

The Public Thing: A Materialist View

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The appearance of *The Republic* was welcome: its survival into a third issue even more so. No movement needs political theory as much as Irish republicanism after the debilitating effect of decades of concentration on armed struggle, reinforced, on the one hand, by the generally philistine influence of the catholic church and, on the other, by the Communist Party's claim to be able to solve the Irish national question by reformist means, leading to the will-o'-the-wisp of 'actually achievable socialism in a single country'.

Of course, this journal cannot be welcomed uncritically. The articles it has published tend to claim for republicanism more than it can bear. This arises partly from a justifiable disillusion with the aforementioned Communist Party panacea. In the first issue, Liam O'Dowd declares: 'Socialists found it difficult to marry a universalistic programme with the reality of having to build socialism (sic) in specific states'. In the second issue, the doubts are more obvious: Iseult Honohan and James Livesey seem to see republicanism per se as more vital and relevant than socialism. Honohan is cautious: 'Socialism appeared to be routed by liberalism'. Livesey has no doubts:

After the demise of socialism, [republicanism] is the major, if not the only intellectual alternative to Anglo-American liberalism ... For much of the twentieth century, indeed, the revolutionary moment was lost to institutional republicanism and instead was found in the communist tradition. French republicanism survived this, and still offers us a strong and vibrant perspective from which to understand the modern world and act within it.

Besides, in an otherwise scrupulously detailed analysis of Irish republicanism before the Treaty, Patrick Maume compounds his colleagues' failings by ignoring the most coherent of the signatories of the 1916 proclamation, James Connolly.

The overall effect implies that the writers (and, perhaps, the editors) believe that republicanism can provide a strategy for the future that will incorporate the strengths, but not the weaknesses, of socialism. But, how

is republicanism so different and superior? Presumably, it means more than having a country ruled and reigned over by Jacques Chirac or George W. Bush, rather than reigned over (but not ruled) by Elizabeth Windsor. Yet, only Livesey tries to articulate his vision, and he can find no better example of it than the French celebrations (surely nationalist, rather than republican?) of their football World Cup win.

This produces a second weakness, seen in the general rather than the specific Irish contributions. The general historical approach is idealistic rather than materialist, fudging the question of the material context in which republican politics are to be applied. Neither Finbar Cullen's challenge on republicanism and nationalism nor Honohan's and Fergus O'Ferrall's articulate descriptions of republican concepts since Aristotle contain any description of their subject's material origins. The unwary reader (and this writer has learnt over the years how few readers are wary) might conclude that republicanism sprang from the brain of the tutor of King Alexander the Great. This is the more contrary in that Aristotle was himself a materialist, whereas his teacher, Plato, was not only an idealist but also the author of the first book known to posterity by the title *The Republic*. The trouble for idealists is that Plato's republic gives women gender equality only in a stratified caste society rather than in the actual practice of the republic (or, more accurately, the *polis* of his day) and so is closer to the practice of Greece's one contemporary monarchy, Sparta.

A materialist account of historic republicanism should begin with the establishment of the first bourgeois republics. This must exclude the pre-monarchical communes of America, celebrated so well by Peter Linebaugh; though folk memories of similar entities may have influenced future radicals, they could not begin to change history positively until Friedrich Engels incorporated anthropological discoveries of the actual nature of the American bodies into socialist theory.

Historic republicanism began with the overthrow of the kings of the classic Greek city-states by those states' rising middle classes. The motives of these rebels seem to have varied, but all wanted to get rid of one who stood in their way, often in the way of their getting greater powers of exploitation. Insofar as there was any contemporary theoretical justification for these rebellions, it is to be found not in Aristotle but in Herodotus' report of the debates among the Persian regicides after the death of Smerdis. And here, there are two differences: the democratic argument was less strident than in Herodotus, if, indeed, it was ever heard at all; and, of course, in Persia, the debate ended with the reassertion of the monarchy under Darius, since a majority of the

participants feared that the techniques used to run a city-state would prove inadequate for an empire.

