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## Connolly: Myth and Reality

Austen Morgan, *James Connolly - A Political Biography*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988), pp.234. £17

Morgan's book opens with the warning that it 'contests Greaves' view that Connolly was a would-be Lenin, by examining his revolutionary politics through the focus of Desmond Ryan's observation that he was 'a man who belonged to and worked within two worlds: the world of international socialism and the world of militant nationalism'. (p. x) The thesis offered by Morgan is, in all its essentials, that James Connolly, after spending most of his life as an active socialist changed, or made a transition to nationalism. In the preface, Morgan says of Connolly:

'The transition in his politics from 1914 was a product of historical crisis. Connolly's revolutionary response in wartime was mediated by socialist collapse ... and by nationalist commitment ... He was an international socialist activist who witnessed for the Irish Revolution, thereby giving working class politics a strong nationalist identity.' (p. x)

The thesis argued by Morgan is put in a less 'transitional' form later in the book where he states in the first line of chapter seven, 'National Revolutionary, 1914-1916',

'In August 1914 Connolly became a revolutionary nationalist, but he was not finally accepted until early 1916, when he joined the armed conspiracy planning an Easter Insurrection.' (p. 139)

Morgan, in defending this thesis, anticipates that it will receive greater acceptance from exponents of 'liberal revisionism or anti-national Marxism' (p. ix). Quite what Morgan's own position is is not explicit. Although it is fairly clear that he is not in any definable Marxist tradition, it is probably fair to say that he is closer to liberal revisionism.

In addition to the essential thesis on Connolly's dramatic conversion to nationalism in August of 1914, Morgan argues that the Rising of 1916 was wrongly characterised by Lenin. In Morgan's opinion the Easter Rebellion was not simply 'premature' in the context of international conditions, but completely lacking in mass sympathy or support at the time. Hence, in Morgan's view, the Rising was correctly described by Karl Radek as a putsch. Subsequent events too - the 1918 anti-conscription campaign, the eventual War of Independence and the growth of mass support for the IRA and Sinn Féin at the end of the war - were, in Morgan's judgment, not in any important respect due to the events of the 1916 Rising.

These bold assertions are not especially new. Connolly did have his critics at the time of the Rising - and there is certainly room for a critical appraisal of Connolly's political theory and practice. Although some of the biographical evidence which he marshals does shed some new light on the political flaws in Connolly's understanding and application of Marxism, it remains difficult to be convinced by Morgan's main contentions. Part of the problem with Morgan's book is that, although he has done a mountain of work in arriving at exactitude on the biographical details of Connolly's life, there is little exposition of the evolution and continuities in Connolly's thought. Granted, Morgan does refer to the influences that formed the context for Connolly's political education; but if the central thesis in Morgan's book is to be upheld, it is necessary to come to grips more roundly with how Connolly understood the relation between the national struggle for independence and the Marxist programme for socialism. In order to do this properly, it is necessary to distinguish the other influences that Connolly absorbed and the manner in which he adapted his Marxism to them. Otherwise it becomes difficult to relate his eventual participation in the Rising to his previous thought, and even less possible to assess the merits of Connolly's political thought in its own right.

Desmond Greaves, for example, argues that Connolly's thought and practice only reached maturity

in the latter part of his political career, 1910-1916 as a whole, because it is only in this period that he is assumed to reconcile the two strands, socialism and revolutionary nationalism. For Greaves, Connolly 'matured' to the extent that he softened an early emphasis on the leading role of the working class in the national struggle and began to recognise a progressive role for sections of the bourgeoisie:

'In asserting working class leadership of the national struggle [Connolly] defined in Ireland what was significantly recognised as a general tendency during the epoch of imperialism, namely for a section of the capitalist class of a subject nation to compound with the oppressors. But it was not for many years that he appreciated that not all the capitalists will necessarily do this.'

Greaves seeks to accommodate Connolly's mature thought within the framework of the Popular Front strategy practised under Stalin's tutelage in China in the 1920s and formalised in the 1930s in France. It is a view, the logic of which makes a virtue of Connolly's subordination of the red banner to the green, as a historic stage prior to socialist struggle. In Greaves' view, Connolly's immature thought consisted in not explicitly reserving a place for the bourgeoisie in the national struggle.

