

FROM THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE: JAMES CONNOLLY AND THE TRANSNATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF SCOTTISH AND IRISH SLUMS

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James Connolly – socialist, anti-imperialist, feminist, Irish nationalist, anti-racist, Catholic, rebellion leader, and martyr. For almost a century, Connolly has often been regarded in categorical, sometimes apparently mutually exclusive terms. Many times he has forcefully been ‘kidnapped’ by one ideology or the other and has been mummified into a symbol, which sometimes completely distorts his written works and his life. Particularly the Fianna Fáil Party under Éamon de Valera imposed its own nationalist-conservative version of the Rising, discarding unwanted elements of the highly multifaceted event, such as the importance of female involvement and feminist and socialist thought (Moran 6-7, 68-83). During this process, James Connolly was stripped of his subversive ideas and was safely celebrated as “a leader of men,” as *The Irish Independent* wrote in 1935. Connolly’s biography has similarly been politically skewed, with some commentators indicating his place of birth as County Monaghan and not, as now historically proven, Edinburgh. These claims, as Chloe Ross Alexander rightly examines, “have a ‘political angle’ in that many Nationalists post-1916 would not have liked to publicise that such an Irish hero was in actual fact born outside of Ireland” (Alexander 74-75).¹ Thus, Connolly was rather “a subject for hagiographers rather than historians” (Laffan 116).

Aside from blunt nationalist propaganda, W.B. Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916” undoubtedly excels any post-mortem assessment of Connolly by neutering his legacy through what Elizabeth Cullingford termed Yeats’s “process of mythologizing” (96). In stanzas one and two, Yeats’s lyrical persona homogenizes the very heterogeneous crowd of rebels not only by neglecting to acknowledge in detail some of the more important rebel leaders and their ideology (among the neglected is Connolly), but also by eventually writing out their names in a verse like chiselling names onto a “national gravestone” (Foster 23). The lyrical “I” is the stonemason who forges and forces his version of the Easter Rising upon Ireland in the coming times. The final result is a petrified poetic account of the rebellion, which is sanitized from any socialist or feminist concerns.² Yet, in how far this ellipsis is indicative of Yeats’s scorn for the filthy modern tide, which perhaps upsets stable hierarchic categories, is not as important

1 One has to add that Connolly was good at confusing biographers as well, as he gave his place of birth as County Monaghan in the Census return of 1901 (Nevin 168).

2 For an in-depth analysis of this process of mystification, see Backus.

here as the fact that it highlights Yeats's uneasiness in finding an appropriate position for Connolly in his poetic oeuvre.

As I will argue, this discomfort or failure of Yeats and others to fix Connolly without distorting him arises from Connolly's explosion of conventional national and cultural categories. My emphasis will be on Connolly as a transnational writer and what I term Connolly's "politics of cultural alternatives." He found the tools for these politics in the Edinburgh and Dublin slums, which were similar in their desolate reality and set apart in stark contrast from cosy middle-class suburban life.

In 1868, James Connolly was born in a slum, namely in the Cowgate in Edinburgh, which was given the name "Little Ireland" (an Irish colony in Scotland, as it were), as it was replete with about 14,000 Irish immigrants, who all struggled to survive in the poverty-ridden and unhealthy conditions of the tenements (Nevin 5-6; Ellis 9). According to Donal Nevin, one of Connolly's biographers, his "boyhood was one of deprivation, harsh poverty, grim housing conditions and hard toil. He had little schooling and from the age of nine earned paltry wages to help keep the family above the bread-line" (5). This description, although lacking the backup of direct historical source material, is consistent with the description given of the area in the book *Slum Life in Edinburgh* published in 1891 by the *Scottish National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children*. One of the 12 sketches reads as follows:

A walk through the Grassmarket or Cowgate, or down the Lawnmarket and Canongate, is at times a very depressing experience; but one has to explore the huge tenements that tower on either side of the street, to enter the houses and speak with the people, to arrive at an adequate idea of what life in some parts of the slums means. A night spent in such an exploration – climbing foul and rickety stairs, groping your way along a network of dark, narrow passages, and peering into the dismal dens which the wretched inhabitants (and their landlords) call "houses" – a night passed in this manner will give an experience of horrors that will for ever remain imprinted on the memory. (10-11)

Of course, this description and others, previously "printed in the *Weekly Scotsman*, and which strongly excited the attention of the Public" (5), have to be treated with caution, as their primary philanthropic motives cloud the distinction between investigative journalism and fiction. Nevertheless, this sketch and the biographical accounts of Connolly's early life in the Cowgate area fit the overall historical assessment that life in the Cowgate slums during the second half of the nineteenth century was characterized by hardship (Rodger 444). Tenement dwellers lacked social security and were consequently at the mercy of poor relief by the Poor Law system, the church, philanthropic endeavours, and, of course, their landlords.

