

SOME BASIC PROBLEMS OF THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

by Peter Gibbon

This contribution limits itself to a few observations on the following points.

1. the principal contradiction in Northern Ireland today;
2. the question of imperialism and anti-imperialism;
3. the nature of the Provisional IRA;
4. the demand for British withdrawal.

1. What is the principal contradiction and how may it be resolved?

Two contradictions have been advanced by leftist commentators as pivotal in the articulation of the current political struggle in Northern Ireland. Some have argued the centrality of the contradiction between the 'forces of the establishment' (the British state, the Dublin government, Official Unionism, etc.) on the one hand and 'anti-establishment forces' (IRA, UDA, UVF, etc.) on the other. Others (particularly Trotskyists), have alternatively argued the centrality of the contradiction between the British state and the Provisional IRA. This question is absolutely critical: it is the key to the identification of progressive and reactionary forces and of the strategies and tactics to be adopted in relation to them. It is upon this logic, for example, that commentators of the former school have advocated independent Ulsterism and those of the latter unconditional and absolute British withdrawal.

Both of these views of the principal contradiction appear to me incorrect. This is not to say these conflicts do not exist. While the language used to describe them may be tendentious, they are both real. Neither explain however the most strikingly obvious characteristic of the Northern Ireland situation: the conflict between Unionist political forces of all kinds and anti-Unionist political forces of all kinds.

This contradiction is 'obvious' not simply at the level of everyday reality (voting patterns, the 'peace line', sectarian assassinations, etc.). It is obvious too in the practical failure of the other conflicts mentioned to hold the centre of the political stage ('anti-establishment forces' have never achieved significant unity, while even the Provisional IRA's supporters would admit that its activity has been overshadowed by other events since 1973). It is above all obvious when the origins and effects of

the struggles of the last ten years are considered. The economic basis of these struggles has been modifications in the access of Protestants and Catholics *as blocs* to social rewards. The political basis has been resistance to the attempt by Terence O'Neill to move the Unionist party away from its traditional strategy. The consistent trends exhibited in these struggles have been firstly for Unionist and Nationalist political positions to be reaffirmed and reinforced—despite serious modifications in their relation to the British state—and second, for these positions to wash away every current seeking to cut across them.

The centrality of the Unionist/anti-Unionist contradiction has been recognised in an ideological way by the bourgeoisie ('tribalism', 'two nations-ism' etc.). It has been motivatedly misperceived by the left as a mere extension of the contradiction between the IRA and the British state (and named, in a way to be discussed, as 'imperialism vs. anti-imperialism').

The principal contradiction is in reality between the two great historical political alliances in Ulster—Unionism and Nationalism—which have shown such impermeable resistance to compromise. This question is one of a national kind, though in a form more complex than allowed for in the 'two nations' notion. The national minority within the state demand not their own secession, but the incorporation of the majority also within the state of the minority's affinity. The majority, on the other hand, demand the minority's renunciation of its national identity.

It is often claimed that the Leninist position in relation to such conflicts was unconditionally to support the right of nations to self-determination (RNSD). Even if this were accurate, it would hardly provide a key to action. Indeed, it has led to the sterile exercises of establishing which (if either) of the blocs is a genuine nation, or a genuine oppressed nation, and of supporting the bloc identified accordingly.

In fact the Leninist position was nothing of the kind. Lenin was not an unconditional supporter of the RNSD: he argued, for example, that Marx and Engels were politically correct to oppose the aspirations of the oppressed south Slavs in the middle of the nineteenth century (on the grounds that the independence of these nations would strengthen feudal Russia)—Lenin's position was actually that the national question was essentially a variant of the question of *political democracy*. National self-determination, in specific periods and areas (in which he included his own) was the appropriate medium for realising a full democratic political life with a strong popular basis. On this principle (and not as a metaphysical one) he was opposed to 'cultural autonomy' (which he believed was associated with the strengthening of clerical control over education, etc.) and supported the political independence of East European national minorities:

If one interprets the Marxist programme in a Marxist fashion, not in a

childish way, one will without difficulty grasp the fact that it refers to bourgeois-democratic national movements. . . all instances of bourgeois democratic national movements (and) only (in) cases where such a movement is actually in existence. . . the national question in most western countries was settled long ago. . . Rosa Luxemburg has lost sight of the most important thing—the difference between countries where bourgeois-democratic reforms have long been completed and those where they have not. . .' *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* in Lenin, *Critical Remarks on the National Question etc.* (Moscow 1971, pp. 48-9).

Declarations in support of NSD, from a Leninist viewpoint, can rest only on establishing that such SD will increase the prospects for democratic politics under popular influence in the geographic area concerned. For Lenin, this in effect meant increasing the prospects of class struggle between classes welded contemporarily into national blocs.

