernity in a barbarous land was a chimera, conjured by the predominance of colonial propaganda:

We are constantly informed by all Anglo-Indian writers that the English in India have been mighty instruments of Divine Providence for winning the land from anarchy and oppression, bringing it within the area of civilization and order; and, finally, of introducing its people to all the inestimable benefits of modern civilization ... We Irish are, of course, well enough acquainted with the ways of English officialdom to be able to discount to a certain extent the brightly coloured reports of progress emanating from such sources.³⁰

Connolly did not deny that “progress ... [had] been made in India under British rule,” but rather questioned the extent to which the British Empire was necessary for such advances. He suggested—in a universalization of his teleology of development—that modernity could well have been attained by India alone, “by an intellectual people with a continuity of literary and philosophic activity stretching back for two thousand years or more.” The polemical character of these extracts does not diminish their utility as sources for explicating Connolly’s thought. From them it is evident that Connolly did not see “civilization” as an exclusively European preserve; instead, he casts the capacity for historical progress as endogenous to colonized nations, India and Ireland alike. The significance of modernity in Connolly’s schema consists, therefore, in the colonial mode of its *imposition*, which can catalyse or accelerate changes in regimes of production and spur the development of revolutionary potentialities.

Connolly thought both within and beyond the orthodoxies of his time to chart a creative, innovative path. In his view of revolutionary subjectivity, he tends to present the “revolutionary proletariat” as the privileged, even exclusive, agent of emancipation.³¹ Connolly conceived the proletariat, though, in expansive terms, writing of it as “the only universal, *all-embracing* class”—to be found in Ireland, South Africa, and other sites of imperial subjection.³² He also appreciated the possibilities of anticolonial insurgency in much broader terms, writing powerfully of Egyptians’ “patriotic effort[s] to repel the [British] invader,” fighting for “home and freedom” and in defence of their “popular government.”³³ Connolly’s notion of colonialism’s centrality to the survival of metropolitan capitalism carves out space for him to conceive of revolutionary agency from the colonial peripheries. The result is that he understands the possible levers

appeared first in *The Harp* in 1908. This is most likely because these collections rely on the Marxists Internet Archive, rather than the original materials, for their sourcing, and the edition of the article there, itself transcribed from a 1974 collection of Connolly’s writings, is from 1908.

³⁰James Connolly, “The Coming Revolt in India I: Its Political and Social Causes,” in Connolly, *Revolutionary Writings*, 201–10, at 203.

³¹“To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat.” Frederick Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling (Chicago, 1908), 139.

³²James Connolly, “Patriotism and Labour,” *Shan Van Vocht*, Aug. 1897, 138–9.

³³James Connolly, “British Butchers in Egypt,” *Workers’ Republic*, 10 Sept. 1898.

of social transformation broadly, through both a more capacious conception of the proletariat and a reach beyond it.

Inevitably, this recasting was not without its limits and elisions. Conor McCarthy, for instance, highlights Connolly's "failure to recognise" that Boer resistance to the British Empire was itself predicated on the defence of a settler colonial project, claiming that this complicates our understanding of Connolly as an "anti-imperialist" thinker.³⁴ Connolly's understanding of southern Africa was indeed illustrative of the boundaries of his notions of political agency and revolutionary subjectivity, but can be seen in its proper context rather than marked in a moralist register as a *failure*. He saw in the Transvaal crisis of 1899 a great political opportunity for the ISRP to agitate in Ireland, joining with Maud Gonne and others to protest against the impending war and enlistment for it, and in solidarity with the Boers. Socialist republican mobilization was not insignificant, with 1,500 people attending a meeting led by Connolly in late August at which a pro-Boer resolution was adopted "to loud and enthusiastic cheers for the Boers, Miss Maud Gonne, and the Social Revolution."³⁵ He also sought to extrapolate from the Boer experience lessons for the struggle against the British in Ireland. The crucial point here, though, is that Connolly did indeed see the Boers as proletarian victims of British plunder whilst eliding the indigenous Africans who had struggled against the British and European settlers alike. In the *Workers' Republic*, he wrote of the "South African War" as being "[for] the purpose of enabling an unscrupulous gang of capitalists to get their hands on the immense riches of the diamond fields," a war by a "government of financiers upon a nation of farmers ... by a nation of filibusterers upon a nation of workers, by a capitalist ring."³⁶ One reason for Connolly's narrow field of vision in this respect is, rather simply, that he was a prisoner of his context, plugged into a particularly anglophone, and more generally European, textual circuit, with resultant limitations on his sources. On several occasions in 1899, for instance, *Workers' Republic* extracted articles on the Transvaal crisis from newspapers of the Australian labor movement. A passage from the *Brisbane Worker* reprinted in July began, "The howl of the capitalist crew who are trying might and main to down the wily old Kruger and his Boer people can be heard just now all over the world."³⁷ In July 1914, the *Irish Worker*—whilst Connolly had significant editorial control of the paper—carried a report of the visit of a "South African labour leader," Archie Crawford, to Dublin. In reference to Boer labor struggles, Crawford remarked that they "could not acquiesce in the standard of white men being levelled down to that of the savage black race." It is reported that Connolly followed up to suggest what Dublin workers might learn from the struggle of their counterparts in South Africa.³⁸ From this we can see the consistent importance of colonial contexts—discursive and political—for understanding Connolly's internationalism and its limits. In the case

³⁴ Conor McCarthy, "Introduction," in Connolly, *Revolutionary Writings*, 1–20, at 11.

³⁵ Nevin, *James Connolly*, 72; for more on the Boer moment as important in Irish politics see Donald McCracken, *Forgotten Protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer War* (Belfast, 2002).

³⁶ James Connolly in *Workers Republic*, 19 Aug. 1899.

³⁷ *Workers' Republic*, 1 July 1899.

³⁸ *Irish Worker*, 25 July 1914.

of South Africa (and Australia), his Anglocentric understanding of proletarian solidarity blurs the complex *settler colonial* reality and thus renders invisible many of its protagonists.

“The Irish idea”

Connolly was intimately engaged in debates and political contestation in a multitude of contexts. Given his political beginnings associated with the Independent Labour Party in Edinburgh, Scotland, he was closely connected to the British labor movement, and by the turn of the century had played a notable role in United States labor politics too. Most important and proximate of all, though, was the context of burgeoning Irish nationalism. From the moment of his return to Dublin, this was the political landscape in which Connolly principally sought, largely without political success, to intervene. What did Connolly’s theoretical interventions in the Irish nationalist movement consist in? How did he conceptualize the Irish nation and its history, and what might this elucidate about other dimensions of his political thought?

