

“IRELAND AS DISTINCT FROM HER PEOPLE IS NOTHING TO ME”

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In less than three years from now, we will be marking the centenary of the Easter Rising. Old questions will be raised in new ways, and a great deal of energy will be devoted, I’m sure, to revisiting “old, unhappy, far-off things; And battles long ago”.

One of the questions sure to be raised will be this: Why did James Connolly ally himself and the Irish Citizen Army to the armed forces of insurrectionary Nationalism?

This is in fact a naïve question, and rarely posed in a disinterested manner. To the extent that Nationalism in the 21st century is generally considered uninformed by analysis and little more than the expression of unthinking, a-historical, sectarian prejudice, the question, when put at all, often masks an unexamined assumption that in one way or another Connolly was wrong.

There is, of course, a short factual answer, and it goes something like this: the continental war had fully engaged the armed forces of Britain to the extent that the Irish Republican Brotherhood, inheritors of the Fenian physical force tradition, came to the conclusion that a tactical opportunity had arisen to strike for independence under arms. Acting through the Irish Volunteers, the IRB had set in train a process that would culminate in a rising. Connolly had been taken into their confidence by leading elements of the IRB, was aware that a Rising was planned, and was faced in the run-up to Easter week with a dilemma: commit the Citizen Army to joint action with the volunteers, or stand aside and allow an

armed Nationalist uprising to go ahead without him and without the backing of the trades union movement that was the ultimate guarantor of the Citizen Army.

Left commentators of the past 40 years have implicitly and explicitly criticized Connolly's decision by saying that he abandoned the principled politics of a workers' revolutionary movement by mistakenly allying himself with a Nationalist uprising that was devoid of ideological content. These commentators would go further, perhaps, and claim that by subsuming the ICA inside the larger nationalist project, Connolly was also opening the door to the negation of progressive politics inside the bigger, inchoate and diffuse national movement that would receive its impetus from the Rising.

This judgement has gained traction over the past few decades as an implicit element in certain critiques of the Provisional Republican movement, but while it is perfectly legitimate to criticize a contemporary political movement for its actual or perceived ideological poverty or even, from the left, lack of a coherent revolutionary strategy, it is not I think legitimate to derive from this contemporary argument a retrospective condemnation of Connolly's tactical decision. If he was right to join forces with the Volunteers, he was right in the context of the times; if he was wrong, he was wrong in the context of the times.

Nothing could be more futile than bringing to bear on an argument knowledge and perspective that could not by any conceivable means have been available to the original protagonists.

The civilized woman or man in our day finds war abhorrent. It seems to most of us axiomatic that war is to be avoided at almost any cost, and there are many among us who feel that war is to be avoided at any cost. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the horrors experienced by humanity in the course of the long and terrible 20th century, but it would perhaps surprise many to discover how recent a phenomenon this universal abhorrence of war is.

We need constantly to remind ourselves that the immediate context of the Rising was a complex and many-faceted war that had convulsed all of Europe and reached out into the remotest corners of the world.

Those who dismiss Pearse, Connolly and the insurrectionists as aberrant near psychopaths obsessed with blood sacrifice need to remember, if they ever knew, that all across Europe, at all levels of society, the idea that national salvation could be mediated through blood sacrifice was everywhere prevalent, and unremarked by most.

The melancholy fact is, all of Europe by 1914 was bizarrely reconciled to the inevitability of war. It would not be going too far to say that there was not just a climate of resignation to war but in many polities, all across the Continent, a grim relish at the prospect. In committing to war against Britain, to armed action per se, neither the leadership of the Volunteers, nor Connolly as the leader of the Citizen Army, were acting aberrantly in the context of the times.

In Britain, in 1910, a close friend of the reigning King Edward VII, Viscount Esher, could say: "the idea of a prolonged peace is an idle dream", and 2 years later, to an audience of undergraduates in Cambridge University he would speak of "the poetic and romantic aspects of the clash of arms." In France in 1913, re-introducing the three-year period of compulsory military service, the Chamber of Deputies embraced what it was pleased to call "the prestige of war"; in Germany that same year the army bill saw a massive increase in expenditure on the army, with popular approval, while 5 years earlier the Russian Duma had voted a succession of allocations to the army far in excess of what the army was actually able to spend. In Serbia, a particularly nihilistic and widely-supported nationalism was pursuing an aggressive annexation of territories under the banner of reintegrating the national territories, even at the risk of provoking war with Austria-Hungary, while on the other side of the world, buoyed up by their success against Russia in the war of 1905, the rising power of Japan was already heavily committed to a politics of war.

