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THE LONG ROAD TO THE EMERGENCE OF A LEFT-RIGHT DIVIDE IN IRELAND, 1922-2020

Since its inception in 1922, the southern Irish state has been distinguished politically from other western European countries mainly by the absence of a left-right divide. The Irish party system thus consisted of two nationalist-inspired organisations, Cumann na nGaedheal / Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, which could be situated, ideologically speaking, either on the right or on the centre-right of the political spectrum.¹ This system was shaped against a backdrop of essentially constitutional antagonisms between supporters and opponents of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. However, while the nature of this divide has changed over time, the electoral loyalty enjoyed by the two main parties in the country only began to be questioned somewhat in the 2011 general election, when the left, as embodied by the Labour Party, came second with 19.4% of the first preference votes. But Labour's subsequent electoral collapse, paradoxical as it may be, did not prevent the Irish left from gaining ground on Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, this time through Sinn Féin, which won the 2020 general election.² This historic victory, although it did not result in the formation of a Sinn Féin government, is seen by some as the beginnings of a left-right divide in the Republic of Ireland³ – a divide which has been essentially based on socio-economic issues in western Europe since the early twentieth century.

This chapter will seek to analyse the Irish party system from 1922 to 2020 and to identify the reasons why it has begun to rest on the left-right divide only since

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1. L. Weeks, "Parties and the Party System", in *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, J. Coakley, M. Gallagher (eds.), 5th ed., London, Routledge, 2010, p. 137-167. See also S. Müller, A. Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?", *Irish Political Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2021, p. 535, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2021.1973737>; S. Hutter, G. Malet, "Ireland – Limited Restructuration in the Poster Child of Austerity", in *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, S. Hutter, H. Kriesi (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 307.
 2. The results of the 2020 general election in terms of percentage of first preference votes are as follows: Sinn Féin 24.5%, Fianna Fáil 22.2%, Fine Gael 20.9%, Green Party 7.1%, Labour Party 4.4%, Social Democrats 2.9%, People Before Profit-Solidarity 2.6%, Independents / others 15.4%. See *The Irish Times*, 10 February 2020, p. 1.
 3. S. Müller, A. Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?", p. 535-555; J. A. Elkink, D. M. Farrell, "Predicting Vote Choice in the 2020 Irish General Election", *Irish Political Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2021, p. 521-534, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2021.1978219>; G. McElroy, "Party Competition in Ireland: The Emergence of a Left-Right Dimension?", in *A Conservative Revolution? Electoral Change in Twenty-First-Century Ireland*, M. Marsh, D. M. Farrell, G. McElroy (eds.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 61-82.

the 2010s, while in other European countries, notably France and Italy, this very divide appears to be in crisis.⁴ To achieve this, it seems necessary to go back to the roots of the southern Irish state in order to provide some non-exhaustive explanations for the absence of a left-right divide on its political scene in the aftermath of the 1916-1923 Revolution that brought it into being. Before doing so, however, we shall attempt to define the political concepts of left and right and set out what fundamentally differentiates them.

The criteria that distinguish the left from the right have of course evolved since this divide emerged during the French Revolution of 1789. However, as Italian philosopher of law and political sciences Norberto Bobbio argues, only the founding criterion of equality vs inequality has remained relevant over time, insofar as all the others have always been subject to one's perception of equality and inequality.⁵ While, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the latter dialectical link has essentially been based on socio-economic differences and therefore class antagonisms, other types of issues, such as women's rights, ecology, globalisation and immigration, were added from the 1970s onwards, making any political analysis based on the left-right divide more complex.⁶ Taking these two dimensions – socio-economic and socio-cultural or societal – into account, political scientists Stefan Müller and Aidan Regan suggest differentiating the electorate on both sides of the political spectrum in these terms. Left-wing voters are thus inclined to support greater economic equality through state intervention in the economy, high tax and spend policies, and generally have more progressive views on socio-cultural issues. Right-wing voters, on the other hand, tend to be opposed to state intervention in the economy, excessive tax and spend policies, favouring a more market-oriented distribution of income, and generally advocate more conservative positions on socio-cultural issues. This also means that voters may hold right-wing views on economic issues and left-wing views on cultural issues, and vice versa.⁷

The question that then arises is what dimension determines the choice of these voters in favour of a left-wing party or a right-wing party. In other words, what is the fundamental dimension underlying the right-left divide? Some studies suggest

4. K. Cunningham, J. A. Elkind, "Ideological Dimensions in the 2016 Elections", in *The Post-Crisis Irish Voter: Voting Behaviour in the Irish 2016 General Election*, M. Marsh, D. M. Farrell, T. Reidy (eds.), Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, p. 46.

