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The State of Marxism in Ireland

THE MOST appropriate commemoration of the centenary of Karl Marx's death by an Irish party which would claim to be Marxist is an intense bout of self-criticism. In other European countries where parties inspired by Marxism are much stronger than in Ireland, the period since 1956 has seen much theoretical and political debate, of which the upsurge of 'Eurocommunism', now in decline, was only the most recent. Although some Irish Marxists (particularly strongly represented in the Communist Party of Ireland), would take pride in the fact that 'orthodox' Marxism has not been challenged to the same extent in Ireland as in other European countries, this absence of serious discussion and debate is no sign of strength — whatever one thinks of Eurocommunism.

In fact it was in part just because the tradition of Irish Marxism represented by the CPI was so untroubled by internal debate that it has proved utterly incapable of giving political leadership to the working class in either of the two Irish states. 'Orthodoxy' has only meant loyalism to the Soviet Union, combined with a view of Irish history which owes more to nationalist assumptions than Marxism. The miserable obverse of this has been Irish Trotskyism, which replaces loyalism with a facile anti-Stalinism, whilst also contaminating Marxism with nationalism.

What are the causes of this depressing situation? It is easy enough to blame the objective situation. But this only echoes the view of academic historians who have simply explained the weakness of socialist and communist ideas in Ireland by reference to such factors as the strength of religion, nationalism, or the weight of a peasant economy and culture. While it would be wrong to ignore these factors, they should not blind us to a specific ideological one, first noted by Engels: 'Ireland still remains the *sacra insula*, whose aspirations must on no account be mixed up with the profane class struggles of the rest of the world.'¹

Complacent insularity and anti-theoretical philistinism is a long intellectual tradition in Ireland from which the left has not been insulated.

One indication of this should be obvious. Almost every organisation on the left in Ireland claims to be inspired by the writings of James Connolly. Yet nearly seventy years since his death, no party has taken on itself the essential task of producing a complete edition of his writings. Their members have to rely on various selections, many of them done by people whose interest

in the development of Marxism in Ireland is dubious, to say the least. The reason is not one of resources — a small group with the minimum of financial resources could have accomplished the task. It was not done for a reason which takes us to the heart of the historic weakness of Marxism in Ireland. Connolly's significance has been defined, not through a comprehensive and critical reading of all his writings combined with a serious investigation of the economic and political conditions of the Ireland of the period, of the Irish and European labour movements and Connolly's own history, but rather through the selective appropriation of those bits of his writings which fit in with the current needs of the organisations concerned.

Much of what passes for Marxism in Ireland tends to be little more than a few basic notions learned mechanically, and kept in the back of the mind to allow their holder to feel that in the last analysis he/she is in possession of a superior form of knowledge to the masses. We could repeat of them what Engels had to say of many German 'Marxists',

'...too many of the younger Germans simply make use of the phrase historical materialism (and *everything* can be turned into a phrase) only in order to get their own relatively scanty historical knowledge constructed into a neat system as quickly as possible, and then they deem themselves something very tremendous.'²

One indication of the lack of a vital Marxist culture in Ireland is precisely the absence of a substantial body of economic, political and historical work on Ireland written by Marxists. To put it crudely, where are the Marxist histories of the Unionist party, of the DUP, of Fianna Fáil, of the Roman Catholic Church? Most incredibly there is no Marxist history of the Irish labour movement. It should surely be a cause of much self-criticism that people in search of a basic Marxist history of Ireland could end up being recommended to read T.A. Jackson's slight work, defective even when it was first published, saturated as it was in nationalist assumptions and a work that is essentially worse than useless, implanting errors and distortions that make their purveyors deficient even by the standards of modern school textbooks.

