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Utopian Impulse in Revolutionary Ireland: A Case Study of the 1918-1923 Irish Soviets

Désir utopique dans l'Irlande révolutionnaire : une étude de cas des soviets irlandais, 1918-1923

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Abstract: Although the socioeconomic dimension of the Irish Revolution has received academic recognition for several decades, many historians have nonetheless tended to downplay its historical significance, despite the large scale of social unrest and the emergence of an alternative organisational method, dubbed “soviet” after the council movement that sprang up in the 1917 Russian Revolution. In order to somewhat qualify the relevance of such an approach, the present article seeks to determine the extent to which the resort to the self-managed soviets was the expression of what Ernst Bloch defined as a “utopian impulse”, how the latter impacted the Irish revolutionary movement, and why it eventually died out, thus contributing to the establishment of a conservative state in independent Ireland.

Keywords: Irish Revolution, utopian impulse, soviets, social disputes, socialism, conservatism.

Résumé: Si la dimension socio-économique de la révolution irlandaise fait l'objet d'une reconnaissance scientifique depuis plusieurs décennies, de nombreux historiens ont néanmoins tendance à en minimiser la portée historique, malgré le nombre important de conflits sociaux et l'émergence d'un mode organisationnel alternatif, baptisé « soviét » en référence au mouvement des conseils issu de la révolution russe de 1917. Afin de nuancer quelque peu la pertinence d'une telle approche, cet article se propose de déterminer dans quelle mesure le recours aux soviets autogérés fut l'expression de ce qu'Ernst Bloch qualifia de « désir utopique », comment ce dernier influença le mouvement révolutionnaire irlandais et pourquoi il finit par s'éteindre, contribuant ainsi à l'établissement d'un État conservateur au sein de l'Irlande indépendante.

Mots clés: révolution irlandaise, désir utopique, soviets, conflits sociaux, socialisme, conservatisme.

The division of present-day Ireland into two distinct entities dates from the historical period known as the 1916-1923 Irish Revolution, in which Irish nationalists, represented by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Sinn Féin, fought for the independence of the island. However, although the revolutionary activity was primarily devoted to political purposes – so as to federate the cross-class nationalist community around the supreme goal of Irish independence –, a substantial amount of social unrest, whether industrial or agrarian, swept through the country, especially from 1917 onwards.

The defeat of the Dublin general strike of 1913, together with the outbreak of the First World War, somewhat dampened industrial unrest in Ireland, which had escalated since the creation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) by James Larkin in 1908 – who made it the Irish spearhead of the “One Big Union” syndicalist doctrine aimed at organising all workers in a single confederation to control all means of production. However, the significant growing demand for

food products and raw materials engendered by the war effort paved the way for an unprecedented wave of wage strikes launched by industrial workers and farm labourers alike, many of whom were ITGWU members. But social turmoil also included boycott, cattle driving, and land seizures perpetrated by the small holders and landless labourers who had not substantially benefited from the land reforms implemented since 1903. Concurrent with these traditional styles and patterns of conflict emerged an alternative organisational method, referred to as “soviet”¹ after the council movement that developed as part of the 1917 Russian Revolution and subsequently in other European countries.² Initially established as auxiliaries within the wages movement – and even the independence movement as in many Irish towns, outside Ulster, as part of a two-day general strike in April 1920 to protest against the treatment of republican prisoners at Mountjoy jail in Dublin –, 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 carried out exclusively by the workers themselves, not without having first ousted or ignored the official owners, managers or rulers. It is therefore through this practice of workers’ self-management that the Irish soviets can be regarded as genuine subversive experiments, comparable to the Russian original soviets and factory committees – which took over their plants and ran them independently of the owners and managers.³

Starting from the premise that the ideologies, whether temporal or spiritual, best characterising independent Ireland in late modern history have been nationalism, conservatism and Catholicism,⁴ one can hardly disagree with historian Charles Townshend when he used the phrase “exotic manifestations” to refer to the above-mentioned soviets established in the revolutionary era, from 1918 to 1923.⁵ “Exotic”, as the term “soviet” is generally associated with such doctrines as communism, socialism, and even anarchism, which have never really taken hold in the whole of Ireland – although the country could boast a seditious tradition since the 18th century, whether in the political sphere with the republican separatists, or in the

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1. The term “soviet” was used either self-consciously by the workers involved or by the press.
 2. Olivier Coquelin, “Soviets and Workers’ Councils in Ireland and Europe (1918-23): A Comparative Study”, in *Visions and Class in Ireland and Europe*, Jack McGinley, Noel Ward (eds.), Dublin, Umiskin Press, 2024, p. 65-75.
 3. On the Russian soviets and factory committees, see Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921* [1958], New York, Pantheon Books, 1974; Nikolai N. Smirnov, “The Soviets”, in *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914-1921*, Edward Acton, Vladimir Iu. Cherniaev, William G. Rosenberg (eds.), London, Arnold, 1997, p. 429-431; Steve Smith, “Factory Committees”, in *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution...*, p. 346-354.
 4. See Niamh Puirseil, “Economic and Labour History”, in *Palgrave Advances in Irish History*, Mary McAuliffe, Katherine O’Donnell, Leeann Lane (eds.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 110.
 5. The whole sentence reads as follows: “Although such exotic manifestations as the ‘Limerick soviet’ of April 1919 were more than enough to satisfy the unionist press that Bolshevism was rampant, they remained localised and transient” (Charles Townshend, “Historiography: Telling the Irish Revolution”, in *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923*, Joost Augusteijn (ed.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 6).