5. N. Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, A. Cameron (trans.), Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

6. D. Caughey, T. O'Grady, C. Warshaw, "Policy Ideology in European Mass Publics, 1981-2016", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 113, no. 3, 2019, p. 675-677; H. Giebler, T. M. Meyer, M. Wagner, "The Changing Meaning of Left and Right: Supply- and Demand-Side Effects on the Perception of Party Positions", *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2021, p. 243-245.

7. S. Müller, A. Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?", p. 537-538. See also K. Cunningham, J. A. Elkind, "Ideological Dimensions in the 2016 Elections", p. 50-51; D. Caughey, T. O'Grady, C. Warshaw, "Policy Ideology in European Mass Publics, 1981-2016", p. 677-678 and p. 684.

that the socio-economic dimension tends to remain the most decisive,⁸ in that the salience given to more societal issues, such as immigration and national identity, has led in some European countries to the consolidation of far-right populist forces in the political landscape, claiming to have overcome the left-right divide in favour of others such as “globalists” vs “nativists”.⁹ These populist parties actually often owe their electoral success to the support of large sections of the working classes dissatisfied with the policies pursued by left-wing parties once in office.

However, over the last decade, the societal issues mentioned above do not seem to have had the same resonance in Ireland,¹⁰ where a traditional left-right divide based on socio-economic issues is emerging, as will be seen below. In the meantime, we will try to understand why it has taken so long for this to happen.

Given the importance of class struggle in shaping the political divisions in other western European countries, especially after the First World War, one explanation for the absence of a left-right divide in Southern Ireland undoubtedly lies in the ideological and strategic retreat of the official labour movement, represented by the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC), during the Irish Revolution – particularly by not standing in the general elections of 1918 and 1921.¹¹ This withdrawal illustrated not only its *de facto* subordination to the separatist movement, but also its refusal to resort to violence to achieve its goals, which were nevertheless imbued with subversive ideals.¹² Labour’s peaceful and gradualist vision of social revolution even led it to

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8. Except for the most affluent and educated fraction of self-identified left-wing voters, whom Thomas Piketty calls the “Brahmin left”, who tend to be less concerned about economic inequality. Economists Bruno Amable and Thibault Darcillon see this as the key to a restructuring into a new social bloc, the “bourgeois bloc”, in which the Brahmin left unites with the most affluent and educated fraction of the right, which Piketty calls the “merchant right”, in common support for centre-right economic policies. See B. Amable, T. Darcillon, “The Brahmin Left, the Merchant Right, and the Bloc Bourgeois”, *Political Economy Working Papers*, University of Geneva, no. 1, 2020, online: <http://acdc2007.free.fr/amable120.pdf> (also published in *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2022, p. 1342-1367). See also T. Piketty, “Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right: Rising Inequality and the Changing Structure of Political Conflict”, *World Inequality Database*, working paper, no. 7, 2018, online: <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Piketty2018.pdf>.
 9. B. Amable, T. Darcillon, “The Brahmin Left...”, p. 4. See also R. Ford, W. Jennings, “The Changing Cleavage Politics of Western Europe”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 23, 2020, p. 304-305.
 10. S. Müller, A. Regan, “Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?”, p. 539; S. Hutter, G. Malet, “Ireland...”, p. 315-316 and p. 321.
 11. B. Farrell, “Labour and the Irish Political System: A Suggested Approach”, *Economic and Social Review*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1970, p. 477-502.
 12. At a special conference held in November 1918, the ILPTUC endorsed a socialist constitution and manifesto, whose 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, manual and mental, engaged therein, in the interest of the Nation and subject to the supreme authority of the National Government” (Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the Special Congress, Held at the Mansion House, Dublin*, Dublin, November 1918, p. 122 and p. 168).

discourage and obstruct any illegal action by workers, which did not go unnoticed in the revolutionary era.¹³ This typically reformist attitude of never deviating from legality was to continue unabated thereafter. It manifested itself in the gradual abandonment of the syndicalist doctrine of the One Big Union,¹⁴ which James Larkin and James Connolly had espoused, in favour of parliamentary and constitutional action. The culmination of this new strategy came when the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) amicably split from its political arm, the Labour Party, at an extraordinary congress in 1930.¹⁵ Once separated from its trade union partner, Labour was able to devote itself to other than purely socio-economic issues. But since most workers – whether unionised or not – hardly made the connection between their emancipation as a class and the political emancipation of the Irish nation, many of them did not hesitate to give their first vote to one or other of the political parties that had emerged from Sinn Féin and therefore fought for their nationalist aspirations, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, much to the detriment of the Labour Party, though it was supposed to represent their particular interests in Dáil Éireann.¹⁶

