

Republicanism and Nationalism: An Imagined Conflict

DALTÚN Ó CEALLAIGH

The Ireland Institute has taken a worthy initiative in launching a new magazine entitled *The Republic*.¹ Ironically, however, the introductory article, ‘Beyond Nationalism: Time to Reclaim the Republican Ideal’, is counter-productive from a republican standpoint, insofar as that aims to advance to the fullest extent the rights of the Irish nation and of its citizenry.

The article commences with a statement of the need to undo the ‘confusion of republicanism with nationalism’. What ensues is an imagined conflict between the two positions rather than a clarification of content and compatibility. The source of the difficulty is established early on by rejecting the approach of ‘nationalisms’ or, put less academically, denying the fact that there are different kinds of nationalism.

As an ideology, nationalism generally emerged in modern history in the form of movements against empire, through the assertion that nations have the right to independence.² (Later, they would be alternatively described as anti-imperialist, although that epithet can be attached to other and complementary stances as well).³ The nation was defined in terms of a socio-cultural entity, although with various mixes and emphases, ranging from the heterogeneity of the Swiss to the virtual homogeneity of the Hungarians, to take but two examples. In other words, the movements in question were not just civic in being comprised of citizens or those thus seeking citizenship instead of subjecthood; they were also ethnic in the delineation of the particular groups of citizens or would-be citizens concerned—therefore the description nationalist.⁴

But while all nationalists hold that the nation should be self-governing, in respect of how it should be so, there are of course varieties of nationalism, just as there are of conservatism, liberalism and socialism. On the right, there is fundamentalist and conservative nationalism; on the

left, liberal and socialist nationalism. In Irish circumstances, the fundamentalist would insist on a catholic nation, while the conservative wants *laissez-faire* economics and has a narrow perspective on civil liberties; the liberal is more flexible on the economic front but is safe on civil liberties, while the socialist is also secure on the latter and advocates democracy throughout the socio-economic system.

It is this refusal to accept that there are varieties of nationalism which leads to the blanket statement that: 'Nationalism categorises the world only in terms of nation and nationality. It ignores other categories such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and more'. True of some nationalists, perhaps, but not of others. Following on from this, it is averred: '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'. The fact that some nationalists ally the drive for national freedom with a commitment to domestic change is overlooked. Next, we hear that: 'Culture from outside the nation will seem alien and to some degree will be interpreted as threatening to the national culture'. Again, true of *some* nationalists. Apart from that, shades of the old and spurious opposition of nationalism versus internationalism (repeated elsewhere) when in reality they can be two sides of the same coin: for instance, in culture, treasure quality in your own and augment it with quality from others. At the same time, if external culture is that of an imperial power and being imposed on a nation while that nation's culture is being extirpated, resistance to attempted substitution, as distinct from worthwhile addition, is only natural.

The article may also be the victim of its own abstract categories. Insofar as nationalism is to be defined as dealing only with the national aspect of things, that does not mean that the nationalist, when confronted with certain problems, refers just to the nation for their solution. But even this distinction is somewhat limiting; not infrequently, the nationalist wants to be self-governing precisely for the purpose of changing some things within the nation—e.g. nationalism with a view to modernism! Or put yet another way, nationalism can not only sit easily alongside domestic transformation, sometimes it is seen as a necessary condition for its achievement. Such nationalism is not therefore defined merely by the national *as it is*, but also by how it can and *ought to be*. These considerations are where the varieties identified above come in.⁵

'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.’ Here, there is reference not only to the blurring of distinctions among different sorts of nationalism in regard to the objects of independence, but also to the blurring of the contrast between imperialism (or colonialism) and nationalism, insofar as the first often rests on the alleged superiority of one nation over another or others. But this may be said to be not primarily a conceptual so much as a terminological dilemma (and not altogether a contingent one), of which more below.

Not surprisingly, given what has gone before, the article proceeds as follows:

... 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 [national]⁶ 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.

Reconstructed in a more precise political fashion, it might run like this (note emphases):

... while nationalism offers a convenient unifying point, a programme for some of building a nation state is essentially conservative and runs counter to the other transformative trends. [Not ‘ironically’] the *right-wing* part of the *nationalist* movement proposes to build a state which is *in its socio-economic character* the mirror image of what the struggle by *left-wing nationalists* is against: it is only the nationality of the state which will be different.

