

RETHINKING NATIONAL MARXISM

James Connolly and 'Celtic Communism'

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**Antonio
Gramsci
colonialism in
Ireland
Irish labour
history
James Connolly
José Carlos
Mariátegui
syndicalism
'the southern
question'**

Recent discussions of the life and writings of the Irish socialist and nationalist James Connolly have tended to see him as having betrayed Irish socialism through an infatuation with nationalism, while his seminal historical work on Irish labour is seen as 'romanticizing' an imaginary 'Celtic communism'. In this dismissal of Connolly, Irish leftism coincides with a larger left antagonism to what it considers 'identity politics'. This essay argues that far from hypostasizing an essential Irish identity, Connolly sketches an approach to the historical formation of cultural difference, and projects a revolutionary transformation based on the cultural differences that colonial capitalism itself produces. The history of Irish labour is at once constitutive of and marginal to the history of global capitalism, and out of this ambiguous position Connolly traces the radical potential of peripheral working classes. What he proposes, in accord with other 'national Marxist' thinkers from Mariátegui to Fanon or Cabral, is a critique of metropolitan leftism that assumes the primacy of an industrial proletarian subject. Connolly envisages the possibility of revolutionary agencies that emerge out of recalcitrance to, rather than passage through, colonial capitalist modernity.

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I am all too aware in commencing of the shadow of untimeliness that haunts the topic of this essay. In the orthodoxy of the present, neither nationalism nor Marxism has much stock and the term ‘national Marxism’ itself may seem a nostalgic throwback to the heady days of Third World liberation struggles and the romantic identification of western leftists with their possibilities. Some twenty-eight years after the fall of Saigon and nearly fifteen years since the collapse of Eastern European socialism, and in a moment when nationalism across the world has become indissociable from ethnic cleansing and religious fundamentalism, why seek to resurrect the wan spectre of discredited political formations? Indeed, the apparently inexorable progress of globalization and the success of transnational corporations and their international institutions like the World Trade Organization seem to throw into question the efficacy of the nation-state itself as a political institution. Former imperial states like the United States, Europe and Japan function as the instruments of corporations that have long since abandoned any but the most vestigial national commitments, and in the new world order that they police, the power of nation-states to resist corporate demands, to assert the rights of labour, or to protect the environment seems minimal at best. The projects of decolonization undertaken by the Third World liberation movements, Marxist and otherwise, have foundered under the weight of neo-colonial development projects and modernization schemes. In the face of the most extreme ever concentration of wealth in the hands of the global elites, the emancipatory promises of Marxism and nationalism have become at best discredited, at worst risible. To make things worse, the opportunistic ‘war against terrorism’ has begun to erode even the vocabularies of emancipation and insurgency, the darkness of 11 September staining every oppositional endeavour.

Pessimistic as it is, however, this sketch of the failure of the emancipatory *promise* of Marxism and anticolonial nationalism does not necessarily entail the judgement that their analytical and theoretical insights have nothing more of value to tell us. Indeed, neither the dual tendency of capitalism to increasing concentration and transnational operation nor the instrumentality of the state should scarcely surprise us, given that Marx and Engels remarked on this process already in *The Communist Manifesto* (1967: 80–5). Again, the potential for the postcolonial state to become the conduit for neo-colonial capitalism was evident to Frantz Fanon and others as early as 1961 (Fanon 1968: 96–106), as indeed it was to James Connolly – the Irish nationalist and Marxist who is the main subject of this paper – as early as 1900. What has continually been a stumbling block to Marxist analysis is the fact that the development of capitalism has not, as predicted, been met by the emergence of an equally transnational class subject, an international proletariat; and that it has not been the case that revolutionary or emancipatory movements have been most active or most progressive where capitalism has been most

developed. It could in fact be argued that the whole theoretical enterprise of 'western Marxism', and especially its contributions to the theory of ideology or hegemony through Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School, down to contemporary cultural studies, has largely been devoted to understanding the 'failure' of Marxism to produce a revolutionary subjectivity in the industrialized west.

Part of that analysis, impelled initially both by the collapse of internationalism with the advent of the First World War and by the interpellative power of racist imperialism and fascism, has entailed a deep suspicion of nationalism and of ethnic politics, a suspicion captured in contemporary leftist disdain for what it terms 'identity politics'. While there can be no doubt that in numerous ways both nationalism and ethnic identifications have often been mobilized for reactionary ends by the state and by conservative political movements, it is my contention that this disdain for nationalisms has impoverished the left theoretically, not only hampering its understanding of the dynamics of anticolonialism but limiting its understanding of and capacity to work with contemporary social movements. All too often, leftist criticisms of nationalisms and so-called identity politics are hard to distinguish from a generalized liberal cosmopolitanism that forgets its own ethnocentrism. Above all, there is a self-confirming tendency to reduce the complex political and cultural dynamics of anticolonial and anti-racist movements to the singular form that does hypostasize racial or ethnic identification and that is generally the hallmark of a populist or bourgeois ideology.¹ Under these circumstances, the critical analysis of nationalist ideology engages in a psychoanalysis of identity formations that is often naive from a materialist perspective and presumes what it seeks to demonstrate – the atavistic psychic formations of the nationalist. A critique of identity so generalized fails to specify the conditions under which nationalist mobilizations underwrite reactionary social projects, and unhelpfully and formalistically conflates all nationalisms – indeed virtually all social movements – with fascism.² At the same time, regrettably, attempts to defend Marxism and nationalism from the critique of identity formations have tended to fall back on modes of analysis that themselves fail to acknowledge the extent to which the specific geographical and historical conditions of colonial capitalism do demand a rethinking of Marxist categories (see, for example, Dirlik 1994: 328–56).

In reinvoking the category of 'national Marxism', I am attempting to use a quite specific historical conjuncture to critique what I take to be some of the cultural and historical assumptions of western Marxism, rather than to establish national Marxism as a superior and generally valid mode of theorization. Though I do want to suggest some reasons for the importance of attending to analyses of capitalism that emerge from locations that have been regarded as peripheral or backward, in so far as they may lead us to question some fundamental historical and cultural assumptions, my point is that it is

1 I have argued this case more extensively in 'Nationalisms against the state', in Lloyd (1999).

2 See, for example, Eagleton (2000), for a recent instance of this tendency.

3 For further remarks on the scattered nature of such ‘bodies’ of theoretical work, see Spurgeon Thompson’s essay, ‘Gramsci and James Connolly’, in this volume.

4 For an extended discussion of responses to Connolly, see Dobbins (2000). As I was revising the first draft of this essay I was agreeably struck by the close correspondences between our arguments. Those correspondences would be too frequent to bear citation, but I would remark in

in their particularity rather than their transferability that such examples are instructive. Indeed, my usage of the term ‘national Marxism’ is problematic in itself, since I am borrowing it from Latin American theory and applying it principally to an Irish thinker and revolutionary, and subsequently to a set of theoretical propositions whose linkages do not in actuality have the continuity or unity that would form a school or body of thought.³ If there is a theoretical conjuncture to which the term can be appropriated, it is by virtue of structural correlations between the quite dispersed social formations out of which anticolonial Marxisms have emerged, correlations that imply no isomorphism between discrete locations and certainly no unitary temporality to colonial formations. What links James Connolly in Ireland to José Carlos Mariátegui in Peru to Frantz Fanon in Algeria, and them to other anti- or postcolonial Marxists, may be less the occasional positive correspondences between their formulations than the negatively critical circumstance of their common engagement with societies marked by the uneven development characteristic of capitalist colonialism. Again, it is perhaps less the ‘truth’ of their formulations that concerns me, given that Marxist theory is performative rather than positivist, than their critical suggestiveness. From the general historical field that I am designating national Marxism, I hope to draw some suggestions that are effective in the present rather than adequate to the past.

