

James Connolly, Civil Society and Revolution

Conor McCarthy



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/osb/2778>

DOI: 10.4000/osb.2778

ISSN: 1775-4135

Publisher

Université du Sud Toulon-Var

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2018

Number of pages: 11-34

ISSN: 1775-4135

Electronic reference

Conor McCarthy, « James Connolly, Civil Society and Revolution », *Observatoire de la société britannique* [Online], 23 | 2018, Online since 01 December 2018, connection on 27 January 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/osb/2778> ; DOI : 10.4000/osb.2778

This text was automatically generated on 27 January 2020.

Observatoire de la société britannique

James Connolly, Civil Society and Revolution

Conor McCarthy

The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace the criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force ; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses once it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for human beings, the root is human beings themselves.

Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843-44)

- 1 James Connolly was one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland. He stands out from the other six signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, however, in that he was the only declared socialist among them. With his background in Marxist thought, in socialist party organisation and union foundation and development, Connolly was unusually explicit in the working of his thought, in the intellectual and political traditions from which he hailed, and in regard to the outcome he envisaged for the Irish revolution.
- 2 Although I am going to try to think of Connolly in somewhat theoretical terms here, he himself was not always very sympathetic to 'theory' as such. He lauded the Industrial Workers of the World (as compared to the American Socialist Labor Party) as never being 'a party of theorickers'¹. Though he was clearly an intellectual, he was also an autodidact. Leaving formal education before his teens left him reading and absorbing influences independently, sometimes putting those influences into play or into action in unorthodox ways. The emphasis was always on action, or *praxis* : thought leading to action, thought as a mode of action. He would have agreed with Antonio Gramsci's description of Marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis'.
- 3 Most studies or treatments of Connolly are empirical histories or contextualisations. Relatively few efforts have been made to think of Connolly in theoretical terms. Why might this be so ? His own scepticism about 'theoricking', as already noted, does not seem to open a welcome to theoretical consideration. But more significant, in Ireland at least, have been other factors : the political weakness and ideological timorousness of

the Left generally, but especially after 1922 ; the status of labour history as a distinctly minority interest in Irish historiography ; even more, the weak and fragmentary nature of Marxist historical studies of Irish society, and their ideological differences and quarrels ; and more generally, the paucity of studies of ideas or intellectual formations in Irish history. Of course, even liberal historians of Ireland note Connolly's Marxism, but this acknowledgement is all too often a way or a reason to marginalize him. His personal qualities of intelligence, integrity, courage and hard work are recognised repeatedly, but his ideas tend to be scanted.

- 4 This article will examine Connolly's political activism partly by discussing his Marxism, with its variations, shifts, inconsistencies, strengths and weaknesses, but more particularly by trying to think the social/ideological spaces or terrains on which he carried out his various activities. These places where Connolly developed his ideas varied across his career. To try to describe those spaces and modes, I will work with a pair of terms : 'civil society' and 'political society'. These are the focus of vast literatures in political theory ; my use will be loose and tactical.
- 5 Connolly's activities were carried out on the terrains of both civil society and political society. Yet he viewed all of this work as contributing to *revolution*. Both zones were amenable to revolutionary agitation, he reckoned.
- 6 This stress on revolution is evident from very early in Connolly's career. In the programme of the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP), published in 1896, he argues for nothing less than public ownership of the means of production, the nationalisation of infrastructure, free education up to university level, a graduated tax on higher incomes, and universal suffrage. But Connolly's national revolution is precisely the conduit through which his international revolution will be delivered : in launching the ISRP, he intended nothing less than the 'incidental destruction of the British empire'².
- 7 The point here is that Connolly did not start off as the leader of a small modest socialist party, become a union organiser, and then finally mutate into an armed guerilla. The militancy was there from the start, and the goal was always revolution. The question was always the means by which this would be achieved. Connolly, across the arc of his career, changed the location from which he considered the revolution best promoted.
- 8 The ISRP was a small revolutionary socialist party of the era of the Second International. It was distinctly Leninist in approach : a *vanguard* party which made propaganda to address the proletariat and contested the political realm with other parties. Directed by Connolly, it sought to negotiate relationships of alliance or hostility, agreement or critique, with the existing political formations in Ireland : Home Rulers, Unionists, and more importantly and more radically, republicans. Connolly had to work out a position that encompassed national self-determination and class war : no easy feat. In doing this, he was affiliating his goal of proletarian revolution with the goal of national sovereignty, the aim of most other political groupings in Ireland, both constitutional-parliamentary, and armed-militant.
- 9 By the end of his career, Connolly had, if not abandoned party politics then certainly reduced its priority. Rather than the ISRP, the organisations to which he gave his chief energies in his last six years in Ireland were the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), and the Irish Citizens' Army. The ITGWU was set up and led by James Larkin in 1909, and it was greatly influenced by the theory of syndicalism and the example of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), set up in Chicago in 1905. Note that pairing of Connolly's priorities – a union and a militia. The zone of political party

contest and interaction is left largely empty. The purpose of this essay is to examine that trajectory, and to arrive at a stock-taking of the political effectiveness of the various decisions and strategies Connolly followed.