In January 1897, Connolly penned an article entitled “Socialism and Nationalism.” Its significance is twofold. First, it captures concisely the essence of his intervention in Irish nationalist debates: the claim that nationalism without socialism “is only national recreancy.” Second, it was published in *Shan Van Vocht*, Alice Milligan’s pioneering “advanced nationalist” journal, first printed in Belfast in 1896. The paper was an organ of the Gaelic revival, drawing on romantic fiction, stories, and polemic; the first seven pages of the issue in which Connolly’s article appeared, for instance, were occupied by a song and a short story.³⁹ Connolly was attuned to this context in his piece, describing the Gaelic revival sympathetically as being driven by a “variety of agencies seeking to preserve the national sentiment in the hearts of the people.” These literary and commemorative societies, he wrote, were doing essential work in rescuing “from extinction the precious racial and national history, language and characteristics of our people.” He raised concern, though, that valorization of Irish history, culture and literature could easily slip into a reified ideal of the Irish nation, frozen in the past, and unfit as a vehicle for revolutionary action. Instead, Connolly thought, the national movement must rise to the “exigencies of the moment.” He sought a nationalism constituted by “not merely a morbid idealising of the past ... but [one] capable of formulating a distinct and definite answer to the problems of the present and a political and economic creed capable of adjustment to the wants of the future.”⁴⁰ If, following W. B. Yeats, the beginning of the Gaelic revival and cultural nationalism’s ascendancy is dated from Charles Stewart Parnell’s death in 1891, Connolly can here be seen as seeking to reassert the primacy of politics.⁴¹ Beyond this, Connolly cast capitalism as the chief barrier to Irish cultural flourishing, writing, “You cannot teach a starving man Gaelic; and the treasury of our national literature will and must remain lost forever to the poor wage slaves who are

³⁹*Shan Van Vocht*, 8 Jan. 1897; Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 151. According to Senia Pašeta, Milligan’s paper laid the ground for Arthur Griffith’s *United Irishman*. See Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 31.

⁴⁰James Connolly, “Socialism and Nationalism,” *Shan Van Vocht*, 8 Jan. 1897, 7–8. This article appeared in the paper’s column “Other People’s Opinions.”

⁴¹R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London, 1988), 431.

contented by our system of society to toil ... for a mere starvation wage.”⁴² He sought, in other words, not to disavow or traduce prevalent nationalist historical imaginaries and linguistic-cultural forms so much as to adjoin them to the cause of revolutionary transformation in the present.

This orientation can be seen clearly in Connolly’s rendering of Irish history in the pamphlet *Erin’s Hope*.⁴³ Citing the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan’s 1877 work *Ancient Society*, he begins with the assertion that common ownership was the basis of primitive society “in almost every country.”⁴⁴ Ireland was particular, though, writes Connolly, in that “primitive Communism” there persisted for long after it had elsewhere disappeared. In a striking passage, he writes,

The ardent student of sociology, who believes that the progress of the human race through the various economic stages of communism, chattel slavery, feudalism and wage slavery, has been but a preparation for the higher ordered society of the future; that the most industrially advanced countries are but, albeit often unconsciously, developing the social conditions which, since the break-up of universal tribal communism, have been rendered historically necessary for the inauguration of a new and juster economic order, in which social, political and national antagonism will be unknown, will perhaps regard the Irish adherence to clan ownership at such a comparatively recent date as the 17th Century as evidence of retarded economical development, and therefore a real hindrance to progress. But the sympathetic student of history, who believes in the possibility of a people by political intuition anticipating the lessons afterwards revealed to them in the sad school of experience, will not be indisposed to join with the ardent Irish patriot in his lavish expressions of admiration for the sagacity of his Celtic forefathers, who foreshadowed in the democratic organisation of the Irish clan the more perfect organisation of the free society of the future.⁴⁵

This extract is particularly significant for its disruption of the teleologies to which Connolly elsewhere seems to subscribe. In other words, his ostensible adherence to a stadial form of Marxism sees Connolly in many of his writings fashion himself more as “ardent student of sociology” than as “sympathetic student of history.” In *Erin’s Hope* his allegiance is clearly with the latter, and we might point to his slippage between the two intellectual characters as the key intelligible structural contradiction of his thought,

⁴²James Connolly, *Workers’ Republic*, 1 Oct. 1898.

⁴³James Connolly, *Erin’s Hope: The Ends and the Means* (1897), at www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1897/erin/hope.htm (accessed 21 Jan. 2019). First published in 1897, it is a collection of three articles that initially appeared in the ILP’s *Labour Leader*, edited by Keir Hardie. See Nevin, *James Connolly*, 75.

⁴⁴Lloyd, “Rethinking National Marxism,” 351–2, suggests that Connolly is here “almost certainly” drawing on Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, but it is evident that Connolly in fact took more straightforwardly from Morgan. Engels’s work was not published in English translation until 1902 (five years after *Erin’s Hope*) and in any case was based in large part on Marx’s notes on Morgan—there is no evidence that Connolly could read German. For a discussion of Marx’s engagement with anthropology, philology and notions of village communalism see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (London, 2016), 568–85.

⁴⁵Connolly, *Erin’s Hope*.

to adapt Anderson. Connolly seeks not a return to the clan system, but rather to identify in the essence and endurance of its “democratic principle” the potential for, and a prefiguration of, the revolutionary future. As such, he breaks with linear temporalities of historical development, suggesting that a bygone social system thought in general to be the antithesis of progress and social transformation might actually, in the present, conduce to it.

