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► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Coquelin. Class Struggle in the 1916-23 Irish Revolution: A Reappraisal. *Études irlandaises*, 2017, 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5243 . hal-02376919

**HAL Id: hal-02376919**

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Submitted on 22 Nov 2019

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Études irlandaises

42-2 | 2017  
Varia

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5243>  
DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5243  
ISSN: 2259-8863

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

### Printed version

Date of publication: 29 November 2017  
Number of pages: 23-36  
ISBN: 978-2-7535-7388-8  
ISSN: 0183-973X

### Electronic reference

Olivier Coquelin, « Class Struggle in the 1916-23 Irish Revolution: A Reappraisal », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 42-2 | 2017, Online since 29 November 2017, connection on 14 September 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5243> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5243

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# Class Struggle in the 1916-1923 Irish Revolution: A Reappraisal

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## Abstract

In line with the view generally held by most historians over the past decades, Peter Hart's *The IRA at War, 1916-1923* (2003) tends to play down significantly the importance of the social disputes in the 1916-23 Irish Revolution. Hart justifies his approach by the fact that those disputes did not pave the way for radical social change in the new Irish Free State. However respectable this statement may be, it remains nonetheless disputable given that, in Terence Dooley's own words, "other than acknowledging some contribution of agrarian issues to the revolution, historians have failed to take up the challenge of exploring them in greater detail or, indeed, to be fully convinced of their existence" (see "*The Land for the People*": *The Land Question in Independent Ireland*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2004, p. 17). This observation is also consistent with the fact that such subversive experiments as the 1918-1923 Irish Soviets have hitherto been examined somewhat on the fringe of mainstream academic research. As part of a project devoted to the latter, the present article will therefore seek to reappraise the relevance of Hart's analysis by assessing the extent to which "class struggle" was an integral part of the Irish Revolution.

Keywords: Ireland, revolution, class struggle, social disputes, trade unions, soviets, conservatism.

## Résumé

*Dans le sillage de pensée de la plupart des historiens de ces dernières décennies, l'ouvrage de Peter Hart, The IRA at War, 1916-1923 (2003), tend à minimiser grandement l'importance des conflits sociaux qui eurent lieu au cours de la Révolution irlandaise de 1916-1923. Hart justifie cette approche par le fait que ces derniers n'ouvrirent pas la voie à de profonds bouleversements sociaux au sein du nouvel Etat libre d'Irlande. Toute respectable que puisse être cette affirmation, elle n'en demeure pas moins discutable, étant donné que « hormis le fait de reconnaître aux problèmes agraires quelque rôle dans la révolution, les historiens n'ont pas pris la peine de les étudier en profondeur, voire se sont montrés des plus dubitatifs quant à leur existence », pour citer Terence Dooley (voir « The Land for the People »: *The Land Question in Independent Ireland, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2004, p. 17*). Cette remarque vaut également pour les expériences subversives, telles que les soviets irlandais de 1918-1923, que la recherche universitaire traditionnelle a jusqu'ici quelque peu ignorées. S'inscrivant dans le cadre d'un projet consacré à ces dernières, cet article se veut donc un réexamen de l'analyse de Hart, à travers lequel est évalué l'ampleur de la "lutte des classes" dans la Révolution irlandaise.*

Mots clés : Irlande, révolution, lutte des classes, syndicats, soviets, conservatisme.

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Up until the 1970s most of the studies exploring the Irish revolution or general Irish history had focused exclusively on its political and military aspects. This unique approach may be explained by the fact that the revolutionary activity had been primarily devoted to military and political purposes, so as to federate the cross-class nationalist community around the supreme goal of Irish independence. A marked turning point in Irish historiography, therefore, occurred only after F. S. L. Lyons' 1971 famous essay *Ireland Since the Famine* had paid a particular attention to social and economic issues, thereby paving the way for other themes being dealt with, including gender, sectarianism, the social background of revolutionaries<sup>1</sup>...

But while the socioeconomic dimension of the Irish revolution has since been recognized, on the other hand, analyses have tended to downplay its historical significance<sup>2</sup>. Hence, except for a few monographs (e.g. Diarmaid Ferriter's most recent *A Nation and not a Rabble, the Irish Revolution 1913-23* and Gavin M. Foster's *The Irish Civil War and Society: Politics, Class and Conflict*, also published in 2015<sup>3</sup>) and those specifically dedicated to labour and land disputes in the revolutionary era (e.g. Emmet O'Connor's *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-1923*, and Conor Kostick's *Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917 to 1923*<sup>4</sup>), socioeconomic issues have hitherto been pushed into the background or diluted in political and military studies that have remained dominant in mainstream academic research – one particularly relevant example is the otherwise compelling monograph by Charles Townshend entitled *The Republic: The fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923*<sup>5</sup>.

