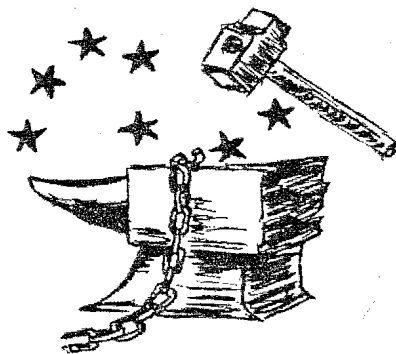


IRISH SOCIALISTS, PARTITION AND THE STRUGGLE IN THE NORTH



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IRELAND UPON THE DISSECTING TABLE

**JAMES
CONNOLLY
ON
ULSTER
&
PARTITION**

A NEW ENLARGED EDITION

THE CORK WORKERS CLUB

60p

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IRISH SOCIALISTS, PARTITION AND THE STRUGGLE IN THE NORTH

Note : This pamphlet forms the Introduction to the Cork Workers' Club historical reprint, IRELAND UPON THE DISSECTING TABLE, which is a collection of James Connolly's writings on Ulster and Partition. Its publication follows wide demand for the Introduction to be published separately as a pamphlet.

Partition has been elevated as never before to a position of dominance on the Irish political stage. Popular violence — nurtured by the injustices and aggravated by the arrogance of Orange Rule — has, over the past three years, swept across the Six Counties, even at times threatening to spill over into the Free State. Stormont has fallen before the vehement assault of a despised people who, having risen from their knees, tasted the potential of their power and unleashed it against their oppressors. The many problems and issues raised and highlighted by this current cycle of popular violence remain for the most part unanswered as yet. To be sure the bourgeoisie as a whole have a clear enough concept of what they want. But what of Irish Socialists who place themselves in the revolutionary camp? Where do they stand on Partition and the present struggle in the North-East? What have they to offer by way of solution, by way of guidance to the people? And how do they see it all, particularly in the context of the overall advance towards the realization of working class power in Ireland?

When the spectre of a Partitioned Ireland first loomed on the political horizon, James Connolly saw with adequate clarity what was at issue, and he opposed it. Why he did so can be readily gleaned from the collection of his writings assembled and arranged in chronological order in this pamphlet. Here, the reader is presented with the greater body of his work pertaining to Ulster. It is not suggested that herein is provided the answers to current problems; the writings of no man can do this on their own. What is offered, however, is a ready insight into the values and considerations that influenced Connolly, as a revolutionary Socialist, in his opposition to Partition. This opposition was based not so much on the abstract principles of an inviolable national territory, as on the real dread that from such a political arrangement the forces of a revolutionary working class movement would emerge the one real loser. To him this was the crucial issue. Partition would not merely introduce a new element of regional division in working class ranks, it would also assure the perpetuation of sectarian divisions already rife within those ranks, especially in Ulster. That is to say, Partition would divide the Irish working class vertically as well as horizontally, and in the process re-enforce the ascendancy of the respective bourgeois ruling factions over the whole. James Connolly did not survive to see

his fears realized, but there are few who could quibble with his prediction that Partition

“would perpetuate in a form aggravated in evil the discords now prevalent, and help the Home Rule and Orange capitalists and clerics to keep their rallying cries before the public as the political watchwords of the day. In short, it would make division more intensive and confusion of ideas more confounded.”

After fifty years of Partition it would be an absurdity to deny it has divided the working class, and has sown a confusion of ideas, aims and parties within working class ranks that mitigate against the emergence of a cohesive and dynamic class consciousness which would normally be expected to ripen into a concerted working class revolutionary effort. Which is to say, fifty years of Partition has amply demonstrated the reality of the impediment it represents to revolutionary Socialist aims in Ireland. Hence, the abolition of Partition becomes a prerequisite to the realization of Socialist objects in Ireland. The whole question is therefore of primary importance to Irish Socialists. One would expect a reasonable consensus of agreement amongst them on it, but instead one finds division. Generally speaking this division of opinion and attitude falls into three distinguishable, though not mutually exclusive categories, and due to the importance of the question they justify some examination.