Connolly does not claim only that the democratic spirit of ancient common ownership anticipates the “free society of the future,” but specifies the revolutionary lever as the consciousness born of the *colonial* destruction of Ireland’s clan system. Crucially, he holds no pretense that the clan system would have forever endured, writing rather that “private capitalist-landlordism” would have indeed developed organically had Ireland remained independent.⁴⁶ It is in the political consciousness resulting from the imposition of social relations of private property by “armed force from without, instead of by the operation of economic forces from within,” that Connolly sees revolutionary potential; for this colonial imposition, he writes, “has been bitterly and justly resented by the vast mass of the Irish people, many of whom still mix with their dreams of liberty longings for a return to the ancient system of land tenure—now organically impossible.”⁴⁷ In this sense, David Lloyd’s contention that Connolly does not suggest the “permanence of Celtic communism in the present” is a partial reading. Connolly argues precisely for its persistence, but as a trace of consciousness rather than a material social system.⁴⁸ This all entails the further implication that the particular conditions of Ireland’s colonial history provide fertile terrain for anticapitalist transformation which would not have been created had relations of private property developed organically. Colonialism, in Connolly’s recuperative formulation, engendered through its violence and destructive force the conditions of possibility for a social revolution against itself.⁴⁹

In *Erin’s Hope*, Connolly appears to go further still, suggesting the prospect (and desirability) of Ireland skipping the stage of industrial development. This is rooted first and foremost in a claim that the contemporary conditions of global political economy are such that the possibility of developing an advanced industrial capital base (in manufacture) are in any case foreclosed: “the thoughtful Irish patriot ... [will] freely recognise that it is impossible for Ireland ... to attain prosperity by establishing a manufacturing system in a world-market already glutted with every conceivable kind of commodity.”⁵⁰ Connolly envisages instead an embrace of Ireland’s predominantly agricultural base, which would be organized “as a public service” under cooperative boards elected by the rural population, cast as “free citizens ... with equal honour.” This would render “perfectly needless any attempt to create an *industrial hell* in Ireland under the specious pretext of ‘developing our resources.’”⁵¹ Such a suggestion, that a socialist republic might

⁴⁶ Connolly, “Labour in Irish History,” 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Lloyd, “Rethinking National Marxism,” 352.

⁴⁹ Credit for this framing of a “recuperative” understanding is owed to Barnaby Raine.

⁵⁰ Connolly, *Erin’s Hope*.

⁵¹ Ibid., added emphasis.

be realized without passage through the stage of wholly developed industrial capitalism, makes for Connolly's most radical break with teleological thinking—and again results from *particular* attention to Ireland. Benedict Anderson identified as one of the three perplexing paradoxes of nationalism its “formal universality” in the conceptual realm as against the “irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations.”⁵² He also suggested that nationalism really had no grand thinkers. Connolly offers an interesting counterpoint. In grappling with the (often romantic) historical imaginaries of Irish nationalism, the particularity of his thought is rather, it seems, productive and self-remediable.⁵³ This is to say that in thinking through what is particular about Ireland's condition and the political strategies by which it might be transformed, he opens up the possibility of a nonlinear conception of historical development and a more universal understanding of revolutionary subjectivity.

How does Connolly conceptualize the Irish nation itself? Important to note first is that he attempts a historical account of its emergence, rather than ascribing it any folkloric eternality. With the destruction of Irish clan society, in his telling, went the possibility of localized insurrection and the disappearance of the clans as a “possible base of freedom,” meaning that the Irish nation was the sole available vehicle for political imagination and action: the “only possible reappearance of the Irish idea henceforth lay through the gateway of a National resurrection.”⁵⁴ In this sense, the emergence of the nation was a defeat and a retreat. Most importantly, the “Irish idea” for Connolly consists in attachment to the clan spirit of common ownership and democracy, and is decoupled from the nation at the latter's inception. He writes that the early history of the Irish nation involved engagement “in a slow and painful process of assimilating the social system of the conqueror.”⁵⁵ In this nexus emerged the “Irish middle class” and their *faux* patriotism, his chief antagonist. Second, Connolly looks to recast the Irish national polity—including its linguistic and cultural inheritance—such that it consists of the working class and the working class alone. A section of *Erin's Hope* is subtitled with the question “Who Are the People?,” to which the unambiguous answer is “the Irish working class—the only secure foundation on which a free nation can be reared.”⁵⁶ By further claiming that the “working-class democracy” (the referent commonly used in his writings) alone legitimately makes up the national community, Connolly's concept of the “Irish people” sees them bound together and internally unified by the same class interest. The proletariat is Connolly's body politic. For the Irish nation to become a vehicle for the realization of the *Irish idea*—whose recuperation,

⁵²Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006), 5. For critical remarks on Anderson's comments, in relation to Egypt's colonial history, see Aaron G. Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism* (Stanford, 2020), 28–9.

⁵³For the misuse of “romanticism” in Irish historiography—in particular mistaking the classical republicanism of the Young Irelanders for romanticism, see David Dwan, “Romantic Nationalism: History and Illusion in Ireland,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/3 (2017), 717–45.

⁵⁴Connolly, “Labour in Irish History,” 116.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶Connolly, *Erin's Hope*.

for Connolly, entails not resurrecting the clans but harnessing their communist spirit to a modern republican project—his class must “itself constitute the nation.”⁵⁷

There is no doubt, though, that Connolly extensively drew on, and was influenced by, more mainstream nationalist thought. Regarding the destructive cultural effects of British rule on Ireland, he was in concert with the concerns of a current that M. J. Kelly has termed “literary Fenianism.”⁵⁸ In this connection, Alice Stopford Green, a “moderate” supporter of Home Rule, seems to have been particularly influential. Connolly read her 1908 work *The Making of Ireland and Its Undoing 1200–1600*, and his review of it was adapted to become the foreword for *Labour in Irish History*, a small book published in 1910 after extensive serialization in *Workers’ Republic*. Stopford Green’s text is itself worthy of sustained attention, but most important for Connolly was its conception of the place of education and consciousness in the machinations of British rule. She wrote that the imposed English system of education taught Ireland’s “people to abandon all tradition of a nation.”⁵⁹ Whether educated at home or abroad, Stopford Green contended, the Irish people were condemned to a “foreign education, wholly detached from the inheritance of their fathers.”⁶⁰ Connolly’s foreword to *Labour in Irish History* is largely derivative with regard to these claims, except in this: he associates the “foreign” conceptions, modes of consciousness and social impositions that are the devil of Stopford Green’s and of nationalist writing more broadly with capitalism. “One of these slave birth-marks is a belief in the capitalist system of society; the Irishman frees himself from such a mark of slavery when he realises the truth that the capitalist system is the most foreign thing in Ireland,” he wrote.⁶¹ This is a significant move, wherein Connolly seeks to articulate nationalist discourse around foreign ideological impositions to the project of *socialist* republican transformation.

