



## **The State in Northern Ireland**

Eoin O'Murchu

It is a sad fact that there is widespread confusion and ignorance, both factual and theoretical, throughout Britain in relation to Ireland. It is also a sad fact that *Marxism Today* has for too long not provided any adequate forum for discussion of an issue that was crucial for the founders of Marxism. Unfortunately, it is a further sad fact that Paddy Hillyard's recent review (January 1980) of *The State in Northern Ireland* by Bew, Gibbon and Patterson does nothing to further understanding among the British labour movement of what is involved in the struggles for democracy and national unity and independence in Ireland, nor to clarify what should be the practical work undertaken by the British labour movement on this question, what demands it should make of the British government.

There is obviously a need for a full and proper theoretical analysis of the Irish struggle, within which 'existing Marxist formulations' may be found to be more compelling than would appear from your reviewer's contemptuous dismissal. But in view of the total theoretical confusion of Hillyard's review, this clearly needs some reply first, even if the more complex discussion is left to a later date.

The very title of the review is itself misleading. The state in Northern Ireland is not and never has been an autonomous entity. And the status of the local Unionist bourgeoisie was not one dictating terms to a benevolent elder brother in Westminster, but the junior partner in a coalition in which British capital dominated and in which Britain's imperial interests — both political

and economic — were paramount. This is the central question. And by not posing it directly as such, Hillyard necessarily erects a set of his own to comfortably knock down in the name of answering Irish Marxism.

For example, he opens by praising Bew and Co's shift of focus in their analysis: '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 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'.

### **Local Bourgeoisie**

But what is the local bourgeoisie? Is it the bourgeoisie of the Six Counties alone, or is it the bourgeoisie of Ireland before partition? Secondly, the traditional Marxist analysis — as advocated by British Marxists like Tommy Jackson<sup>1</sup>, as well as by Irish Marxists like Connolly and Sean Murray, former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Ireland — asserts that the partition of Ireland (which created the Northern Ireland 'state') was not the product of local divisions among the bourgeoisie primarily, but was for the purpose of weakening the whole national struggle of the Irish people, thereby maintaining the special exploitation of Irish producers, both workers and working farmers, by British imperialism.

The Unionists did not set up their own state to exploit 'their' working class; British imperialism set up the Unionist state to

maintain British control over the whole of Ireland. Why, indeed, would they do anything else?

Of course, these political changes did not occur in a vacuum. There were divisions within the Irish bourgeoisie, which corresponded to class interest. The Northern industrial bourgeoisie were closely linked for markets with the British empire, and linked to it for sources of capital also. A considerable role was played also by contracts for the British army and navy.

Similarly, while the Southern bourgeoisie, arriving late on the scene in terms of capital accumulation, sought protection for their home market, a significant element of it was also closely tied with British imperialism for sources of goods. The Irish merchant and commercial bourgeoisie, particularly those associated with the live cattle trade, were wary of anything that might jeopardise those links. Home Rule, of the Free State 'tied up with red, white and blue'<sup>2</sup> that eventually emerged, suited their interests admirably. It was the working people and the newer, more confident entrepreneurs, but particularly the small emerging manufacturers, who wanted more.

And overall, there was the traditional English ruling class in Ireland, the landlords, who also had links with Irish merchant capital. For all the 'Catholic' nature of the Twenty Six Counties, the Protestant Ascendancy still dominate banking and stockbroking in Dublin.

So, Britain had allies who could mobilise some degree of mass force. The consequence was the defeat of the Republic, the establishment of the Free State and of Northern Ireland. This suppression of Irish democracy was carried out by violence, including a pogrom against Catholics in the North. And throughout its history, the Northern state was maintained by violence and is so maintained today.

The defeat of the Republic, the institution of partition, resulted, as Connolly had penetratingly predicted, in a 'carnival of reaction' on both sides of the border. And yet Hillyard can still ask what democracy has to do with it all.

### Connolly

Connolly, of course, comes in for special criticism, necessary in any argument attempting to give a spurious Marxist gloss to defending the partition of Ireland. His position on the national question is denounced as 'economistic', presumably a label employed to evince some Pavlovian reaction, despite the fact that Hillyard himself declares his support for the view that the 'fundamental purpose of the Northern

state is to maintain the conditions for the exploitation of the working class' and nowhere recognises the essential relation of British imperialism's political aims to the foundation of that state.