Firstly, are those who suggest the desirability of removing the Border by peaceful means. That is, the non-revolutionary abolition of Partition on the basis of consent amongst the bourgeoisie. This, they suggest, would lay the foundations for a real class alignment in Irish politics, and would facilitate the natural evolution of the class struggle within the realm of constitutional politics, and be therein resolved. This, of course, is a classical Bernstein position, and finds favour with the Labour Party and its allies.

Secondly, are the more revolutionary orientated sector. As to Partition they are generally opposed to it, but are badly divided on what to do about it. They agree on the desirability of demolishing it by eradicating bourgeois rule on both sides of the Border, but cannot agree on how this is to be achieved. Prior to the current armed struggle, when peaceful agitation held the stage, the lack of any clearcut approach on the part of Socialists did not appear great; it was felt it would be resolved in good time. However, once the guns began to speak in the North the issue became paramount; what were Socialists to do, how were they to act. It would appear that even yet there is no clearcut agreement on those questions.

The situation was clear enough. Imperialism was under attack in the Six Counties; its lackeys in the Free State were in a state of virtual siege as a consequence; where were the revolutionary Socialists? Some took off, presumably to get a more objective perspective from afar. The greater portion of the remainder were either in disarray or bickered over trifles. It was postulated in all solemnity that what was (and still is) happening was not a class war at all, but a sectarian faction fight. Therefore the violence was unacceptable to *true* Socialists; and more

so when people were actually getting killed in the process. Many and varied were the arguments as to why the situation did not possess real revolutionary potential; so much so that one is inclined to hark back to Lenin for a little clarity on the question:

“to imagine that social revolution is conceivable . . . without the revolutionary outbursts of a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without a movement of politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against . . . national and other oppression — to imagine that means *repudiating social revolution*.”

Lenin would surely be surprised to know just how many Socialists do repudiate social revolution on those terms, and in his name at that! As to this question of sectarianism; of course it is present in the current struggle; given the circumstances, to expect otherwise is nothing less than romanticism. But to avoid commitment on the plea that the aims of the violence are sectarian is plain dishonesty. That is just not the case, and the mass of evidence to demonstrate it is accessible to all who care to seek or see it.

More plead they cannot fight imperialism in the North *at this time*, because such a conflict entails the possibility of collision with a section of the working class who are presently under the sway of imperialism. They say we must *first* unite the working class in the North-East before we can justifiably take on imperialism in the area. This is all very nice indeed, but the fact remains, the cause of existing working class divisions emanate from imperialist policies, and will persist for so long as those policies dominate and see fit to perpetuate such division. Therefore, to claim that working class unity must precede the launching of an offensive armed struggle against imperialism in the North-East — even though conditions may objectively favour such a course — is to put the cart before the horse: to say in effect, armed struggle is out completely. This is not the same thing as saying that class unity should not be sought both before and during such a struggle; it is to emphasise that, given favourable conditions, armed struggle must proceed *regardless of the existence of class unity*. In other words, objectively the real basis for class unity in Ireland will exist when the real cause of class disunity has been destroyed.

Many and varied are the remaining quibbles made by this category of Socialists on the question of Partition and the current struggle generally. Some even find it expedient to take a swipe at Connolly, as a means of avoiding a commitment. Connolly, they say, was wrong on this or that point of Irish history. This may well be, but he still stood up to be counted when it was called for, and it is such committed Socialists who lead the people to Socialism.

Finally, are those who (as the Chinese would say) are best described as the “Running dogs of Imperialism” in the Irish Socialist camp. This particular species are dealt with in the following paragraphs.

It has become a fashion of late amongst Socialist sects of a neo-Walkerite persuasion to espouse the “Two Nations” theory by way of

explaining an economic basis and justification for Partition. This "theory", derived from what is grandiosely presented to be the Marxist analysis of Irish history, is being peddled as a startling and new discovery. The plain truth of the matter is, this particular line is old hat to the imperialist propaganda machine in Ireland. Prior to Partition it rested almost exclusively on racist and sectarian arguments; subsequently, the economic argument coupled with that of the separate national consciousness of the Six County Protestants was added for good measure. It is a matter of historical record that imperialism evolved such propositions not in the process of analysing the Irish situation, as is said, but for the sole purpose of rationalising the changing nature of its lordship over Ireland.