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particular on Gregory Dobbins’s project to rethink the Irish literary revival and associated movements in the context of political thinkers like Connolly.

James Connolly remains an enigmatic and problematic figure in the history of Irish nationalism, less on account of any ambiguities in his theory and practice than because of what he represents.⁴ Born in Edinburgh in 1868 to Irish working-class parents, Connolly was executed by the British for his participation in the 1916 uprising in Dublin. Although some continue to consider his participation in the rising an inexplicable and aberrant betrayal of his socialist principles to the cause of an idealist and even mystical military nationalism, it is clear that throughout his writings Connolly regards socialism and nationalism as inextricable. As early as 1897, he writes in ‘Socialism and nationalism’ sentences that ought to resonate through the history of post-independence Ireland:

5 As Aindriais Ó Cathasaigh points out in his Introduction to *James Connolly: The Lost Writings* (1997: 12), Connolly 1987a and 1987b are far from a genuinely ‘collected works’. It is, however, the most comprehensive collection of his works available.

If you remove the English army to-morrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organization of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain.

England would still rule you . . .

Nationalism without Socialism – without a reorganization of society on the basis of a broader and more developed form of that common property which underlay the social structure of Ancient Erin – is only national recreancy. (Connolly 1987a: 307)⁵

Nor is there any evidence that Connolly considered socialism a secondary adjunct to nationalism, a goal to be delayed until the achievement of independence. In 'Socialism and Irish nationalism', published in the same year, he argues for the integration of the socialist with the national struggle, seeing political emancipation as a means to 'the transference of the means of production from the hands of private owners to those of public bodies responsible to the entire community' (ibid.: 318). Nothing suggests that Connolly in later years abandoned these principles, and he continued to assert on the eve of the rising itself that '[t]he cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of Labour. They cannot be dis severed' (1987b: 175). There is, indeed, considerable evidence that Connolly's influence drew Padraic Pearse, the ideological figurehead of the Irish rising of Easter 1916, to a position more radical than he had occupied, rather than that Connolly suspended his socialism for the sake of a mere political nationalism.⁶ Again, the representation of the Easter Rising as a kind of ritual blood sacrifice on the part of its leaders, one which has flourished since the Northern Irish 'troubles' began in 1969, has obscured not only Connolly's consistent anti-militarism and his insistence on the primacy of non-violent means of action, but also the fact that he considered the rising at least as much an action on the part of socialist forces against an imperial war as an expression of Irish nationalism. Only the collapse of European socialist internationalism at the commencement of the First World War, which dismayed Connolly, could have obscured this motivation of Connolly's actions – his belief in the articulation of an anti-imperialist nationalism with an internationalist Marxism – for his contemporaries.⁷ The current neglect of Connolly, who can be seen as a major theorist of socialist anticolonialism, a significant strategist of guerrilla warfare, and an exemplary 'organic intellectual', has more complex dimensions but is certainly due in part to the anti-republican tendencies of Irish public intellectuals, to the conservatism of post-Independence Irish labour, and to the general anti-nationalist 'cosmopolitanism' of the British left. In Ireland, revisionist historiography, which has tended to see the rising as the expression of a reactionary, even fascistic, nationalism, ironically completes the appropriation of the rising by Arthur Griffith and Sinn Féin, which had initially condemned its leftist republicanism. Postcolonial theory, even in its Irish versions, has generally paid little more than honorific attention to Connolly's work.

An important recent exception to this postcolonial neglect of Connolly has been the work of Robert Young. He remarks that

Connolly was the first leader in a colonized nation to argue for the compatibility of socialism and nationalism, in doing so producing a position which would not only inspire Lenin and through him lead to the Third International, but which would subsequently become the defining characteristic of the triumphant

6 This position is argued persuasively by Ellis (1985: 223–5).

7 For Connolly's response to the outbreak of the war, see 'A continental revolution' (1914) in Connolly (1987b: 38–42); for his analysis of the failure of international socialism as due primarily to 'the divorce between the industrial and political movements of labour', see 'Revolutionary unionism and the war' (ibid.: 60).

tricontinental Marxism of the national liberation movements, including that of Fanon, but also that of Mao, Cabral, and Guevara.

He goes on to argue that Connolly ‘should also rightfully be given central importance within the history of anticolonialism and its theoretical tradition’ (Young 2001: 305–7). At one point in his essay, Young remarks on a characteristic of Fanon’s writings that suggests the addition to those already outlined of another possible reason for Connolly’s neglect. Fanon’s writings, for Young, ‘operate at a schematized and general level that is readily applicable elsewhere’ (ibid.: 302). It is the opposite tendency in Connolly’s work that I want to emphasize in what follows, if at the expense of certain aspects of his internationalist Marxism, although I shall want to argue that it is Connolly’s very particularity that makes him theoretically interesting for our present conjuncture.

Connolly frequently insists on the specificity of his analysis, and the terms of that analysis, to Irish conditions and to the Irish working class. In part, his conviction as to the necessity of this separation of an Irish from a larger British labour movement comes from the bitter experience of the Irish unions in the pre-war period. Time and again, British unions would fail to support Irish strikes, undermining the principle of the sympathetic strike that was so central to the syndicalist strategies of Connolly and of his collaborator Jim Larkin. The British TUC’s condemnation of Larkin that spelt the end of the Dublin lockout of 1913 was only the most notorious and significant of a series of such setbacks that led both Connolly and Larkin through the ITGWU ‘to decolonize labour consciousness, arguing that Irish workers should rely on their own resources and build a movement geared to tackling native conditions’ (O’Connor 1992: 68–9).⁸ For Connolly, the discrepancy between the British and Irish labour organizations was compounded by the fact that the British Labour Party allied itself in parliament with the Irish National Party which ‘openly avows in Ireland its hatred of Socialism and its opposition to Independent Labour representation in this country’. Connolly continues:

This question of presenting Socialism so that it will appeal to the peculiar hereditary instincts and character of the people amongst whom you are operating is one of the first importance to the Socialist and Labour movement. A position, theoretically sound, may fail if expressed in terms unsuited to the apprehension of those to whom you are appealing. For years I fretted at what I considered the foolish attitude of certain Socialist propagandists in Great Britain. Their arguments did not appeal to me, and I did not believe they could appeal to anyone else. Since then I have come to believe that these people, perhaps, understood the psychology of their own countrymen better than I did, and that this question of psychology or mental make-up was of fundamental importance. Since that dawned upon me, I have painstakingly stuck to the endeavour to translate Socialist doctrines into terms understood by the Irish, in or out of Ireland. (‘The solidarity of labour’, in Connolly 1987a: 404)

8 On the relations between Larkin, the ITGWU and British trade unionism, see O’Connor (1992: 70–89) and Ellis (1985: 167–210).