social sphere with agrarian secret societies such as the Whiteboys.⁶ Paradoxically, however, this historical “exoticism” has hitherto been examined somewhat at the margins of mainstream academic research,⁷ in which, apart from a few monographs, collective works and articles specifically dedicated to labour and agrarian unrest during the revolutionary era,⁸ socioeconomic issues have been overshadowed or subsumed under political and military studies that remain dominant to this day⁹ – although there has been a noticeable shift in the Decade of Centenaries, commemorating the key historical events between 1912 and 1923.¹⁰ This approach was usually justified by the fact that the various disputes that took place in the Irish Revolution did not pave the way for radical social change in the new Irish Free State.¹¹ However respectable this

6. Niamh Puirseil, “Economic and Labour History”, p. 110.

7. Except for their discussion in general works on the Irish labour movement during the revolutionary period, the Irish soviets have until recently been the exclusive focus of books and articles produced essentially by independent historians, some of them also active in politics or trade unionism. See, for example, Oisín Ó Drisceoil, “The Arigna Soviet of 1921”, in *Labour History in Irish History*, John Cunningham, Francis Devine, Sonja Tiernan (eds.), Dublin, Umiskin Press, 2023, p. 142-150; Dominic Haugh, *Limerick Soviet 1919: The Revolt of the Bottom Dog*, Shannon, Thomond Publishing, 2019; Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919* [1990], 2nd ed., Cork, Orla Kelly Publishing, 2019; Brian Kenny, *When Ireland Went Red: The Soviet Experiment, 1918-1923*, Dublin, Umiskin Press, 2017; David Lee, “The Munster Soviets and the Fall of the House of Cleeve”, in *Made in Limerick*, vol. I, *History of Industries, Trade and Commerce*, David Lee, Debbie Jacobs (eds.), Limerick, Limerick Civic Trust, 2003, p. 287-306; D. R. O’Connor Lysaght, “The Munster Soviet Creameries”, *Irish History Workshop*, vol. 1, 1981, p. 36-49; Michael McCarthy, “The Broadford Soviet”, *The Old Limerick Journal*, vol. 4, 1980, p. 37-40. It is worth noting that a few academic researchers have taken an interest in Irish soviets over the past decade. See, for example, Olivier Coquelin, “Cleeve’s Soviets: ‘Socialism from Below’ in Revolutionary Ireland, 1920-22”, in *Bread Not Profits: Provincial Working Class Politics during the Irish Revolution*, Francis Devine, Fearghal Mac Bhloscaidh (eds.), Dublin, Umiskin Press, 2022, p. 144-160; Luke Dineen, “The Cork Harbour Soviet of 1921”, *Saothar*, vol. 42, 2017, p. 31-42.
8. See, for example, *Spirit of Revolution: Ireland from Below, 1917-23*, John Cunningham, Terry Dunne (eds.), Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2024; *Bread Not Profits...: Fergus Campbell, Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland, 1890-1921*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917 to 1923*, London, Pluto Press, 1996; Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-1923*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1988.
9. To give but a few examples: Brian Hughes, *Defying the IRA? Intimidation, Coercion, and Communities during the Irish Revolution*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2016; Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923*, London, Allen Lane, 2013; Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution, 1910-1922*, London, Faber and Faber, 2013; Bill Kissane, *The Politics of the Irish Civil War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence*, Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002; 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; Michael Hopkinson, *Green against Green: The Irish Civil War*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1988.
10. Some historians have thus addressed socioeconomic issues as an integral part of the Irish Revolution. See, for instance, Conor McNamara, *War and Revolution in the West of Ireland, Galway, 1913-1922*, Newbridge, Irish Academic Press, 2018; Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution, 1913-23*, London, Profile Books, 2015; Gavin M. Foster, *The Irish Civil War and Society: Politics, Class and Conflict*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Gemma Clark, *Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.
11. See among others, Peter Hart, *The IRA at War, 1916-1923*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 21.

view is, 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".¹² For his part, Fergus Campbell points out that the agrarian unrest that ravaged the west of the country during the revolutionary period has not yet given rise to an in-depth examination that would bring out its socially subversive character more clearly.¹³ These remarks can also be made regarding the Irish soviets of 1918-1923, which have yet to be fully explored.¹⁴

The present article will seek, on the one hand, to give an insight into the motives of those workers who tried to take a step beyond the traditional strike action by resorting to subversive methods¹⁵ to achieve their goals and, on the other, to identify the different factors that contributed to their demise. This will involve addressing such questions as: were the striking workers imbued with socialist doctrine of any kind? Or were the Irish soviets mere manifestations of what the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch delineated as "utopian impulse" – in this case triggered by the socioeconomic or sociopolitical circumstances of the time? And to what extent was the cause of their final dismantling also to be found in the latter circumstances? But before tackling these issues it seems necessary to define and describe succinctly the concepts of "utopia" and "utopian impulse".