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1. F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*, London, Fontana Press, 1985 [orig. 1971]; Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble: the Irish Revolution 1913-1923*, London, Profile Books, 2015, p. 51-85.
  2. Reflective of this trend is notably Richard English's research work on republican socialism. See, for example, Richard English, "Socialism: Socialist Intellectuals and the Irish Revolution", in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, p. 203-223.
  3. Diarmaid Ferriter, *op. cit.*; Gavin M. Foster, *The Irish Civil War and Society: Politics, Class and Conflict*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2015. See also Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971; Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary Governments in Ireland: Dáil Éireann 1919-1922*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1995.
  4. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-23*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1988; Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917 to 23*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2009 [orig. 1996]. See also Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890-1930: The Irish Labour Movement in an Age of Revolution*, Dublin, Irish University Press, 1974; Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution, 1890-1921*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
  5. Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923*, London, Allen Lane, 2013. See also Joost Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare: The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-1921*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1996; Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution, 1910-1922*, London, Faber and Faber, 2013; Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence*, Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002; Michael Hopkinson, *Green against Green: The Irish Civil War*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1988.

According to Charles Townshend and Terence Dooley, this traditional approach can be traced back to Patrick Lynch's 1966 article "The social revolution that never was" in which, to explain why the Irish Revolution was never a social revolution, the author contends that, "by 1916 most agricultural holdings had been purchased by their occupiers, subject to land annuities, which were not then a matter of contention. The tenant had become a proprietor, the owner of his land; and little land remained, to which the system of voluntary purchase could be applied"<sup>6</sup>. Lynch nonetheless acknowledges that "sporadically, advantage was taken of the unsettled conditions in the country to show that an aggressive spirit of social unrest still existed"<sup>7</sup>. Likewise, John Regan would much later concur with this finding:

Any chance of real social revolution had been substantially undermined by land reform and the creation of an increasingly conservative peasant proprietorship in Ireland sponsored by various British Governments in the four decades before independence<sup>8</sup>.

In line with this view, which has been held by other historians over the past decades<sup>9</sup>, Peter Hart argues in his 2003 *The IRA at War, 1916-1923* that "not only did the Irish revolution not bring social transformation, there was no socially revolutionary situation in Ireland, even in prospect". This not least because "most farmers owned their farms by 1922", although "this is not to say that nothing

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6. Charles Townshend, "Historiography: Telling the Irish Revolution", in Joost Augusteyn (dir.), *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare: The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-1921*, *op. cit.*, p. 5; Terence Dooley, *The Land for the People: The Land Question in Independent Ireland*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2004, p. 17.

7. Patrick Lynch, "The Social Revolution that Never Was", Desmond Williams (dir.), *The Irish Struggle, 1916-26*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 41, p. 49. However, one year before Lynch, Nicholas Mansergh had pointed out that although the 1903 Wyndham Act had virtually settled the land question, it did not prevent Irish farmers' patriotic feelings from stirring during the War of Independence. Hence the so-called Irish question was at that time essentially a political question as "national sentiment was shown to be the fundamental force". See Nicholas Mansergh, *The Irish Question, 1840-1921: A Commentary on Anglo-Irish Relations and on Social and Political Forces in Ireland in the Age of Reform and Revolution*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1965, p. 83-110.

8. John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1912-36*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1999, p. 377. Regan's position on this issue is confirmed in the introduction to the collection of chapters he edited with Mike Cronin in 2000: "There is little evidence of a social component within the Irish revolution and less again in its settlement. Such potential as there was for social upheaval had to a great extent been defused by the transfer of land back to native ownership under a series of reforming land acts at the end of the nineteenth, and the beginning of the new century". Mike Cronin and John Regan, "Introduction: Ireland and the Politics of Independence, New Perspectives and Re-consideration", Mike Cronin and John Regan (eds.), *Ireland: The Politics of Independence, 1922-49*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2000, p. 1-2.

9. See, for example, Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 315; John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1975, p. 10; Francis Costello, "Labour, Irish Republicanism and the social Order during the Anglo-Irish War", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 17, n° 2, 1991, p. 16.

happened in terms of social unrest, or that nothing important happened, but rather that nothing revolutionary happened<sup>10</sup>”.

Hence the substantial amount of social unrest, whether industrial or agrarian, that spread across revolutionary Ireland is not included in this otherwise convincing three-dimensional process consisting of three interwoven struggles: a war against the British State; an ethnic and communal conflict; a fratricidal struggle in the nationalist community<sup>11</sup>.