And, one might add, the persons who govern it. Also it is declared: ‘Neither democracy nor the republic refer to the nation or nationality’. That may be so semantically, but how are they to be made politically concrete other than by resting on the nation? Or are we back to Austro-Marxism with its hope of transmogrifying an empire into a republic with whatever contemporary equivalent is chosen—the EU perhaps?

We are next informed that: ‘Attaching rights and obligations to a common citizenship leads to more open and democratic outcomes than attaching them to nationality’. Once more, false antithesis raises its head. There is no necessary ‘either/or’ here. One has rights both as a member of a nation and as a citizen, and the two cannot be divorced if democracy is to be fulfilled in the real world. One has rights as an *Irish* citizen or as a *French* citizen, and so on. Some of these rights are human and universal (freedom of conscience), others are more particular (use of a specific language).⁷ Another illustration of sweeping false antithesis is the following: ‘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 ...’ This might describe the position of Griffith; it certainly would not that of Connolly.

There is then the conclusion: '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'. One wonders where this leaves the United Nations and its premise of self-determination? Of course, nations and states, given geographic and demographic factors, cannot always be congruent, even after self-determination, and the rights of national minorities, where they exist, should be respected. But that does not take away from the fact that, in the modern world, the nation is the principal determinant of the state. To some extent, it depends here on what is meant by 'political organisation' and being 'equated with the state'. Insofar as it is a protest against forced homogeneity and intolerance, that is unobjectionable. However, as it stands, the statement perpetuates the failure to distinguish between the approaches of right and left-wing nationalism.

It is true that, whatever about its origins, nationalism as a term has by now, unfortunately, owing to sloppy usage in both academia and journalism, become convoluted for many in its general significance. This is not entirely accidental. If, in *international* relations, for instance, the nation is taken, on the one hand, in an egalitarian way as a justification for independence and, on the other, in a superior way for domination, and 'nationalism' is used to describe both situations, then meaning is blunted and has to be qualified by referring to democratic or aggressive nationalism.⁸ (Previously, the first would have simply been nationalism and the second imperialism.) It may be that, in global political discourse, such a point of required qualification has been reached. But let us at least acknowledge that and not persist in the obfuscation that there is only one 'nationalism', either domestically or in international relations. An excellent example in international relations of convenient obfuscation was when Britain attacked Egypt in 1956 and said it was standing up to nationalism in much the same way as it had stood up to Hitler!

We must also be conscious of a usage deriving specifically from Irish history. With capital initials, 'Nationalism' and 'Republicanism' came to have respectively right and left-wing connotations because, more latterly, of the Redmond-Griffith and Pearse-Connolly spectra. But the nomenclature of parties or constellations of same should not bedevil political analysis. The fact is that Redmond was a home rule nationalist, Griffith a duo-monarchical nationalist, Pearse a democratic republican nationalist, and Connolly a socialist republican nationalist. However, the nationalist-republican dichotomy of nomenclature was perpetuated in the partitioned six counties with the continued existence of a Nationalist Party and the alternative of the Republican Movement. Yet, properly speaking, in Ireland, all republicans were nationalist, even if not all nationalists were

republican. (One suspects that the article is significantly affected by this dichotomy and also by the influence of ultra-leftism).

Subsequent to 1921, however, every form of Irish nationalism in time became in effect republican, if only with a small ‘r’, because being a nationalist region or co-player in empire was no longer an option, and nobody seriously suggested that an independent Ireland should be a monarchy in its own right rather than some kind of republic, whether or not the word was to be used in the official title of the state. Currently, SDLP politicians are wont on occasion to stress that they are republican as well as nationalist. (In the contest for support that is taking place in the north, the intelligent riposte for Sinn Féin would be to underline that it is nationalist as well as republican).

Moreover, if there is a contemporary, broader *terminological* problem with nationalism, republicanism is not without its difficulties either. We have referred to the classical denotation of nationalism and agree, in the same classical vein, that ‘a republic without democracy would not be a republic’, that it has got to do with ‘the welfare of the people’ and that it enshrines the principles of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’. But how many ‘republics’ are, or have been, capable of such attribution? And what about some ‘republicans’, whether those in the US or the neo-fascist *republikaner* in Germany? Is it any surprise that people now also talk about *democratic* republics (even in official title) and conservative and radical republicans? Republic now often just conveys that the head of state is not a monarch, although he or she may be the vilest of dictators. Does that beg the challenge that we must seek to recover the original and essentially progressive nature of republicanism? Is there not then also the challenge of recovering the original and essentially progressive nature of nationalism?⁹

