

Reflections on James Joyce's Politics

Jeff Shantz

2012

Until very recently, most commentary on Joyce stressed that his works are apolitical. Since Joyce is said to have been largely apolitical it is claimed his work is also apolitical. More recently however some scholars have begun to look at the political, even radical, influences on Joyce and his engagement with radical political movements. While most of the commentators who have discussed Joyce's politics identify his influences as socialistic, it is more precise to suggest that Joyce's politics were influenced by libertarian versions of socialism, notably anarchism and syndicalism (or revolutionary unionism).

Significant works such as Dominic Manganiello's *Joyce's Politics* Richard Ellmann's *The Consciousness of Joyce* have made a strong case for the Joyce's libertarian socialism. Laduyt and Lernout (1995) note that Joyce drew much of his research material for *Finnegan's Wake* from the anarchist geographer Metchnikoff's masterwork *Les Grandes Fleuves Historique*. In preparing his notes, Joyce also gave particular attention to the "Introduction" written by the renowned anarchist geographer Elisee Reclus. A look at those instances where expressions of political concerns appear in Joyce's work suggests that there is a strong affinity with anarchist themes. Ehrlich (1997) notes that from the vantage point of the turn of the late 20th century "we may easily forget to what extent late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth-century socialism and anarchism were necessary stations for the avant-garde on the road to literary modernism" (84).

Other commentators, such as Robert Scholes suggest that Joyce exhibited a general disillusionment with socialism that affected many exponents of European modernism. Scholes (1989) suggests that the failings of mass socialist parties, eventually culminating in their capitulation at the outbreak of World War One, which saw socialists supporting their national bourgeoisie in war efforts, brought "authoritarian and totalizing proclivities" within socialism to the fore (29). In the case of Joyce these tendencies, according to Scholes, "took an aesthetic direction toward the artist as a supreme figure, absolute in his own world and without any specific social responsibility" (29). A more recent work, James Fairhall's *James Joyce and the Question of History* (1993) also provides a portrait of Joyce as a youthful enthusiast who later became disillusioned with socialism. Noted theorist Helene Cixous, in *The Exile of James Joyce* (1972), goes even further in condemning Joyce for a perceived authoritarianism. For Cixous Joyce enjoyed only "two socialist years" which simply served as "a mask for the 'inner heroism'" and "'redeeming selfishness' of the artist" that represented his true political values (203 202, 203).

In my view such approaches, which view Joyce's politics through the lense of traditional socialist categories are not suited to understand the complexity of Joyce's idiosyncratic political vision. Joyce's notions of the artist as heroic herald of a new world, rather than standing counter to socialism invoke visions of socialism that, despite their marginalization from the mainstream of socialist politics, were vital during Joyce's lifetime. As only one overlooked example, I would argue that the emphasis on the artist as mythic herald of a new world, is an already present characteristic of the Sorelian revolutionary syndicalism which influenced so strongly Italian syndicalists, and through them, Joyce as well. According to Caraher, "a fuller, more detail-oriented, social construction of Joyce's politics, as enacted through his life and texts, tends to place the author's European modernism not so much within the camp of international socialism...as on its intellectual fringes" (176). Any discussion of Joyce's politics must avoid simplifying his complex ideological impulses despite the many interpretive challenges they pose.

Partly Joyce stands counter to the orthodox socialism by which he is usually measured. Instead Joyce suggests an anti-feudal rather than anti-capitalist socialism based not on the industrial proletariat, from which Joyce experienced and felt some distance but rather from a declassé petty

bourgeoisie, an “in-between class” that painfully felt the constant threat of downward mobility and impoverishment.

The conventional working class — gardeners, plumbers, carpenters — has virtually no representatives here. Joyce’s people belong almost exclusively to the lower middle class, often affecting a sense of superiority that is only a reflection of their own insecurity. Poised between upper-class aspirations and the possibility of descent through the no-safety-net floor of 1904 society, Joyce’s characters inhabit a gap, a site of high anxiety in historical Dublin... (Sherry, 8).