By objective analysis, this readiness to pursue politics by means of war was a project of that power élite who stood most to benefit from the spoils — the armaments manufacturers, of course, but also that large class of investors who sought markets, materials and profits by the retention of, or expansion into, colonial or mercantile imperial possessions. What perhaps seems strange to us now was the enthusiasm of all those national populations for war, whether conceived as aggressive or defensive. What seems positively perverse to most of us, perhaps, is the extraordinary willingness to die of those in all countries who stood to gain least from imperial wars, the urban working class and unemployed, the agrarian poor, the salaried serfs who staffed the low-paid offices — that and the enthusiasm of mothers, sisters, lovers, fathers and brothers that the young, predominantly the young, should as a matter of honour be prepared to offer up their lives to the mass funeral pyres that were, since the beginning of the century, inexorably being prepared.

The young of Bulgaria, Serbia, Austria, Russia, France, Britain and Germany were prepared to slaughter each other for something as chimerical as imagined national honour, and the ruling classes of these and other countries were prepared to nurture and complacently prepare this mass suicide, this mass murder, for no better end than an increase of profits, power and prestige — that's the blunt and melancholy truth of it. If the poor who would do the bulk of the dying knew no better, it was because they were for the most part cruelly and neglectfully uneducated; if the officers who would lead and conduct the slaughter might or should have known better in our eyes, we need to make a deliberate effort of the imagination to understand that the complacent acceptance and embrace of war was almost completely pervasive in all European societies of that time. For most of us, most of the time, standing outside the norms and accepted realities of a given society is next to impossible. It takes a remarkable independence of mind to resist the orthodoxy of the given moment, but Connolly had precisely that rare independence of mind.

His consistent analysis was that the Great War, in its conception and in its bloody flowering, was a war between capitalist powers for the control of resources, a

war between Empires which would have no outcome in the expansion of post war social justice but would instead result in a widening and deepening of injustice and exploitation. In polemic after polemic, in newspaper articles and in speeches, he laid out this analysis.

That history has shown him to have been correct is neither here nor there. The men in the trenches of the Somme, Ypres, and Passchendaele, on the barren heights of the Tyrol and in the unspeakable conditions of the Russian front would eventually experience the truth of his analysis, or at least elements of that truth, in the mud, ice, blood and entrails of unprecedented slaughter. The mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers of the dead would see, staring into their dying fires when the guns had fallen silent, the faces of loved ones who had died for a nullity, honourably in their individual cases, some of them, but the vast majority in mute, uncomprehending resignation.

The English poet Wilfred Owen would eventually recognize the brute reality of it all:

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.
Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est Pro patria mori.

Owen saw through it all, but late, very late, and had he not been in thrall at the start of the war to a chimerical vision of England, he might have seen through the rhetoric of nationalist propaganda to the bloody and visceral reality of what war would actually be like.

Another way of saying this would be: if he had possessed an analytic perspective.

Connolly, on the other hand, did possess such an analytic perspective, which is a way of saying he did not subscribe to illusions, no matter how seductively and romantically framed.

In the newspaper **Workers' Republic**, 20th August 1898, he wrote:

"The Cabinets who rule the destinies of nations from the various capitals of Europe are but the tools of the moneyed interest. Their quarrels are not dictated by sentiments of national pride or honour, but by the avarice and lust of power on the part of the class to which they belong. The people who fight under their banners in the various armies or navies do indeed imagine they are fighting the battles of their own country, but in what country has it ever happened that the people have profited by foreign conquest?"

His analysis was global. In the same article he wrote:

“The mad scramble for wealth which this century has witnessed has resulted in lifting almost every European country into the circle of competition for trade. New machinery, new inventions, new discoveries in the scientific world have all been laid under contribution as aids to industry, until the wealth producing powers of society at large have far outstripped the demand for goods, and now those very powers we have conjured up from the bosom of nature threaten to turn and rend us. Every new labour-saving machine at one and the same time, by reducing the number of workers needed, reduces the demand for goods which the worker cannot buy, while increasing the power of producing goods, and thus permanently increases the number of unemployed, and shortens the period of industrial prosperity. Competition between capitalists drives them to seek for newer and more efficient wealth-producing machines, but as the home market is now no longer able to dispose of their produce they are driven to foreign markets.”