The term "utopia" actually covers two main meanings: a colloquial or pejorative one synonymous with "impossible", "unrealism", "illusion", and "perfection", the latter often being equated with "totalitarianism"; and a more vigorous or theoretical, if not literary sense referring to any speculation on the future with a view to drawing up or setting up a still-non-existent better or ideal society removed of the present flaws or dregs. Here utopia is associated with such notions as "possible", "desire", "hope", "imagination", "change", "revolt", "revolution" and the like. However, the former approach has hitherto prevailed over the latter, notably as a means used by the proponents of any mainstream ideology to discredit the ideas or designs of their maverick opponents. Thus it was for the socialist movement through Marxist dominant currents who, in the name of their scientific concept of socialism, branded "utopian" the epigones of such pre-Marxist thinkers as Robert Owen, Charles Fourier and Claude Henri de Saint-Simon – though the latter regarded themselves as social scientists. This explains why orthodox Marxists have always rejected any attempt at speculative construction of the future socialist society – why, for example,

12. Terence Dooley, *"The Land for the People": The Land Question in Independent Ireland*, Dublin, Dublin University Press, 2004, p. 17.

13. Fergus Campbell, "6. Land and Revolution in the West of Ireland, 1918-1921", in *Land and Revolution...*, p. 226-285.

14. On all these historiographical issues, see notably Olivier Coquelin, "Class Struggle in the 1916-23 Irish Revolution: A Reappraisal", *Études irlandaises*, no. 42-2, 2017, p. 23-36, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5243>.

15. The adjective "subversive" is used here to describe a mode of action that completely overturned the traditional way of operating in the companies, agrarian estates, services and urban areas where soviets were set up.

the way of achieving concrete “socialisation of the means of production” has never been clearly articulated.¹⁶

Nevertheless, alongside this prevalent trend, a few Marxist thinkers, including William Morris, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, sought to rehabilitate the concept of “utopia”, drawing on its theoretical approach that often entails a three-stage process: first, rejection or criticism of the present society or regime; second, desire or hope for a new and better society; and third, development of a comprehensive scheme for a non-existent alternative society or, in Yolène Dilas-Rocherieux’s own words, “inverted society”, understood as “the positive inversion of the negative present”.¹⁷ To this can be added a fourth stage in the case of those practical utopias or utopian experiments intended to set up an “inverted society”, whether drawn up beforehand or not. This means that utopian practice can also be devoid of predetermined content and be, if anything, the result of spontaneous action, as a pragmatic response to existing social conditions that require transformation. This need or aspiration for radical change resulting from extreme dissatisfaction is actually ingrained in human nature, according to Ernst Bloch. It is consubstantial with what he calls the “utopian impulse”¹⁸ – not to be confused with the more elaborate “utopian goals” – which is ubiquitous and, to quote Vincent Geoghegan,

[...] can be found at all levels of activity: in leisurely dreaming, in the various forms of personal display, in eroticism and art, as well as in the more familiar form of futuristic blueprints. It can of course take the form of mere escape from a hostile world.¹⁹

In relation to the present topic, the question arises of the extent to which Irish soviets fit into this analytical framework. To provide an answer, this article will focus on three categories of emblematic soviets, each corresponding to a specific goal: the Limerick soviet (urban and sociopolitical), the Cleeve soviets (industrial and socioeconomic) and the Broadford soviet (agrarian and socioeconomic).

The first soviet that will be explored here, the Limerick soviet, is probably the most famous of all Irish soviets, not least because it received wide press coverage throughout its existence.²⁰ It lasted for two weeks in April 1919 and was set up by the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council, after the city had been proclaimed a “special military area” by the British military authorities, under the provisions of

16. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* [1990], 2nd ed., Oxford, P. Lang, 2011, p. 1-5, 7-9, 41-42, 208-210, 200-222.

17. Yolène Dilas-Rocherieux, *L'utopie ou la mémoire du futur*, Paris, R. Laffont, 2000, p. 9, 181, 183, 187, 193 (our translation). See also Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 7, 97, 123, 151.

18. The notion of “utopian impulse” actually provides the conceptual basis of Ernst Bloch’s major work: *The Principle of Hope* [*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1954], 4th ed., Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, Paul Knight (trans.), Cambridge, MIT Press, 1998, 3 vol.

19. Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism* [1987], 2nd ed., Oxford, P. Lang, 2008, p. 16-17. See also Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, New York, Verso, 2005, p. 2-3.

20. In fact, the two weeks that the Limerick soviet lasted saw the presence of many national and international reporters, due to a transatlantic flight that a Major Wood was to attempt at the same time, with a stopover in Limerick.

the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA),²¹ in response to the escape of a republican and trade unionist prisoner, Robert Byrne, during which he was killed together with a policeman. This coercive measure, introduced less than three months after the outbreak of the War of Independence, actually provided for the issuance of permits for all the citizens entering and leaving the city. The general strike launched in protest by the local labour movement, with the ITGWU at its forefront, was therefore politically motivated. But it was also imbued with a strong social flavour, being exclusively led by representatives of the working class, with the support of some middle-class sections and the lip service of the mayor and the Catholic Church – before the latter denounced the strikers’ alleged communist designs as antithetical to Church doctrine. Thus, it was the Trades Council that, first, elected a strike committee, which soon became known as the “soviet”, and then, so as to facilitate the management of the city, appointed subcommittees responsible for propaganda, food, vigilance and finance (the soviet even went as far as to issue its own money to compensate for a shortage of financial resources). Their efforts eventually bore fruit as the military authorities suspended martial law officially on May 5 – that is, one week after the strike had ended.²²

