The Famine, the Land War & 19th Century Resistance

Why is it not happening today

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Over the past three years Ireland has witnessed unprecedented austerity. An aspect that has surprised many people has been the limited and at best sporadic resistance to what has been a savage cut in people's standards of living. Politicians and the media have on many occasions relished the fact that resistance has been largely ineffectual and isolated, while many left wing activists have been left questioning why most people seem willing to take so much pain.

Sections of the mainstream have attempted to understand the muted response in a pseudo-racial fashion arguing that Irish people are not like our "hot blooded" neighbours in the Mediterranean. However, the explanation may be far more straight forward. If we look at the issue from a different perspective, asking the question "where would such resistance to austerity come from?" it becomes clear that resistance to austerity was unlikely to emerge. Successful resistance to oppression does not just fall from the sky, spring from raw emotion or emerge because something is wrong. Instead it emerges not only from a sense of injustice but high levels of politicisation and political experience.

Irish history has produced such large scale movements of resistance several times over the past 3 centuries but perhaps the prerequisite need of politicisation and political experience were never more obvious than in the 19th century. Twice in that century the ruling class exacted a brutal class war on the poorest in society with very different consequences. One resulted in a catastrophic defeat – The Great Famine, the other a victory of sorts known as The Land War. The difference between these two struggles may explain the lack of organised resistance in Ireland today.

19th century Ireland

19th century Ireland was marked by two periods of intense class warfare, The Great Famine (1845–51) and The Land War (1879–1882). These events were similar in that they saw recessions become potential crises when the potato crop, the staple diet of the majority of population, failed for several years in a row. In both 1845 and 1879 the poorest in society, as they faced starvation, were forced to bear the brunt of the recession as Landlords, supported by the British State, refused to stop food exports or reduce rent. Indeed many landlords tried to use both crises to evict tenants into destitution and starvation in order to replace them with more profitable ranches while continuing to export food abroad.

The Famine and Resistance

In 1845 the result was catastrophic. Already living on the margins of society the poor could not shoulder the crisis but rather the opposite, they needed help. This aid did not come, aside from tokenistic gestures, and in the region of 800,000 and 1 million people died while 58,000 tenants and families were evicted between 1848 and 1851.

The popular view is that people did not resist these extreme measures of eviction or continued food export by the ruling class in Ireland and London. This is not true. Demonstrations, protests, armed attacks and assassinations were not unusual. Frequent protests at market and port towns where food was sold for export exploded into riots. On some occasions tenants attacked their landlords. Most famously Captain Denis Mahon was assassinated in Strokestown,

County Roscommon. These forms of resistance were so common that food exports were usually accompanied by military convoy.

While anger was palpable and people lashed out, this resistance however never developed into a movement capable of stopping the human aspects of the Famine. While being widespread it was reminiscent of the resistance we have witnessed to austerity so far in Ireland in the 21st century – it was localised, isolated and on an overall level largely ineffectual.

Resistance to the famine in many ways harked back to a medieval past when a local riot could force prices down or stop traders exporting food. In 1845 — 51 the problem however was not local. Like today, Ireland was increasingly part of a system of global trade, supporting the ever growing industrial population in English cities. Just like today local solutions were inadequate — an overall economic and political solution was needed to the inequality caused by the trading system of the British Empire. Just as a protest outside Roscommon hospital alone will not end European austerity today or its effects, a riot in Clonmel, Kilkenny, Cobh or Waterford or an assassination in Roscommon did not challenge the economic machine of the British Empire. By 1851 the population was broken having suffered a famine, which if not caused by human action was certainly made infinitely worse by human action.

The Land War

Less than 30 years after the famine abated in 1851, another crisis caused by a combination of potato crop failure and economic recession provoked another crisis in Ireland in 1879. Although less extensive than in 1845, the West Coast of Ireland looked like it would revisit the horrors of the famine. By 1879 famine was declared in some areas of County Mayo as potato crops failed for a third consecutive year while cholera severely damaged an emerging poultry industry.