At the time when Connolly was writing this, German industrial production was leaping ahead in the period of post-Bismarck national consolidation, modernizing at a speed and to a depth unmatched by any other European country. The German trade union movement was the most advanced in Europe, and in the major cities was beginning to build programmes of education, social welfare and social consolidation unmatched anywhere in the world — this in the face of a highly-reactionary political leadership, an army General Staff actively advocating for war and an unstable Kaiser. At the same time, the British trade union movement was sluggish, jingoistic and timid, more than happy to support reactionary craft unions in Ireland as satellite operations and ill-disposed towards Larkin’s and Connolly’s aim of building a revolutionary, independent Union in Ireland. It is necessary to understand these things in order to grasp why Connolly had no qualms about accepting aid from Germany at a time when that country was at war with the United Kingdom.

Connolly was also aware that the poor of Ireland were dying in Flanders mud in a war for spoils between Imperial powers, that British recruitment in Ireland was cynical and mendacious.

In the **Workers’ Republic**, 8th April 1916, 16 days before the Rising, he wrote:

“That the young men of Ireland might be seduced into the service of the nation that denies every national power to their country, we have seen appeals made to our love of freedom, to our religious instincts, to our sympathy for the oppressed, to our kinship with suffering.”

He continued:

“The power that for seven hundred years has waged bitter and unrelenting war upon the freedom of Ireland, and that still declares that the rights of Ireland must forever remain subordinate to the interests of the British empire, hypocritically appealed to our young men to enlist under her banner and shed their blood ‘in the interests of freedom’.”

And he said this:

“The power which holds in subjection more of the world’s population than any other power on the globe, and holds them in subjection as slaves without any guarantee of freedom or power of self-government, this power that sets Catholic against Protestant, the Hindu against the Mohammedan, the yellow man against the brown, and keeps them quarrelling with each other whilst she robs and murders them all – this power appeals to Ireland to send her sons to fight under England’s banner for the cause of the oppressed. The power whose rule in Ireland has made of Ireland a desert, and made the history of our race read like the records of a shambles, as she plans for the annihilation of another race appeals to our manhood to fight for her because of our sympathy for the suffering, and of our hatred of oppression.”

His article of 1898 sets out an analysis of the causes of the coming war, the ground from which, eventually, with a terrible inevitability, the Great War will come.

His response to Britain’s appeal for Irish cannon fodder comes 18 years later, but is framed in the same over-arching analysis. It is possible, tracing the line of his thought, to see that by his lights the struggle of the Irish workers for control of their lives, their livelihoods and their destinies was objectively also a struggle against Empire, and that all deeds that weakened empire must necessarily offer at least the hope of advancing the interests of the working class and the poor and powerless in general.

To this extent, at least, we can now see the rationale that led him to commit the

Citizen Army to what was in essence and certainly in the eyes of its commanders a nationalist political project.

The Rising was criticized by Leon Trotsky as petit-bourgeois adventurism, but Lenin saw it in a more positive light: In an article published July 1916 in **Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata No. 1**, replying to the dismissal by Kark Radek of the Rising as no more than a putsch, the architect of the Russian Revolution, who would prove no mean butcher himself, wrote:

“The centuries-old Irish national movement, having passed through various stages and combinations of class interest, manifested itself, in particular, in a mass Irish National Congress in America (**Vorwärts**, March 20, 1916) which called for Irish independence; it also manifested itself in street fighting conducted by a section of the urban petty bourgeoisie and a section of the workers after a long period of mass agitation, demonstrations, suppression of newspapers, etc. Whoever calls such a rebellion a "putsch" is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of envisaging a social revolution as a living phenomenon.”