In contrast to Hillyard's assertion that Connolly failed to take the Unionist position seriously and merely considered it a sham, he in fact recognised the dangers of it, recognised that this was a possible way for Britain to maintain its grip on Ireland. This indeed is hardly surprising since Connolly lived in Belfast, organising the ITGWU during the 1912 riots when Catholics were forced out of the shipyards and closed-shop trade union work only agreements torn up.<sup>3</sup>

Connolly is further accused of being imprecise in his analysis of 'protestant ideology'. Actually, despite Unionist propaganda protestant and unionist are not necessarily synonymous. And Connolly was very precise in his analysis of what Unionism would mean for Irish democracy. But Hillyard goes on to develop this theme by championing the following: 'The underlying ideology around which the ruling class mobilised . . . contained a general hostility to Orangeism and was a blend of anti-establishment and anti-landlord traditions'. But later in the same paragraph, Hillyard accuses Connolly of failing to 'perceive the way in which Orangeism and working class consciousness had interpenetrated each other'.

So, the anti-Catholic riots of 1912, fanned by the hate-filled sectarian speeches of Carson<sup>4</sup> and Bonar Law<sup>5</sup>, were merely expressions of working class consciousness. But who organised the Orange order? Who had founded it? The answer is the landlords.

But perhaps, the reason for Connolly's 'imprecision' was the fact that he understood, whereas Hillyard does not, that the ruling class in Ireland was British imperialism and its local allies, foremost of whom were the Ascendancy landlords. Orangeism was a weapon of division, which subsequently became enshrined as the method of maintaining the British connection.

Connolly is further taken to task for considering Orangeism 'a mere instrument which the ruling class could mobilise to divert workers' attention from the class struggles, while [class consciousness] had a material base which would shatter illusions once mobilised'.

But Orangeism is precisely that. It assures the protestant section of the working class that the catholic section threaten their privileges, such as the privilege to dominate the skilled labour force, and that protestant workers have a common interest with protestant bosses and landlords in making

the 'croppies'<sup>6</sup> lie down. Connolly was certainly right to see that that was a diversion from class struggle. But he did not believe that class consciousness was automatic and mechanical. Class consciousness would have to be worked for through independent working class organisations that would stand up to Orangeism. While Connolly worked to prevent partition becoming a reality, it is fair to assume that today he would in logic agree with a struggle to remove the undemocratic basis without which the Northern state cannot stand: equality without discrimination or sectarianism, without Orangeism. Certainly Irish Marxists have not drawn the principal message of Connolly to be that we should wait and that the light of truth will dawn spontaneously.

### Partition and the national question

Hillyard's convoluted argument in favour of partition becomes more obvious when he faces up to the issue of the right of nations to self-determination. This, he declares, cannot be supported 'on the basis of some abstract definition of a nation nor on some moral principle'. Presumably the abstract definition is Stalin's and the moral principle de Valera's.<sup>7</sup> Hillyard goes on: '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 political question which requires independent evaluation'.

But Marx and Engels did not support Irish freedom *only* because it advanced British democracy, though certainly they pointed out to British workers that their freedom was tied in with the national freedom of the Irish people. They supported the Irish struggle

<sup>1</sup> T A Jackson's *Ireland Her Own* still remains one of the best histories of Ireland available.

<sup>2</sup> The Irish Free State was established by a British Act of Parliament in 1921, in defiance of the Republic ratified by Dail Eireann, the Irish revolutionary assembly, in January 1919. A Republican song of the period refers to David Lloyd George's present of a 'Free State that's tied up with red, white and blue'.

<sup>3</sup> See Desmond Greaves *The Life and Times of James Connolly* London, 1961, Chap. XVI.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Carson, leader of the Unionists during the Home Rule crisis.

<sup>5</sup> A leader of the British Conservatives during 1912.

<sup>6</sup> 'Croppies' a term originally coined to describe rebels of the 1798 period, and later applied to Catholics as sectarian ideology was developed to divide the Irish people on religious lines. It is ironic that the majority of the original Croppies were in fact Protestants.

<sup>7</sup> Eamon de Valera, anti-Treatyite but non-revolutionary leader, was renowned for his adroit understanding of the finer points of principles.

for national freedom also because they saw in it a social struggle against feudalism: it was a democratic struggle in its essence. And it is clumsily mechanical to assert that the national question *must* be linked to some other political question. The reality is that it is. The right of national self-determination existed for Lenin wherever nations existed, but the factors which determine which way that right is exercised are fundamentally ones of democracy. Thus, Lenin (and Stalin) supported the Finnish right to self-determination even though that meant Finland breaking away from the world's first workers' state. In general, however, the Marxist view is that the right is exercised in the light of paramount class interests.

Stalin, indeed, went further in 1925. Then he 'corrected' his earlier pre-war position when the right to self-determination was considered to be part of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. As a consequence of the changes in the international situation and of the October Revolution, the national question had now become a part of the proletarian-socialist revolution. Desmond Greaves, in *Connolly: Socialism and Nationalism* (Wolfe Tone Society, Dublin, 1976) points out that Connolly anticipated this position by asserting that the working class should lead the Irish struggle for national freedom, as the incorruptible inheritors of that fight; and that Connolly, like Lenin, had no intention of letting the revolution stop at that first stage.