- 10 Political theories dividing society into apparently opposed realms or spheres are many and various and have a long history. In the *Politics*, Aristotle refers to an ethical community of equal citizens living under the law, with a view to common wellbeing (commonwealth): this is ‘political society’, as opposed to the space of domesticity and the family. For Aristotle, man was a ‘political animal’, but it must also be noted that he conflated our modern senses of the ‘political’ and the ‘social’. The emergence of the Greek city-states meant that every citizen’s life bridged two spheres of existence – that which is communal, and that which is personal. In fact, as Hannah Arendt points out in her classic account, it ‘was not just an opinion or theory of Aristotle but a simple historical fact that the foundation of the *polis* was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship’³. And of the various human activities, two were reckoned by Aristotle to be ‘political’ and constituted the *bios politikos*: action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*). From these emerged the world of human affairs, from which all that is merely necessary or instrumental has been excluded. In the *polis*, action and speech gradually separated, and the stress came to be placed on speech – but on speech as rhetoric and persuasion. In this way of thinking, to be ‘political’ meant that all decisions or positions were arrived at through words and suasion, not by means of force or the threat of force.
- 11 Arendt shows that in modern times, a profound misunderstanding or confusion has arisen regarding the division of the public and private realms, as conceived in classical Greek political theory. Because in modernity an image has been forged of political community as a ‘national’ or ‘social’ economic formation, which it is the primary responsibility of government to manage, one might say that *political theory* in the classical sense has been replaced by ‘political economy’. Yet for the Greeks, it was precisely the realm of production that related to the domestic, and hence was, by definition, non-political. In this mode of thought, it was the linkage of the private realm with *necessity*, with the satisfaction of needs and wants, that rendered it separate from the political; the latter, by contrast, was a zone of *freedom* and *equality*. Yet that freedom associated with the political realm was only achievable on the basis of unfreedom (the institution of slavery) and inequality in the domestic sphere. In Arendt’s words,
- Because all human beings are subject to necessity, they are entitled to violence towards others; violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world. This freedom is the essential condition of what the Greeks called felicity, *eudaimonia*, which was an objective status depending first of all upon wealth and health. To be poor or to be in ill health meant to be subject to physical necessity, and to be a slave meant, in addition, to be subject to man-made violence⁴.
- 12 The Greek *polis* was distinct from the household realm, in that it knew only ‘equals’, whereas the domestic space was one characterised by the strictest inequality. To be free meant not to be subject to necessity, and also neither to be ruled by another nor to rule oneself. ‘Thus, within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only insofar as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals’.⁵ As Arendt points out, this ‘equality’ of the political realm had very little to do with the modern

concept of justice. It was the quintessence of a kind of freedom, which required the 'unfreedom' of others. To be 'free' and 'equal' in this classical Greek sense meant to be free to consort with one's peers, and not to have to deal with others, on whose unfreedom one depended.

- 13 This freedom also demanded particular qualities of courage, or in republican terms, *virtue*, since to enter onto that political terrain, to disencumber oneself of the shackles of domestic life, meant that the political subject or citizen was ready to risk his life and was not enslaved to it. This 'good life', as Aristotle called it, permitted a togetherness and a form of community quite unlike the ordinary collective life. In Arendt's words,

... the life of the citizen ... was not merely better, more carefree or nobler than ordinary life, but of an altogether different quality. It was 'good' to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process⁶.

- 14 The classical Greek concept of the political did not survive the development in the Middle Ages and then in the modern period of what Arendt calls 'society'. By this she means the ever-increasing interpenetration of the realms which for the Greeks were separated into the political and the domestic, and then, in the form of the discipline of 'political economy', the rise of the linkage of political power and of the management of a people – a nation – and an economy. Yet the importance of property, as a qualifier for political agency, has ancient antecedents, though we associate it now with the early Enlightenment thought of John Locke. In a now-classic essay, 'Invoking Civil Society', Charles Taylor points to a number of ideas and institutions that appear to underpin Western democracy (as compared to the long history of despotisms of Russia, especially)⁷. First among these is the fact that in the Middle Ages society was not defined in terms of its political character, as it had been classical times. A society defined in terms of its political constitution is one, Taylor argues, which is therefore always permeable to that kind of power. But the mediaeval period in Europe was marked by a diffusion of political power, where the authority of the sovereign was one centre of influence amongst others. Furthermore, in Christian Europe, the nature of the Church enhanced this pattern – it gave rise to a separation of temporal and spiritual powers. The spiritual was subordinate to the secular in some respects, and the opposite structure obtained in others. But neither sphere was wholly under the control of the other, and the individual human subject inhabited both. Not merely this, but in the same context arose the notion of subjective rights. The feudal system of vassalage had a quasi-contractual character. Accordingly, the overlord was bound by obligations as much as the *villein*. To breach these obligations was a crime, and these rights were privileges enjoyed as a kind of property. On the wider level, this system meant that the feudal sovereign faced a society conceived as a complex web of rights and duties. Combine this with the transnational authority of the Church, and the chartering of self-governing cities, and one has an overall socio-political formation with multiple and at times competing levels and spaces of authority, where consent must be courted and won for major changes. The monarch ruled a shifting and unpredictable array of estates, which had to be convened from time to time but whose support could never be merely assumed.
- 15 In the early modern period, monarchs in much of Europe circumvented, or sought to circumvent, the estates, acquiring the power to raise taxes without convening the estates, and building powerful standing armies on that centralised basis – this is the

absolutist monarchy of which Hobbes and Bodin were the pre-eminent theorists. But against this idea, which was undermined by economic developments most especially in England and the Low Countries, arose the anti-absolutist theory of Locke, and, indeed, the public sphere earlier mentioned, as a zone from which power could be criticised. For Locke, the society which lifts individuals out of the state of nature is a formation which pre-exists government. It is a community constituted under natural law, which is enjoined on us by God. The polity which is then created is supreme, but it has to respect that higher law, since those who set it up were bound by it and could not pass on powers they themselves lacked. So the political structure has a fiduciary relationship to society – if it is in breach of its trust, society can reassert its priority. Locke's pre-political 'society', we should therefore note, is not the anarchic and violent condition of the 'war of all against all' invoked by Hobbes, and consequently its theorisation allows for the creation of the modern public sphere, where opinion can be formed and shaped, and where criticism can be launched against the overbearing power of the emergent state.

