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Two Historians: Hart & Kostick

The perils of defence of the status quo, the perils of incomplete resistance

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As Irish Capitalism continues in its current fourfold crisis, financial, economic, social and political, it becomes more rather than less necessary to consider the theoretical pitfalls that exist in the revolutionary path. These obstacles have been in existence for a long time, of course. They handicapped revolutionaries in their response to the national crisis after 1968. They will not be easily eliminated, the less so in that they are now far more subtle than the crass forms of two nationalism that took sustenance from the intellectual sterility of so much republican 'theory' in the nineteen-seventies. Nonetheless, an essential part of the struggle remains that of their exposure.

Despite much effort, this continues to be necessary in the discipline of history. Here the problem is twofold. There is that common throughout the world save, presumably, in such remaining workers' bridgeheads as Vietnam and Cuba: the determination of the academic elites to suppress the fact of class struggle. On top of that, in Ireland, there is the elite's need to suppress the record of the said struggle in its expression as the fight for national self-determination. This dual strategy is relevant to two events that have occurred in recent months. One raises the issue of the strategy itself, the other the pitfalls that are in the way of resisting it.

The first of these is the second in time, but it is put first here because it raises very clearly the methods used to suppress understanding of, and thereby the possible support for resistance to class and national oppression in Ireland. The death of Peter Hart on 22 July ended the career of a particularly dedicated and hardworking interpreter of history in the interests of the maintenance of the status quo. This was recognised in reaction to his death in the Irish Times (31 July). The official obituary is comparatively restrained; it does give a paragraph to the issues of the continuing controversy that marred his career, the Kilmichael ambush and the Bandon Valley murders in his work *The IRA and its Enemies*. It concluded, nonetheless, by emphasising the work's 'invaluably detailed research into the social and occupational background of IRA members' after praising Hart's 'brilliant, detailed account of the escalatory dynamics of 1916-23 tit-for-tat violence, seen locally in terms of interwoven cycles of vengeful reprisal.'

Even more fulsome was Caroline Walsh's tribute in the Weekly Review of the same number. After recalling 'the delights of banter' with Hart as one of her department's reviewers, she presents (no surprise here) Roy Foster to declare that Hart's 'finished work has left an enduring mark on the interpretation of the Irish Revolution' and (rather more surprisingly) Diarmaid Ferriter who compares him favourably to his opponents whom he accused of promoting faith-based or creationist history.

Well, nothing to be said but good of the dead, of course, but the learned professors quoted should have tried at least to refute the specific charges that have been made against Hart and that Hart never wrote to answer adequately. After all, they are quite serious accusations of falsification, such as would have spurred Foster and Hart or at least their acolytes to attack any more traditionalist historian who tried to pull such stunts. As it stands, it appears that Hart invented interviews with alleged IRA veterans and excised a portion of a British government document on which he relied to prove his case, because that portion would have destroyed his argument. The first affects his account of the battle of Kilmichael in which he argues that some of the defeated British Auxiliaries were shot dead after surrendering. The second concerns his case that the notorious murders of Protestants in the Bandon valley in April 1922 were inspired by Catholic sectarianism.

Hart had every opportunity to disprove these charges in print, but he never did. In a four page apologia in History Ireland in July/August 2005, he ignores completely the, far more serious, accusation about 1922 and concentrates on the Kilmichael charge. In this article he does not display much of the courtesy and dignity ascribed to his debating techniques in the Irish Times obituary. It is here that he accuses most of his critics of practicing 'a kind of faith-based or creationist history.'

This enables him to point out in the style of one teaching his granny to suck eggs that war causes its participants to commit foul deeds, that, however glorious their cause, not all soldiers behave in a manner 'pious and holy' (as far as this writer knows, only Padraic Pearse believed they did) and that, accordingly, 'democratic and non-violent action' as opposed to physical force was a viable alternative for Irish nationalists from 1916 onwards and is the way forward for them today. He does not answer the substantive charge that those he claimed to have interviewed about the battle, on whose testimony he declares he 'relied' either did not exist, were not IRA veterans or were, at least, not present at the fight.

In themselves, Hart's statements might be seen as insignificant. From a scientific, if not a republican point of view, though the better cause does tend to attract better people, it cannot guarantee superiority. No

doubt there were sectarians among the Volunteers and, at Kilmichael, fake surrender or not, it is difficult to see how the victors could have spared their surviving adversaries with any strategic intelligence, given the absence of secure prison accommodation on their side and the proven readiness of the Auxiliaries to break their promise to end their struggle if allowed to walk free.

However Hart's prevarications are important for two reasons. The first is quite simply that falsifying history does not help raise understanding, particularly political understanding. People in general and revolutionaries in particular need to know the truth the better to act effectively upon it.