This debate represented the first assertion of a feature that would come to distinguish the republic from the monarchy. Up to then, there had been a tradition of open debate in the tribal councils, with the king participating as first among equals and chief justice. It appears that, in many cases, his expulsion was caused by a fear that he would use his third role as military commander to curtail or even end that tradition. While this would happen in Persia, in the Greek states the defeat of royalty, though often accompanied by an increased repression of the less propertied, preserved the right to discuss this and other matters. While the monarchies became increasingly reliant on the monarch's will, tempered by his courtiers' intrigues, the new republics, the new *polises*, gave their name to the practice known as politics. In the absence of the threat of monarchy, political debate could and did develop throughout the free citizenry. Political thinking matured as it could not in contemporary Persia. Aristotle did not invent the republic; the republic could be said to have invented Aristotle.

The main issues behind such political disputes arose from class differences. The initial benefits of the republic were felt mainly by the rich. Without any interference from a king, they stepped up the pauperisation of the lower orders. These latter responded partly by yearning for an unobtainable return to a folk-remembered golden age, but sought redress as well from new monarchical figures, called tyrants, who did bring redress but also proved to block political development as much as their earlier role models. At the time of the Persian Wars, many of the Athenian democratic party are said to have gone farther and to have conspired to hand their state to the monarchical enemy. The subsequent broadening of the entitlement to political participation to include all (male) citizens put the wealthy on the defensive. Many of these began to look to the kingdom of Sparta for deliverance. Eventually, after Sparta's victory over Athens, they got their way and imposed, through their own thirty tyrants, a mercifully brief classical forerunner of twentieth-century fascism.

The trouble was that the economic basis for these democracies was one of chattel slavery. This had begun as a useful and even (compared to killing) humanitarian means of disposing of prisoners of war; by classical republican times, it had been extended to the impoverished citizens of the *polis*. It meant that the bourgeoisie had no incentive to develop the means of production (the classical Greeks knew most of the principles used to increase production during the industrial revolution; the use of slaves

removed the incentive to anticipate these practices.) At the bottom, the poorer citizens feared that free slaves would become competition, and their situation was merely one to be avoided personally rather than ended collectively.

The result was that the most enlightened Greek state, Athens, could pay for this enlightenment and for the appeasement of its poorer citizens only by an exploitation of their weaker nominal allies, isolating it decisively from Sparta and beginning a period of inter-Greek warfare that left the city-states vulnerable to King Philip of Macedon and his son and successor, Alexander the Great. This basic problem would not be solved by the Roman republic that supplanted Macedon and the Greek city-states. Certainly, it had more success than Athens in foreign policy, but this success gave the expanded republic problems that it could not resolve. To deal with them required strong government, something denied by the conservatives. The caesars led the democrats to abandon the republic for an imperial tyranny. Two and an half centuries later, all freemen in the expanded state were admitted to citizenship, but, now, this meant only increased imperial revenues. The *polis*, the Romans' 'public thing', seemed an impossible ideal.

Yet, it would not die. As barbarian invasions broke up the empire in the west, refugees joined with local fishermen to found a new monarch-free zone: the republic of Venice. This state developed in a new context. The barbarian conquerors of the rest of Europe had less developed economies than those that they destroyed; this meant not that they had no slavery, but that they depended on it less than those they defeated. The disintegrating Roman slave-operated estates were replaced by looser units, with local chiefs commanding hosts of tenants who paid for their lands through their service, all under an increasingly national authority. Such large-scale backwardness provided a centuries-long period of economic stability, which yielded economic units too poor to require slaves, yet productive enough not to be destroyed for slavery. Commodity production revived in the form of production by free men for exchange. All this contrasted with the stability of the Roman Empire in the Byzantine east and its neighbours. Here, equally strong imperial entities battled for supremacy, replacing their rivals where they could, but only with identical social-political orders. Slavery remained unchecked, as did absolute monarchy, the dominance of intrigue over politics, and a sterility of political thinking.

So, it was left to western Europe to host the gradual revival of republican practice and thought. This took some time. By the end of the first Christian millenium, Venice's example had been followed by a rival,

Ragusa (now Dubrovnik), and in northern Italy by several city-states that declared themselves republics in opposition to the theocracy of Rome and the revived Holy Roman Empire. By 1300, according to tradition, three Alpine cantons had formed a form of republican confederation to protect their interests against the emperor.