What were the Limerick strikers’ real motives for taking over their city? Did they merely aim at curbing their deteriorating working conditions due to martial law? Or did they ultimately contemplate creating a new and “inverted” system in place of the existing one? Addressing these issues John O’Callaghan contends that the Limerick soviet was an essentially politically inspired takeover with a social dimension nevertheless utterly devoid of subversive intentions.²³ Niamh Hehir and Joe Morrissey, for their part, go as far as asserting that:

[I]t would be a distortion of historical fact to claim that the Limerick Soviet was proof that Irish workers were thirsting for Socialist revolution in 1919. Essentially, the strike was in defence of civil liberties and when a compromise solution was worked out over the military permit system the Soviet folded up.²⁴

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21. Passed in 1914, four days after Britain entered the war, it granted special powers to the government to ensure the kingdom’s security throughout the conflict. This involved measures of social and political control, such as censorship. Later, it took on a further dimension with the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act 1920, which was designed to deal with the violence in Ireland at the height of the War of Independence, allowing arbitrary arrests and imprisonment without trial.
 22. On the Limerick soviet, see Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution...*; Dominic Haugh, *Limerick Soviet 1919...*; Frances Lynch-Kearney, “The Potency of ‘Soft Power’: The Catholic Church’s Influence on the Limerick Soviet of 1919”, *Scoláire Staire*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, p. 14-18; Nicola Queally, *Rebellion, Resistance and the Irish Working Class: The Case of the “Limerick Soviet”*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010; D. R. O’Connor Lysaght, *The Story of The Limerick Soviet: The 1919 General Strike against British Militarism* [1979], 3rd ed., Limerick, The Limerick Soviet Commemoration Committee, 2003, online: <http://homepage.eircom.net/~paddytheassessor/lim/lysaght.htm>.
 23. John O’Callaghan, *Revolutionary Limerick: The Republican Campaign for Independence in Limerick, 1913-21*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2010, p. 119-123.
 24. Niamh Hehir, Joe Morrissey, “Ten Days That Shook Limerick”, in *Revolt of the Bottom Dogs: History of the Trade Union Movement, Limerick City and County 1916-1921*, Dave Lee (ed.), Limerick, Labour History Research Group, 1988, p. 11.

Dominic Haugh somewhat qualifies the latter assertion, claiming that:

Irrespective of the issue that sparked the Soviet, the reality is that the workers of Limerick reacted with class instincts, immediately organising their own democratic structures to facilitate the organisation of affairs in the city.²⁵

While it seems difficult to determine precisely what each striker ultimately yearned for, one may possibly have an insight into the path the Limerick workers could have taken, under other and more favourable circumstances – especially as the soviet leaders contemplated extending their movement to the whole country.²⁶ In this respect, the way *The Irish Times* reporter described the general mood among the strikers, after the soviet leaders had called for work to resume, is worthy of note:

This announcement [...] has been received with mixed feelings among the workers. Many of them are glad to get back to work, but others regard the result as a defeat, and feel that their sacrifices have gone for nothing. They were basing their hopes upon a national strike, and, even when it became evident that this would not take place, they expressed their determination to continue the struggle. Their leaders, however, saw the futility of pursuing such a course, and wisely decided to get out of an awkward situation as gracefully as possible.²⁷

For its part, nationalist *New Ireland* pointed out after the strike: “It is consoling to know the rank and file were prepared to carry on the fight: a large and important section was indignant at the stoppage of the strike”.²⁸

Thus, if their strike was essentially in defence of civil liberties, why, then, did they seek to escalate the Limerick soviet to a national level? Especially as the strikers eventually obtained what they had initially fought for, with no national strike in support. Furthermore, why did some of them feel betrayed by the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress’s national executive (ILPTUC) who had ruled out the idea of a national general strike?²⁹ When some members of the ITGWU went as far as threatening to set up another soviet, was it because they expected the national executive to “make Limerick the headquarters of Ireland’s national and social revolution”, as D. R. O’Connor Lysaght argues?³⁰ Another possible answer is that they felt extremely frustrated when ordered to resume work as they had demonstrated their ability to run their city’s economy both autonomously and effectively. And it is out of this newly acquired self-confidence, that one may think that the Limerick

25. Dominic Haugh, “Socialist Revolution in Ireland: A Lost Opportunity, 1916-22”, in *Marxist Perspectives on Irish Society*, Michael O’Flynn, Odette Clarke, Paul M. Hayes, Martin J. Power (eds.), Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, p. 12.

26. Commenting on the strike, the Catholic and pro-Sinn Féin *Irishman* announced: “There is a possibility of the strike extending to the whole of Ireland” (*Irishman*, 26 April 1919, p. 1).

27. *The Irish Times*, 25 April 1919, p. 4.

28. *New Ireland*, 3 May 1919, p. 1.

29. Liam Cahill, *Forgotten Revolution...*, p. 81-95.

30. See the section entitled “Union Bureaucrats Make Their Move”, in D. R. O’Connor Lysaght, *The Story of The Limerick Soviet...*

striking workers (who numbered 15,000 out of a population of 38,000 inhabitants) gave a subversive dimension and, by doing so, a “utopian impulse” to their original designs. As, from a spontaneous and pragmatic response to the present state of dissatisfaction, vaguely imbued with syndicalist theory,³¹ they henceforth aspired to take a further step forward and spread their “inverted” organisational structure nationwide, as part of a general strike. But this “utopian impulse”, as described above, was probably more evident as regards the Cleeve soviets.

