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# THE REPUBLICAN TRADITION

Des O Hagan

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## INTRODUCTION

The following lecture was delivered by Des. O'Hagan in March 1975 at the University of Bangor, Wales.

In it he traces the development of Irish Republicanism from its founder, Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen to the present day. Concisely, yet comprehensively, he shows clearly that Irish Republicanism is a distinct philosophy separate yet linked to all the major progressive movements elsewhere in the world.

Des O'Hagan, a native of Belfast and former Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Stranmillis, Belfast, is Editor of the United Irishman (monthly paper of the Republican Movement). He is also Director of Education for Sinn Fein and a member of the Ard Comhairle of Sinn Fein. He is the author of the famous letters from Long Kesh prison camp where he was interned for over 12 months in 1971-1972.

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Comrades:

The title of my talk this evening, "Republicanism, the vehicle of the Irish National Liberation Struggle" raises many important questions in terms of revolutionary theory and practise. You who are philosophers will have already noted that I say "the" and not "a" vehicle of the Irish National Liberation Struggle. It is obviously therefore my purpose to convince you whether, Communist or Socialist, radical or democrat, that the distinct historical experience of the Irish people confirms that there is only one historically valid and unique road by which the Irish people will attain their independence. That road is the Republican road.

It is necessary therefore to discuss at some considerable length the theoretical nature of the revolutionary philosophy called Republicanism. To outline in conceptual terms the distinct characteristics of Republicanism which enables it to stand positively as a coherent revolutionary body of thought as a "unique" domain. But it is not only necessary in the theoretical philosophical sense but equally important politically so as to disqualify bogus contenders to the title Republican, to exclude, as it were, monster claimants.

Modern Republicans by virtue of revolutionary necessity are Marxist-Leninists and therefore the approach to understanding Republicanism must be by way of dialectical and historical materialism. Concepts so arrived at will be clothed in the flesh and blood of actual revolutionary experience and not snatched from some romantic ether or quarried in the mud of British empiricism. This is not to say that there is no "idealistic" aspect to the struggle of Republicans against Anglo-American Imperialism nor would we deny that at times our approach is conditioned by the exigencies of immediate circumstances. To be sure like all revolutionary bodies we are forced, often against our will, to react to opposing forces.

But Republicanism, as I understand it, tries at all times to permeate its practise with a consistently revolutionary theoretical understanding and we demand of our members as far as is possible a recognition of the fact that a prior autonomous grasp of theory is necessary to correct practise; at the same time we seek to avoid the pitfalls of casuistry or sterile "academic" debate, which characterises so many latter day revolutionary socialist organisations.

What then are the fundamental characteristics of Republican theory? Clearly one can trace the evolution of four distinct features, the absence of any one would, it seems to me invalidate any claim to be within the revolutionary Republican tradition.

Republicanism is separatist, it is secular, it is socialist, and it is internationalist.

Even a cursory glance at Irish history from its modern stage will confirm the existence of these four conceptual strands. Modern Ireland, like modern Europe begins in the last two decades of the 18th Century. The ideas of the Rights of Man as opposed to the Divine Right of Kings are an expression of the emergence of the new bourgeois class; but contrary to many opinions held about the Irish national struggle and her people, that revolutionary fervour which culminated in the French Revolution found fertile soil in the oppressed Irish people.

Ireland, through the Irish Volunteers, later described as the United Irishmen, celebrated the downfall of the Bastille in 1791; Wolfe Tone, recognised as the Father of Republicanism, was in close touch with developments in France. The abortive revolution in 1798 was in fact the Irish contribution to changing the face of Europe. But this is not all. The revolutionary programme outlined by Tone and his comrades, while reflecting the bourgeois internationalism of their day, encapsulated both distinct Irish problems and efforts at their resolution. Some of those problems and their unresolved character are with us to the present day.

