

An anarchist look at the ideas of James Connolly

the single most important figure in the history of the Irish left

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James Connolly is probably the single most important figure in the history of the Irish left. He was an organiser in the IWW in the USA but in Ireland is best known for his role in building the syndicalist phase of Irish union movement and for involving the armed defence body of that union, the Irish Citizens' Army in the 1916 nationalist insurrection. This left a legacy claimed at one time or another not only by all the Irish left parties but also by the nationalists of Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein. In this article I will attempt to look at the long neglected anarchistic aspects of Connolly's thought and ask the question was Connolly a libertarian?

Connolly is one of those historical figures who can seem to have been both everything and nothing. People claim him for a myriad of political ideologies, many of which are irreconcilably opposed to one another. At times it can seem like he was little more than a confused revolutionary who was never sure what he was for or what he was against. Connolly held diverse opinions, (many of which I, unfortunately, will not have the space to go into here). At the same time his analysis is unique in that it possessed remarkable depth and clarity. Because of this, quotes can be found in his work to enable almost anyone to claim him as an advocate of almost any political cause.

Connolly was, of course, not an anarchist. He advocated parliamentary action, at times advocated a form of State Socialism and considered himself a nationalist. These positions are contradictory to anarchist thought.

Syndicalist

First and foremost James Connolly was a Socialist. And when asked to elaborate on his Socialist theory, he would always advocate Revolutionary Syndicalism. Readers of James Connolly may react by saying that almost nowhere in Connolly's work can any mention of Syndicalism be found. This is simply because Connolly preferred to use the term 'Industrial Unionism' to Syndicalism.

Leninists are very fond of claiming that Connolly was only a syndicalist in his innocent youth and by the time of the Easter rising (his role in which secured his place in history) he had abandoned syndicalism. C. Desmond Greaves, the author of the definitive biography of James Connolly *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, wrote that by the beginning of 1916 'no more than a faint echo of syndicalism remained'¹. This is quite strange seeing as that in Connolly's last major work the pamphlet *The Re-Conquest of Ireland*, published on the 14th of December 1915, Connolly fervently advocates Syndicalism or as he calls it 'Industrial Unionism'. Connolly writes:

The principle of complete unity upon the Industrial plane must be unceasingly sought after; the Industrial union embracing all workers in each industry must replace the multiplicity of unions which now hamper and restrict our operations, multiply our expenses and divide our forces in face of the mutual enemy. With the Industrial Union as our principle of action, branches can be formed to give expression to the need for effective supervision of the affairs of the workshop, shipyard, dock or railway; each branch to consist of the men and women now associated in Labour upon the same technical basis as our craft unions of today.

¹ C. Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, (Seven Seas Publishers, 1971), p. 398.

Add to this the concept of One Big Union embracing all, and you have not only the outline of the most effective form of combination for industrial warfare to-day, but also for Social Administration of the Co-operative Commonwealth of the future.

A system of society in which the workshops, factories, docks, railways, shipyards, &c., shall be owned by the nation, but administered by the Industrial Unions of the respective industries, organised as above, seems best calculated to secure the highest form of industrial efficiency, combined with the greatest amount of individual freedom from state despotism. Such a system would, we believe, realise for Ireland the most radiant hopes of all her heroes and martyrs.

This is syndicalism pure and simple, and no amount of historical acrobatics can change the fact that Connolly was a life long Socialist and a life long Syndicalist².

Nationalist

As I mentioned earlier Connolly called himself a nationalist. This has enabled generations of Irish nationalists from every side of the political spectrum to lay claim to Connolly's legacy.

Because nationalism is the dominant ideology of capitalism and has profoundly affected every one of us who lives under capitalism, thinking about it objectively is quite a challenge.

Nationalism is the ideological justification of the nation-state. It imagines that capitalists and the working class share a common political interest; it imagines that the oppressed and their oppressors, the exploited and their exploiters share a common political interest just because they share the same nationality! It advocates the strengthening/creation of a nation-state to protect this common interest. It seems strange that Connolly, as a socialist, would identify himself with this ideology.

I believe Connolly's mistake was that he never made the distinction between national liberation and nationalism. Libertarian socialists are, in all circumstances, opposed to oppression. Libertarian socialists, therefore, defend all liberation movements, whatever their form. As such, libertarian socialists should (although they often don't) defend national liberation movements. Where people are being oppressed due to their nationality, all socialists and all progressive people in the world should defend their right to fight this oppression. But does not mean we see them as a solution. Although racial liberation movements are rarely racist and sexual liberation movements are rarely sexist, unfortunately, most national liberation movements are nationalist, and as they campaign against oppression of one kind they advocate that of another, namely the oppression of the nation-state. Libertarian socialists must be at all times conscious of this complexity, Connolly unfortunately wasn't.