Cleeve is the name of a Protestant, politically unionist family who, at the time of the Irish Revolution, headed the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland, encompassing 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, went through major social disputes over wages, working hours and conditions, involving the most radical and powerful trade union of the time, the ITGWU. Fairly soon, however, some of these conflicts 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” – in the wake of the Limerick soviet –, starting with the Knocklong creamery (40 workers involved) and its twelve auxiliary branches (County Limerick) in May 1920, followed by the Bruree mills and bakery (County Limerick) in August 1921,³² and virtually all the Cleeve factories and their auxiliary branches (Counties Limerick, Tipperary and Cork) – some forty establishments in all³³ – for several months in 1922.³⁴

Why did these workers decide to seize their firms and manage them themselves instead of just simply refusing to work? As an explanation for such a phenomenon, some researchers take up the “strike tactic” argument as couched by the *Voice of Labour*, the ITGWU’s official organ, as early as 1921.³⁵ Thus, for example, referring to the 1919 Monaghan Asylum soviet led, Donal Ó Drisceoil states that:

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31. 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.
 32. The author of the present article has yet to find any source indicating the number of workers involved in the Bruree soviet.
 33. To date, the author of the present article has only partial data on the number of workers involved in the Cleeve soviets in 1922: around 90 in Carrick-on-Suir, 200 in Clonmel, 400 in Tipperary Town. See *The Irish Times*, 15 May 1922, p. 5; *Irish Examiner*, 15 May 1922, p. 5; *Nenagh News*, 20 May 1922, p. 3; *Freeman’s Journal*, 1 August 1922, p. 4; *Nenagh Guardian*, 5 August 1922, p. 4.
 34. For a detailed account of the Cleeve soviets, see Dominic Haugh, “The ‘Dreaded Menace of the Red Flag’: The Munster Soviets of 1922”, in *Spirit of Revolution...*, p. 132-155; Olivier Coquelin, “Cleeve’s Soviets...”; David Lee, “The Munster Soviets...”; D. R. O’Connor Lysaght, “The Munster Soviet Creameries”.
 35. The argument was used as part of a report on Castleconnell fisheries (County Limerick) seized by their workers and organised as a soviet: “And after all the action of these workers, like those of Bruree, Arigna, etc., is a *strike tactic* – their stay in strike is a means to compel an employer to give decent wages and decent conditions and keep the machinery of food production going” (*Voice of Labour*, 10 December 1921, p. 4; our italics).

As [Desmond] Greaves has pointed out, however, this was not a syndicalist “take and hold” operation, but a means of taking industrial action without withdrawing labour. It was essentially a strike tactic, though with undeniable political overtones, and in all cases of “soviets” up to 1921, the employers’ property was returned once demands had been met.³⁶

This was, indeed, essentially the *modus operandi* of Irish soviets, at least until 1921: a means of pressuring employers or political authorities to give in to the demands of striking workers. One of the protagonists of the Drogheda foundry soviet, set up in September 1921, thus defined Irish “sovietism” as opposed to socialism, when replying to a reader of the *Drogheda Independent* who had castigated them for seizing the foundry not for themselves but for the workers of Drogheda:

In last week’s issue, “Bricriu” [pseudonym of the reader] seems to be groping in the dark or may be the shoe pinches? By this letter he is trying to construe the issue and fails miserably to find the interpretation of the word Soviet. He sits down in his office and gallops on the wrong course: his is Socialism, mine is Sovietism; two distinct words and meaning as far as the Irish workers’ point of view. He also declares “that they seized the works for the workers of Drogheda”, which statement I fully repudiate. We had no mandate from the Workers’ Council to that effect, so, therefore, we could not act on their behalf as “Bricriu” tries to make it appear to those ignorant of the Irish Soviets’ methods or why the Irish Soviets were seized at all. Why did the Ironworkers seize the works? [...] To prove to the engineering world, that the proprietors could advance the wages of the workers concerned instead of reducing them, and still have a very big profit. Why were the proprietors so anxious to put us off the premises? Because we would prove it so.³⁷

However, regarding the fact that “the employers’ property was returned once demands had been met”, it should be remembered that in some cases this presumably occurred following negotiations brought about under the threat of the Sinn Féin government, as in 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.³⁸ As for the Knocklong soviet, while the creamery was handed over to the Cleeve family after a settlement had been reached with them, the rationale that lay behind the workers’ action is nonetheless worth mentioning due to its manifest utopian approach. Their grievance essentially rested upon the fact that their wages were far lower than those obtained by their colleagues in other branches of the firm, as a result of strikes or bargaining. After several months of unfruitful negotiations, they eventually set about taking control of their plant and running it without the tyrannical official

36. Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2001, p. 13.

37. *Drogheda Independent*, 1 October 1921, p. 4.