Tone's contribution to theory exists at the four conceptual levels I have already mentioned. On separatism he argues "...to break the connection with England, the never failing source of all our evils" and to achieve this (secularism) "to create the unity of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter and substitute the common name of Irishman". Both clear statements of a secular, separatist nature. It is also equally apparent that Tone was no narrow, chauvinistic nationalist nor were his comrades. Their enthusiastic support for the French Revolution is, I would insist, ample evidence of their consistent internationalism. Did not the Volunteers sing the Marsellaise on the way to the Battle of Antrim in 1798?

But what of socialism? Clearly it would be ludicrous both politically and theoretically to expect a fully coherent socialist doctrine at this point in time, (the late 18th century). (Although Ireland can boast to the brilliant forerunner of Marx-Engels in William Thompson of Cork, (1775 - 1833), who wrote on Cooperation, the Equal Distribution of Wealth and incredibly enough on Women's Liberation). But there is, however, I feel an embryonic Socialist statement in one of Tone's remarks that they (the emergent Irish bourgeoisie) "would free themselves by the aid of that large and respectable class of the community, the men of no property". Embryonic, but impressive, for its insight into future world history.

Subsequent Irish history of the 19th and 20th centuries is a series of unsuccessful attempts, more or less, to articulate in fuller form these four fundamental principles of Republicanism. What is incredible, though on reflection perhaps not so, is the manner in which the Irish people's struggle to free themselves from British oppression has been depicted as a succession of romantic, despairing gestures totally unlinked to the vicious material exploitation of the country by British and now Anglo-American Imperialism.

This is not to say that the indigenous Irish revolutionary tradition has proceeded through a gradual incline until one arrives at a fully articulated socialist position. Far from it, there are contradictions at every stage but one can point continuously to progressive politics and mass agitation on economic issues. People like Davis, O'Donovan Rossa, Davitt and Parnell, and not forgetting the agrarian revolutionary, Fintan Lalor, are concerned to maintain the struggle for national independence as a people's struggle and also see it in the main in the context of the struggle of the peoples of the world. To be sure there are others who are narrow nationalists such as the Fenian, Charles Kickham, who opposed the struggle for Italian unity and were subservient to the demands of the Roman Catholic Church. But it is I think indicative of the Irish people's innate understanding of the real struggle that the heroes they remember and cherish are those who were closest to the people's desire for freedom - economic, social and political. (Note also Marx/Engels reciprocal interest in the Irish struggle/Fenian movement).

One example of people's understanding should suffice. The Land League, which was a mass struggle of the people for the ownership of the land, to destroy landlordism, was an economic war of considerable importance and recognised as such by European socialists; it is, in spite of the split between Parnell and Davitt, remembered as a people's struggle, the leaders, as revolutionary successes.

But it is only with the emergence of the Marxist-Republican, Connolly, not only as a trade union organiser and proponent of working class rule but as co-planner of the 1916 Rebellion that Tone's four fold vision is theoretically realised. Connolly, whom I would hold to be the Irish Lenin, recognised and fought not only for "national" liberation but for the complete social transformation of society - a transformation culminating in the words of the 1916 Proclamation - "for the ownership of Ireland by the people of Ireland". Certainly a long road from the classical socialist statement "of the dictatorship of the (Irish) proletariat", at the same time Connolly was aware that it would be necessary for the organised workers, the Irish Citizens' Army to hold their weapons as their allies of the day would be the enemies of the morrow. A

lesson, which had Salvador Allende learned, it would have preserved Democracy and Socialism in Chile.

In the subsequent struggle for independence, the "Four Glorious Years" of 1917 to 1921, the social struggle was pushed aside; Eamonn De Valera's words "Labour must wait" uttered in 1919, stamps bourgeois supremacy on the Irish National Liberation struggle. The Treaty with Great Britain was in fact a victory for the three middle classes of these islands; in Ireland, the Protestant bourgeoisie in the North, the Roman Catholic bourgeoisie in the South (whether pro or anti-Treaty) and the English ruling class.