The key phrase here is “social revolution as a living phenomenon”. We need to remember that Connolly’s decision to commit the Citizen Army to armed insurrection was driven in part by his analysis of imperialism; we need to remember also that in the context of the times, the kind of moral opprobrium that attaches to war-making in our day did not for the most part have the minds and hearts of the people — principled pacifism, of the kind that Francis Sheehy Skeffinton and a handful of others so nobly embraced, was so rare as to be almost imperceptible. Most of all, though, we need to remember that Connolly’s decision was made in a particular living moment, pressured and shaped by the living forces actually in play.

What did Connolly know at the time? He knew that the Volunteers, led and directed by the largely-hidden hand of the IRB, were planning a Rising — not the truncated and largely symbolic Rising that would actually take place but a country-wide insurrection, an actual bid to confront and defeat the imperial power. He had, therefore, to decide whether to commit the Citizen Army to this effort, or stand down the workers’ militia, small as it was, and await the outcome. If the military capacity of the Citizen Army was limited, he would have known

that the symbolic resonance of its engagement in the coming struggle would have a powerful persuasive effect on trades unionists and workers across Ireland, thereby increasing popular support for the planned rising. He would have known also that, should the Rising be successful, in whatever measure, he would have gained authority and a place at the table when it came to determining the rights of Labour in the new Ireland that would emerge. Conversely, had the Citizen Army stood aside, one of two negative outcomes was likely: if the rising succeeded, it would succeed as a venture largely fought by clerks and small farmers, and would very likely have been quickly suborned by Nationalist minded capitalists, Catholic pietists and sentimentalists. Had it failed, the all too necessary compact between the liberty-minded Volunteers and the working class as represented by the unions, with the Citizen Army as its spearhead, would have been broken, and Labour, generally considered, would have lost the support and trust of the larger and more diffuse liberation movement.

Given these considerations, under intense pressure to act in the given moment, Connolly and the Council of the Citizen Army made their fateful and terrible decision for war.

En route to the GPO that Easter Monday morning, William O'Brien asked Connolly something to the effect of, "What are we doing?" Connolly's reply was terse and grim, "We are going to be slaughtered."

MacNeill's countermanding order ensured, and I know it was not his motive, that the Rising would fail — but the combined force of Volunteers and Citizen Army fighters that spread out across Dublin on that fateful morning were prepared to hazard their lives on a desperate gamble, that the doomed fight in Dublin would set in train a new and unstoppable phase in the struggle for national liberation. As things turned out, the Volunteers would win that gamble, at least in part, at least for a little while, and the armed forces of Labour, the revolutionary vanguard, would lose.

The extent of what Labour had lost can best be seen, almost three years later, when the First Dáil convened and was called on to vote for The Democratic Programme of 1919. Labour had responded to Sinn Féin's plea to stand aside in the great election of 1918, in order to allow Sinn Féin candidates maximize their votes, which of course they did. One of the immediate consequences of this was that the leadership of what was by then already a nascent state was made up of men, and a few women, for whom the primary, for many the only, aim was to end British rule in Ireland. Just that, and no more than that. Theirs was to be, in political or philosophical terms, a revolution devoid of content. Neither Sinn Féin, nor the Irish Republican army nor indeed the IRB had anything like a coherent, theorized social programme for the post-independence state. Nevertheless, and perhaps made uneasy by the hovering ghost of the one man who might have given them such a programme, the convenors of the Dáil gave permission to Labour leaders Thomas Johnston and William O'Brien, aided by Cathal O'Shannon, to draw up and lay before the assembly the social and political programme for the coming Republic.

The Democratic Programme was proposed to the Dail by General Risteárd Ó Maolchatha, TD for Clontarf and, remarkably, Chief of Staff of the IRA. Unanimously adopted, the Programme was, in fact, a very radical document. Among its rather startling propositions was this, for instance: "the Nation's sovereignty extends not only to all men and women of the nation, but to all its material possessions, the Nation's soil and all its resources, all the wealth and all the wealth-producing processes". It went on to proclaim that "all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare." Equally radically, and in words that surely embody the after-echoes of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, the Declaration stated: "It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing or shelter, but that all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education and training as Citizens of Free and Gaelic Ireland."

Influential elements of the IRB, Michael Collins prominent among them, had argued down even more radical propositions, certainly on political instinct, being often deeply conservative men, but mostly on the grounds that adopting and attempting to implement such a radical and thoroughgoing programme would detract from and indeed confuse what they saw as the primary aim, the breaking of British power in Ireland. "To break the connection with England" was always and ever the sole aim of the Fenians and their lineal successors. Tragically, it would prove to be their only aim.