Connolly was a nationalist of sorts, but he never believed a national revolution could act as a substitute for a social revolution. He harshly ridiculed those that did in his pamphlet *Socialism Made Easy* when he wrote:

After Ireland is free, says the patriot who won't touch Socialism, we will protect all classes, and if you won't pay your rent you will be evicted same as now. But

² Although before he went to America his syndicalism was less developed, as were his politics in general.

the evicting party, under command of the sheriff, will wear green uniforms and the Harp without the Crown, and the warrant turning you out on the roadside will be stamped with the arms of the Irish Republic.

Now, isn't that worth fighting for?

And when you cannot find employment, and, giving up the struggle of life in despair, enter the Poorhouse, the band of the nearest regiment of the Irish army will escort you to the Poorhouse door to the tune of St. Patrick's Day.

Oh, it will be nice to live in those days...

Now, my friend, I also am Irish, but I'm a bit more logical. The capitalist, I say, is a parasite on industry...

The working class is the victim of this parasite — this human leech, and it is the duty and interest of the working class to use every means in its power to oust this parasite class from the position which enables it to thus prey upon the vitals of Labour.

Therefore, I say, let us organise as a class to meet our masters and destroy their mastership; organise to drive them from their hold upon public life through their political power; organise to wrench from their robber clutch the land and workshops on and in which they enslave us; organise to cleanse our social life from the stain of social cannibalism, from the preying of man upon his fellow man.

Clearly Connolly did not believe in ignoring class division in the name of nationalism, nor did he think he needed to, due to his unique theory of what a nation is. He wrote a mere sixteen days before the Easter rising:

We are out for Ireland for the Irish. But who are the Irish? Not the rack-renting, slum-owning landlord; not the sweating, profit-grinding capitalist; not the sleek and oily lawyer; not the prostitute pressman — the hired liars of the enemy. Not these are the Irish upon whom the future depends. Not these, but the Irish working class, the only secure foundation upon which a free nation can be reared.

The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour. They cannot be dissevered. Ireland seeks freedom. Labour seeks that an Ireland free should be the sole mistress of her own destiny, supreme owner of all material things within and upon her soil. Labour seeks to make the free Irish nation the guardian of the interests of the people of Ireland, and to secure that end would vest in that free Irish nation all property rights as against the claims of the individual, with the end in view that the individual may be enriched by the nation, and not by the spoiling of his fellows.

As can be seen, Connolly believed that the true Irish nation is the Irish people; he once said, "Ireland without her people is nothing to me."³ He believed the Irish nation did not include capitalists. It is clear that for Connolly the Irish nation and the Irish working class (in the broadest sense of the term) were synonymous. However, by this logic George W. Bush is not an American

³ *ibid.*, p.38

and the Queen of England is not English. But that is not the only inconsistency in Connolly's nationalism.

First of all, when Connolly says 'Ireland for the Irish', what does he mean?

Does he mean Ireland for those that live in Ireland? Surely not, many people who live in Ireland aren't Irish. There are many people living in Ireland that would identify themselves as American or British or Canadian or Chilean or Chinese etc. So, unless Connolly thought that these people are Irish but they just don't know it, this is not the correct interpretation of his slogan.

Does he mean Ireland for those that identify themselves as Irish? I'm confident he doesn't. I'm sure Connolly would find the idea of workers not being given equal rights because of their national identity detestable. It seems to me that Connolly hasn't fully thought out what he is saying.

Some might say that this is an unfair criticism. They might argue that it is only in recent times that a lot of people living in Ireland aren't Irish, a phenomenon Connolly had no experience of. And they'd have a point but not a very strong one.

Connolly was a migrant. He grew up an Irish man in Scotland and spent 8 years in America, living in Ireland for only 12 years. Connolly should have appreciated that the nation-state cannot be the form of workers self-emancipation.

However, when a nation is being politically oppressed that nation is politicised and a national liberation movement emerges. Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century was a nation in the grip of a national liberation movement.

On the one hand Connolly believed that in the Ireland of his day you had British imperialist capitalism and on the other hand you had the Irish fighting against imperialism and for a new way of living. Connolly believed that that new way of living must be socialist, and he believed that all the forces fighting capitalism and imperialism in Ireland should unite and struggle together.

In *Labour in Irish History*, his greatest work, he writes that the working class are 'the inheritors of the Irish ideals of the past — the repository of the hopes of the future'⁴. Socialism being the hope of the future.

