



An Irish Revolution without a Revolution

Aidan Beatty

Concordia University

ajbeatty@tcd.ie

Abstract

There is a conventional view among Irish historians that a revolution occurred in that country between the passing of the Third Home Rule Bill of 1912 and the end of the Civil War in 1923. The violence of those years, the collapse in support for the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), the meteoric rise to power of Sinn Féin, a new sense of meritocracy, a greater sense of democracy and a widespread radicalism; all are seen as elements of a major change in Irish politics and life, a 'Revolution.' Drawing on Gramsci's notion of a "revolution without a revolution," this paper seeks to understand the events in Ireland of 1912-23, not as a sudden rupture with the past but as the culmination of a much longer period of (often British-backed) capitalist development in post-Famine Ireland. This paper argues that Irish nationalist politics in the decades before 1912 is better understood via categories such as class, gender, capitalism and the pervasive power of the British state. As such, as well as pursuing a reassessment of the project of Irish historical development and state-building, this paper also seeks a reassessment of the project of (an equally statist) Irish historiography.

Keywords: Ireland, Nationalism, Historiography, Irish Civil War



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There is something of a consensus among Irish historians that a revolution occurred in that country between 1912 and 1923. The violence of those years, the collapse in support for the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), the meteoric rise to power of Sinn Féin, a new sense of meritocracy, a greater sense of democracy and a widespread radicalism; all are seen as elements of a major change in Irish politics and life, a “revolution.” One of the first serious historical works to study the period in these terms was David Fitzpatrick’s *Politics and Irish Life*, a seminal study of local politics in Clare. This county, he argues, underwent a profound social upheaval as, with echoes of Enoch Powell, those lower down the social ladder now “had the whip-hand” over those previously dominant (Fitzpatrick 1998: 49, 62). This collapse in deference seems, for Fitzpatrick, to have been the defining characteristic of the “revolution.” Not dissimilarly, Senia Pašeta has studied the decline in power in the decades before 1918, of an older conservative Catholic middle-class. These people were soon to be replaced, she argues, by emergent, radical lower middle-class Republicans (Pašeta 1999). The controversial Peter Hart has uncontroversially argued that the revolution was the product of competing, incompatible claims on the state and on popular loyalty: “The legitimacy and existence of the British state was directly and forcibly challenged; this challenge was supported by a large proportion of the Irish population; and Irish sovereignty in the 26 counties was ultimately transferred to a new polity and government” (Hart 2002: 18). Sitting somewhat uneasily with these analyses, Conor Kostick’s Marxist study sees the revolution as the intense agitation of workers and peasants’ movements, happening in parallel to the high politics of Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army but generally outside of their control (Kostick 2009).

All of these historians, in different ways, have made important contributions to the scholarly understanding of what was, by any reckoning, a tumultuous period during which Irish society exhibited important changes. This essay, however, proffers a different analysis and chronology of modern Irish history. Reviewing the secondary literature on the Irish revolution, as well as drawing on a smaller amount of primary research, this macro-historical essay argues that it is more profitable to trace a long arc of development from the years after the Famine well into the twentieth century, rather than identifying a rupture in Irish life in the years surrounding the Easter Rising of 1916. There was not a revolution, so much as there was a slow process of capitalist evolution, as post-Famine Ireland was integrated more and more into the capitalist world-system. Irish nationalism was a product of this socio-economic change and the Irish War of Independence was not a rupture with the past, but the culmination of that past.

In the aftermath of the War of Independence (1919-22) and Civil War (1922-23), the nationalist laureate W.B. Yeats spoke of a long gestation of Irish cultural ferment, stretching from the Parnellite schism of the early 1890s up to his own time (Cairns and Richards 1988: 58). More

recently, Patrick Maume's much-cited, if archly empiricist work has taken the notion of a "long gestation" as a framing device for understanding early twentieth-century Irish politics in general (Maume 1999). While Maume is somewhat circumspect as to what was "gestating" during this long gestation, he is right to place an emphasis on long-term change; temporality can be a slippery problem in scholarly analyses of "revolutions." As Immanuel Wallerstein points out, *revolution* is a term that connotes "sudden, dramatic, and extensive change. It emphasizes discontinuity." Yet, when many scholars come to study "revolutions," what they often end up studying are the much slower, long-term social changes that feed into an ostensibly sudden rupture with the past. Wallerstein even goes so far as to query the analytic utility of such a slippery and contradictory term (Wallerstein 2011b). At the very least, the study of a revolution should not be divorced from the formative events of preceding decades.¹

Compounding this, Irish political and economic development, as Denis O'Hearn notes, occurred along a "path dependent process of globalization" (O'Hearn 2001: 15). Declan Kiberd has similarly suggested that Irish nationalists remained trapped within the very codes they sought to oppose (Kiberd 2009: 204).² The Irish revolution, such as it was, was also trapped with certain delineated codes and operated along pre-existing paths. There was a *certain* amount of radicalism, but this was tempered by a coterminous conservatism. As Fitzpatrick, the historian, and Kevin O'Higgins, the 1920s Irish Minister for Justice, have both suggested, this revolution was a markedly conservative event.³ To understand why Ireland had a "conservative revolution" (a potentially oxymoronic term) requires placing the events of 1916-23 in a much broader historical and world-systemic context. What was gestating in the decades before 1912 or 1916 were market-driven economics, private property, an Irish variant of a privatised sense of selfhood; in other words, capitalist modernity. And already, well before 1916, Ireland and Irish identity were markedly affected by the country's status as a supplier of agricultural raw materials for British

¹ In Kostick's *Revolution in Ireland*, his first chapter, on the "Prelude to Revolution," is dated 1913-1917. He begins, however, by tracing the country's socio-economics back to the Act of Union of 1800, thus more than tacitly recognising the slow pace of class-based histories.

