

James Connolly, a Socialist for the Present

In his recent James Connolly lecture, Labour's John McDonnell praised the Irish revolutionary as a formative influence on his politics. Connolly's republicanism isn't just of historical interest — it tells socialists how to think about democratizing society today.



Statue of James Connolly, March 2016, Dublin, Ireland. William Murphy / Wikimedia

Even after being thrust from the margins of British political life to its center, Labour's [John McDonnell](#) has hardly hidden his Marxist sympathies. There's still much to learn from Marx's *Capital*, the Shadow Chancellor [declared in a 2017 interview](#) on national television. But if Lenin and Trotsky were his inspirations on the backbenches, the likes of Joseph Stiglitz appear to figure more prominently as influences in his Shadow Treasury team. It's striking, then, that last month McDonnell delivered the [James Connolly lecture](#) in Belfast, named after the great [socialist leader](#) of Ireland's fight for independence.

In the lecture at the newly opened Connolly visitor center, McDonnell pointed to the Irish [revolutionary](#) as a figure formative for his own political development. He recalled how decades ago he read Connolly as well as Marx in an afterwork reading group in the basement of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) headquarters. For a socialist politician with a historic commitment to the Irish republican struggle, this was hardly a surprise. More impressive was the sharpness with which McDonnell appraised Connolly's politics, highlighting the enduring relevance of his principles of cooperation, industrial democracy, and internationalism. He went further, to claim that these same principles are reflected in Labour's mission today. It was quite brilliant to see McDonnell — a politician now not so far from taking up the reins of the British state — asking what about Connolly's politics lives on in Labour's program. This, not only because it implies that, beneath the statesmanlike tones, McDonnell has lost little of his own radicalism, but more importantly because the Shadow Chancellor took

Connolly seriously as a political thinker and theorist — something few scholars and historians have yet managed.

Connolly's political theory didn't stand in isolation from practical struggle but was formed in and through it. He was a "[philosopher of the barricades](#)" — and as McDonnell suggested, he should interest us as an organic intellectual whose political thinking has been neglected. In this sense, recognizing Connolly's revolutionary intellect means restoring him, rescued from condescension, to his proper place in history. Yet where such a bid to historicize revolutionaries' thought merely consigns them to the past, this can be its own, equally reactionary, form of condescension — we need only think of historian Gareth Stedman Jones's [recent attempts](#) to reduce Marx to a purely nineteenth-century figure.

There are many examples of how we can use the approaches of past thinkers to address today's challenges. In the late 1980s, balancing past and present, Stuart Hall sought to "'[think' \[contemporary\] problems in a Gramscian way."](#) Connolly's writings do not approach the philosophical depth of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, though there are lots of intriguing, unexplored intersections. The former's *Labour in Irish History*, for instance, might be seen as a prefigurative attempt at thinking through the category of the subaltern, universalizing revolutionary agency beyond the metropolitan, industrial proletariat. But for our purposes, the guiding similarity between Connolly and Gramsci is simply that we can take useful signposts for the present from the fragmented texts of both. The question towards which McDonnell was gesturing is the right one, then: how we should think *with* James Connolly today?

Economic Democracy

At the top of McDonnell's agenda is a push for economic democracy. [Alternative Models of Ownership](#) — a report he commissioned together with Shadow Business Minister Rebecca Long-Bailey, which was released shortly after the 2017 general election — begins by outlining the need to democratize the British economy. It points to addressing the challenges of automation, tackling the failures of privatization, and championing democracy and equality. Inclusive share ownership — where large and medium-sized companies are compelled to afford 10 percent of their total share value to their workers — was the headline policy announcement at last year's Labour Party conference and was promoted on a broadly similar basis.

Bernie Sanders, too, is proposing an agenda for economic democracy (for instance, with his employee ownership proposal) but in articulating its animating principles has begun to go further to [foreground discussion of freedom](#). Such an effort from the Left to reclaim and reinvigorate the politics of freedom is long overdue and has gathered particular momentum in the United States. The absence of this discourse in Britain isn't so surprising and might (rather obviously) be attributed to [historically rooted](#) differences in political and intellectual culture: namely the relative dearth of republican traditions and languages of politics. In British politics, in other words, there is less to contest or reclaim when it comes to the question of what it means to be free. It is here, first, that we can most helpfully think with Connolly today.