- 16 In the modern era of Enlightenment and Revolution, Hegel suggested that civil society was a definable realm between the family and the state, characterised by its own system of needs. Noticing that this zone emerged in parallel with capitalism, Hegel (and Smith and Ferguson) suggested that civil society was the space of private or corporate economic activity: individual rights and private property. Civil society could be further divided into various estates, including agriculture; trade and industry; and the universal estate. Marx followed Hegel to a degree: civil society was the area of economic activity and relations – the 'base'. Political society was the 'superstructure' of society. Marx and Hegel both saw civil society as dominated by the bourgeoisie – with its economic needs and interests – but Marx, of course, saw this from an aggressively critical angle of vision. Furthermore, Marx held a view of the state very different from that of his great predecessor. Where Hegel had a positive view of the state as the neutral summit of society, as rational and ethical, Marx saw it as shaped and run in the light of the class interests of the bourgeoisie.
- 17 The most famous leftwing theorist of civil society in the twentieth century was probably Gramsci. Part of the importance of his view was that he widened the idea of civil society to take account not only of economic activity, but the full range of social and cultural activities and institutions in modern societies. But Gramsci saw these institutions in somewhat *military* light: the civic and institutional depth and variousness of Western liberal democracies or quasi-democracies are such societies' 'outer earthworks' or outer defences⁸. In the sphere of civil society, ideological leadership is created and re-created: that form of ideological and cultural power known as 'hegemony'⁹. The dominance by the bourgeoisie of civil society reinforces its control of the state. But this also means that civil society is a crucial locus for struggle in social or revolutionary change. It is in the sphere of civil society that 'counter-hegemony' is built: an alternative bloc of social groups and classes, with a newly elaborated worldview. For Gramsci, of course, this worldview would be that of the workers. The subaltern classes in the existing dispensation would prepare the way forward by a variety of civil society activities: building up institutions as (most obviously) unions, cultural associations, educational institutions, and of course, propaganda, or means of representation: newspapers, pamphlets, posters, songs, plays,

performances, meetings, debates, and so on. This task was to be led, Gramsci suggested, by intellectuals. These can be ‘organic’ intellectuals :

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates, together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields¹⁰.

18 Or they can be ‘traditional’ intellectuals :

However, every ‘essential’ social group which emerges into history out of the preceding economic structure, and as an expression of a development of this structure, has found ... categories of intellectuals already in existence and which seemed indeed to represent an historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical changes in political and social forms¹¹.

19 The function of all such intellectuals, for Gramsci, is to give direction, form, codification, theoretical justification and explanation to the social/political/economic forms and relations by which they have been produced and to which they are affiliated. If in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had argued that the engine of historical change is the coming into conflict or contradiction of the existent relations of production and the productive forces, Gramsci’s focus was on the ways that this conflict would be fought out in the realm of ideology, as well as in actual combat on the ground. The persons engaged in this *agon* would be the intellectuals, traditional and organic. Putting the case most bluntly, traditional intellectuals function as the legitimators, at the level of discourse and ideas, of the status quo ; while organic intellectuals forecast, argue for, give shape to, direct, and in significant ways actually embody, the emerging dispensation to come. In so doing, they create a new *hegemony*. Hegemony is that form of ideological leadership where subaltern sections or classes of society have so introjected the value-system – expressed across the spectrum of the superstructure, in religion, law, education, culture, even aesthetics – of the dominant classes *as to recognise it as their own*. This kind of rule, that of ‘obligations written in the heart’ as Burke would say, is the most powerful of all¹².

20 It is easy to see that Connolly was a kind of organic intellectual for the Irish urban working poor. His every effort seems to have been given in seeking to expand the sphere of influence of the working class, and he was fully aware of the need to do this not only by setting up parties such as the ISRP, but also by disseminating the ideas of his party via newspapers, meetings, rallies and all the other discursive forms we have enumerated. Let me borrow another idea from continental thought to describe this : the Habermasian notion of the ‘public sphere’¹³. If Habermas described the emergence of the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ in seventeenth and eighteenth century England – that realm of putatively rational discussion amongst literate rational subjects of a variety of classes, set in the coffee-houses but also in the growing world of newspapers and journals, where ‘public opinion’ could be shaped and made – this too was part of the world of civil society. Both civil society and the public sphere were born as social spaces where the brutal *diktats* of the absolutist state could certainly be debated, maybe even ameliorated. Habermas’s public sphere was chiefly a zone where matters of ‘public interest’ could be discussed, but indeed part of its function was precisely *not* to advance revolutionary ideas, but rather to produce and educate a body of opinion which would give internal coherence to civil society and thereby flesh out the social space controlled, in the final instance, by the state. But after the work of Negt and Kluge, we

were offered the idea of the ‘counter-public sphere’¹⁴. Negt and Kluge, writing in the context of the students’ movements of the late Sixties, suggested that there was the need for a left framework of analysis and action which goes beyond party organizations, and which equally side-steps the bourgeois public sphere. Radical movements must forge a ‘counter-public-sphere’, as a forum in which to contest the ‘consciousness industry’ (Adorno et al.) of the middle-class mainstream¹⁵. The counter-public-sphere emerges in fragmentary form, partly in the rifts and contradictory moments or spaces of the bourgeois public sphere. Negt and Kluge argue that the proletarian public sphere takes form not via abstract ideas of class consciousness and political party, but in the real processes of political mobilization and their material bases in daily experiences, needs and aspirations. Radical organizing of these elements is the proletarian public sphere. Negt and Kluge interestingly suggest that one of the enabling conditions for the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the interwar period in Italy and Germany was precisely the failure for a proletarian counter-public-sphere to be brought into being, leaving this vital unifying and expressive social space empty and available to the totalitarian Right.