Future Irish revolutionary history, apart from a brief period in the hungry '30's tends to fall into the rut of narrow chauvinistic, militarism. The IRA campaigns of the '40's and '50's are concerned, as campaigns, only with the question of "unity" in the territorial sense.

There is little recognition of the need for mass struggle, or unity of Protestant and Catholic, of the real relationship of the Irish people to Imperialism. Freedom has become a matter of flags and anthems. Connolly's terrible warning of believing that freedom means the hoisting of the green flag over Dublin Castle and ignoring the struggle for economic control goes unnoticed.

It is not until the emergence of the struggle for democracy in the North of Ireland in the late '60's and the formation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, that military sterility is abandoned in favour of the mobilisation of people for democratic reforms. However it would be wrong to assume that the Republican Movement, by helping to create the N.I.C.R.A. had simply altered its tactics to achieve national unity, and this is a point of some critical significance.

The reassessment by the Republican organisation of its history and past failures led to the far from startling, but vital conclusion that the enemy of the Irish people was Anglo-American Imperialism both North and South of the border, that the Re-conquest of Ireland implied the mobilisation of the people on a national level round all sorts of demands, relating to minerals, rivers, housing, rents and democratic rights. In short, material and political demands. Agitations on these economic issues and in defence of workers' rights characterised the Republican struggle in the 26 Counties as it sought to heighten people's consciousness of the real enemy, Imperialism. This fact conjoined with the mass mobilisation of the Roman Catholic minority behind the highly significant democratic demand 'one man, one vote' in the North, opened up the whole Irish question.

Unfortunately, in the 1969 situation right wing anti-Republican elements

were quick to seize on the ferment generated by the Civil Rights demonstrations. Members of the then Southern Cabinet, in particular, Neil Blaney, Kevin Boland and the millionaire, Charles Haughey, saw the opportunity to destroy the Republican Movement in the South and the North, by turning the democratic and workers' struggles into the old channel of a "war in the North".

And this is why I made the point earlier that the strategy and tactics of the Republican Movement in the late sixties is critical, not only to understand this past five years but the events of today. Fianna Fail, one of the two 26 County capitalist parties has always claimed the title Republican, partly to differentiate itself from Fine Gael, an equally reactionary party, but also to capitalise on the instinctive support of the people for 'republicanism' - the undifferentiated brand of popular imagination.

Recognising through Southern military intelligence and a common sense grasp of where the Republican Movement was heading (a Socialist Society) and that it could not be subverted by promises of arms and funds to conduct another Northern campaign, the 26 County politicians set about creating what was subsequently to become the Provisional (Alliance) organisation. Lest any may doubt that such a conspiracy existed, it is only quite recently, in 1974, that Neil Blaney, MP for Donegal, boasted in Dail Eireann that he was proud of the fact that he had helped to create the Provisional Alliance.

Republicans had identified the real enemy as Imperialism. Fianna Fail had long since abandoned its native bourgeois economic policy of protectionism and surrendered to the multi-national corporations. (They now, in fact, represented a comprador class). The Republican agitations on ownership, wealth, land and minerals, were rocking the boat - a war in the North was totally to the advantage of the Fianna Fail ruling class. This is not to subscribe to a conspiracy theory of history, but a recognition of the objective interests of the Southern bourgeoisie and their relations with the Republican Movement.

At the same time it is true that the 26 County politicians could not have succeeded but for certain other factors, of both a social and historical character.

Among those were - (1) The attacks by the RUC and the para-military 'B' Specials on Roman Catholic ghettos in Belfast and Derry; (2) arousing massive sectarian fears, as well as (3) bringing the British Army onto the streets of the North. Here was indeed a situation ripe for exploitation by those who could recognise Republican/Socialism as the long term danger. They were easily assisted by - (a) "Republicans of the '40.s" who had been indoctrinated by militarism; (b) grossly sectarian elements; (c) ultra-left adventurists such as

Michael Farrel, Eamonn McCann and Bernadette Devlin of the People's Democracy (who could see imminent revolution in the street riots - shades of Paris 1968). It then only required the British Army acting on the advice of the Northern Tory Unionists and the logic of then, Brigadier Kitson (Counter Insurgency, Low Intensity operations) to put the torch to light the past five year's conflagration with tragic results.