If we accord some credibility to the idea that Connolly's upbringing in the Cowgate did in fact "for ever remain imprinted on the memory" of Connolly, we are able to approach his fierce hatred towards "rack-renting slum landlords [...] and parasites of every description" (*Justice* 12 Aug 1893, in Greaves 48) from a new perspective. His special attention to the urban slum misery which we later on find in his political pamphlets in Dublin seems to have its roots in his experience in the Edinburgh slums.

During his first public appearance in October 1894 as a socialist candidate in the municipal elections for the depleted St Giles Ward in Edinburgh, he focussed almost exclusively on housing issues demanding an instant end to one-roomed houses (Nevin 39).³ In a remarkable speech he says:

Perhaps [the working-class] will learn how foolish it is to denounce tyranny in Ireland, and then vote for tyrants and the instruments of tyrants at their own door. Perhaps they will begin to see that the landlord who grinds his peasants on a Connemara estate and the landlord who rack-rents them in a Cowgate slum, are brethren in fact and deed. Perhaps they will realise that the Irish worker who starves in an Irish cabin and the Scotch worker who is poisoned in an Edinburgh garret are also brothers with one hope and destiny. Perhaps they will observe how the same Liberal Government which supplies police to Irish landlords to aid them in their work of exterminating the Irish peasantry also imports police into Scotland to aid Scottish mineowners in their work of starving the Scottish miners. (*Edinburgh Labour Chronicle* 5 Nov 1894, in Howell 26)

What is most striking in this quote is his cultural-political bridge-building not only between rural and urban spaces, but also across the Irish Sea: between Scotland and Ireland. The Irish and Scottish are “brothers with one hope and destiny” and thus closer to each other than to any national or even racial ideology. They have one common enemy – British colonialism in the disguise of liberal capitalism. Here one feels most clearly Connolly’s impetus for transnational ethics, which goes beyond insular nationalism or a narrow-minded perception of national identity. Moreover, he already addresses what he later would repeatedly stress: that the crux of the Irish situation does not lie first and foremost in the issue of achieving national independence, but in the problem of the capitalist institution of private property. The worst results of this exploitative institution could be found in the Scottish and Irish slums. They were the residues of a rack-renting antisocial capitalist agenda.

In the 1880s Connolly had spent about seven years in the First Battalion of the King’s Liverpool Regiment, and it is likely that he “was among the troops who took part in the celebration of Queen Victoria’s jubilee in Dublin in 1887” (Nevin 17; see Greaves 27). When he thus campaigned in Edinburgh in 1894 he had most probably borne witness to similar misery in the Dublin slums as he had known from Edinburgh. After all, the “urban ‘fever nests’” (Prunty 76) in Dublin were not contained to one area but spread all over the inner city. Furthermore, in light of the fact that Dublin had statistically the highest death-rate in Europe (almost twice as high as Edinburgh’s death-

3 The St Giles Ward was mainly occupied by poverty-stricken inhabitants of Irish origin. The main issue for Connolly in this ward was, as Chloe Ross Alexander says, “the Irish working-classes who inhabited the slums of St Giles tended to vote Liberal as opposed to his socialism”. This was due to the fact that the Irish National League “encouraged its members to vote for the Liberals” because of their preoccupation with Home Rule in Ireland. In this sense, “while the Irish working classes were passionately enthusiastic about voting against tyranny in Ireland”, they actually “cast their vote in support of the promotion of tyranny against themselves and their own class in Scotland” (81). This possibly strengthened Connolly’s conviction to give the slum inhabitants a strong political voice.

rate⁴), that it had been hit hard by epidemics (Prunty 153), and that it also had suffered a serious problem of unemployment during the 1880s (Daly 107), perhaps Connolly had even sensed that the Dublin slum situation was particularly precarious. After losing his job as a “dust carter” in Edinburgh (Nevin 167), Connolly and his family first moved to Dublin and lived in tenement housing in Queen Street. This move, stimulated by poverty in Edinburgh and a job offer for Connolly as the secretary of the Dublin Socialist Club (Nevin 58), has also to be seen in terms of finding a stronger breeding ground for his socialist ideas. Although Edinburgh was the home of a lively socialist scene in 1890, the propaganda did not quite spark off as Connolly had hoped for. In 1893 he gives vent to his frustration:

The population of Edinburgh is largely composed of snobs, flunkeys, mashers, lawyers, students, middle-class pensioners and dividend hunters. Even the working-class portion of the population seemed to have imbibed the snobbish would-be respectable spirit of their ‘betters,’ and look with aversion upon every movement running counter to conventional ideas. (*Justice* 12 Aug 1893, in Greaves 48)

Edinburgh, in a nutshell, had too much of an élite flair about it. After they lived in Queen Street in Dublin, the family relocated to 76 Charlemont Street from May 1896 (Nevin 59). In 1897, they eventually moved to a house at 54 Pimlico. According to Thom’s Street Directory for Dublin for 1898, these streets contained a large number of tenement buildings. It is quite likely that the Connollys faced scenes of urban misery, which were worse than what they had experienced in Edinburgh.

From his personal experience and overall socialist, anti-imperialist conviction, the slum situation for him was both a testament to, and a subversion of, British colonialism. Successively, Connolly proposed an alternative reading of history focussing on the colonially submerged remnants of an alternative form of community, which he believed existed in the slums. During this re-evaluation of an alternative culture, Connolly highlighted the fact that the slums were a colonial product and that they, as a periphery in a colonial space, offered the possibility to rediscover potential pre- and anti-colonial forms of cultural identity. Connolly was convinced that the slums, be it in Edinburgh or in Dublin, were the perfect loci to uncover a means of defiance to colonialism.

In his first article in *The Labour Leader* in 1897, Connolly begins with a quote from the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, which in Connolly’s view is “the key for unravelling the whole tangled skein of Irish politics”: “Before the time of the conquest the Irish people knew nothing of absolute property in land. The land belonged to the entire sept [...]” (“Erin’s Hope”). Connolly believes that Ireland is exceptional because primitive communion was intact up to the seventeenth century:

[I]n Ireland the system formed part of the well-defined social organization of a nation of scholars and students, recognized by Chief and Tanist, Brehon and Bard, as the inspir-

4 In 1879 Dublin had a death-rate of 35.7 per 1,000 inhabitants compared to Edinburgh’s 21.3. In 1899 Dublin’s death-rate was 33.6 per 1,000 inhabitants compared to 19.2 in Edinburgh (O’Brien 104; Prunty 74).

ing principle of their collective life, and the basis of their national system of jurisprudence. ("Erin's Hope")

An alternative reading of history would thus rectify the fatal tendency of the Irish "to worship the glories of the past, while remaining indifferent to the evils of the present," such as the slum squalor (*Workers' Republic* 7 Oct 1899, in Nevin 131). Later on, in the first American issue of *The Harp* in January 1908, Connolly radically explicated the Benjaminian method to brush history against the grain, when he calls for no less than "a correct interpretation of the facts of Irish history, past and present" (*The Lost Writings* 93). Furthermore, in his book *Labour in Irish History* (1910) Connolly excavates historical sources in order to illuminate layers of history, which had been concealed by the hegemonic view of history.

Considering Connolly's endeavour to reveal an alternative to dominant history, which can be used as "a lamp to [the worker's] feet in the stormy paths of today" (*Labour in Irish History* 137), it seems fruitful to draw on an argument put forward by David Lloyd. "The non-modern," he writes, "emerge[s] out of kilter with modernity [...] in a dynamic relationship to it [...] It is a space where the alternative survives [...] as an incommensurable set of cultural formations historically occluded from, yet never actually disengaged with, modernity" (2). This alternative form of culture is exactly what Connolly attempts to bring into focus, as it includes alternative values and ethics, which are diametrically opposed in "character from the deadly embrace of capitalist English conventionalism" (*Labour in Irish History* 9). Connolly is confident that the cultural formations of the non-modern can be "sought and found [in] its last fortress in the hearts and homes of the 'lower orders,' ... [in] the same 'wretched cabins [which] have been the holy shrines in which the traditions and the hopes of Ireland have been treasured and transmitted'" (9). For him, the forgotten riches of Irish culture are located in the most abject places – the wretched cabins, the slum tenements. *Locus horridus* inverted becomes an alternative *locus amoenus*, in which the foundation for the restructuring of society can be found. The so far discarded and disregarded dwellings are now the most important places for cultural (re-)discovery and consciousness.