Even though Hart's study undoubtedly challenges the prevailing historiographical tradition in many respects, it remains nonetheless disputable. The present article will therefore seek to reappraise its relevance by assessing the extent to which “class struggle” was an integral part of the Irish Revolution, as much as the other overlapping struggles suggested by Hart<sup>12</sup>. In so doing, it will, first, define the concept of “class struggle” and then depict its various manifestations in revolutionary Ireland.

Although the concept of class struggle is central to Marxist theory of history, many authors before Karl Marx had analysed social classes and their development and antagonism throughout history. Writing on March 5, 1852, to his friend Joseph Weydemeyer Marx himself acknowledged that he did not originally draw up the concept:

And now as for myself, I do not claim to have discovered either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle between the classes, as had bourgeois economists their economic anatomy<sup>13</sup>.

The “bourgeois” historians and economists whom Marx alluded to actually included liberal thinkers such as François Guizot, Augustin Thierry, François Mignet, John Wade and David Ricardo<sup>14</sup>. Further down, in the same letter, Marx summarized his own contribution to class theory in these words:

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10. Peter Hart, *The IRA at War, 1916-1923*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 21.

11. Peter Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 19-20. See also Peter Hart, “Definition: Defining the Irish Revolution”, in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare: The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-1921*, *op. cit.*, p. 24-27.

12. Although the term “ethnic cleansing” Hart used in this book and other writings to emphasize the scale of violence perpetrated by the IRA against Protestants in the South may seem exaggerated and has been passionately taken issue with ever since. On this contentious issue, see for example Brian P. Murphy and Niall Meehan, *Troubled History: A Tenth Anniversary Critique of Peter Hart's The IRA and its Enemies*, Aubane, Aubane Historical Society, 2008, [<http://aubanehistoricalsociety.org/>], last accessed 20 December 2016.

13. Marx-Engels, *Correspondence 1852, “Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer in New York”, London, 5 March 1852*; [[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/letters/52\\_03\\_05-ab.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/letters/52_03_05-ab.htm)], last accessed 5 April 2016.

14. Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2012, p. 115-117.

My own contribution was 1. to show that the *existence of classes* is merely bound up with *certain historical phases in the development of production*; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*.

But how, in Marx's view, were the different classes dialectically connected? What were the conditions and mechanisms whereby the process of class struggle was triggered? Elaborating on his thoughts on this issue in other writings<sup>15</sup>, Marx thus posited that a class really comes into existence when its members not only share common socioeconomic features, but also become aware of the inherent antagonism between their common interests and those of other social groups, as a result of conflicting relationships to the means of production. Class consciousness and identity, therefore, acts as a catalyst for social conflict and competition that will inevitably lead to revolutionary change and, in the case of industrial capitalist society, to "*the dictatorship of the proletariat*".

Among the proponents of the liberal class-conflict theory, some dismiss Marx's conception of class struggle as totally irrelevant<sup>16</sup>, while others recognize its merits, at least to some extent<sup>17</sup>. Thus, for example, the French philosopher and sociologist, Raymond Aron, contends that Marx's empirical definition of class makes it acceptable for non-Marxists, albeit with reservations. Economic conflicts between employees and business owners for the distribution of national income undeniably exist in industrial society. On the other hand, Aron disputes Marx's assertion whereby each of the antagonistic classes has its own conception of society and, as such, aspires to power. In Marx's class theory, the growing pauperization of the workers arising from the development of capitalist production will thus inevitably incite them to overthrow the capitalist system to establish a new mode of production. The fact is, however, that as aggregate income increased over time in the most developed countries, the rivalry between classes grew less intense and violent, thereby weakening the revolutionary movement. Class struggle in the Marxist sense of the term gradually gave way to what Aron calls "quarrelsome satisfaction" (« *La satisfaction querelleuse* »), in the form of peaceful resolutions of conflicts designed to ensure more equitable income distribution within the existing order. Such a trend, of course, is at variance with Marx's prediction. But while capitalism does not necessarily create the *conditions condu-*

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15. See, for example, Chapter VII in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, first published in 1852. [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm>], last accessed 6 April 2016.

16. See, for instance, Ludwig Von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962 [orig. 1951], p. 314-358.

17. See, for instance, Joseph Shumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York/London, Routledge, 2003 [orig. 1942], p. 1-58.

*cive to revolution*, this does not mean that those conditions do not exist. For class struggle to develop into revolution, Aron argues, two seemingly contradictory sentiments must prevail: hope and despair – that is, hope for a new society resulting from profound dissatisfaction with existing conditions. Two sentiments, Aron points out, that are mostly felt in backward capitalist and predominantly agrarian countries, such as Russia in 1917<sup>18</sup>.