The mixture of half truth, racist undertone, religious sectarianism, distorted history, vulgar personal polemic and second-hand British propaganda which go into the making of the current "Two Nations" theory, would require the accomodation of a large volume to unravel; and at that the labour could hardly be justified that would treat with such seriousness the efforts of those who are, for want of a better name, mere run-of-the-mill political eunuchs. There are, however, a few points which should serve to highlight its essential spuriousness.

We are asked to accept that the peculiarities of capitalist development in Ulster, especially throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, gave rise to the emergence of a distinct national entity in that area. The learned works of "honest bourgeois" economists are trotted out to substantiate this. But is it not *slightly* peculiar that such accomplished and dedicated Marxists should so completely ignore the works of Marx and Engels when delving into the problem? Both had more than a passing familiarity with Irish affairs and the development of capitalism therein during the 18th and 19th centuries, and could be expected to have at least perceived the evolution (taking place, we are now led to believe, before their very eyes) of two distinct national bourgeoisies as a consequence of an uneven development in Irish capitalism. It is to be feared that neither Marx nor Engels — or Lenin for that matter — had any inkling of such a phenomenon. Instead, they tended more to what the *neo-Walkerites* now style a "revisionist" and "opportunist" position, in that they saw Ireland as an integral unit politically, socially and economically. It could be, of course, that Marx and Engels read the wrong newspapers when it came to Ireland — this is what is held with respects to Lenin, so as to account for his depiction of Carson and the Orange gang as the "Black Hundred" of Ireland. Or, taking the more charitable view, may not the explanation lie somewhere in the observation made by Engels in 1890.

"Marx and I see ourselves partly to blame for the fact younger writers sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it Unfortunately, however, it happens only too often that people think they have fully understood a theory and can apply it without more ado from the moment they have mastered its main principles, and those even not always correctly. And I cannot

exempt many of the more recent Marxists from this reproach, for the most wonderful rubbish has been produced from this quarter too."

We are told that "Partition arises out of the uneven development of capitalism in Ireland." A pamphlet which attempts to demonstrate this view, *The Economics of Partition*, by the Irish Communist Organisation (I.C.O.) does, however, reflect some rather muddled thinking on the subject. On page two we are told:

"At a time when British merchant adventurers were plundering the world to gather 'primitive accumulation' . . . (16th & 17th centuries), the North was the last stronghold of Celtic, tribal Ireland. With regard to capitalist production it lagged far behind the rest of the country. Then, suddenly, in the 18th century large scale bourgeois production appeared in the North-East. It was based on the British market."

When one takes into account the Jacobean Plantation of Ulster in the *first* decade of the 17th century, following as it did the almost complete disintegration of what remained of the old Irish social system following the battle of Kinsale, it is difficult to perceive just how the North still remained the "last stronghold of Celtic, tribal Ireland" during the 17th century. And even if it did, for the sake of argument, what then were the forces within it which caused "large scale bourgeois production" to "suddenly" appear in the 18th century? When the foregoing tripe was first written, it was explained by the claim that, "It was in fact a section of British capital which engaged in production there. It did not arise out of the contradictions of society in the North-East." Having perceived, perhaps, the metaphysical trend in this line, and, perhaps, having read another bit of Irish history, the I.C.O. decided this was inaccurate after all, and it was "corrected in the second article."

Unfortunately, the second article throws little light on the subject. By then the last stronghold of Celtic, tribal Ireland had been conveniently forgotten and now, on page two, we are told "the basic reason why an industrial capitalism developed in the North but not in the South . . . is the difference in the system of land tenure."