On the other hand, it is also true that only a minority of industrial and agricultural workers seemed to be willing to act on the socialist ideals of the Labour leaders. Therefore, in order to understand the ideological specificities of contemporary Ireland, it is necessary to look beyond the relative passivity shown by the leaders of the ILPTUC at the time of the Revolution, and to ask whether the country could at the time boast a genuine and authentic tradition that was not only seditious but also revolutionary. This was apparently the case, since the will to break with the established order was regularly manifested in theory and practice since the Enlightenment, both in the political field (with the republican separatists) and in the social field (with the Land League in particular) – not to mention the cultural field through the “Celtic Renaissance” of the 1880s and 1890s. However, it must also be acknowledged that the revolutions thus built or carried out before and during the Anglo-Irish Union period were more conservative than progressive in nature and had several dimensions.¹⁷ Firstly, in the

13. These illegal actions included mainly land seizures by small farmers and landless labourers, as well as self-managed “soviets” in which the workers took over the management of their workplaces in order to obtain full satisfaction of their demands. On class struggle and its various manifestations in the Irish Revolution, see O. 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>.

14. Arising at the turn of the twentieth century, this doctrine aimed to organise all workers, no longer in the same trade but in the same industry – from the labourers to the skilled workers – with each trade union then grouping together in a large confederation. Thanks to this organisational mode, the industrial workers could then control the means of production, which would – it was thought – inevitably lead them to ultimately seize state political power, hitherto held by the bourgeoisie.

15. N. Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2007, p. 31-33. Despite this split, the trade unions still had the option of joining the Labour Party.

16. P. Mair, “Labour and the Irish Party System Revisited: Party Competition in the 1920s”, *Economic and Social Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1977, p. 59-70.

17. O. Coquelin, *L'Irlande en révolutions, entre nationalismes et conservatismes: une histoire politique et sociale, 18^e-20^e siècles*, Paris, Syllepse, 2018. There are several conservative schools of thought which,

political sphere, where the conservatism of the revolutionaries was illustrated, on the one hand, by the idea – applied during and after the Revolution – of setting up democratic institutions that did not entail fundamental upheavals, to the exclusion, of course, of the Irish nationality of the new rulers. And, on the other hand, in the socio-economic content of their designs, which, although relegated to the background, was nonetheless part of a conservative approach, based there too on the status quo, which nevertheless needed to be more or less radically reformed. As for the social sphere, it was mainly in rural areas that revolutionary aspirations were expressed, essentially with a view to establishing the system of peasant proprietorship – which became effective in 1903. This was probably more of a conservative than a progressive revolution, from an ideological point of view, in that the aim was not to challenge the principle of private and individual property, but to transfer and democratise it.¹⁸

Such a conservative phenomenon can be explained in various ways. One of them logically involves the considerable influence of the Catholic Church, which was primarily concerned with protecting its faithful against all forms of deviance from the Gospel message preached from the pulpit. The high and low clergy thus condemned, in a quasi-systematic way, the various socialist doctrines supposedly carrying the seeds of atheism and moral permissiveness, as well as any act of violence of a political or agrarian nature, most often perpetrated by secret societies like the Fenians and the Ribbon Lodges.¹⁹ Although sermons and threats of excommunication undoubtedly had a dissuasive effect on a large part of the Irish Catholic population, they did not prevent certain categories, often among the most modest of the population, from rising up, in one way or another, and thus disregarding the Church's commands – yet without endorsing any form of socialism. This means, to be clear, that the rejection of a large majority of Irish people for progressive social revolution cannot be the result of Church propaganda alone.

Another explanation lies in the fact that the main component of Irish society, the peasantry, was intrinsically conservative. This conservatism, which was typical of European peasants, was characterised by a deep individualism, a piety bordering on

despite fundamental differences, share a number of values, including those of authority and hierarchy. Apart from the strictly ideological interpretation, conservatism also has certain characteristics that go beyond the traditional boundaries of the right-wing political forces with which it is usually associated. Thus, what political scientist Andrew Vincent calls “the situational or positional perspective” implies a stance towards an institutional order that can be more or less radically reformed in order to improve it, short of fundamentally changing it. Hence, it is possible to include in the conservative camp any agenda or organisation with so-called progressive aims, i.e. advocating the reduction of inequalities and the enhancement of rights and liberties, provided that it does not consider destroying pillars such as private property on which the established order rests, contrary to what the fundamentally progressive movements and doctrines aspire to. See A. Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1995, p. 55-83.