Greaves' thesis deserves to be reassessed. Not only does Greaves view Connolly's position during the 1914-18 war as akin to Lenin's, but he regards Connolly's thinking as close to Lenin's on the relationship between socialism and religion while comparing Connolly's views favourably with those of Engels on the question of monogamous marriage and the future of the family, even though Connolly was against socialists fighting for the right of divorce. Morgan, in flatly rejecting the main element in Greaves' thesis, fails to develop this argument on the terrain of theory to any extent. It may be that Morgan believes that the living record of Connolly's involvement in political events better reveals his weaknesses than would a sustained attempt to understand his political subjectivity. On the other hand, there is the implication in this approach that not only was Connolly not close to Lenin in his theory but that Connolly's political thought does not amount to a corpus worthy of detailed consideration either in itself or in its effect on Connolly's political practice. Morgan implies as much when he suggests what Connolly might be remembered for apart from the Rising. He regards Connolly's socialist bequest as 'a respectable corpus of propaganda writings' from the first Marxist to express the desire for socialism in Ireland. This concession, however, is qualified by the assertion that Connolly's participation in the Easter Rising is not connected with any 'putative socialist theory of the Irish revolution'. (p. 202)

By not engaging in a fuller critique of Connolly's political thought, and by implying that this thought was so superficial as to be dropped completely in 1914, Morgan throws out the proverbial baby with the Greavesian bathwater. Of course Connolly was not Lenin. But what was Connolly and how is he to be characterised politically? For Morgan, Connolly was variously a political activist of 'sectarian' socialism, later a syndicalist, and finally, when he abandoned socialism, a revolutionary nationalist. This view is unconvincing precisely because it ignores the very core of the Connolly enigma, namely the continuous and lifelong attempt to render into an operative perspective for struggle in Ireland the theoretical, political and historiographical culture he had at his disposal.

Morgan's conclusion is disappointing also in view of the promise to follow the inspiration of Desmond Ryan in treating Connolly as a man simultaneously working within two worlds - that of international socialism and that of the Irish national liberation movement. Where, for example, is there any serious consideration in this political biography of the crisis of the Second International brought on by the opening of the inter-imperialist conflict in 1914? Or indeed, what importance does Morgan attach to the development of socialist theory and debate in the years preceding the war? The life of the Second International, as Morgan is aware, spans exactly the political career of Connolly. Morgan, however, betrays a certain disdain and carelessness in his attitude to not only the International at large, but specifically to Engels and the Marxist analysis of women's oppression. For example, in a section on Connolly's views on religion (pp. 54-60), Morgan refers to *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* as something Engels was led to 'dash off' following his discovery of Marx's ethnological notebooks, glibly stating that 'The family therefore became a topic for passing considera-

tion' in the International. Bebel's classic work which reached its thirty third edition before being translated into English and read by Connolly is summarily dismissed by Morgan as simply saying that 'socialism was the answer to the women's question (whatever the question)'. (p. 55).

More crucially, there is no attempt by Morgan to analyse the debates in the International on the national question - a serious deficiency in a biography whose subject is a Marxist whose lifelong preoccupation was with this matter and its relationship to socialism. Nor is there any discussion of the debates on imperialism in the International and the divisions which were brought to a head in 1914 over how the international socialist movement should respond to the new realities. Only in the context of the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899 does Morgan give some rather gnomical reference to the 'contradictory' attitude of British-based Social Democrats and Connolly's being less influenced by this than by what he saw on the streets of Dublin. (p. 36 ff.)

Morgan has left us with a book that is laden with empirical detail, some of it new but not all of it contributing to the thesis he wishes to sustain. The treatment of Connolly's *Labour in Irish History* and *The Reconquest of Ireland* provides some usefully suggestive passages on Connolly's thinking on Irish history. (pp. 85-88, 105-107). The description of Connolly's family background restates fairly vividly what we already know from other biographies, adding a detail here and there. The account of the Rebellion could probably be developed to stand on its own as it is quite rich in logistical detail. The Lockout episode too is dealt with competently, though in both the account of the Lockout and of the Rising, we only glimpse Connolly from time to time, as Morgan pursues different, often poorly integrated themes. The style of the book, and perhaps the choice of a biographical form itself, tends to clutter the arguments or crowd them into the margins where they are stated rather baldly without proper development. In view of this it seems necessary to offer some suggestions to counter the overall impression created by Morgan, namely of a Connolly who was without any worked-out conception to sustain him before and after the month of August, 1914.