Farm and field and factory: the republican ideal

In one of the very few meditations on the political thought of the Irish Revolution, Richard Bourke argues that it was indeed a republican affair, writing that “assorted doctrines of republicanism lay at its heart.”⁶² But in what ways was it republican? As one might expect from the general state of the literature, there has been little, if any, consideration of this question in general, never mind particular appraisal of Connolly’s socialist republicanism. This term seems to have been coined by Connolly with the founding of the ISRP, and captures well the structure and originality of his thought. He was among the first to insist, systematically, on the inseparability of

⁵⁷“The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must itself constitute the nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones (London, 2002), 242.

⁵⁸M. J. Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882–1916* (Woodbridge, 2006), 98–128.

⁵⁹Alice Stopford Green, *The Making of Ireland and Its Undoing 1200–1600* (Dublin, 1909), 413.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 445.

⁶¹Connolly, “Labour in Irish History,” 72.

⁶²Bourke, “Reflections on the Political Thought of the Irish Revolution,” 191; see also Richard Bourke, “Introduction,” in Richard Bourke and Niamh Gallagher, eds., *The Political Thought of the Irish Revolution* (Cambridge, 2023), ix–xli.

national from socialist revolution, fusing Marxism and republicanism to intervene in his Irish context. Two republican doctrines in particular were central for Connolly: popular sovereignty and freedom as nondomination.

The founding manifesto of the Irish Socialist Republican Party, penned in 1896 by Connolly and reprinted every week for many years on the back page of *Workers' Republic*, stands out, despite its brevity, as one of the first coherent outlines of his thought. It is especially notable, then, that the text—in putting forward the ISRP's codified programme—explicitly invokes popular sovereignty in support of its socialist agenda, arguing

That the agricultural and industrial system of a free people, like their political system, ought to be an accurate reflex of the democratic principle by the people for the people, solely in the interests of the people.

That the private ownership, by a class, of the land and instruments of production, distribution and exchange, is opposed to this vital principle of justice, and is the fundamental basis of all oppression, national, political and social.⁶³

This extract encapsulates one of the key moves in Connolly's political theory, which constitutes the essence of his socialist republicanism and enables his sharp discursive intervention in Irish politics: a claim that popular sovereignty ("by the people for the people, solely in the interests of the people") means little if it is confined to the political realm—the Irish people must be sovereign in the social and economic spheres too. Note that an important precondition for this extension of popular sovereignty is Connolly's insistence, discussed in the preceding section, on recasting the Irish national polity as the Irish working class: the coupling of class and nation to the point of synonymy. On this reconfigured ground, the broadening of the concept of popular sovereignty is seamless, for the "interests of the people" are equally and inextricably bound up in the national *and* social questions. Perhaps most significantly in the longer view of twentieth-century intellectual history, Connolly's conceptual move here strikingly anticipates the foundation of the Communist International's appeal to anti-colonial militants, for such a "homology posited between proletariat and oppressed nation was," as Manu Goswami has argued, "the ideological and strategic basis of the Comintern."⁶⁴

James Fintan Lalor, a leading Young Irelander, was a crucial source for and influence on Connolly's republicanism.⁶⁵ One article, "The Faith of a Felon," was particularly

⁶³James Connolly, "Irish Socialist Republican Party" [1896], in Connolly, *Revolutionary Writings*, 22. For discussion of the trajectories and uses of popular sovereignty in the Indian anticolonial context see Karuna Mantena, "Popular Sovereignty and Anti-colonialism," in Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2016), 297–320; for a pioneering treatment of anticolonial visions of popular sovereignty and self-determination within and beyond the *telos* of the nation-state see Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019).

⁶⁴Manu Goswami, "A Communism of Intelligence: Early Communism in Late Imperial India," *Diacritics* 48/2 (2020), 90–109, at 92.

⁶⁵For a valuable account of Lalor's spatially bound nationalism (against unbounded imaginaries) see Marta Ramón García, "Writs of Ejectment: James Fintan Lalor and the Rewriting of Nation as Physical Space, 1847–1848," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 68 (2014), 71–82.

important. Lalor penned it in July 1848, fearing arrest and eager to “put ... [his] own principles upon record,” and it was later republished by Connolly with his own introduction as part of a small pamphlet. Lalor argued that “the English conquest consisted of two parts combined into one whole—the conquest of our liberties, the conquest of our lands.”⁶⁶ Given the character of his intervention, urging other cadres of the Confederation—who “wanted an alliance with the land owners”—to recognize the necessity of social revolution, it is little surprise that Connolly saw “a most striking parallel ... between his time and our own.”⁶⁷ In laying out a strategy for “re-conquest,” Lalor recommended mass refusal of rent payments and resistance to the “ejectment” that would likely follow. What is of interest specifically here, though, is the radical republicanism of his formulations, which are laden with invocations of popular sovereignty.⁶⁸ Lalor wrote, “the people ... ought to decide ... that thee rents shall be paid to themselves, the people, for public purposes, and for behoof and benefit of them, *the entire general people*.”⁶⁹ He continued to suggest that “the first great modern earthquake,” alluding to the French Revolution, had been caused by “the right of the people to make the laws,” and that the next would be sparked by “the right of the people to own the land.”⁷⁰ Here, clearly, is a seed of Connolly’s socialist republicanism.

Connolly is taken not only by Lalor’s particular ideas about Ireland but just as importantly by their universality. In Chapter 15 of *Labour in Irish History*, in which Connolly extracts at length from “The Faith of a Felon,” he writes that Lalor “advocated his principle as part of the creed of the democracy of the world.”⁷¹ Earlier in the book, Connolly valorizes the universality of Wolfe Tone, writing that he “understood that the Irish fight for liberty was but a part of the world-wide upward march of the human race,” and that it would be hard to locate “anything more broadly International in its scope and aims.”⁷² In the following chapter, Robert Emmet is read in similar terms, as an “Irish apostle of a world-wide movement for liberty, equality and fraternity” allied with the French republic.⁷³ Sociologist Kieran Allen is the only scholar who has considered in any depth the influence of Lalor, Tone, and others but does so rather inanely,

⁶⁶James Fintan Lalor, “The Faith of a Felon,” *Irish Felon*, 3, 8 July 1848, reprinted in *James Fintan Lalor, Patriot and Political Essayist: Collected Writings* (Dublin, 1947), 92–104, at 93.

⁶⁷James Connolly, “Introduction,” in James Fintan Lalor, *The Rights of Ireland and the Faith of a Felon* (Dublin, 1896), 4.