That the Imperialists and their agents have been almost totally successful in their plans is clear when one analyses the fact that the South of Ireland during this period (1972) voted overwhelmingly to enter the European Economic Community and surrender the last vestiges of National sovereignty. War in the North for territorial unity and total absorption of the South by the Common Market. What a paradox!

The activities therefore of the Provisionals have in fact been counter revolutionary and objectively anti-Republican. Their so called economic war has pushed even further apart the Protestant and Roman Catholic working class. Consciously or unconsciously their campaign was sectarian. A further analysis of the sources of their aid, for example, in the United States demonstrates that no matter what lip service was paid to socialist ideas in some of their publications their backers were politically, militantly right wing. (Mayor Daley, Chicago). This is unfortunately true of most of the Irish American population, e.g. in Boston.

That the sectarian Colonel Ghadaffi of Libya, was also willing to aid them is additional evidence of their political orientation. Those left revolutionaries e.g. International Marxist Group (G.B.); International Socialists (G.B.); Socialist Workers' Party (U.S.A.); who pinned their hopes on the Provisionals must now be grievously disappointed. The recent ceasefire has left the the "national question" unresolved, sees a strong determined Protestant-Loyalist camp and repression unaltered.

The Northern campaign has once again proved to be a failure and disastrous for the real forces of National Liberation.

This in spite of the fact that a fierce campaign of bomb and bullet has been conducted for almost five years. As Cathal Goulding, a leading member of the Republican Movement, recently pointed out the result of the Northern campaign has been to produce a few Provisional staffed "incident centres".

During this past five years the Republican Movement has been assailed from all sides.

Nationalists have condemned us for spreading an alien ideology, socialism -

ignoring that the most alien feature of Irish life is the capitalist system; sectarians have condemned us for not declaring war on the Protestant population; ultra-leftists, dominated by British empiricism, have berated us for cultivating the "myth" of the unity of the working class and 26 County capitalist state expansionists have bitterly opposed us for refusing to mount a campaign to "free the North". But the Republican Movement continues to forge ahead with the revolutionary philosophy of Tone and Connolly - Unity of the working class, Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter.

There has been a recent faction created, the anti-thesis in some senses to the Provisionals which requires mention. I refer to the peculiar group known as the Irish Republican Socialist Party, headed by a former member of the Republican Movement, Seamus Costello, and Mrs. Bernadette McAliskey ex People's Democracy.

This group is the classical proof of one of Lenin's masterly insights. It represents the unity of the infantile left and the right. Formed apparently due to the "failure of the Republican Movement to wage the war against Imperialism", the Irish Republican Socialist Party has spent its few months life in attacking, murdering and attempting to murder Republicans. They have also engaged in the bombing of Protestant owned pubs, e.g. Bayardo Bar and the assassination of Protestant workers.

Ideologically the Irish Republican Socialist Party as far as can be ascertained from their public statements is a militant anti imperialist force, but and this is critical - they are unconcerned about the possibility of a sectarian civil war in Ireland which would engulf the entire country to the sole benefit of the forces of reaction, counter-revolution and imperialism. On this account alone their claim to the title Republican is spurious.

Tone does not figure in their constellation of Founding Fathers who ever else may be in that virulent picture gallery.

For those un-involved in the Irish struggle there are some lessons to be learned by the appearance of this recent faction; (a) The ex members of the Republican Movement had every opportunity to put their views democratically within the Party. They were overwhelmingly defeated, but persisted in seeking to undermine Party unity and the trust of members in the leadership. (b) They were joined by individuals who had continually attacked the Republican Movement from an ultra-left position - such as McAliskey/McCann/McCorry. (c) Their small rank and file is composed in the main of people dismissed from the Party for acts of gangsterism or sectarianism. That this group have emerged at a point in time where the Republican Movement was providing the lead on

so many issues, economic and political, is, I put it to you, no historical accident. The exposure of the American C.I.A. as the force behind many so-called radical or 'left' organisations in Africa, Asia and Europe over the past years has been well documented by the mass media.

