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NOTES ON ARMS DECOMMISSIONING IN THE LIGHT OF REPUBLICAN ATTITUDES TO ARMED STRUGGLE

The Northern Ireland peace process is currently held up by a political impasse over the question of decommissioning weapons by paramilitary organisations. On the one hand, Unionists refuse to go back into government with Sinn Fein unless there is destruction of weapons and on the other hand, Sinn Fein say that their constituency has been stretched as far as it will go, that "the Republican well is dry," (Gerry Adams 9 March 2000). In other words the IRA is refusing to disarm at this stage.

Yet the IRA have come very close to it. They effectively agreed that decommissioning would have to happen at some point although "in the context of removal of the causes of violence."¹ This general statement, lacking in specifics but close to agreeing to decommission in principle, was made too late to save the devolved government, but did mark a major shift for the IRA. Yet something much less significant in some senses, a token gesture of destruction of some old weapons or explosives, would have saved the process at any time in the past few months. Why could the IRA not bring itself to make a militarily meaningless gesture that would have given it massive political gains?

The answer lies in the Republican attitude to armed struggle. On 7 March Gerry Adams declared: "The arms issue became an issue of tactical political management. That was the downfall of the process." Yet if armed action, or maintaining the capability for it, is not a tactic, what is it? In effect, for Republicans, the answer is that it is a principle, not a means but an end. *- is this the Hughes argument - does it carry across all Rep-family?*

Let us come at this issue by a process of elimination of standard critiques of armed struggle (understood as non-state political violence), for to understand the republican attitude towards violence, we must understand what it is not.

From the standard perspective of liberal democracy, armed struggle is "terrorism," a horrendous attack on democracy. Paul Wilkinson, a well-known British academic expert on terrorism, puts it this way:

"If we attach any meaning and value to our Western Judaeo-Christian, liberal and humanist values and the ethical and legal systems that have been shaped by this tradition, we must logically recognise the criminal nature of terrorism. Yet terrorism is not just any crime. It is a moral crime, a crime against humanity, an attack not only on our security, our rule of law and the safety of the state, but on civilised society itself." (Wilkinson 1986:66)

This attitude will be familiar from the discourse of any state faced with an insurgent group; unless it puts in doubt its own legitimacy it must condemn armed opposition as criminal and undemocratic. In a peace process, however, a government has tacitly or explicitly agreed that the past political order was not perfect, has negotiated with its opponents and carried out reforms. It then says, "there is no place for private armies in a democracy; you must now disband." Assuming that the previous insurgents have signed up to the new deal, they will presumably agree with them. The tactic of armed struggle will have achieved a desired political end and so can be dispensed with.

¹ The "second" report from General De Chastelain, head of the International Arms Decommissioning Body, delivered just after the institutions of government were suspended on Friday (date) ~~Feb~~ Feb 11th.

the republican movement and it has had relations of solidarity with many national liberation and revolutionary movements across the world.

Clearly there are different currents within these ideologies and different emphases upon the role of armed struggle. It is, however, possible to distil some common themes. First, it is widely accepted that violence must be under political control and subject to political calculation. As Mao put it: "Power comes from the barrel of a gun; but the Party controls the gun." Though the second part of that maxim is rarely quoted, it was at least as important for Chinese and other revolutionaries as the first part. Whilst some revolutionaries would insist on the eventual need for violence in a revolution, it would be unthinkable for most to consider military action independent of political direction.

Second, it is widely accepted that popular support is necessary for guerrilla actions. Mao's metaphor about the revolutionary being the fish swimming in the sea of popular support is sometimes seen as purely pragmatic. In other words, a guerrilla needs a certain level of practical help from the people – food, safe houses, intelligence and so on – to keep the struggle going. But this factor also reaches the level of principle. Che Guevara, in *"Guerrilla Warfare: A method,"* said:

"A guerrilla war is a people's war, and it is a mass struggle. To attempt to conduct this type of war without the support of the populace is a prelude to inevitable disaster. The guerrilla force is the people's fighting vanguard... supported by the masses of peasants and workers of the region and the entire territory in question. Except on this basis, guerrilla warfare is unacceptable."²

✓ The point here is that, unless guerrilla action gains popular support, it is counter-productive and even counter-revolutionary. While military action for its own sake, divorced from popular support, has been common enough, particularly in Latin America, its virtually universal failure has been seen as its own devastating critique.

The third point is that armed action should be a last resort. In *"The War of the Flea,"* Robert Taber argues:

² In *Venceremos ... The Speeches and Writings of Ernesto Che Guevara*, ed. J Gerassi (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968, p. 267.

Army Council, rather than any act in the real world, nonetheless demonstrates that, in principle, it is the support of a generation of eighty years ago which gives them their legitimacy.

