

A new book on Northern Ireland has just been published

The State in Northern Ireland

a review by Paddy Hillyard

Introduction

This is a most important book. It achieves two things. First, it provides for the first time a comprehensive critique of traditional Marxist accounts of the Northern Ireland problem. In particular, it suggests that Connolly was incorrect on a number of matters and that formulations which are based on concepts such as the right of nations to self-determination, imperialism and labour aristocracy are inadequate. Second, it presents a new and original analysis of the ways in which the local protestant bourgeoisie gained and held power and how they managed for over 50 years to maintain a cross-cutting class alliance.

The focus throughout is on the state and the analysis breaks new ground because instead of explaining the divisions in the Northern Ireland state as a product of divisions within the local bourgeoisie, the direction of the analysis is altered and it begins from the position that the fundamental purpose of the state is to maintain the conditions for the exploitation of the working class. In the pursuit of this task certain sections of the ruling class will be more favoured economically than others. These sections therefore owe their dominance not to organic internal divisions within the bourgeoisie but from the central purpose of the state.

As the criticisms of existing Marxist formulations are so wide-ranging, it is likely to be a highly controversial book. In any event, it poses a direct challenge to those who justify their present support for the struggle in the North either on notions of self-determination or imperialism or on arguments suggesting that political and ideological relations are simply reflections of a basic material relationship.

Critique of Irish Marxism

The critique of Connolly is substantial. It is argued that his analysis possessed three major deficiencies. To begin with, as a direct consequence of his economistic position on the national question, he failed to take the Unionist position seriously. He considered that Unionist resistance to Home Rule was a sham as it was not motivated

by a distinct class interest. Secondly, his analysis of protestant ideology was imprecise. He, like many others, considered that the underlying ideology around which the ruling class mobilised itself was Orange. But it was far from this. On the contrary, it contained a general hostility to Orangeism and was a blend of anti-establishment and anti-landlord traditions — elements brought to Unionism when Ulster Presbyterians moved in to support the anti-home rule alliance in 1886. Furthermore, it was pro-imperial and anti-nationalist. Thirdly, Connolly misunderstood the relationship between Orangeism and class consciousness. He considered that the former was a mere instrument which the ruling class could mobilise to divert workers' attention from the class struggles while the latter had a material base which would shatter illusions once mobilised. But he failed to perceive the way in which Orangeism and working class consciousness had interpenetrated each other. As a consequence, he did not grasp the fact that militant protestantism whether expressed within the Independent Orange Order or elsewhere, did not threaten Unionist or Orange ideologies.

The principal message which many have derived from Connolly's work over the years is that in the long run the circumstances will allow Protestant workers to see the truth and return to the class struggle. But as the authors drily remark: 'Unfortunately, it has not just been a case of unfavourable circumstances but the wrong message'.

The criticisms of the related concepts of the right of nations to self-determination cannot be supported on the basis of some abstract definition of a nation nor on some moral principle. It can only be supported under very specific conditions. When Marx and Engels argued for Irish self-determination they did so because they considered that it would lend weight to the revolution in Britain. The only general Marxist principle on the national question is that it must always correspond to some other political question which requires independent evaluation. For Lenin it was related to democracy. Democracy had to be established because it provided the best conditions for the class struggle. Some Marxists today conflate socialism and nationalism and hence consider that socialism in Ireland cannot be achieved until the national struggle is completed. But, as the authors emphasise, political struggles can be progressive without a

solution to the question of socialism. In addition, it is not clear what completion has to do with democracy. As they so rightly suggest:

On the side of incompleteness stands democracy for three million in the South, albeit infringed by the 'sense of national grievance', accompanied by restrictions on democracy for a million and a half in the North, the result of the forcible inclusion of a Catholic minority within the state's borders. On the side of completion stands the probability of restrictions on democracy for four and a half million as a consequence of the forcible inclusion of a Protestant minority within a thirty-two county republic.