- 21 It seems to me that one can combine insights from Gramsci on the one hand, and from Negt and Kluge on the other, reasonably easily and certainly profitably. Negt and Kluge suggest some of the detail, Gramsci some of the overall architecture, into which one might usefully put Connolly’s patterns of working towards revolution. It is a truism, which originates with Yeats, that in the years after Parnell’s death, Irish energies were channeled into cultural matters, with the focus taken off Home Rule. Of course, Yeats was partly also highlighting spheres in which he was personally active: theatre, literary publication and translation. But there was also the language revival movement, the Gaelic Athletic Association, the nascent Sinn Fein, and the co-operative movement, and these made for an exceptional ferment of cultural-ideological activity, described very well a few years ago by PJ Mathews, in his book *Revival*¹⁶. What would be important would be to see Connolly as attempting to locate himself, and the working-class movements, on this complex terrain. Because these movements, organisations and trends were densely interlinked and networked, involvements or positions in one often had impacts on another.
- 22 It is in this context that one finds Connolly setting up the ISRP in 1896, and then negotiating complex and shifting alliances with a variety of other activists. Most obviously, his work at this time consisted in trying to build up this tiny party, contest local elections, canvass for membership and set up and run *The Workers’ Republic*, the country’s first openly Marxist newspaper. It must be noted that, as Fintan Lane and other Irish labour historians have shown, Connolly was not the first Irish Marxian thinker, or the first socialist¹⁷. Party activity had mostly been absent, but organisations for the dissemination of socialist thought and ideas existed in the 1880s and early 1890s. The Irish union movement dated at least back to 1824, and Ireland had played host to various kinds of utopian socialist experiments, produced at least one substantial proto-Marxist thinker, William Thompson, and had attracted the interest of earlier foreign socialists such as Engels and Marx, William Morris, and the Fabians. As Emmet O’Connor has shown, labour activists had interacted in complex and sometimes radical ways with nationalist politics during the nineteenth century. Labour organisations had supported Daniel O’Connell’s movement for the Repeal of the Act of Union, and the Young Ireland movement, particularly in the person of James Fintan Lalor, had sought to radicalise the Irish on cultural-nationalist grounds, forging a counter-public sphere

with the *Nation* newspaper and 'Repeal reading rooms'. But both the O'Connellite and Young Ireland movements had been eviscerated by the Great Famine in the 1840s, and republicanism and trade unionism drifted apart after 1848 – republicanism concentrating more on armed conspiracy, and trade unionism focusing mostly on inserting itself into the nexus of power between high politics and capitalist business, taking pride in its legitimacy and its capacity to win workers immediate reformist gains in pay and conditions, as against operating in the service of a wider critique of society.

- 23 What was particular about Connolly, and what was at least potentially galvanising about his activism and his position, was his particularly firm and open affiliation of Marxism and militant nationalism, or separatism. It is in this respect that he acted like a magnet dropped into a cluster of compasses: his actions prompted reorientation by various organisations beyond his own. The ISRP's stress on separatism put the party in advance not only of constitutional nationalists (Home Rulers), but also of the great bulk of prior socialist organisations and of the union movement. The party's stress on class, class consciousness and the redistribution of wealth on the national level put it well to the left of all republican formations – certainly to the left of Sinn Féin, and mostly to the left of the residual IRB.
- 24 But Connolly also knew that alliances would be needed to push forward anything like the political programme with which the ISRP was inaugurated. The obvious allies were republican groupings, and the unions. But the ISRP showed little interest in developing links with the unions – Connolly was pessimistic about the apparently perennial capacity of capital to buy off workers' organisations. Relations with republicans were complex but he pursued them, partly by way of researching a genealogy of left separatism or left-republicanism, republishing the writings of James Fintan Lalor. In 1898, Connolly, with Maud Gonne, used the occasion of the centenary of the 1798 Rising to set up 'Rank and File' Committees, to the left of and in mockery of the official 1798 commemorative committees which were dominated by Home Rulers. The same constellation also organised anti-monarchist protest on the occasion of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897, including a notable march attended by several thousand protestors, at the culmination of which a coffin bearing the name of the British Empire was hurled into the river Liffey to cries of 'To hell with the British Empire!'. Connolly's anti-imperialism also led him at this time into pro-Boer protest. The ISRP passed motions and resolutions in defence of the Boer republics of southern Africa in their war with Britain. In this respect, Connolly and the ISRP were working in parallel with other 'advanced nationalist' groupings. These various activities show Connolly active not only in seeking to develop his own party, but also in creating a certain kind of socialist-republican 'public' or even public sphere. Whether they amount to a counter-hegemony is perhaps more debatable.
- 25 At a deeper level, however, Connolly was personally developing an historical vision of Ireland which would justify his position, and which would eventually issue in fully realised form in *Labour in Irish History*. But at this point, he was already engaged in developing the idea of 'Celtic Communism', and it finds its earliest exposition in the pamphlet *Erin's Hope: The End and the Means* (1897). This was a revisionist reading of Marx's notes on 'primitive communism', where Connolly suggested that modern property relations and eventually capitalism itself were essentially imports from the period of the Normans in the twelfth century. In this argument, pre-capitalist Ireland was characterised by a form of 'commons' where land and other resources were held

for general or 'public' use by the clan or sept. Not merely this, but this mediaeval dispensation was in fact a harbinger of the revolutionary present :

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 breakup 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 Seventeenth Century as an 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 future¹⁸.