Having discovered the "Ulster Custom" as it applied to landlord-tenant relations and, apparently, also having read *The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry*, by Conrad Gill in the meantime, the I.C.O. now concluded that, "The capitalist class in the North developed gradually, in which (sic) is called a 'natural way.'" (p. 12) The thesis of the "sudden jump" had lost out to that of the "natural way". That is to say, it was now postulated that the economic advantages accruing from the "Ulster Custom" provided the basis for a primitive accumulation, which in turn gave rise, *in the natural way*, to a capitalist class in Ulster which was distinct by virtue of such origins from the capitalist class emerging throughout the remainder of the country.

To explain the alleged dichotomy in Irish capitalist development upon which this *line* rested, the "Peers & Peasants" thesis was advanced. According to this, "The capitalists of the South were

gentlemen — a mere bubble on the surface of society (they) had not clawed their way up from the peasantry and the urban petty-bourgeoisie.” Whilst on the other hand, “In the North the linen industry was carried on by peasant weavers Every peasant weaver was the seed of a manufacturing capitalist. Every two-penny-halfpenny trader was the germ of a merchant capitalist. Over a period of about a century a solid bourgeois class was developed out of these seeds.”(p.11) Some Seeds!

We now have the rather startling suggestion that from the Herculean labours of the Ulster peasantry throughout the 18th century, there came into existence (and simultaneously at that) both merchant capital and capitalist manufacture. And to top it off, it is further submitted that “this capitalism developed out of Irish society, but not on the basis of Irish society.” One may well ask in bewilderment, “Whither Marxism”!

Had the genius who penned this particular line of reasoning even a passing familiarity with the rudiments of Marxism he would, perhaps, have perceived the mixture of metaphysics and Economic Materialism that form the essentials of his rationalization. However, that aside, with respects to this business of the *natural way* of capitalist development, Marx, in his “Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist” (*Capital*, Vol. 1) noted its existence, but quickly brushed it aside with the observation: “The snail’s pace of this method correspond in no way with the commercial requirements of the new world-market that the great discoveries of the end of the 15th century created.” The I.C.O. in their wisdom may well scorn the capitalists “who had not clawed their way up from the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie”; but these were the people possessing the mass of the wealth at that time, and this, on being converted to capital, laid the basis of capitalist manufacture in Ulster, as elsewhere. Marx also underscored this fact in the forementioned chapter of *Capital*. Of course, this is not to deny outright that some peasant weavers became small capitalists during the 18th century in Ulster. But it does reject out of hand, and on the basis of Marxist theory as formulated by Marx, that a linen industry could rise, in Ulster or elsewhere, which had as its fountainhead the peasant weaver. And this being so, it is ludicrous to even suggest that a middle class could evolve in Ulster, which derived an exclusive origin from a peasant-originated linen industry of the 17th and 18th centuries, and which was consequently endowed with a national identity peculiar to itself by virtue of such an exclusiveness, rooted as it was in peasant origins.

When the basis of any thesis can be shown to be spurious, it becomes unnecessary to demolish the whole, part by part. And it is well that this is generally accepted to be so, because on assessing the overall output of the I.C.O. on Partition, the labyrinth of its perverse reasoning is simply fantastic. Indeed, an inescapable conclusion is that its greatest potential lies more in the realm of psychoanalysis than in political analysis. A psychoanalyst may well be able to deduce the

mental derangement or pattern of alienation which bedevils the writer (or writers), and from there proceed to deduce what was actually meant at any given time, as distinct from what was actually written:

How else, for example, is one to approach a pamphlet such as *The Economics of Partition*, especially when its formulators insist that "it is only by its own standards it can be faulted." One would have thought that any analysis purporting to be Marxist could be legitimately faulted on the basis of standards inherent to Marxism. Not so, apparently, with the work of the I.C.O. — they are the "Word" and the "Word" is a law unto itself. And as if this claim to divine knowledge did not proffer sufficient defence against legitimate criticism they, like the Druids they are, added an additional rider. This device endows their rigamarole with a state of perpetual change; which is to say, their analysis of any past historical development is automatically endowed with the capacity of perpetual revision to meet changing needs. A theory of Permanent Analysis which precludes criticism on any given point, since that point enjoys the privilege of being subsequently altered to meet such criticism.