It is of further interest to take note of the IRSP constitution. When in process of formation they gave as one of the major reasons the lack of democracy of internal debate within Sinn Fein. If we read their constitution and compare it with the constitution of Sinn Fein. The important sections of it we find that they have adopted word for word the constitution of Sinn Fein. I must say it is heartening to know that the organisation which they claimed had no policies, no members, no potential, no influence, at least had a constitution which they thought worthwhile to copy. In many cases they have not even bothered to change the position of a comma. The most recent sections of the Sinn Fein constitution adopted at the Ard Fheis 1973 which Seamus Costello and his gang bitterly opposed are now included in their constitution. That part of the Sinn Fein constitution relating to the outlawing of factions is particularly relevant here for when they were members of Sinn Fein they continually claimed the right to organise as a faction within the organisation.

The Irish National Liberation Struggle as I understand it is a struggle against Anglo-American Imperialism. It has as I have endeavoured to outline its own particular vehicle, Republicanism. It is similar to the struggles of the colonial peoples everywhere and in recognising this the Republican Movement stands with the colonial peoples in their fight. This very fact has also provided ammunition for our enemies.

For having recognised that the world is divided into three political dimensions comprising the Imperialist countries, the socialist countries and the peoples fighting for their freedom from colonial oppression, the Republican Movement has declared at successive Ard Fheiseanna our support for the anti-colonial struggle and our recognition of the role played by the socialist world in enabling the oppressed peoples to free themselves. The capitalist media have maintained a constant attack on us ever since. It is ironic that in this attack they are wholeheartedly supported by many claiming to be on the left.

In order to conduct a National Liberation Struggle there are certain obvious pre-requisites. Theoretically, Liberation or Freedom must mean freedom for the working class, the smashing of the capitalist system and its replacement by socialism.

Therefore in any national liberation front the working class must play the

dominant part. We have learned through our own history (De Valera's comment) that if this is not the case then the working class will not come to power.

But this is not just to say that a vanguard party of the working class plays the key role in a National Liberation Front (though this in itself is a sine qua non). Clearly, there must be a high level of consciousness among the working class and their allies such as the peasants, small farmers and the intelligensia as to the real nature of the enemy and the real nature of the struggle. And this is exactly why the Republican Movement is engaged in struggles on so many fronts, some of which have been indicted as reformist (e.g. Civil Rights). But what is wrong with revolutionaries leading a reformist struggle?

Our practise is a recognition of the need to raise the level of consciousness throughout the country. The fact that we have taken part in electoral activity both North and South and will continue to do so (as we did in the Convention elections) is not to say that we believe that the bourgeois political institutions can bring about the revolutionary changes we demand. But it is a recognition of the fact that every opportunity for propaganda, every opportunity to present the Party programme must be seized upon.

In the event of our securing electoral successes at anytime, North or South, our candidates would attend and participate in the political institutions. Again we would reject allegations of reformism on these grounds. Our candidates are bound by Party discipline and would participate or withdraw from assemblies on the decision of the Party as to which act was of the greatest benefit.

However, currently in the Irish struggle the greatest problem is that of sectarianism. Right wing, and now ultra-left killers of the Irish Republican Socialist Party and elements of the Provisional Alliance are extremely active in many areas in the North particularly in Belfast. We have endeavoured through leafleting, posters, and informal discussions with such groups as the Ulster Volunteer Force/Ulster Defence Association to bring a halt to this disastrous campaign. Each sectarian killing is to the advantage of the forces of Imperialism. On this account in spite of our encouragement it is particularly unfortunate that the British Trade Union Congress and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions have not pushed ahead in a determined fashion and mobilised all available workers' support against the sectarian killings.