Joyce evokes a complex variant of socialism which finds its inspiration and speaks of the concerns of overlooked classes, those who do not play the world historic part of either the proletariat or the bourgeoisie in the dominant Marxist versions of socialism. In looking at Joyce the socialist one is opened to significant, if under-appreciated counter or marginal currents within the history of socialism. Closer attention to Joyce’s socialism reveals the complex and contradictory forces of radical modernism as well as hinting at alternative visions of social struggle which cannot be contained within binaries such as “socialism or barbarism” that inform the works of critics such as Robert Scholes. In this way a re-thinking of the sources and expressions of Joyce’s socialism provides a useful starting point for re-thinking the sources and influences underlying European modernism as well as opening interesting avenues for understanding histories of socialism.

Colin McCabe (1979) argues that reading of Joyce’s correspondence with his brother Stanislaus between 1905–1907 suggests a powerful but highly personalized interest in revolutionary socialism. For McCabe, the letters reveal fundamental concerns and influences that further account for contradictions in Joyce’s politics.

In these letters we can read the contradiction between an optimism engendered by Italian socialist politics and a pessimism confirmed by the developments of Irish nationalism. Joyce’s politics were largely determined by attitudes to sexuality. Central to his commitment to socialism was his ferocious opposition to the institution of marriage, bourgeois society’s sanctified disavowal of the reality of desire (McCabe, 160).

In this short article I discuss these aspects of Joyce’s politics to highlight the complex and heterodox character of the socialist vision he develops.

Sherry suggests that a touchstone for the development of Joyce’s political sensibilities can be found in the figure of the Irish syndicalist James Connolly. For Sherry, Connolly provides both a parallel as well as a contrast for Joyce’s socialism. Connolly eventually arrived at an uneasy settlement between socialism and Irish nationalism in which nationalism was a useful expedient in arriving at socialism. For Connolly, nationalism could contribute to social regeneration only insofar as it served to separate the Irish from the interests of the English aristocracy. In this way nationalism, by fomenting the spirit of separation from the imperialist bourgeoisie, might contribute to a process of class rebellion that would eventually supercede it.

While Joyce at times allows for an uneasy acceptance of Irish nationalism he elsewhere maintains that an English presence in Ireland might contribute a necessary part to the evolution of socialism (Letters, II). Specifically, English investment would contribute the capital required for industrial development and the corresponding emergence of a full-fledged organized working class. This view, however misguided, fit with a certain Second International version of socialism that argued capitalism, and the superceding of feudal relations as a requisite part in the transition to socialism.

Perhaps more sympathetically, Sherry suggests that this acceptance of an English presence invokes Joyce’s pan-national view of socialism and his hope that the new century might usher in

the end of international war (10–11). This hope was, of course very soon dashed on the rocks of 1914. As Stanislaus Joyce (1958, 85) recounts, in describing his brother's socialist leanings: "My brother thought that fanned nationalisms, which he loathed, were to blame for wars and world troubles."

Connolly's expression of socialism, tinged with nationalist sentiments, can be said to reflect one crucial fact of Irish social history at the time — the absence of a mass industrial proletariat. For Connolly nationalism served as a necessary addition to socialist ideology given the absence of a broad and united proletariat that might play the role assigned to it by Marxism.

For his part, Joyce was as aware as Connolly of this aspect of the Irish social context and saw the necessity of revising orthodox socialism in light of this. In his letters Joyce offers the conclusion: "The Irish proletariat is yet to be created" (*Letters* II, 174). From this crucial fact of history, Joyce drew much different conclusions. For Joyce the very lack of a mass industrial proletariat in Ireland suggested the appropriateness of an anarchist rather than a socialist (or Marxist) program of social change.¹

Sherry suggests that this awareness was central to the socialism of Joyce's younger years which developed from his youthful experiences and peaked in 1906–1907 during his time in Italy. Joyce's stay in Rome coincided with a meeting of the international socialist congress. "Among the rival factions at the congress he prefers the trades-unionists or Syndicalists, who subscribe to an anarchism Joyce justifies in view of the problems peculiar to Irish social history, in wording that forces to a focus the predicaments underlying Connolly's own argument and rhetoric" (Sherry, 10).

In response Joyce contemplates the necessity for "the overthrow of the entire present social organisation" in order to spur "the automatic emergence of the proletariat in trades-unions and guilds and the like" (quoted in Sherry, 10). In this Joyce echoes popular revolutionary syndicalist doctrines of the day which argued for the revolutionary general strike as the mythic force which might regenerate the working class and its organizations through the heroic form given to their struggle. Indeed French syndicalists as well as Italian insurrectionary anarchists (both of whom played a part in the Rome congress) advocated the general strike as the means by which an unformed or partly formed proletariat might come to recognize itself consciously.