Third, the IRA are the current inheritors of a "physical force" tradition which James Connolly, the Marxist revolutionary, subjected to a devastating analysis at the beginning of the century.⁶ This tradition expresses the absolute opposition to the foreign occupier in a concentration on the necessity of insurrection. Physical occupation is seen to imply the necessity for physical force to remove it. What in a more sophisticated revolutionary movement is seen as a tactic, is elevated into a principle. Connolly argued that, lacking a social base to the concept of revolutionary anti-imperialism, that is, in his terms, failing to see that the overthrow of capitalism was a necessary part of defeating imperialism, Republicans fetishised physical force as an alternative. He claimed that the difference between revolutionary and constitutional nationalists was therefore simply a tactical one and they would be subject to the same compromises and betrayals as a result. This is an important and central issue and we will return to it but, for now, the point is that, for Republicans, "the armed struggle" cannot be seen as a "last resort," it is a given and a constant. ✓

?? If what outsiders – and indeed many insiders who have adopted either revolutionary or pragmatic positions – see as rationality, has its limits, does this mean that the IRA is irrational? We would argue not; it is neither a collective of psychopaths nor a mystical order idolising the concept and structure of violence. It is a political/military formation in which political debates are as important as gun lectures (training sessions). It predates, but is cognate to, the guerrilla *foco*, which Debray called "the Party in khaki."⁷ In that sense, politics, if not a separate party, do control the gun. But it is the nature of those politics, with respect to violence, that we have to probe if we wish to enter into productive dialogue.

✓ In attempting to do that, it is necessary to make quite clear that understanding is not the same as sympathising. In some senses, peacemaking can be seen as a process of translation and to translate you have to know both languages. To explore issues within the paradigm of militant republicanism is not to support that paradigm any more than doing the same thing within the languages and mode of thought of the state apparatus identifies one with it.

Within this Republican paradigm, the use of violence, or the continuing capacity to use it, are seen as political statements of the most central significance. Armed struggle (it is largely irrelevant, for the purposes of this argument, whether there is a ceasefire or a continuing campaign) is not an instrument, not a tool, not a means to achieve the end of an independent nation, but a statement in itself of that end. The armed existence of the IRA is, in itself, a part of the end – a united, independent Ireland – only separated in time and scale from that future state. It is the nascent, nation state.

IRA or armed existence of IRA?

The organised and armed existence of the IRA amounts to the assertion of national identity in arms – it is a hugely powerful cultural and political statement. At one and the same time this assertion of national identity in arms is:

- a) a challenge to the claimed sovereignty of the "foreign" power, Britain. For establishing a competing military force breaches the claimed monopoly over the use of force which is a distinguishing characteristic of the state.

⁶ Ryan 1948)

⁷ *A Critique of Arms* Regis Debray. Penguin Books. Harmondsworth. 1977. P 169.

- b) a guarantee and enshrinement of the continuing commitment to the establishment of the future nation state and, of course,
- c) a potent piece on the contemporary political chess board. Most important, however, it is
- d) an existential statement, a demonstration of pure will, which says in the present what will exist in the future, but also, in one sense, is sufficient in itself. It is as though each bomb, shooting, uniformed parade, military ceremony, shot over the coffin of a deceased veteran, incarnates the nation as the bread and wine *— one believed to incarnate the body and blood of Christ in the Mass* *— are signifiers of the nation?*

metaphor?

This is not illogical mysticism – from one point of view it is entirely logical politics – you ensure loyalty to the desired end by identifying means and end. This is the feature so often misunderstood; using loyalty to the armed struggle as a touchstone of loyalty to the future nation state is not some macho virility test, nor is it a “stupid” confusion of a tactic with a goal. It is, arguably, a necessary or inevitable feature for a movement whose declared goal is, “simply” an independent nation state, yet which is faced with a mess of competing identities and states on the national territory. On the one hand, there are many opportunities for compromise and “sell out” and on the other hand, there is no consensus on the social content of the future nation state and so no ideological core except this pure nationalism. *// yes!*

Connolly was both right and wrong when he said that “physical force” nationalists would be subject to the same compromises and betrayals as “constitutional” nationalists. It is true that the same temptations exist and are embraced, but, on the physical force side, the price of compromise is giving up the commitment to physical force itself. The problem is, of course, that any questioning of the role of armed struggle is identified as betrayal and collaboration from the start, thus stultifying genuine political debate. Because of that, the questioners are forced to split from a movement to whose ideals they may remain committed.

*— compromise is negotiation
nothing is verboten?*

in the first instance?

Irish history is littered with the examples of those who, at crucial junctures, have “betrayed” the armed struggle position and taken the “constitutional” path. Usually they have been the majority, always they have left behind a sufficient minority capable of re-igniting the flames of military “resistance” when the demand from a people – still subject to a distorted polity – rises again. This is the nightmare of any Republican leader – to be accused of betraying “the Republic” by “going in” to any institutions that are not those of the new nation state.

The present leadership of the Republican movement have already “gone in” to some institutions – the Dail, the British Parliament (though unable to sit through refusing to take the Oath to the Queen) and, of course, the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. But the price of these huge steps for Republicans has been their unswerving support for the IRA. The present leadership have no desire to lead the majority, even a big majority, of their adherents into peaceful politics but leaving the “soul” of the IRA behind – even if it were to be a depleted or newly created rump. Their aspiration is to “remove the causes of violence,” or, in other words, achieve a final settlement of the “Irish problem.”

final settlement will be historical, which de facto, can never be ‘final’ — state of flux!