The Democratic Programme was unanimously adopted by the Dáil, and as unanimously ignored in the decades from that day to this.

Speaking about the Democratic Programme on RTE television on the 21st January 1969, Mr. Ernest Blythe, said, " I never found anybody who took the slightest interest...[it was] some sort of a hoist of a flag." On the same programme, Seán Mac Entee said: "We couldn't impose a quasi-socialist policy... the workers themselves wouldn't have credited your sincerity" — having prefaced this remark by saying, in effect, that an electorate of farmers would not have stood for such a Programme.

Connolly gambled in Easter Week that an alliance in arms between the cause of labour and the cause of Ireland would permit the emergence of a truly revolutionary politics in the aftermath of the military struggle.

He had his answer in the cynical adoption of, and the immediate & permanent sidelining of, The Democratic Programme.

Here, for its bitter appositeness, though against the poet's own political purpose in writing it, I might quote a late poem by Yeats:

The Great Day

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
A beggar on horseback lashes a beggar on foot.

Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.

If Connolly, as we now see, gambled and lost, it might have been otherwise. Drawing on his own thought, from another strand of his carefully-wrought analysis, we can see a different path he might have taken, but before we consider this, we need once again to consider the wider European framework of his thoughts and actions. In his very remarkable book, **THE SLEEPWALKERS: How Europe Went to War in 1914**, the historian Christopher Clark makes the same point over and over again: there was no fore-ordained inevitability in the continent-wide drift towards the Great War; at any one of a multitude of crisis points, the contending powers, severally and together, could have taken a different road. Nevertheless, the prevailing mood was of resignation to what seemed inescapable. This mood was rooted in a quasi-mystical understanding of what it meant to be Russian, British, French, German, Hungarian and so on, a chimerical idea of the nation assiduously fostered by ruling élites all across Europe, aided and abetted by a venal and shallow press.

In the **Workers' Republic**, 15 July 1900, Connolly wrote what was to become a much-quoted, and sometimes mis-quoted passage:

"Ireland as distinct from her people is nothing to me: and the man who is bubbling over with love and enthusiasm for Ireland, and can yet pass unmoved through our streets and witness all the wrong and the suffering, the shame and the degradation brought upon the people of Ireland – aye, brought by Irishmen upon Irishmen and women, without burning to end it, is in my opinion, a fraud and a liar in his heart, no matter how he loves that combination of chemical elements he is pleased to call Ireland."

The twin foundations on which early 20th century national feeling are based, Connolly touches on here. One is 'the people', a concept that everyone understands inside a particular polity, or at least everyone thinks they understand. The fact that, put under pressure, the term will always prove curiously evasive, does not take from its potency as a talisman — most notoriously perhaps in the use of the term by Hitler, who could spellbind a whole

nation by his invocation of the mystical volk, a usage that found its apotheosis in the phrase “ein volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer.” The essentialist idea of a people, meaning a native people who may rightfully claim title to a place, is used by nationalists as a kind of mandate, an abstract term that by a curious dullness of repetition evades the singularity and particularity of the individual human who may consider herself or himself one of those people. This evacuation of the term, common in romantic nationalist propaganda, is what allows warlords to invoke the sacred destiny of, say, the Serbian people while sending the same people in hundreds of thousands to kill other people and, very likely, be killed themselves. Even more notoriously, in the perversion of communism that came to occupy power in post-revolutionary Russia, the authority of ‘the people’ would be used to cloak and legitimize barbaric excesses. Connolly, however, meant and used the term in a different way. By ‘the people’ he meant the poor and the powerless, the excluded and the suffering, actual people, actually, individually, morally and physically present in history as themselves — sons and daughter, mothers and fathers and relatives and neighbours, brothers and sisters, mortal and breathing and equally and individually owed their dignity as human beings.

When he would go on to describe the Great War as the organized slaughter of the working classes, he was not speaking in or of abstractions, he was raging against the mass murder of infinitely valuable human beings.