- 26 Connolly's position here has been and still is debated intensely. Mainstream historiography would dispute this interpretation of mediaeval Ireland, and Marxists of various kinds point out that this vision not only re-reads Marx himself, but also sits in contravention of the progressivist teleological official Marxism of Connolly's contemporaries and comrades in the Second International. But it must be noted that Lenin himself would eventually have to tackle the same issue – of developing a socialist revolution in a polity which had undergone only partial industrial and democratic modernisation, and which was peripheral to the capitalist world-system – in promoting revolution in Russia. Furthermore, and in regard to Connolly's function as an organic intellectual, we should see that the 'grand narrative' he offers here, of a putatively Arcadian-communist past, trampled on by Norman and Tudor colonisation, allows him to suggest that the Workers' Republic of the impending future, will in fact be a *return* or even a *revival*, that the land nationalisation programme which the ISRP advocates is actually a reversion to the deepest historical-political instincts of the people. And this was very much in keeping with the wider cultural *Zeitgeist* of the time. In this sense, Connolly's deep history powerfully affiliates his socialist republicanism with the revivalism pervasive across the field of culture. This is a heritage much longer than that of mere republicanism. And this kind of bridge-building is very much part of the way that Gramsci envisaged hegemony being built – by the making of alliances, discursive adjacencies, ideological linkages.
- 27 When Connolly went to America in 1903, a number of things happened. Firstly, the ISRP effectively collapsed in his absence. While Connolly was exhausting himself touring New England and the Midwest, doggedly remitting funds raised for the party back to Dublin, *The Workers' Republic* was being produced only sporadically, and the party was being run into debt – the final insult being a bar being set up on its premises. Meanwhile, Connolly, who'd been influenced by Daniel De Leon and the Socialist Labor Party of America even before he went to the United States, was finding that the leader and the party were not quite up to his expectations. De Leon was authoritarian in manner and dogmatic in practice. His scepticism about workers' campaigns for better wages and conditions, in a huge, expanding industrial society, led Connolly to fear that the SLP was actually emasculating and lulling the American proletariat into passivity and fatalism. De Leon's belief that the United States was in the van of socialist

development betokened a degree of self-marginalising complacency in the man and the party.

- 28 The emergence of the Industrial Workers of the World in Chicago in 1905 completely altered the situation for Connolly: here was a mass movement, whose militancy was unequalled, and which sought to appeal to the poorest of the poor, as well as being ecumenical in its approach to black and female workers. Gradually shifting his loyalties and energies from the SLP to the Wobblies was the surface expression of a much bigger alteration in Connolly's approach to revolutionary politics. The SLP was an unashamedly vanguard party. It had a union affiliate, which tended to be de-prioritised. But the IWW, with its doctrine of 'one big union' (a motto for the ITGWU later in Ireland), its aggressive use of strike action, its plainly radical intentions (as against the reformism and corruption of the American Federation of Labor), its unifying of the workers rather than campaigning for workplace reform and implicitly contributing to hierarchies of labour in the manner of the craft unions – all of these elements greatly appealed to Connolly. The IWW was a union, but it was plainly a *revolutionary* union, far to the left of the regnant Second International social democracy.
- 29 In theoretical terms, however, Connolly's refocusing his activism away from the revolutionary party and towards radical syndicalism represented a move away from 'political society' to 'civil society'. This produced gains and losses. In Gramsci's terms, Connolly was showing an ever-greater sense that revolutionary action could be taken on the terrain of civil society, via the means of mobilising the masses. The union would provide the institutional structures to organise, train, educate and deploy the proletariat in the 'war of position' (by which Gramsci meant the ideological, cultural and theoretical preparation for the revolution) which would either lead to the 'war of manoeuvre' (by which Gramsci meant the frontal attack on, or active contesting of, the state by revolutionary forces), or even supersede it. Connolly was in no doubt as to the value of a militant and revolutionary union. Ordinary unions, he reckoned, seek 'to better our lot as slaves', but never 'to abolish our status as slaves'. But 'industrialism is more than a method of organisation – it is a science of fighting. It says to the workers: fight only at the time you select, never when the boss wants to fight'¹⁹. Syndicalism turned the form of the union into a revolutionary weapon. For Connolly now believed, with syndicalist activists and anarchists, that the future society would take shape in the realm of industry itself. By taking control of the means of production, of the workplace, the workers would develop the structures of a revolutionary society within the workings, the seams and interstices, the institutions of existing industrial society. Here's how Connolly puts this in *Socialism Made Easy*:
- Social Democracy, as its name implies, is the application to industry, or to the Social life of the nation, of the fundamental principles of democracy. Such application will necessarily have to begin in the workshop, and proceed logically and consecutively upward through all the grades of industrial Organization until it reaches the culminating point of national executive power and direction. In other words Social Democracy must proceed from the bottom upward, whereas capitalist political society is organized from above downward.²⁰
- 30 The implication is that the new society would grow up and around existing economic institutions like so much ivy, eventually occluding the economic structures of bourgeois society. Such a programme suggests a particular view of the central

institution of political society : the state. About the state in the present, Connolly notes chiefly that

The political institutions of today are simply the coercive forces of capitalist society, they have grown up out of and are based upon territorial divisions of power in the hands of the ruling class in past ages, and were carried over into capitalist society to suit the needs of the capitalist class when that class overthrew the dominion of its predecessors²¹.

