

The republican tradition — a place to build from?

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Ireland has an indigenous revolutionary tradition that successfully mobilized tens if not hundreds of thousands in the struggle for more freedom over the 200 years since 1798. Irish republicanism has always included a radical democratic and leveling element and which continues to provide part of the culture of resistance of the most down trodden sections of the working class. Many believe this makes it the best base to build from, at the fifth Rethinking Revolution meeting Andrew Flood asked if they are right?

The WSM actually gets a fair bit of stick from some anarchists in Ireland and leftist communists internationally for our willingness to work on a day to day basis with the republican left. So part of our motivation here is to give people a chance to air these opinions in the real world and part of it is to give a political critique of left or socialist republicanism which we wouldn't in general think it appropriate to do at the business meetings of common campaigns we are involved in like Shell to Sea or the 1% Network.

There is a crude version of this debate between republicanism and anarchism which goes something like this:

The Republican argument — *“Anarchism has no attraction to anyone in Ireland apart from a few students. Where the working class take up radical politics it is republican politics they take up, that's always been the case. The left is only relevant when it is a republican left that combines the fight for socialism with that for national liberation”*

The Anarchist argument — *“Republicanism is just another form of nationalist ideology that whatever left rhetoric it might use to get support at the end of the day just delivers capitalism as usual but under green, white & gold rather than red, white & blue. And whatever about a section of the catholic working class being attracted to republicanism the protestant working class in the north have no interest and are hostile to it, that sort of nationalism can only divide the working class.”*

That's actually the polite version of the crude debate. It's a useful starting point because both positions are more or less true even though in both cases things are actually a little more complex.

The two faces of republicanism and the emergence of anarchism

On the global level in the developed world republicanism as an ideology no longer has a radical component as the fight against monarchy and other forms of absolute rule has to a large extent been won everywhere. Sure our comrades in Britain still have a little way to go but otherwise its generally true. The American, French and Haitian revolutions of 200 years ago began the process of transforming the way society was organised to bring to an end a couple of thousand years when absolute rule by monarchs accompanied by slavery or near slave conditions for the rest of the population was the natural order.

But the contradictions within republicanism were also visible from that far back whether in the form of the American Revolutionaries like Thomas Jefferson who also happened to be slave holders, the French revolutionaries who wanted to hold onto Haiti as a colony or the Haitian revolutionaries and self liberated ex slaves who intended to maintain compulsory, if paid, labour on the old plantations. The winning of freedom in terms of political democracy did not bring an end to economic inequality even if in general there was normally at least a section of these republican movements that advocated that transformation as well.

Examples from Ireland

In Ireland in the 1790's we had a mass republican movement influenced by the American and then the French revolutions. That movement included those who favored a radical leveling agenda as well as the democratic agenda of mainstream republicans. Edward Fitzgerald, the military planner of the rising was one such proponent. But it also contained those like Wolfe Tone who saw an independent Ireland as opening up its own colonies in the Caribbean. In the north Henry Joy McDonald had to remove the existing United Irish leadership paralyzed by fear of the mob seizing property before the rising there could get underway, weeks after it had begun in the south. After its defeat and before his execution he warned future republicans to beware that "*the rich always betray the poor.*"

This lesson was repeated over the next 200 years, in 1848 the Young Ireland rebellion in the middle of the famine failed to catch light at least in part because William Smith O'Brien, the wealthy landlord that led that rising forbade the seizing of food from the big houses or even the felling of trees to block roads without the permission of the owner of the estate. As before there was also a radical leveling minority, lets start to call them left republicans who opposed this but the unity of the movement came first. In the 1860's the left of the Fenians played a significant if not fully researched role in the creation of the Land League and the Land War that followed but the Fenian's as an organisation decided not to pursue that strategy and other Fenian leaders denounced it as divisive.