⁶⁸Karma Nabulsi, Bruno Leipold and Stuart White, “Introduction: Radical Republicanism and Popular Sovereignty,” in Nabulsi, Leipold and White, eds., *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition’s Popular Heritage* (Oxford, 2020), 1–19; Connolly is passingly referenced in this essay at 11.

⁶⁹Lalor, “The Faith of a Felon,” 95, added emphasis.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 96–7.

⁷¹Connolly, “Labour in Irish History,” 177.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 120–21, 123.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 131; Connolly was enamoured with the revolutionary French republican tradition and its example. In a 23 Oct. 1915 *Workers’ Republic* editorial, he wrote, “France, the example of France, the free spirit of France, the human outlook of France, the glorious traditions of France—all combined to make France the ideal among the nations of all lovers of liberty. Ever since the Revolution this has been the lot of France—to inspire and enthuse rebels everywhere, and everywhere to lend keenness to the blades of whosoever stuck out for Freedom.” Connolly read Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray’s *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, which was translated into English in 1886 by Eleanor Marx.

arguing that they had “little in common with socialism” and that Connolly is wrong to suggest otherwise.⁷⁴ The more significant and interesting point is that Connolly takes from them the universality of the democratic, republican cause and seeks to imbue the “working-class democracy of Ireland” with the same sympathies in the contemporary socialist struggle.⁷⁵

The conceptual ease with which Connolly both extends discourses of popular sovereignty beyond the merely political and melds the universality of traditional republican doctrines with that of the “cause of Labour” is telling. These were the tenets of his socialist republicanism, and wavered little across time. In a key passage from *Labour in Irish History*, Connolly reads into the Emmet conspiracy the convergence between republican and proletarian politics that was actualized in his own thought, writing that the republican proposal “to subvert the oppressive governing class and establish a republic founded upon the votes of all citizens ... was one likely to appeal alike to the material requirements and imagination of the Irish toilers.”⁷⁶ And over four years later, in Jim Larkin’s *Irish Worker*, he wrote that the architects of Ireland’s “true Republican freedom ... will and must be the Irish working class.”⁷⁷ Connolly’s doctrinal (re)deployment of popular sovereignty entails, in essence, the same theoretical move as does his treatment of freedom in the labor market. In order to radicalize and universalize republican doctrines, he—as William Clare Roberts writes of Marx’s political theory—“departs from an analysis of the social form of modern life, rather than holding fast to the purely political constitution of the public sphere.”⁷⁸

Connolly’s account of “wage-slavery” and the ubiquity of its attendant vocabulary of domination and subjection in his writings evinces a clear attachment to a “neo-Roman” (or more straightforwardly republican) ideal of freedom as nondomination.⁷⁹ His deployment of the language of slavery is twofold: first, as highlighted earlier, he considers Ireland to be politically enslaved in light of its domination by Britain, and second, he associates wage labor with slavery.⁸⁰

References to slavery in relation to the social realm are scattered throughout Connolly’s writings. Wage slavery is identified as an economic stage subsequent to chattel slavery in *Erin’s Hope*, one of his earliest texts, and he refers to “industrial slavery”

⁷⁴Kieran Allen, *The Politics of James Connolly* (London, 2016), 91.

⁷⁵Connolly, “Labour in Irish History,” 177.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 131.

⁷⁷James Connolly, “Irish Rebels and English Mobs,” *Irish Worker*, 22 Nov. 1913.

⁷⁸William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton, 2017), 22.

⁷⁹In the early modern revival of this conception, famously reconstructed by Quentin Skinner, unfreedom was understood as “a condition of political subjection or dependence”—and freedom its opposite. See Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998), 69–70. Skinner has elsewhere noted that many later articulations of the republican ideal of freedom took their phraseology “entirely” from ancient Rome, and in particular from the *Digest* of Roman law, which gave “the fundamental division within the law of persons” as “that all men and women are either free or are slaves.” Slavery is then defined as “an institution ... by which someone is, contrary to nature, subjected to the dominion of someone else.” Quentin Skinner, “A Third Concept of Liberty,” *British Academy Review* 6 (2001), 23–5, at 23.

⁸⁰This was a common contemporary way of articulating nationalist grievances, but also has much longer republican antecedents. Think of Machiavelli’s discussion of Italy’s enslavement at the hands of foreign conquerors in *The Prince* (Cambridge, 1988).

in an early *Shan Van Vocht* article.⁸¹ The rendering in *Labour in Irish History* is variously “economic slavery” and “social slavery.”⁸² And an early series of articles by a labor correspondent for the *Workers’ Republic* chronicled the struggle against “wage slavery” by workers on Dublin’s tramways.⁸³ We first find a more substantive account of what precisely Connolly takes wage slavery to mean in a speech given in 1903 during elections for the Wood Quay Ward in Dublin. In it, Connolly presents the alienation of the worker from the means of production as resulting in dependence on employers for survival, contrasted with the relative freedom of the independent producer, cast as a “shopkeeper”: “This is what I call wage-slavery, because under it the worker is a slave who sells himself for a wage with which to buy his rations, which is the only difference between this system and negro slavery where the master bought the rations and fed the slave himself.”⁸⁴

Connolly’s time in the United States, and his close involvement with the American labor movement, seem to have been crucial for furthering his attachment to a radical republican critique of wage labor and market dependence. “Freedom lies within the grasp of the American wage slave,” he wrote in 1908.⁸⁵ Later that year, in a blistering polemic, Connolly suggested that the only liberty he knew of in America was “the liberty to go hungry.”⁸⁶ Any man who moved from Ireland or elsewhere to become

a participant in the freedom of America has to turn out his work rain or shine, winter or summer, and be ready to stand in line to be picked out of a gang as he used to pick out pigs at a fair at home, only that the pigs got fed, if they were or were not picked, whereas he and his family are likely to go hungry if he does not keep on the soft side of the boss ...⁸⁷

Here it is clear: to be a wage laborer is to be structurally dependent on one’s boss for survival, and thus to be dominated; that is, enslaved. By the time he returned from America, Connolly’s discussions of wage slavery are more thoroughly articulated. He wrote in 1915,

From being citizens with rights the workers were being driven into the position of slaves with duties. Some of them may have been well-paid slaves, but slavery is not measured by the amount of oats in the feeding trough to which the slave

⁸¹ Connolly, *Erin’s Hope*; Connolly, “Patriotism and Labour.”