Connolly's position has impeccable Marxist antecedents. But modern Irish Marxists do not rely just on quotations from the past. Socialism can only be built in Ireland when the working class has the political and economic democracy to do so. We must have a country to build socialism in. And secondly, though by no means primarily, until the national question is resolved the working class will remain divided and subject to the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie, championing in the south the cause of national unity — though doing little about it — and in the north the cause of protestant supremacy. But the central reason is that the working class, having no interest in exploitation, can inherit uncorrupted the full demand for unity as part of its special class emancipation.

#### Democracy

Hillyard's own view of democracy seems remarkably vague and formal. He quotes with approbation a statement in the Bew et al book which affirms that the existing state of affairs leads only to an undemocratic system in the North to suppress the Catholics, while Irish unity would mean an undemocratic

system throughout Ireland to suppress the Protestants. On this reasoning, one presumes that when Lenin spoke of bourgeois democracy as a dictatorship over the working class he really meant to argue that the bourgeoisie had no democracy either. Laws for the suppression of counter-revolution are not undemocratic, as Bew and Co would seem to say. A united Irish state would have a democratic right to prevent imperialist counter-coups. But the reality is that Irish Marxists see the issue of democracy being tackled at first hand, in the North itself. At its last 17th Congress the Communist Party of Ireland stressed the central role of the struggle for democracy, including a Bill of Rights and the implementation of the demands of the trade union movement's Better Life For All programme.

The struggle for democracy leads inevitably to the raising of the national question because the denial of Irish unity and independence is undemocratic, against the will of the overwhelming majority of the Irish people. And that denial of democracy was carried out by British imperialism.

Hillyard prefers however to imagine that the predominant aspects of Irish politics predate imperialism. While accusing others of ahistoricity, he fails himself to see imperialism as a development of colonialism. It could, to follow Hillyard's logic, be simplistically stated that imperialism was not a factor in British India because the 1857 War of Indian Independence predated imperialism. In reality, Britain's control over Ireland, like its control over India, provided it with an important source for the accumulation of capital, through direct pillage and controlled markets. Such colonialism was indeed decisive in the development of British capital. As that capital grew and consolidated itself, so it reached a higher stage, which Lenin called imperialist. Certainly Lenin, when supporting the Faster Rising, did not dismiss the Irish claims because the essence of them had been made at the time of the French Revolution. Certainly, non-Marxists in Ireland use the term very loosely, but Hillyard delicately avoids quoting the views of the CPI to support his contention, presumably because such quotations would defeat his argument.

It can be seen that in his total failure to recognise the significance of Connolly's analysis, Hillyard has sown the seeds for absolute misrepresentation.

#### The conflict with Unionism

So, the foundation of the Northern Ireland state, effected by the partition of Ireland, is viewed outside the context of the all-Ireland character of the War of Independence and

the British terrorism resorted to to stop it, terrorism that was condemned from the first moments of its formation by the CPGB. Instead, while conceding a role for the British ruling class, Unionism is presented as 'conceding a portion of bourgeois power to the Orange section of the working class'. This amazing historical discovery apparently took place through conferring official status on the Specials. One might just as well argue that the German bourgeoisie conceded a portion of their power to the German working class because Hitler's Stormtroopers comprised significant numbers of workers in their rank and file.

Who organised the Specials and for what end? Why, none other than the landlords, including Brooke. And the purpose? To protect the estates of the Ascendancy, and to intimidate local nationalists from involvement either in the national struggle itself, or in the land-grabbing (which included the burning of landlords' big houses) which broke out in various parts of the country. Thus, sectarianism was deliberately encouraged by British Imperialism and Unionism, from the time of Randolph Churchill<sup>8</sup> in the 1880s, to the role of Wilson<sup>9</sup> in the Belfast pogrom of 1920, to the bitter bigotry of Brooke himself. But this, Hillyard would have us believe, was merely a concession to the working class.

And so, the real conflict within Unionism, between the landlord interests — who dominated right up until the fall of Chichester Clarke and the temporary accession to the long coveted office of shirt-manufacturer Brian Faulkner — and the manufacturing interests (of which Faulkner was a major representative) is ignored altogether. And the tactical questions of how much sectarianism to encourage at any given time — populism or anti-populism, as Hillyard imagines it — assumes precedence.

To attempt a proper analysis of what led to the fall of Stormont, and what the road ahead is now, would stretch this article too far. It is, however, a task that clearly needs to be done. But I hope that I have done enough to show how utterly ill-conceived Hillyard's position is, and how much richer is the Irish Marxists' analysis of the situation in their struggle than Hillyard presents it. D

<sup>8</sup> Basil Brooke, later Lord Brookeborough, Fermanagh landlord and unsurpassed promoter of bigotry.

<sup>9</sup> Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the British Imperial General Staff, executed on the orders of Michael Collins for his part in instigating sectarian anti-Catholic pogroms in Belfast in 1920.

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