

The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland

By Henry Patterson
W.W. Norton, 248 pp., \$25.00

The British State & The Ulster Crisis: From Wilson to Thatcher

By Paul Bew and Henry Patterson
Routledge, Chapman & Hall
154 pp., \$9.95

The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-72: Political Forces and Social Classes

By Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson
St. Martin's Press (1979)
231 pp., out of print

Marxist Perspectives in Northern Ireland

Science & Society (special issue)
Vol. 53, No. 2
Edited by Ellen Hazelkorn
Guilford Publications, 120 pp. \$6.00

By Wim Roefs

NORTHERN IRISH POLITICAL SCIENTIST Henry Patterson's long overdue book should educate, among others, the left (socialist and otherwise) in Great Britain, Europe and the U.S. *The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland* analyzes the many attempts since 1921 of, as Patterson calls them, "social republicans" in Ireland to combine purist Irish nationalism with socialist politics. These attempts were, above all, full of contradictions in terms of ends and means. The latest, and perhaps last, attempt is the Provisional IRA and its political wing, Provisional Sinn Féin.

Patterson's analysis of the republican movement is merciless and void of the sentiment and nationalistic romanticism that often characterizes leftist writings on Northern Ireland. *The Politics of Illusion* fits into a series of books by Patterson and fellow socialist Paul Bew. Their research is unpopular among most of the left, which has linked itself in a politically and intellectually lazy way to the slogans of Irish nationalism, including those of the Provisionals.

Many on the left claim to be "critical supporters" of Irish republicanism, but their "critical attitude" doesn't prevent them from ignoring a vast body of left-wing revisionist analysis on Ireland, of which the "Marxist Perspectives on Ireland" special issue of *Science & Society* (Summer 1989) gives some good examples. Bew and Patterson's work is part of the revisionist trend. Although the style of their writing and the organization of their material is frequently rather sloppy, nobody interested in Northern Ireland should ignore these analyses.

Historical recap: In 1921, the partition of Ireland made the south independent, while Northern Ireland was established for the Protestants who wanted to stay within the United Kingdom. All over Ireland, the IRA remained actively opposed to the settlement but increasingly found it

Political openings and Irish schisms



Northern Ireland: exploring the contradictions of economic and ideological poverty.

self in the margins of Irish politics. From the '20s to the present, the organization has tried to compensate for the defeat of purely militarist and politically backward republicanism by taking up social and economic issues. In doing so, the IRA or its political wing, Sinn Féin, tried to create a mass movement for the "anti-imperialist struggle" against the British presence in Ireland. Patterson writes that the working class "was significant as a resource to be mobilized behind a pre-existing objective," the unification of Ireland.

This instrumental approach to "socialism" and social agitation created severe problems for the social republicans. First of all, they got in trouble when taking their social agenda seriously; the struggle for a united Ireland, particularly the IRA's violent campaigns, interfered with their capability to attract broad support. They never considered, however, that the real needs of the masses might not be compatible with the republican objective.

Secondly, their traditional Irish nationalist perceptions and their fixation on uniting Ireland resulted in a severely distorted view of Irish political realities. They overestimated the chances for the creation of a broad social movement and the possibilities for Irish unification.

The present republican movement is an example of this. By the mid-'70s, the Provisional leadership took up social issues to build a broad movement that would support the

IRA's armed struggle for unification. Yet despite existing strong national sentiments, "an organization which sought to link economic and any other domestic issue to support for the 'armed struggle' [in the North] was doomed to perpetual marginality in the Republic," Patterson concludes.

In the North, the Provisionals did create a successful movement during the '80s, but the contradictions

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of social republicanism are felt there as well. IRA violence prevents Sinn Féin from making progress beyond the present support of 11 percent of the total electorate. Furthermore, the party's rallying call for jobs is offset by IRA violence, which might jeopardize investments. It contrasts even more with the IRA's bombing of "economic targets," which destroys jobs.

Sinn Féin's instrumental approach

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to "socialism" is also reflected in the opportunistic way the party refers to it. In the early '80s, a confident republican movement seeking the support of the British left emphasized the struggle for a socialist united Ireland. By the end of the decade, however, a stagnating movement pursued cooperation with conservative Irish nationalist parties, insisting that "socialism" was not on the agenda.

Patterson argues that the basis for the Provisionals' support is not the old slogan of "completing the national revolution" but the fact that they give "a bitter ... expression to real needs" of the Catholic population. Therefore, if these needs would be seriously addressed by a British government, "social republicanism" would be consigned to the history books.

In *The British State & The Ulster Crisis*, Patterson and Bew argue that substantial state-sponsored reforms, particularly an economic face-lift, could well be the key to some sort of decent settlement in Northern Ireland. Bew and Patterson have been accused of 'Marxist economism' in expecting economic reforms to ease nationalist feelings. Yet nobody expects economic reforms to do away with Irish nationalism, nor that they are an instant solution. The argument is that happy Catholics are less likely to make the nationalist cause their top priority, which in turn would make Northern Ireland a less explosive and polarized community.