In recent years there have been signs that this situation is beginning to change. There has been an

increasing amount of academic work which at the very minimum has been influenced by Marxism or deals seriously with the sort of areas that will be significant for the development of a serious Irish Marxism. The only party on the left which has related seriously to such developments, whilst at the same time making its own independent contribution, has been The Workers' Party. Ironically, this has occurred in a party whose historic relation to Marxism has not been an organic one. Evolving out of a tradition which, whilst it had a socialist component, was not Marxist, it has demonstrated a capacity to re-evaluate many of the fundamentals of traditional left-wing thinking in Ireland. It has been able to promote the necessary theoretical work and research which has begun the process of developing a Marxism that takes full account of the realities of life in both states in Ireland. It is perhaps because that, unlike the CPI, The Workers' Party could not *assume* that because of its institutional links to the USSR and the international communist movement it was in a sense 'naturally' Marxist, that it has had to begin the process of *constructing* its relationship to Marxism, a process in which nothing can be taken for granted. This has already produced positive results in theoretical and political terms, but given the depressing environment sketched out above, there is clearly no room for complacency. In this context, the party should be open to what can be learned from the debates within Marxism that have taken place elsewhere.

DOGMATISM AND REVISIONISM

It is above all necessary to avoid the danger of an approach which treats Marx's work as a finished system, a complete theory which holds the key to all the problems of the universe. The great Italian communist Antonio Gramsci warned of the dangers of this approach: 'Marx has not written a catechism, he is not a Messiah who left a string of parables pregnant with categorical imperatives, indisputable absolute norms, beyond the categories of time and space.'³

This does not mean that Marx did not accomplish an historic theoretical revolution; simply that in establishing a set of concepts for analysing social formations and their contradictions, Marx, who was not super-human, could not in many areas go beyond laying the foundations on which it was the task of his successors to build. As Louis Althusser, the French communist philosopher who has done much to establish the full dimensions of Marx's achievement (see his *For Marx* London 1969) has written,

We must remember Lenin's perfectly clear phrase: Marx 'gave us the corner-stones..' None of the classics gave us a unified and finished whole, but a set of works comprising a number of solid theoretical principles and analyses, mixed up with difficulties, contradictions and gaps. There is nothing astonishing about that. If they provided us with the beginnings of a theory of the conditions and forms of class struggle in capitalist societies, it is nevertheless absurd to consider that this theory could have been born in a pure and complete form.⁴

Althusser points out in his essay that increasing talk of a 'Crisis of Marxism' in the 1970's was not something from which communists should recoil in negative, defensist positions. From the time that Marxism has become a social and political force by fusing with the workers' movement, its enemies have proclaimed its

crisis for it and attempted to exploit its real problems. It is as necessary in such situations to avoid a simple defensist position — denying that problems exist, as it is to go to the other extreme and become so 'self-critical' that Marxism itself is put into question. A good example of the latter tendency would be the 'neo-Gramscian' position which has become increasingly influential in Britain especially within the Communist Party, as increasing numbers of articles in *Marxism Today* bear witness. Two prominent representatives of this tendency were recently interviewed by an American socialist journal where they concentrated on criticising the 'economistic deformation' of Marxism which they claimed Gramsci had done most to combat. Their definitions of economism are significant. They argue that economism has two forms. Their outline of the first form is not one with which issue can be taken: 'The first concerns the role played by the 'superstructures' which are seen as epiphenomena of the economic structure, mechanically reflecting the latter while playing no active part in the historical process.'

It is their definition of the second form that is problematical: 'The other form is class reductionism which concerns the nature of the superstructures. In this case politics and ideology are conceived as determined by the position of agents in the relations of production'.

The political implications of their analysis is clear: "We need a different concept of socialism, for so long as it is conceived only in terms of socialisation of the means of production it has very little to offer to satisfy the demands of the 'new movements' (feminism, gays, environmentalists, CND etc.)"⁵

The underlying assumption of these arguments is that valid political analysis can only be anti-economist, but that this also entails analysis being 'anti-class reductionist'. This seems to mean that it is impermissible to relate politics and ideology to social classes and their conflicts. Now whilst it is clearly possible to put forward extremely crude and simplistic analyses of the relationship between classes and politics and ideology, it is nevertheless integral to Marxism that political and ideological structures and conflicts are nothing other than the forms (varied and complex) of class struggle.