From a straightforward Marxist perspective, this parallax shift is not half as interesting (at least for literary historians) as when one considers that Connolly saw his works as "an integral part of the Revival," as Gregory Dobbins has highlighted ("Connolly, the Archive, and Method" 51). In the foreword of *Labour in Irish History* Connolly writes, "this book, attempting to depict the attitude of the dispossessed masses of the Irish people in the great crisis of modern Irish history, may justly be looked upon as part of the literature of the Gaelic revival" (9). His position adds a new view on the politics of the Revival, as it attacks predominantly escapist, allegedly non-political visions such as Yeats's early attempt to find alternative forms of culture in his faeryland in the West of Ireland or even Synge's apparent realist search for authentic Ireland among the peasants on the Aran Islands.

If one regards Connolly as part of the Irish Revival, as he does himself, he indeed is one of the few writers who actually had experienced slum life (another exception being James Stephens) and who knew the hardship and social inequality of the situation. When he prepared his return to Dublin in 1910, he writes to William O'Brien, "I do not see my way to live after I once more set foot on Irish soil. And that part of the problem is the hardest, as of course I could not go into the Dublin slums again to live; one experience of that is enough in a lifetime" (in Nevin 315). And again he stresses his dilemma a few months later, "[y]ou see I am grown cautious. I do not want my family to do any more starving" (318). Indeed, as in *Slum Life in Edinburgh*, the experience of horrors of slum life did seem to remain forever imprinted on his memory.

In addition to his personal experience, Connolly was very well aware of the recent development of the overall slum conditions, which he would study at the National Library of Ireland. In *The Re-Conquest of Ireland* he quotes recent slum statistics from 1911 that estimate that "the death-rate in Dublin was 27.6 per 1,000 [which] was the highest of any city in Europe," even higher than the death-rate of "such cities like Moscow and Calcutta" (211). Bashing the jovial comment of an Alderman of the city, who "airily described [the situation] at a public dinner the other day as 'trifling'," Connolly concludes "that there is permitted in Ireland [...] the ceaseless slaughter of precious human life" (212). Furthermore, he assesses that "[t]he higher the social status the lower the death-rate, and the lower the social status the higher the death-rate" (212). These conclusions are in line with historians' assessment that the efforts of the Dublin Corporation were ineffectual (Prunty 320) and that "Dublin was a markedly unhealthy place to live" (Daly 270) in which "the most important determinant of children's health was social class" (266). Highly accurate in its historical assessment, Connolly's criticism is even more impressive in the light of the Irish Revival and its mostly rural trajectory, as he was one of the few prominent writers and thinkers of this loosely tied literary movement who clearly voiced their opinion about the plight of Dublin's inner city.⁵

Already in 1897 Connolly had stressed that literature must not solely be preoccupied with the past but must also be engaged with "vital living issues":

In Ireland at the present time there are at work a variety of agencies seeking to preserve the national sentiment in the hearts of the people. These agencies, whether Irish Language movements, Literary Societies or Commemoration Committees, are undoubtedly doing a work of lasting benefit to this country in helping to save from extinction the precious racial and national history, language and characteristics of our people. Nevertheless, there is a danger that by too strict an adherence to their present methods of propaganda, and consequent neglect of vital living issues, they may only succeed in stereotyping our historical studies into a worship of the past [...]. (Connolly, "Socialism and Nationalism")

5 George Russel (Æ) being a notable exception when he writes a letter of indignation after the Church Street Disaster of 1913 (Corlett 41).

For Connolly, the literature of the Revival should commit itself more on the non-modern as the bearer of alternative knowledge and values – anti-materialist and anti-imperialist, social and egalitarian at heart – and its ineluctable entanglement with present social ills.

To stress the importance of this alternative non-modern, Connolly had to resort to an aggressive reversal of commonly acknowledged values. During an election campaign in the Wood Quay Ward in Dublin in 1903, he tirelessly emphasised “the threats and the bribery” of slum owners, whose efforts would forfeit “clean, healthy, or honest politics in the City of Dublin.” After having lost the election, he penned the angry poem “Song of the Elections.” In it he depicts the misery of the people and the bribery of the landlords:

[...]

Tell us of the Death Rate,
High in Dublin Town;

[...]

Sing of workers' children
Dying in the slums;

[...]