Economic recession plunged agricultural prices and cut off the essential seasonal work many tenants depended on to pay their rent. This created a situation where over 100,000 families found themselves in rent arrears and facing eviction in 1879 as well. As in 1845 landlords steeled themselves for a vicious class struggle with many flatly refusing abatements or reduction in rent. Lord Lucan, "hero" of the Crimea and landlord in the west of Ireland refused to help his tenants as this would mean in his words "a reduction in means". This attitude reflected the thinking of many landlords.

It seemed, in a repeat of 1845, that the poorest in society were about to shoulder the effects of the natural disaster and recession even if it meant starvation. In the situation that developed, the experience could not have been more different to 1845. Although the economic crisis lasted until 1882, as did crop failure, there was no famine and evictions never surpassed a few thousand each year, dramatically down from the figures during the famine.

The Land League

This achievement was not down to a miracle or clemency from the ruling class but it was largely the work of the National Irish Land League and The Ladies Land League, which formed a mass movement of around 200,000 people. On a local level this movement resisted attempted evictions and in some cases forced rents down while supporting famine relief schemes. Simultaneously the movement focused national attention on specific cases bringing political pressure

to bear, something that was never successfully done during the famine. This was most notably done in the case of the Landlord Robert Bloose in late 1879 and Captain Boycott in 1881. These "celebrity" cases served to bring pressure on the economic centre in London while local activism staved off the worst excesses of the landlords on the ground. These activities were supported by mass meetings and demonstrations most famously Irishtown and Westport in Mayo in 1879 and Dublin in 1880 which solidified the movement.

This campaign developed new tactics including the deadly effective social ostracisation which would become known as boycotting after an early victim – Captain Charles Boycott. Through these militant protests the National Irish Land League and The Ladies Land League effectively defeated Irish Landlordism and the British Government. The movement was not revolutionary in that the poor were still poor in its aftermath and the Empire survived intact, but nonetheless its implications were immense – 1845 was not repeated, within 20 years large scale landlordism in Ireland was in terminal decline (although the solution of peasant proprietorship was far from satisfactory). For us today the pertinent question is why could society in Ireland produce a movement like this in 1879 and not 1845?

What Changed?

Before the famine the major political movements were the successful campaign for Catholic emancipation in 1829 and a failed campaign for the repeal of the Act of Union, which had seen Ireland ruled directly from London. These campaigns whilst often using many ordinary people made almost no difference to the lives of the poor. Rather than challenge the British Empire in Ireland these campaigns were essentially attempts for the Irish upper and middle classes (or in the case of emancipation the catholic upper class) to control their own fate within the Empire. If anything these served to dis-empower ordinary people.

The other form of resistance took the shape of secret societies – militant, often informal, clandestine groups. These organisations varied from region to to region and differed massively but often attacked property or people in opposition to local injustices. They were clandestine and often intensely local organisations. They too failed to give people the skills to organise widespread opposition and probably contributed to the localised nature of the opposition to the famine.

After the famine politics changed fundamentally. The emergence of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.) popularly known as the Fenians had a transformative effect on politics. Formed in 1858, through the 1860's and 1870's, the Fenians became the pole of attraction for many radicals in Ireland.

Although known for their secretive and hierarchical organising method the Fenians equipped their activists with skills in popular agitation. Along with the high profile funeral of Terence Bellew Mc Manus in 1861, they were integral to the Amnesty Associations' campaign for amnesty for Fenian prisoners in the 1870's. In 1872 this organisation organised a meeting of around 100,000 people in Clontarf.

It was in the West of Ireland however that Fenian organisers broke most fundamentally with the organisation's strict focus on national liberation through armed struggle alone. They explored the possibilities of several different avenues of struggle. This saw them become the driving force behind the successful electoral campaign of John O Connor Power in Mayo in 1874. They were also heavily engaged in organising tenant rights associations most famously the fenian Matthew

Harris in Ballinasloe. Through these activites the Fenians, particularly in Connaught, gained great organisational skills. Their success did not go unnoticed and by 1878 they were supported by Fenians from Dublin and the North of England as well as the highly influential Irish American John Devoy and Fenian organiser Michael Davitt when he was released from prison in December 1877. It was their activities that formed the basis of "The new departure" a policy that saw some Fenians break with the traditional militarism of the founders of the organisation.