Anarchism emerges

This process was mirrored in republican movements elsewhere. Left republicans would build real popular struggle but then be confronted with the need to preserve national unity in the face of the wealthy republicans whose funds were often needed for arms backing off because they feared for their privilege. And this is where we find the roots of the early anarchist movement, coming out of the concrete experience of left republicans like Bakunin in Poland or the Italians in Italy. In Bakunin's case he travelled to Poland in 1863 to take part in the republican insurrection there but became disillusioned when he realised that the Polish republican landlords were far more concerned about protecting their estates from the Polish peasants than they were with winning Polish liberation from the Russians. In the Italians case they had fought alongside Massini to liberate Italy only to discover that the economic misery of the mass of the people continued as before under a single democratic state as opposed to the old patch work of kingdoms and papal holdings.

In Ireland though no anarchist movement emerged in this period, or rather almost none, Fintan Lane recently revealed there was in fact a small anarchist group in Dublin in the 1860's but it didn't last long. The struggles during the Anglo Irish war of the late 1910's did see a spontaneous syndicalist upsurge with 5 general strikes, 17 local general strikes and in the region of 80 workplace occupations or even city wide 'soviets'. That's too complex to cover here but it demonstrated that radical ideas similar to anarchism could and did take a hold.

But otherwise it seems to have been the late 1960's before there was any sort of organized anarchist presence on the island. The few anarchist individuals who were around in the years between tended to have some sort of association with the republican movement, Captain Jack

White, the founder of the Citizen Army who went on to become an anarchist in the 1930's being the best known example. And in the late 60's and early 70's the movement that did emerge came from returned emigrants on the one hand and disaffected left republicans on the other.

So in terms of historical development anarchism and republicanism have a lot in common, in fact anarchism is arguably an off shoot of republicanism, an off shoot that emerged for the first time in the 1860's but has emerged on other occasions since then including in 1970's Ireland where some of those leaving the official republican movement became anarchists while other anarchists were joining both provisional and official republican movements. This is a rather difficult historical fact for those who want to main the polar opposite analysis I sketched at the start but it also does not do away with some the major differences between the two.

The difference though is not one about being pro or anti capitalism, at least as it is commonly understood. Socialist Republicanism differs from main stream republicanism because its adherents also see themselves as anti-capitalism — now we can discuss just what that means in reality but their attitude is not that all that is needed is to change the color of the flags. Indeed James Connolly ridiculed those nationalists who thought freedom simply meant swapping the crown for the harp.

The problem is a different one — because we don't see socialist republicanism as capable of building the sort of united working class movement that can transform the island and link up with similar movements internationally.

The million protestants

To return to one of the arguments I started with, the idea that while republicanism appears to have a natural constituency among a section of the working class in the north it offers nothing because of the historical divisions within the working class there. That is the million or so protestants in the north for some considerable period have identified as being against Irish separatism and the very marriage of nationalism and socialism that makes republicanism attractive to catholic workers makes it repellant to protestant workers.

The answer that is often used to this is sure wasn't Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, William Smith O'Brien, Bulmer Hobson and even Ronnie Bunting (of the Official IRA and then the INLA) a protestant. Wasn't Irish Republicanism developed and led for the first fifty years by protestants and didn't they play a significant role in the leadership afterwards, Bunting was Chief of Staff of the INLA. In June of 1795 wasn't it several Irish Protestants gathered on top of Cave Hill, overlooking Belfast. that swore "*never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted our independence*" and gave birth to republicanism in Ireland (unless for the sake of a row we want to count the visit of Cromwell and the New Model Army).

From this perspective loyalism is seen as some sort of bad dream that has somehow seized the protestant mind and which can be blown away with a correct understanding of the facts, the '*did you know King Billy was blessed by the pope after the Boyne*' school which in its most sophisticated form falls into the marxist idea of false consciousness.

There are two problems with this approach

1. This is an argument that republicanism lost in the 1790's and which has got progressively weaker ever since. Protestant support for Irish separatism was a brief break from the

history of sectarian conflict that went before and the sectarian history that came afterwards rather than a reality that can be returned to if only people wake up / the argument is presented in the right way.