Unity

Connolly was a great advocate of left unity. He believed that to create Socialism all the people struggling for a new social system should work together and offer one another support and solidarity. Even if such a union diluted the political message of Revolutionary Syndicalists like himself, he believed that

'the development of the fighting spirit is of more importance than the creation of the theoretically perfect organisation; that, indeed, the most theoretically perfect organisation may, because of its very perfection and vastness, be of the greatest possible danger to the revolutionary movement if it tends, or is used, to repress and curb the fighting spirit of comradeship in the rank and file.'⁵

Connolly believed that the struggle for socialism, for the co-operative commonwealth, for a workers' republic, for the re-conquest of Ireland; for the new social system, should be conducted

⁴ James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, (New Books Publications, 1973), p.124

⁵ *Old Wine in New Bottles*, James Connolly: Selected Writings, (ed.) P. Berresford Ellis, p.176.

on every front. He saw the revolutionary potential in all autonomous working class organisation. He gave his full support to the co-operative movement and argued that it was part of the same struggle as syndicalism. He even went as far as supporting the Irish language movement. Despite rather cynically observing that ‘you can’t teach a starving man Gaelic’⁶, Connolly appreciated the fact that the Irish language movement was a movement ‘of defiant self-reliance and confident trust in a people’s own power of self-emancipation’⁷.

Of course Connolly’s main concern was with the most rapidly growing section of the Irish population, the industrial working class. He argued that the industrial working class (wage-earners) should unite in Industrial Unions. He said:

“The enrolment of the workers in unions patterned closely after the structure of modern industries, and following the organic lines of industrial development, is par excellence the swiftest, safest, and most peaceful form of constructive work the Socialist can engage in. It prepares within the framework of capitalist society the working forms of the Socialist Republic, and thus, while increasing the resisting power of the worker against present encroachments of the capitalist class, it familiarizes him with the idea that the union he is helping to build up is destined to supplant that class in the control of the industry in which he is employed. The power of this idea to transform the dry detail work of trade union organisation into the constructive work of revolutionary Socialism...It invests the sordid details of the daily incidents of the class struggle with a new and beautiful meaning.”⁸

He argued strongly against craft unionism, that is when workers are divided into unions by craft despite working in the same industry, and struggling against the same bosses. He points out that if only one section of the workers in a workplace go on strike the strike will be ineffectual, and argues that all workers in a workplace need to be in the same union. He also points out how craft unionism creates and encourages craft snobbery. Examples of craft snobbery would be when, office workers sneer down at office cleaners, or middle managers doing the same to those below them, or manual workers dismiss the grievances of intellectual workers. Connolly argues that all crafts should be united, and workers should be organised industry by industry in One Big Union.

As well as believing in a united social struggle Connolly believed in the need for a united Socialist force with in that struggle. He almost always treated the socialist movement as if it was a homogenous whole, which it of course is not. After a century of ‘socialists’ such as Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Trotsky and Lenin on the one hand and the likes of Blair and Schroeder on the other, we know better than to feign unity where there is none.

Parliament

Connolly never lived to see the poverty of ‘social-democracy’ nor did he live to see the barbarity of Leninism. He never saw how quickly people abandon their principles once placed in a position of power. In part because of this, although a Syndicalist, he was never an Anarcho-Syndicalist.

⁶ James Connolly: Selected Writings, (ed.) P. Berresford Ellis, p.47

⁷ The Language Movement, *ibid.*, p.289

⁸ James Connolly, *Socialism Made Easy*, (The Labour Party, 1972) pp.43–44.

In 1908 there was a split in the IWW (the 'Industrial Workers of the World', a mainly American organisation to which Connolly devoted much time and energy). The split was essentially between the Marxist Daniel De Leon and his followers and the Anarcho-Syndicalists. It is well worth noting that Connolly sided with the Anarcho-Syndicalists and against the Marxist Daniel De Leon.