² Kiberd says of Gerty McDowell and The Citizen, minor characters in *Ulysses*: "Gerty's problem... is rather like that of the nationalists in 'Cyclops': her rebellion is doomed because it is trapped in the very codes it opposes."

³ Fitzpatrick concludes his analysis by stating: "if revolutions are what happen to wheels, then Ireland underwent a revolution between 1916 and 1922 [in which] social institutions were turned upside down, only to revert to full circle upon the establishment of the Irish Free State." More than fifty years earlier, Kevin O'Higgins famously asserted that "We were probably the most conservative minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution." *Dáil Debates*, ii, 1909 (1 March 1923). Quoted in Laffan(1985).

markets. The dominant currents of early twentieth-century Irish nationalism were products of this capitalist modernity on the periphery⁴ of the British economy, and never broke from its strictures.

The problem with speaking of an “Irish Revolution” in the 1910s and 20s is much the same as that identified by Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (1986) for a roughly contemporary Egypt:

In retrospect, the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 was far from being a revolution in the classic meaning of the term. Its leadership was largely drawn from the native Egyptian elite (albeit from newer, rurally based strata rather than the Ottoman-derived element that had dominated political life in the nineteenth century). It was primarily a political phenomenon, aiming at no socioeconomic transformation of class structure and as a result achieving none (the rural risings of 1919 were quickly repressed and were not repeated); the main economic aspiration of the nationalists was to seek to create a native Egyptian capitalist sector parallel to the foreign one that had dominated the economy to that time). Most important, even its political achievements were limited to a greater measure of (but by no means total) independence from Great Britain, which continued to maintain both military forces in the country and influence over Egyptian affairs. But to many Egyptians who participated in the Revolution of 1919, these limitations were either irrelevant or temporarily overlooked. At the time, Egyptians perceived it as a genuine revolution (Gershoni and Jankowski 1986: 40).

The dynamics identified by Gershoni and Jankowski are conceptually similar to those explored in this paper: the nationalist elite at the head of the Irish “revolution” represented the class interests of a slowly emerging and predominantly rural bourgeoisie, whose economic interests were tied to Ireland’s agrarian status. Like their Egyptian contemporaries they had a marked interest in ensuring that their political revolution never became a socio-economic one. Thus, their “revolution” never seriously challenged the country’s status within the world-economy. In this, Ireland did not buck any postcolonial trends. Perry Anderson has recently argued that in India, for

⁴ Ireland complicates the notions of periphery and semi-periphery in world-systems theory: it displays many characteristics of peripheral economies [a trend toward economic mono-culture, a mostly weak state] whilst also having a higher standard of living and relative democratic freedoms usually seen in core or semi-periphery states.

instance, “the motto of independence has invariably been: what empire has joined, let no man put asunder.” Anderson explains this both by recourse to the material interests of Nehru and the Congress party (“As a party, Congress was controlled by a coalition of rich farmers, traders and urban professionals, in which the weight of its agrarian bosses was greatest, and its policies reflected the interests of these groups, unconcerned with the fate of the poor.”) as well as something more diffuse: an Indian nationalist ideology produced by the colonial encounter itself. He talks of “the umbilical cord attaching the Congress regime of the post-independence years to the arrangements of the Raj” and identifies an “Anglophone provincialism” as being key elements here. As such, Anderson’s broad conclusion is that “There was no overthrow of the Raj, but a transfer of power by it to Congress as its successor” (Anderson 2013: 105-115). My contention is that something very similar happened in Ireland: not only was nationalist discourse heavily determined by the relationship with British rule but the Irish “revolution” was also strongly delimited by the economic and political “umbilical cord” linking Ireland to Britain and the broader world-system. What Ireland experienced in the years orbiting 1916 was “a revolution without a revolution.”

In seeking to understand Italy’s political and economic development, Antonio Gramsci espoused the idea of a “passive revolution,” something he also labelled “revolution without a revolution,” a slow change in the political order that avoids any rupture in social relations (Gramsci 1999: 250).

The “passive” aspect refers to the way challenges may be thwarted so that changes in production relations are accommodated within the current social formation. This might not be done in a “passive” way but refers to the attempt at “revolution” through state intervention or the inclusion of new social groups within the hegemony of a political order but without an expansion of mass control over politics (Morton 2003: 634).

This is a useful heuristic device for historical sociology. Drawing directly on Gramsci, Riley and Desai’s comparative study of Italy and India talks of passive revolution as “a revolutionary model of political organization and revolutionary political techniques... pressed into the service of a conservative modernization project” and “Specific to passive revolutions is the paradoxical combination of conservative aims and revolutionary means.” Moreover, “passive revolutions leave intact, and may even strengthen, the social and political power of pre-existing dominant classes” (Riley and Desai 2007, 816). The Irish events of 1916-22 certainly echo this; a new mass party rapidly came to prominence, armed militias attracted tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of

members, and populist politics were to the fore. Yet, the social order was not drastically altered, agrarian and labor agitation were undercut and ultimately suppressed, and the country's status in the world-economy remained largely the same. It was a (political) revolution without a (social) revolution. But it could be better to go even further, not just to redefine things along the lines of a "passive revolution" but perhaps to abandon the term "revolution" altogether. The "passive" part of Ireland's "passive revolution" highlights why "revolution," with its attendant notions of rupture and drastic change, can be unhelpful for fully understanding the events of 1916-22. Talk of "revolution" helps us to get at the popular mood in Ireland, but also blinds us to the deeper structures of Irish society and of Ireland's global status, which were not only unchanged by the "revolution," but were not seriously threatened.

