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Socialism and Irish Nationalism - On the Irish Republic and popular power

Tuesday 22 March 2016, by [CONNOLLY James](#) (Date first published: 1897).

Connolly's 1897 article, "Socialism and Irish Nationalism", from an issue of *L'Irlande Libre* addresses socialism versus the chauvinist conception of Irish nationalism. Marking the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, we are republishing this from the Marxist Internet Archive. It was transcribed by the James Connolly Society [\[1\]](#) in 1997.

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The public life of Ireland has been generally so much identified with the struggle for political emancipation, that, naturally, the economic side of the situation has only received from our historians and public men a very small amount of attention.

Scientific Socialism is based upon the truth incorporated in this proposition of Karl Marx, that, "the economic dependence of the workers on the monopolists of the means of production is the foundation of slavery in all its forms, the cause of nearly all social misery, modern crime, mental degradation and political dependence". Thus this false exaggeration of purely political forms which has clothed in Ireland the struggle for liberty, must appear to the Socialist an inexplicable error on the part of a people so strongly crushed down as the Irish.

But the error is more in appearance than in reality.

The reactionary attitude of our political leaders notwithstanding, the great mass of the Irish people know full well that if they had once conquered that political liberty which they struggle for with so much ardour, it would have to be used as a means of social redemption before their well-being would be assured.

In spite of occasional exaggeration of its immediate results one must remember that by striving determinedly, as they have done, towards this definite political end, the Irish are working on the lines of conduct laid down by modern Socialism as the indispensable condition of success.

Since the abandonment of the unfortunate insurrectionism of the early Socialists whose hopes were exclusively concentrated on the eventual triumph of an uprising and barricade struggle, modern Socialism, relying on the slower, but surer method of the ballot-box, has directed the attention of its partisans toward the peaceful conquest of the forces of government in the interests of the revolutionary ideal.

The advent of Socialism can only take place when the revolutionary proletariat, in possession of the organized forces of the nation (the political power of government) will be able to build up a social organization in conformity with the natural march of industrial development.

On the other hand, non-political co operative effort must infallibly succumb in face of the opposition

of the privileged classes, entrenched behind the ramparts of law and monopoly. This is why, even when he is from the economic point of view intensely conservative, the Irish Nationalist, even with his false reasoning, is an active agent in social regeneration, in so far as he seeks to invest with full power over its own destinies a people actually governed in the interests of a feudal aristocracy.

The section of the Socialist army to which I belong, the Irish Socialist Republican Party, never seeks to hide its hostility to those purely bourgeois parties which at present direct Irish politics.

But, in inscribing on our banners an ideal to which they also give lip-homage, we have no intention of joining in a movement which could debase the banner of revolutionary Socialism.

The Socialist parties of France oppose the mere Republicans without ceasing to love the Republic. In the same way the Irish Socialist Republican Party seeks the independence of the nation, while refusing to conform to the methods or to employ the arguments of the chauvinist Nationalist.

As Socialists we are not imbued with national or racial hatred by the remembrance that the political and social order under which we live was imposed on our fathers at the point of the sword; that during 700 years Ireland has resisted this unjust foreign domination; that famine, pestilence and bad government have made this western isle almost a desert and scattered our exiled fellow-countrymen over the whole face of the globe.

The enunciation of facts such as I have just stated is not able today to inspire or to direct the political energies of the militant working class of Ireland; such is not the foundation of our resolve to free Ireland from the yoke of the British Empire. We recognize rather that during all these centuries the great mass of the British people had no political existence whatever; that England was, politically and socially, terrorized by a numerically small governing class; that the atrocities which have been perpetrated against Ireland are only imputable to the unscrupulous ambition of this class, greedy to enrich itself at the expense of defenceless men; that up to the present generation the great majority of the English people were denied a deliberate voice in the government of their own country; that it is, therefore, manifestly unjust to charge the English people with the past crimes of their Government; and that at the worst we can but charge them with a criminal apathy in submitting to slavery and allowing themselves to be made an instrument of coercion for the enslavement of others. An accusation as applicable to the present as to the past.

But whilst refusing to base our political action on hereditary national antipathy, and wishing rather comradeship with the English workers than to regard them with hatred, we desire with our precursors the United Irishmen of 1798 that our animosities be buried with the bones of our ancestors – there is not a party in Ireland which accentuates more as a vital principle of its political faith the need of separating Ireland from England and of making it absolutely independent. In the eyes of the ignorant and of the unreflecting this appears an inconsistency, but I am persuaded that our Socialist brothers in France will immediately recognize the justice of the reasoning upon which such a policy is based.

1. We hold “the economic emancipation of the worker requires the conversion of the means of production into the common property of Society”. Translated into the current language and practice of actual politics this teaches that the necessary road to be travelled towards the establishment of Socialism requires the transference of the means of production from the hands of private owners to those of public bodies directly responsible to the entire community.

2. Socialism seeks then in the interest of the democracy to strengthen popular action on all public bodies.

3. Representative bodies in Ireland would express more directly the will of the Irish people than when those bodies reside in England.

An Irish Republic would then be the natural depository of popular power; the weapon of popular emancipation, the only power which would show in the full light of day all these class antagonisms and lines of economic demarcation now obscured by the mists of bourgeois patriotism.

In that there is not a trace of chauvinism. We desire to preserve with the English people the same political relations as with the people of France, or Germany, or of any other country; the greatest possible friendship, but also the strictest independence. Brothers, but not bedfellows. Thus, inspired by another ideal, conducted by reason not by tradition, following a different course, the Socialist Republican Party of Ireland arrives at the same conclusion as the most irreconcilable Nationalist. The governmental power of England over us must be destroyed; the bonds which bind us to her must be broken. Having learned from history that all bourgeois movements end in compromise, that the bourgeois revolutionists of today become the conservatives of tomorrow, the Irish Socialists refuse to deny or to lose their identity with those who only half understand the problem of liberty. They seek only the alliance and the friendship of those hearts who, loving liberty for its own sake, are not afraid to follow its banner when it is uplifted by the hands of the working class who have most need of it. Their friends are those who would not hesitate to follow that standard of liberty, to consecrate their lives in its service even should it lead to the terrible arbitration of the sword.

James Connolly

P.S.

* From *L'Irlande Libre*, Paris 1897.
Transcribed by The James Connolly Society in 1997.

s21 on March 16, 2016:

<http://rs21.org.uk/2016/03/16/conolly-socialism-irish-nationalism/>

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1897/xx/scirenat.htm>

Footnotes

[1] <https://jamesconnollysociety.com>