Like their classical predecessors, these medieval republics began as small towns and villages. Only the Swiss confederation managed to transcend urban limits, perhaps because it was confederal rather than fully federated. As yet, its units were also relatively poor and rural. Within other state boundaries, the 'public thing' was fragile. It had to contend with growing trade and the resulting increase in disparities between rich and poor. The latter remained atomised and disorganised enough to look to ambitious members of one or other of the leading families for salvation (as in Rome, for example). By 1500, every Italian republic, apart from Venice, Genoa and San Marino, had become a hereditary tyranny. Moreover, as with the *polises* of classical Greece, their collective weakness had left Italy vulnerable to foreign powers.

Outside Italy, the growth of national states under kings seeking increased independence from emperor and pope meant that national monarchs retained allegiance through compromise with republican principle and by assembling their parliaments to give a voice to the rising (and increasingly tax-paying) bourgeoisie as a counterbalance to the armed feudal nobility. This delivered less than it seemed to promise. The international power struggles offered subjects little choice beyond their rulers, while, once the nobility had been subdued and trade (and, hence, revenue) expanded, most monarchs were able to abandon the parliamentary experiment.

It was precisely the rise of the Italian republics in the context of monarchical adaptation to traditional republican forms that reinvigorated political theory. Both Thomas Aquinas and Marsilio of Padua preached the mixed constitution. Later, another Italian, Nicolo Machiavelli, produced two less compromising works that reflected a more critical situation in his country. *The Prince* expressed Machiavelli's gut reaction that a tyrant was needed to unite an independent Italy. His *Discourses* recognised that the more difficult path of a restored and reformed republicanism was needed.

Outside Italy at this time, the protestant break from Rome (the reformation) was preparing opportunities for further republican experiments. In the Netherlands, it provoked a political break from monarchy and a federation of republican states: the largest republic since classical Rome. In Britain, attempts by successive monarchs to keep the

break under their control led to King Charles' execution and a still larger republic.

The religious issue alone did not inspire the new republics. The rebellious emphasis on freedom of conscience did justify moves towards republics and even towards democracy and socialism, but these were crushed with the blessing of the new churches' founders. In the end, the reformation strengthened the local German dukes and the Scandinavian kings; indeed, in Sweden, it helped revive the monarchy after the defeat of a developing republic.

On the other hand, opposition to the religion of the ruling monarchs justified moves towards republicanism by catholics as well as protestants. The very first French republic was proclaimed by catholics who rejected both the protestant Henri IV and his rival, the catholic king of Spain, though they abandoned their 'public thing' when Henri converted to catholicism. An even briefer catholic initiative was the project for a seventeenth-century Irish republic unearthed by Tomás Ó Fiaich.

The protestant republics did better, but they succumbed, too, to monarchical pressures in the end. The British surrendered to Cromwell's tyranny before restoring a monarchy that accepted, more or less, the formal practice of the *polis*. The Dutch resisted longer, before bowing to the hereditary authority of the House of Orange. In each case, as in classical times, many of the most democratic (though rarely the most nearly socialist) proved the least republican.

By 1775, the 'public thing' was limited to Venice, Ragusa, Genoa, San Marino, and the Swiss confederation and its neighbour Geneva. In Britain and Sweden, monarchy was tempered with republican representative assemblies, but politics stayed subordinate to intrigue. (In a few years, the king of Sweden would restore full monarchical absolutism.) Outside cities and cantons, the concept was still less real than possible—and a temporary possibility at that.

Within ten years, this had changed because of the American Declaration of Independence and its realisation by force of arms, albeit including the arms of monarchies more absolute than the British oppressor. This achievement has been enhanced by the new republic's survival and current international pre-eminence. Much of the credit for this has been given to the Federalists, the drafters of the new country's constitution—John Adams, James Madison and John Jay—but they built on the unifying concept of the white American community opposing European monarchical intrigues, acting, in effect, as heirs of the British republic before Cromwell's subversion.

The Federalists contributed two further unifying concepts. First, the

new *polis* would be independent, if tolerant, of all religions. This had not been the practice in the former colonies. Nor had it been a feature of previous states going back to prehistoric times: those states had seen religious conformity as ensuring unity. Only Cromwell had been tolerant but, then, not to Catholics. However, while religion could and still can help develop political thinking, its dogmatic enforcement must inhibit it.