Indeed, Jackie Smith and Dawn Wiest (2012:11) have recently shown how global structures of power "shape movements and their possibilities for challenging the social order, and the interactions of movements with states and interstate actors then transform the larger set of structures that form the stage on which social conflicts are expressed."⁵ The Irish "revolution" occurred within a broader system of British power that ensured it would remain conservative. Scholars' continuing use of the analytical lens of "revolution" elides these larger questions of global power. Writing with Rachel Kutz-Flamenbaum, Smith (2010: 211-218) has also criticized the manner in which contemporary social science research "focuses on movements within particular states and frames conflicts largely within existing national (or diasporic) boundaries." According to Smith and Kutz-Flamenbaum, "The assumption that conflicts are bounded by national politics blinds the researcher to the ways these conflicts are shaped by a larger world system" and its attendant issues of political power. "Moreover, state-centric approaches ignore the fact that the national state can only exist within a larger system of states and institutions that recognise, legitimate and help to reinforce their authority and control over particular geographic regions."

These are problems familiar to Irish historiography. The scholar of nationalism John Hutchinson (1996) and the British imperial historian Stephen Howe (2000) have both labelled Irish revisionist historians "methodological nationalists," due to the manner in which they avoid comparative analyses and shy away from questioning the historicity and ontological reality of the Irish "nation."⁶ The continued use of the analytic category of "revolution" represents a comparable

⁵ Smith and Wiest are here drawing on Terry Boswell & Christopher Chase-Dunn. *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

⁶ Using the same rhetoric as Howe and Hutchinson, Smith and Kutz-Flamenbam (2010: 218) state that "the 'methodological nationalism' that characterises a considerable amount of the social science literature... indicates a

problem. Viewing the events of 1916-22 as a revolution means accepting a nationalist narrative of a break with the past and a break with Britain. The use of this term imposes a singular narrative on a diverse set of events and thus subtly elides the competing political projects of the period. Many events that have been called a “revolution” are a mix of the radical conservative and all are experienced as a sudden rupture even if the temporal roots are far deeper; The analytic utility of this term, not only for the study of Irish history, is not always clear and as a scholarly tool “revolution” perhaps creates more problems than it solves.

For sure, the War of Independence was a culminating moment in a longer history of social change. But this resulted in a delineated widening of access to elite power rather than in a break with that power. It was a “revolution without a revolution.” Recognising this requires recognising a hidden Ireland, the underlying power dynamics of Irish society, rather than focusing on the conspicuous and the ubiquitous: military engagements, elections, and parliaments. *Who* ruled Ireland underwent some change as the Union was dissolved. *How* Ireland was ruled did not radically change.

In his politically charged account of *The Invention of the White Race*, Theodore Allen offers an intriguing alternative to more conventional chronologies of Irish historical development, in an analysis deserving of serious attention. With broad brush-strokes, Allen dissects the political relations between oppressors and their victims and, in seeking to understand the long-term structural dynamics of these unequal power-relations, he places much emphasis on what he calls “the intermediate social control stratum.” By this, he means an elite cadre within colonized and racially oppressed societies who act as a conduit for the political projects of the dominant colonizer or oppressor. The lack of such an Irish “intermediate social control stratum” was, Allen states, “the central problem of British rule in Ireland for more than two centuries” after the colonizing wave of the sixteenth century (Allen 2012: 70). This changed, however, in the aftermath of the 1798 Rebellion, an event that shook British complacencies in Ireland. The barring of Irish elites from political power “was a luxury that the British ruling class could no longer afford. *The resolution of the crisis would mean nothing less, and nothing more, than a change in the system of British colonial rule in Ireland from racial oppression to national oppression, by the incorporation of the Irish bourgeoisie in the intermediate buffer social control stratum*” (Allen 2012: 92, emphases in original).

In this context, Allen identifies a “détente with the Catholic hierarchy and bourgeoisie that was sprouting between the cracks of Protestant Ascendancy” and suggests that “Catholic Emancipation meant... in short, the formal admittance of propertied Catholics, although on a

tendency of scholarship to remained within the statistical and conceptual confines (prisons?) of the modern national state.”

necessarily subordinate basis, into [Britain's] buffer social control stratum" (Allen 2012: 92-97). Allen's central programmatic claim is that "For the British colonial bourgeoisie, the categorical imperative was maintenance of the legislative union. If forced to it, they would be ready to abandon rule by religio-racial oppression in favour of admitting the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie into a role in the system of social control" (Allen 2012: 92-97). The central thrust of this paper is that accepting a limited set of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie's demands (demands which were usually expressed in the new language of nationalism) meant abandoning the Union but ultimately was also the manner in which that Irish Catholic bourgeoisie were more fully incorporated into the capitalist world-system. The form and content of bourgeois Irish nationalism, I suggest, was heavily determined by this "system of social control" as leading nationalists devoted much energy to damping down anti-systemic politics. For much of the nineteenth century, Irish nationalists had worked to sublimate class tensions into an ostensibly cross-class nationalist project.