⁸² Connolly, “Labour in Irish History,” 87, 115.

⁸³ See first three editions of *Workers’ Republic*, series of articles entitled “Dublin Tramways and Wage Slavery,” 13–27 Aug. 1898.

⁸⁴ James Connolly, Wood Quay Ward election address, Dublin, Jan. 1903, at www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1903/01/woodquay.htm (accessed 11 Feb. 2019).

⁸⁵ James Connolly, “To Irish Wage Workers in America,” *The Harp*, April 1908, in Connolly, *Revolutionary Writings*, 56–9, at 59.

⁸⁶ James Connolly, “Facets of American Liberty,” *The Harp*, Dec. 1908, in Connolly, *Revolutionary Writings*, 60–66, at 60.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

is tied. It is measured by his loss of control of the conditions under which he labours.⁸⁸

This conceptualization of wage slavery was hardly Connolly's innovation. Skinner has noted the presence in Marx's work of a republican political vocabulary, whilst Bruno Leipold has explored more closely his ideas of freedom in relation to wage slavery.⁸⁹ But the most pertinent scholarship in this connection is Alex Gourevitch's history of "labor republicanism" in late nineteenth-century America. Focusing in particular on the Knights of Labor, a major union which organized laborers on plantations in the American South and across the country, Gourevitch traces a group of workers who opposed wage labor "in the name of republican liberty." They denounced it as a system "based on relations of mastery and subjection."⁹⁰ Henry Sharp, one of the Knights' leading thinkers, said that despite the relative freedom of the wage laborer compared to the chattel slave, the former's condition was still "largely one of dependence"; they were "forced to work."⁹¹ Or as George McNeill, another leading Knight, put it, "there is no such thing as liberty of contract between a wage worker and an employer ... A starving man cannot contract with a man of wealth."⁹²

Considering this tradition of labor republicanism is important for two reasons. First, the Knights' critique of wage labor stands as an important precursor to Connolly's ideas. Indeed, the legacy of labor republicanism exerted an indirect influence on his thought: the Knights' critique was taken up by the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union that Connolly helped found in Chicago in 1905.⁹³ Second, and perhaps more significant, is Gourevitch's claim that these labor republicans, hardly professional philosophers or high theorists, were engaged in conceptual innovation. Their insistence that social as well as political subjection constituted a state of unfreedom, and thus acted as a fetter on liberty, can be seen as a move to radicalize and universalize the republican tradition.⁹⁴ This in turn, perhaps, provides further clarity regarding the theoretical underpinnings of Connolly's socialist republicanism: his expansive vision of republican freedom sees domination and subjection not only in Ireland's (colonial)

⁸⁸James Connolly, "A War for Civilization," *Workers' Republic*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁸⁹Skinner has said he is "very stuck by the extent to which Marx deploys, in his own way, a neo-Roman political vocabulary. He talks about wage slaves, and he talks about the dictatorship of the proletariat. He insists that, if you are free only to sell your labour, then you are not free at all. He stigmatises capitalism as a form of servitude. These are all recognizably neo-Roman moral commitments." Quentin Skinner in "Liberty, Liberalism and Surveillance: A Historic Overview," at www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/quentin-skinner-richard-marshall/liberty-liberalism-and-surveillance-historic-overview (accessed 11 Feb. 2019); Bruno Leipold, "Chains and Invisible Threads: Liberty and Domination in Marx's Account of Wage-Slavery," Cambridge Political Thought and Intellectual History Research Seminar, 7 May 2018. See also Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, for freedom as nondomination in the political theory of vol. 1 of Marx's *Capital*.

⁹⁰Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2015), 1, 6.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 109.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 107.

⁹³It is worth noting that a Knights of Labor branch was established in Belfast in September 1888. It organized a fourteen-week ropemakers' strike. See Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824–2000* (Dublin, 2011), 54.

⁹⁴Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 132.

national position but also in the (capitalist) structure of its social relations. Here we have a partial explanation of the conceptual and political compatibility of the republican and Marxist traditions exemplified by Connolly's thought. The republican "idiom of freedom in which enslavement and subjection are the great ills" lends itself to wide application and can track closely with the concerns of Marxist political thought.⁹⁵

Connolly, moreover, envisaged the form of a socialist republic in similar terms to the Knights of Labor. For both, the means of universalizing republican liberty was to insist on "the principle of cooperative production."⁹⁶ Though his strategic vision for its realization changed significantly over time, Connolly too remained committed to this principle, towards the end of a state in the form of a "Co-operative Commonwealth," which he wrote of in 1915 as the "ideal ... common now to the militant workers of the world."⁹⁷ This was the form he envisaged an Irish workers' republic taking: "the application to agriculture and industry of the democratic principle of the republican ideal."⁹⁸ In 1910, on the occasion of King George V's visit to Ireland, Connolly affirmed that he was a partisan of "*the ultimate sovereignty of those who labour*."⁹⁹

The road to Easter Week

It has long been common to think of Connolly's final act, the culmination of his republican career, as an aberration—a puzzling departure from his lifelong commitment to socializing the national revolution. His participation in the Easter Rising of 1916 was cast by F. S. L. Lyons as a mystery: "how did James Connolly come to sign such a platitudinous document; for that matter, how did he come to be in the General Post Office at all?"¹⁰⁰ Indeed, accounting for the involvement of the rising's other leaders is a much easier task. Cadres of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) like Tom Clarke had long subscribed to the politics of subterranean republican conspiracy, and their valorization of national freedom was always relatively detached from the social demands that were constitutive for Connolly. But mapping Connolly's intellectual and political trajectories elucidates significant continuities in his thought and practice since the late 1890s that render his insurrectionary turn less surprising and rather more intelligible. There *were* notable shifts in his thinking conditioned by industrial defeats and the outbreak of the First World War, but the road to Easter 1916 should be seen less as a story of radical rupture with his political past, and more as a case of long-standing

⁹⁵ Phillip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Cambridge, 2002), 132. Paradoxically, then, as Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 13, has noted, the origins of republican thought in Roman jurisprudence which codified slavery have in fact been an asset down the line, owing to the ease with which the conceptual apparatus of mastery and subjection can be applied beyond their antecedents.

⁹⁶ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 122.

⁹⁷ James Connolly, "The Reconquest of Ireland," at www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1915/rcoi/chap08.htm (accessed 6 March 2019).

⁹⁸ *Workers' Republic*, 27 Aug. 1898.