There is in their approach a dubious anti-Leninist version of Gramsci. They criticise existing left parties for having simplistic strategies for seizing state power, and not being concerned with the need to relate to diverse 'popular' movements in an attempt to build up an alternative 'hegemony' — bloc of political and social forces to that of the ruling class *before* state power is taken. However, how some possible fusion of these diverse new 'popular' movements will add up to an alternative 'hegemony' is never adequately argued through. The results of this form of 'anti-economism' is an eclecticism where no prioritising of struggles is possible since no principle of evaluation is provided. This has little in common with Gramsci's approach which clearly emphasised that the roots of any class's hegemony are in the role it plays in production. Thus while waging his own prolonged struggle against economism, Gramsci never departed from the central principle of Marx's science of history: that class conflict rooted in a mode or modes of production is fundamental for the understanding of any society.⁶

As one relatively sympathetic commentator has put it; 'The neo-Gramscian focus on "political intellectual and moral leadership" has been associated with a corresponding neglect of economic contradictions and constraints'.⁷

Yet if these exotic products of 'advanced theoretical work' are barren, it would be wrong to complacently assume that we can simply turn to the verities of "Marxist Leninist" thought. This is impossible, because any body of theory has to be constantly developed in relation to transformations in the object which it set out to analyse. The problem is particularly greater for Marxism with regard to politics. This is because, although for Marx's practise as a revolutionary, politics was absolutely primary, he did not develop a comprehensive theory of politics comparable to his economic analysis. Although there is an enormous quantity of Marx and Engel's writings about politics, as one commentator put it, '...these authors did not specifically discuss the region of the political at the level of theoretical *systematicity*. In other words, since they were occupied in the direct exercise of their own political practise, they did not explicitly deal with its theory in the strong sense of the term.'⁸

This fact, together with the systematic analysis of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*, did contribute to the development of a type of economic fatalism in the socialist movement which believed that the transition to socialism would be a product of the simple ripening of the internal economic contradictions of capitalism. It was this over-simplified reading of *Capital* which led Gramsci to greet the October Revolution as 'The Revolution against *Capital*'. Gramsci recognised in Lenin the theorist who had recaptured the revolutionary essence of Marx's own work in his own theoretical assault on economism. This meant a break with the notion that the simple development of the productive forces would be the motor of revolution. It also meant an understanding of politics and of the position held by the state and the superstructures in the class struggle. Far from simply being born out of economic struggles of the working class, political struggles relate to the position of *all* classes and of important non-class groups in society, in their relationship to the state:

The fact that economic interests play a decisive role does not in the least imply that the economic (trade-union) struggle is of prime importance; for the most essential of the 'decisive' interests of classes can be satisfied *only* by radical political changes in general.⁹

However, two swallows do not make a summer, and it would be wrong to dwell on Lenin and Gramsci, and neglect another major reality of Marxism in this century. This was a certain rigidification and narrowing of the concerns of Marxist thought that set in in both the Soviet Union and much of the international Communist movement from the late 1920's. We do not share the facile Trotskyist notion that this was the responsibility of 'Stalinism', although Stalin's influential *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* represents an example of an economistic approach to Marxism. However, the problem is wider than that of Stalin. One simple indication of this being that Trotsky shared an economistic perspective. While its roots are partly in the major problems experienced in the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union, they are also specifically theoretical — they go back to the work of Marx himself.

Thus, some of Stalin's formulations do appear to be based on what Marx did write. Even the classic statement of the primacy of the productive forces in accounting for historical transformations which

relegates class struggle to a secondary level (and is a clear example of economism) does have some basis in Marx's own formulations. ("First the productive forces of society change and develop, and then in conformity with them, men's relations of production, their economic relations, change." Stalin, *Leninism* London 1940, p.608). There is in Marx examples of a mechanical, one-sided materialism which treats the development of the productive forces as the primary cause of historical change. However, in his work as a whole it is clear that the driving force of history is the class struggle and that this cannot be adequately analysed independently of politics and ideology.

We need to distinguish in the writings of Marx and Engels between what was radically new... and what was merely repetition of old ideas, or provisional points of transition toward revolutionary positions and analyses.¹⁰

Marx's writings must therefore be read in an open-minded and critical way. Since the 1950's there has been a resurgence of critical thought in many communist parties, not always of a particularly useful or progressive nature. There has, nevertheless, been in many cases a real improvement in the quality of Marxist thought and debate. Unfortunately the Irish Communist Party is one of those least affected by these changes.