In a recent, highly innovative work of historical sociology, Anne Kane, focusing specifically on the Land War (1879-1882), argues that Irish national identity, as we currently understand that term, was in many ways a product of this period of intense agrarian agitation. Even more, she states that it was during this period that ideals of private property acquired a new, hegemonic status in Irish society. As Kane shows, during the earliest stages of the Land War, the demands of smallholding tenants drew on radically different ideas of property ownership than those held contemporaneously by "strong farmers," those with larger farms of fifty acres or more. Broadly speaking, the "strong farmers" believed in private property, the smallholders had not yet been *taught* the rules of private property, and the former looked with suspicion on the radical demands of the latter. By the end of the Land War, however, a certain amount of nationalist solidarity had been built up between small and large-farmers, and the idea of (relatively) inviolable private-property rights had been solidified in Ireland. Looking backwards and forwards at the longer history of Irish agrarianism, Kane concludes that the process that intensified during the Land War culminated with formal independence in 1922 (Kane 2011 1-29). Nationalism, in the Land War as in 1922, was a leading means for sublimating competing class interests within a homogenized (but at heart, bourgeois) vision of the "nation."

The path identified by Kane in the Land War certainly continued to be trudged in later decades. Fergus Campbell, studying the agrarian agitation of the 1890s, picks up on some remarkably familiar tropes. The Irish National League, successor to the Land League (suppressed during the Land War), adopted a constitution that "avoided advocating an agrarian policy that might alienate grazier support." The agrarian agitation of 1898 led to the founding of the United Irish League (UIL), a top-down organisation headed and controlled by William O'Brien, a wealthy

ex-MP. Though particularly active in the more impoverished west, its local leadership tended to come from relatively wealthier and more elite backgrounds. “Unlike the Land League, which the UIL self-consciously emulated in a number of fundamental ways, the new League did not commit serious crimes in order to achieve its objectives.” Nonetheless, the *perceived* radicalism of the UIL worried the IPP leadership, who were concerned that a focus on land redistribution, as Campbell says, “might alienate the support of the wealthy nationalist graziers of east Leinster.” In a process that did much to defang smallholders’ class concerns within the movement, the UIL were effectively integrated into the conservative IPP at the start of the twentieth century (Campbell 2005: 25-43).

Bourgeois Irish nationalism’s class biases continued to manifest themselves in some remarkably similar ways during the “revolution.” Denis O’Hearn (2001) has spoken of how Ireland remained trapped within a certain kind of capitalist path-dependency. This was no less the case in terms of how, even at the height of the supposed revolution, the interests of workers, smallholders and peasants continued to be suppressed in favour of a set of bourgeois interests masquerading as “the national interest.” Already during the Lockout, the bitter labor disputes of 1913, the Irish Republican Brotherhood’s *Irish Freedom* newspaper criticised socialism as a divisive ideology: “we wish, if at all possible, to heal breaches within the nation, to avert the war of class against class at a time when every class must stand together to save the nation, to reassert her independence, to rehabilitate our national life” (“Capital and Labour” 1913). As had long been the case, Irish nationalists continued to define their “nation” in narrow and exclusionary bourgeois terms. P.S. O’Hegarty (1924: 178-180), the co-editor of *Irish Freedom*, was certainly critical of socialists, seeing them as lazy and a threat to the nation, in general denouncing those who, he felt, put individual goals over supposedly shared national interests.

The IRA’s Dan Breen held to a similar view of the Labor candidate who stood against him in the Tipperary constituency during the 1922 general election (Breen: 1924: 254). He would later claim the Labour Party represented “a very poor type of manhood. They are one and all a gang of chancers with no interest in Ireland or the Irish people” (Breen 1966). Even Ernie O’Malley, a leading IRA figure who was not unsympathetic to left-wing politics, was critical of “extreme labour,” claiming “The Volunteer spirit in essentials was hostile to Labour, afraid that any attention to its needs or direction would weaken the one-sided thrust of force” (O’Malley: 1936: 59). On a personal level, he remembers “my annoyance at the convictions of purely revolutionary workers who stood outside the nationalist movement and a certain amusement at their arguments” (O’Malley: 1936: 144). Sinn Féin had already claimed to stand “less for a political party than for the Nation... Believing that the time has arrived when Ireland’s voice for the principle of untrammelled National self-determination should be heard above every interest of party or class,

Sinn Féin will oppose at the Polls every individual candidate who does not accept this principle” (Sinn Féin 1918). In 1921, the Sinn Féin-allied *Cumann Léigheachtaí an Phobhail* [Republican Lecture Group] issued a pamphlet on “the labour problem” which sought to present an image of aloofness from petty ideological squabbles, whilst still claiming strikes were the product of unions’ “selfish” demands for higher wages. The author also claimed “Labour... is like a virulent foreign element in the social system” and “whatever else we are, capitalist or worker or neither, we are all Irishmen interested beyond anything else in the welfare of our common country, and as an Irishman speaking to Irishmen I put it that these industrial conflicts, if continued, will inevitably impair, if not utterly destroy, our common country” (O’Ceileachar 1921).