- 31 Over against this conception of the state in the present, Connolly pitches his syndicalist-socialist vision of the future. He reckoned that that ‘the fight for conquest of the political state is not the battle, it is only the echo of the battle. The real battle is being fought out every day for the power to control industry’. Connolly’s syndicalism transfers the crucial zone of the struggle from political society to civil society, as we have said, and so offers what he calls a ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ model of organizational and administrative institutions. For Connolly, the result of this model will be the abolition in the present and the avoidance in the future of the bureaucratic (and implicitly, the coercive) character of the state :

... this conception of Socialism destroys at one blow all the fears of a bureaucratic state, ruling and ordering the lives of every individual from above, and thus gives assurance that the social order of the future will be an extension of the freedom of the individual, and not a suppression of it²².

- 32 This is a socialist-libertarian vision of the *future* of the state. Furthermore, Connolly argued, it was the anvil on which hegemony could be hammered out :

The power of this idea to transform the dry, detailed work of trade union organisation into the constructive work of revolutionary socialism and thus make of the unimaginative trade unionist a potent factor in the launching of a new system of society, cannot be overestimated. It invests the sordid details of the daily incidents of the class struggle with a new and beautiful meaning²³.

- 33 Yet we must note that the syndicalist approach is also predicated on the workings of a significantly industrialised society : how this was going to work in Ireland was always debatable. In concentrating on civil society, it neglects political society. It leaves the space of party empty for the enemy to control it and seems to suggest that the state apparatus can be circumscribed as much as conquered. Syndicalist activism also possibly suffers by way of its parasitic relationship with the economic order which it seeks to colonise : in the event of a sharp economic downturn, when industry downsizes, so then the union suffers dramatically, and this is exactly what happened to the IWW in 1907. A financial crash occurred – an anticipation of 1929 – and the union suffered severe damage. This helps to account for Connolly’s otherwise ideologically inexplicable lurch toward the Socialist Party of America at this time, and also for his move back to Ireland in 1910.

- 34 While in America, Connolly wrote his masterpiece, *Labour in Irish History*, published in 1910. It is here that he most fully elaborated the vision of history which subtends his activities in his own present. The book has been long debated – mostly scotched or ignored by mainstream professional historians, and argued over by the left. Contemporary scholars of postcolonial history, such as David Lloyd and Robert Young, have seen in Connolly’s work a forerunner not only of the vision of Frantz Fanon, who would publish *Les Damnés de la terre* in 1961, but also of the ‘subaltern studies’ historians of South Asia in the last 20 years. As we have seen earlier, in *Erin’s Hope*, published in 1897, Connolly was already developing his vision of resources available in

the past for an Irish socialism in the present. In *Labour in Irish History*, the argument is developed further and given a new inflection. Repeatedly and powerfully, in a chain of Irish historical movements and conjunctures from the wars of the late 1600s up to the nineteenth century, Connolly focuses on the political position and fate of the rural poor and the emerging working class. Repeatedly, he discusses what he calls the ‘social question’ in Irish history. From the 1780s onwards, he finds the pattern whereby nationalist leaders, whether militant or constitutionalist, invoke an idea of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ in order to call up the restless power of the masses, but always fail to act in the interests of those masses. Always the leadership has acted in the interests of the elite from which they are themselves sprung or by which they are co-opted. In a strong sense, *Labour in Irish History* can be seen as a ‘syndicalist’ history : it seeks repeatedly to return an idea of popular agency, coherence and intellectual capacity to persons and movements which tend to move under the political and even epistemological radar of both Whig-nationalist historiography, and British nationalist or imperialist historiography. In this sense, Connolly’s implicit theory of history can be seen to buttress and to affiliate itself to his activism. As we noted earlier of the knitting together of ideas and action with *Erin’s Hope*, *Labour in Irish History* also represents a counter-hegemonic manoeuvre – to elaborate or fill out the ideological space surrounding Connolly’s activism, to offer a legitimating backstory, or ‘narrative’, for action in the present.

- 35 Lest this seem all very charmingly culturalist, it must be noted that Connolly remained a militant. He took a militant, or military, view of all aspects of the struggle. He favoured the IWW because it was a militant and revolutionary union. He viewed class conflict as class war. Long before Michel Foucault inverted Clausewitz’s famous maxim that war is politics by other means, Connolly saw politics as war by other means. In this, too, he was thinking similarly to Gramsci, who deployed what Edward Said always noted as a geographical, or even geopolitical, vocabulary : territory, blocs, manoeuvre, position, ensembles of intellectuals and movements²⁴. Rather like Pierre Bourdieu and, indeed, like Said, Gramsci and Connolly saw intellectual and cultural work as struggle and contest, ideas as seeking to dislodge other ideas²⁵. Connolly’s republicanism came out in the ways that he did this in public, for a public, and to *make* a public : the public space at war. This manner of thinking and proceeding was therefore entirely in accord with the creation of the Irish Citizen Army, and Connolly’s interest in revolutionary fighting in the past. His late articles on urban warfare in France and elsewhere illustrate this : if he was an organic intellectual of the workers in regard to the economic sphere, he also began to emerge as an organic intellectual – not only a leader – of the workers armed in combat.
- 36 Yet the armed rebellion of which he was one of the most experienced and notable leaders was no socialist insurrection. It did not conform to the development of the new socialist society anticipated in *Socialism Made Easy*. The ICA was a workers’ militia, initially intended to defend demonstrating or striking labourers – to that extent, it may be seen as a military extension of the ‘bottom-up’ model of political organising and of proletarian agency. But the way in which it was deployed in the Rising sat only in uneven accord with the ways in which Connolly had been thinking, planning and acting since his first contact with the Wobblies in 1905.
- 37 In 1915, as noted above, Connolly published a series of articles on insurrection and urban warfare in earlier revolutionary situations – Paris in 1830, Belgium in 1830, Paris