Certainly this turn towards social myth is reflected elsewhere in Joyce's works. That the crisis and resolution of *Ulysses* is expressed in the language of myth (Sherry 2) echoes the mythic impulse of revolutionary syndicalism. *Ulysses* like Sorelian social myth fuses the mythic, especially moral allegory, with the factual.

This is not unique in Joyce's works and is not confined to a later period of his writing. "Previously, in early 1904, Joyce wrote the unpublished first draft version of "Portrait of the Artist," using socialist utopian ideology with images of man and woman in a future Dublin. It combined in experimental prose some elements of the socialist manifesto and the aesthetic manifesto, the sexual confession, and the new psychology of Bergson" (Ehrlich, 1997: 87). This is a crucial connection since it further suggests the link between Sorel, revolutionary syndicalism and Joyce. Bergson, the vitalistic philosopher, was a key influence on Sorel who attended Bergson's lec-

¹ These readings also provide an alternative perspective from recent work such as Emer Nolan's *James Joyce and Nationalism* (1995).

tures and incorporated Bergson's notions of *elan vital* as a key feature of his writings on the mobilizing powers of social myth.²

Like the theoretician of revolutionary social myth Sorel, Joyce ascribes an important role not to a specific class but to the creative strata within struggle, those who can shape the social myth. "Here the power he ascribes to the artist's Word — to incarnate the millennial State and race — breathes through the mythopoetic, ritualistic diction of his own prose" (Sherry, 13). Joyce's appeal to the artist to ring in the coming revolution takes on the tone and force of a revolutionary manifesto. In the manner of the revolutionary social myth, Joyce's call to the artist invokes the new world gestating in the shell of the old, a new world born of the united social, economic and sexual revolutions. This is expressed most notable in Joyce's famous words from the 1904 draft of "Portrait of the Artist":

To those multitudes not yet in the wombs of humanity but surely engenderable there, he would give the word. Man and woman, out of you comes the nation that is to come, the lightening of your masses in travail; the competitive order is employed against itself, the aristocracies are supplanted; and amid the general paralysis of an insane society, the confederate will issues in action (Portrait, 265–266).

This invocation of the artist as heroic herald of a new world has provided some of the basis for the evidence of those who cite Joyce's turn to authoritarianism. Scholes argues that this represents a turn towards the authoritarian in Joyce's work. Certainly there is some basis for taking such a position as the curious path of Sorel himself suggests. In his later years the prophet of working class will exerted through the social myth succumbed to endorsements of both Lenin and Mussolini. Indeed the turn to express social visions in art, especially the privileging of literary authorship found its corollary in the political authoritarianism of Pound and Wyndham Lewis (Sherry, 13).

Another view however suggests that the view of the artist-hero in Joyce has affinities with anti-authoritarian ideas. Manganiello connects expressions of Joyce's political consciousness with individualist anarchism of the type articulated by the nineteenth century American anarchist Benjamin Tucker. For Manganiello, this connection with Tucker's anarchism, with which Joyce was familiar and found appealing, sheds light on Joyce's views of the artist as herald of a new world. Caraher explains this perspective as such: "In place of the encircling and coercive tyrannies of existing social and political institutions, the individualist anarchist as artist employs the resisting power of the clarifying and redeeming word" (175–176). Manganiello develops this position on political resistance through reference to this passage in the twenty-fourth chapter of *Stephen Hero*: "the artist as literary Messiah reconstructs the spectacle of redemption and legitimizes his role of redeemer in his works by affirming that which presumptive States and presumptive Churches negate" (76).

Joyce's articulation of aesthetic concerns with ideals of individualism and freedom from authoritarianism is also reflected in his attraction to the position offered in that other famous work of idiosyncratic socialism, Oscar Wilde's essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism." Both literary and libertarian socialist affinities rest behind Joyce's decision to become the official translator of Oscar Wilde's classic of libertarian socialism *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. According to Manganiello, "Joyce probably realized for the first time in Wilde's tract that his demand for absolute

² One might also make note of the importance of ideas Joyce borrowed from Vico whose emphasis on *corsi* and *ricorsi* in the writing of history greatly influenced Sorel.

freedom to accomplish his aesthetic aims could be made consonant with the political views of Tucker, who stressed respect for individual liberties” (220–222).