In a 2011 essay, [Corey Robin urged](#) that the Left should reclaim the politics of freedom as part of a broader return to *first principles*. McDonnell's Connolly lecture, and Labour's strategy more broadly, doesn't quite heed this call. The concept of economic democracy, as research from the [New Economics Foundation has suggested](#), has limited cut through with the wider electorate. Excavating and explaining the powerful principles that underly it, then, is far from an academic concern. The Shadow Chancellor, for example, pointed to Connolly's support for co-operative ownership (as against state socialism) but omitted that the Irish revolutionary's support for a "co-operative commonwealth" was driven by a desire to

challenge relations of domination. For Connolly, economic democracy and the institutional forms he envisioned as enshrining it were principally means by which *republican freedom* could be realized.

Republican Freedom

Simply stated, the republican ideal conceives freedom as non-domination or the absence of subjection. In ancient Rome, to which this concept traces its origins, free persons were considered those who weren't enslaved, with [slavery defined](#) as "an institution ... by which someone is, contrary to nature, subjected to the dominion of someone else." Through the early modern period, this idea, with its stress on relations mastery and subjection, was revived as a language of *political* liberty. But from the mid-nineteenth century, as work by [Alex Gourevitch](#) and [William Roberts](#) has brilliantly shown, the idea of republican freedom was seized upon by labor militants, who sought — in theory and practice — to radicalize and universalize it.

Their key conceptual innovation, also present in some of Marx's writings, was to refuse a formal or strictly political delimitation of republican freedom, insisting instead that freedom from domination and dependence must extend to relations of production and the structure of social life. They focused in particular on a critique of "wage-slavery," attacking wage-labor as a condition of unfreedom and subjection. [Gourevitch dubbed this](#) tradition one of "labor republicanism," though his history of it doesn't stretch much beyond the early 1890s.

But from around 1897 onwards, Connolly enthusiastically took up this labor republican critique. In early articles he variously denounced "industrial slavery," "social slavery," and "economic slavery," and he commissioned reportage for his paper, the *Workers' Republic*, on the struggle against "wage-slavery" on Dublin's tramways. Connolly's time in America was crucial for furthering his commitment to radical republican freedom. The only liberty he had discovered in the United States, [he wrote in 1908](#), was "the liberty to go hungry." Across two decades, his writings consistently evince an understanding of wage-labor as a condition of structural dependence and domination — a state of unfreedom:

From being citizens with rights the workers were ... driven into the position of slaves with duties. Some of them may have been well-paid slaves, but slavery is not measured by the amount of oats in the feeding trough to which the slave is tied. *It is measured by his loss of control of the conditions under which he labours.*

Connolly thus fought for a socialist republic — or a "co-operative commonwealth" — as the only type of state compatible with winning Ireland's freedom from both political (colonial) domination and social (capitalist) subjection. For Connolly, in an evident convergence of republican and Marxist thought, the push for workers' control was fundamentally about extending the realm of freedom: he wrote in 1898 calling for "the application to agriculture and industry of the ... principle of the republican ideal."

Despite the historical chasm between the "proletarian moment" Connolly struggled in (his early twentieth-century conjuncture, alive with revolutionary possibility) and our time, his political economy of freedom clearly speaks to the present. Though Labour's nascent push to democratize ownership in the economy is hardly an assault on the capitalist system of wage labor itself, we can see it as beginning from first principles congruent with Connolly's own. The party and movement alike have much to gain from striving to articulate this more clearly — the radical promise of these proposals lying precisely in that they are (implicitly or otherwise) premised on a push for freedom from [capitalism's degrading structures of domination](#). Socialists, as Connolly suggested, are those "enthusiastic in the cause of human freedom." Such a language is no less compelling today.

The Sovereignty of Those Who Labor

Ireland's republican tradition began with the French revolution, and the way it was seen from Irish soil. One result was a long-lasting tendency to valorize France and its radical history. Connolly, for instance, [wrote in 1915](#) of France as "the mother of European democracy, the apostle of the right of rebellion, the century-long sword of the revolution of peoples." Another consequence was that Irish republicanism was suffused, from its inception, with an explicit focus on popular sovereignty — demands for which obviously held particular currency in the context of anti-colonial struggle. Connolly's intervention here, deeply influenced by the Young Irelander James Fintan Lalor, was to again insist on the inextricability of the social and the political. Popular sovereignty ultimately meant little if its exercise was contained to the political sphere: the Irish people had to be socially sovereign too. As [he wrote in the founding manifesto](#) of the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP) in 1896, he and his comrades believed:

That the agricultural and industrial system of a free people, like their political system, ought to be an accurate reflex of the democratic principle by the people for the people, solely in the interests of the people.