9 On the development of notions of national character in Ireland, see Deane (1997: especially ch.2).

At first reading, these remarks of Connolly would seem to implicate him in a straightforward ethnic psychologizing of a kind that we might associate with nineteenth-century arguments about ‘national character’.⁹ Although it would be surprising if Connolly were exempt from such thinking, I would argue that his position is decisively more complex and far more concerned with a quite materialist understanding of cultural difference. Emmet O’Connor suggests that such arguments were embedded in the syndicalist and cooperative movements of the Irish left at the time and part of attempts to produce a ‘counter-culture’ to the values of British capitalist modernization:

The *Daily Herald’s* assistant editor, W. P. Ryan . . . linked Larkinism with the co-operative commonwealth ideal; hoping that Larkinism, with the co-operative movement of Horace Plunkett and AE, and politico-cultural forces like Sinn Féin and Conradh na Gaeilge, marked a resurgence of the Gaelic primitive communism romanticized by Connolly in *Labour in Irish History*. Larkin had always been attracted to the syndicalist idea of underpinning the socialist struggle with a working-class counter-culture based on collectivist values like sharing and solidarity, and standing in opposition to the bourgeois ethic of possessive individualism. (O’Connor 1992: 88)

In such a context, we can begin to understand Connolly’s apparently paradoxical assertion in the essay just cited that, although the Irish were politically behind the English and Scottish, a separate Irish labour movement would allow for the ‘organization of Irish workers on a more revolutionary basis than was usual in England and Scotland’ (Connolly 1987a: 403). Ireland’s relative backwardness becomes the means to a more revolutionary organization than is possible in the more advanced political culture of Great Britain, precisely because it offers the possibility of an alternative counter-culture. The pivotal element in this direction of Connolly’s theory is also its most easily misconceived; that is, the concept of Gaelic or Celtic communism.

O’Connor refers to this concept somewhat dismissively as ‘romanticized’. There is no doubt that the concept of ‘Celtic communism’ lends itself potentially to an idealizing nationalism that seeks to trace in the past the contours of a benevolent and undegraded national spirit. But Connolly’s deployment of the concept in *Labour and Irish History*, *The Reconquest of Ireland* and elsewhere, though a consistent element of his socialist project, is if anything precisely opposed to such idealizing. Deriving almost certainly from Friedrich Engels’ *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Connolly’s conception of the primitive communism of the Gaelic clans, and of Celtic society in general, cites, like Engels, the historical anthropologist Lewes Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and is specifically seen as a moment in the historical development of early society (Connolly 1987a: 24).¹⁰ Connolly’s purpose

10 Interestingly, it is on primitive communism in Mexico and Peru that Connolly cites Morgan, underlining the coincidence of his views with those of Mariátegui, discussed below.

here is not to imply the permanence of Celtic communism in the present, but to preface his pioneering study of working-class radicalism in Ireland with a refutation of the claims made by both unionists and conservative nationalists as to the aristocratic nature of early Gaelic society and the consequent ‘ancient Irish veneration for the aristocracy’ (ibid.: 20). Connolly is insistent that what are regarded as the national characteristics of the Irish are in fact the products of the material destruction of Irish culture in the course of colonization, reproduced in the literary stereotype of the Irishman, ‘the conquered, robbed, slave-driven, brutalized, demoralized Irishman, the product of generations of landlord and capitalist rule’:

If, with the memory of perennial famines, evictions, jails, hangings, and tenancy-at-will beclouding his brain, he humbled himself before the upper-class, or attached himself like a dog to their personal fortunes, his sycophancy was cited as a manifestation of ‘ancient Irish veneration for the aristocracy,’ and if long-continued insecurity of life begat in him a fierce desire for the ownership of a piece of land to safeguard his loved ones in a system where land was life, this new-born land-hunger was triumphantly trumpeted forth as a proof of the ‘Irish attachment to the principle of private property’. (ibid.: 20–21)

Far from romanticizing national characteristics as innate and essential, Connolly in *Labour and Irish History* is insistent on their material and historical basis and deeply critical of the ideological function of the appeal to such stereotypes within nationalist ideology.¹¹

11 For a discussion of unionist appropriations of Irish stereotypes, see Lloyd (1987: 83–5). Ellis, in an extended discussion of the historical bases for the idea of Celtic communism, also analyses conservative nationalist ideas of early Gaelic society, in particular Eoin MacNeill’s indirect criticisms of Connolly’s position (1985: ch.1, esp. pp. 12–14).

At the same time, however, the claim to the actual existence of Celtic communism is an intrinsic element of Connolly’s analysis of colonial capitalism in Ireland, which sees colonization and the destruction of the Gaelic world as inseparable from the emergence in Ireland of capitalism, and the capitalism espoused by bourgeois nationalists as, therefore, ‘the most foreign thing in Ireland’ (ibid.: 22). The origins of the nationalist bourgeoisie depend accordingly on ‘the rupture with Gaelic tradition’, whereas, as *Labour in Irish History* seeks to demonstrate, the radical, working-class tradition of Irish nationalism has represented the obscured continuity of authentic anticolonialism (ibid.: 23). There can, following Connolly’s argument, be no nationalism, economic or cultural, that is not in the end a critique of capitalism and socialist in its aims. As early as 1898, he had already made the point to language revivalists that:

The chief enemy of a Celtic revival to-day is the crushing force of capitalism which irresistibly destroys all national or racial characteristics, and by sheer stress of its economic preponderance reduces a Galway or a Dublin, a Lithuania or a Warsaw to the level of a mere second-hand imitation of Manchester or Glasgow. (‘The language movement’, in Connolly 1987a: 340)

Throughout his career, Connolly was acutely aware that his socialist republicanism was a battle on several fronts and that a principal antagonist in that struggle was the conservative bourgeois nationalism that did in effect gain ascendancy with the founding of the Irish Free State. In this respect, Connolly foreshadows and anticipates Fanon's revolutionary anticolonial nationalism and its trenchant critique of the limitations of a purely political nationalism.

But if the invocation of Celtic communism is an ideological gesture in the struggle with bourgeois nationalists, does it for Connolly have anything but rhetorical critical force? What, in other words, is the theoretical status of his invocation of the concept when he argues, as he does in *Labour in Irish History*, that the end of the struggle is 'the re-conversion of Ireland to the Gaelic principle of common ownership by a people of their sources of food and maintenance' (Connolly 1987a: 22), even if that re-conversion is to take place 'on the basis of a broader and more developed form' (ibid.: 307)? What is the effective force of the notion of Celtic communism in the consciousness and therefore in the 'counter-culture' of the Irish working classes? Connolly's assessment seems ambiguous. His own historical work is understood as an intervention designed to rewrite a history of which the Irish people have become ignorant – 'the majority of the Irish do not know that their fathers ever knew another system of ownership' (ibid.: 21) – and must therefore overcome a fundamental cultural rupture. Elsewhere, however, Connolly seems to have in mind the more substantial claim that a memory of an alternative system of property persists in the Irish consciousness, particularly among the peasantry, and that it has substantial political effect. Speaking of the possibilities of the cooperative movement in *The Re-Conquest of Ireland*, Connolly locates its appeal in the long-standing custom of 'practical cooperation' that constituted what we might now call the 'moral economy' of the Irish rural poor (ibid.: 257). But beyond the customary practice of cooperation impelled by the need for survival, Connolly makes the stronger claim that Ireland's leaders had not 'ever been able to take from the peasantry the possession of traditions which kept alive in their midst the memory of the common ownership and common control of land by their ancestors' (ibid.: 258). In political terms, then, far from being a backward element in need of radical conscientization, the peasantry can be seen as already possessing, if in inarticulate ways, the counter-cultural consciousness that would be the basis for the syndicalist cooperative commonwealth.

It should be stressed that this memory or consciousness is not for Connolly an effect of any ethnic essence or even of some deep, occult continuity in Irish culture. On the contrary, he is quite emphatic that, without colonization, Irish society would probably have developed its own forms of 'capitalist-landlordism' (ibid.: 28). It is precisely colonization, the violent rupture with a past social organization, which produces the conditions for the politically effective memory of a past formation among the dispossessed:

12 Connolly's ideas are not so anomalous and correspond to, and may have derived from, the work of Ireland's most respected political economist, J. E. Cairnes. Cairnes also remarks on the ways in which conquest interrupted the course of Ireland's 'natural development', suspending the development of a sense of property: 'the natural development of property in the soil was in this manner violently arrested in Ireland, which has accordingly never known peasant proprietorship' (Cairnes 1873: 158–9). Cairnes's friend and fellow economist John Stuart Mill similarly believed that the peculiar forms of Irish land tenure that resulted from colonialism gave rise to an association of property with 'foreign dominion' and 'spoliation' (1979 [1867]: 12). It is probable that Connolly may have known these works through Thomas Kettle, the nationalist professor of economics at the Nationalist University from 1909. For a discussion of Kettle's work and its relation to left-wing nationalism, see Gibbons (1991: 951–2).