The second reason proceeds from this and applies to Hart's overall approach to his subject, in which the fake Kilmichael surrender and the causes of the west Cork murders are merely extreme cases. While his investigations into the details of I.R.A. membership are, no doubt admirable, they are not balanced against any overall picture of the struggle and the issues involved in it. (Strangely enough, this omission was not a failing of Hart's mentor, David Fitzpatrick, in his pioneering study of the overlapping period in Co.Clare, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913-1921* (Dublin, 1978)). The result is that described by Trotsky in his article 'Historical Objectivity and Artistic Truth';

'The philistine, especially if he is separated from the fighting arena by space and time, considers himself elevated above the fighting camps by the mere fact that he understands neither of them.

He sincerely takes his blindness regarding the working of historical forces for the height of impartiality, just he is used to considering himself the normal measure of all things.

Notwithstanding their documentary value, too many historical papers are being written according to this standard. A blunting of sharp edges, even distribution of light and shadow, a conciliatory moralising, with a thorough disguising of the author's sympathies easily secures for an historical work the high reputation of objectivity.' - *Art & Revolution*, New York, 2007, PP.96-97.

This describes Hart's approach rather well. His work is a masterly study of trees, but the wood that they total is never revealed. People join the I.R.A. out of family loyalties or for individual whim, but though Hart admits that 'most of them were patriots and idealists' it is never clear from his account what their patriotic ideals were. He sneers at Meda Ryan's statement 'they fought for Irish freedom', but Ryan does recognise, at least, that the sum total of their motivations, however inadequate, did put them in a different class to their no doubt as variously motivated opponents.

He is not alone in this. A similar, if more definitely political viewpoint has been expressed later by his co-thinking historian Joost Augustejin. In his comments of the Coolacree killings after criticisms of the rather blatantly revisionist television documentary on that subject, Augustejin equates the views of the victims as being as valuable as those of their killers. He misses the point (deliberately?). In some cosmic moral order, it may be, indeed, that the Pearsons' motive for spying was as valid as that of the Volunteers for killing them, but, even there, they were not the same. The Volunteers wanted 'old Ireland free', their victims believed in Irish subjection to safeguard the empire on which the sun never set. The revisionists know this but know, too, that to acknowledge the fact in today's climate would not help sympathy for the I.R.A.'s opponents, so they avoid the issue and distort the historical record accordingly.

Such fudging performs a valuable act to the powers that be. If differences are as little as presented or, even, just the product of personal relationships producing social relationships only, as it were by chance, then there is no point in going beyond 'democratic and non-violent action' to change society, an idea welcome to those who are more than happy to go beyond such action to prevent change. Indeed, Hart's formula for the proper means of change confuses parliamentary/ electoral with mass action, in what may be considered a more conscious but similar confusion to that that has brought Sinn Fein to see power-sharing in Northern Ireland's provincial assembly as the way to achieve a united and independent Ireland.

Certainly, Ireland's tradition of non-violent and democratic mass mobilisation is a proud one, but it was not always successful by itself. O'Connell failed to obtain repeal. The farmers would not have got the land without the fear of Fenian arms on the one hand and the 1880s agricultural depression on the other. In the Anglo-Irish War after 1916, mass action is too often ignored, yet even the partially democratic treaty settlement would not have been possible if a suppressed electorate had not refused to nominate candidates to oppose the nominations to the second Dail of those who were waging the military struggle. Finally, even the inadequacies of the peace process settlement would have been far less without the preceding armed struggle (Contrariwise, of course, it was precisely the failure to maintain mass struggle in the twenty-six counties that ensured that the settlements would be so inadequate.). Just as a successful hunger striker has to face the possibility of death by starvation, so an organiser of mass agitation has to recognise that at a certain point such a movement may have to take its place as a support for armed struggle if it is to get anywhere. All very regrettable no doubt, but all too true.

Hart and his friends are arguing, in fact, for an inclusively parliamentary politics, using a similarly one dimensional interpretation

of history to justify it.

It is something of a relief to turn from Hart's obituaries to the other historical event to be discussed. Though its place here is second, Conor Kostick's *Revolution in Ireland* was republished in reality before Hart's death. More importantly, its interpretation of the events with which it deals is far superior. It does not neglect their context and interprets it in a manner that revolutionary socialists can accept readily. They would not deny the possibility that after 1916 there was a real opportunity for the Irish working class to take state power. Nor would they deny that this opportunity was thwarted by the actions of the workers' official leaders, as well as by the capitalist perspectives of Sinn Fein, allowed by the said Labour leaders to become the vanguard party of the Irish revolution. Nonetheless, there are reasons why enthusiasm for this work must be tempered with reservations.

