



The weight of the dead generations

Henry Patterson
The Politics of Illusion:
republicanism and socialism in modern Ireland
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WISHFUL THINKING CAN characterise the ends or the means of political actors. If they have unfeasible objectives their politics are likely to be pathologically utopian—a revolutionary chiasm which refuses to recognise reality. If they consistently choose inappropriate means, they will be perpetually disappointed. Frustration may lead them to become revisionists, to change their methods; it may lead them to scale down their aspirations; it may even lead them to change their ends. The title of Patterson's important and stimulating book suggests the history of socialism and republicanism—which he terms 'social republicanism'—provides casebook specimens of wishful thinking.

Liam Mellows and leftist anti-treatyites in the 1920s, Peadar O'Donnell and the Republican Congress in the 1930s, the Official IRA in the 1960s and Sinn Féin in the 1980s have sought in their turn to create an all Ireland republican-socialist state. Each in turn has failed. In his unsparing dissection of this tradition Patterson demonstrates how social republicans regularly adopt political strategies utterly inappropriate to their declared goals. In the Free State they persistently maintained fanciful propositions about the revolutionary dispositions of the Irish

peasantry. Peadar O'Donnell and the Republican Congress held absurd beliefs about the Protestant working class. Social republicans in the Official IRA in the late 1960s and early 1970s, armed with palaeo-Marxist analyses, hoped the Protestant working class would eventually become left-wing and republican. The current Sinn Féin's support for insurrectionary republicanism frequently degenerates into ethnic hatred of Ulster Protestants, and its republican-socialist camp-followers become the 'critical supporters' of such 'politics'—adding a gloss of ill-digested political theory to sordid ethnic war.

As Patterson shows, however, in many cases frustration leads social republicans to become revisionists. They either become straightforwardly nationalist republicans or, more rarely, abandon Irish nationalism in favour of socialist politics. The latter course was taken most spectacularly by the Workers' party in its long march from the IRA, and in Patterson's eyes this trajectory clearly embodies the rational road out of the social-republican tradition. He holds out little hope for a similar internal transformation within Sinn Féin.

The Politics of Illusion deserves to be read by anybody interested in the politics of the Irish left. It is based on extensive research and in-depth interviews in the manner of contemporary oral history. Moreover, its assaults on the pieties of social republicans and the British ultra-left are driven home with some force. The author makes up for his lack of stylistic elegance by sheer, dogged determination to understand his enemy and to prove to the reader that the enemy is wrong. He takes social republicans at their word and, by finding them logically wanting, makes his case more effectively than in knee-jerk editorial denunciations.

Yet Patterson's book is no innocent piece of academic endeavour, as I'm sure he would be happy to concede. It has an overt sub-text—a unionist one, albeit unionism favourably disposed to the Workers' party. This sub-text is mostly kept in check until the final chapter of the book when the author lets himself go—in a manner which spoils the previous impression of careful research and *gravitas*. He quotes, and tells us that he finds impressive, an analysis of Northern Ireland Catholics which includes a description of them as having "the characteristics of the old Roman plebs". Such lapses into bad taste are exceptional, however.

The more fundamental criticism of Patterson's argument is that it is vulnerable to the same objections that he makes against social republicans. He too displays wishful thinking, which appears to have both Marxist and unionist foundations. Whereas social republicans assume that Protestant British nationalism is a distorted reflection of temporary economic interests, Patterson tends to assume that the nationalism of the Catholic Irish is a distorted reflection of unmet economic interests—stemming from their unequal position in Northern Ireland's notoriously segmented labour markets. He is confident that the nationalism of the minority can be radically reduced by reforms of an economic character.

While Patterson is right and sincere in his expressions of regret at the failure of the British state to reform Northern Ireland's labour markets, he appears wedded to exactly the same kind of Marxist 'economism' which he finds objectionable in the social-republican tradition. There is little evidence in Irish history, or from comparative analyses of ethnic conflicts, to support his confidence that economic transformations have direct causal effects on nationalist sentiment. To put it crudely, if every Catholic citizen of west Belfast were to have a job as a manager in a Japanese car factory, a house and *pied à terre* of their own—replete with videos, compact-disc players and Apple Macintosh computers—it would not necessarily imply any diminution of their nationalism.

Marxism, tacit or otherwise, is not a useful tool for examining nationalism: material interests are not always detachable from the cultural or ethnic forms in which they are expressed, and material interests are not always primary in explaining political motivations. This objection should *not* be taken to suggest that Patterson's advocacy of full employment or affirmative action is wrong; these objectives are very desirable in their own right, but their attainment will not be sufficient to end the conflict.

Patterson's thinking also displays residual and unexamined unionist assumptions, albeit of a left-wing kind. He fails to address adequately a key strength in the social-republican case: the failure of the British state to reform Northern Ireland, before 1972 but especially between 1972 and 1985. He is right to attack 'imperialist' explanations, but he fails to examine the proposition that the failure of reform might have something to do with the fact that the relevant state is *British*. Indeed this otherwise trenchant history of folly is marred by two failings still typical of enlightened unionists: reluctance to recognise that the roots of the conflict are bi-ethnic, and that fully bi-ethnic institutions are necessary if one side is not to be allowed to triumph over the other. ●