But coming as it did in obedience to armed force from without, instead of by the pressure of economic forces from within, the change has been bitterly and justly resented by the vast mass of the Irish people, many of whom still mix with their dreams of liberty longings for a return to the ancient system of land tenure – now organically impossible. (ibid.: 28)

The 'prolonged arrested development' (ibid.: 18) produced by colonization has the contradictory effect of preserving the social formations through which antagonism to colonialism is articulated and transforming them into the bases of a modern social revolution. This is a condition that Connolly seems to think unlikely where capitalism developed internally and 'organically' within a nation.¹²

Colonization, then, becomes the explanation for the conundrum by which a people that is *politically* less advanced may yet be capable of a more revolutionary organization. Connolly is often insistent on the historically greater radicalism of Irish socialists in comparison to their English counterparts and of their importance to the development of socialism in Britain. Speaking of the Chartist period, he remarks that:

A study of the fugitive literature of the movement of that time shows that the working-class Irish exiles were present and active in the ranks of militant labour in numbers out of all proportion to the ratio they bore to the population at large. And always they were the advanced, the least compromising, the most irreconcilable element in the movement. (ibid.: 170)

A number of questions, at once historical and theoretical, are stimulated by Connolly's claims. To what extent is it the case that Irish workers were 'advanced' in relation to their English counterparts, and in what sense might that be so? If there is historical evidence for this claim, which could in any case never be answered definitively, what does it suggest theoretically about relations between the colonized periphery and the metropolitan core? How do Connolly's arguments relate both to the wider assumptions of Irish historiography and, more importantly, to Marxist and anticolonial theory?

In terms of Irish historiography, there are a number of obstacles to answering these questions that oblige us to speculate rather than to pose any decisive empirical answers. Despite Connolly's pioneering attempts in labour history, which challenged further, more detailed studies, we still have relatively few narrative accounts of Irish radicalism and even fewer that engage with 'history from below'. Irish histories are overshadowed by the reactionary nationalism of the Free State and by the relative conservatism of the Labour Party and trade union movement that developed within it. From within these shadows, the narrative of nationalist struggle understands the land war of the late 1880s and the Land Acts that followed not, as Connolly claimed, as 'the

germ out of which a socialisation of land may ultimately develop' (ibid.: 327), but as productive of the small, conservative farmers that constituted the 'nation-building class'. Socialist forces in Ireland are seen, with some justice, to have been engulfed by bourgeois nationalism in the period from the Easter rising to the foundation of the Free State, and in particular by the bloody defeat of left republicanism in the civil war. Given such narrative assumptions, written, as I have argued elsewhere, from within the trajectory of state formation, it is hard to retrieve any sense of a continuous tradition of radical activism in Ireland (see Lloyd 1999: especially ch.5). In the effective suspension of decolonization that took place with the victory of bourgeois nationalism, alternatives fall outside representation. What Connolly essayed – namely the attempt to link the episodic uprisings, socialist experiments, agrarian movements and popular anticolonial organizations, such as the Land League or the Fenians, into a discontinuous but nonetheless articulated subaltern narrative – has not been carried further. Rather, these phenomena have either been subsumed into a history of nationalist politics or, as seems to be surprisingly the case with Fenianism, marginalized. I want to go on to argue that part of the problem may lie in leftist assumptions themselves and suggest that a careful reading of Connolly's writings may still have some valuable lessons. If I seem tentative at this point, it is partly because it is hard to know how to assemble a counter-narrative from the evidence that we do have and partly because I am conscious, as so often in the attempt to locate the alternative in history, of rubbing up against the grain of historical and theoretical verisimilitude. Let me try, nonetheless, to elaborate Connolly's argument through the evidence that is available and through some theoretical configurations in the field of national Marxism. I shall commence with Connolly's theoretical approach to the problem of the specificity of national developments and return at the end of the essay to sketch some counter-possibilities that Connolly seems to have glimpsed in his histories of Irish labour.

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Through *Labour in Irish History* and *The Re-conquest of Ireland*, Connolly seems to be arguing not only for the contingent need for a distinct Irish labour movement but that the conditions for that movement and its revolutionary potentials lie in Ireland's colonial history. The effects of that damaging history include not only the dispossession of the Irish but the survival, in some form, of an antagonism to both feudal and capitalist property forms that derives from a precolonial 'Celtic communism'. The continuous, if interrupted, phenomenon of subaltern resistance to colonialism in Ireland is motivated by an 'Irish character' that is in resistance to those property forms: he speaks of

‘the recoil of that character from the deadly embrace of capitalist English conventionalism’ (Connolly 1987a: 21–2). Unlike the bourgeois nationalist ‘spirit of the nation’, however, that character is an historical class formation, and the definitive struggle for decolonization is at once a struggle against capitalist imperialism and a struggle against ‘the apostate patriotism of the Irish capitalist class’ (ibid.: 23). Nationalism is not a unitary movement, predicated on the suspension of class difference, but a contested site in which competing definitions of the people and antagonistic social projects struggle for hegemony. Connolly would certainly not have been surprised by the realignment of forces that brought the capitalist postcolonial state into being.

Connolly’s rhetoric operates within the field of racialized debates on national character that were in large part impelled by British frustration at the recalcitrance of the Irish to assimilating British principles of government, legality and political economy. What Connolly regards as an important impulse to the Irish revolutionary movement, a native disrespect for private property, is prefaced by a century of British, and Irish nationalist, laments at the apparent uninterest of the Irish in sustained labour, capital accumulation and prudent political economy, and their susceptibility to turbulence, impulsiveness, and ungovernability.¹³ What may appear as a Marxist’s wishful thinking is in fact to a large extent corroborated by this continuous racial discourse on the Celt that is fuelled by the fear of Irish radicalism from the agrarian movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to the Fenianism of the 1860s. Indeed, Connolly’s judgement as to the antagonism of the Irish to private property echoes in unlikely ways that of Lord Bessborough in the 1881 report of a Commission of Inquiry into the workings of the 1870 Land Act:

There has in general survived in him [the Irish tenant] through all vicissitudes, despite the seeming or real veto of the law, in apparent defiance of political economy, a living tradition of possessory right such as belonged in more primitive ages of society to the status of men who tilled the soil. (cited in Ellis 1985: 161)

One of the functions of the discourse on the Celt, as this citation suggests, is to relegate the causes of Irish unrest to the backwardness of Ireland, a backwardness which is to be cured by the interventions of the state and by the imposition of a rational political economy. The apparently progressive distributions of land to the Irish tenantry under Gladstone was indeed such a measure and had some limited success in producing the regime of property on which a more governable Irish society might have rested. But the backwardness of the Celt is not merely economic; it is profoundly psychic, and to that psychic lag is attributed the continuing, ‘turbulent’ resistance of the Celt. From the perspective of the modern state, these are, to echo Matthew Arnold, ‘unpromising’ characteristics.

13 For an excellent review of recent literature on nineteenth-century ‘Celticism’, see Howes (1996: 16–43). I have discussed the relation of this discourse on the Celt to the attempt to impose political economy in Ireland in ‘The memory of hunger’ (Lloyd 1997: 35–44).