That is, in essence, the core of the question of decommissioning: does the Good Friday Agreement remove the causes of violence? Of course, the preliminary answer to this question is that the Agreement has not yet been implemented in full and so we cannot say. Indeed, Republicans still have the suspicion that the Unionists do not

or conflict that has led to violence?

want to implement the Agreement and so it could turn out to be just a piece of paper, not a settlement at all. From their point of view, they are being asked the question too early, asked to trust the Unionists and the British. Furthermore, they would argue, if we disarm in circumstances where important elements of our constituency still feel excluded from the political process and still feel only a united nation state can remedy that, dissident Republican groups would take up the fight and "capture the soul" of the IRA.

These are contingent and tactical arguments, however. It is by no means certain that the IRA would disarm even if all the institutions of the Agreement were up and running. They had that opportunity between November and February and did not take it. It is necessary to come back to the real nature of the IRA to examine in what context they might decide to disarm or disband.

We need to stress that this is not a matter of "finding a peacetime role" for the IRA. It is an essential part of the peace process to assist in opening up ways for effective peaceful activism. IRA members are, today, involved in great deal of peaceful activism, in community organisations, ex-prisoners' groups, restorative justice projects and the like. In some of these activities, they are under the direction of, and report back to, the structures of the IRA. We must remember it is a *political/military* formation. This has little or no bearing, however, on the question of disarmament. The British or any state Army may quite happily carry out unarmed tasks, such as disaster relief, but they have weapons back at base, they are still a military organisation. At the moment the IRA still has weapons back at base and is still a military organisation.

It is arguable that if the real nature of the IRA as an armed organisation is the contemporary incarnation of the future nation state, then it can only be disarmed or disbanded in an act of betrayal of the future. Even if it is accepted that the Good Friday Agreement opens up the way to an effective, peaceful prosecution of the cause of a United Ireland, Republicans might argue that the IRA should remain intact, not just as a contingent reserve, but as the symbol of the continuing commitment to the future nation state. Unless, that is, the nature of the future vision can be seen to have changed, so that its contemporary manifestation can also change to suit it.

To put it clearly: if, in the Republican paradigm, the goal of a nation state is equated with the means of a clandestine army, the issue of the army cannot be approached without engaging with the issue of the future nation state. For if the goal is a traditional nation state covering the entire territory of Ireland, with one governmental power and all inhabitants being citizens solely of that state, like it or not, a clandestine army has great power as a contemporary manifestation of it, for the reasons put above. *accept - but in whose minds - the clandestine army's, or the broader structures?*

Yet what if the goal has changed? Has the debate within nationalism gone as far as to say that national identity may be asserted in ways other than the nation state and freedom for the people of this island may be achieved in structures other than a United Ireland? Do Republicans agree that people of different national identity or allegiance can share the same territory? Do the structures of the Agreement sufficiently enshrine and give scope to develop the all-Ireland character of the Irish national allegiance? Have state and social structures in the North been sufficiently transformed to guarantee justice, equality and social inclusion for those with an Irish national identity?

If the answer to these questions is in the affirmative, then it may be appropriate to consider whether the IRA is now redundant or, more positively, how the IRA can transform itself into a more relevant expression of this new understanding of the national goal. The problem is, of course, that, while some of the above questions can be answered at the ideological level, others are matters of practical judgement and demonstrations of good faith. It is in this context that the Republican leadership has a good case when it says that all political forces must help persuade the IRA that the time has come to decommission. They are not asking the Unionists and the British government for more hectoring and lectures about the undemocratic nature of private armies. They are asking for commitments in words and deeds to a new, transformed society in which the Irish national identity finds a full, but not exclusive, expression. ✓

The logic of this argument is that peacemakers and all progressive political forces should rally around the content and spirit of the Belfast Agreement. It is useless to argue with the IRA in terms of moralities and epistemologies that they do not accept. It is possible, however, to achieve a process of translation which demonstrates to all concerned that the different goals of the protagonists in the conflict can be met in a transcendent structure which guarantees justice, equality and full expression of different identities.

In philosophical terms, analytic logic, with its ideologically determined "facts," its structure of cause and effect and mechanical understanding of means and ends is doomed to failure in understanding this problem. Emanative logic seeks understanding of a particular phenomenon in terms of its relationship with the totality of other relevant phenomena.⁸ So, the IRA, its role and significance, cannot be understood except in relation to the totality of the Republican project, past and present. That understanding, however, can point the way towards positive action that can help us resolve the present impasse in the Irish peace process. The lessons might also be useful for other conflicts where many diverse forces, of Right and Left, bemoan and condemn the "irrationality" of those who take up armed struggle.

⁸ See *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* Lucien Goldmann. Cape Editions, London, 1969 pp125-8