

*Introductory Article*

## Beyond Nationalism: Time to Reclaim the Republican Ideal

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Republicanism is a term which has long been misused in Ireland and largely separated from its meaning and origins. It has been equated by many with militant and armed nationalism and an absolutist rejection of any British government in Ireland. This confusion of republicanism with nationalism needs to be unpicked and their very different principles, programmes and objectives need to be understood. It is only in such clarification that what would constitute real self-determination in Ireland can be grasped and the task of promoting the republican agenda can properly begin.

The confusion of republicanism with nationalism has meant that almost all thinking in this area has been directed towards the examination of nationalism. Even a year of commemoration of that great eighteenth-century republican movement, the United Irish societies, failed to spur on more than a few commentators to a recovery and reappraisal of the rich republican tradition in Ireland. Instead their gaze has been fixed firmly on nationalism.

Approaches based on nationalism tend to pose problems though, particularly at times of change such as this. One recent trend in addressing such problems has been to advocate a theory of 'nationalisms'. The plural is seen as a way of reconciling the existence of negative tendencies in nationalism alongside positive ones. But this is evasive. It seeks to resolve an apparent contradiction through a linguistic shift or semantic manoeuvre.

A better solution begins by disentangling the concept of nation from that of nationalism. Once we achieve that, we can begin to examine nationalism itself, its objectives and its limitations and the need for other answers to the questions we face in Ireland today. One answer can be found in republicanism.

### **Nation and nationality**

Nation and nationality are real, material things. They are not just imagined or constructed at an ideal or conceptual level. This is not to say that the ways in which particular communities and peoples define and describe themselves do not involve creative acts of self-imagination. What it does mean, is that such acts of creativity are performed on a concrete basis; there is a reality in existence to which the label of nation has been attached.

Nation is essentially a form of community, and nationality a form of identity derived from belonging to that community. The word nation first entered the English language in the fourteenth century and is derived from the Latin noun *natio*: birth, tribe, from *nasci*: to be born. Belonging to a nation arises simply from being born into it. Clearly this cannot by itself account for the existence of different nations nor the differences between them. It is the combination of a wide range of factors – historical, geographical, climatic, economic, social and others – that gives rise to the form of community that is a nation.

These factors have definite outcomes in terms of constituting and defining particular communities or nations. Climate and geography create different economic possibilities in different places; these in turn create social and cultural possibilities; and all of these will have considerable influence on historical developments.

Nationality is simply the form of identity that comes from belonging to a particular nation. Like nation therefore, nationality has a material element which is prior to any act of imagination. We are born into a particular community with its own economic, social and cultural arrangements. No matter what attitude we adopt to these later we cannot escape this reality or their influence. But we are free to engage critically with nationality and nation. We can create identities for ourselves that embrace the nationality we are born into; we can reject elements of it or try to mould or reshape them; we can borrow new or different elements from other nations and nationalities; we can choose to regard that part of our identities that is connected to nationality as unimportant or dispensable. Amidst all these possibilities for self-imagination, however, what we cannot do is make ourselves re-born, free of that nationality into which we were originally born. Rejection of our nationality to the extent of believing that we have in effect erased it is to live in denial.

It is also the case that nation and nationality are not static and unchanging. The factors that contribute to the emergence of nations are themselves subject to change over time, and as they change the nation and the nationality they help to form will of necessity change with them. Furthermore, contact between nations and peoples, their cultures and

economies, cannot leave either party untouched or unmoved. It is inevitable that ordinary interaction between nations will give rise to ongoing and mutual change.

What is important this far is twofold. Firstly, nation and nationality have a prior existence upon which any subsequent acts of self-imagination take place. As forms of community and identity they are inescapable and apply everywhere. Secondly, they are subject to our shaping and choosing as we go along. They are not static and unchanging over time, nor are they immune from the influence contact with others brings.

It follows from this that nation and nationality, as forms of community and identity, should be welcomed and respected, though not uncritically, and they should continuously be examined for the good and the bad they can contain. Viewpoints that regard them as solely imagined constructs are difficult to sustain, while conservative ideas of unchanging and unchangeable nations and nationality are contradicted by reason and experience.

### **Nationalism**

There is some difficulty about the definition of nationalism. In the first instance many of those discussing it avoid providing a definition or feel no need to do so. This is unhelpful and leaves the question of what nationalism is floating there, subject to the biases and preconceptions that different viewpoints bring to it. A second tendency is to equate nationalism with the feeling of belonging or sense of identity that we have discussed as nationality above. But if we define nationalism only in terms of feeling or sentiment, or even identity, it ceases to be a primary political force or vehicle for political action. It becomes instead secondary and must attach itself to some other doctrine or ideology in order to have effect or influence. While there may seem to be some merit in this – other ideologies almost always exploit the gaps in nationalism – our experience of nationalism as a potent force in history and the world suggests that this approach is not sufficient either.

So, what is nationalism? If we accept that nationalism is a primary political force, then we must treat it as we treat other political forces. It is a system of ideas about how political life and society should be organised. In this sense, nationalism is an ideological force or doctrine. Like many other ideologies it is more the creation of political and historical processes than of any formal setting-down of its principles and contents. It developed as a response to real political circumstances and served particular interests. And as with socialism or capitalism, or republicanism, it is all the more potent and vital because of this.