2. Irish separatism reacted to the growth of class tensions within the population in Ireland by creating an imagined community of nationalists that could overcome those tensions in order to build the strength needed to defeat imperialism. This was not a left project even if some left republicans bought into it, rather the nation that was imagined was a Gaelic, peasant and Catholic one. The irony is that many of those who led this project were Protestants, Hobson included but any reasonable reader has to recognize that this Gaelic revival created a set of additional cultural barriers to reaching out to the bulk of Northern Protestants. One indication being that it resulted in loyalism dropping the usage of the Irish language that continued to exist up to that period. It's pretty impossible to imagine an Orange Lodge today declaring "*as Orangemen, as Freeholders, as Irishmen that we consider the extinction of our separate legislature as the extinction of the Irish Nation*" as Lodge 500 did in 1800 during the debate about the Act of Union. Indeed today hostility to the cultural agenda of Irish separatism has reached such a level that a very large segment of Northern Protestants try to define themselves as something other than Irish regardless of the geographical space where they are born, live and die. If you think about it that is a pretty extreme divide.

This cultural divide has been re-enforced and extended by the military struggles of the last 100 years. In the 1790's the problem in uniting Catholic Protestant and Dissenter under the title of Irish (republican) was already in existence as a substantial mythology of massacre and counter massacre that was part of everyday discussion and used politically to cement the division of the working class. The rebellion in Wexford ended up fatally adding to that narrative, the theme of republican betrayal of nonsectarian rhetoric which is often used even today whenever a section of Northern Protestants takes an interest in 'pure' republicanism. (it matters little that the story is much more complex than that, myths don't go in much for on complexity). The war of the last 40 years, has served to cement this mythology in the current generation meaning its impossible to operate as a republican in working class Protestant areas. And if you can't even carry out political activity how can you hope to overcome such a deeply entrenched mythology. In that context Irish separatism, even of the left republican variety has almost no realistic hope of uniting the working class on this island and without that unity there can be no fundamental change in the economic and political systems that run our lives on this island.

Now what I've just said probably seems a little unfair and one sided. It is. I've not really touched on the role of British imperialism in shaping this dynamic or of the reactionary nature or loyalism in general. This is because I'm giving this talk in a radical space in Dublin and our intention is that these Rethinking Revolution seminars should be provoking and avoid reassuring those who attend with old truths and familiar arguments. I'm not in other words expecting all that many loyalists or British imperialists in the audience tonight.

If I was going there I wouldn't start from here

The problem we face, anarchist and left republicans alike is how to help nurture the Irish revolution in the context of the global revolution. And in many ways that problem for us in Ireland can be summarized under the old 'if I wanted to go there I wouldn't start from here.'

Our native revolutionary tradition does indeed contain history that can be drawn from but as a package it is not fit for purpose. The problem though is that it has enough of an attraction to a section of the catholic working class that almost any left project based around republicanism will be almost instantly able to generate a level of interest that goes beyond what the existing revolutionary left and anarchist movement can achieve. Again and again this makes socialist republicanism see like the best strategy of offer.

The question for anarchists is what do we do about this. How do we deal with the reality we are in rather than what we might wish for. We might wish we lived in Barcelona. We might wish to be in one of those European countries where anarchism is the default or close to the default of what people understand by revolutionary politics, where anarchism is therefore a first port of call for people discovering radicalism in their teens.. Not only is this not the case here but those attracted to anarchism are almost certainly going to be those who have looked at and rejected republicanism in a determined but not necessarily deep way.

The consequence of this is that they often end up with a shallow and sectarian view of Irish republicanism, one that only sees the reactionary and militarist angles I have outlined. Or less common but not unknown are people from republican backgrounds who have become anarchists but still carry a good deal of the assumptions of republicanism. This is a recipe for disastrous misunderstanding and pointless debates, indeed this week I was reading a perfect example of this online in relation to the fact that the person playing at a fundraising gig for Just Books in Belfast was also a supporter of the Republican Unity Network.

The challenge for anarchists is to recognize the common point of politics and method we have with socialist republicans and to be therefore to engage in common work without losing sight of the political differences that exist between us.

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