Let me on the otherhand make it quite clear that the Republican Movement is not "soft" on sectarian killers and we urge our membership to impliment our standing policy of defence and retaliation in this field as in relation to the armed forces of British imperialism.

The economic crisis currently threatening the capitalist countries is as clear in Ireland as elsewhere. There are in the whole country 150,000 unemployed and that figure is growing. Through the Trade Union Movement we are pushing for the creation of unemployed workers' groups, not in an amorphous mass but linked to their Trade Union Branches.

Also critical to the Irish economy are two vital issues - (a) the European Economic Community and (b) the ownership and use of our vast Natural resources, both actual and potential. On both these counts Sinn Fein is the most progressive force in Ireland. We continue to oppose Southern Ireland's membership of the European Economic Community and are opposed to Northern membership through Britain's membership.

Our demands on resources are supported by the left of the Irish Labour Party, and the broad front group - the Resources Protection Campaign, is attracting the best of Trade Unionists and left people in general. Here the programme is linked to the already existing State Companies, i.e. Electricity Supply Board and Bord na Mona and while it is as yet too early to speak definitively, there is a groundswell of opinion against exploitation by Anglo-American oil interests. Our nationalisation line is the only possible answer to the activities of the multi-nationals and their equally dangerous native reactionary agents who front for them.

Also closely allied to the European Economic Community question is the problem of the Irish small farmers. Here the Republican Movement believes, like Lenin that while recognising the petty-bourgeois nature of the class involved that the progressive programme is to defend the small farmer against the rancher and demonstrate that his class ally is the working class. Not to do so is to see the peasant/small farmer driven into the right wing camp and ultimately to fascism.

Understanding of the Irish National Liberation struggle would be incomplete if I failed to mention an extremely critical area of imperialist domination - both in the psychological and sociological senses - culture. The Republican Movement is concerned not only to assure the preservation of the Irish speaking districts of the country but to resist the continued assault on our language and national values. This is not a language fetish but an awareness that control of the national and people's heritage is vital to resisting the inroads of Imperialism. While I am not able to dwell at length on this aspect of our policy we are as far as is possible promoting the idea of the identity of the language defence with opposition to the colonial and imperialist domination of our country. Any other policy is meaningless; for some it may be valid to talk about language on "its" own. To us it is entirely vacuous.

Finally may I return to the last of the theoretical points which I raised initially. Internationalism. The Republican Movement is building links with all principled groups who are engaged or sympathetic to the war against Imperialism wherever it may be taking place. Our attendance at the World Conference of Peace Forces in Moscow in October 1973, was the first major step in the development of principled international relations.

Obviously continuous and developing contacts with the "mainland" is vital to the strategies of the Republican Movement. We abhor any action which may alienate the British working class and are vitally concerned to promote fraternal understanding with all workers groups who can identify with our programme. Let me say, therefore, once again, that the Republican Movement totally condemns the bombing campaign which was carried out by the Provisionals in Birmingham and London and other areas in Britain. Such actions, like sectarian activity, in Northern Ireland, only serve the interests of the British ruling class.

You will certainly have gathered from the points made on the nature of the National Liberation Struggle that the Republican Movement is fighting on every front on which Imperialism manifests itself. Too often the National Liberation Struggle is reduced to a military struggle without regard to the overall dimensions of Imperialism. This is not the case where comrades have studied and learned the lessons of past, direct colonial rule e.g. Ghana, where Nkrumah learnt that to rule meant to control the price of cocoa. Imperialism is not only a military phenomenon but strangles the political and cultural life of national communities. The myth of political freedom must therefore be opposed so as to prevent the side-tracking of genuine anti-Imperialist struggles into terrorism or chauvinistic national struggles.

We in the Republican Movement, having learned the lessons of History, both our own and other peoples, put forward the proposition that the Irish National Liberation Struggle can only proceed to a successful conclusion if led by the Republican Movement as the Vanguard party of the people in circumstances where the Irish working class has raised its consciousness to the point where they are prepared to defend their gains by force of arms, if necessary.

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