The role of the Fenians in Irish politics in the 1860's and 70's is best seen, as the historian R.V. Comerford described, as one "not of ideology but of function". The official Fenian ideology of achieving independence through armed struggle alone had little impact on the Land League but its experienced activists formed the back bone of the movement. Their involvement in the election campaign of 1874 was one "not of ideology but of function" where the activists involved, while remaining highly sceptical of involvement in Westminster, got a crucial understanding of local politics in the area which they would soon put into practice.

In 1879 as the crisis hit, these Fenians not only had vast amounts of political skills but crucially they understood the local complexities of politics of the West through years of campaigning. When tenants in the small town of Irishtown in Co. Mayo began to agitate about local conditions they swung into action. The Fenians in the West along with others organised a mass meeting attended by around 8,000 people. Their involvement had a massive impact from an early stage – there would be no repeat of 1845 – they recognised the need for a structural approach to the problems Ireland faced. On the stage at the Irishtown meeting a left wing Fenian from Dublin, Thomas Brennan illustrated the view they had for the solutions to the crisis in 1879:

I have read some history, and I find that several countries have from time to time been afflicted with the same land disease as that under which Ireland is now labouring, and although the political doctors applied many remedies, the one that proved effectual was the tearing out, root and branch, of the class that caused the disease.

From an early stage Fenians and former Fenians became influential members of the movement applying skills learned in past few decades. Many organisers of the the emerging land movement including Thomas Brennan, Michael Davitt and Matthew Harris were all Fenians or former Fenians as was the treasurer Patrick Egan. Their experience and outlook shaped the emerging campaign for tenants' rights in Mayo into a national campaign. This was made possible by the active engagement of hundreds if not thousands of members and former members of the IRB in the west who threw themselves into the emerging struggle, along with their political skills and experience.

As the struggle grew, this movement named the Irish National Land League in October 1879, became one of the greatest social movements in Irish History and the political experience of the Fenians was crucial in this process. In 1880 it was former Fenians, notably Michael Davitt and Thomas Brennan, who were key supporters of the women who founded the Ladies Land League which proved to be integral to the movement's success. While very successful in ensuring that opposition to the evictions of 1879–1882 was national, coherent and strategic, the experienced activists' attempts to focus on the class division within the land movement and attempts to incorporate Dublin's emerging working class into the struggle, met with only limited success.

Decline and Compromise

After three years of struggle the movement began to decline after severe repression and a compromise made by conservative politicians, however its achievements were nonetheless notable. Not only had Irish National Land League prevented landlords evicting tenants they had contributed massively to famine relief. This was only possible due to the large numbers of activists on the ground who had political experience, an understanding of the wider political landscape and the nature of the problems Ireland faced in the 19th century.

Reflections on today

Clearly Ireland does not face the issues it did either in 1845 or 1879. The country is almost completely different in that the majority of the population now live in cities but there are some interesting aspects that are of some relevance.

While some were hopeful that the arrival of the IMF and ECB would produce a similar reaction to that of 1879, this was never going to happen. If we ask the question "where would it come from?" it's clear we could not emulate the response of 1879. It was shaped and honed by the involvement of hundreds if not thousands of experienced activists.

It's clear that any response in Ireland today is going to be limited given the comparable lack of experience. We live in perhaps the most apolitical time in generations. There are vast swathes of the country with no political activists or experience in recent decades. Conversely what political activists there are, are arguably out of touch with modern Irish society, something that was so important in 1879. This is reflected in the fact that no political group today is in anyway comparable to the IRB in Connaught in terms of size or penetration into the fabric of modern society.

Unfortunately the reactions in Ireland to austerity so far, reflect this lack of political consciousness and are in some ways similar to resistance to the famine – outdated and localised. Even if protests do emerge, it is hard to see them becoming a sustained long term movement. We need to adopt a slow burning strategy of organising. The upcoming campaign against the household and water taxes gives radicals a chance to grow in terms of members and influence and begin to grapple with how 20 years of consumerism, the Celtic Tiger and the shock of recession has shaped modern 21st century working class communities. While achieving these goals by no means guarantees success and history is not a blueprint for the future, there are some lessons we need to learn if we are to have a chance of mounting a serious opposition to austerity.

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