

# James Connolly and Syndicalism

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By the early 1900s, James Connolly, with the Irish Socialist Republican Party still struggling to make an impression on the Irish political scene, had become aware of the American Socialist Labor Party, which seemed to be attaining some successes under the energetic leadership of Daniel DeLeon. The context for Connolly's learning of the SLP and DeLeon was a debate within the Second International on the question of socialist parties making alliance with bourgeois parties: DeLeon and his SLP were fiercely opposed to such marriages of convenience, as were Connolly and the ISRP. He tried to use the example of the SLP to force a leftward move in British socialism and to wean it away from its support of Home Rule, with its reformist, bourgeois, and pro-capitalist tendencies. But this effort, which involved shuttling back and forth between Ireland and Scotland, did not pay substantial dividends. Connolly then took the drastic step of emigrating to America, with his wife and young family following him in stages.

We will not enter into the detail of Connolly's sojourn in America, which began in 1903 and ended in 1910. But it's important to note the outlines of the shifts in Connolly's ideological positioning which were occasioned by his American stay. He quickly quarrelled with DeLeon, finding him authoritarian and dogmatic. By 1905, Connolly was drifting away from the SLP and was caught up in the foundational drama of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), nicknamed the "Wobblies." Emerging from mining disputes, the IWW was formed at a congress in Chicago in 1905. Well to the left of the SLP, the IWW also was deeply critical of the dominant American craft union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), for its reformist attitude to capitalism and its refusal to accept unskilled workers into its membership. The IWW was a trenchantly and explicitly syndicalist organization, with its motto of "one big union" for all workers and its resistance to the elitism, racism, and sexism of the AFL, which had no space in its ranks for female or immigrant workers. The IWW was also an expression of the powerful energy given to the labor movement globally by the Russian uprising of 1905, which seemed to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of the general strike as a weapon of the proletariat.

Syndicalism is a movement on the anarchist side of socialism. It is predicated on workers' initiative, militancy, and power and workers' organization and an approach to the political realm founded in the place of work. It was often known in America as "industrial unionism," because of its stress on organization and action within the industrial workplace. The term "syndicale" is of course the French term for a union; this reveals the roots of the phenomenon in the labor movement. In Europe, syndicalism stood as a rebuke to the mainstream socialist or social demo-

cratic parties, which it saw as bureaucratic, corrupted by parliamentarism and compromise with the bourgeois state, too inclined to a reformist acceptance of capitalism. To destroy capital, the workers must concentrate their struggle in the workplace. Syndicalism was strongest in those European countries (such as Spain) with an anarchist tradition and also with little experience of centralized collective bargaining.

Connolly was galvanized by the unadulterated revolutionism and militant aggression of the IWW. Here was an organization of the workers and of the poorest of the poor, which regarded them as the engine of the revolution and of history. Here was a workers' organization which was as forceful in its stress on revolution as any "physical force" Irish republican secret society. On his return to Ireland in 1910, his activity in the increasingly febrile years leading to the Easter Rising would be considerably shaped by what he learned from syndicalism.

This activity would be underpinned by the historical and theoretical arguments of *Labour in Irish History*. In a strong sense, this book, Connolly's most sustained work, could be seen as a syndicalist history of Irish politics. At each of its stages, it tries to attend to the fate of the working poor. At each of those stages, it finds that Irish political action, both nationalist and republican, has worked by stirring the sleeping giant of the sentiments and energies of the massed poor, sought to control this motive force, and then ultimately abandoned it or even betrayed it in the pursuit of bourgeois goals.

*Labour in Irish History* was mostly composed in America. In 16 brief chapters, Connolly offers a critique of mainstream views of Irish history of a ruthlessness and penetration few modern "revisionists" can match. Repeatedly, the highlights of Irish nationalist political history are interrogated and found wanting in class terms. Studies of Jacobite heroes, of eighteenth-century "patriot" politics, of the Enlightenment radicals of the United Irishmen, and of Daniel O'Connell and his campaigns for Catholic Emancipation and the Repeal of the Act of Union show each time the cynical class compromises that repeatedly were made. Connolly sees nationalism as the "idealized expression of class interests," but he also hoped for a more "authentic" nationalism.