Tell how the slum voters
On Election Day,
For a pint of porter
Sell that chance away.
Sing us how the publican,
The landlord, the employer,
Strive to press the workingman
Deeper in the mire,
Tell how Socialist voters,
Yet with righteous wrath,
Will sweep these slimy vermin
Out of Labour's path. (qtd. in Nevin 176)

This politically straightforward poem has a bitter undertone, as it illuminates Connolly's frustration with the socio-political situation in Dublin. Yet, it also highlights the problem that the dispossessed subjects in the Dublin slums and slums elsewhere are easily stripped of their agency.

In order to restore this agency and thus to empower the dispossessed in the space of the non-modern, Connolly resorts to a reversal of values by inverting the middle-class trope of dirt and dirtiness as being a reflection of morals. As “Song of the Elections” shows, it is not that the slum inhabitants are dirty and thus morally infected, as it were, but the ruling class, the “slimy vermin,” who obstruct clean politics. This Nietzschean motif of moral inversion of cultural hegemonic values concerning cleanliness and dirt can be found in the entire corpus of Connolly's writing. In the *Workers' Republic* editorial from 15 July 1899, he calls the British army “a veritable moral cesspool corrupting all within its bounds, and exuding forth a miasma of pestilence upon every spot

so unfortunate as to be cursed by its presence" ("Soldiers of the Queen"). This is the exact vocabulary used in contemporary discourse about slums in Dublin, Edinburgh, and elsewhere,⁶ which expressed a middle-class fear of infections of moral and manners by the filthy and thus morally corrupt inhabitants (Prunty 36). In *The Workers' Republic* in March 1916 Connolly asserts that Ireland is run by the "foul minds of those in charge" ("Notes on the Front" 207) and in 1914 that the working class is "surrounded by the most unclean pack of wolves that ever yelped at the heels of honour" ("Address to the Delegates" 135).

In one of his most powerful writings, "The Slums and the Trenches" (1916), he completely upsets the acknowledged idea of slums nourishing immorality by stating that "death in a slum may be the noblest of all deaths if it is the death of a man who preferred to die rather than dirty his soul by accepting the gold of England." Connolly's statement had previously been triggered by "a speaker at a recent recruiting meeting in Dublin [who had] declared that the Dublin slums were more unhealthy than the trenches in Flanders." Considering the statistics that the British Army recruited more than 140,000 Irishmen during World War I (Jeffery 7) and that up to the 1916 Rising 13,000 of these came from Dublin's inner city (which equalled 20% of all inner-city Dublin men aged fifteen to forty-four) (Callan; qtd. in Thompson 17), Connolly's dilemma was the fact that recruitment cut the ground from under the anti-imperialist working-class movement. Reflecting upon that and the conviction that the slums are the devastating results of immoral British politics in Ireland, in 1915 he says, "Ireland is rotten with slums, a legacy of Empire" ("The Manchester Martyrs"). This leads Connolly to the statement that a person dying in the Dublin slums is "a hero and a martyr fit to be ranked with and honoured alongside of the greatest heroes and noblest martyrs this island has produced" ("The Slums and the Trenches"). By comparing the horrible conditions of the trenches with the similarly horrible conditions in the Dublin slums, which are "worse than those of any civilised people on God's earth," he thus elevates the slums and turns them into a frontline and combat zone, in which one can honourably die for one's country.

To conclude, it seems at first paradoxical to regard James Connolly's method of excavating alternative forms of cultural and societal life of pre-colonial times as more than just a straightforward national approach. Yet Connolly constantly attempted to empower dispossessed subjects beyond a plain and simple nationalism. Whether Scottish or Irish, he saw the slum inhabitants as victims of rack-renting British capitalist destruction. Furthermore, his focus on the slums as a place of resistance and hope and thus as a place where alternative forms of culture and knowledge exist is innovative and subversively daring, as it goes beyond any contemporary literary or political discourse. That is, his transnational nationalism and his politics of cultural

6 For a comparative analysis, see Rodger. For a general study on the concept of the slum, see Mayne.

alternatives as a self-declared Revivalist writer broke the mould of conventional categorical thinking about Irish culture. With regard to a historical assessment of his role in the Easter Rising, this calls for a more open-minded, more careful, and less biased approach, as Connolly is a far more complex figure than often assumed and portrayed. Quite possibly, this complexity accounts for why Yeats and others, searching for a more straightforward national categorization in deed and thought, were not able to accurately locate Connolly on their respective map of cultural identity.

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