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14 See also Marx and Engels (1971: 253–4). On Marx's and Engels' Celticist views of the Irish, see also Howes (1996: 23).

They appear to have seemed no less unpromising to Marx and Engels, who, although they recognized the socialist and internationalist dimensions of Fenianism, lapsed into the stereotypes of Celticism in praising backhandedly 'the revolutionary fire of the Celtic workers' in contrast to 'the restrained force but slowness of the Anglo-Saxons' (Marx, cited in Ellis 1985: 147).¹⁴ Expressed in such terms, both the radical 'passion' of the Irish and their successive failures at insurrection take on a drearily familiar essentialism. Connolly's refusal of such mythologizing and his attempt to sketch a more materialist account of the roots of cultural difference and of the ideological fissures within the nationalist struggle represents a decisive theoretical advance as he seeks to understand not so much the 'failures' of Irish radicalism as its deep continuities. It is here that Connolly's anticolonial Marxism, and perhaps the theoretical work of national Marxism in general, has a significant contribution to make in understanding the material history of cultural difference and its potential political significance. It suggests to us an account of difference that is not essentialist but addresses how colonialism produces and reproduces sets of differences that are in fact relatively stable over time and that have critical effect in the mobilization of anticolonial struggles.¹⁵

15 Cf. Dobbins (2000: 619), where he comments on Connolly's 'greater project of challenging those dimensions of the Irish Revival circumscribed by the politics of identity without abandoning an insistence upon Irish cultural specificity'.

16 I have found no evidence that Mariátegui knew Connolly's work, though during a sojourn in Italy in the early 1920s he did write at least one newspaper article on the Anglo-Irish war and was clearly to some extent aware of events in Ireland. For a brief but useful introduction to Mariátegui's career and importance, see Young (2001: 197–200).

It may help us to elaborate Connolly's argument to compare his formulations with those of the Peruvian national Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui which bear a remarkable similarity conceptually and theoretically. Writing in Peru in the late 1920s, in the context of Peruvian syndicalism, Mariátegui introduces the concept of 'Inca communism'. Within the framework of what Mariátegui acknowledges to be a religious despotism, Inca society 'constructed the most highly-developed and harmonious communistic system' which took the form of an 'agrarian communism' (1971: 29n, 35).¹⁶ Spanish colonialism introduces a rupture into the system of Inca society but does not entirely destroy the communal forms of Indian social life. The notion and practice of 'community' persist despite the feudal and slaveholding forms of Spanish and republican rule, and they persist as the continually mutating forms of survival. The different forms in which Indian communities have evolved 'demonstrate . . . the vitality of the Indian "community", which invariably reacts by modifying its forms of cooperation and association':

The Indian, in spite of one hundred years of republican legislation, has not become an individualist. And this is not because he resists progress, as is claimed by his detractors. Rather, it is because individualism under a feudal system does not find the necessary conditions to gain strength and develop. On the other hand, communism has continued to be the Indian's only defense. Individualism cannot flourish or even exist effectively outside a system of free competition. And the Indian has never felt less free than when he has felt alone.

Therefore, in Indian villages where families are grouped together that have lost the bonds of their ancestral heritage and community work, hardy and stubborn habits of cooperation and solidarity still survive that are the empirical expression of a communistic spirit. The ‘community’ is the instrument of this spirit. When expropriation and redistribution seem about to liquidate the ‘community’, indigenous socialism always finds a way to reject, resist or evade this incursion. Communal work and property are replaced by the cooperation of individuals. (Mariátegui 1971: 57–8)

The community and the communal practices of the Peruvian Indians are not for Mariátegui traditions that derive in any direct fashion from Inca communism and its institutions. On the contrary, he emphasizes that the persistence of communal practices depends on a continual and tactical transformation of their forms in the face of material threats. At the same time, the forms of survival in which that communism lives on do not involve any assimilation of the Indian either to ‘the semi-feudal latifundium’ or to republican modernity. This is not, Mariátegui insists, because of any innate resistance to progress; it is rather its own mode of production of the new that should not be confused with a petrifying traditionalism: ‘the Indian “community” is still a living organism and . . . within the hostile environment that suffocates and deforms it, it spontaneously shows unmistakable potentialities for evolution and development’ (ibid.: 56). The product of colonial damage, the Indian community is nonetheless an obstinate form of living on. And in that living on itself lie the conditions of a further social transformation: the dialectic that Mariátegui describes is not one which would require the dissolution of the forms of the Indian community in order for a more progressive – a modern – communist movement to supplant it. It is a dialectic that produces an *Aufhebung* in which what is preserved is difference rather than identity.

This dialectical swerve away from the trajectory of modernization seems to me to unite Connolly and Mariátegui across their otherwise markedly different locations and histories and to mark their theoretical distance from western Marxism. It is not just that they share in refusing the racializing charge of backwardness that is levelled against the subaltern classes. They also produce an alternative conception of the historical processes of colonization, survival and transformation, recognizing that the antagonist of colonial modernity is not tradition – which both excoriate – but the alternative forms that emerge and persist at its violent interfaces. Crucial to this alternative conception of history is its refusal of the assumption, fundamental to western Marxism, that the proletariat is the subject of history and that the development of revolutionary consciousness proceeds apace with the development of capitalism itself. Since I am aware that this characterization is also something of a caricature, let me try to clarify things by turning to the western Marxist

text that has most often been brought into conjunction with colonial theory, Antonio Gramsci's *The Southern Question*.

The core of 'the southern question' is the relationship between the industrial north and the backward, agrarian south. How can an industrial proletariat draw into its struggle the peasant masses of the south given not only the massive differences between the social conditions of each segment of the working class but also the bourgeois ideology that seizes on the backwardness of the south to racialize its population as 'biologically inferior beings' to whose nature, rather than to capitalism, their underdevelopment can be attributed (Gramsci 1995: 20)? The correspondence between this ideology and the racialization of the Irish or the Peruvian Indian is striking and, citing an earlier article of his own, Gramsci draws on the colonial analogy:

The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies; by emancipating itself from capitalist slavery, the Northern proletariat will emancipate the Southern peasant masses enslaved to the banks and to the parasitic industrialism of the North. The economic and political regeneration of the peasants should not be sought in the division of uncultivated or poorly cultivated lands, but in the solidarity of the industrial proletariat who need, in turn, the solidarity of the peasantry. (ibid.: 16–17)

Within this formulation, the agency of emancipation is the urban, industrial proletariat whose object is the southern peasantry. Gramsci makes this explicit later in the text, claiming that 'in a certain sense, the *Ordine Nuovo* and the Turin communists . . . have positioned the urban proletariat as modern protagonist of Italian history, and therefore of the Southern Question' (ibid.: 44). Crucial to adopting this position is an assessment of the Italian peasantry as a class which echoes Marx's dismissal of the French peasantry in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1954). For Gramsci,

[t]he South can be defined as a great social disintegration. The peasants, who make up the largest part of the population, have no cohesion among themselves . . . Southern peasants are in a perpetual ferment, but as a mass they are unable to give a centralized expression to their aspirations and needs. (ibid.: 36)

As Marx would have put it, the southern peasants 'do not form a class' (1954: 106). Accordingly, for both Marx and Gramsci, the volatility of the peasantry raises the question of leadership, Marx critiquing the coup by which Louis Napoleon appoints himself representative of the peasantry, Gramsci the reactionary southern intellectuals who, in alliance with the landowners, 'represent the keystones of the Southern system' (Gramsci 1995: 36). Against these reactionary 'traditional intellectuals', the urban proletariat stands out as a 'vanguard' or 'avant-garde' precisely by proving itself capable of

abolishing traditional status distinctions and forming itself as a class (ibid.: 34).