18. Olivier Coquelin, *L'Irlande en révolutions...*, p. 261-384.

19. E. Larkin, “Socialism and Catholicism in Ireland”, *Studies*, vol. 74, no. 293, 1985, p. 66-92; D. McCartney, “The Churches and Secret Societies”, in *Secret Societies in Ireland*, W. T. Desmond (ed.), Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1973, p. 68-78.

bigotry and a lack of education and culture, generally illustrated by a high illiteracy rate.²⁰ In the case of Ireland, however, it is clear that not all farmers fitted this profile, since, on the one hand, they were able to establish strong bonds of solidarity among themselves, both organisationally and professionally;²¹ and, on the other hand, although they were devout Catholics, they were also able – at least for some of them – to show their independence from clerical sermons on many occasions. And finally, because the literacy rate of the Irish population was relatively high during the Union period.²² But they all seemed to share a quasi-religious attachment to the land, exacerbated by a strong feeling of dispossession which naturally led them to become fierce defenders of the principle of peasant proprietorship and, consequently, to assert revolutionary ambitions of conservative inspiration.²³ This did not, however, prevent some of them from experimenting with collective self-management in appropriate circumstances during the Revolution, thus demonstrating an undeniable progressive potential within the peasantry – as exemplified by the so-called “Broadford soviet” established in County Clare in 1922.²⁴

As for the industrial and agricultural workers, they mostly sought to radically reform the existing social order, but not to overthrow it. Most Irish workers thus had a pragmatic rather than ideological conception of their socio-economic interests. In other words, they generally had a short-term vision of their condition, which undoubtedly prevented them from taking on a more distant and abstract and, therefore, more uncertain revolutionary perspective.²⁵

In fact, the notion of revolutionary “idealism” or “romanticism” was expressed in Ireland, in theory and practice, primarily in the political realm strictly speaking, through an orthodox republican movement whose supreme goal required the sacrifice of one’s particular and immediate interests for the sake of the more abstract and allegedly higher interests of the national community. In other words, the collective ideal of the Irish republicans was based not on the concept of class but on that of the nation, which in turn was based on the conservative principle of class collaboration, as opposed to the more progressive principle of class struggle.²⁶

20. On this topic, see S. Clark, J. S. Donnelly, “Introduction”, in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, S. Clark, J. S. Donnelly (eds.), Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1983, p. 12-16; W. Rösener, *Les paysans dans l'histoire de l'Europe*, D.-A. Canal (trans.), Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 9-20.

21. On the various forms of solidarity and cooperation among Irish peasants, see in particular A. O’Dowd, *Meitheal: A Study of Co-Operative Labour in Rural Ireland*, Dublin, Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1981.

22. For example, between 1841 and 1911, the literacy rate of the Irish population over the age of five rose from 47% to 88%. See J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848-1918*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1973, p. 13.

23. O. Coquelin, *L’Irlande en révolutions...*, p. 366.

24. M. McCarthy, “The Broadford Soviet”, *The Old Limerick Journal*, vol. 4, 1980, p. 37-40.

25. O. Coquelin, *L’Irlande en révolutions...*, p. 385-482.

26. O. Coquelin, “Class Struggle...”; O. 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. 29-39.

There is, therefore, every reason to believe that the main components of the dominant ideology that permeated the southern Irish state were based on a predominantly conservative foundation, in the broadest sense of the term. This conservatism was already present in Ireland's political and social life throughout the period from the Enlightenment to the Irish Civil War of 1922-1923, and did not begin to fade gradually until the 1990s.²⁷