It remains to be seen to what extent the industrial and agrarian conflicts that occurred in the 1916-23 Irish revolution fit with the Marxist and liberal or nonexclusively Marxist perspectives on class struggle.

The failure of the Dublin general strike of 1913, together with the outbreak of the First World War, somewhat curbed industrial unrest in Ireland, which had intensified since the creation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) by James Larkin in 1908. The significant growing demand for food products and raw materials engendered by the war effort actually brought prosperity to the country, which the industrial workers and labourers hardly benefited from, unlike many farmers, employers and shopkeepers. Thus, the post-war economic boom provided an incentive for the former to claim their share of the general growth in prosperity. They did so in an unprecedented wave of wage strikes that coincided with the upsurge in trade union militancy in the later war years<sup>19</sup>. At that time, the Irish Labour movement was embodied by the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC), which had dramatically increased the number of its affiliates since the 1914 annual meeting, rising from below 110,000 to 230,000<sup>20</sup> in 1920. This dramatic growth in union membership was mainly the result of the diverse campaigns led by the most powerful Irish trade union, the ITGWU, which could count on 100,000 members by 1920 – as compared with 30,000 before the 1913 Dublin Lockout –, about 40 % of them working in agriculture<sup>21</sup>.

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18. Raymond Aron, *La Lutte de classes : nouvelles leçons sur les sociétés industrielles*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 21-127, p. 197-309.

19. Emmet O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 8-13, p. 20-25.

20. If one refers to the 1911 census, this figure accounts for approximately 37 % of all workers – including agricultural labourers –, themselves representing roughly one third of the working population, out of a total population of 4,390,219 inhabitants. See W. E. Vaughan and A. J. Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Irish Historical Statistics*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1978, p. 3; Census of Ireland, 1911, General report, Occupations of the people, 1912-13, Cd.6663, CXVIII, 1, p. xxviii-xxx.

21. Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting, 1920*, Published by Authority of the National Executive, p. 145-154; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting, 1921*, Published by Authority of the National Executive, p. 75, [<http://centenaries-ituc.nationalarchives.ie/annual-reports/>], last accessed 20 December 2016. For the proportion of ITGWU members in agriculture in 1920 and ITGWU membership in 1913, see Desmond Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers's Union: The Formative Years, 1909-1923*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1982, p. 91, p. 259. It is important to note that, except for Congress membership for 1914, which is only mentioned in the 1921 annual report, these figures do not take account of such affiliated organisations as the trades' councils, but only include the members of each affiliated trade union.



This means that, in addition to the industrial sector, the ITGWU had also made a significant breakthrough in rural areas since the agrarian outbreak of 1917, thereby organising tens of thousands of labourers, landless farmers and smallholders within four years<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, from 1918 to 1921, what was known as the wages movement translated into 782 industrial strikes – as against 307 in the years 1914-1918 –, most of them being successful<sup>23</sup>. But social turmoil also included boycott, cattle driving and land seizures perpetrated by all those left behind the land reforms implemented since 1903, including not only the landless tenants and labourers but also the significant portion of smallholders who had not purchased sufficient land for the economic viability of their holdings<sup>24</sup>. Knowing that between two thirds and three quarters of the Irish farmers became landowners by 1914 and that the land purchase and emigration processes were suspended for the duration of the War, such a phenomenon can by no means be ignored and tends to indicate that agrarian unrest was more intense and radical than suggested by Lynch, Regan, Cronin and Hart<sup>25</sup>. Two trends of rural agitation actually prevailed in the revolutionary period: one based on strike actions for better wages and working conditions led by labourers belonging to the ITGWU – and this mostly in the east; and the other on land seizures carried out by the smaller farmers and labourers for the break-up of the larger estates and their redistribution – and this mostly in the west<sup>26</sup>. Concurrent with these traditional patterns of conflict, however, emerged an alternative organizational method, named “soviet” after the council movement that developed as part of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Initially established as auxiliaries within the wages movement, the one hundred or so Irish soviets nonetheless differed from the latter in two aspects: their action did not rest upon work stoppage but on the continuity of production or management conducted exclusively

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22. Emmet O'Connor, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-39; Terence Dooley, “*The Land for the People*”: *The Land Question in Independent Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 17-18.

23. Public Record Office London, Strikes and lockouts, 1914-21, Lab 34/14-20, Lab 34/32-39, figures cited in Emmet O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 25. However, the Irish workers' achievements should be somewhat qualified given that the significant wage increases won as a result of strike actions hardly compensated for the rising retail price of food. See David Fitzpatrick, “Strikes in Ireland, 1914-21”, *Saothar*, vol. 6, 1980, p. 32.