Connolly began to develop his own analysis of the Irish revolution in the mid-1890s after a number of years on the Scottish Marxist left. His awareness of how Britain retarded Irish economic development led him to develop a schematic view of the relationship of the Irish national question to British colonialism and imperialism. In this schema, Connolly argued that independence on a capitalist basis was not a viable road for Ireland to travel, the reason being, he argued (erroneously as it happens), that unless Ireland could gain overseas colonial markets it could not develop its fledgling industries. This theory identified the source of British imperial power as its monopoly of the trade of its colonies throughout its vast empire and its control of the seas. Connolly thus argued that an independent Home Rule Ireland could not develop economically due to the absence of overseas markets. This idea of 'underconsumption' as the key to capitalist crisis was commonly expounded in Scottish and English social democratic circles in the mistaken belief that it was the view held by Marx.<sup>2</sup> In fact it arrived from Germany but was transmitted by the followers of Lassalle. Connolly took it on board and augmented it to deal with the problems of development in an independent Home Rule Ireland. This theory provided an objectivist explanation for a necessary confluence of the forces of socialism and nationalism in Ireland sooner or later.

In his first period in Ireland (1896-1903), and after the initial introduction to his writings by John Leslie, Connolly incorporated the influence of the revolutionary populist, James Fintan Lalor, into his reasoning on the impossibility of a viable Irish capitalism. Lalor had argued that the legislative question of repeal of the Union was nothing more than the outer political echo of the social question embedded in the ownership of landed property. Liberation of the peasants, *qua* labouring people, or the 'most oppressed class', was the real kernel, he argued, of the national question. Connolly imbibed this conception to develop an innovative theory of the Irish national struggle across the centuries in which feudalism and capitalism were essentially a foreign implantation, and this theory implied that, in the conditions of the turn of the century, the working class would inherit the centuries-long struggle against the class-based system of English colonialism.

But this perspective of Connolly's, summed up in his adage that 'the cause of labour is the cause

## International:

'I believe that the war could have been prevented by the socialists; as it was not and all the issues are knit I want to see England beaten so thoroughly that the commerce of the seas will be free to all nations, the smallest equally with the greatest.'<sup>4</sup>

Hence the focus of his attention switched from working class action against the war to the task of striking a blow against the principal enemy, the monopolist of world trade and oppressor of Ireland. His *perspective*, however, was the same as that which grounded his call for an Irish Labour Party in 1912 when Home Rule seemed a peaceful inevitability, i.e., a future independent Ireland in which syndicalism and socialism could re-emerge as a force.

Such a mixture of views reflected Connolly's location among the various currents in the crisis-racked international Social Democracy. However, despite his different and weaker understanding of the dynamics of an imperialist war, as compared with Lenin, it would be wrong to conclude that Connolly abandoned his syndicalism and socialism and his general commitment to internationalism. These remained in spite of his clear adaptation to revolutionary nationalism during the war, placing him, therefore, in the 'left-of-centre' in the spectrum of the Second International. Although it would be difficult to argue that his *centrist* politics would have led him inexorably towards the right, he seriously compromised his socialism to the extent that he subordinated his politics to the propaganda and the conspiracy of the radical nationalists. He resorted to purely insurrectionary methods, isolated from any strategy for *revolution*, behind the backs of the workers' organisations. In doing so he liquidated politically any objective expression of working class independence other than the separate organisation of his workers' militia. There is no expression whatever of distinct working-class interests in the proclamation of the Rising. But to say that he thus *became* a revolutionary nationalist is wide of the mark. Morgan lapses somewhat crudely when he asserts that: 'The Dublin insurgents, Connolly included, were opposed to over seven centuries of British domination, not to the havoc capitalism had created across the globe.' (p. 10)

Morgan's book deserves a qualified welcome. The book aims to 'demythologize' Connolly, and as a new biography pitched against received wisdom, it contains many suggestive remarks and some new perspectives. But it is disappointing because the assertion contained is not thoroughly backed up in the main body of the work. The source of this problem is that Morgan does not treat the corpus of Connolly's political ideas, and their bearing on his practice, with the seriousness they deserve. Without this it is impossible to come fully to grips with the enigma of the founder of Irish Marxism.

Joe Larragy

## Notes

1. C.D. Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, (London, 1976, ed), p. 78.
2. See Henry Collins, 'The Marxism of the SDF' in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History*, Vol. 2, (London, 1971).
3. For an extended critique of Connolly's historiography see Irish Workers' Group, *Class Struggle*, 15, Dublin, March, 1985.
4. *International Socialist Review*, March, 1915.