But Gramsci's denial to the peasantry in itself of a revolutionary potential is not merely traced back to the effect of its social structures. As becomes evident in the *Prison Notebooks*, which draw out the embryonic arguments of *The Southern Question*, it goes beyond Marx's structural analysis of the peasantry to address the question of the relation of the peasantry to the past. For Gramsci, what survives among the peasantry as a relation to history is 'folklore', which is in turn not so much the survival of an alternative conception of the world as it is 'the residue of traditional conceptions of the world', opposed to 'an historical, dialectical conception of the world' (Gramsci 1971: 34). It belongs, implicitly, to 'the framework of a fossilized and anachronistic culture' (ibid.: 35). It is, for Gramsci, the function of education to shatter this conception of the world and to introduce the child to the conception of work as that which mediates the social and natural worlds, and to the state as embodying 'the human order which historically best enables men to dominate the laws of nature'. Such is, essentially, the 'modern outlook' (ibid.: 34). A complex set of premises is embedded here, but it is hard not to hear in it the resonances of a colonialist relation to the world for which the non-modern is not merely underdeveloped but essentially lacks the capacity for an historical relation to the world. The non-modern is, in a sense, not even a prehistory, since there is nothing in it that would give way to an historical, that is, modern, conception of the world. What must be brought to bear upon it is a process of development that is at once by and for the state.

I have drawn so much on Gramsci here because in a certain sense he is himself a 'national Marxist', everywhere insistent on the necessity for theoretical reflection to address the specific conditions of national development and the forms of hegemony that operate historically within each nation. Indeed, as Gramsci's crucial theoretical work unfolds in the *Prison Notebooks*, the site of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggle is the nation-state and, in particular, what he terms the 'ethical state' – that set of institutions in which the modern subject is formed as political citizen. Gramsci's understanding of the war of manoeuvre that is the struggle for proletarian hegemony is profoundly tied to the modern state form and to the conception of history that underlies it. The crucial difference for a Connolly or a Mariátegui lies in their relation not, strictly speaking, to a national state but to the colonial state; and it is in this fact, I would argue, that their originality as Marxist thinkers is based. For the colonial state is not, for the colonized, the location of history but, as Amílcar Cabral argues much later in the century, the agent of the abolition of their history (Cabral 1979: 142).¹⁷ Yet this appearance of the abolition of history is an appearance, for in the negative dialectic of colonialism the interruption of indigenous development nonetheless preserves certain social formations that live on and transform as

17 'Thus it is understood that imperialist domination, denying to the dominated people their own historical process, necessarily denies their cultural process.'

means of survival. Appearing to the colonizer in their recalcitrance as backward, these formations are, for all that, non-modern effects of modernity, emerging in time with colonial modernization but as its incommensurable alternative. Unsubsumable as the 'prehistory' of colonial capitalism, they are the measure of another history whose radical potential lies not in its fulfilment or overcoming of but in its obliquity to modernity.

3

In a recent essay, 'The two histories of capital', Dipesh Chakrabarty has supplied suggestive terms for comprehending the simultaneous presence in and externality to capitalism that, I would argue, James Connolly perceives to be the potentially productive condition of the Irish working class. Notoriously, theories of modernization, which are generally indissociable from histories of capitalism and of colonialism, assume a trajectory whereby any social formation or element that is recalcitrant to development is necessarily subsumed or annihilated, making way for the subjects and institutions of the modern or capitalist state. For the left, as much as for the right, whatever resists development is trapped in a backwardness that must inevitably, if only gradually, be overcome. In order to be effective, a progressive politics must pass by way of the modernizing force of capitalist technologies and modes of production. Such is, for example, the force of Marx's notorious remarks on the dissolution of the 'Asiatic mode of production' as one of the progressive aspects of British imperialism. Engaging with no less a progressive historian than E. P. Thompson, Chakrabarty characterizes the argument as follows:

[Historicist thought] sees capitalism as a force that encounters historical difference, but encounters it as something external to its own structure. A struggle ensues in this encounter, in the course of which capital eventually cancels out or neutralizes the contingent differences between specific histories. Through however tortuous a process, it converts those specificities into historically diverse vehicles for the spread of its own logic. This logic is ultimately seen not only as single and homogeneous but also as one that unfolds over (historical) time, so that one can indeed produce a narrative of a putatively single capitalism in the familiar 'history-of' genre. Thompson's argument both recognizes and neutralizes difference, it is difficult for it to avoid a stagist view of history. (Chakrabarty 2000: 48)

Against this 'stagist' historicism, which would neutralize difference and for which, no doubt, the industrially advanced British proletariat would inevitably be more politically advanced than its colonial counterparts, Chakrabarty draws from Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value* an alternative conception of historical process. On the one hand, following Marx, there is that history

of capital that is the history of its necessary preconditions – the emergence of ‘free labour’, for example, or, indeed, the primitive accumulation that requires the subordination of the colonized. This Marx refers to as ‘capital’s antecedent “posited by itself”’. As Chakrabarty remarks: ‘This is the universal and necessary history we associate with capital. It forms the backbone of the usual narratives of transition to the capitalist mode of production.’ This history, for brevity’s sake, he terms ‘History 1’. On the other hand, there is ‘History 2’, which consists of those antecedents of capital that it encounters ‘not as antecedents established by itself, not as forms of its own life-process’. The elements of History 2 Chakrabarty understands to be ‘relationships that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of capital’. The social relations of the Gaelic or Inca past would be among those antecedents but so, no less, would be the persistent and non-identical communalism that, as we have suggested, capitalist colonialism itself helps to preserve among the colonized. In this sense, as Chakrabarty stresses, ‘History 2s are thus not pasts separate from capital; they inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital’s own logic’ (2000: 64–5). Formations we might designate as belonging to History 2 are not, then, formations merely awaiting development or destruction, but elements produced differentially in relation to capital. They are what, in terms I have used elsewhere, we might describe as the difference that is produced at the interface between the modern and the non-modern, in and from the encounter between capitalist colonialism and the social formations of the colonized (Lloyd 1999: 45–6).

Chakrabarty’s formulations are helpful in understanding both Connolly’s theoretical insights and a recurrent pattern of contradiction or paradox that is apparent in every attempt to characterize the role of the Irish working classes in the political and economic struggles of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. On the one hand, the Irish poor are seen as a disorganized peasantry or a pre-industrial and largely artisanal urban working class, always backward in social and political development in relation to the English proletariat. When impelled by poverty and dispossession to migrate to English cities, they form – according to figures as politically disparate as Carlyle and Engels – a dissolute and disease-ridden lumpenproletariat that undercuts the wages of the English worker, exacerbates slum conditions, and is unpromising political material. On the other hand, their presence in the most ‘advanced’ social movements is constantly noted – from Bronterre O’Brien, Feargus O’Connor and John Doheny among the Chartists, to the Fenians whom Karl as well as Eleanor Marx thought of as the most revolutionary element of the working class, if for peculiarly essentialist reasons. Eric Hobsbawm’s account of the Irish poor in nineteenth-century Britain is sufficiently typical a condensation of such contradictions to be worth citing at length:

Apart from the language (if they happened no longer to be Irish-speaking), they brought nothing with them which would have enabled them to make more sense of nineteenth-century England or Scotland than of China. They came as members of a pauperized, degraded peasantry whose own native society had been crushed by some centuries of English oppression into fragments of old custom, mutual aid and kinship solidarity, held together by a generically Irish 'way of life' (wakes, songs, etc.), by a hatred of England and by a Catholic priesthood of peasants' sons and brothers . . . Partly because they brought with them the habits of a peasantry on the verge of starvation and discouraged by the Irish landlord system from savings or investment, partly because they entered occupations which least called for industrial routines, they were remarkably slow to adapt themselves to industrial society . . . They initially lived in Liverpool slums as in Munster cabins, and even generations later continued to provide a large part of the inhabitants of those decaying and socially disorganized quarters which so often develop on the periphery of the core of great cities. To the English and Scots, and especially their middle class, they were merely dirty and feckless, undesirable semi-aliens subject to some discrimination. Yet their contribution to nineteenth-century Britain was capital [*sic*]. They provided industry with its mobile vanguard, especially in building and construction into which they have always flocked, and the heavy industries which needed their muscle, their dash and their readiness to work in huge spurts. They provided the British working class with a cutting edge of radicals and revolutionaries, with a body of men and women uncommitted by either tradition or economic success to society as it existed around them. It is no accident that an Irishman, Feargus O'Connor, was the nearest thing to a national leader of Chartism, and another, Bronterre O'Brien, its chief ideologist, that an Irishman wrote 'The Red Flag', the anthem of the British labour movement and the best English working-class novel, *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. (Hobsbawm 1968: 266–7)

At the very least, Hobsbawm's wavering here back and forth between a version of the Irish as backward peasants and a version of them as the 'mobile vanguard' of industry, as the denizens of disorganized slums and as the ideologists of Chartism and Labour, betrays a backhanded ambivalence by no means untypical of a British left tradition regarding its peripheries.¹⁸ But the contradiction between the appearance of backwardness, especially of the Irish inability to either comprehend or adapt to industrial society, and their ubiquity as what Sidney Pollard has called the 'shock troops' of the industrial revolution (cited by Cormac Ó Gráda, in Harris 1994: x), demands a rethinking of the relation between political radicalism and social or economic development as it is generally posed within the historicist logic that Hobsbawm here represents. Such a rethinking may also suggest that grounds which are far from a racially inflected 'romanticism' or wishful nostalgia underlie Connolly's insistence on the specificity of Irish anti-capitalism and his belief in the radical potential of the Irish working classes.

18 For a trenchant attack on that tradition, see James D. Young (1993: esp. 145). Young cites part of this passage from Hobsbawm.

Implicit in the presumption that colonial working classes are backward is a stagist historicism which assumes, severally, that proletarianization and politicization correlate to the degree of industrial development, that the effects of capitalism reach the colonial sphere belatedly in relation to metropolitan developments, and that, not least in Ireland, peripheral colonial economies, in remaining predominantly rural, sustain peasant societies that have local horizons and stagnant, settled populations. Under these conditions, it becomes difficult to imagine the possibility of a colonial working class articulating and acting upon an analysis of modern social and economic conditions, with the result that resistance to capitalism and colonialism tends to be seen as merely reactive and spasmodic, an inarticulate and usually violent upsurge tinged ideologically with nostalgia for illusory better times. Each of the assumptions, assumptions that deeply inform contemporary left and revisionist dismissals of Connolly himself, proves to be questionable both individually and as a set of related conditions for colonial resistance. Rather than representing a belated political formation, the Irish working class may be seen to have emerged as embedded at once in the long history of capitalism's becoming and in the no less drawn out process of resistance to that history. From the perspective of Chakrabarty's 'History 1', it is possible to argue that the formation of the Irish working classes has been coeval with the emergence of colonial capitalism and structural to its very possibility. Historians from Nicholas Canny to Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown in some detail how intricately involved the violent subjugation of Ireland was with the dynamics of Atlantic capitalism and how deeply involved in the early formation of a maritime and mobile proletariat were dispossessed Irish labourers. A series of colonial wars and subsequent settlements, from the Elizabethan and Stuart plantations to the penal era of the eighteenth century, dispossessed and displaced untold numbers of Irish who became the slaves and indentured servants of Virginia and the Caribbean, the labour power that was unleashed to form the navvying, soldiering, gang-labouring, unskilled and semi-skilled workforce that underpinned the rapid and voracious development of mercantile capitalism (see Canny 1979; Linebaugh 1993; Linebaugh and Rediker 1990). Such labour was formative and not peripheral to the development of colonial capitalism, and if the Irish experience was not that of the English industrial revolution but rather one of capitalist underdevelopment, it was nonetheless a crucial experience of the dynamics and effects of capitalism modernity. The rationalization of agriculture, the enclosure of land for tillage or grazing, and the displacement of whole populations, turning Ireland into what Marx would come to call a 'sheep-run' for Britain, supplied both the fodder and the labour power for a developing capitalism. In Ireland, perhaps more than anywhere, all that was solid melted into air.¹⁹ Only a historicism that discounts all that it has not already determined to be the most advanced historical experience could argue otherwise.

19 Declan Kiberd (2001) makes this precocious experience of modernity, rather than backwardness, a crucial element of Irish culture from the late sixteenth century onwards. Luke Gibbons's essay, 'Montage, modernism and the city' (1996), argues for the dislocatory effects of colonial modernity on the consciousness of the colonized, anticipating not only Kiberd's argument but the considerations on the speed of proletarian consciousness by Linebaugh and Rediker (1990).

There is also reason to believe that the mobility of this Irish proletariat, its exploitation in unskilled work and its constant circulation among different forms of manual labour, was more typical than settled industrial labour and that to a later date than is generally assumed. Even in the wake of the industrial revolution and the supposed triumph of mechanical production, brute labour power remains a more persistent and longer-lasting requirement of capitalism than has been allowed. It seems probable, in fact, that the deployment of a labour force in constant displacement and with a high proportion of so-called unskilled, casual and transient workers is more predominant in modern capitalism in general than the traditional Marxist and socialist emphasis on a relatively skilled industrial proletariat might suggest. Irish labour clearly intersected with, and composed a significant proportion of, such labour: historians constantly emphasize the mobility of the Irish migrant labourer, whether in agricultural or in construction, dockwork or canal- and rail-building.²⁰ Ruth-Ann Harris, for example, emphasizes the importance of casual and transitory labour, remarking: 'It may be necessary to revise some earlier assumptions about the nature of the labor force during the early period of industrialization if we accept the fact that it appeared at the time to be extremely transitory' (Harris 1994: 121–2). That transitoriness involved both movement geographically by a migratory and often largely Irish workforce, from region to region and between urban and rural locations, and movement between different kinds of work according to seasonal and local demands (Davis 1991: 100). Though this mobility, and the versatility with which Irish migratory workers adapted to diverse forms of manual work, is often held to have set the Irish communities off from their more settled British or Anglo-American counterparts, if transient labour forms a great part of the workforce in the long history of capitalism the Irish experience must be seen as an intrinsic element of modern social formations, not as a belated hold-over from otherwise outmoded forms of labour.