This kind of thinking, obviously, did not represent the entire gamut of Irish nationalism. Leftist nationalists and republicans had long proved themselves adept at reworking the rhetoric of bourgeois nationalism. James Connolly’s *Labour in Irish History* had already posited the Irish nationalist return to sovereignty not only as a return to a glorious past, but also as the return to a lost Irish communal economics (Connolly 1919). Connolly employed a sense of historical time and a masculinist language of revival familiar to Irish nationalists. He claimed that socialism would be a return to “the Brehon laws of our ancestors” and was “the only principle by which the working classes can in their own turn emerge in the divinity of Freemen, with the right to live as men and not as mere profit-making machines for the service of others” (Markievicz 1925). Similarly, the Labour Party’s organ *The Watchword of Labour* drew on nationalist rhetoric when, during the War of Independence, it denounced the right-leaning *Irish Independent* as “Connolly’s Murderers” and “journalistic supporters of British rule in Ireland” (“Connolly’s Murderers Attack ‘Watchword,’” 1919).⁷ In his study of socialist republicanism, Richard English devotes considerable attention to the contradictions inherent in left-wing nationalism, particularly the degree to which socialism, an ideology privileging the interests of the working class, sits uneasily with the cross-class unity ostensibly inherent to nationalism and Irish republicanism (English 1994). This is not inaccurate. Yet, it should also be said that the far less discussed, but far more prevalent “capitalist nationalism,” by far the stronger tendency within pre-Treaty Sinn Féin,⁸ was also riddled with contradictions; it sought to promote an economic system based on individual self-interest but alongside a political system based on a supposed cross-class solidarity. During all this tumult, and as leftist ideas gained increased traction, the very real danger with socialist republicans was that they might expose these capitalist contradictions. Thus, leftists would have to be suppressed and

⁷ In the aftermath of the Easter Rising, the *Independent* infamously called for Connolly’s quick execution.

⁸ “...characteristic of the party was a vote in the Naas Sinn Féin club on “Capital versus Labour from the Sinn Féin point of view.” Most of those present voted in favour of capital (Laffan 1999: 257).

their politics and concerns blocked by, and from, the harmonious narrative of Irish nationalism's fraternal unity. There would be no social or economic revolution.

The denunciations and dismissive attitudes of Breen or O'Hegarty reflected the more concrete actions taken against those who, in the midst of the crisis, seized land, went on strike, or formed soviets. A Sinn Féin manifesto condemning a spate of land seizures in Kerry, signed by leading party members Piaras Béaslaí, Fionán Lynch and Austin Stack, declared that "The present time – when the Irish people are locked in a life and death struggle for freedom... is ill-chosen for the stirring up of strife amongst our fellow countrymen." Instead, signposting the later claims of post-1922 Irish politicians to be above petty ideological politics, the manifesto pushed for social politics to be fully removed from the nationalist agenda. "All our energies must be directed towards clearing out—not the occupier of this or that piece of land—but the foreigner who holds the Nation in his grip" (Sinn Féin 1920). Similarly, Art O'Connor, acting minister for agriculture, when intervening in a land dispute in Kerry in early 1920 felt that "the people confused license with liberty." As Laffan says, "his response was worthy of a Dublin Castle official" (1999: 315-316). Yet, even if land seizures and labor actions were never as radical as they might have appeared, there was widespread fear of them. As one official Dáil report concluded:

All this was a grave menace to the Republic. The mind of the people was being diverted from the struggle for freedom by a class war, and there was a likelihood that this class war might be carried into the ranks of the Republican Army itself, which was drawn in the main from the agricultural population and was largely officered by farmers' sons (Laffan: 1999: 315)

Conor Kostick, in his work on *Revolution in Ireland*, has successfully recovered the voices of those involved in land seizures and strikes. His account steps out of more conventional understandings of the War of Independence and Civil War, highlighting the serious ideological struggles that marked quotidian politics at this time. His work, however, is not without its problems. His claim that there was a "deep radicalisation" of the Irish working class between 1917 and 1923 probably overstates the depth of this change (Kostick 2009: 25). He relies on an essentially Leninist set of arguments to explain why this ostensibly radicalised working class did not prove more successful. A properly socialist vanguard, he argues, could have led the workers to victory (Kostick 2009: 47). The leaders of the Irish labor movement, Kostick says, had "no desire to play the role of Lenin or Trosky" (Kostick 2009: 150) and "the appearance of a Bolshevik-style party in Ireland had been smothered in the vital years of 1918 to 1920 more by the apparent radicalism of the labour leaders

than as a result of any structural considerations” (Kostick 2009: 157). This, of course, is to presume that the rank-and-file of the labor movement wanted a Bolshevik-style revolution, of which there is scant evidence. In fact, from the Land War onwards, conservative notions of private property had become increasingly dominant across rural Ireland. Timothy McMahon, for instance, has shown how a desire for private land-ownership among those “near the bottom of the social ladder” was part of the “rising expectations” of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Ireland (McMahon 2010). And Donald Sassoon, in his panoramic history of the European Left has critiqued the kind of analysis in which Kostick engages, which tends to ignore deeper (and more politically awkward) structural questions in favor of the simpler suggestion that for revolutions to succeed, all that is needed are “good and consistent socialists.” (Sassoon 2010: 63) Against Kostick, and for precisely structural reasons, it is strongly questionable whether rural Ireland was genuinely ripe for a Bolshevik-style revolution.

Already as early as de Valera’s electoral victory in 1917, the Catholic clergy (not usually known for their radicalism) had begun to swing behind Sinn Féin.⁹ Kostick astutely notes that the First Dáil’s “radical stance with respect to Britain was accompanied by an outlook that in many other respects was conservative and, above all, Catholic” (Kostick 2009: 50). Moreover, he identifies Sinn Féin’s “philosophy of sublimating social differences in their model of an Irish nation” (Kostick 2009: 69). A major concern of this nationalist elite was to prevent any kind of substantive change in the social or economic order. Just as the word “nation” serves to hide a number of competing concerns, so also “revolution” imposes a singular narrative on a diverse set of events. Kostick argues that it is “clear that nationalist leaders such as Griffith and Collins were dealing both with opposition from Britain *and* aspirations from below which they saw as destabilising a future Irish society” (Kostick 2009: 5). What Wallerstein (2011b) identifies in the French Revolution, that there were actually two revolutions (one bourgeois and one anti-systemic), could also be tentatively applied to Ireland, with the important modification that the “anti-systemic” forces remained quite weak and the bourgeois “revolutionaries” were dedicated to conserving the prevailing socio-economic order.