Even more importantly, the Federalists asserted the sanctity of private property. This had existed with the 'public thing' from Roman times onward, when private land ownership completed the unequal division of wealth. Minorities always dissented: e.g. rebel slaves, reformation anabaptists and, in Cromwell's time, the Levellers. Secure private property was obviously in the interests of America's capitalist founding fathers, not least those who were slave-owners. It also provided a necessary stimulus to opening the new country's western frontier to discontented propertyless whites, who carved their own properties from the communal holdings of the primitive American-Indian republics.

George Washington had been president of the United States for only four months when the people of Paris stormed the Bastille. When he was re-elected, France was a republic. Many academics emphasise the conservative aims of the war of American independence, but it had inspired a republicanism that was far less restrained. The younger republic executed its king and queen, instituted full manhood suffrage, did not just separate church and state but also seized the lands of the majority Catholic church, abolished slavery throughout all its territories, and tried to spread republicanism in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Italy. It tried, too, to tackle the divisions between rich and poor that had led to the downfall of its republican predecessors.

All this created problems that forced the revolutionaries to reverse major parts of the revolution. The revolutionary wars became a means of expropriating the client republics in order to solve France's economic crisis. The same crisis meant abandoning the attempt at a command economy and ending the voting rights of those who desired them most. To increase exploitation, slavery was restored in the colonies. The latter was enacted by a new tyrant, a former member of the democratic Jacobin party, Napoleon Bonaparte. He made himself emperor, allowed voting only for staged plebiscites (for which, however, he restored manhood suffrage), and signed a concordat with the Vatican. In 1815, he was overthrown by the older European monarchies, which restored the old monarchical ruling house to reign in the British manner. For the moderate republicans of the USA, this confirmed their moderation. For many Europeans, it confirmed the lessons taught by the careers of Julius

Caesar, the House of Orange, and Cromwell.

The monarchs were less sure. The great revolution had destroyed more thrones than could be restored. As after Cromwell, but now on a continental scale, several monarchies had saved themselves by conceding some revolutionary principles; in France, monarchy was limited by a constitution, while Prussia finally had to end serfdom. Only bourgeois weakness thwarted even greater compromises.

So, the European monarchs founded a Holy Alliance against the threat of revolution and to help each other rule by Christian (essentially feudal-absolutist) principles. For a century, in spite of major upheavals, this was reasonably successful. It could not stop Belgian and Norwegian independence, nor that of the Turkish empire's Balkan colonies, but it ensured that the new states had hereditary monarchs, like the new German empire and the united Italy. The hostility to republics was such that when Portugal discarded its monarchy in 1910, Britain and Germany opened talks about seizing its colonies—talks that were ended only by the First World War.

Yet, republicanism continued to advance. The Holy Alliance could not block it in France or Portugal, let alone in Latin America or China. To protect the hereditary principle, compromises had to be made with such developing forces as democracy and nationalism. In Italy, a single monarch replaced six others, the bulk of the papal territories and a province of the Austrian empire (including the former Venetian republic). In Germany, the new empire accepted manhood suffrage for its Reichstag.

However, as with the separation of church and state, republicanism was better able to identify with the new forces, if only because of its openness to new political ideas. It was best able to identify with democracy, since there had never really been any principled reason why some citizens rather than others should be allowed the vote. Identification was made more easy by the European and American struggles against slavery, though less so in America, where, in the USA, bourgeois radicals introduced full white male suffrage a quarter of a century before waging civil war to stop slavery and where, in Brazil, the republic was founded by former slave-owners revenging themselves on the emperor who had destroyed their property rights in slaves. Nonetheless, from the 1848 revolution in France onwards, republicans tended to oppose slavery more than monarchists.

They were readier still to extend voting rights. Few monarchs were willing to copy the German empire, and manhood suffrage came to their states, if at all before 1914, only after major agitation. As for votes for

women, they came first in the new western states of the USA. Most of the new republics agreed to separate religion from politics. Interestingly, the European pioneer, France, did not break Napoleon's link until the twentieth century, and then it failed to extend the separation to primary education. Indeed, in most states, separation was honoured more fully in form than in substance.