In this respect it should be remembered that the present Catholic revolt started 20 years ago as a civil-rights movement, not as a nationalist movement. Decent political and economic reforms in the past might well have prevented the mess of the last two decades. Whatever the outcome of substantial economic reforms now, the bottom line is that any settlement is unlikely as long as the unemployment rate among Catholics is twice as high as among Protestants.

One of the most powerful dogmas of Irish republicanism in the last two decades goes against the argument of reforming Northern Ireland. Unlike the social republicans of the IRA in the '60s who tried to reform Northern Ireland as part of their strategy to create a socialist united Ireland, the Provisionals claim that Northern Ireland will be irreformable as long as partition exists, because Northern Catholics will suffer severe discrimination. After 50 years of structural, state-sponsored discrimination, the failure of the '60s civil-rights movement to win substantial reforms from the Protestant regime was seen as the ultimate "proof" of this notion.

The Protestants are seen by republicans as one monolithic reactionary bloc who have always been unwilling to compromise. Since it was the British presence in the North that gave the Republicans the power, British presence is said to be the key problem. The fact that the British

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didn't manage to abandon discrimination after they put Northern Ireland under direct rule from London in 1972 is supposed to be further evidence for that.

With the anti-imperialist flavor of Irish nationalism and the justified concern for the battered Northern Catholics, this dogma is the most important reason why many on the left give uncritical support to Irish nationalism in general and not seldom to the Provisionals specifically. But the only thing Northern Ireland's history proves is that it hasn't been reformed, not that it can't be reformed. In *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-1972*, Bew and Patterson, with Peter Gibbon, argued that the Protestant bloc was not monolithic. They show that at any time in the country's history, important sec-

tions of the Protestant political elite demanded. "British standards" for Northern Ireland, which included equality for Catholics.

British reserve and reserves: Because British policy was dominated by the hope of avoiding getting bogged down in Northern Ireland's affairs, the British failed to support the reform-minded section of the Protestant ruling class. In *The British State & The Ulster Crisis*, Bew and Patterson can thus argue that "the problem of the involvement of the British state in Northern Ireland lies not in its existence but in its specific forms."

Bew and Patterson show that the British longtime unwillingness to get involved made them grossly unprepared to act when all hell broke loose in the late '60s.

Since 1972, British reluctance has

translated into a policy that exacerbated the Northern crisis. The steady sectarian violence by Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries and the resulting political and communal polarization obviously hasn't enhanced the chances for a democratic settlement.

The real problem with Britain is not its presence but the ambiguity of that presence: it can't leave but doesn't want to be there. Great Britain has no economic incentive to stay, since their involvement costs them a bundle. Northern Ireland's supposed strategic importance to NATO—another popular argument among republicans and their supporters—is most certainly nonsense as well. The truth is that the British Labour Party is in favor of reunification of Ireland and that the Conservative government agrees that unity

can come about by consent, if the Northern Protestants agree to it. The real reason why the British are in Northern Ireland is, as Bew and Patterson argue, "the near impossibility of expelling a million citizens [the Northern Protestants] from the United Kingdom—especially in response to a campaign of terrorism."

Britain's limited commitment to Northern Ireland, in combination with Thatcherite monetarism, has so far been the luck of the Provisionals. The Thatcher government isn't prepared to deliver the funds to deal with Catholic needs and thus keep social republicanism alive. Patterson argues that the future of social republicanism and of the Provisionals' substantial support in the North is "sybiotically tied to the future of the Thatcherite project."

Perhaps it is some consolation to

the left that the arguments presented here are not so much arguments for or against Irish nationalism or Protestant unionism. These are arguments for addressing the real needs and problems in Northern Ireland. The progressive position on Northern Ireland is neither support nor opposition for one faction there but rather to promote practical politics that create equality, peace and reconciliation. The constitutional context—Irish or British—within which this happens should be of no great concern for the left or anybody else who is interested in these things. Creating the social context that is most likely to fulfill these goals is the task at hand.

Wim Roefs is a Dutch writer specializing in Northern Ireland. He is co-author of *Verdeeld Belfast* (Divided Belfast).

Stalemate saga anything but stale

The Wild Colonial Boy

By James Hynes
Atheneum, 356 pp., \$18.95

By James North

THIS FIRST NOVEL, A POLITICAL tale of contemporary Ireland, gets much stronger toward the end. Early on, the pacing is a bit too slow. But the ending gathers force suddenly and surprisingly, like a thunderstorm at the end of a balmy, mellow day, sweeping the reader through emotions that are unexpectedly shocking and deep.

The story begins when Brian Donovan of Detroit, whose grandfather fled Northern Ireland in the '20s for political reasons, is asked by his family to illegally deliver \$10,000 in cash to the Provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army. Brian is a confused, spoiled young man who has not earned the right to the cynicism he affects. He is in contrast with the Irish cousins he meets for the first time on his arrival, who are seri-

ous about ousting the British from the North and reunifying the island.