That Connolly thought the causes of nationalism and socialism in Ireland to be inseparable is well-known, but the underpinnings of this socialist republicanism are less often considered. In this particular instance, the precondition for his socialization of popular sovereignty was to suggest that the Irish working class and the Irish people were one. "Who are the people?," reads a subtitle in his [1897 pamphlet *Erin's Hope*](#), to which Connolly answers: "the Irish working class — the only secure foundation on which a free nation can be reared."

The architects of "true Republican freedom ... will and must be the Irish working class," he wrote sixteen years later in [Jim Larkin's *Irish Worker*](#). Connolly often named the insurrectionary political subject he dedicated his life to mobilizing as "the working-class democracy of Ireland". In other words, he consistently sought to couple and subsume class and nation, conceiving the Irish body politic as itself proletarian.

As we have suggested, Connolly's ideas lend themselves to wide application, beyond the particular historical context in which they were formed. Anti-colonial struggles are alive from Palestine to Kashmir, and the fight for Ireland's unity — and the formation of a socialist republic — remains. But Connolly's radical approach to popular sovereignty is especially useful for thinking through democratic-socialist moment and the Corbyn project, in ways that McDonnell didn't highlight.

If talk of freedom is scarce in British politics, the same cannot be said for sovereignty. Demands for a reclamation of *national* sovereignty have proved to be hugely powerful, politically. How the Left relates to this trend is a [complicated question](#) — and with the far right on the rise across Europe, an urgent one too, its pertinence hardly unique to Britain. In the debate over Brexit the language of popular sovereignty continues to be abused by hard-right demagogues and supporters of supranational neoliberalism alike — but it's largely unused by the Left. This abdication is striking. With the deeply undemocratic nature of the United Kingdom's constitution thrown into stark relief by the current parliamentary impasse, Corbyn's Labour clearly offers the best hope of democratic transformation in the political sphere. But more importantly, the push for economic democracy chimes with Connolly's insistence that popular sovereignty can only really be meaningful if it is social.

For all their insight, Connolly's interventions befitted the anti-colonial insurgencies of the twentieth century rather than twenty-first century electoral politics in an old imperialist metropole. Nevertheless, it's testament to Connolly's brilliance that his conceptual apparatus remains useful, offering a vision of sovereignty that can be coupled with class rather than nation — while allowing us to contest the same political terrain. It's less a matter of "take back control," as the Leave campaign put it, than "seize control" — fighting for sovereignty not over national borders but the shop floor.

Advocating not only the *social* extension of popular sovereignty but its coupling with class politics has the potential to speak to those suffering the dislocation and disempowerment of life under neoliberal capitalism. Here, therefore, thinking with Connolly can help point us towards an ambition fit for an insurgent radical left in government: to make popular power proletarian again, in pursuit of “[the ultimate sovereignty of those who labour](#).” If we are to be collectively both free *from* domination, and free *to* flourish, nothing less will do.

From Marx to Rousseau

Connolly’s socialist republicanism was rich and consisted precisely in an innovative fusion of the Marxist and republican traditions. Connolly, perhaps before anyone else, embodied in his praxis the marriage of Marx and Rousseau that [Lucio Colletti](#) once pointed to in Fidel Castro. This has too often been missed by Connolly’s interpreters, who either [overlook his theoretical insights completely](#) or badly misread socialist and republican politics as [necessarily counterposed](#).

McDonnell’s turn to Connolly was no doubt a good start. Of course, it would do a disservice to Connolly if Labour’s socialist leaders were to struggle for his principles in Britain without also recovering their historic support for a united Ireland. But there’s also a lot more to learn from the Irish revolutionary.

At a moment of deep crisis, Labour should seize the opportunity, and argue more explicitly for a socialist republican politics. Here, Connolly provides both the first principles of, and a powerful language to argue for, the cutting edge of Corbynism — a policy agenda centered on the extension of democracy into all fields of life.