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Reviews

The state of Northern Ireland and the democratic deficit. Between sectarianism and neoliberalism

- Reviews section -

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The reviewer approached this book with some anticipation. I knew a number of the authors personally, many have a high reputation as anti-imperialist activists and trade unionists and I had worked with some as a member of the Irish Workers Union.

My initial anticipation turned to confusion, incomprehension and finally disappointment.

Although in a number of the sections such as those dealing with the statistics of poverty in the North, (p47-53) migrants (p55-68) and with victims of the conflict in West Belfast (p 142-147), the individual voices speak clearly and give a simple account, these are never drawn together to produce an overall narrative.

The format changes from section to section. Narrative and interview sit alongside statistics, the jargon of trade unionist officials, and, most of all, the incomprehensible jargon of the academic.

But the academic jargon of identity politics and conflict resolution hides a deeper problem. Many arguments start in mid-flow, leaving the reader to track backwards to follow the logic. The basic ideas, the foundation on which the book is based, are simply assertions stated as self-evident reality rather than the ideological positions they actually are and thus debate is constricted rather than enabled.

What exactly is meant by neoliberalism? Democratic deficit? Neo sectarianism?

There are specific weaknesses relating to the trade union movement. A dewy-eyed acceptance of the role of the union bureaucracy ends up as an apologia for reaction. So their goal of remaining intact during the period of the troubles through fudges and compromises was seen as necessary to head off a split into an Ulster TUC and ICTU (p. 150).

There was a loyalist threat in the unions, but it was a threat of intimidation rather than a political threat. There was never any real prospect of an Ulster TUC. The loyalists were bosses' goons and everyone understood that. Protestant workers faced a contradiction between their role as workers and support for unionism and frequently defied the bosses in major strikes. They never made an issue of the all-Ireland structure of the unions.

The reality is that at the start of the civil rights campaign the unions were not recognised. They won recognition by bowing the knee to partition and setting up the Northern Ireland committee.

NIC-ICTU suppressed discussion of republican politics and was the leading force for a peace inside the bounds of the existing state.

Ever since then the union bureaucracy has become more and more closely bound to the institutions of the state, taking off the table the alternative of a workers movement acting in its own interests. In doing so it betrayed both Catholic and Protestant workers.

The writer on the unions condemns the latest example of such betrayal - acceptance of the "Fresh Start" austerity programme on the grounds that it was necessary to save the local administration. However spokesperson Peter Bunting gets the blame and opposition by NIPSA and UNITE is quoted approvingly. That opposition was simply verbal. All the unions now work within the strictures of Fresh Start with no mobilisation by any of the factions.

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Similarly, in the 26 counties the hair-thin success of a left conference resolution is seen as balancing the reactionary role of the majority on water charges and water privatisation.

The same wide-eyed naivety is shown in relation to the "Third sector." This is the area of the economy where community and voluntary activists meet "social entrepreneurs" arising from the privatisation of public services. After detailed description of various areas, we are asked to believe, despite the evident patronage and corruption, that these organisations are successful in: "promoting new forms of local democratic participation and empowerment." (p136).

So the central puzzle of the book remains. A wide range of individuals and groups - former republicans, community activists, trade unionists, the Communist party and the Socialist Workers Network, with some linkage to Bernie McAliskey and the Socialist Party, make up the community seen as the left. What unites them? Is the tired reformism of the Communist Party, operating like a hermit crab within the shell of the trade unions, enough to unite the various elements of the group?

The central idea of the book is the concept of "neoliberalism." This widely accepted meme is based on the assertion that all the attacks on the working class are driven by right-wing ideology. All the evidence is the other way - capitalism attacks the workers because it is in crisis. The neoliberal idea justifies a strategy where the standard fare of protests and lobbying can persuade government to change direction. If this is not possible a new government can be elected that will reverse cuts. If, on the other hand, austerity is basic to the survival of late capitalism, then a revolutionary strategy is required.

The argument for neo-sectarianism is extremely obscure. The argument seems to define the Good Friday Agreement as good in parts, aiming to reduce sectarianism but falling short. Loyalism is outlined as a structural phenomenon, involving relations between classes within unionism and stress between reform and reaction.

This is standing the Irish peace process on its head. Britain determined the shape of the GFA to maintain its own presence and to continue sectarianism as the main mechanism for its rule. Loyalism does not define the British presence. It is the British presence that defines loyalism. We get nowhere if we define class in terms of culture or forget the word imperialism.

Similarly the suggestion of a "democratic deficit" seems obscure and contrived. The claim is that the GFA offers opportunities for democratic change but these are frustrated by the pressures of neoliberalism increasing sectarian division. The author gives credit to Conor McCabe for the idea of a "double transition" – on the one hand a good peace process and on the other a bad neoliberal offensive.

I was at the Belfast Trades Council meeting where Conor introduced this idea. I queried it. Rather than a good and bad process was it not better to talk of a political offensive through an inherently undemocratic political settlement and a savage economic offensive, both arising from imperialist domination?

I received no answer from the meeting nor do I find any in this book.

Throughout the book there is a tendency to start narrative half way through without making the case for the underlying assumptions. A fundamental assumption, that the way forward is inside "Northern Ireland", fixing a democratic deficit, is never explained. Yet for most of their political lives many of the contributors would have balked at uttering the words "Northern Ireland." surely the democratic deficit is the partition of Ireland?

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Such is the power of defeat.

For all that this is a useful book. Our eyes are opened to a political convergence between the Communist party and the Socialist Workers Network that would have unthinkable a few years back. One of the oddest things about the publication is that, although it is quite clearly in the orbit of the Communist Party, it received a critical review in Socialist Voice, the CP paper, asking as this reviewer did; “ Why neoliberalism and sectarianism? Why not just fight imperialism?” [1]

There is a debate to be had here. The books concepts are mostly held in a closed world of conflict resolution, cultural studies and rights-based frameworks. Can these ideas survive the cold light of day?

Socialist Democracy are prepared to invest resources in open debate with the authors, if they are willing, to find the answer to that question.

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[1] <https://socialistvoice.ie/2018/11/books-between-sectarianism-and-neo-liberalism/>