In that sense, if republicanism and nationalism are to be compared, we should be explaining where they overlap and combine to eventuate in the enlightened result of a national republic.¹⁰ The ideological struggle here is not *between* nationalism and republicanism, but *within* each and to produce the best of both; we don’t want nationalism without meaningful democratic content, and we don’t want republicanism without meaningful social content.¹¹ Counter-position of nationalism and republicanism instead of selective synthesis is the real confusion, and one which can only be damaging to advanced politics in the north, in particular, and throughout the island in general. The proper objective, not least in the context of the threatening super-state of a post-Nice EU, is no less than republican nationalism—which is the first step towards republican internationalism.

Notes

¹ No. 1, Dublin, June 2000.

² Although an independent nation state logically need not be internally democratic or liberal, nationalist movements tended to embody these perspectives.

³ For example, persons in metropolitan countries opposing their own nation's expansionism.

⁴ However, 'colonial nationalism' did not include aboriginal peoples, and certain examples of 'internal colonialism' can be found elsewhere. For example, some of the south Slavs, sympathetic to the Hungarians in their resistance to the Austrians in the mid-nineteenth century, resiled when they found out that the borders of the old Hungary were to be maintained and would still incorporate them.

⁵ This has been particularly so in the case of some African and Asian nationalist movements.

⁶ As the movement is defined in the preceding sentence.

⁷ If there is a tension between the civic and the ethnic in Ireland today, the real one is clearly between unionism/loyalism and nationalism/republicanism, at least in terms of community and identity, requiring, among other things, confirmation that fidelity to reformation protestantism does not demand union with Britain and attachment to Tridentine catholicism is not a condition of Irish independence. Otherwise, the cultural content of Irishness in the civic-ethnic continuum should be a matter of choice.

⁸ That is, apart from fundamentalist/conservative and liberal/socialist 'nationalisms', all of which are at least anti-colonialist (although some would say not all are anti-neocolonialist).

⁹ At the same time, this is more of a problem in international debate, because, while that can feed back into discussion on this island (as the article in question demonstrates), generally speaking, Irish people do not find in nationalism a suggestion of fascism or view republicanism as a neutral description when it comes to consideration of the radical.

¹⁰ Connolly warned against 'Nationalism without Socialism', just as he was opposed to nationalism without republicanism. But it was not a case of socialism *instead* of nationalism, any more than of republicanism *instead* of nationalism. D. Ryan (ed.), *Socialism and Nationalism* (Three Candles 1948).

¹¹ One could add that a specific task is: getting *militarism* out of republicanism and *hibernianism* out of both.

Finbar Cullen writes:

Daltún raises many interesting points. At the beginning, he establishes that the essential feature of nationalism is that it bases the political organisation of society on ethnicity. This is the source of the problems: it gives political expression to divisions between, and solidarity within, ethnic/national groups.

The ‘nationalisms’ argument is a vehicle to rescue ‘left-wing nationalists’ from these problems. But is nationalism itself the source of the left-wing, right-wing, or liberal in the various ‘nationalisms’? Is it not the socialism, conservatism, or liberalism that is attached to nationalism in these cases that distinguishes one from the other, while the nationalism is the same in all of them? It is this undifferentiated shared nationalism that allows national movements to contain such contradictory and opposed factions.

The compromise platform that the contradictory factions share is the programme of nationalism: the construction of a nation-state. This almost always involves the deferment of radical social and economic policies in the interest of ‘unity’. And it is why national movements reproduce the type of nation-state that already exists—the mirror image of the colonising/oppressor state.

Are national movements anti-imperialist? ‘Imperialism’ is often used as another word for colonialism. A more critical usage defines a world system which incorporates peoples and countries into a globally-organised capitalism. Those national movements which are anti-colonial (many are not) rarely have difficulty accommodating themselves to imperialism—claiming a stake in the system is often the principal objective.

As for Connolly, this much is clear: he was no nationalist. Unlike many of his followers, he had no illusions about nationalism in power: ‘Nationalism without Socialism ... is only national recreancy. It would be tantamount to a public declaration that our oppressors had so far succeeded in inoculating us with their perverted conception of justice that we had finally decided to accept those conceptions as our own ... Let us never forget that he never reaches Heaven who marches there in the company of the Devil.’

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