De Leon was a major influence on Connolly, he considered himself a De Leonist for many years. However, while in America, Connolly was repulsed by the sectarianism and dogmatism of De Leon. De Leon argued that to achieve socialism the working class should elect a socialist party backed by a strong Industrial Union into parliament so as to create a socialist government, he believed that by doing this the working class could control the State and usher in Socialism. He believed that the working class should elect his 'Socialist Labor Party', a party that he believed was the only true socialist organisation in America. He believed that socialism could be achieved through the ballot box, provided the ballot was backed by a strong industrial union. He wrote: "The might of the revolutionary ballot consists in the thorough industrial organisation of the productive workers organised in such a way that when that ballot is cast the capitalist class may know that behind it is the might to enforce it."⁹

To Connolly this seemed bizarre, why create industrial unions capable of enforcing a revolution and capable of being the organisational loci of a socialist society and then not use them? Why create a revolutionary movement capable of revolution and then expect it to wait for 'the revolutionary ballot'? Connolly thought this was ridiculous. He believed that:

"The fight for the conquest of the political state is not the battle, it is only the echo of the battle. The real battle is the battle being fought out every day for the power to control industry, and the gauge of the progress of that battle is not to be found in the number of votes making a cross beneath the symbol of a political party, but in the number of these workers who enrol themselves in an industrial organisation with the definite purpose of making themselves masters of the industrial equipment of society in general.

That battle will have its political echo, that industrial organisation will have its political expression. If we accept the definition of working-class political action as that which brings the workers as a class into direct conflict with the possessing class AS A CLASS, and keeps them there, then we must realize that NOTHING CAN DO THAT SO READILY AS ACTION AT THE BALLOT-BOX. Such action strips the working-class movement of all traces of such sectionalism as may, and indeed must, cling to strikes and lock-outs, and emphasizes the class character of the Labour Movement. IT IS THEREFORE ABSOLUTELY INDISPENSABLE FOR THE EFFICIENT TRAINING OF THE WORKING CLASS ALONG CORRECT LINES THAT ACTION AT THE BALLOT-BOX SHOULD ACCOMPANY ACTION IN THE WORKSHOP."¹⁰

As you can see Connolly was no anarchist but instead advocated a kind of reversed De Leonism. De Leon argued that the party must usher in Socialism, and the role of the Industrial Union was to support the party. Whereas Connolly argued that the Industrial Union must usher in socialism, and the role of the party was to support the union. This is an important distinction.

⁹ C. Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, p.190

¹⁰ James Connolly, *Socialism Made Easy*, p.51

De Leon was arguing for a revolution that involves seizing control of the State, a revolution lead by politicians. Connolly was arguing for a revolution that gives immediate power to new form of social organisation, a revolution lead by the workers themselves. De Leon was arguing for a political revolution that could lead to a social revolution. Connolly was arguing for a social revolution straight out.

Connolly dismissed the idea that socialism could be ushered in by seizing State control. He didn't think that the political institutions of today could be used to achieve socialism. He wrote:

“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 predecessors.

The delegation of the function of government into the hands of representatives elected from certain districts, States or territories, represents no real natural division suited to the requirements of modern society, but is a survival from a time when territorial influences were more potent in the world than industrial influences, and for that reason is totally unsuited to the needs of the new social order, which must be based upon industry...

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 organisation 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 organised from above downward...”

“Under Socialism, States, territories, or provinces will exist only as geographical expressions, and have no existence as sources of governmental power, though they may be seats of administrative bodies...”

“As we have shown, the political State of capitalism has no place under Socialism; therefore, measures which aim to place industries in the hands of, or under the control of, such a political State are in no sense steps towards that ideal; they are but useful measures to restrict the greed of capitalism and to familiarize the workers with the conception of common ownership.”¹¹

As can be seen Connolly was no ‘Social Democrat’,¹² he was an avid socialist, dedicated to the achievement of socialism. Nor, as can be seen from the above quotations, was he a state socialist. However, this must be said with reservation. Connolly did write:

“Socialists are bound as Socialists only to the acceptance of one great principle – the ownership and control of the wealth producing power by the state.”¹³

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp41-43

¹² By Social Democrat I am referring to the politics of those party organised in or around the Socialist International. In Ireland these parties are Labour and the SDLP, in Britain; Labour, in Germany; the Social Democrats, in France; the Socialist Party etc.

¹³ Labour Nationality and Religion, James Connolly: Selected Writings, (ed.) P. Berresford Ellis, p.68.

This is clearly a state socialist claim. It is, however, directly contradicted by another thing he wrote:

“State ownership and control is not necessarily Socialism — if it were, then the Army, the Navy, the Police, the Judges, the Gaolers, the Informers, and the Hangmen, all would all be Socialist functionaries, as they are State officials — but the ownership by the State of all the land and materials for labour, combined with the co-operative control by the workers of such land and materials, would be Socialism.”¹⁴

To explore Connolly’s understanding of the State fully would extend beyond the remit of this article as it would require an in depth consideration of the differences between the Marxist and Anarchist understanding of the State. It should suffice to say that both anarchists and Marxists agree with Connolly’s claim above that the State is ‘simply the coercive forces of capitalist society...’¹⁵

It would, of course, be ridiculous for me to claim that Connolly was an anti-statist, he wasn’t. I merely want to point out that Connolly’s idea of the Workers’ Republic was not the same as the ‘Socialist Republics’ that existed in any of the world’s Leninist countries. Nor was it the same as the ‘Irish Republic’ of today.