At the same time, the mobility of such labour is figuratively and literally related to its recalcitrant potentials. As Harris points out, links were often made between 'the restless and migratory spirit . . . of the manufacturing population' and their resistance to 'permanent improvement', an instability that is surely linked less to 'backwardness', as it is coded, than to the lower level of disciplinary intervention that could be imposed upon a mobile workforce. It is in consequence of this, it may be, that there is much evidence 'that the Irish are more given to combination, and are more intractable than the English' in nineteenth-century Britain (Harris 1994: 121, 129; Davis 1991: 106–7). Mobile 'shock troops' of the industrial revolution, the Irish working class in its displacement and circulation persistently furnished elements that made a 'decisive contribution to the formation of an urban proletariat' that was no less unstable and undisciplined (Linebaugh 1993: 290). From the

20 See, for example, Neal (1999: 79–80, 83–4, 99–100), O'Dowd (1991: esp. ch.1–3) and Davis (1991: 110). In this respect, Patrick MacGill's vital narrative of Irish migratory labour in the fields, on the railways, in construction and navvying, may be typical (1999). Unfortunately, few of either the folklore or social history studies of migrant Irish labour spend much time exploring the politicization of this marginal section of the workforce.

perspective of History 1, then, the Irish working class must be seen as an intrinsic if recalcitrant element in the history of capitalism itself: its experience was not that of a peripheral backwardness, registering the effects of colonial capitalism as an echo from afar, but that of direct, often traumatic, participation in its dislocating processes. This fact, difficult as it has always been for left, let alone revisionist, historians to grasp, would demand a profound rethinking of the nature of Irish labour's relation to modernity, and in particular a rethinking of the assumption that a peasantry is necessarily confined to local horizons, subject to the 'idiocy of rural life' – a phrase that even if it fits the petty bourgeois proprietorial conditions of a post-Napoleonic French peasantry, scarcely applies to the dispossessed and migratory rural labourers of colonial or postcolonial Ireland.

Indeed, it is doubtful if the term 'peasantry', in so far as it continues to connote a population settled on the land and confined by local perspectives and traditions, is in any way adequate to describe the historical experience of the rural, let alone the urban, Irish poor. For that history is one that, far from occupying the backwaters of capitalist development, is marked from the early modern period on by the effects of violent social dislocations intrinsic to primitive accumulation, by a turbulent circuit of movements of labour, capital and commodities that launched Irish workers into the 'north Atlantic turbine',²¹ and by some of the earliest administrative, legal and military formations of the modern colonial state. Relatively 'backward' in purely economic terms as they may be judged to have been, the Irish, and in particular the Irish working classes, were always in relation to the most profoundly transformative effects of capitalist development. We should not mistake the constant recalcitrance and frequent open resistance of Irish popular culture to capitalist modernity for an ignorance or innocence with regard to its effects. As with Chakrabarty's History 2, the formations of Irish culture may not have lent themselves to the prehistory of capitalism, but they were intricately involved with its emergence, even as its 'other'. As the long history of successive British attempts to impose 'civility' on Ireland suggests, Irish cultural formations continued to be among the many resistances that capitalist colonialism had to overcome in the course of its becoming and, as Connolly seems to have grasped, the coercive force of that overcoming produced as its differential counterpart a persistent if apparently discontinuous set of counter-modern discourses and practices. This is what Connolly means in indicating that the violent rupture of Irish historical development succeeds in preserving rather than destroying the practice of 'cooperation' among the Irish working class. From this perspective, the elements of History 2 must be understood not as the dead ends of truncated developments, sidelined into the eddies of historical change, but as charged repertoires of 'alternative futures', signalling 'an alternative, non-capitalist form of modernity to the rest of the colonized world' (Dobbins 2000: 630, 634).

21 I borrow this felicitous phrase from Ed Dorn's 1967 poetry collection, *The North Atlantic Turbine*.

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In recent work, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown in great detail the crucial importance of a mobile, maritime proletariat in the formation of revolutionary consciousness and practices from the English revolution to the early nineteenth century, and made specific the connection between mobility and radicalism. Against the common assumption that it is the artisanal working class that furnishes the radical vanguard of proletarian movements, they demonstrate the consistency with which this dislocated and mobile workforce of sailors, navvies, slaves, apprentices and soldiers circulated not only commodities and bodies, but ‘principles’ – principles that were based in the preservation and articulation of social ideals and practices founded in the concept of the ‘commons’ (Linebaugh and Rediker 1990: 234). Within this ‘history of inter-racial co-operation’, the contribution of Irish workers was constant and crucial, as the forms and practices of agrarian revolts in resistance to dispossession and enclosure were transmuted into practices of working-class organization and rebellion:

And although it began in rural settings against enclosures, the movement ought not to be interpreted exclusively as ‘agrarian unrest’. Just as the creation of a landless proletariat is a necessary corollary to the expropriation of land, so the forms and experience of that struggle will move with the wandering, roving proletariat thus created. (ibid.: 238)

Linebaugh and Rediker’s suggestion that the *forms* as much as the memory of past struggles are a crucial part of the formation of counter-modern social movements applies no less to the relation between mobility itself and the radicalization of recalcitrance. As Hobsbawm somewhat backhandedly implied, along with deterritorialization goes a deep disidentification with the state and its institutions, and along with physical transitoriness comes a rich capacity for adaptation and innovation. In addition, far from producing the inveterate localism and fixity of which the lowest orders are often accused, dislocation may be the locus of radicalizing interracial encounters and alliances:

The circulation of working-class experience, especially certain forms of struggle, emerges as another theme, linking urban mobs, slave revolts, shipboard mutinies, agrarian risings, strikes, and prison riots, and the many different kinds of workers who made them – sailors, slaves, spalpeens, coalheavers, dockworkers, and others, many of whom occupied positions of strategic importance in the international division of labor . . . At its most dynamic the eighteenth-century proletariat was often ahead of any fixed consciousness. The changes of geography, language, climate, and relations of family and production were so volatile and sudden that consciousness had to be characterized by a celerity of thought that may be difficult to comprehend to those whose experience has been steadier. (ibid.: 244–5)

22 Keogh (1982: 3) is one such work which seeks to emphasize the 'trade union consciousness' rather than 'a social revolutionary one' among Irish labour leaders at the turn of the twentieth century.

Linebaugh and Rediker's work focuses on the eighteenth-century proletariat and on the North Atlantic and Caribbean circuit, but there is little doubt that the kinds of social process they so intimately detail lasted through the nineteenth century, if in transforming modes, and across the whole field of British colonial capitalism in which the Irish were dispersed as soldiers, felons, labourers, sailors, and servants. Their research obliges us to rethink many of the givens of Irish working-class history, in particular its focus on the emergence of the trade union movement from the perspective of its post-independence conservatism.²² It helps to explain, to the contrary, the success of syndicalist modes of organization that flourished in early twentieth-century Ireland, as among migrant workers in the United States, in ways that were peculiar within the British Isles. It seems clear that there is a relation between syndicalism, in its belief in revolutionary spontaneity and in its focus on creating an undifferentiated working-class movement within the framework of 'one big union', and the transitory and mobile forms of labour characteristic of the Irish experience. It was the mode of organization to which both Connolly and Larkin were devoted, with remarkable if short-lived success, and it seems probable that its specific Irish forms grew out of the longer history of agrarian and anticolonial mobilizations and populist movements like Fenianism. Even after Connolly's execution and Larkin's departure to the United States, syndicalist 'soviets' flourished briefly and with apparent spontaneity in rural and urban Ireland, before being suppressed by the Free State and the more reactionary elements of the IRA (O'Connor 1988: 127–31). Clearly, an extensive effort of research is called for to retrieve this radical tendency within Irish labour from the received ideas of Irish historicism. Nonetheless, it seems probable that Connolly, who in his own life traversed more than once the circuits of the North Atlantic and engaged in the myriad forms of labour that the migratory Irish took on, had reason to assert the radical potential of an Irish working class forged in the crucible of colonial capitalist dislocation. Far from fetishizing some originary Gaelic tradition, fixed in the irrecoverable past, his work begins the crucial task of mapping the interface between colonial modernity and the counter-modern formations that emerge in relation to it – between History 1 and History 2. His versions of 'national Marxism', far from representing a model outmoded by transnationalism, are embedded in the longer history of colonial capitalism and offer the possibility of alternative histories and alternative futures that might sidestep the iron logic of developmental historicism. They offer us a way of thinking the problem of cultural difference without stepping back into the fixity of identity, and an understanding of how, even now, we can draw the possibilities of survival from the continuing toll of damage.

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