

Culture, class, and Connolly

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I am honoured to have been invited to deliver this lecture in the name of so mighty a hero of the Irish nation as James Connolly. Some Irish historians nowadays don't much like the word "hero," which they suspect of having nasty, macho, aggressive, romanticising connotations—these usually being the kind of historians who also see the Famine as a spot of food shortage, and Oliver Cromwell as the best friend Ireland ever had. Mysteriously, however, some heroes for these people are more heroic than others. Martin Luther King was a hero, but Thomas Clark was not. Steve Biko was a hero, but not Wolfe Tone. Sylvia Pankhurst might just about qualify, but certainly not Constance Markievicz. Foreign-bred freedom-fighters may sometimes be heroes, whereas home-grown ones are always butchers and cowards.

Of the three mighty Cs I've been asked to speak on—culture, class, and Connolly—the third is perhaps the least troublesome. As far as class goes, it's a notable Marxist joke (and there aren't many Marxist jokes, notable or otherwise) that just when Marx comes to offer a definition of it in one of his works, the manuscript breaks off. It's rather like never finding out what happens to Harry Potter in the end. An Irish sociologist once remarked that in the United States there was no such thing as class; in Britain there's nothing else; and in Ireland there's class all right, but nobody can work out what it is. As far as culture goes, well, it's said to be the second most complex word in the English language—the most complex being "nature." Anyone who wants to sort out the various meanings of culture could do a lot worse than consult a remarkably cheap, extraordinarily attractive little book called *The Idea of Culture*, written by no less a person than myself.

There are three main senses of culture, the first and most narrow being the arts. A second, rather broader meaning of culture concerns what we might call the whole distinctive web of meanings, values, beliefs, customs, practices and ways of doing things of a particular group of men and women. Culture in this sense is everywhere you look these days: we have deaf culture, police culture, gay culture, Microsoft culture, beach culture, military culture and no doubt Pearse Street culture as well. Then there's a third definition of culture, which denotes a whole way of life, as in Mexican culture or Tasmanian culture—a kind of anthropological use of the term. If the first meaning of culture (the arts) is too narrow, this last one is arguably too wide. Words that can mean everything mean little or nothing.

Now all three of these senses of culture are relevant to the socialist and working-class movements, though some are more relevant than others. To my mind, there are few more precious and honourable traditions in Ireland and Britain than that of working men and women seeking against all the material odds to educate themselves. I was a tutor at Oxford University for thirty years, and none of my students were more devoted than those from Ruskin College, the trade union college at Oxford, where one teaches ex-dockers and miners and shopworkers. There used to be in Britain an outfit known as

the Worker Writers' Association, with which I used to have some small connection; and I once went to Bristol to talk about autobiography to a group of working-class men and women who were trying to commit their own life stories to paper. I gave what I hoped was not too difficult a talk, but when I sat down was dismayed to be asked rather imperiously by an elderly, half-blind woman at the back in her rich West Country accent: "What kind of language is that you're talking?" I was just about to launch into a craven, breast-beating apology for sounding so high-falutin when she added: "Because I'd like to learn that language." She must have been at least in her late seventies. Some time later she published a magnificent autobiography called *Our Joyce*, to which I added a preface. So anyone in the audience who's planning to leap up the moment I sit down and announce self-righteously that you didn't understand a word and you object to being patronised by bloody Sasanach intellectuals, just keep our Joyce steadily in mind.

Now despite the fact that this working-class tradition is in my view one of the most precious and estimable, I don't think that culture in this sense of the word has been especially vital to the socialist and labour movements. However we may honour those mill girls in Victorian Lancashire who rose an hour before work to read Shakespeare together—and there were indeed such women—however we may honour their memory, I don't think that socialism is in the first place about culture in this restricted sense of the term. And one reason it isn't was supplied by Marx: those who monopolise the material means of production, he once wrote, tend to dominate the intellectual means of production as well. Naturally so: for cultural and educational deprivation among working people are structural facts of capitalism and couldn't be radically transformed without a transformation of the system. Culture for capitalism largely means what to do with people when they aren't working—and there are enough greedy profit-seekers on hand to provide false solutions, like the *Sun* and Sky TV.

In the end, to be sure, socialism is all about culture—or, better, leisure. The only good reason for being a socialist is that you can't stand work. Socialism isn't about dignifying labour but abolishing it. This is why that great socialist Oscar Wilde offered his own aristocratic indolence as an image of the liberated future. Just lie on a couch all day in loose crimson garments sipping absinthe with a lily in your hand and be your own communist society. Work, as the wise old adage has it, is the curse of the drinking classes. Equally, the only good reason to be a socialist, or any kind of radical, is to get to the point where you can stop being one. Radicals seek to bring into existence the conditions which will render them unnecessary. The point is to do oneself out of business. If there are still socialists or feminists around in ten years' time, it will be a very sorry situation—and I don't mean that in the sense in which Kevin Myers or Mary Kenny would mean it. We should object to the fact that we have been forced by our rulers to invest so much energy in class, race and gender—distinctions which shouldn't fundamentally be all that important—and long for the day when the idea of racial or gender discrimination will seem to future generations every bit as bizarre and bemusing as burning witches. When that day comes we can just lounge around the place all day in various states of undress and be free to ask some really important questions, such as why are Prince Charles's ears so astonishingly large.