⁹⁹ James Connolly, "Visit of King George V" (1910), at www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1911/xx/visitkng.htm (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹⁰⁰ F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890–1939* (Oxford, 1979), 94–5.

tensions and contradictions coming to a head, and resulting in a collapse into physical force.

What of the proximate political context? Connolly returned from America a committed syndicalist, and quickly became dedicated to building an independent Irish labor movement. He pushed a motion through the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1912 calling for the “independent representation of labour upon all public boards” to be a chief object of the organization.¹⁰¹ Working closely with Jim Larkin, he built the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) and wrote regularly for its newspaper, the *Irish Worker*, whose weekly circulation had topped 20,000 within a month of its launch.¹⁰² The culmination of these agitational efforts was the famous Dublin lockout, which began in late August 1913, and saw over 20,000 workers locked out by their employers. William Martin Murphy spearheaded a group of bosses, eventually numbering in the hundreds, who blacklisted ITGWU members and sought to deny their workers the right to organize. An *Irish Worker* editorial from early October 1913 declared, “The employers in a rash moment adopted a position they find no longer tenable ... The workers in Dublin must remember that with failure in this mighty effort for higher wages and the right of combination their future will be poor. Stand together as one man, and victory will be yours.”¹⁰³ But the lockout was over by late January 1914, marking a major defeat for the ITGWU after which Larkin himself departed for America. Crucial here, though, is that this defeat and the outbreak of war some eight months later together shattered Connolly’s syndicalism. The terrain of struggle had sharply shifted away from industrial unionism and (broadly) towards the “pursuit of national freedom.”¹⁰⁴

In mid-1899, Connolly penned a sharp critique of what he termed the “physical force party” in Irish politics, by which he meant those “whose members are united upon no one point, and agree upon no single principle, except upon the use of physical force as the sole means of settling the dispute” between the Irish people and Britain.¹⁰⁵ This article is of particular interest because its most obvious target was the IRB, the organization alongside whom he would fight in 1916. Its core contention is that “advanced Nationalists” “exalt into a principle that which the revolutionists of other countries have looked upon as a weapon.” Connolly contrasts this apparently baseless valorization of violence with the Jacobins, whose “sacred right to insurrection” was undergirded by unanimity on “some great governing principle of social or political life.”¹⁰⁶ Crucially, he is not opposed to insurrection or the use of violence for revolutionary ends, but thinks that such means should be used only in particular circumstances. The “party of progress” should first seek to advance democratically to the extent that it is “representative of a will of a majority of the nation” and, following that, exhaust peaceful means

¹⁰¹ O’Connor, *A Labour History*, 89.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰³ *Irish Worker*, 4 Oct. 1913.

¹⁰⁴ Nevin, *James Connolly*, 422.

¹⁰⁵ James Connolly, “Physical Force in Irish Politics,” *Workers’ Republic*, 22 July 1899. See Young, *Postcolonialism*, 300–3, for interesting comparison of Connolly’s conceptions of revolutionary violence to those of Fanon and Sorel.

¹⁰⁶ Connolly, “Physical Force in Irish Politics.”

towards the seizure of power (in 1899, for Connolly, this meant electoral politics, but by the 1910s it meant industrial struggle). After this, Connolly says, a resort to arms is justified. Insurrectionary violence, then, is appropriate when democratic attempts to end British rule through “moral force” have been rejected, and peace foreclosed.¹⁰⁷

These formulations can be fruitfully read against his eventual, fateful participation in Easter Week. Connolly’s 1899 polemic on the “physical force party” evinces a gradualist optimism. He saw in the ballot box, with the widening of the franchise, the possibility of successfully promulgating socialist politics in the electoral and public spheres, and presenting to the British government the “demand for freedom from the yoke of a governing master class or nation.” Later, the means of such “moral force” became industrial agitation. By 1914, even prior to the crisis induced by the war, the picture was rather bleaker—and we might consider Connolly as having shifted to a stance of immediatist voluntarism. Attempts at electioneering first with the ISRP and later with the Socialist Party of Ireland had roundly failed, and his attempts to build power through amalgamated industrial unions lay in tatters. Means other than physical force, that is, had been largely exhausted, and the Easter rebels, though a motley crew, were united in the moment by absolute disaffection with constitutionalist politics, and in principle by the object of national freedom. In other words, the moment of rupture had arrived. The defeat of the ITGWU was “the day on which the question of moral or physical force” was finally decided: efforts at exerting the former had been exhausted, and the outbreak of the Great War provided an opening to strike by means of the latter.

It is important to recognize, too, that Connolly’s common cause with his rebels was not entirely novel: there was long precedent for him allying with nationalists and republicans to his political right. He worked closely with both Maud Gonne and Alice Milligan in the earliest days of the ISRP, and sought alliances with the likes of Arthur Griffith in the midst of the Boer War. Even in early writings built around scathing attacks on “revolutionary nationalist[s]” and “Home Rulers,” Connolly prophesied the likelihood of unity in the cause of national freedom. In a June 1900 *Workers’ Republic* piece entitled “Socialism and Revolutionary Traditions,” he wrote that the Socialist Republicans “adhere to the high ideal of national freedom sought for in the past, [but] go beyond it to a fuller ideal which we conceive to flow from national freedom as a natural and necessary consequence.”¹⁰⁸ He concluded, crucially, that although they, the socialists, were the agitators for revolution and the republicans the conspirators, the national cause demanded a certain unity, for “when the hour of action arrived our only rivalry need be as to which shall strike the most effective blows *against the common enemy*.”¹⁰⁹ In May 1908, Connolly compared the barriers facing the socialist struggle in America and Ireland, concluding that the chief difference was the presence of a “foreign government” in the latter. The vote of the Irish working class for freedom, he wrote, “was answered by a foreign army shaking thirty thousand bayonets in our faces.”¹¹⁰ And finally, in October 1915, he wrote of the function of the Irish Citizen’s

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ James Connolly, “Socialism and Revolutionary Traditions,” *Workers’ Republic*, 23 June 1900.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., added emphasis.

¹¹⁰ Connolly, “To Irish Wage Workers in America,” 59.