Through one cousin, Maire, Brian stumbles into a subplot within the IRA. A renegade Provo, Jimmy Duggan, plans a violent attack designed to embarrass the organization's leadership into ending its first tentative forays into participating in electoral politics. The aimless and somewhat weak-minded Brian is the per-

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fect mule to carry plastic explosives across borders.

Hynes has a good ear for dialogue and an impressive talent for description, whether he is rendering the red-brick grittiness in Belfast or the wild Donegal seacoast. But he devotes too much time to the comings and goings of the participants instead of showing us what motivates them. Jimmy Duggan and Maire come off as fairly standard fanatics, motivated almost exclusively by revenge. People do get to be that way, but that's

not how they start life.

Midway through, Hynes introduces an unlikeable, well-drawn new character, an American Irish freelance journalist named Tim McGuire. Tim is a putative left-winger whose Irish nationalist sympathies clash with his desire to get the big scoop.

Art imitates: Any left-wing journalist who has worked overseas will instantly recognize this scene. One afternoon, Tim comes into the hall of his low-rent Belfast boarding house and looks for his mail: "The only thing for him was a letter from his mother in Boston. No check from *In These Times*, no check from the *Voice*, no answer from his *Mother Jones* query letter. He scowled and pushed his mother's letter into the pocket of his parka and started heavily up the stairs. What those wire service jerks in the Europa didn't realize, *couldn't* realize, since they never left the fucking bar, did they, didn't have Tim's contacts or years of experience on the ground, Belfast was just another Beirut or Managua to them, with less exotic food—was that there was some kind of unusual seismic activity in the Provos."

The story begins to move at a gripping pace. Brian is down in Dublin, continuing his clandestine journey. As he walks the Dublin streets, he notices the signs of American mass

culture, which are so ubiquitous overseas and so depressing. He muses: "Heroes were for movies. The methodical Provos got results, while his grandfather's self-defeating, hand-me-down nationalism had nothing to show for itself but some heroic statuary and a lot of weepy folk songs. In the end they had lost the war not to the British or the Orangemen but to last summer's American blockbusters and the flame-broiled hamburger."

Brian Donovan continues passively on his mission. Hynes is deft at gradually adding darker shading to what started out sounding like a lighthearted, half-whimsical caper. He is strong on suspense, without stumbling into melodrama. A brutal interrogation scene near the end is sketched with particular skill, as the

victim slides in and out of consciousness. We get to the horrifying finale with complete, deep conviction.

Yet Hynes' protagonists never face real dilemmas, never stop to ponder alternatives in the way that can bring drama and power to a novel. (For example, in Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, will the scientist-prisoners win their own freedom by developing a device that will enable Stalin's secret police to identify telephone voices?) Hynes' characters continue to travel grimly down paths that seem to have been laid out for them. But maybe the stalemate in Ireland makes change seem inconceivable, whether on a political level or in individual lives.

James North, author of *Freedom Rising*, is a former correspondent for *In These Times*.

NOTEBOOK

The Carlos Chadwick Mystery

By Gene H. Bell-Villada
Armador Publishers (Box 12335,
Albuquerque, NM 87195)
255 pp., \$9.00

The center cannot hold in *The Carlos Chadwick Mystery*, a political parable of campus life and corporate America. But that's only because the political center seems to be a dubious and tawdry fiction. This is, however, a criticism not of author Gene Bell-Villada's active imagination but of the reality he satirizes. Indeed, the invisible ideology of journalistic objectivity serves as the all-purpose whipping boy for this broadly comic tale.

Romanticism and disillusionment await idealistic young Carlos "Charlie" Chadwick as he makes his way from a sleepy childhood in Caracas to a sleepy New England college—where he ultimately becomes the prime suspect in a campus bombing. The book is divided into three parts. The first canto lays out the prosaic facts of Charlie's life in the form of a mainstream magazine article, encumbered by all the excess baggage of that arena's bogus "balance." The sec-

ond part is a "personal memoir" penned by a narcissistic coed and budding "liberal" journalist who has her own ax to grind—and doesn't mind who she grinds it on. After a brief affair, she cuts Chadwick loose and sends him skidding toward giddy Marxism.

The third section is Chadwick's one-act play, *Perspectives Industries Ltd.*, a heavy-handed swipe at liberal education's marketplace of ideas. In Chadwick's sardonic scenario, all ideas are "value-free"—the industrialists of PIL will peddle pro or con on anything (Hitler, slavery, Marxism, what have you). It just so happens that some ideas are more popular/profitable than others.

Each of the novel's three sections has its carefully crafted myopia, but some of the blind spots are more telling than others. Bell-Villada clearly has sympathy for his reasonable fanatic Carlos but none for the raving moderates who surround him. The author has nevertheless done a fine job of caricaturing those complacent collegians who don't realize that ideology is as intertwined with college life as ivy is to the walls.

—Jeff Reid