As the pages of this journal show, the most controversial of republicanism's new relationships is with nationalism. Of course, nationalism can be, and has been, nurtured and mobilised by absolute monarchs, as well as by democrats and republicans. It is true, too, that the French and, indeed, previously, the British revolutions showed internationalist aspects, presaging permanent political revolutions. Closer examination shows that the British attempt at extending its struggle was more protestant than republican and more power-political than either. Similarly, the French revolution's establishment of client republics ignored their citizens' desire to build nation states and dampened their republicanism by extortion (via expropriation, taxes, etc.) for the revolutionary mother country. For all this, nationalism does have greater affinity with republicanism than with monarchy, particularly since the former broke through the shell of the city-state. Both nation and republic respond to the needs of an increasingly powerful bourgeoisie. The common cultural experience that goes to create a nation is essential to a genuine republic, larger than a city and its hinterland, and more so where the cement of religion is separate from the state. Such identification is negative only in three circumstances. Its emphasis on common cultural bonds tends to lead to valuing those nationals who would subvert republican principles (like Sir Tony O'Reilly, Doctor of Marketing) above foreign republicans. Further, it hinders the recognition of the republic's need for international socialism. Finally, it can be the nationalism of the oppressor, rather than of the oppressed. All these problems can be difficult to recognise, but their results are displayed vividly in today's USA.

What republicans collectively could not discover was an economic perspective to combat the class divisions that had destroyed past attempts to realise its ideal. Bourgeois republicans tended to be satisfied with the general structure of society, sharing with their less wealthy allies a hostility to less productive and relatively marginal exploitation, such as landlordism, and, even then, to a lesser degree. Their radical supporters extended their hostility to the banks and tried to diminish poverty by command, as in the French revolution: they still hankered for the society of small enterprises that was then receiving the *coup de grâce* from the

necessary collectivisation that was occurring and the increasing numbers of free but propertyless workers.

These material differences to the slave societies of Athens and Rome created conditions for a real solution to the class problem: i.e. socialism, and this attracted some consistent republicans. Their wealthy leaders would have none of it. They went the other way, embracing liberal economics and, in many cases, making peace with the Holy Alliance. Between them were the traditional republicans: small bourgeois, artisans and small farmers—the traditional Irish ‘men of no property’. They maintained friendly contacts with socialists. At the end of the American civil war, Abraham Lincoln corresponded amicably with the International Workingmen’s Association. Later, his supporter Charles Sumner was said to have been recruited to it, along with the Irish republican leader James Stephens. Despite this, the creed of such republicans (including members of Lincoln and Sumner’s Republican Party) lacked the resources to oppose capitalist economics. In power, they followed a capitalist rather than a specifically republican line, allying with the heirs of their movement’s monarchist foes and opposing the socialist heirs of their republican predecessors. This became easier as the forms of republicanism became more general. In France, during the first half of the twentieth century, the ineptly named Radical Socialist Party claimed to uphold the true republican traditions against left and right. In practice, the only inheritance of the great revolution defended by it was that revolution’s refusal to give women the vote. For the twenty years between the two world wars, its members sat in every cabinet, left and right, agreeing happily to the foulest capitalist and imperialist practices.

Before this, rival imperial capitalisms had loosed on humanity the First World War. After four years, it was won by the side that had recruited America. The outcome established capitalist democratic republicanism as the dominant political form internationally, although, outside Europe it was happy to support pliant colonial and semi-colonial tyrannies, while Soviet Russia offered the promise not just of new politics but also of a new economic order.

This picture of world capitalist politics has stayed much the same since 1918, with two exceptions. On the right, the national bourgeoisies in central Europe retreated into a form of imperialist tyranny called fascism and precipitated the Second World War, which destroyed it and enabled a victorious republicanism to replace the remaining direct colonialism with a semi-colonialism under its own political form. Half a century later, Soviet Russia imploded because its leaders had abandoned republicanism, claiming it to be superfluous since they had achieved

socialism, but ensuring that in reality they had achieved merely a new form of tyranny. The true heirs of the great Soviet initiative remain, like the French republicans after 1815, learning the lessons and planning for the future, while they struggle against the pure and simple formal republicans who dominate the earth.