When it comes to culture (in the sense of the arts) in Ireland, those of us who like myself are left-wing literary critics are faced with a grave embarrassment. You see, we spend a lot of our time trying to point out to our conservative opponents that we don't

think there's a direct relation between literature and history. The arts aren't just some sort of passive reflection of the history which produces them. Only so-called vulgar Marxists believe that, and vulgar Marxists are as rare these days as Americans who haven't been abducted by aliens. When it comes to literature and history in Ireland, however, how can one not be a vulgar Marxist? It really is all very embarrassing. I mean, when does the first great national poet emerge? Bang on cue in the era of the United Irishmen (I'm speaking of course of Thomas Moore), who was a close friend of some of the revolutionaries. What do we get when the momentous Act of Union is passed? Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), again both bang on cue. What emerges for the first time as O'Connell's Emancipation movement gets off the ground? Why, nothing less than the first major Catholic novelists, Gerald Griffin and John and Michael Banim. As the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy comes under increasing threat from Catholic nationalism and grows increasingly anxious and persecuted, what do we get? The Protestant gothic novel, from Maturin to Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, full of fantasy, terror, and paranoia, haunted by old crimes and corpses that won't lie down. The death of the destitute, diseased James Clarence Mangan and the ravaging of his whole people in the Great Famine are events which occur cheek by jowl. The final collapse of the Ascendancy and the fall of that Oedipal son of it, Oscar Wilde, are almost simultaneous. And as if all that isn't embarrassing enough, what about the emergence of Ireland's greatest English-language poet right in the midst of the national revival? Or—even worse—the fact that the date of publication of *Ulysses* is also the date of the founding of the Free State? Not to speak of the fact that it's only with the arrival of the Free State that a Catholic rather than Protestant theatre flowers into being, with Behan and later Friel. (It's true that Seán O'Casey was a Protestant, but this was just one of history's regrettable oversights. History doesn't always get things exactly right. It tends to screw things up now and then.) As for Heaney and the Troubles—well, no, I think we've said enough.

When it comes to the second sense of culture—culture as a network of signs, values, meanings, customs, beliefs and so on—it's a very different matter as far as radical movements are concerned. For culture in this sense means what you're prepared to kill for. Or die for. Not many people are prepared to die for Seán O'Casey or Paul Henry, but plenty of people are prepared to die or kill for their culture in this sense of the term—for place, roots, identity, community, kinship, symbol, language, sect, tradition, doctrine, heritage and so on. The importance of culture in this sense is impossible to overestimate. Among other things, it is what beds down power. Any political power which doesn't manage to entwine itself with the roots of people's identities and emotional allegiances simply won't survive. As the greatest of Irish political theorists, Edmund Burke, teaches, we must come to love the law like a father if it is to secure our obedience. The Anglo-Irish Ascendancy governed, sure enough—but they couldn't capture that magical thing which Gramsci calls hegemony, couldn't legitimate their governance in the affections and allegiances of their underlings.

If one looks at the three movements which have dominated the agenda of radical politics for the past decades—revolutionary nationalism, the women's movement and ethnic struggles of one kind or another—a remarkable fact emerges. In all these political currents, culture in this broad sense of the word is absolutely central—as it isn't so central, say, in the industrial struggle. In all three political currents, culture in the sense

of language, value, symbol, identity, tradition, belonging and so on is the very language in which political demands are articulated. It isn't just window dressing, the icing on the cake or an agreeable bonus. Now this is a momentous development, because traditionally speaking, for the rulers themselves, culture meant more or less exactly the opposite of this. Culture meant those fundamental values, shared by all men and women by virtue of their sheer humanity, which cut deeper than the petty things which divided them: class, gender, ethnicity and so on. This was a generous-hearted vision when it was first espoused by the revolutionary middle class; but it is also a deeply mystifying one, which denied the importance of conflict in a way mightily convenient to the rulers themselves. You find just this vision in a lot of liberal-minded Ascendancy thinkers, from Edgeworth and Isaac Butt to Yeats and Augusta Gregory, with their appeal to a common Irishness in contrast with which all real, material or cultural divisions supposedly fade into insignificance. It was convenient to have around the place a kind of tangible embodiment of these rather misty shared values, something you could touch and handle and carry around with you, a kind of portable version of civilisation itself—and this was known as literature. Literature distilled what, fundamentally, you stood for. And since it was portable, you could carry it off to the colonies to introduce the natives to the splendours of civility: child labourers, cholera, imperial genocide, the East India Company, women without votes—that sort of thing.