in 1848, Moscow in 1905²⁶. It is not difficult to see the traces of the doctrines outlined in these essays, and in his 'Street Fighting – Summary', then put into action during the Rising. Recognising that the most effective terrain on which a lightly armed militia could engage a more numerous and heavily equipped enemy would be mountainous, Connolly draws analogies between cities and mountain ranges. 'What, after all, is a street?' he asks, and offers the answer: 'A street is a defile in a city'. Cities are therefore to be thought of as composed of hundreds of small valleys and canyons – hundreds of defensible positions. Accordingly,

[E]very difficulty that exists for the operation of regular troops in mountains is multiplied a hundredfold in a city. And the difficulty of the commissariat which is likely to be insuperable to an irregular or popular force taking to the mountains, is solved for them by the sympathies of the populace when they take to the streets.

- 38 Cities, Connolly concludes, offer double attractions for irregular military action – a defensible terrain, and 'the sympathies of the populace' – he assumes that the presence and sentiments of the urban masses will enhance an insurrection in a city. And so,

[T]he general principle to be deduced ... is that the defence is of almost overwhelming importance in such warfare as a popular force as the Citizen Army might be called upon to participate in. Not a mere passive defence of a position valueless in itself, but the active defence of a position whose location threatens the supremacy or existence of the enemy²⁷.

- 39 But this is not how the Rising was conducted. Accepting that its launch was bungled (the change of date, Eoin McNeill's countermanding order), and that the hoped-for aid from Germany never arrived, one must nevertheless look at what did take place, and think of it from Connolly's syndicalist position. The problem, therefore, with Connolly's participation in the Rising is not, as revisionist historians have so often said (and as Sean O'Casey argued at the time) that Connolly was compromising his socialism by joining with republicans and nationalists in armed action. It was rather the nature of the uprising that was problematic. A military operation which was planned in secret, which relied on spontaneity, could only ever come to the mass of the workers as a shock and a surprise. The fact that, whether through party or union apparatus, no political discussion or propaganda was made to feed into the Rising meant that its connection with the 'sympathies of the populace' was tenuous at best. Little effort was made (and it is hard to see how it could have been made, without breaching secrecy) to organise sympathetic strikes or other forms of proletarian supportive action. Though the Jacob's factory was seized, its status as industrial infrastructure was not the reason it was taken. There is little sense of how the ICA's participation in the Rising would articulate with the actions of the ITGWU, the bastion of syndicalist industrial unionism in Ireland.
- 40 In Gramsci's terms, we would conclude that with the Rising, Connolly moved back to activity on the terrain of political society, but without adequate preparation for that action, on the terrain of civil society. The shift from the 'war of position' to the 'war of manoeuvre' was abrupt and ill-planned. The Rising suggested an abandonment of the long ideological and counter-hegemonic war to be conducted through the radical union, but it also was not a full-frontal attack on the institutions of the (colonial) state. Gramsci himself, it should be noted, had doubts about the effectiveness of syndicalism (accepting that Italian syndicalism had quite a different character from its Irish or American counterparts). Criticising the belief in 'the possibility of leaping from class society directly into a society of perfect equality with a syndical economy', Gramsci

suggested that syndicalism was a self-limiting doctrine, whereby the proletariat connived in its own defeat or in the containment of its radical action :

Here we are dealing with a subaltern group, which is prevented by this theory from ever becoming dominant, or from developing beyond the economic-corporatist stage and rising to the phase of ethical-political hegemony in civil society, and of domination in the State²⁸.