This is the case of the party system in Southern Ireland with, on the one hand, the Sinn Féiners, supporters of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, who held power from 1922 to 1932, under the name of Cumann na nGaedheal in 1923 – and then became known as Fine Gael from 1933 to the present day. And, on the other hand, anti-Treaty Sinn Féiners who, in 1926, founded Fianna Fáil, following a further split in Sinn Féin. The advent of Fianna Fáil on the political scene not only consigned Sinn Féin to oblivion for a time, but also relegated to the background the Labour Party, which had been the main force of opposition to Cumann na nGaedheal from 1922 to 1927. The latter, once in power, was determined to revive the country's economy and restore the balance of public finances – not to mention law and order – after ten months of civil war. To do this, William Cosgrave's government launched a major loan and hydroelectric works on the Shannon, and maintained a policy of free trade designed to encourage agricultural exports – the benefits of which were supposed to promote the country's industrial development. This, of course, was in contrast to the protectionist principles of Sinn Féin founder Arthur Griffith, who was himself a supporter of the Treaty. The Cosgrave government also pursued a fiscal policy designed to stimulate economic growth, it continued the process of land purchase and redistribution, reduced public expenditure and some social benefits such as pensions, and responded to the Catholic Church's expectations in matters of morality by enacting the Censorship of Films Act in 1923 and the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929.²⁸ It can therefore be assumed that Cumann na nGaedheal's policy fell under the heading of liberal conservatism, regarded as one of the schools of thought within conservatism.²⁹

But, while free trade favoured the interests of large farmers and industrial exporters – all of whom wanted to maintain economic relations with their British neighbour –, it was apparently a hindrance to the development of small farmers in the west and certain small manufacturers whose production for the domestic market would have benefited from protectionist measures to shield them from international

27. Evidence of this includes the ratification by referendum of divorce in 1995, gay marriage in 2015 and abortion in 2018, as well as the appointment by Dáil Éireann of a gay head of government of Indian origin, Leo Varadkar, in 2017. Not to mention the electoral breakthrough of the Irish left from the 2010s onwards. See O. Coquelin, *L'Irlande en révolutions...*, p. 507-508.

28. C. Meehan, *The Cosgrave Party: A History of Cumann na nGaedheal, 1923-33*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 2010.

29. A. Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies*, p. 64-67 and p. 79-82.

competition.³⁰ They thus turned to Éamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil, which, from its inception in 1926, had been a champion of all those left out of the new Irish Free State. To the point where, in the words of Kieran Allen, it could even be considered an "ersatz social democratic party",³¹ given its determination to use state power in the collective interest and its affinity with certain traditional ideals of the European left, such as the material well-being of the working classes and the submission of the banking system to the will of the people (embodied in the state). As a result, after coming to power in 1932, Fianna Fáil could rely on Labour to achieve most of its goals over the next four years, convinced as they were that the republican party "[would] be advocating the Labour Party programme in its entirety before long".³² Besides, as early as 1927, even the far left had embraced the idea of supporting Fianna Fáil to better confront the forces of capital. In its September issue, *The Workers' Republic*, official organ of the communist Workers' Party, urged Labour to "make De Valera President and responsible for the government of the country", in order to prepare the way "for the real coming to power of labour".³³ The left-wing organisations, however, were soon under no illusions as to the real motives of an increasingly less radical Fianna Fáil government in the socio-economic sphere.³⁴

On the other hand, were the progressive values of Fianna Fáil, mentioned above, the ideological preserve of the left alone? Far from it, in that they were also among the foundations of currents in Europe that came from the far right – notably fascism and Nazism³⁵ – and the conservative right, not to fuel the class struggle but in the interests of national unity. In addition, there were other tenets, usually associated with certain right-wing political families, which Fianna Fáil embraced and put into practice in the 1930s and 1940s, including the perpetuation of order, hierarchy and tradition through the state and intermediary bodies such as the family and the Church; a preference for rural society over the materialism and immorality of the urban world; the celebration of a glorious and mythical past; the defence of private property; the exaltation of the nation; class collaboration...³⁶ This also means that, notwithstanding

30. I. Rufflé, *Du néocolonialisme au dragon celte: croissance et dépendance de l'économie irlandaise au 20^e siècle*, PhD thesis in Irish studies, Rennes 2 University, 2002, 2 vols., p. 36-49; J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1999, p. 148, p. 285, p. 307-308 and p. 316-317.

31. K. Allen, "Forging the Links: Fianna Fáil, the Trade Unions and the Emergency", *Saothar*, vol. 16, 1991, p. 48.

32. *The Watchword*, 21 November 1931, p. 2.

33. *The Workers' Republic*, September 1927, p. 2.