Objectively, the "Two Nations" theory as presently expounded by the I.C.O. is nothing but blatant pro-imperialist propaganda. As early as 1923, the Free State government (for its own purpose to be sure) dealt specifically with this theory in its *Handbook of the Ulster Question*. Chapter Five of this book is headed oddly enough: "The Two Nations Theory"; and is subheaded: "A Favourite Weapon." Herein are outlined all the social, political and economic arguments that are presently being propagated by the I.C.O., but which were then more directly propagated by British imperialism. Irrespective of the counter arguments forwarded by the Irish bourgeoisie in 1923, the fact still remains: if a "theory" currently expounded by self-proclaimed Marxists corresponds in all its details to one previously expounded by British Imperialism, *there's something wrong somewhere*.

Either British Imperialism resorted, over half a century ago, to Marxist theory in its efforts to "understand" the Irish Question, and its relations with Ireland were subsequently determined by such a Marxist analysis; or, the I.C.O., when making their own analysis, were the conscious or subconscious tools of bourgeois ideology; with the result that their "independent" findings corresponded in detail to those already derived by imperialist propagandists. The latter appears the more logical deduction.

A psychoanalyst may well come to the same conclusion on the strength of a veneration for imperialist politics implicit in all I.C.O. writings on Ireland. Occasionally, this even betrays itself openly in expressions of reverential awe. Take for instance their exaltation of the British Tory party.

"The British Tory Party is probably the most remarkable, the most effective, the most intelligent bourgeois political party that ever existed." (*The Birth of Ulster Unionism*, p. 5)

One can hardly be faulted for wondering where all of this leaves Engels, who, when writing to Bebel in 1891, remarked:

"The Tories, because they are asses, can be induced by some outstanding personality, like Disraeli, to strike out boldly from time to time. But when no outstanding personality is available they fall under the sway of asses, as is the case just now." (Marx & Engels: *On Britain*, p. 572)

So much for "the most intelligent bourgeois political party that ever existed." So much for the I.C.O.

Undoubtedly, contradictions within Irish society contributed to the establishment of Partition; but there can be no disputing that the *principal contradiction* in Ireland — the contradiction formed by the domination of Britain over Ireland — determined its establishment. This is the very nub of the question. And to assert that Partition was determined other than by imperialism is to suggest that prior to its setting up the Principal Contradiction in Ireland was other than that formed by the domination of Britain over Ireland. No one is surely going to suggest, for instance, that a conflict between the six Ulster counties and the rest of Ireland resulted in negotiations between them which ended in Partition! And yet, to claim that Partition was the result of a struggle between two national bourgeoisies is to say precisely this. The thing is laughable.

The facts are: Partition emanated from the corridors of British power and was accepted by the two main bourgeois factions in Ireland, not because both wanted it, but because neither wanted the alternatives to it.

To the bourgeois-orientated leadership of Sinn Fein the alternative was a resumption of the I.R.A.-dominated armed struggle, and this would inevitably have led to its radicalization. There was sufficient evidence of this as it was, and the trend could not fail but be accelerated, due to the needs and inner dynamic of the conflict, were that conflict to be protracted further. Given a resumption of the struggle it would no longer be possible to curtail its scope to the mere destruction of the administrative machinery of British rule. Already, more revolutionary factors were coming into being, new social antagonisms were being fermented; and a renewed struggle impregnated by such explosive elements would inevitably tend to engulf the social structure of bourgeois order throughout the country. In short, this was the prime reason why the petty bourgeois leadership of Sinn Fein opted for Partition: and why the bourgeoisie proper, who had hitherto remained aloof from the liberation struggle, cast their weight behind the Pro-Treatyites to crush the I.R.A. who, by its insistence on pursuing the struggle for an *All-Ireland* Republic, brought into sharp relief the very real prospects of a social revolution in Ireland.