- 41 The disarticulation of the syndicalist struggle before the Rising and the armed insurrection of the Rising itself, is illustrated in the ways that the movements of which Connolly was a leader collapsed in the wake of the rebellion. The ICA's strength was decimated in the uprising, and the ITGWU, in the extraordinary years after the Rising – times of exceptional radicalisation of the Irish working-class and the rural poor – severed its links with the armed militants, lapsing into reformism and gradualism.
- 42 In conclusion, my points would be twofold : 1) that Connolly's greatest breakthrough in his career was possibly also the avenue of his final defeat – that moving so wholeheartedly into civil society organising with his immersion in syndicalism, he arguably left open the space for his political defeat at the start of the First World War, when the Irish male proletariat volunteered for the British Army in tens of thousands, in spite of the lonely voices of Connolly and the Serbians and Russians in the International calling for transnational proletarian solidarity. The ITGWU, and other labour organisations, weakened after the Lockout, were unable to stop this hemorrhage. Significantly at this time, Lenin and Luxembourg were not calling for strike or industrial action ; they saw the war as the opportunity to prepare for revolution. This is what Connolly eventually did, but by deploying the ICA militia in a vanguardist insurrection. He had no illusions about what the ICA was getting involved in – he told his soldiers to be ready for struggle with their class enemies after the Rising. But in throwing himself and the Citizen Army into the Rising he also put at risk – fatal risk, as it turned out – the leadership of the Workers' Republic long hoped for. An Irish labour movement still headed up by Connolly in the 1917-1923 period of the most extraordinary febrile and fertile activism of the working poor in Ireland might have produced quite a different emergent Free State ; 2) that those of us involved today in various forms of civil society activism need to learn from Connolly – his strengths *and* his weaknesses – that revolutionary civil society praxis is something that puts theory in the hands of ordinary people ; that allows us to see our social and political situation clearly and critically ; that lets us realise our situation is not simply natural or given but has been made by prior social and political forces, by prior economic and political choices made ; and that it is something which helps us find allies and identify opportunities for better futures. But the outcome of Connolly's choices also allows us to see that civil society activism alone and of itself is unlikely to produce the kinds of change often so desired and needed, and that, as Jodi Dean has recently been arguing, a fresh confrontation with the nature and the need for the political is necessary, too²⁹.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, K., *The Politics of James Connolly*, London : Pluto, 1990.
- Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998.
- Bourdieu, P., *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John Thompson, Cambridge : Polity, 1995.
- Burke, E., *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, vol. V*, London : Henry G Bohn, 1855.
- Connolly, J., *Writings of James Connolly : Collected Works*, ed. Donal Nevin, Dublin : Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union, 2011.
- Writings of James Connolly : Political Writings 1893-1916*, ed. Donal Nevin, Dublin : Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union, 2011.
- Dean, J., *Crowds and Party*, London : Verso, 2016.
- Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
- Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere : An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge : Polity, 1989.
- Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London : Verso, 1979.
- Lane, F., *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism 1881-1896*, Cork : Cork University Press, 1997.
- Mathews, P.J., *Revival : The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Fein, the Gaelic League and the Co-Operative Movement*, Cork and Notre Dame, Indiana. : Cork University Press and Notre Dame University Press, 2003
- Negt, O., Kluge, A., *Public Sphere and Experience : Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi et al., Minneapolis : University of Minneapolis Press, 1993.
- Said, E., *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, London : Faber and Faber, 1984.
- Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. : Harvard University Press, 2000
- Taylor, C., *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 1995.

NOTES

1. Letter from Connolly to John Carstairs Matheson, March 1908; cited in Allen, K., *The Politics of James Connolly*, London: Pluto Press, 1990. p. 77.
2. Nevin, D. (ed.), *Writings of James Connolly: Collected Works*, Dublin: Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union, 2011. p. 3.
3. Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]. p. 24.
4. *Ibid.* p. 31.
5. *Ibid.* p. 32.
6. *Ibid.* p. 37.
7. Taylor, C., *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. pp. 205 – 224.
8. Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Hoare, Q. and Nowell-Smith, G., London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971. p. 238.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 12 – 13.

10. *Ibid.* p. 5.
11. *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.
12. *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, Vol. V, London: Henry G Bohn, 1855. p. 214.
13. Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Burger, T. and Lawrence, F., Cambridge: Polity, 1989.
14. Negt, O., Kluge, A., *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Labanyi, P. et al., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
15. See Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Cumming, J., London: Verso, 1979.
16. Mathews, P.J., *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Fein, the Gaelic League and the Co-Operative Movement*, Cork and Notre Dame: Cork University Press/University of Notre Dame Press, 2003.
17. Lane, F., *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism 1881 – 1896*, Cork: Cork University Press, 1997.
18. Nevin (ed.), *Writings of James Connolly: Collected Works*, pp. 8-9.
19. Nevin (ed.), *Writings of James Connolly: Political Writings 1893 – 1916*, Dublin: SIPTU, 2011. p. 315.
20. Nevin (ed.), *Writings of James Connolly: Collected Works*, pp. 109 – 110.
21. Nevin (ed.), *Writings of James Connolly: Collected Works*, p. 109.
22. Nevin (ed.), *Writings of James Connolly: Collected Works*, p. 110.
23. Nevin (ed.), *Writings of James Connolly: Collected Works*, p. 111.
24. See Said, E., *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. pp. 453 – 473.
25. See Said, E., *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984. especially the title essay; and also Bourdieu, P., *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. Thompson J., Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
26. See Connolly, 'Moscow Insurrection of 1905', 'Insurrection in the Tyrol 1809', 'Revolution in Belgium 1830', 'Defence of the Alamo 1836', 'Revolution in Paris 1830', 'Lexington 1775', 'Paris June 1848', and 'Street Fighting – Summary' in Nevin (ed.), *James Connolly: Political Writings*, pp. 533 – 558.
27. Nevin (ed.), *James Connolly: Political Writings*, p. 558.
28. Gramsci, pp. 160 – 161.
29. Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016)

ABSTRACTS

This essay argues that across the span of James Connolly's revolutionary career there was a move from prosecuting revolutionary activity in the sphere of 'the political' or 'political society' to that of 'civil society'. This is exemplified in Connolly's move from organising and running a small Leninist party, the Irish Socialist Republican Party, in the 1890s, to his involvement with the Industrial Workers of the World, and then the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union - radical syndicalist unions - in the early 1900s and in the lead up to 1916. The essay argues that Connolly's move is a crucial element in the matrix of factors that contributed to his ultimate and tragic political failure.

INDEX

Keywords: revolution, civil society, intellectual, hegemony, syndicalism, republicanism, 1916 Rising, Arendt (Hannah), Gramsci (Antonio), Marx (Karl), Hegel (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich), Taylor (Charles), DeLeon (Daniel), Connolly (James)

AUTHOR

CONOR MCCARTHY

Lecturer à la National University of Ireland, Maynooth