As agrarian agitation increased during the War of Independence, prominent landowners flocked to the Republicans seeking protection. Sinn Féin, acting through their newly founded parliament, the Dáil, “was desperate to prevent ‘selfishness’ from breaking up the unity of the national struggle and equally anxious to prove its credibility with the landowners.... The point of the Dáil’s activities was to prove to the landlords and big business that *they could be relied on to*

⁹ Though Kostick points out that Sinn Féin’s membership were not universally supportive of this clerical support (Kostick 2009: 32-33).

maintain the usual law and order.” (Kostick 2009: 112-113, emphases added). As one piece of Sinn Féin electoral propaganda frankly noted: “It has been said that a Free Ireland means an Army and Navy. That is so. It has also been said that this means Red Ruin and Revolution... These are the facts. A Free Ireland does not mean Revolution: It means peace and prosperity... A Free Ireland means—not Red Ruin—but the salvation from Red Ruin” (de Valera 1917). Sinn Féin’s leadership, whatever about their erstwhile radicalism, were themselves part of the same native bourgeoisie crystallising in post-Famine Ireland. For long-term structural reasons, it would be their class interests that would define the scope of this “passive revolution.”

In the same vein, it is not clear how radical a political or economic break Sinn Féin sought from Britain. In a 1918 interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, which Sinn Féin later reissued as a pamphlet, Eamon de Valera claimed that the Irish sought “to be free... not to have a master.” At the same time, though, he claimed that once the “enforced partnership” with England was ended, a new friendship of equals, of “independent neighbours” could emerge, “each respecting the rights and interests of the other” (de Valera 1918). The implied assumption was that the country’s socio-economic structure would not change, rather there would just be a change in terms of who had the responsibility of managing Ireland. Indeed, the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 left much untouched. The northeast corner of the island would remain a part of the United Kingdom, British troops would continue to be stationed in Ireland (on both sides of the border), and the Irish state would continue to contribute to the British national debt.

Nevertheless, defending the Treaty in which he had been so closely involved, Arthur Griffith, spoke of it as a “Treaty of equality,” the first official document to recognise Ireland’s equality with England (Griffith 1922). Even de Valera’s much-debated *Document No. 2*, a proposed alternative to the Treaty, accepted partition as well as the country’s continued status within the Empire. De Valera was probably being more accurate than he intended when he frankly asserted, in September 1922, “I must be the heir to generations of conservatism. Every instinct of mine would indicate that I was meant to be a dyed-in-the-wool Tory or even a Bishop, rather than the leader of a Revolution” (de Valera 1922). Declan Kiberd has suggested that Irish nationalists remained trapped within the very codes they sought to oppose. Irish nationalist ideology, for all its anti-British rhetoric, was itself a product of British rule and British influence. Sinn Féin, whatever about their claims to represent a supra-ideological “national” interest, were inherently ideological and advocated an agrarian-based and essentially capitalist political project. What they ultimately sought was the right to run the socio-economic entity called “Ireland” along capitalist lines and within a still British-centric world-system. As Wallerstein says:

The interstate system is not a mere assemblage of so-called sovereign states. It is a hierarchical system with a pecking order that is stable but changeable. That is to say, slow shifts in rank order are not merely possible, but historically normal. Inequalities that are significant and firm but are not immutable are precisely the kind of processes that lead to ideologies able to justify high rank but also to challenge low rank. Such ideologies we call nationalisms (Wallerstein 1991: 82).

“Nationalism” was the ideological means for understanding Ireland’s status within the broader capitalist world-system. But more than that, Ireland’s semi-peripheral economic status also had a major determining role on the ideological form and content of Irish nationalism. This is the rub of the issue: the main currents of Irish nationalism were too bound up with the country’s global politico-economic status to be able to (or really want to) imagine a revolution in that status.

Some in the Irish labor movement did seek to oppose all this. The famous Limerick Soviet, for instance, took control of that city in April 1919. Two years later, workers at the Cleeves’ Bakery in nearby Bruree took control of their factory and declared it a soviet: “Bruree Mills and Bakery are now the property of the workers. The mill and shop are open for the sale of bread, flour and meal. It is hoped to reduce prices and do away with profiteering within a day. By order of the workers.” There was something ephemeral about this, however. The Bruree soviet only lasted nine days after which “work resumed as normal” (Kostick 2009: 174-175). The Limerick Soviet lasted all of two weeks: “British authority had been shaken but remained intact” and, according to Kostick’s Leninist appraisal, “the workers fall back into passivity” (Kostick 2009: 86).

It is more accurate to say that those who went against the dominant capitalist trends of Irish nationalism failed to develop a coherent ideological alternative. Even some of the ostensibly radical soviets, for instance, still operated within a discourse and praxis of private property and wage labor. The first “soviet,” at an asylum in Monaghan (close to what would soon be the border with Northern Ireland), merely sought a four-shilling pay raise. Their “soviet” lasted twelve days and ended when that pay-raise was secured. Of the various strikes discussed by Kostick, many clearly did not have radical intentions and several ended within a single day (Kostick 2009: 116-117). Kostick himself recognises that, while there would be over a hundred “soviets” declared in Ireland between 1919 and 1920, “The news coming from Russia was insufficient for a full understanding of how a soviet functioned” (Kostick 2009: 74). Moreover, and more important for the focus of this paper, it is worth recalling that bourgeois nationalist politics remained dominant during this period and the new political space that benefitted land agitators and striking workers