Full political democracy was in fact established in southern Ireland in 1923. In that sense, there is today no general Irish 'national revolution' awaiting 'completion' (Lenin specifically argued that the question of the RNSD had nothing to do with the question of economic dependency). Democracy of a sort was simultaneously established in the north. It is difficult to see how partisans of either national bloc could demonstrate that its victory could improve this democracy, or simplify class antagonisms (although some attempts of this kind are examined in section 4). On the contrary, it appears more likely that the complete victory of either bloc could only be enforced through *restrictions* upon democracy.

If this is the case the question of identifying friends and enemies should be turned from one of 'taking sides' between the parties to the contradiction to one of scrutiny and analysis of the politics of the component forces within the Unionist and anti-Unionist blocs. The object is not to further weld together either of these blocs, but to break them up. The question which should be posed is: what are the relatively progressive and reactionary forces within these blocs and on what basis could a progressive bloc be formed out of them? Clearly, the progressiveness cannot be measured with respect to the militancy with which the pursuit of national aims is advocated. On the contrary, one of the criteria of progressiveness should be disposition toward democratic accommodation. Others should comprise more universal criteria: positions on the general class struggle, womens' rights and so on. On this basis elements of the Official Republican movement, the Communist Party of Ireland and the traditional wing of the Northern Ireland Labour Party could be considered more or less progressive, while (amongst others) the bulk of the Provisional Republican movement, Loyalist paramilitary groups and official Unionism could be considered reactionary. The problem for Marxists is to discover a form of political activity in which the former forces could become allied and which at the same time could achieve a mass basis.

2. *Imperialism and anti-imperialism*

It is necessary to consider in more detail another frequent argument, namely that what has been identified here as a conflict between Unionism and anti-Unionism is not only a conflict of an uncomplicatedly national character, but moreover is one between imperialism and anti-imperialism. There are two main strands to this argument. One is that the present conflict is a historical extension of a traditional struggle against British political and economic oppression. The other is that the *de facto* intervention of a power in which monopoly capitalism is dominant (Britain) on behalf of Unionism makes opposition to it anti-imperialist.

Two points may be made in relation to the first argument. In the first instance, the shape of British political and economic domination over Ireland was completed well before the age of imperialism (which Lenin believed commenced in the 1890s), and there is little specifically *imperialist* about this domination. In the second place, as has been argued already, full political democracy was established over most of Ireland by 1923. The present conflict is in no sense a struggle to extend the consequences of this settlement, but has its roots in the independent development of a Unionist political bloc in Ulster.

The second strand of the 'anti-imperialism' thesis is rather more confused. It is not the overseas politico-military presence of an Imperialist power in a conflict which makes that conflict one involving imperialism and anti-imperialism. It is instead the conjuncture of national and international situations, or to put it another way, the international balance of forces.

To take a pertinent example. We have already seen the principles on which Lenin supported the 1916 Easter Rising as a *national* struggle. It is a fact that he also saw it as an *anti-imperialist* struggle. This was for entirely different reasons. Not because democracy was the issue—nor because the Irish Volunteers and the Citizen Army were fighting the British army, but instead because the contemporary conditions of existence of Imperialist monopoly capitalism were in Lenin's view making its increasing oppression of small European states absolutely crucial to its survival. In these international circumstances 'the dialectics of history were such that small nations, powerless as an *independent* factor in the struggle against imperialism, played a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which helped the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance upon the scene' (Lenin, *The Discussion of self-Determination Summed Up* in Lenin, *ibid.*, pp. 147-8).

Lenin distinguished a variety of conflicts involving national blocs, the principal ones of which were national wars (i.e. wars for the creation of independent nations) and inter-imperialist wars. He distinguished between both of these and anti-imperialist struggles, and refrained from calling the former anti-imperialist except specifically in the period of the First World

War when the international conjuncture described prevailed. (Lenin at this time also believed that colonial revolts in general were not *ipso Jacto* anti-imperialist).

To look at things in terms of who is in the ring fighting is purely formalistic. According to this method, every Saturday night pub fight in which the police became involved would be a challenge to the authority of the state—likewise, crime in general. Lenin rejected this approach, defining the nature of conflicts according to the 'significance invested in them by the balance of forces in given conjunctures. Where these determine that the *conditions of existence* of monopoly capitalism's reproduction are directly or indirectly touched upon, then one can speak of anti-imperialist struggles.

The object of British intervention in Northern Ireland has been to stabilize a conflict which in no foreseeable way has the significance which has been attributed to it. This is not an international crisis (or even within Britain and the Irish Republic a national one). It is an 'unseemly' situation within what is recognised by all as Britain's sphere of influence. Despite the IRA, the fundamental issue in the conflict from Imperialism's point of view has all along been the manner in which Britain and its major allies (the Dublin government and 'respectable' Unionism) should divide up local state functions.