38. This fact should be treated with caution as there is no official evidence of Markievicz’s threat other than that reported in the *Voice of Labour* on 10 November 1923 (p. 8).

manager, David Riordan, whose dismissal was also demanded. Not only was the takeover used as an alternative to strike action to get satisfaction of their most important claims, but, as reported in *The Irish Times*, “apparently the object of the workmen in seizing the place was [also] to prove that the wages they demanded could be paid out of the profits”.³⁹ Their soviet was therefore a sort of temporary utopian space meant to demonstrate that their demands were valid and could be successfully put into practice notably within the framework of a new and “inverted” form of socioeconomic organisation, symbolised here by the raising of the red flag over the factory and, above all, by the replacement of the Cleeve name plate at the entrance with a banner stating: “Knocklong Soviet Creamery. We make Butter, not Profits”. Not to mention the inherently utopian “imagination”, as conceptualised by Ernst Bloch,⁴⁰ that the Knocklong soviet aroused in the workers, according to John O’Dwyer, the soviet’s assistant manager: “[...] but the bold stroke by which we established the Soviet has appealed to the imagination of the workers, many of whom, including the women, have since come into our ranks”.⁴¹ And, over one year later, such “utopian imagination” was to find expression once again in a soviet established this time in Cleeve’s mills and bakery at Bruree, its slogan proclaiming: “Bruree Workers Soviet Mills. We make Bread not Profits”. Here too, the taking over of the concern was brought about by an unsettled dispute, in which the mill workers demanded the reinstatement of two dismissed employees with the payment of full wages for their time spent out of work. But here, the soviet went even further in its utopian intent to reject the past radically and create a better life for the workers themselves and the whole population alike, as was made explicit on the poster displayed at the entrance door: “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”.⁴² But notwithstanding the commercial success it experienced, the Bruree soviet was compelled to cease operations after ten days, apparently under the threat of military intervention uttered by the Sinn Féin government, in compliance with its strategy of cross-class unity – as mentioned above.

However, unlike the soviets set up in the period 1918-1921, whose original goals had been achieved, all of the 1922-1923 soviets ended in total failure. According to Emmet O’Connor, this can be accounted for by the economic context of each period. Thus, the post-war economic boom created an incentive for the workers to claim their share of the general growth in prosperity. From 1918 to 1921, what was known as the wages movement translated into 782 industrial strikes – as

39. *The Irish Times*, 29 May 1920, p. 3.

40. See Judith Brown, “Ernst Bloch and the Utopian Imagination”, *ERAS Journal*, vol. 5, 2003, online: <https://www.monash.edu/arts/philosophical-historical-international-studies/eras/past-editions/edition-five-2003-november/ernst-bloch-and-the-utopian-imagination>.

41. Quoted in *Freeman’s Journal*, 22 May 1920, p. 5.

42. Quoted in *Freeman’s Journal*, 31 August 1921, p. 5; *Irish Examiner*, 31 August 1921, p. 4; *Irish Independent*, 31 August 1921, p. 4.

against 307 in the years 1914-1918 –, most of them being successful.⁴³ And when work stoppage or negotiation proved insufficient to achieve expected results, some workers resorted to soviet occupations. But, with the slump of 1921-1923, social unrest turned into struggles against wage cuts imposed by the employers and the big 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".⁴⁴ Such circumstances naturally fostered the resurgence of soviets, which were henceforth increasingly felt as serious challenges to traditional private property rights, not least because of the unprecedented scale of factory occupations that took place in the south-west of the country in spring 1922. This also means that the utopian impulse grew even more acute in the 1922-1923 period – as in the Cleeve plants taken over in response to a lockout resulting from an unsettled dispute about pay and staff cutbacks. In the latter case, the workers' decision to resume production, despite their employers' intention to shut down the factories, was actually 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". 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, "Long Live the Sovereign People".⁴⁵ The utopian impulse, embodied in the need to create a perfect life for themselves and the national community, was all the more conspicuous here that, according to the *Voice of Labour*:

[T]hese 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.⁴⁶

Yet this perfect and "inverted" occupation, as portrayed here, proved short-lived due to the joint effect of widespread farmer boycotts and frequent interventions by the Free State Army in connection with the Civil War, both being consistent with what Emmet O'Connor calls "the conservative response" to social chaos.⁴⁷

43. "Strikes and Lockouts, 1914-21", The National Archives (TNA), Public Record Office (PRO), "Ministry of Labour and successors, Trade Disputes, Record Books", Lab 34/14-20, Lab 34/32-39, figures cited in Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland...*, 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 (David Fitzpatrick, "Strikes in Ireland, 1914-21", *Saothar*, vol. 6, 1980, p. 32).

44. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland...*, p. 106.

45. Quoted in *The Irish Times*, 15 May 1922, p. 5; *Limerick Leader*, 15 May 1922, p. 3; *Irish Examiner*, 13 May 1922, p. 8; and 15 May 1922, p. 5; *Freeman's Journal*, 13 May 1922, p. 5; and 16 May 1922, p. 5.

46. *Voice of Labour*, 27 May 1922, p. 8.

47. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland...*, p. 154.

Not to mention the Irish Labour leaders whose refusal to use subversive methods to carry out their revolutionary goals naturally led them to ignore the soviets showing the slightest sign of subversion, as in the 1922 Cleeve soviets,⁴⁸ but also in the Limerick soviet where the leaders had considered spreading their movement to the whole country.