ECONOMISM AND IRELAND

It is an indication of the weakness of what often passes for Marxism in Ireland that it is The Workers' Party which is usually branded as 'economist'. Its critics from the CPI to *Magill* use the term in a way that Lenin would have scorned. In Ireland 'economism' means refusing to accept the primacy of the so-called 'national question'. If this is the case, we can only hope that it gets stronger, for it will only contribute to the destruction of the influence of a reactionary ideology on the labour movement. In fact economism is a problem in Ireland as it is in all capitalist societies, for an integral strategy of all bourgeois states is to encourage the natural sectionalism and corporate consciousness of the working class. The dangers of this are particularly clear in the Republic. Here the fixation of the left for so long on the 'unfinished' national revolution has meant that, until very recently, little attention was paid to the analysis of the actually existing bourgeois state in the Republic, and to the nature of the main parties of the bourgeoisie. Instead we had the simplistic notion that as both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were 'bourgeois' parties it would only be a matter of time before the masses perceived this and rejected them. As the profound structural crisis of the economy intensifies, the real dangers of an economistic position will become clearer. Economism consistently exaggerates the automatically radicalising effects of economic crisis, and as it has no conception of political strategy — either bourgeois or socialist — underestimates what Gramsci referred to as the 'organisational' reserves of the bourgeoisie which can allow it to recover from what may appear to the economist as the 'final death agony of capitalism'.

These reserves are various. There is the personalised political culture, encouraged by the infamous political machines of the major political parties, which has encouraged a deeply ingrained individualistic approach to politics and which cuts across the wider solidarities which the left has to encourage. A major problem for any serious party of the left will be how it will relate to

these forms of clientilism. Another reserve is the authoritarian aspects of Irish political culture noted by political scientists, which have their roots in the structures of familial and sexual relations, and in the deep inbrication of state and church in broad areas of social life particularly education, welfare and the family. The temptation of economism to dismiss the constitutional debate, which in its broadest sense includes all these areas, and to have a dismissive and/or opportunist relation to the womens' movement, must be resisted. Similarly economism is often complicit with the reactionary nationalist aspects of bourgeois culture in the Republic — which in their own 'moderate' ways the Coalition partners participate in. The irredentist aspects of southern politics embodied in Articles Two and Three of the Constitution continues to encourage the idea that here is 'unfinished business' in which all classes have a common interest. Apart from its obviously reactionary effects in the North where it serves as an aid to the SDLP, this aspect of nationalist culture has tended to obscure class divisions in the Republic.

Economism today means, not the rejection of the primacy of the national question, but failing to perceive the essential inter-connection between the question of democracy and socialism. It was in fact classical Marxism's first great political discovery (in the analysis of the revolutions of 1848) that the meaning of the democratic revolution was only specificable in relation to that of proletarian revolution. No less than the attainment of political democracy and national independence in an earlier age, the attainment of sexual equality, the destruction of clientilism, and the elimination of nationalist influences in the Republic's politics must become integral aspects of the struggle for socialism. However, these democratic struggles no

matter how popular, do not, as the neo-Gramscians argue, displace the struggle for socialism which has its roots in economic class struggle. The attainment of their objectives is a condition of the class differentiation which must take place before the struggle for socialism becomes possible.

THE FUTURE

In one sense, it could be argued that Marxism has never been stronger in Ireland than it is at the present. There are certainly more people who would define themselves as Marxist than ever before, and even the extremely conformist institutions of higher education in both states are no longer able to insulate their students from the influence of Marxist ideas. There are more Marxists working in the fields of Irish history and politics than ever before. In a wider perspective the profound economic problems of both states creates the conditions for a possible mass receptivity to Marxist analysis of the current situation. Yet the experience of British Marxism should make us wary about over-optimism. An upsurge of academic Marxism since 1968 has not in fact resulted in much serious work on the key question of the nature and crisis of the British state. It also has not been able to benefit from the crisis of British labourism to get roots in the working class. Much of what passes for Marxism in Ireland is narrowly academicist or is wedded to fundamentally reactionary positions on the need to complete the 'national revolution'. It has therefore no possibility of making a progressive fusion with the labour movement. The radical political break which The Workers' Party has made with the traditional positions of 'Irish Marxism' puts it in a pre-eminent position to make Marxism a real force in Ireland. An essential element in accomplishing this will be its continuation and intensification of its own theoretical work.

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