In the first place Kostick makes exactly the opposite mistake to that of Hart. He leans far too heavily on secondary sources. Though in this edition he flushes out his material with items from the Military History Archives, they do not add much to his narrative. This is no doubt a less heinous error than Hart's; it is nonetheless quite a serious flaw. The fact is that it is well to check secondary sources for oneself as, surprisingly often, their authors misunderstand or, like Hart it would seem, misinterpret their primary data. Moreover, for the period discussed, there are many questions, to some of which, undoubtedly the answers would strengthen his overall case, but which are not to be found in published accounts. This can be seen in Kostick's account of Connolly's strategy in the period leading up to Easter Week; depending mainly on Kieran Allen's biography, he cannot acquit his subject of a simplistic, indeed a republican approach to the serious business of planning rebellion. A less important consideration is that his method ensures that his conclusions will be taken less seriously than Hart's outside the ranks of the faithful.

On top of this, and aided by it, he overstates his case unnecessarily. He implies too often that, in itself, raising the Plough and the Stars in place of the tricolour would have overcome the problems that aborted the Irish national bourgeois revolution and its potential for working class state power.

The reality is that the demand for the workers' republic was merely the beginning of wisdom. There were barriers in the revolution's way that needed consideration in depth.

One such was the Ulster pogroms from July 1920. Kostick insists that they were not organised by the skilled labour aristocracy but by 'the apprentices and rivet boys' (P.167). However most apprentices were connected, often by family ties, to the established skilled workers. This explains the failure of the majority of carpenters to follow their union's

line in opposition to the expulsions, not to mention the failure of other organised workers outside the Labour political milieu to do anything at all about them. As it is Kostick can only gloss over this failure.

Again, he asserts that the truce of July 1921 occurred because the British government needed to keep troops in Britain to suppress its militant workforce rather than sending them to suppress the Irish. The truth is that the British workers' militancy had suffered a recent major blow due to the treachery of the transport unions on Black Friday. The government did fear it but as a longer term problem. In the immediate period, its Irish strategy was influenced by the facts that the elections for the partition parliaments had shown rock solid support for Sinn Fein in the twenty-six counties, that, no doubt because of this, the military could not guarantee that the I.R.A. would be suppressed before 1922 and that the war was increasingly unpopular with the British public, not just the workers. These were reasons enough to test the possibility of peace talks.

His perspectives lead him, too, to ignore factors in the revolutionary situation that a contemporary revolutionary would have had to take into account. One is the fact that many Sinn Feiners were influenced by the distinctly utopian co-operative socialism of George Russell, published five months after the Rising in his 'National Being'. Its idea that eventually the bosses would surrender their enterprises to their workers voluntarily acted as a left cover for the real Sinn Fein plans (narrower than those of the Proclamation and the Dail's Democratic Programme) as agreed at the party's convention in October 1917 and won to it many who might have been reluctant to join a bourgeois party otherwise. When the post-war slump came finally (Kostick does not mention it), and the bosses chose to fight their workers rather than surrender their enterprises, it was too late for most of them.

Perhaps even more important is Kostick's avoidance of the relationship of the land question to the independence struggle. The struggles of small farmers and agricultural labourers are lumped together. No mention is made of the larger unpurchased tenant farmers who dominated the I.R.A. in Co.Clare, who did not need the land courts to justify their enthusiasm for the Republic in the early days of the Anglo-Irish War, but who were happy to settle for the Saorstát rather than risk any new war stimulating agitation below them. The Congested Districts Board which did dampen land agitation in its areas is not examined, nor is the effect of its collapse leading to the radicalisation of formally quiet rural areas in the later months of the war with Britain. These are important omissions, the essentially rural capitalist aspirations of the farming classes was a major argument of Thomas Johnson against participation in the national struggle. It has still to be rebuffed.

Kostick handicaps himself further by his readiness to

compartmentalise. Three separate chapters, quite apart from the one each on the Belfast engineering strike and the Limerick soviet, deal separately with 'Repression and Resistance', 'Workers in the War of Independence' and 'Labour, Nationalism and Unionism' to cover the said war. This is not quite as disastrous as Nevin's compartmentalising in his account of Connolly's last years, but its tendency is similar. It is basically undialectical; the struggles of the workers and the oppressed intermingled with that of all national interests for Irish independence, was influenced by it and itself influenced it. All that the reader gets from Kostick's account is the fact that, during the troubles after 1916, the workers attempted to get some of their own back under cover of the Republican military struggle, only to be slammed down by the partial victors who feared them more than they did the Brits. Despite the blurbs on the back of the new edition, this is not new. Hart's one merit is that of originality.

Peter Hart was an openly conscious defender of the status quo. Whether he believed in the most conspicuous expression of this, the current bank bail-out, is not known to this writer, but it seems likely. Conor Kostick is a committed opponent of the system. That the publishers like them both should tell him something. The walls of capitalist Ireland are not the walls of biblical Jericho; it will take more than a trumpet blast to bring them down. Part of that task requires better history.

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