What has happened in our own time, in other words, is that culture has ceased to be part of the solution and has instead become part of the problem. Rather than acting as a kind of spiritual cement or consensus, it is now the scene of a pitched battle. And nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of revolutionary nationalism—the single most successful radical movement of the modern age, of which this country was of course the twentieth-century pioneer. Someone once remarked that nationalism was the invention of literary men, which might be overstating it a bit; but think of how many poets, writers and critics there were among the executed leaders of 1916. In England, the Romantic poets were perhaps the last moment when culture in the sense of the arts still acted as a political force. By the time of the Victorians, literature has become privatised: it no longer belongs to what one might call the public sphere. This was far from true in Ireland. From the United Irishmen to the Young Irelanders and then on to the Revival, culture in the form of ballad or broadsheet, newspaper or theatre, song or novel, is more political weapon, social ceremony or public ritual than private meditation. In this sense, it follows the pattern of religion, which in Britain means Protestant individualism and in Ireland public ceremony and collective institutions. This is also true to some extent of sexuality, which in the metropolitan nation is becoming increasingly privatised but which in nineteenth-century Ireland remains bound up with questions of dowry, match-making, birth rates, labour power, welfare, emigration, impartible inheritance and so on.

Culture at that time is more social, communal and material in Ireland than it is in Britain. It could still act as a political force. The great O'Connellite rallies were carnivalesque festivals as well as political events, popular spectacles or forms of street theatre in which music, banqueting, insignia, concerts and processions played a key role. It's not for nothing that O'Connell himself was that most theatrical of all professional functionaries, a barrister. Poetry in nineteenth-century Ireland is less inward reflection than incantation, pledge, prophecy, national myth or political rallying-cry. Yeats was not

only poet and playwright but cultural commissar, political organiser, public man of letters, canny operator, activist, rhetorician, man of affairs. Nationalism is the most “spiritual” or “poetic” of political currents, indeed one which is often somewhat cavalier about the dull, prosaic world of political arrangements. One would think twice before putting Patrick Pearse on the sanitation committee (let alone on the executive council of the Boy Scouts).

Finally, what about culture in the third sense, as a whole way of life, as in Mexican or Tasmanian culture?—culture as a matter of social institutions and relations? Raymond Williams writes in *Culture and Society* that working-class culture in this sense

is not proletarian art, or council houses, or a particular use of language; it is rather the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from this . . . The working class, because of its position, has not since the industrial revolution produced a culture in the narrower sense. The culture which it has produced is the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the cooperative movement or a political party. Working-class culture . . . is primarily social (in that it has created institutions) rather than individual (in particular intellectual or imaginative work). When it is considered in context, it can be seen as a very remarkable creative achievement.

It might be worth adding a comment here on the idea of middle-class culture. Do Beethoven and Dostoevsky fall into this category? Well, the only straight answer to that question is yes and no. Yes, in so far as they themselves were products of the middle class, and listening to them or reading them is mainly a middle-class pursuit; no, in the sense that there’s nothing inherently “bourgeois” about listening to Bach or Beethoven. We need to distinguish, in other words, between values which are inherently middle-class—sending your children to private schools, for example—and values which happen at the moment for historical reasons to be mostly in the possession of that class, but can quite easily be extended beyond it.

It’s a striking fact about Connolly, I think, that he appreciated the importance of culture without overinflating it. A nationalist couldn’t but recognise the centrality of culture, in the broad sense of the term; on the other hand, a Marxist couldn’t but recognise the natural and material forces which give shape to culture, unlike those post-modern thinkers today for whom culture goes all the way down. Connolly held these two perspectives in fine balance in his work, and this was merely one of his mighty intellectual achievements. But I don’t want to give an appraisal of his life and work here; instead, I’d like to end by turning from fact to fiction and reading you the final paragraph of my novel *Saints and Scholars*, in which at the outset Connolly miraculously escapes execution and has various adventures in the west of Ireland, but at the end finds himself back against the wall before the firing squad.

The hood trapped the mist against cheekbone and eye socket, the body sagging beneath. The last act, Connolly thought to himself beneath the blindfold; God send I don’t make a balls of it. The Fusiliers’ breath steamed rawly in the drizzle, while McGrath ran back through the execution shed to fetch a rope. Nothing to be done but sit it out. Finish it off so we can get started. Invisible hands trussed him

around the chest; he was about to go on. You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. See this bungled charade through to an end. He heard the officer call the squad to attention and felt the priest and warders withdraw from his side. As the rifles were raised he was already fading, dwindling, fragments of his body flaking away to leave only an image beneath. When the bullets reached him he would disappear entirely into myth, his body nothing but a piece of language, the first cry of the new republic.