The antinomies which complicate Connolly's work are those we've already delineated. On the one hand, he recognizes and compels his reader to see that there is in his time and has for a very long time been a greater identity of interests and goals between the Irish owners of capital and those of Britain, than exists between the Irish bourgeoisie and the Irish workers and peasants. Herein lies Connolly's radicalism. On the other hand, he wishes, partly for tactical political reasons, to find resources for action, grounds for alliance, in the Irish revolutionary tradition, dominated as it is by republicanism. Part of the book's project, therefore, is to scour the republican tradition for hints of class-orientated progressivism. Herein lies Connolly's compromise with his context.

At its most abstract, Connolly's argument is that the understanding of private property in Ireland is and has been different from that in England. This is the political-theoretical version of his point in *Erin's Hope* that feudalism and capitalism in Ireland had only arrived by way of Norman and then Tudor colonization. But in this later and longer book, the stakes in the argument are higher. As we've noted earlier, and indeed as Connolly writes himself, *Labour in Irish History* is a work of the Irish Revival, and this is not only a matter of context but of the book's subtext. In a manner similar to the discovery – or, more importantly, rediscovery – of an ancient Irish Gaelic culture, and hence "nation," which was to be discerned in cultural nationalists of Connolly's own time and earlier, such as Standish O'Grady, Samuel Ferguson, WB Yeats, and Lady Gregory, Connolly reads back into the historical evidence an idea of Irish national character, even an idea of

Irish national consciousness. Modern historians, certainly of the liberal “revisionist” kind, and also of the Marxist kind, would argue that Connolly over-interprets his materials. Modern historians of nationalism, mostly nowadays working in the wake of the important writings of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Miroslav Hroch, Eric Hobsbawm, and Shlomo Sand, would argue that nations are mostly *post-factum* “inventions” or “invented traditions” and that national consciousness emerged in Europe mostly in the nineteenth century. Not merely this, but Connolly ascribes to that national consciousness attributes of coherence, self-consciousness, organization, and resistance which are difficult to verify in positive terms. In particular, his chapters on agrarian radicalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – the Whiteboys of the 1700s and the Ribbonmen of the 1800s, for example – remain both provocative and problematic. Connolly makes the wager – a hermeneutical maneuver finely balanced between political and historical interpretation – on their having forged a national (as against local or regional) program of resistance. In his reading of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he excoriates “patriot” politics of the kind associated with the parliamentarism of Grattan and Flood for its bourgeois character. But in doing so, he also fails to see the potential radicalism of the new middle classes, both Protestant and Catholic, which would form the engines of nationalism after the failure of the United Irish rebellion in 1798. Connolly is hesitant to see nascent radicalism in the middle-class movements for separatism. Middle-class nationalism for him is inauthentic. Yet further, Connolly reads into the agrarian movements of these pasts, and of his present moment, a desire to return to the supposed ancient Gaelic modes of commonage. In the context of the Revival, of course, the implication is that the spirit of Irish “primitive communism” is latent within the rural poor of the present, just waiting to be reawakened by the right ideological and political leadership.

This helps to account for Connolly’s positive view of the United Irishmen. He admires Tone’s forceful Jacobinism, but that admiration helps to gloss over the bourgeois character of the United Irish movement (whose famous newspaper, *The Northern Star*, staunchly defended property rights). So too with Connolly’s assessment here of Young Ireland, and, once again, James Fintan Lalor. As we saw with *Erin’s Hope*, Connolly focuses on Lalor’s left-leaning stance within the Young Ireland group, with its stress on a radicalized and nationalized peasantry. Not only this, but, in an echo of his sympathy for the South African Boers, he passes over John Mitchel’s late-career support for slavery in the American South.

*Labour in Irish History* is undoubtedly Connolly’s masterpiece. With all its flaws, it remains one of the most remarkable and radical essays in Irish historiography. That it is not a “professional” academic history is both a source of its weakness and of its strength or importance. Just as Georg Lukacs’s towering *History and Class Consciousness* (published in 1923, just after the Hungarian revolution of 1919) represents both a formidable critique of German Idealist philosophy and a manual for proletarian revolution that works by re-reading Marx in that tradition, written during the revolution, so Connolly’s book should be understood both as a theoretical underpinning of his syndicalist vision and as a text taking part in the attempted revolution in Ireland between 1913 and 1923.

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*The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*  
Excerpted from "James Connolly: Labor, Empire, Ireland".

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