was the product of the nationalist struggle. Nationalist thinking and language continued to predominate. Terence Brown, for instance, has noted how even “as intelligent a social commentator as Peadar O’Donnell,” a strong supporter of rural agitation, couched his radical economic programme within classically nationalist terms (Brown 1985: 94). Perhaps mirroring how Irish nationalists remained trapped within British codes, so also anti-systemic figures like O’Donnell remained trapped within nationalist political codes. O’Donnell would later write about the regret he and other veterans of the War of Independence felt about the lack of a social revolution during those years, and how they may have even contributed to its suppression. His perception, mixing nationalist and class-based shibboleths, was that “Fenian Ireland, the Ireland of the poor” had approached “the very doorstep of a struggle for power” but “failed to achieve a leadership to correspond with its needs and was driven back in confusion” (O’Donnell 1963: 19-20 & 32).

Working-class agitation was never as organised or as radical as Kostick suggests. Certainly, though, *the fear of radical social change* had an impact on the nationalist leadership; the emerging nationalist elite backed away from a full confrontation with the British partly out of a fear that it would unleash more subversive dynamics in Irish politics. Additionally, the form and content of Irish nationalism had long been influenced by British ideas of economics, state formation and social organization and the British never had too much to fear from the likes of Arthur Griffith or even de Valera. Consciously or not, Griffith or de Valera ultimately acted as defenders of a British-centric economic system, suppressing rural agitation and leftist workers’ movements. Mainstream Irish nationalists, even at the height of this “revolution,” remained a kind of “intermediate social control stratum.”

At the eve of the War of Independence, Kevin O’Higgins, rapidly emerging as a leading figure in Sinn Féin and later to be a dominant figure in post-1922 politics, told his interrogators in the Special Crimes Court that “most of us who support Sinn Féin in these days are out only for the independence of Ireland and not necessarily for the destruction of the British Empire; our idea would be if the British Empire behaved itself” (Regan 1999: 84). Sinn Féin, of course, was never a unified force. Even at the height of its electoral successes, the party continued to hold a diversity of political viewpoints. Moreover, O’Higgins could be accused of playing to the choir here, telling his prosecutors what they wanted to hear. Nonetheless, he was still hinting at a deeper conservative imperative within the party and the “revolution.” A desire to dampen down anything that would undermine the prevailing socio-economic order was a major concern of Sinn Féin’s leadership throughout the War of Independence. O’Higgins himself spilt much ink on the dangers to the “social fabric” (O’Higgins 1922; Regan 1999: 86).

As early as 1919, the Lord Lieutenant in Ireland, John French, was moving away from a policy of trying to suppress Sinn Féin, instead arguing that the partition of Ireland with a moderate Sinn Féin rule in the South was tolerable: “The British administration had come to appreciate the divergence between the relatively conservative Sinn Féin activists, such as Arthur Griffith, and those more willing to carry out military activities... The more the movement in the South was led by the conservative Catholic middle class, the less it would demand of Britain” (Kostick 2009: 63). Lloyd George may have brazenly informed the British Parliament that Irish sovereignty could not be allowed, but also, as Kostick points out, the British prime-minister “was more sensitive to the nuances of nationalist politics in Ireland, at least to the extent that his experience with the followers of John Redmond [the leader of the IPP] had taught him that there was a relatively moderate wing of the movement *with whom it might be possible to do business.*” Thus, though the British were considering a military dictatorship, they “also sought out possible compromises. It is for this reason that, on his return to Ireland at the end of 1920 [after an American fund-raising tour], British Intelligence did its best prevent harm coming to de Valera; they adopted a similar approach to Arthur Griffith” (Kostick 2009: 96-98, emphases added).

The range of British interests and imperial political objectives during the Irish War of Independence, Treaty negotiations, and Civil War remains a frustratingly understudied field within mainstream “revisionist” historiography, a lacuna that says a lot about revisionism’s unwitting ideological assumptions. Nonetheless, as John Regan has quite reasonably stated “His Majesty’s British ministers had not won a world war to lose a local one on the issue of the Crown in the backyard of the Empire” (Regan 1999, 374). At the 1919 May Day Parade in Glasgow, Constance Markievicz, a leftist veteran of the Easter Rising, addressed 150,000 workers (Nairn 1997: 33). In the era of the Red Clydeside, the British elite cannot have been enamoured with these more radical strands of Irish nationalism and the possibility that they would spread across the Irish Sea. The Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed at the end of 1921, kept Ireland within the Empire, partitioned off the industrialised north-east of the island, and helped to pour water on any radical aspirations. It was, Regan concludes, “an imperial settlement and can only be understood within the pink swathes of that global context” (Regan 1999: 374). There were profound power-disparities between the British state and the Irish rebels, which partly explains the British-centric content of the Treaty. But more than that, it is important to give due focus to the “much greater consensus” identified by Regan, “over the rights of private property, the rights of the private citizen, and Church-party-state relations” (Regan 1999: 375). Ireland had long been an agrarian periphery of the British economy. Maintaining Ireland as a pliant source of raw materials was an integral part of this capitalist project. This was not, as Irish nationalists would later claim, a devious plot by British policy-makers to

prevent Irish economic success. Rather, it was a much more impersonal function of Ireland's continuing status in a broader economic and political system; "the trend in the periphery was towards monoculture" (Wallerstein 2011a:102), and Irish people remained primarily the producers of agricultural products for British markets.