Of course, such subversive inclination also affected the rural areas – accustomed since the 18th century to seditious acts for the rights of tenants or for the ownership of land – which witnessed several attempts at implementing collective ownership of land, as in the village of Broadford (County Clare) in 1922, though located in an area with no strong trade union tradition, where the 300-acre Going estate – after the name of the landlord, James Dennison Going – was run as a soviet for nearly ten months by tenant farmers who had initially called for “reductions in first and second term rents and the distribution of grass lands”.⁴⁹ To this end, a “Committee of farmers, tenants, workers and Transport Union workers on the Going estates” was formed, with one of its members, Michael Collins, 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 marked by the Broadford Committee’s decision to pay what it reckoned to be a fair rent for six months, namely £110, which was well below the payment expected by the landlord’s agent. And they did so until November 1922, when they were compelled to return the estate due to the legal action taken against them, and which extended over more than three years. 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 renting out plots for tillage to landless men in Broadford. They also appointed herd supervisors with responsibility for maintaining the fences, and evicted employees who refused to comply with the soviet’s requirements. Their hope was that after running the estate for six months: “[...] a proper form of Government will be in office, which will attend to the land purchase of Ireland, and start our country on new lines of agricultural progress”.⁵⁰

48. For example, while the 1920 Knocklong and the 1921 Arigna soviets are referred to in the report of the 1921 annual meeting of the ILPTUC, no mention is made of the 1922 Cleeve soviets in the 1922 and 1923 reports. See Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting*, Dublin, 1, 2, 3, 4 August 1921, p. 13, online: <https://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/27th-annual-report-1921.pdf>; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Meeting*, Dublin, August 1922, online: <https://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/28th-annual-report-1922.pdf>; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting*, Dublin, 6, 7, 8, 9 August 1923, online: <https://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/29th-annual-report-1923.pdf>.

49. *The Irish Times*, 14 April 1926, p. 8; *Limerick Leader*, 14 April 1926, p. 8.

50. Quoted in *The Irish Times*, 14 April 1926, p. 8; *Limerick Leader*, 14 April 1926, p. 8. For further details on the Broadford soviet, see Brian Kenny, *When Ireland Went Red...*, p. 81-83; Michael McCarthy, “The Broadford Soviet”.

Other similar “soviet” experiments were also conducted in the north-west of County Clare in 1922-1923 – in Toovahera, Kilfenora, Ballyvaughan, Roadford, Doolin, Corkscrew Hill, Ballynalacken and Moher, in the neighbourhood of Crab Island –, here too by tenant farmers left on the sidelines of the 1903 and 1909 land reforms,⁵¹ 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.⁵²

In the conclusion of his article on the Broadford soviet, Michael McCarthy argues that “[i]t is impossible to say to what degree the genuine spirit of Bolshevism motivated the men of Broadford [...] in February 1922”.⁵³ Here the term “spirit of Bolshevism” refers to the revolutionary movement that had swept through Russia and other parts of Europe since February 1917. In this respect, it is important to point out that the ITGWU had also been actively involved in the land agitation since the agrarian outbreak of 1917, thereby organising tens of thousands of labourers and landless farmers within four years.⁵⁴ It was no wonder, therefore, that the trade union participated in the setting up of the Broadford soviet in February 1922 – hence “Transport Union” was added to the Committee’s title. Thus even though the rank and file of this land soviet – together with that of all the other rural experiments –, whether unionised or not, did not have, to quote Conor Kostick, “a full understanding of how a soviet functioned”,⁵⁵ or, in James Kemmy’s own words, “had little socialist ideology”,⁵⁶ they had most probably been told by their local leaders: first, that the ITGWU was the Irish spearhead of the aforesaid syndicalist “One Big Union” principle; and second, that the ILPTUC, to which the ITGWU was affiliated, had openly espoused socialism from November 1918 onwards.⁵⁷ Thus, had the striking farm workers, most of whom were devout Catholic, given credence to the frequent anti-socialist messages preached in the churches, they

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51. The massive settlement of English and Scottish Protestants in Ireland carried out all along the 17th century reached such a degree that by 1703 only about 14% of Irish land was still in Catholic hands – as against 90% in 1603. It was not until the 1879-1882 Land War that the Catholic peasantry would gradually repossess the confiscated lands, principally outside of the province of Ulster, through a series of agrarian reforms culminating with the Wyndham Act (1903) and the Birrell Act (1909) that allowed tenant farmers to purchase their holdings through refundable loans granted by the state.
 52. On these land soviets, see *Freeman’s Journal*, 3 May 1923, p. 3, 4, 5; 9 May 1923, p. 5; 17 May 1923, p. 6; and 25 May 1923, p. 6; *Irish Examiner*, 15 June 1923, p. 4, 5; and 16 June 1923, p. 6.
 53. Michael McCarthy, “The Broadford Soviet”, p. 40.
 54. According to Desmond Greaves, almost 40% of ITGWU members worked in agriculture in 1920 (Desmond Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union: The Formative Years, 1909-1923*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1982, p. 259).
 55. Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland...*, p. 70.
 56. James Kemmy, “The Limerick Soviet”, *The Irish Times*, 9 May 1969, p. 14.
 57. At a special conference held in November 1918, the delegates endorsed a socialist constitution and manifesto, which stated that the ILPTUC’s ultimate aims included “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” (Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of a Special Congress*, 1, 2 November 1918, p. 122; see also p. 123, 165-169, online: <https://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/24th-annual-report-1918.pdf>).

undoubtedly either would not have swelled the ranks of the ITGWU or would have refused to get involved in social unrest alongside an organisation wearing the “cloven hoof of socialism”⁵⁸. In other words, even though the vast majority of the strikers did not label themselves as “socialists”, they nonetheless readily contributed to come “as near as they could to practical socialism”,⁵⁹ to quote Kemmy again – and this during nearly ten months. This would tend to demonstrate that the concept of utopian impulse most assuredly permeated the latter land experiment in a three-stage process, it being itself pervaded throughout by two seemingly contradictory sentiments: despair and hope. From small farmers to agricultural labourers, therefore, most of them undoubtedly felt extreme dissatisfaction with existing conditions and, in this case, not only with their landlord’s refusal to reduce their rents and the slow pace of land distribution, but also with their failure to win concessions. This feeling of despair towards the system in place led them to practically express hope for a new, better and “inverted” organisational structure, for themselves and the local community, in the form of a self-managed soviet, as an alternative and pragmatic response to the current unsatisfactory private property rights. For, as in the above-mentioned 1918-1921 soviets, their decision to manage the estate themselves democratically was above all meant to substantiate the appropriateness of their demands.