A word of qualification is required here. It is not being argued that Imperialism does not exist at all in Ireland, and that no strategic account should be taken of it. Some of its effects (e.g. resource depletion by multinationals) will have to be come to grips with by revolutionaries when composing their strategy. Imperialism in the sense of foreign economic and political domination is not however the main issue facing them, either in Northern or Southern Ireland.

3. *What is the nature of the Provisional IRA?*

Those who argue the centrality of the Imperialism vs. anti-imperialism contradiction also frequently adhere to the view that the Provisional IRA is a National Liberation movement (NLM). This thesis is directly deduced from the characterisation of the principal contradiction which has been discussed. Since the IRA is engaged in armed struggle against the forces of an imperialist power, *ego* they are a NLM.

But even if it were the case that this was a straightforward national war with an anti-imperialist content, it would be necessary to evaluate the IRA more closely before calling it a NLM.

Mao tse-tung approached the problem of evaluation by examining the practice of particular movements. Genuine NLMs were those which fought *People's Wars*. This concept included the following dimensions:

—what does the movement regard as determinate in the last instance—people or weapons?

- what is the relationship of the movement to the masses—does it integrate with them and take up their struggles, or does it divorce itself from them and pursue its own independent aims?
- in what way does the movement seek to consolidate a base for **itself**—does it begin to construct new forms of social organisation in the areas where it is strong, or does it simply use them as fortresses?
- in what way is the movement's strategy and tactics decided—is it possible for the masses to enter into their determination or are they imposed from above?

The claim that the Provisional IRA is a NLM is hollow. This is **verified** by the relationship of its Trotskyist **admirers** to it: despite their claim that a NL struggle is being pursued they are unable personally and **organisationally** to participate in it. What kind of NLM is it which excludes such champions of NL?

The Provisional IRA is in fact a nationalist movement pursuing an armed struggle. This has been somewhat incoherent in strategy (it appears today to be to bomb a series of concessions from the British state) and has not lent itself to mass participation. Its leadership is utopian and at least partly corporatist in ideology. The movement itself appears to have declined over the last five years, despite relatively favourable circumstances. There is a definite social, political and ideological basis for this movement and tacit support for it remains widespread. But it is fighting a struggle which is unlikely to be won with existing methods.

4. *The demand for British withdrawal*

Earlier it was argued that to advocate that Marxists should take sides on the conflict between Unionist and anti-Unionist blocs required a demonstration that this contradiction could be resolved in a way favourable to democratic prospects.

Openly or tacitly this is acknowledged by most pro-Nationalists, in their presentation of scenarios for the period following British withdrawal. It is variously agreed that Protestants, in the absence of the British Army, would not be prepared *en bloc* to fight, and that uncompromising loyalties would be marginalised; that Unionism is at present inherently unstable and the withdrawal would render it impotent; and that Protestants have only fought Irish nationalism when they felt confident of British support.

All three of these points are unsupported by evidence. The idea that paramilitary forces such as the UDR would allow themselves to be disarmed upon withdrawal is very questionable. The USC showed great reluctance even in a situation where it was promised both British Army presence and reorganisation in the UDR. Withdrawal seems likely to be viewed by such forces as both a substantially greater threat and as an opportunity to resolve independently the 'security problem.'

Those who point out the instability of Unionism are formally correct but fail to properly analyse the nature of this instability. The division of Unionism into a variety of parties reflects not substantial strategic and class fissures but the break-up of a state apparatus (Stormont) which itself played a major role in maintaining Unionist unity. There is no reason to suppose that this source of instability will not be eventually adjusted to and overcome. In any case, it is plain that the major divisions within Unionist politics are tactical rather than strategic, and that they would not be difficult to repair.

Those who argue that Unionist shows of militancy only occurred when British backing was assured are simply empirically wrong. Most such shows were in fact *aimed* at deflecting British policy from a non-committal to supportive position. Think of **1886**, **1912** and **1921**, when the British ruling-class were by no means unequivocal in their support. Think also of **1935** and **1969** when unofficial Protestant violence was unleashed largely without even the local state apparatus's support.

A systematic thread of wishful thinking has run through nationalist and leftist versions of the Ulster holocaust for the last ninety years. Unionism is not a paper tiger, and will not be blown away by British withdrawal. The most likely present scenario for post-withdrawal Ulster is in fact the recreation of a weak state on the lines of the **1973-4** Executive, with substantial (and divided) popular unofficial control over the use of force.

Ultimately any progressive resolution of Northern Ireland's contradictions will involve withdrawal. Nevertheless it seems pointless to demand withdrawal in circumstances where there is no force which could effect it in a manner having progressive consequences.

In these circumstances attention should be turned to likely contemporary developments and the question of concrete ways in which Marxists might intervene in them. The most likely of such developments in the short-term is a partial *or* pseudo-withdrawal of British troops on lines dictated by the British. In these circumstances the most urgent task to be confronted is not striving to 'purify' such a withdrawal but fighting for the establishment of some institutional means of defence of the Catholic population in such an event.