34. O. Coquelin, "Politics in the Irish Free State...", p. 33-34.

35. P. Milza, *Les fascismes*, Paris, Seuil, 1991, p. 304-316.

36. D. Ferriter, *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Éamon de Valera*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 2007, p. 102-103, p. 113, p. 279 and p. 363-364; R. Fanning, *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power*, London, Faber & Faber, 2015, p. 199-202; R. Marx, *Éamon de Valera*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1990, p. 62-69 and p. 113-135. On the different conservative hues, see A. Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies*, p. 55-83; A. Heywood, *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*, London, Macmillan, 1994, p. 286-293; *A Dictionary of Conservative and Libertarian Thought*, N. Ashford, S. Davies (eds.), London, Routledge, 1991, p. 45-51; N. O'Sullivan, *Conservatism*, London, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1976, p. 22-31.

certain oratorical allusions, the socio-economic aims of de Valera and his followers were not really identified with any form of socialism, but rather with a theory known as distributism, inspired by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (published in 1891),³⁷ and developed by English Catholic authors Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert Keith Chesterton. This economic theory advocated, *inter alia*, a broadening of private property (individual or cooperative), a fairer distribution of land within the peasant community, and credit control to curb the proliferation of trusts.³⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that Fianna Fáil found favour with small farmers eager for land, unlike the big farmers who were more supportive of Cumann na nGaedheal, then Fine Gael, or other political organisations from their own ranks, such as the Farmers' Party (1922-1932) and the National Centre Party (1932-1933).³⁹ As for the industrial workers, Fianna Fáil's social reforms (such as the reduction of the working week to 48 hours), combined with a most virulent anti-imperialist policy (via the economic war waged against the British neighbour until 1938),⁴⁰ undoubtedly appealed to many of them who had a strong nationalist streak.⁴¹

By the end of the 1950s, however, ideological differences on socio-economic issues tended to fade between the country's two main parties. Under the leadership of Seán Lemass, Fianna Fáil eventually abandoned Griffith's self-sufficiency and protectionism in favour of liberal principles based on free trade, integration into the world economy and openness to foreign investment. For its part, Fine Gael, while remaining committed to economic liberalism, adopted a more social profile, particularly through its association with the Labour Party within various coalition governments.⁴² Such programmatic proximity – where continuity prevailed with each change of majority – not only did not undermine the Irish party system, but

37. Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* – extended and enriched forty years later in Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* – was intended as a philosophical expression of a Christian alternative to capitalism and socialism. It was for this reason that it inspired distributism, *inter alia*.

38. A. Cooney, *Distributism*, London, Third Way, 1998. These principles were actually enshrined both in the aims of Fianna Fáil, when it was formed in 1926, and in its 1932 election manifesto. See *An Phoblacht*, 5 February 1926 p. 3; *The Irish Press*, 12 February 1932, p. 5.

39. D. Jones, "The Issue of Land Distribution: Revisiting Graziers, *Land Reform and Political Conflict in Ireland*", in *Land Questions in Modern Ireland*, F. Campbell, T. Varley (eds.), Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013, p. 140-141; T. Varley, "The Politics of 'Holding the Balance': Irish Farmers' Parties and Land Redistribution in the Twentieth Century", *ibid.*, p. 238-239.

40. Once in power, Fianna Fáil broke with the free trade policy of its predecessors and, inspired by Arthur Griffith's economic nationalism, sought to make the country self-sufficient in food and industry through subsidies and tariff protection, but also by cancelling the land annuities that many Irish farmers still had to pay to Britain to repay the money they had borrowed to buy their land. This triggered an economic war between the two countries from 1932 onwards, which took the form of a reciprocal escalation of tariffs that affected Ireland in particular at a time of global economic crisis. Finally, the tariff war ended with an agreement signed in London in April 1938, whereby Britain agreed to stop receiving land annuities in return for the payment of £10 million.

41. K. Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour: From 1926 to the Present*, London, Pluto Press, 1997, p. 35.

42. See note 44 below.

also facilitated the implementation of measures that led to the economic boom from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s – albeit with the critical support of Labour and the main trade unions.⁴³

Thus, as the main left-wing organisation in Southern Ireland (until the 2016 general election when it was superseded by Sinn Féin), Labour was only able to have some influence on the country's public policies through sporadic participation in coalition governments, led mainly by Fine Gael, from the late 1940s.⁴⁴ Long before that, however, the refusal of anti-Treaty members to sit in the Dáil from 1922 to 1927 had enabled Labour to focus general attention on issues more relevant to its concerns, as the leading opposition force in Parliament. The advent of Fianna Fáil on the political scene ended this interlude and gave way to a new kind of ideological divide, against a nationalist backdrop, in which the Labour Party found it very difficult to assert itself.⁴⁵ Especially as the same national issue continued to dominate the political agenda over the next two decades, much to the discomfort of the Labour Party, which was more concerned with advancing its views on social justice than on constitutional law.