All political doctrines systematise ideas about how society should be organised. Nationalism is a political ideology which makes nation and

nationality the principles of political organisation. What are essentially forms of community and identity are elevated into organising principles in society. The dangers here should be obvious. If one community and the identity attached to it are to become the basis of political organisation, then the first question that arises is how the state will relate to and accommodate other communities and identities which may be either within the same territorial boundaries, or external to them, or both. This is not just an academic question. It has been the cause of huge problems in the world and will continue to be as long as nationalism remains a significant political force.

Nationalism categorises the world only in terms of nation and nationality. It ignores other categories such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and more. But these categories already exist in the nation and the world and so the state that nationalism creates will reflect the existing relationships in these categories. The inequalities and injustices that exist are likely to be continued and reinforced by the implementation of a nationalist programme. If we consider any category, gender say, or class, what position can nationalism adopt towards it? Nationalism proposes that the state should be based upon the nation and rights derive simply from nationality. If there is a conflict based on gender or class, in what way can an appeal to nationality as arbiter resolve that conflict? The only answer it can find is one which is already contained within the nation, and it is this which inclines nationalism towards conservative and authoritarian solutions and a propensity to favour the powerful and privileged.

It is in this sense that nationalism is a type of identity politics: political questions are addressed in terms of nationality, i.e. identity. But even in areas where politics based on identity seem useful, there is much that is problematic. Questions of culture constitute such an area. If identity in the shape of nationality is to be the arbiter of cultural issues, then culture will be divided into culture that is an expression of the nation and culture from without. Culture from outside the nation will seem alien and to some degree will be interpreted as threatening to the national culture. Two further points are worth considering. Firstly, while such politics based on identity are familiar to all of us, they are at such odds with life and experience that they cannot stifle the impulses for openness and democracy that are everywhere. And secondly, the placing of culture in the national sphere, responsible for the expression of national identity, can lead to a narrowing down of democratic space, and an exclusion of identities that cross national boundaries.

A recent development has seen the emergence of a theory of nationalisms. This is in response to the apparently different ways nationalism manifests itself in practice. One form of this response has been to talk of Irish nationalism, British nationalism, English nationalism, French

nationalism, and so on. While this is not particularly challenging – it does little more than identify the nation to which nationalism must always be attached outside of theory – it does serve the purpose of reminding us that nationalism is at work in places where it has not always been acknowledged.

Another version of the nationalisms argument can be summarised as 'good nationalism' versus 'bad nationalism'. It identifies nationalism at work on both sides of colonial or imperial conflicts. There is a nationalism that fuels colonialism and imperialism and is oppressive and chauvinistic. However there is also an anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist nationalism, which is progressive and democratic. Nationalism, it is argued, is simultaneously liberating and oppressive, cosmopolitan and chauvinistic, democratic and undemocratic. The usefulness of a concept which can contain such opposing meanings at the one time is doubtful. If, instead, we hold fixed the definition of nationalism as a political doctrine which has the nation as its central organising principle, then we will have to find another explanation for the seeming contradictions which the nationalisms approach identifies.

That explanation can be found in a simple formulation: nationalism is the same everywhere, with the same agenda; it is the location and the context which have clouded the viewpoints of some commentators. Resistance to colonialism and imperialism has almost always adopted a nationalist guise. While nationality (like religion and language) may be an important criterion in allocating privilege in a colonial system, it is never the case that it is the motivating factor in colonial domination and expropriation. Economic needs and ambitions, and political considerations are the decisive factors. So, the problems that oppressed people face – lack of democratic control, lack of economic control, the absence of equality and justice, etc. are problems that may not be resolved by the assertion of national autonomy. But because the political order is imposed by outside forces it seems to many that a nationalist programme is the answer. In fact the progressive and transformative tendencies in the resistance derive from those elements that are anti-colonial and anti-imperial, the part that is oppositional. It is the location, being in opposition to undemocratic and oppressive forces, that is the source of democratic and progressive ideas in national movements. On the other hand, while nationalism offers a convenient unifying point, its programme of building a nation state is essentially conservative and runs counter to the other transformative trends. Ironically, the nationalist part of the movement proposes to build a state which is the mirror image of what the struggle is against: it is only the nationality of the state which will be different.

This also helps to explain what has been the widespread failure of national liberation movements to find answers to the problems their

peoples and countries face. Great hopes have been raised in the period of opposition, progressive programmes have been advanced and democratic transformation promised. But as soon as the period of opposition has ended, nationalism is left with only the project of building a state based on the nation. In many cases this has brought the mainstream national movements, now in power, into conflict with groups which want more democratic change, in economic and social life, and in questions related to equality and gender and class. In response to this, nationalism in power has often been intolerant and authoritarian, co-opting opposition where possible, squeezing it out where necessary, and often resorting to violent repression.