24. Terence Dooley, “*The Land for the People*”: *The Land Question in Independent Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 17-18, p. 33-56. According to the 1911 census, the agricultural class was the largest occupational group consisting of 780,867 people, of whom 761,791 were employed in fields and pastures, comprising 613,021 farmers (together with their sons and relatives), graziers, shepherds, gardeners and farm servants, as well as 148,770 agricultural labourers. See Census of Ireland, 1911, *op. cit.*, p. xxviii-xxx.

25. Terence Dooley, “*The Land for the People*”: *The Land Question in Independent Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 29, p. 31; Paul Bew, “Sinn Féin, Agrarian Radicalism and the War of Independence, 1919-1921”, D. G. Boyce (ed.), *The Revolution in Ireland, 1879-1923*, Basingstoke/London, Macmillan Education, 1988, p. 221; Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000*, London, Profile Books, 2004, p. 62-63, p. 159; Fergus Campbell, “*Land and Revolution Revisited*”, Fergus Campbell and Tony Varmey (eds.), *Land Questions in Modern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016 [orig. 2013], p. 151-154.

26. Conor Kostick, *op. cit.*, p. 110; Paul Bew, *ibid.*, p. 220.

by the workers themselves, not without having first ousted or ignored the official owners, managers or rulers.

Anyhow, the wages movement that widely spread throughout the country in the thriving period 1917-21 essentially aimed at achieving a fairer distribution of the wealth created during the war years. The conflicts were most certainly fought between antagonistic classes aware of themselves as groups sharing common socioeconomic interests adverse to those of other groups (employers and shopkeepers vs workers and employees; farmers vs labourers), each being specifically represented by one or several organizations: the various trade unions for the workers, labourers and employees; the Irish Farmers' Union for the farmers; the Irish Association of Employers for the employers. But the aim for each class was not to claim or seize power in the name of a specific conception of society. Class struggle, therefore, was not used as a political tool designed to maintain or overthrow the current system, although many striking workers were imbued with the radical spirit of syndicalism<sup>27</sup> instilled by the most active trade union, the ITGWU<sup>28</sup>. And such radicalism often expressed itself symbolically through the "red flag" that was conspicuously hoisted or displayed during rallies and demonstrations, all along what Emmet O'Connor calls "the red flag times"<sup>29</sup> that also saw the ITUC – re-named the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC) – endorsing a socialist constitution and manifesto at a special conference in November 1918<sup>30</sup>.

As for the agrarian conflicts for land widely carried out by small farmers and landless labourers against landlords and graziers in the west of Ireland, here too class struggle aimed less to subvert the existing system based on private property than to conquer land or redistribute it more fairly – except for those attempts at establishing collectively-run farms in County Galway in 1920<sup>31</sup>.

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27. Syndicalism can be defined as a doctrine aimed at organising the workers as a whole into "one big union" to achieve working class control of all industries by direct means, with a view to establishing a socialist society.

28. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1992, p. 67-116.

29. Emmet O'Connor, "Syndicalism, Industrial Unionism, and Nationalism in Ireland", Steven Hirsch and Lucien Van Derr Walt (eds.), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940*, Brill, Brill Academic Publishers, 2010, p. 210. For accounts of struggles or gatherings of workers or labourers displaying the red flag, see for instance *The Kerryman*, 10 May 1919, p. 4; *Leitrim Observer*, 12 April 1919 p. 2; *The Nenagh Guardian*, 4 September 1920, p. 4, 26 November 1921, p. 3; *The Freeman's Journal*, 22 November 1921, p. 3.

30. The 1918 manifesto reveals that the ILPTUC's ultimate aims were notably "to win for the workers of Ireland, collectively, the ownership and control of the whole produce of their labour; to secure the democratic management and control of all industries and services by the whole body of workers". See Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of a Special Congress, Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1918*, Published by Authority of the National Executive, p. 122-123, p. 165-169, [<http://centenaries-ituc.nationalarchives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/24th-annual-report-1918.pdf>], last accessed 22 January 2017.

31. Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 280-282, "Land and Revolution Revisited", *op. cit.*, p. 151-152. For a retrospective account of this collective experiment, see Kevin O'Shiel, "The Dail Land Courts", *The Irish Times*, 14 novembre 1966, p. 10.