Significantly the socialist influences on Joyce may have upheld his fundamental resistance to the political perspective of the authoritarian modernists. Joyce gave voice to very personal political and social concerns which were informed by his libertarian undertsanding of socialism. “In his projection of a higher political order, Joyce believed that courageous personal acts, such as his elopement with Nora without marriage, and his continuing rejection of the church after the birth of their children, required the ideological support of socialist political principles” (Ehrlich, 1997: 83). Socialist principles were not abandoned but expressed in novel ways that in his concern for individual liberty stood opposed to authoritarianism.

Pound’s glorification of a hieratic priesthood, his esteem for ancient echelons of title and class, locate an authoritarian demeanor alien to Joyce. To that “aristocracy of the arts” [in Pound] Joyce would oppose “the confederate will.” The difference leads him, first of all to a socialist politics, ultimately to a dialogic language that orchestrates differences, pluralities, tolerances (Sherry, 14).

Indeed this language, the language of Joyce’s works, is a language of anarchy as political philosophy. Indeed one may see in this a hint of the relation that May and Newman suggest in their work on anarchy as the first post-modernism.

As Ehrlich (1997: 82) suggests, Joyce’s radical social ideals were essential elements in his development as a modernist artist. Throughout his work Joyce explored the possibilities of a new society as well as new visions of the people who might make up that society (Ehrlich, 1997). Ehrlich (1997: 82) notes that in breaking dramatically from the traditions of church, nation and family Joyce “acted not only out of his desire to become a writer but also from a unified set of radical convictions about society, sexuality and art” (82).

The “in-between” class, including of course many artists, lacking neither the capital nor the social power of a mass proletariat to effect large-scale social change was often left with a pursuit of mythic and heroic forces that might mobilize societal transformation towards their interests. “Joyce empowers the emerging artist, now free from the restraints of class and gender stereotypes to utter “the word,” as the old competitive aristocracies and their “insane society” are replaced by the new general will of the hopeful and active masses. Joyce’s sexual radicalism is expressed in gender-neutral or androgynous phrasings: “the wombs of humanity” and “man and woman, out of you comes the nation” (Ehrlich, 1997: 88). This is not to subscribe to any class essentialism or structural determinism but rather to try to understand the complexity of subject positions and concerns and their articulation with/in socialist discourse. Joyce gives voice to the hopes and anxieties of a socialism that is largely unrecognized in commentaries on the subject of his politics as well as within commentaries on socialism of the early 20th century.

Again, Joyce expressed a heterodox socialism drawn not, as for most conventional Marxism, from an understanding of the industrial proletariat but rather from everyday experiences of oppression and struggle. “When Joyce regarded himself as a socialist or anarchist, he often relied on the political education he received not in the factory or on the farm but rather from his own family as a direct witness of the warfare between his father and mother” (Ehrlich, 1997: 82). In this sense Joyce expresses a sharp recognition of the idea that the personal is also political, a key insight of feminist movements that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

For Joyce, this understanding that the personal was political set his socialism against not only capitalist exploitation but against a range of oppressive hierarchies that were more deeply rooted in everyday relations. According to Stanislaus, the basis for Joyce’s radicalism was this

fundamental opposition to what he viewed as an ongoing feudalism, associated most directly with the brutal violence directed by their father against their mother and sisters. “He calls himself a socialist but attaches himself to no school of socialism. He marks the uprooting of feudal principles” (Joyce, 1971: 54). Against feudalism, Joyce offered his visions of modernism as influenced by his complex approach to libertarian socialism.

In an unpublished story, “Silhouettes,” the narrator stops in front of a “row of mean little houses” and witnesses in a window the shadows of a man and woman “in violent agitation” (Joyce quoted in Ehrlich, 1997: 85). Ehrlich (1997: 86) suggests that “Silhouettes” offers “the prototype for the recurring warfare that rages in Joyce’s early fiction between the drunken, brutal father and the young children protected by their mother.” This battle is depicted in several of the stories in *Dubliners*, most notably in “Counterparts” and “Eveline,” and to a lesser degree in “A Little Cloud” and “Araby.”