Thereafter, the Labour Party evolved in accordance not only with its alliances – notably with Fine Gael – but also with its electoral performance and the zeitgeist. After a surge in the 2011 general election in which it came second, ahead of Fianna Fáil, it now seems to be experiencing the same fate as some European parties of the same movement – in particular the Socialist Party in France –, following its bitter failure in the 2016 general election, obtaining only 6.6% of the vote. The same general election saw Sinn Féin become the leading left-wing political force in the Republic of Ireland. This momentum carried over into the 2020 general election, which Sinn Féin won (at least in terms of percentage of first preference votes) but failed to form a government.

This victory for Sinn Féin, and thus for a left-wing party for the first time in the country's history, can be explained in a number of ways. Firstly, the economic prosperity of the 1990s and 2000s also brought with it a seemingly unstoppable process of secularisation of Southern Irish society, to which the Catholic Church is still struggling to adapt and which has seen its influence greatly diminish as a result.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Sinn Féin has been able to somewhat move away from its traditional nationalist discourse to focus on socio-economic issues, “while not reneging

43. I. Rufflé, *Du néocolonialisme au dragon celté...*, p. 145-150; D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000*, London, Profile Books, 2004, p. 538, p. 558, p. 696 and p. 701.

44. The coalition governments in which the Labour Party participated were: the Costello government (Fine Gael) 1948-1951 and 1954-1957; the Cosgrave government (Fine Gael) 1973-1977; the Fitzgerald government (Fine Gael) 1981-1982, then 1982-1987; the Reynolds government (Fianna Fáil) 1993-1994; the Bruton government (Fine Gael) 1994-1997; and the Kenny government (Fine Gael) 2011-2016.

45. P. Mair, “Labour and the Irish Party System Revisited...”, p. 69.

46. D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000*, p. 732-739; J. S. Donnelly, “A Church in Crisis”, *History Ireland*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2000, p. 12-17; P. McGarry, “‘A Possible Disaster’: Catholic Church Reckons with Declining Interest Post-Pandemic”, *The Irish Times*, 7 May 2021.

on its ultimate goal, Irish unity".⁴⁷ This has appealed to the most disadvantaged and especially young people, at the expense of the Labour Party, which has no doubt been penalised for its participation in the Fine Gael government of Enda Kenny as "it had promised too much to voters in the 2011 campaign and was unable to deliver on key promises in office".⁴⁸

Regarding Sinn Féin, it should be remembered that the republican party has not always been ideologically on the left of the political spectrum. From the late 1920s until the early 1960s, its leadership was largely influenced by the social teaching of the Catholic Church and tended to relegate economic and social issues to the background in favour of the overriding goal of Irish reunification. The all-Ireland party did not begin its transformation until the 1960s, when the republican movement sought to modify its traditional militarist and abstentionist strategy following the failure of the 1956-1962 border campaign.⁴⁹ The new leadership made a point of getting the population, and the working classes in particular, more involved in their cause. To this end, they set about transforming the IRA and Sinn Féin from an underground armed resistance movement into a revolutionary mass socialist party fighting for national liberation and the social transformation of Ireland. Such a project was not without internal dissension, which led to the split between the "Provisionals" and the "Officials" at the start of the Troubles in 1969-1970. Although the Provisionals agreed to give their political aims a left-wing socio-economic dimension, this was to remain subordinate to the armed and political struggle for the reunification of the island. The Officials, for their part, viewed the national struggle in the same way as the social struggle and henceforth favoured legal political action.⁵⁰

In sync with its new approach, Official Sinn Féin abandoned abstentionism and became electorally active on both sides of the border under the name of Sinn Féin Worker's Party from 1977 onwards, even obtaining an elected member in Dáil Éireann in 1981. The following year, the party officially abandoned all references to republicanism and transformed itself into a simple Workers' Party in the pure Marxist-Leninist tradition. Positioned to the left of Labour, it reached its peak in 1989 when seven of its candidates were elected to the Dáil. Plagued by internal dissension, its progress was halted in 1992 with the creation of the Democratic Left by its own splinter group.

47. A. Maillot, *Rebels in Government: Is Sinn Féin Ready for Power?*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2022, p. 108. See also C. Bouyoux, "Le paysage politique irlandais après les élections du 8 février 2020", ERIBIA seminars, University of Caen Normandy, 18 February 2021, online: <https://www.canal-u.tv/105919>.