One more point worth considering is the extent to which all types of groups, movements and even states have been willing to embrace nationalism or at least try to harness it to their own purposes. Communists, socialists, democrats, republicans and others have all tried to ride the back of nationalism as a step towards other goals. The extent to which nationalism has triumphed and other programmes have been discarded should be a warning to those who would choose this route.

### **An Alternative**

Up to this point we have looked at the ideas of nation and nationality, and nationalism. Disentangling these concepts leaves us with, on the one hand, nation and nationality as forms of community and identity which are welcome and valued. Alongside this we have a political ideology, nationalism, which transforms these concepts into principles of political organisation. In this transformation the welcome and valuable aspects of nation and nationality are changed into a programme which is conservative and closed. Clearly there is a need for a different answer to the problems and issues which face us in Ireland today and elsewhere. A political programme that can respect different communities and identities while advancing inclusive, democratic strategies for the state is needed. One such programme is provided by republicanism.

### **Republicanism**

In Ireland republicanism has long been problematic and controversial and for most people the term has come to be emptied of its true meaning and content. In the last thirty years it has become common to equate republicanism with militant or armed nationalism and an absolutist rejection of any British involvement in Ireland. For some it became a term of abuse, and many who might have shared the goals and principles of republicanism, retreated from the word itself. Perhaps now with the end of the armed conflict and the continuing peace process there will be more space to challenge this. Already people are reaching out to the word again,

and some to the ideal. We must try to ensure that it will never be co-opted again for undemocratic or chauvinistic purposes, or to serve the goals of nationalism.

The republic, literally the public thing, is a form of government, in which sovereignty rests with the people. From this simple but fundamental idea, the principles of modern republicanism were developed over time. While these principles are basic and lacking in controversy, their implementation would be fundamentally challenging and transforming. The principles of republicanism are democracy, citizenship and internationalism; liberty, equality and fraternity. They were developed from the foundation proposition that the people should be sovereign, and in the course of the historic movements for republican government, particularly in America, France and Ireland.

The democratic core of republicanism rests on the sovereignty of the people. Democracy is simply government by the people and a republic without democracy would not be a republic. Government by the people is, in intention, participative rather than representative; plural rather than majoritarian; diverse rather than homogenous. Neither democracy nor the republic refer to the nation or nationality. It is membership of the polity, the republic, that confers rights and obligations and is the source of republican citizenship.

The purpose of republicanism is to provide good government in the interests of the common welfare – ideas of the common good and the commonwealth are central to the meaning of republicanism. In seeking to advance the welfare of the people and in the historic development of republicanism, the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity were added to its programme. The internationalism of republicanism also has its roots in this history where the links and solidarity between America and France and Ireland in the eighteenth century were extensive and important. But the principle of cooperation, understanding and solidarity beyond the boundaries of the nation and the state also has origins in republican thinking and the recognition that interests are shared across borders. The implementation of republican and nationalist programmes lead to very different outcomes.

The republican principles of democracy, citizenship and internationalism challenge the usurpation of nation and nationality as principles by nationalism. Attaching rights and obligations to a common citizenship leads to more open and democratic outcomes than attaching them to nationality. The democratic allocation of sovereignty in the republic means that each person has a right to be self-determining and to a share in government. And the purpose of this is to advance the common welfare of the people. Nationalism, however, collapses all these rights into the rights of the nation. The right of the nation to be self-governing is placed above

the right of each person to be self-governing, and the welfare of the nation, which usually means the interests of the dominant section, is placed above the common welfare of the people. Finally, the internationalism of republicanism challenges the inward focus of nationalism. It also challenges the nationalist idea that interests can be confined within national boundaries.

The inability of nationalism to deal with categories other than nation has been noted. When confronted with problems based on gender or class or ethnicity, it can only appeal to nation and nationality for a solution. In contrast, republicanism has a programme which can address any category or political question. It simply asks what is the democratic way which maximises the control of people over their lives? What promotes liberty and equality and fraternity? Certainly people will find different answers to these questions, but they do provide an open, progressive approach to problems, where looking for them within the nation or within nationalism cannot.

While republicanism rejects the idea that nation and nationality should be the basis for political organisation, or that nation should be equated with the state, it does respect and welcome them as forms of community and identity. It sees them as arising out of ordinary human activity, social, economic, cultural and political, and as such they are part of ordinary democratic development. Neither does republicanism favour one nation over another, nor believe that nations should be territorially contiguous. It treats all nations equally. It follows that republicans should have a democratic respect for their own nations and nationality, supporting what is good and challenging what is not.

Republicanism offers a way forward for Ireland today. Its principles provide an approach which is relevant to contemporary issues everywhere in the world. Using these principles, democracy, citizenship and internationalism; liberty, equality and fraternity, we can ask:

- How are these principles advanced or impeded in economic, social, cultural and political matters?
- How would the implementation of these principles affect outcomes in any situation?
- What would a republican society look like?
- How can we move forward towards such a society?

Republicanism is ultimately an open political doctrine. It proposes great principles but it is not about providing a blueprint that must be followed detail by detail. Rather than claiming to be the final answer, it tries to provide a route towards those answers. While its important principles are non-negotiable, space is left for democratic debate about what the meaning and content of those principles are or should be.

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