When he used the term ‘combination of chemical elements’ as a description of the land of Ireland, he was calling attention to, and by that opposing, the cynical personification of the land of Ireland, the cynical misuse of the proposition that the land itself was somehow in and of itself sacred, by 19th century orators and their successors who by evoking this mystical identity could avoid what for Connolly were the hard and urgent questions: who owned this land and its production, who should benefit from the working of the land, how should the land be best used for the good of all? The land of Ireland, Connolly was saying, was solid, material and actually present in a very particular way to those who walked its fields and pavements barefoot, who sweated to load its produce on ships, sweated to draw wealth from its fields, sweated 4 and 5 families to a floor

in its tenements in summer, and froze in winter.

Connolly was hardheadedly realistic and clear in his scorn of those who would invoke a mystical Ireland as a spur to the fight for liberty while indifferent to or by choice unaware of the hardships endured by so many of those Irish men and Irish women invoked in the Proclamation of Easter Week.

Those who would vote for and promptly ignore The Democratic Programme of 1919, those men and women whose first and last thought was to break the connection with England, saw politics and Ireland in a very different light to that in which Connolly saw his country. Some would belatedly pay lip service to his ideas, as when Eamon de Valera, speaking in the La Scala Theatre to the inaugural meeting of Fianna Fáil, 16th May 1926, would say this:

“I think I am right also in believing that Independence – political freedom – is regarded by most of you, as it is regarded by me, simply as a means to a greater end and purpose beyond it. The purpose beyond is the right use of our freedom, and that use must surely include making provision so that every man and woman in the country shall have the opportunity of living the fullest lives that God intended them to live. It is only since I have found how neglected of this purpose many of us are inclined to become, that I have been able to sympathise fully with James Connolly’s passionate protest:- ‘Ireland as distinct from her people [is] nothing to me...’ ”

I have been arguing that Connolly was to some extent circumscribed by the mindset, the common mentalité, of his time. I have also, I think, indicated that in certain aspects of his thought he was capable of flying free of those nets.

Certainly he was capable of envisaging an alternative trajectory for the struggle for independence, a path that could lead through the ballot box to victory for the poor, a principled politics of and for the poor and hitherto powerless. He laid out this analysis in a remarkable article published in **Workers’ Republic** as far back as 22nd July, 1899. The article was entitled, simply, ‘Physical Force in Irish Politics’. Like The Democratic Programme, it deserves to be thoroughly discussed, parsed and analysed to see if its arguments and propositions cannot be brought to bear on our understanding of the predicament in which we now

find ourselves. Certain of these arguments and propositions have, of course, been made redundant by advances in both political thought and the acquisition by the Irish people of elements, at least, of liberty. Nevertheless, and again like The Democratic Programme, his analysis still holds a certain startling persuasiveness.

He begins by pointing out the essential vacuity of what he calls the physical force party:

“...a party, that is to say, 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 people of this country and the governing power of Great Britain.”

He contrasts these would-be insurgents with comparable predecessors in Europe:

“Other countries and other peoples have, from time to time, appealed to what the first French Revolutionists picturesquely described as the “sacred right of insurrection,” but in so appealing they acted under the inspiration of, and combated for, some great governing principle of political or social life upon which they, to a man, were in absolute agreement...Our people have glided at different periods of the past century from moral force agitation, so-called, into physical force rebellion, from constitutionalism into insurrectionism, meeting in each the same failure and the same disaster and yet seem as far as ever from learning the great truth that neither method is ever likely to be successful until they first insist that a perfect agreement upon the end to be attained should be arrived at as a starting-point of all our efforts.”

Did Connolly, I wonder, feeling himself pressed by the convergence of historical forces and opportunities, reflect on these words of his on the eve of the Rising? Whatever of that, his analysis continues to the next stage, the laying bare of a certain revolutionary fraudulence at the heart of the 1798 rebellion, one that would find an improbable echo in the simultaneous adoption of and sidelining of The Democratic Programme in 1919:

“The '98 Executive, organised in the commencement by professed believers in the physical force doctrine, started by proclaiming its adherence to the principle

of national independence “as understood by Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen,” and in less than twelve months from doing so, deliberately rejected a similar resolution and elected on its governing body men notorious for their Royalist proclivities. As the '98 Executive represents the advanced Nationalists of Ireland, this repudiation of the Republican faith of the United Irishmen is an interesting corroboration of the truth of our statement that the advanced Nationalists of our day are utterly regardless of principle and only attach importance to methods – an instance of putting the cart before the horse, absolutely unique in its imbecility and unparalleled in the history of the world.”