In Ireland, republicanism has diverged from the international pattern only in its early identification with a developing national identity that had harked back to various 'wild ganders' and to the then current booby who claimed to be the rightful (Stuart) king of Britain. The great French revolution inspired a left wing version, distinguished not only by its maintenance of a form of revolutionary strategy (physical force) but also a programme more democratic than that of its moderate Home Rule rivals. Like the latter, but also like other republican movements, Irish republicanism was prepared to compromise with monarchy and imperialism. The leaders of the 1916 rising (excluding, significantly, the socialist Connolly) offered to crown a Prussian prince as king of Ireland in return for aid against the British. In 1922, the bourgeois wing, represented by its elected deputies, voted for a peace with Britain that compromised their republic, while the petty bourgeois armed wing fought against it. Today, most of the heirs of both wings have settled for a republic with six counties missing, and only a small minority remains prepared to do anything about it. Church and state are formally separate, but in a manner extremely favourable to the church. Those republicans who seek to complete the revolution tend to depart even further from the basis of their stated political ideal. Among them, political discussion is subordinate to the claims of physical force, even when physical force is not being used; since 1938, the clandestine IRA Army Council has been militant republicanism's ruling body, above the Sinn Féin Ard Chomhairle. This places intrigue above politics, as evidenced most clearly in the history of the former majority Official republicans. Here, the Official Army Council used its authority and the resemblances between the political practices of the two movements to manoeuvre its followers behind the tyrannical police-'socialism' of the degenerated Soviet bloc and then, also in tune with that bloc's evolution, into open reformism.¹

So, revolutionary republicans have been more revolutionary as nationalists than as defenders of the 'public thing'. This can be seen in three issues that reveal their strengths and their weaknesses: the neo-liberal economic strategy of the present government and its 'Rainbow' predecessor; Ireland's position in Europe (emphasised by Kevin McCorry, in issue one of *The Republic*, as a republican weak spot); and

national unity.

On the first issue, republicans can and should attack present economic policies, even though these have increased employment, cut taxation and maximised economic growth—achievements of which previous generations of Irish republicans could but dream. There are two replies to this. The first is the pragmatic one that this prosperity is appearing as a flash in the pan and that it was won by policies that have deprived the state of valuable resources for the lean years that are coming. Republicans would add that the increase in the economic gap between rich and poor caused by these policies is creating precisely that alienation from politics that separated the poorer classes from the ‘public thing’ and helped destroy it in previous periods and countries. They might add, accurately, that, more than in the past, these policies are being backed by the suppression of long-term opposition to them through the power of the media not just to suppress but also to distort, compounded by the difficulty of denouncing this publicly and effectively when most national newspapers are owned by a single person.

The trouble is that Irish republicanism’s essentially military-political nature is challenged by the central fact of political life, particularly in its democratic form: the central importance of economics. The movement cannot offer an alternative to the present neo-liberal cant without going beyond the boundaries of the nation state and without losing (as did the Official republicans) the revolutionary impetus of their nationalism. They can, and must, turn to the socialists for interim economic measures, but the growth of the global economy, albeit a super-exploitative one, means that any economic alternative must be more than that summarised in the idea ‘Sinn Féin’.

Similarly, in Europe the republican may defend national interests not as a nationalist but rather on the political field as defender of the ‘public thing’. It is, after all, the European Union that set the guidelines for present economic policy through the Maastricht Treaty, even if consistent neo-liberals (McCreevy, Harney, Duncan Smith) now consider those guidelines inadequate. Maastricht guides the partnership programmes in a manner least favourable to the workers. The privatisation frenzy, criticised by Colm Rapple (in issue one of this journal) and worked with such indifferent results in Britain, is to be the rule under the EU, even where real competition is impossible (e.g. modern rail), but where trade union power will be broken by division into private companies (the real purpose). Simple nationalism is mistaken tactically, as well as in principle; it is all too like the oppressor nationalism of the British Tory Euro-sceptics, defending the old imperial currency. With the Nice Treaty

passed and another referendum to be introduced on a European constitution, it should be understood that, as it is developing, Europe is not only not socialist but is also not truly republican. The more enthusiastic Europhiles support the union as a counter to the USA. The trouble is that, under capitalism, the EU is likely to be the US's rival in the super-exploitation of the dependent world and probably, as inter-imperial rivalry increases, an enemy in arms. For socialists, the cry must be for the United States of Socialist Europe, but this will be adopted all too easily by reformist Europhiles like Proinsias de Rossa. In any case, it will take time to educate the electors after the events of the last twenty years. In the meantime, republicans and socialist republicans should concentrate on specific constitutional demands to maintain the national veto (particularly in matters of war and peace); on extending it to allow nullification of previous treaties (a strategy used in the early years of the USA); and, particularly, on the duty of all member states to hold referenda to approve constitutional changes and to allow popular initiatives for referenda: that is, confederation rather than federalism. Such provisions will allow the blockage of militarist and globalist-imperialist measures. They are also democratic and republican.