As for the Unionist bourgeoisie with its main power base in the North-East; their position was somewhat different. At no time did they seriously seek a Partitionist solution to their claims, but when it was presented to them they had to accept; the alternative, as they saw it, was inclusion in a United *Separatist* Ireland. It is a measure of their political stupidity that their appreciations were so narrow, so oblivious to the changing forms in relations between an imperialist state such as

Britain and its colonial possessions, that they just could not perceive another alternative. From the outset the Unionist bourgeoisie opposed Home Rule, and when that opposition lost its main prop — the House of Lords veto — they stoked the fires of religious sectarianism in the North-East to lend substance to their gambit of a special status for Ulster. They did not want a separate Ulster state; they simply thought that by agitating for and claiming it, Ulster Unionism would be the rock upon which Home Rule perished. As Carson said even as late as 1920:

“The truth of the matter is that there is no alternative to the Union except Separation.”

He could not, and rightly so, accept that Britain would willingly consent to Separation, a situation he clearly saw to correspond with traditional aims of Irish Separatist Revolutionaries. But the truth is, *there was a viable bourgeois alternative*: a relationship between Britain and Ireland which would perpetuate the essentials of British domination in the more subtle form of Neo-Colonialism. True, this is more readily obvious now. But the plain fact is, this was the precise solution proffered by the non-Unionist bourgeoisie in their Home Rule for Ireland proposition. Ulster Unionism, with its political values rooted in classical capitalist concepts of privilege, apparently possessed neither the vision nor the subtlety of intellect to appreciate the potential of such an arrangement. Blinded by its own prejudices and wallowing merrily in the mire of its own sectarian propaganda, Ulster Unionism showed itself incapable of distinguishing between historical fact and its own fictions. And once again, the plain fact was that at *no time* did the non-Unionist bourgeoisie advocate the Repeal of the British Conquest. At *no time* did *any* significant section of the Irish bourgeoisie (Catholic or Protestant) involve itself in a struggle for the Revolutionary aim of total separation. This is historically indisputable, notwithstanding the fact that the Society of United Irishmen was motivated by bourgeois ideological values. As a revolutionary movement operative in the late 18th century, the ideological values of the United Irishmen could hardly be other than bourgeois-dominated; but their movement was not supported by the bourgeoisie, and this is the crucial and indisputable point. The most advanced demand ever forwarded by the Irish bourgeoisie, Catholic or Protestant, was repeal of the Union, which is an entirely different matter from the revolutionary aim of Repeal of the Conquest. Consequently, by insisting on the sanctity of the Union, based as it was on the requirements of a 19th century British capitalism, the Ulster Unionists influenced the imperialist decision to partition Ireland, and by so doing jeopardized in the long term the 20th century interests of British Imperialism in the country as a whole. In this context one could well style the Ulster Unionists, “the bourgeoisie who never grew up.”

On viewing Partition and the complexity of contradictions it brought into play, it becomes clear that there exists sufficient problems to be mastered by Irish Socialists without creating more based on pseudo-historical analysis. James Connolly, when assessing its possible

consequences, saw many of the contradictions, some antagonistic, which could be formed by it between sections of the Irish working class. And there can be no doubt but that these did arise and did seriously disrupt the national unity and efforts of labour.

However, it is equally clear now that Partition has formed other contradictions also, and on being thoroughly understood and exploited these could well offset in the long term many of the disadvantages as seen by Connolly. Antagonistic contradictions within the Six Counties have proved sufficiently potent to bring about the downfall of Stormont, and these are not yet spent. In addition, there are other contradictions, formed by the peculiarities of the relation between Britain and the Six Counties, which apparently make quite vulnerable the overall position of imperialism in Ireland. In this respect the Six Counties is proving itself the Achilles' heel of imperialism in Ireland; and for this reason, if for no other, the present struggle there must be pushed to the limits, because if imperialism can be broken in Ulster then, by such an achievement alone the whole question of imperialist domination in Ireland is thrown automatically into the melting pot of instability and uncertainty. From such a condition could emerge anything, even a United Peoples' Republic of Ireland.

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