48. T. Reidy, *The Irish General Election of 2016: Winners, Losers and Policy Implications*, Berlin, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2016, p. 3, online: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/12631.pdf>. See also K. Cunningham, J. A. Elkin, "Ideological Dimensions in the 2016 Elections", p. 49.

49. This refers to the Irish Republican Army (IRA)'s campaign of resistance to the British military presence in Northern Ireland from 1956 to 1962. For the most part, this took the form of a rural guerrilla war, sparing the major urban centres of Belfast and Derry.

50. E. Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, London, Pluto Press, 2009, p. 151-154 and p. 194-208.

Two years later, this new organisation joined Labour in the coalition government led by John Bruton (Fine Gael), then merged with the main left-wing party in 1999.⁵¹

For their part, the Provisionals adopted the “armalite and ballot box” strategy following the hunger strikes of 1980-1981, during which one of the strikers, Bobby Sands, was elected MP in a by-election. This prompted Provisional Sinn Féin to become more electorally committed and thus to unveil its socio-economic proposals in its political programmes. While the party enjoyed some success in Northern Ireland, this was not the case in the Republic. Hence, it abandoned its abstentionist strategy in 1985 for the general elections in the South. From then on, it fully asserted its left-wing orientation, while striving to break out of its image as a party primarily concerned with national issues – despite a significant presence in the field of social and societal struggles. This gradually began to happen in the 2000s, when the Celtic Tiger model of economic development began to show its limitations and to arouse some discontent because of the inequalities and failings in public services that it generated. But it was not until the financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing austerity policies that Sinn Féin was able to gain a higher profile on the socio-economic issues on the agenda. Its image as a radical left-wing party was even reinforced by its progressive stance on societal issues – despite its past ambiguities on certain issues such as abortion and immigration, in line with the diversity of its electoral support.⁵²

It was, therefore, all the socio-economic issues that arose in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis (such as the housing shortage, the rise in rents, and the deterioration of the health system) that gradually undermined the electoral loyalties inherited from the civil war and favoured the emergence of a left-right divide. For the first time in the country’s history, the proponents of a neo-liberal economic model, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, were brought together in a coalition government, following the 2020 general election.⁵³ To reach this point, it took almost a century for a majority of Irish voters to steer their vote in relation to the equality vs inequality dialectic – constitutive of the left-right divide – on socio-economic and societal issues, and no longer according to parameters such as locality and family traditions.⁵⁴ This long road to the emergence of a left-right divide in Ireland was the end result of a political and social conservatism that had been forged throughout the period of the Anglo-Irish Union, via the profound influence of the Catholic Church’s social teaching, a burning desire for land ownership in a predominantly rural country and a cross-class conception of national liberation which dominated the Irish nationalist movement of all stripes – apart from a minority current intent on combining political and social struggles. This endemic conservatism

51. E. Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, p. 155-160.

52. A. Maillot, *Rebels in Government...*, p. 17-18 and p. 106-150.

53. G. Ní Aodha, “How Did They Do It? Sinn Féin’s Historic 24% Win Was Built on Learnt Lessons and a Fed-up Electorate”, *TheJournal.ie*, 12 February 2020; S. Hutter, G. Malet, “Ireland...”, p. 314-316 and p. 325; K. Cunningham, J. A. Elkink, “Ideological Dimensions in the 2016 Elections”, p. 63-64.

54. K. Cunningham, J. A. Elkink, “Ideological Dimensions in the 2016 Elections”, p. 46.

was perpetuated and amplified in the aftermath of the island's partition, preventing the emergence of a traditional left-right polarisation in Southern Ireland until the 2010s.

Ireland thus seems to be moving away from what had previously distinguished it politically from other western European democracies. However, insofar as the country is moving in the opposite direction to countries like France and Italy – where the left-right divide is no longer as dominant as it once was, due to new antagonisms based on issues such as the environment, globalisation, national identity, etc., which have been added to the traditional socio-economic antagonisms⁵⁵ –, one may wonder to what extent Ireland is not once again politically distinguishing itself from part of western Europe.

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55. J. Karremans, G. Malet, D. Morisi, “Italy – The End of Bipolarism: Restructuration in an Unstable Party System”, in *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, p. 118-138; J. Lorenzini, M. M. Van Ditmars, “Austria, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland: Old and New Winning Formulas of the Populist Radical Right”, *ibid.*, p. 261-280.

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