The third strand of Irish Marxism which they examine critically is the notion of Imperialism. They point out that it is typically used ahistorically, that it is seen to have no specific effects other than violence and repression and that it is reduced to a question of the policies of the ruling class. This usage contrasts sharply with the Marxist-Leninist concept. As developed by Lenin, imperialism was a

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specific stage of capitalist development in which capitalism was internationalised at a specific period and a world economy established in which colonial expression was a major plank. When this concept is applied to Ireland it can be seen that the predominant aspects of Irish politics had already taken shape by the time imperialism arrived. They conclude that:

'Struggles over the status of the North are no more automatically anti-imperialist than crimes against property are automatically anti-capitalist. Nobody to date has shown that the IRA's fight for territorial completion offers any prospect of an end to British imperialism. Most of the evidence points to a different interpretation — that in the long run British imperialism would itself prefer a form of territorial completion'.

The Form of the Northern Ireland State

Their analysis of the birth, life and death of the Northern Ireland state begins with an examination of the various forces which gave the state its unique form. The central thesis is that the state was a product of a union of the strategy of the class alliance pursued by the Unionist bourgeoisie and the strategies of the British ruling class. After the IRA had broken Britain's political and military domination over Ireland, the class alliance within the Unionist bloc needed consolidation in order that it was in a stronger position to respond to the Republicanism. This could only be achieved by conceding a portion of bourgeois power to the Orange section of the working class. One important concession involved conferring official status on the Specials. Thus the strong sectarian and populist flavour which has always been a feature of both the repressive and other apparatuses of the state owes its existence to the need to consolidate Unionist class alliance.

The other element determining the form of the state — the strategy of the British ruling class — was characterised by an intensive conflict between Lloyd George and Churchill which the Unionists used to the full. They secured considerable financial support from the British state much to the fury of the Treasury. This was not all. The Treasury were prevented from establishing the principle of strict accountability over Northern Ireland affairs.

The significance of this class explanation of the distinctive form of the Northern Ireland state clearly contradicts the traditional nationalist and Unionist positions. The nationalist interpretation argues that the role of the British was of primary importance: British imperialism wished to divide Ireland in order to weaken Irish nationalism. The Unionist interpretation argues that Unionist

hostility to a united Ireland and the opposition of nationalists to the Northern regime were the determining forces.

Populism and Anti-populism

The unity of Unionism at the birth of the state was not to last long. By 1925 the authors claim that there were two identifiable groups within the ruling class who were continually in conflict. On the one hand, there was one group whom they labelled 'populist'. This centred around Sir James Craig, John Andrews, the Minister of Labour and Dawson-Bates, the Minister of Home Affairs. The aim of the populists was to build a state in which the relations between Protestant classes were similar to those in the Specials. Sectarian and democratic practice were therefore to the fore. In addition, they supported extensive public expenditure. The other group, which they labelled anti-populist was centred around the Ministers of Finance, Hugh Pollock and John Milne, and supported by the head of the Civil Service, Sir Wilfred Spender. This group wished to develop a state similar to that across the water in which a pre-Keynesian economic policy was dominant. The conflict between the two groups is explained in fascinating detail. In order that the division of the working class was maintained, populist strategies dominated but their excesses were modified by anti-populist pressures. This continual conflict, therefore, contributed greatly to the resilience of the state. The major problem with this part of their analysis is how to reconcile the populists' dominance and their apparent extravagance with public funds with the very low levels of public expenditure which occurred in the interwar years. For example, in social security and housing the levels of public expenditure were lower than in the rest of the United Kingdom. The unemployment insurance scheme was far narrower in application than in Great Britain: it excluded a larger proportion of workers and the contribution conditions were more severe. As a result a far larger proportion of people were forced to seek help from the Poor Law. Expenditure under the Poor Law, however, was considerably lower than in other parts of the United Kingdom.

A similar pattern is seen in housing. Local authorities only provided 15% of all new housing built between the wars compared with 25% in England and Wales. This lack of investment in this period partly explains why Northern Ireland today has one of the worst housing stocks in Europe with one in five of every dwelling unfit to live in.

It could be argued in reply that these examples indicate the influence of anti-populists controlling the excesses of the populists. But there is no evidence to suggest that the populists wished to pursue extravagant public expenditure programmes in the field of welfare.

The subsequent analysis concentrates on examining the transformations which occurred in populism and its opposition during and after the war. Northern Ireland could no longer remain insulated from the economic and political developments in the rest of the United Kingdom. In particular, the development of the welfare state was to have a profound impact on Northern Ireland. It not only threatened to produce substantial disunity within the ruling class, but it encouraged the Protestant masses to reconsider their relationship with the state. Andrews who succeeded Craig in 1940, attempted to pursue a populist line but alienated both anti-populists and the British Treasury. Brooke emerged as the champion of responsible government. But he only succeeded, it is suggested, because some important changes had occurred in anti-populism.