The same finding also partly applies to the “soviet” occupations that some workers resorted to, when work stoppage or negotiation proved insufficient to get the expected results. As Donal Ó Drisceoil points out: “In all cases of ‘soviets’ up to 1921, the employers’ property was returned once demands had been met<sup>32</sup>”. However, regarding the fact that “the employers’ property was returned once demands had been met”, it must be reminded that, in some cases, the workers did it reluctantly and at times following negotiations brought about under the threat of the Sinn Féin Government, as in the Castleconnell soviet and the Bruree soviet where Constance Markievicz, the then Minister for Labour, would have threatened to dispatch republican soldiers to force the workers to leave the premises peacefully<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, the practice of workers’ self-management that underpinned the soviet occupations made them appear as genuine subversive experiments – comparable to those Russian factory committees which took over their plants and ran them independently of the owners and managers throughout 1917<sup>34</sup>. This is well illustrated by the poster displayed at the entrance door of the Bruree mill (Co. Limerick), which read: “Bruree Mills and Bakery are now the property of the workers. The mill and shop are open for the sale of bread, flour and meal. It is hoped to reduce prices and do away with profiteering within a day. By order of the workers<sup>35</sup>”. Not to mention the subversive symbols that accompanied these workers’ action: starting with the name “soviet” used to identify them, but also through the “red flag” raised over some of the occupied factories or slogans such as, “Bruree Workers Soviet Mills, We make Bread not Profits”, that was printed over the door of entrance to the Bruree mill. Here class struggle in the Marxist sense of the term was arguably still in its infancy. But fairly soon, the economic conditions would allow it to mature.

Thus, the post-war economic boom gradually gave way to a slump as of late 1920. With it, social unrest in Ireland gradually turned into struggles against wage cuts imposed by the employers and farmers. The tide was now turning in favour of the latter, to the extent that, to quote Emmet O’Connor, “labour was [...] coming close to conceding what had been won since 1914<sup>36</sup>”. Such circumstances arguably fostered further hardline stances among labourers and farmers, as well as the resurgence of soviets which, from tactical tools used to complement the wages

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32. Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O’Donnell*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2001, p. 13.

33. See the official organ of the ITGWU, *The Voice of Labour*, 10 December 1921, p. 4.

34. On the Russian factory committees, see Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1974 [orig. 1958], p. 125-128; Marc Ferro, *Des Soviets au communisme bureaucratique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 74-82, p. 86-87, p. 191.

35. Cited in *The Freeman’s Journal*, 31 August 1921, p. 5; *The Irish Examiner*, 31 August 1921, p. 4; *The Irish Independent*, 31 August 1921, p. 4.

36. Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

movement, were henceforth increasingly viewed as genuine alternatives to traditional private property rights<sup>37</sup>. Emblematic of this trend were the Cleeves soviets.

Cleeve is actually the name of a family who, at the time of the Irish Revolution, ran a network of some 100 creameries, separation stations, condensed milk factories and mills located in Counties Limerick, Tipperary and Cork. About 3,000 people worked for this business empire, which also processed the milk of some 5,000 farmers. From 1918 onwards, Cleeves, like many other Irish companies, underwent major social disputes over wages, working hours and conditions, some of which were to take the form of factory seizures in which the workers kept their plant running under their control. These workers' self-managed occupations were naturally dubbed "soviets", starting with the Knocklong creamery (Co. Limerick) in May 1920, followed by the Bruree mills and bakery (Co. Limerick) in August 1921, and 39 creameries, along with mills and other workshops (Co. Limerick, Tipperary and Cork), for several months in 1922. In the latter case, the plants were taken over in response to a lockout resulting from an unsettled dispute about pay and staff cutbacks. Here the workers' decision to resume production was justified on the ground that such closing down would "[imperil] the means of livelihood of 5,000 farmers, [risk] the destruction of national produce to the extent of thousands of pounds a week, and [throw] 3,000 workers and their family out of work, to beg and starve<sup>38</sup>". It was therefore "in the interest of the community, and to preserve the industry for the nation" that the workers were instructed to carry on work. These designs, both communal and national, were encapsulated in their motto, "the Sovereign People<sup>39</sup>". Yet this revolutionary impulse, embodied in the need to create a new mode of production for themselves and the whole nation, proved short-lived due to the joint effect of the farmers' boycott and the intervention of the Free State Army<sup>40</sup>, both being in line with what Emmet O'Connor calls "the conservative response" to social disorder<sup>41</sup>. Not to mention the official Labour leaders whose refusal to use subversive methods to carry out their revolutionary goals<sup>42</sup> naturally led them to ignore the soviets

37. *Ibid.*, p. 103, p. 114-116.

38. Cited in *The Irish Times*, 15 May 1922, p. 5.

39. *Ibid.*

40. For a detailed account of the Cleeve soviets, see David Lee, "The Munster Soviets and the Fall of the House of Cleeve", David Lee and Debbie Jacobs (eds.), *Made in Limerick*, vol. 1, *History of Industries, trade and commerce*, Limerick Civic Trust, 2003, p. 287-306, [<http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/limerick%20soviet%2015.pdf>], last accessed 8 January 2016; D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, "The Munster Soviet Creameries", *Irish History Workshop*, vol. 1, 1981, p. 36-49.

41. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

42. The report of the 1922 annual meeting of the ILPTUC thus specifies: "It is the duty of the Labour Party to make use of whatever instrument and power the political struggle has placed in its hands. As we have been willing to make use of the opportunities which Town and Urban Councils and Poor Law Boards provide to further the cause and protect the interests of the workers, though neither of them accords with our ideals, so we ought to work the new Governmental machine if it is established, even though it is not built according to our design,

showing the slightest sign of subversion<sup>43</sup>. This also means that the ITGWU's involvement in virtually all the soviets set up in the revolutionary era was mostly initiated by the rank and file – or by the union's communist officials from 1921<sup>44</sup>.

Of course, such a subversive trend in the period 1921-23 did not spare the rural areas, which witnessed several attempts at implementing collective ownership of land, as in the village of Broadford (Co. Clare) in 1922 where the Going estate was managed as a soviet for a few months by tenant farmers merely demanding “a reduction in first and second term rents and [...] distribution of grass lands among the small tenants”. To this end, a “Committee of farmers, tenants, workers and Transport Union workers on the Going estates” was created, with one of its members elected as its secretary. Paradoxical as it might seem, however, the Going estate became self-managed and autonomous, while remaining officially the landlord's private property. This ambiguous situation was characterized by the Broadford Committee's decision to pay what it reckoned to be a fair rent for six months, namely £110 which was much less than the payment expected by the landlord's agent. In addition to this, the Committee or “soviet” endeavoured to support the local community in two ways: first, by converting part of the estate into common fields for meadowing; and second, by letting lands for tillage to landless men in Broadford<sup>45</sup>. Other similar “soviet” experiments were also conducted in County Clare in 1922-23 – in Toovahera, Kilfenora, Ballyvaughan and other areas in the neighbourhood of Crab Island –, here too, by tenant farmers left on the sidelines of the 1903 and 1909 land reforms, and yearning for a fairer distribution of land and a drastic reduction of rents that they imposed by taking over the estates they worked on<sup>46</sup>.

If credence is to be given to Raymond Aron's proposition whereby hope and despair are necessary prerequisites for class struggle to develop into revolution, as

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provided it can be adapted for turning out the products we require. [...] The object of the Irish Labour Party is, and must be, to establish in Ireland a Co-operative Workers' Republic. In the course of the struggle to attain this ultimate social, political, and economic freedom, Labour must demand and work for many ameliorative reforms”. See Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting, 1922*, Published by Authority of the National Executive, p. 62, p. 64, [http://centenaries-ituc.nationalarchives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/28th-annual-report-1922.pdf], last accessed 23 January 2017.

43. For example, while the 1920 Knocklong and the 1921 Arigna soviet are referred to in the report of the 1921 annual meeting of the ILPTUC, no mention is made of the 1922-23 Cleeve soviets in the 1922 and 1923 reports. See Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting, 1921*, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting, 1922*, *op. cit.*; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Meeting, 1923*, Published by Authority of the National Executive, [http://centenaries-ituc.nationalarchives.ie/annual-reports/], last accessed 23 January 2017.

44. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

45. On the Broadford soviet, see Michael McCarthy, “The Broadford Soviet”, *The Old Limerick Journal*, n° 4, 1980, p. 37-40, [http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/Media,3937,en.pdf], last accessed 23 January 2017.

46. On these land soviets, see *The Freeman's Journal*, 3 May 1923, p. 4, p. 5, 9 May 1923, p. 5, 17 May 1923, p. 6, 25 May 1923, p. 6.

Marx saw it, a large part of the lower strata of Irish society was therefore imbued with revolutionary sentiment in 1921-23. From industrial workers to agricultural labourers to small farmers, many of them undoubtedly felt extreme dissatisfaction with existing conditions and, in this case, not only with their employers' attempt at cutting their salaries and the slow pace of land distribution, but also with their failure to win concessions through strike action, negotiations and land seizures. This feeling of despair towards the system in place led some of them to practically express hope for a new and better organisational structure, particularly in the form of self-managed soviets, as an alternative to the current private property rights, and this outside the country's most industrialized areas. This revolutionary impulse, embodied in the need to create a better life for themselves and the local community or national community, was all the more conspicuous in one of the 1922-23 Cleeve soviets that, according to the *Voice of Labour*:

These men were straining every nerve to secure perfection in the product they were manufacturing; that no possible slur should be cast upon the Workers' Factory, (in which), the minutest detail failed to escape the keen observation of the Works manager (who was only a worker and) whose fervent enthusiasm and love of his work was a constant urge to the best in every man and woman<sup>47</sup>.