Army's (ICA), "Its constitution pledged and still pledges its members to work for an Irish Republic, and for the Emancipation of Labour. It has ever been foremost in all national work, and whilst never neglecting its own special function has always been at the disposal of the forces of Irish nationality for the ends common to all."¹¹¹ It is clear that although Connolly's critical political contribution was to systematically insist on the inextricability of national from social revolution, he had long essentially recognized the necessity of first uniting to win the former. Usurping British rule was unavoidably a precondition for the establishment of an Irish social republic. In this connection, Connolly's insurrectionary turn is altogether less perplexing, and not a question of his turning away from social republicanism or abandoning it as a horizon, but a matter of strategic ordering. Connolly was perhaps the first anticolonialist to face the bitter implausibility of deliverance from domination being *at once* political *and* social—he would hardly be the last.

There was, however, a marked shift in Connolly's thought occasioned by the onset of the First World War. If we can crudely characterize his political theory as at least in part the product of a composite between elements of Marxian "materialism" and the historical idealism of nationalist thought, then a tilt towards the latter is evident from 1914 onwards. Most notable in this regard is his sharp departure from earlier attempts to theorize—against the fictive, romantic idealizing of nationalist thinkers—a historically grounded account of the Irish nation's emergence as a political entity. He fell prey to the "morbid idealising of the past" for which he had once sharply rebuked other nationalists and republicans. Commenting on the funeral of the Fenian O'Donovan Rossa in August 1915, Connolly wrote,

To many people today it seems that the funeral of O'Donovan Rossa came to Ireland in such a moment of national agony—came on such a mission of divine uplifting and deliverance. The mists and doubts, the corruption and poisons, the distrust and treacheries, were blown away, and the true men and women of Ireland saw with pleasure the rally of the nation to old ideas.¹¹²

This is little different in substance from Patrick Pearse's graveside oration: "We stand at Rossa's grave not in sadness but rather in exaltation of the spirit that it has given to us to come thus into so close a communion with that brave and splendid Gael."¹¹³ Even more striking are Connolly's remarks in February 1916, in *Workers' Republic*, on the "ineffaceable marks of the separate existence of Ireland" as "the handiwork of the Almighty," and of "the most perfect world [as] that in which the separate existence of nations is held most separate."¹¹⁴ More Mazzini than Marx, this lengthy article, which seeks to answer the question "What Is a Free Nation?," remarkably barely mentions class or "the

¹¹¹ *Workers' Republic*, 30 Oct. 1915. Notable here also is Foster's reading of the recollections of Easter Rising volunteers recorded by the Bureau of Military History. He notes that social and economic grievances are far less common than "the traditional nostrums of Catholicism, historical victimhood, glorification of past struggles and resentment of English dominance." Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 328.

¹¹² *Workers' Republic*, 7 Aug. 1915.

¹¹³ Padraic H. Pearse, "O'Donovan Rossa—Graveside Oration," in Pearse, *Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin, 1952), 133–9, at 135.

¹¹⁴ James Connolly, "What Is a Free Nation?," *Workers' Republic*, 12 Feb. 1916.

cause of labour.”¹¹⁵ In other words, Connolly’s turn to Fenianism was conditioned by the political conjuncture and its hard realities, but unquestionably found exaggerated intellectual expression, too.

Connolly was on the whole a flexible and nondeterministic thinker, due both to his encounter with Irish nationalist thought (its culturalist and idealist dimensions in particular, represented by the likes of Stopford-Green) and to the ultimate non-correspondence of Ireland’s social terrain with the Marxist ideal types of the factory form and its industrial subject. At times he seemed to hold firm to a crude economism—the late attachment to syndicalism, for instance, necessitating ascribing the economic “base” an absolute determinacy in the political field—but in general he was driven, by the nationalist encounter and the heterogeneous social terrain, to treat consciousness, ideology, education and culture with great seriousness, and to see politics qua politics as fertile terrain for republican struggle. We should not, therefore, take Connolly’s 1899 metaphor about the economic basis of politics, “the stomach, not the brain,” as indicative of the general character of his political thought.¹¹⁶ We can go so far as to say that Connolly lived the repudiation of his early insistence (borrowed, he thought, from Engels) that successful revolutions “are not the product of our brains, but of ripe material conditions.”¹¹⁷ The rising and his participation in it were an irreducibly political decision to strike at “the golden moment of hot wrath” in the wake of industrial defeat for socialist republicans amidst evidently *unripe* social conditions.¹¹⁸ Connolly’s bold argument that the Irish working class constituted the nation—the proletariat as the body politic, the *sine qua non* of a socialist republican strategy—was a political conjuring act, an early instance of what would become a common move in the anticolonial “search for a subject.”¹¹⁹ It did not survive contact with Irish social realities, and republican insurrection followed. The social republic would have to remain, and remains still, in the wings.

There can be no doubt that, contrary to the condescension of some leading Irish historians, Connolly was a complex republican theorist whose ideas are worthy of sustained scholarly attention in their own right. In grappling with Ireland’s past, present and future, and the question of the strategic ordering of the political and the social

¹¹⁵Mazzini’s influence on Irish nationalist political thought and practice was significant and enduring. For initial influence see Colin Barr, “Giuseppe Mazzini and Irish Nationalism, 1845–70,” in C. A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini, eds., *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism, 1830–1920* (Oxford, 2008), 125–44; and for endurance see brief discussion of Alice Milligan’s rather Mazzinian formulations in *Shan Van Vocht* in Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal*, 123–5.

¹¹⁶James Connolly, *Workers’ Republic*, 12 Aug. 1899.

¹¹⁷Connolly, “Labour in Irish History,” 77; Engels had in fact insisted, more precisely, that in shifting regimes of production and exchange were to be found the “*final causes*” (Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, 94) of revolutionary upheaval. Perhaps Connolly did not read this passage closely enough to grasp its essence; nevertheless, the substance of his thought came much closer to it than many of his statements of (determinist) methodological intent might imply. Recall that for Connolly the *ideological* sediments of the Irish clan system—and the anticolonial modality through which anger at its usurpation found expression—were an important condition of possibility for the success of the Irish socialist republican project in the present.

¹¹⁸James Connolly, “Ireland—Disaffected or Revolutionary,” *Workers’ Republic*, 13 Nov. 1915.

¹¹⁹Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Belatedness as possibility: subaltern histories, once again,” in Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri, eds., *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader* (London, 2010), 37–49, at 45.

in the revolution against empire, he stands amongst the great anticolonial thinkers who defined the decades that followed his execution at the hands of the British state. If Connolly cannot properly be said to have historically *anticipated* them, he was at least their forebear.

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