In particular, anti-populism changed from its original status as a non-partisan critical force and had become associated with the Orange Order. It also had become totally opposed to 'Socialistic' British legislation. But most important of all it now accepted the need to promote the division in the working class along Catholic and Protestant lines. Both groups therefore accepted the objective of strengthening the relationship between the Protestant bourgeoisie

and the masses. Despite these changes, Brooke still had to cope with the problem of how to introduce welfarism into Ulster. He succeeded they assert because of an outbreak of ruling class division.

By the late fifties, the Brooke administration was in deep crisis. Unemployment and other social problems were leading to the deflection of the Protestant working class to the Northern Ireland Labour Party. But there was very little room for manoeuvre. To meet the demands of the local bourgeoisie for reduced taxation and more state capital, welfarism and grants to encourage outside firms would be threatened and this would only lead to greater defections. Compromise was the only solution. O'Neillism grew out of this compromise.

It did not emerge, as they cogently argue, as a representative of a modernising fraction of capital. It was because of the continuing strength of traditional capital that Brooke failed. In any case, O'Neil's political concerns were not determined by the need to modernise the economy, but by the loss of dominance over a section of the Protestant working class. Among other things, this required centralisation of initiative at the centre.

Their exposition of the crises of the 1950s concentrates mainly on the protests against unemployment. It is important to note, however, that the discontent was much more widespread. In 1956, for example, there was a large scale protest against the government's proposal to follow Westminster's example and decontrol rents in the private sector. Hundreds of people marched on Stormont to lobby MPs. Even at this point in time, there was concern that the Unionist class alliance was about to crumble. This concern was expressed clearly in a speech by Edward Warnock:

'This, in my view, is the blackest day in the history of our Party for the past 35 years. Two months ago a Unionist Government was invincible. For 35 years successful Unionist administrators have enjoyed in full the confidence of the working people of the city of Belfast . . . Today great masses of the most loyal people of this Province have lost their confidence in this Government. . . The tragedy is that the blow has been struck not by our enemies but by those whose primary duty . . . was to maintain and consolidate the unity of our own people.'

The Collapse

The collapse of the regime is explained in terms of a number of different factors. At the outset they reject the Cameron Commission interpretation that the rise of the civil rights movement, which was

instrumental in the collapse, was a product of a recently expanded Catholic middle class. The interpretation is much more complex. They argue that the empirical evidence does not show a change in the size of the middle class in the post-war period. However, important changes are observable over a much longer period. Between 1911-1971, there was an increase in the proportion of professional and managerial occupations. In addition, this was balanced by an expansion at the other end. These two features they suggest indicate that political factors rather than structural factors explain the mobilisation of the Catholic middle classes in the 1960s. The expansion in the proportion of the unskilled working class also helps to explain why the civil rights movement received such widespread support in the Catholic community.

The major deficiency in this argument is that the census material is very limited and does not permit any assessment of changes in the class structure of either Catholics or Protestants in the post-war period. Reliable comparisons cannot be made principally because there was a very high non-response rate on the religious question in 1971. It is, therefore, too early to dismiss a structural explanation for the mobilisation of the Catholic middle class.

The other important factor in the collapse was British policy. They argue that the Unionist government thought that a transformation had taken place in London-Belfast relations. In order to safeguard their own autonomy they began to dismantle the populist structures of the state. From this moment on the populist class alliance began to crumble and break up. The authors point out, however, that the British had no long term commitments to either integration or unity. Their strategy was one of minimum intervention. Ironically a structured misperception was one of the last nails in the Northern Ireland regime's coffin.

Overall, it is a fascinating and stimulating analysis. In focusing throughout on the State and the key role it played in perpetrating the Protestant bloc, we are taken beyond those economic theories which reduce the politics of crises to conflict between different forms of capital.

The only major criticism of the book is the style. In a number of places the text is obscure. As a result it is not easy to read and some people no doubt will not persevere. This would be regrettable because a book which not only provides an extensive critique of Irish Marxism but also develops a new theory of the State in Northern Ireland needs the widest possible readership. •