Connolly advocated a ‘co-operative commonwealth’. A society in which all productive property is owned in common and managed by democratic co-operatives, which in turn are organised along co-operative lines, industry-by-industry, region-by-region. Connolly demanded a real ‘Social Democracy’ as opposed to the sham ‘Political Democracy’ we have today. He wanted all of society to be run and organised democratically for the benefit of all of society.

Legacy

Readers may be quick to note that Connolly’s mistakes are the same as those that have plagued the Irish left ever since his death, and they would be right. His incoherent opinions concerning the national question were parroted ceaselessly until the seventies when they began to be questioned by a number of socialist groups. And his acceptance of the flawed Marxist theory of the state is only beginning to be questioned. These mistakes have resulted in disastrous policies often advocated by the revolutionary left; policies that have varied from advocating Stalinism (Communist Party) to advocating/participating in terrorism (IRSP) . His mistakes have also provided a shield for the impotent ‘labour must wait’ policies of the reformist left in Ireland.

It is often queried why Connolly fought in 1916 when he knew that they were ‘going out to be slaughtered’¹⁷ and when he knew that a national revolution could not easily be turned into

¹⁴ State Monopoly versus Socialism, James Connolly, *Erin’s Hope: The End and the Means and The New Evangel: Preached to Irish Toilers*, (New Books Publications, 1972), pp.27–28.

¹⁵ Where we differ, however, is that Marxists believe that to achieve a social revolution you need a political revolution that puts the working class in control of the State, making them the ruling class. Anarchists object to this saying that the transition from a class based society to a classless society must not involve the creation of a new ruling class. It is argued that to create Socialism new forms of social organisation that enable everyone in society to have an equal say must be created so as to enable the everyday running of a classless society. The aim is a social revolution to empower these organisations. Some Marxists, libertarian Marxists, believe that this is a false dichotomy, they argue by creating new socialist forms of social organisation anarchists want to give power to the working class. By giving power to the working class they make it the ruling class, this, they say, is what they mean when they refer to a Socialist State.

a social revolution? There is a widespread anecdote that he told the socialists fighting in 1916 to hold onto their guns because after the rising they may well have to fight against those they had just fought beside. The simple answer is he thought that a national revolution needed to be a social revolution in order to succeed. Ireland couldn't be free until the working class of Ireland was free. And because of that, he felt that a national revolution could lead to a social revolution. Quite clearly the social revolution never happened but it very nearly did.

It is worth remembering that both the influence of Connolly and the part that Labour played in the Irish National Revolution ensured that the Democratic Programme of the Irish Republic, agreed at the first sitting of the first Dáil (Irish Parliament) on January 21st 1919, read:

We declare in the words of the Irish Republican Proclamation the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland...we declare that the nation's sovereignty extends ..[to] all its resources, all the wealth and all the wealth-producing processes within the Nation, ... declare it is the duty of the Nation that every citizen shall have opportunity to spend his or her strength and faculties in the service of the people. In return for willing service, we, in the name of the Republic, declare the right of every citizen to an adequate share of the Nation's labour...

It shall also devolve upon the National Government to seek ... a standard of Social and Industrial Legislation with a view to a general and lasting improvement in the conditions under which the working classes live and labour...

We declare and we desire our country to be ruled in accordance with the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Justice for all...

If this seems radical the draft democratic programme was more so. It included the passage:

It shall be the purpose of the Government to encourage the organisation of the people/citizens into Trade Unions and Co-operative Societies with a view to the control and administration of the industries by the workers engaged in those industries.¹⁶

These passages from one of the founding documents of the Irish Republic give an indication of the revolutionary intentions of many republican activists during the Irish National Revolution, a revolution that involved widespread working class militancy with Soviets being declared in Cork and Limerick and workers frequently seizing their workplaces. All this when 5 years previously the seeds of a socialist movement scarcely existed in Ireland!

This shows how close Ireland came to the Social Revolution that Connolly dreamed of and gave his life for. This revolution can't be achieved by means of a lobby, or a parliament or a coup d'état. This revolution will only be achieved when the ordinary people of the world, us, the working class, get up off our knees and take back what is rightfully ours; namely, everything.

¹⁶ S. Cronin, *Irish Nationalism*, (The Academy Press, 1980), p.322.

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