Method before principle, there we have it. If Connolly's analysis is clear-headed and exact in its day, it will also prove prophetic: the partial success of the physical force movement will indeed lead to a Republic that has not, even to this day, declared itself a Republic in its own Constitution, a Republic moreover whose latter-day rulers have voluntarily surrendered its sovereignty. We have a republic that has never, neither in its Free State antecedent nor in any subsequent régime, embraced the doctrines of liberty, equality and fraternity, nor yet can it be said to embody that commonality of Catholic, Protestant and dissenter that the United Irishmen as originally conceived aspired to establish as the fruits of their work.

Against the emptiness of physical force as a method and as an end in itself, as the one sure path to victory, Connolly proposes the ballot box and education:

“Thus the policy of the Socialist Republicans is seen to be the only wise one. “Educate that you may be free”; principles first, methods afterwards. If the advocacy of physical force failed to achieve success or even to effect an uprising when the majority were unenfranchised and the secret ballot unknown, how can it be expected to succeed now that the majority are in possession of voting power and the secret ballot safeguards the voter?

The ballot-box was given us by our masters for their purpose; let us use it for our own. Let us demonstrate at that ballot-box the strength and intelligence of the revolutionary idea; let us make the hustings a rostrum from which to promulgate our principles; let us grasp the public powers in the interest of the disinherited class...”

It is not my business here to examine the failure of Connolly and his comrades to

successfully propose and carry through a socialist Republic by means of the ballot box. I mean only to draw attention to the fact that 17 years before the Rising, he had conceived and proposed an alternative strategy to that which, at the latter end, would indeed drive the British army out of Ireland, or part of Ireland at least, but would leave untouched the corpus of the colonists' civil and criminal law, the structure and horizons of the imperial civil service, the forms of judiciary and parliament, the habits at once of arrogance in power and deference to power that are among the more bitter inheritances of our past.

Perhaps even worse: because our state is founded on a politics derived from the simple mandate of physical force, because there is, so to speak, no philosophy of the state that might be taught, debated, amended or frankly challenged in our politics, it has proved impossible to eradicate the pernicious idea that radical transformation of our politics is possible only through the employment of physical force.

That is not now, nor should it ever again be, an option for us as a people. The glorification of James Connolly as an exponent of physical force politics is a corruption of his beliefs and hopes, a travesty of his analysis, a grotesque and impermissible appropriation. The contradictions of history as they converged on that fateful week in 1916 left him, as I see it, with no option but to participate in the Rising. He can only have hoped that, win or lose, his politics would not die with him but would be carried on into the future, into further struggles, on to other and better ground.

I salute him for that, certainly, for his realism and for his amplifying visions and hopes; all that I know of him has long since entitled him to my admiration as a man — a man, however, possessed of no more than the advantages and weaknesses of what was possible to a man of his time. Connolly was an agitator, a worker and a warrior in thought and deed, flawed like us, sentimental as we often are, a lover and father, a true comrade to his fellow workers — but he was neither oracle nor saint, he left us no gospel to be followed, no true faith to which

we must swear allegiance. There has been too much lip-service paid to a simplified version of Connolly, his politics and his analysis. Like some saint of the Catholic church to a decadent and venal Cardinal, his name is frequently on the lips of those tribunes of Labour who have long since lost their connection to, or respect for, the humanity of the poor. I should like to see an end to that cynical mock veneration. Equally, I should like to see the latter-day inheritors of the simplistic doctrine of physical force acknowledge the particularity, and especially the reasoned politics, of a man who vehemently disdained such a brutal and counterproductive political strategy.

I will quote him one more time before I close, from the **Workers' Republic** 13th November 1915:

“Despite all seeming to the contrary we assert that Ireland is not really a revolutionary country. Ireland is a disaffected country which has long been accustomed to conduct constitutional agitation in revolutionary language, and what is worse, to conduct revolutionary movements with due regard to law and order.”

Alas, my friends, he knew us all too well.

END

Given at Cork City Library, 01 October 2013

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