Class struggle most assuredly permeated the revolutionary era in a two-stage process, each corresponding to a specific approach: the liberal or nonexclusively Marxist approach prevailing in the period 1917-21; and the Marxist approach prevailing in the period 1921-23. Class struggle, therefore, can hardly be considered of secondary importance compared with the political and military conflicts confronting Ireland at that time, not least because of the high number of strikes and soviets that swept across the country between 1917 and 1923: in the industrial sector alone, there were 1199 strikes – including 28 involving over 1,000 workers each – and more than 100 self-managed soviets as of 1920, most of which were creameries<sup>48</sup>. So much so that, as Emmet O'Connor puts it: "Never since has the working class confronted the rationale of capitalism so profoundly or so extensively<sup>49</sup>." As for the land conflicts in the west of Ireland, Fergus Campbell points out that "far from being resolved, serious grievances remained unaddressed and provided the basis for renewed land agitation on a scale not seen since the days of the Land War (1871-81)<sup>50</sup>". This, Campbell adds, notably translated into

47. *The Voice of Labour*, 27 May 1922, p. 8.

48. Public Record Office London, Strikes and lockouts, 1914-21, Lab 34/14-20, Lab 34/32-39; Public Record Office London, Strikes and lockouts, 1921-23, Lab 34/39-41, figures cited in Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 25, p. 100.

49. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, *ibid.*, p. 110.

50. Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

the forcible seizure and redistribution of hundreds of grazing farms throughout Connacht, at times in the form of experiments in collective land ownership, thereby infringing private property rights<sup>51</sup>.

Furthermore, all these manifestations of class struggle were not without causing great concern in the Irish revolutionary movement, which responded accordingly. The strategy of cross-class unity adopted by the republican leadership thus justified using every possible means to eradicate anything that could sow the seeds of division within the nationalist community, and in particular class struggle<sup>52</sup>. As a result, some of the self-managed soviets were compelled to cease operations under the threat of military intervention uttered by the Sinn Féin government, and several significant measures were taken to resolve the agrarian crisis and take control of the land agitation – a National Land Bank was created in 1919 to accelerate the process of land purchasing through loans made available for the tenants anxious to purchase their own farms; the following year saw the establishment of the Land Settlement Commission and land courts designed to implement a redistribution of grazing land; then, during the Civil War, the Free State government decided upon using strong-arm tactics too, through the Special Infantry Corps specifically created to suppress agrarian turmoil, strikes and any infringement of the law altogether<sup>53</sup>.

Thus, while there is no denying that, in Peter Hart's words, "nothing [socially] revolutionary happened" during the Irish Revolution, at least on a large scale, that "there was no socially revolutionary situation in Ireland, even in prospect", is however more than debatable<sup>54</sup>. For there was clearly a socially radical and revolutionary potential, whether industrial or agrarian, in Ireland during the 1916-23 Revolution. And despite the support and involvement of some sections of the republican and trade union rank-and-file members in the social conflicts, such a potential was discouraged and hampered by the main leaders of both movements: in the name of a moderate and conservative vision of Irish political independence, which admitted of no social hindrance, for the former; and, in the name of a

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51. *Ibid.*

52. Referring to the agrarian unrest that had swept across the country before the setting up of the Dáil courts in 1920, a Dáil report pointed out: "All this was a grave menace to the Republic. The mind of the people was being diverted from the struggle for freedom by a class war, and there was every likelihood that this class war might be carried into the ranks of the republican army itself which was drawn in the main from the agricultural population and was largely officered by farmer's sons". Ministry for Home Affairs (compiled and edited by Erskine Childers), *The constructive Work of Dáil Éireann, n° 1, The National Police and Courts of Justice*, Dublin, The Talbot Press, 1921, p. 12.

53. Terence Dooley, "*The Land for the People*": *The Land Question in Independent Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 46-49, p. 82; Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 255-257; Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 162-163.

54. Peter Hart, *The IRA at War*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

peaceful and gradualist vision of social revolution, which eschewed subversive and illegal action, for the latter.

Hence one is entitled to believe that the Irish Revolution was actually a melting pot of “motivations, expectations and opportunities<sup>55</sup>”, to quote Diarmaid Ferriter’s own words, in which class struggle featured as prominently as the other ingredients – even though social radicalism was eventually defeated and was not to give rise to progressive forces sufficiently powerful to counterbalance independent Ireland’s conservatism established by “the reactionary elements among the elite of Sinn Féin<sup>56</sup>”.

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55. Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble*, *op.cit.*, p. 231.

56. Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 282.