Compared to its simple reflex opposition to the EU, Irish republicanism can, and does, claim vindication in Northern Ireland. It has won, at last, what seems to be, to paraphrase Michael Collins, freedom to achieve unity. Closer examination reveals major flaws. They do not include the suppression of a mythical 'protestant nation'. As an entity, the mainly protestant unionist majority in the six county province acts, in its essential parochialism and reliance on religion as a social unifier, less as a nation than as a pre-national *polis*, and, moreover, in its culture of colonial elitism and monarchism, it is even more primitive than a *polis*: less Athens than Sparta.

A real flaw is that Britain is permitting the possibility of Irish unity only in a manner that will cause the least disturbance to its interests and that will, in particular, bind the whole island of Ireland into its defence network. It was no accident that the Good Friday agreement was followed by the Irish government's formal and specific abandonment of its election promise not to join the so-called Partnership for Peace unless mandated to do so by a referendum (a classic piece of intrigue). Within Northern Ireland, sectarianism is enshrined formally in the new order. Above all, that order depends on the good will of the British government. Irish republicans, real and nominal, have a major collective responsibility in this. The rival constitutional parties have clear aims: to keep the northern troubles from affecting the twenty-six county state and its

uninterested bourgeoisie. Only after the self-sacrifice of the hunger strikers and the popular response had shown that the struggle would not be ended on traditional partitionist terms did the official Irish government start consistent diplomacy on the issue.

The revolutionary republicans allowed their rivals to get away with this through their traditional failings. An armed struggle fought as if it could drive the British army into the sea alienated much potential sympathy for reunification and left it restricted to what was a militant minority of the Northern Irish minority community. The mobilisations after Bloody Sunday and during the hunger strikes brought gains that were squandered in order to maintain a war that would end, by the time of the ceasefire, as one of attrition, facing defeat. The leadership responded with intrigue: secret negotiations resulting in a ceasefire on terms hidden from the rank and file and sold as a victory. This has led to disillusion and splits centred mainly on those who seek to resume the armed struggle. The leadership majority knows that such an option will mean not only military disaster but also the loss of the support that their peace strategy has won in the Republic, yet it cannot move too fast lest more defect. Seeing politics itself as being inherently reformist, the leadership is fulfilling this assumption by becoming as reformist as political. For it, characteristically, the choice is one of armed struggle or reformism—disaster or a minor role in future bourgeois coalitions.

Meanwhile, the unionists increase their pressure, hoping to force the republican movement into ‘immediate and terrible [and probably suicidal] war’. If unionism wanted real reconciliation, the inspection of the arms dumps would be enough for them. The republican leaders are reluctant to risk their control of the nationalist vanguard by organising the necessary popular mobilisations against breaches of the Good Friday agreement on sectarian marches, routine rights of way (particularly that to Holy Cross School, Ardoyne), and the loyalist use of arms to intimidate catholics. They have to be geared to spread south of the border in a way that cannot be accomplished by the republican leaders’ elitist approach. They will provide stimuli for more working class challenges to the state powers, north and south, and open the way thereby to a workers’ republic, leading to the world socialism that is the only way to give security to the ‘public thing’.

To those who object that, outside small select units, socialist initiatives have failed wherever attempted, it should be stated, once more, that over the two millennia before 1776 the same was said of republicanism.

Notes

¹ Apart from its role as the apparently viable alternative to imperialism, Stalinism appealed to the Irish republican movement for two reasons, neither of them revolutionary nor even republican. It appealed to nationalism by its strategy of 'First the republic, then the workers' republic' and its assurance that a socialist society could be achieved in a single country. In addition, the Stalinite use of intrigue corresponded to the similar practice within Irish republicanism.