The Irish soviets, as epitomised in the Limerick, Cleeve and Broadford soviets examined here, were quite clearly imbued with a utopian impulse, growing more intense over time as a result of changes in the political and economic environment, and whereby:

- The workers felt profound dissatisfaction with existing conditions (which is at the root of any utopian process) and, in this case, with British militarism, their particularly high rents, low salaries or their employers’ attempt at cutting them, but also with their failure to win concessions from the imperial authorities, employers and landlords through strike action or negotiations.
- The workers practically expressed hope for a better, “inverted”, if not perfect organisational structure for themselves and the population at large – amidst a climate of political and violent turmoil not only in Europe but also in Ireland through the IRA and Sinn Féin’s fight for independence –, either as a temporary radical tactic to have their claims met or as a potential alternative to the current private property rights.
- The soviets were all pragmatic responses to current dissatisfaction, the result of direct action, which is one of the basic principles of a syndicalist doctrine, not as theoretically elaborate as other tendencies within the socialist movement.⁶⁰

58. Michael McCarthy, “The Broadford Soviet”, p. 40.

59. James Kemmy, “The Limerick Soviet”.

60. On the origins and principles of syndicalism, see Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland...*, p. 1-8.

- They were all more or less transient, lasting from a few hours to several months, due either to successful bargaining or to intense external pressures.⁶¹

And yet, were not the areas where those self-managed experiments took place alleged to be intrinsically anti-socialist – and, therefore, naturally averse to giving vent to such progressive utopian impulse – owing to their essentially rural, nationalist and Catholic character? Most probably, except for the fact that the Irish Revolution was also a transitional period, during which such a progressive force as the labour movement asserted itself and expanded rapidly to ensure that workers achieved full recognition of their right in an independent Ireland.⁶² The conservative society into which Ireland was to evolve following the setting up of the Irish Free State was not yet so firmly established. Far from being predetermined – although already present for some decades –, the consolidation of the new state's prevailing paradigms was therefore rather the result of the conservative spirit that had eventually swept through the whole separatist movement – not so much in defence of the status quo as to eradicate any division within the Irish nationalist community⁶³ – at the expense of the progressive tenets endorsed by the many unionised workers of the revolutionary era.⁶⁴ Ultimately, this reminds us that history is not a linear process, a matter of teleological explanation whereby the present would be the inevitable result of deliberate and premeditated construction; while it rather appears as the culmination of a long series of historical accidents forged by largely unforeseeable or inexorable circumstances at the time of occurrence. This was true in the case of Irish soviets inspired by the continental political and social context, and taking advantage of the political instability and turmoil Ireland had been facing from 1916 onwards.

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61. This last feature actually relates to the more general issue pertaining to utopia that was raised notably in the Copernic seminar held in Paris on 9 October 2012, under the title, “Les utopies sont-elles condamnées à l'échec?” [Are utopias doomed to failure?], online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTh7bi8XvG0>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIyfTLOG8PY>.
 62. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1992, p. 46-116.
 63. Olivier Coquelin, “Politics in the Irish Free State: The Legacy of a Conservative Revolution”, *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2005, p. 29-40.
 64. At the time, the Irish labour movement was embodied by the ILPTUC which had dramatically increased the number of its membership since the 1916 annual congress, reaching 300,000 in 1921. On the basis of the 1911 census, this figure accounted for approximately 48% 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. This dramatic growth in union membership was mainly the result of the diverse campaigns led by the ITGWU, which could count on 100,000 members by 1920. See Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting*, Cork, 2, 3, 4, 5 August 1920, p. 154, online: <https://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/26th-annual-report-1920.pdf>; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting*, p. 75; *Irish Historical Statistics*, William Edward Vaughan, André Jude Fitzpatrick (eds.), 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.

However, for a more comprehensive analysis of the present topic, it remains to be seen whether the Irish soviets were not set up against a backdrop of intertwined utopian impulse and class struggle – whose liberal theory, at least as drawn up by the French philosopher and sociologist Raymond Aron, also involves the two conflicting sentiments, hope and despair.⁶⁵ Or whether different forms of utopia – in accordance with Karl Mannheim’s typology of the utopian mentality, including chiasm, the liberal-humanist idea, the conservative idea, and the socialist-communist utopia⁶⁶ – were not in mutual opposition during the Irish Revolution through the main forces involved, thus explaining why such potentially subversive vehicles as the soviets, albeit eventually quelled, have never given rise to progressive forces sufficiently powerful to counterbalance independent Ireland’s conservatism – or independent Ireland’s utopian conservatism?

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65. Aron argues that, for class struggle to develop into revolution, as envisioned by Karl Marx, two 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 (Raymond Aron, *La lutte de classes: nouvelles leçons sur les sociétés industrielles*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 21-127, 197-309).
66. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* [*Ideologie und Utopie*, 1929], Louis Wirth, Edward Shils (trans.), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 190-221.