Much like Lampedusa's famous assessment of the Italian *Risorgimento* [itself the original subject of Gramsci's "revolution without a revolution"], *everything had to change, in order for everything to stay the same*. That the Union came to an end did not mean the end of conservative political thinking:

The responsiveness of the newly independent Irish state to the interests established by capitalist colonial rule and its anxiety to preserve and enhance those interests were manifested from the beginning. A major concern of the newly independent state was to stress that though the flag and the anthem had changed, though the language used on some official occasions had become Gaelic, and though the seat of legislation had moved from London to Dublin; despite these changes, the content of the legislation was substantially the same. It was very much "business as usual" in independent Ireland. It was "freedom from" rather than "freedom for" (Crotty 1986: 71).

The Irish nationalist leadership tended toward the economically conservative and valorised a private-property-based agrarianism, the very commercial form that reified the country's semi-peripheral status. Nineteen-Twenty-Two brought little in the way of substantive change in the Irish social-order or economics. The first Free State government, under the leadership of W.T. Cosgrave and the pro-Treaty *Cumann na nGaedheal* [The Irish Organization], remained wedded to British markets and British orthodoxies, as a number of scholars have noted (McCabe 2011; Regan 1999: 146-147). In 1920s Ireland, agriculture continued to employ over half the workforce, and accounted for eighty-six per cent of all the Free State's exports (Dooley 2004: 4). And ninety-eight per cent of these exports, worth £51.8 million in total, went to Great Britain and Northern Ireland. *Cumann na nGaedheal's* economic policies were tailored to this situation (Dunphy 1995: 20-21). De Valera and his *Fianna Fáil* [Soldiers of Irish Destiny] party, in power after 1932, did try to change this, engaging in a tariff war with Britain, the so-called Economic War (1932-38). It ultimately did little to change the country's position within the broader world-system. As J.J. Lee

has pointed out “in 1937, despite the Economic War, Ireland still depended on Britain to take 91 per cent of her exports” (Lee 1989: 187).

It is telling that neither of the two dominant parties in post-1922 Ireland were quick to abandon the ideas of Irish privatised agrarian economics. Cosgrave promoted agriculture over all else, arguing it was the “spring and fertiliser of many other forms of industry *natural to an agricultural country such as this is*” (Regan 1999: 146, emphases added). Even de Valera, who drew on a more popular political base and sought to end Ireland’s peripheral economic status, sought to do so primarily via agriculture, the very sector that reinforced the country’s economic “servitude,” rather than through rapid and heavy industrialization, as other developmentalist states would seek to do in the twentieth century. Indeed, in a recent work that seeks to understand Irish historical development in the context of world-systems analysis, Maurice Coakley has spoken of the “limits of independence” in Ireland (Coakley 2012: 155-158). This could be expanded upon by speaking about the limits of an Irish nationalism whose ideological form and content was so strongly determined by the country’s gradual modernisation on the agrarian semi-periphery of the world-system.¹⁰ Even at the height of the “revolution,” Irish nationalism remained something of an “intermediate social control stratum,” albeit acting on behalf of a harder to define capitalist orthodoxy, rather than the easier to pin down British rule.

Conclusion

For those at the centre of contemporary Irish politics, as with other anti-colonial nationalists, discussions like this were probably irrelevant. The events of 1916 to 1923 were experienced as a “genuine revolution.” The question of whether it was a revolution is intimately linked to the categories of analysis used to understand these events. The vast majority of Irish historians have understood events from the Easter Rising to the end of the Civil War through the prisms of the “nation” and the “nation-state.” Moreover, they have often adopted a micro-historical focus.¹¹ Drawing on Fernand Braudel’s view that “*histoire événementielle*” [event-dominated or episodic history] can be “dust,” Immanuel Wallerstein notes that such a micro-historical focus can act as

¹⁰ Mike Cronin has intriguingly called Ireland’s situation after 1922 one of ‘Informal Empire’. His claim that *Cumann na nGaedheal*’s economic policies “stressed orthodoxy over ideology,” however, confuses the issue and elides the degree to which capitalist orthodoxy was, and is, highly ideological. This was not ‘post-treaty pragmatism’, as Cronin claims, but the construction of a reinforced hegemony post-1922 (Cronin 2000).

¹¹ Commenting on the micro-histories favoured by Irish historians, Regan says that “In these approaches—local, personal, intimate—the greater political forces at play—abstract, impersonal, universal—too easily can go overlooked... Rather than liberating us this approach may be limiting, even voyeuristic... It also marginalises ideology as a motivational factor” (Regan 2013: 210-211).

dust in a double sense: “that it spoke about ephemeral phenomena; and that it got into our eyes, preventing us from seeing the real underlying structures” (Wallerstein 2004: 15).¹² With this kind of thinking in mind, this paper has sought to use these “underlying structures” (class, ideology, Ireland’s status within capitalism’s global division of labor) as its primary categories of analysis. The macro-level narrative that results departs markedly from the story of a revolution in early twentieth century Ireland. For sure, it is a narrative that ignores some specific nuances, but historiographically is the general thrust not more important than potentially ephemeral finer details?

About the Author

Aidan Beatty holds a doctorate in international history from the University of Chicago. His first book, *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism, 1884-1938* will be published this summer by Palgrave-Macmillan, as part of their *Genders and Sexualities in History* series. He is currently a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies and a Scholar-in-Residence at the School of Canadian Irish Studies, at Concordia University in Montreal.

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¹² Braudel seems to have held to a different definition, and thus more positive view, of the ‘dust’ of history: ‘little facts which do, it is true, by infinite repetition, add up to form linked chains. Each of them represents the thousands of others that have crossed the silent depth of time and *endured*’ (Braudel 1981: 560). Nonetheless, Wallerstein’s point holds true.

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