This draws attention to a crucial complexity in Joyce’s approach to socialism. Indeed it calls to mind the long overlooked concerns of another idiosyncratic socialist, Charles Fourier and his utopian writings on liberating the passions, rather than any of the mainstream versions of socialism in Joyce’s time. “Joyce’s socialism gave him a way of cutting the three ties to church, nation, and family: the socialists were commonly seen as Rome’s prime enemy; they were international, not national, in scope; and their tradition of utopianism had offered ample alternate models to bourgeois family life” (Ehrlich 86). All of this occurs in a context in which the spectre of a sexual revolution in Ireland appeared more dangerous even than a political revolution. Joyce’s writings on the ill treatment of women, which Brown (1985) identifies as feminist, are informed by his socialism and sexual liberalism. Such domestic concerns were central for the outlook of anarchists during Joyce’s era. Indeed anarchist concerns with such everyday oppressions, as distinct from the daily exploitation experienced in the workplace, marked their analysis as unique with respect to much of the socialist movement.

If Cixous is mistaken in viewing Joyce as politically disengaged, she is correct in identifying his conscience as one of exile and heresy. In his *Letters* Joyce describes his relation to the established social order as that of a vagabond. “For Joyce to be a ‘vagabond’ was to build a base of radical philosophical and social principles for future artistic activity” (Ehrlich, 1997: 83). His exile and heresy suggest the rootlessness of the *declassé*, characteristic for many artists. In more contemporary language he evokes conditions of nomadology or exile as contestatory against the power of states.

Joyce articulated a position of antibourgeois and antiauthoritarian resistance, but he located the source and focus of such political consciousness not in an international collective of workers but in an empowering individualism that he personally regarded as his own “redeemer” — the term he uses in the sixteenth chapter of the discarded and fragmentary text of *Stephen Hero* (Caraher, 176).

In a brief sketch written for his brother Stanislaus, Joyce provided a picture of the political and personal ideals that marked his work.

[Scene: drafty little stone-flagged room, chest of drawers to left, on which are the remains of lunch, in the centre, a small table on which are *writing materials* (He never forgot them) and a saltcellar: in the background, small-sized bed. A young man with snivelling nose sits at the little table: on the bed sit a madonna and a plaintive infant. It is a January day.] Title of above: *The Anarchist* (*Letters* 2: 206, quoted in Ehrlich, 84).

Ehrlich (1997: 84) suggests that this sketch “affirms Joyce’s views of the nobility of poverty, art, exile, sexual freedom, religious nonconformity, and social and political dissent.”

In the end we must agree with James Fairhall’s conclusion: “The critic trying to identify Joyce with any particular discourse faces an impossible task, since no one discourse is privileged or indeed has any meaning except in dialogue with other discourses” (60). This short discussion paper invites some other discourses, one’s that have been marginalized or excluded, into that dialogue. These discourses, illustrating the complex character of Joyce’s socialism, show, as Caraher suggests, that “readers of Joyce’s work and life can disclose factual divergences and contrasting evidence that complicate an easy overlay of any single typology or semiotic code” (176). These notes on the idiosyncratic socialism of Joyce may allow for a more complex understanding of Joyce’s politics and artistic interests than that suggested by theses of Joyce’s move from internationalism to authoritarianism.

Works Cited

- Brown, R. 1985. *James Joyce and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Caraher, Brian G. “Cultural Politics and the Reading of ‘Joyce’: Cultural Semiotics, Socialism, Irish Autonomy, and ‘Scritti Italiani.’” *James Joyce Quarterly*. 171–214
- Cixous, Helene. 1972. *The Exile of James Joyce*. New York: David Lewis
- Fairhall, James. 1993. *James Joyce and the Question of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Landuyt, Ingeborg and Geert Lernout. 1995. “Joyce’s Sources: *Les Grands Fleuves Historiques*.” *Joyce Studies Annual*. 6: 99–138
- MacCabe, Colin. 1979. *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. London: Macmillan
- Manganiello, Dominic. 1980. *Joyce’s Politics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- May, Todd. 1994. *The Political Philosophy of Poststructural Anarchism*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press
- Newman, Saul. 2001. *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*. Lanham: Lexington Books
- Nolan, Emer. 1995. *James Joyce and Nationalism*. London: Routledge

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Jeff Shantz
Reflections on James Joyce's Politics
2012

Social Anarchism.

<https://www.socialanarchism.org/issue/45/reflections-on-james-joyces-politics>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net