

Constance Markievicz and the Idea of Ireland

37th Annual Constance Markievicz Lecture

Irish Association of Industrial Relations

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I would like to begin by thanking the Irish Association for Industrial Relations for the kind invitation to deliver the 37th Annual Constance Markievicz Lecture. I understand that this is the first time that the subject of the lecture is Markievicz herself, so I am especially honored. Noel Harvey, Jack McGinley, Marian Geoghegan, and Gerry McMahon have been helpful and generous hosts. I would also like to thank Theresa Hurley, Head of the School of Management at DIT, for her support of the association and for providing such a fantastic space and atmosphere for today.

Constance Markievicz's idea of Ireland rests on two principles: her idea of the people of Ireland and the ownership of Ireland. My discussion of these principles will point to some of the contexts and sources for her political thought. In looking closely at her ideas in their contemporary moment, rather than from historical hindsight, I am contesting the political biases and gender biases that have dictated our understanding of her. The principal culprits here are her first biographer, Sean O'Faolain, the jaded accounts of the infamously prickly Sean O'Casey, and – perhaps the greatest culprit of all – Eamonn de Valera.

Markievicz's idea of the people of Ireland has sexual equality as its first principle. We can see this in her early involvement in suffrage. In fact, a series of suffrage meetings that she organized with her sisters Eva and Mabel when she was still Constance Gore-Booth in 1896 can be understood as her first political act. She declared Ireland as 'our country', which had once been at the forefront of the fight for liberty but was now 'so far behind England'. In that inclusive 'our', she at once identified herself as Irish – a nationality that would be challenged by her future detractors – and gave ownership of the country to women as well as men. This one statement demonstrates her power as a public speaker and the political deftness with which she managed the rowdy, and potentially violent, crowd. Before a hall filled mostly with men, she proclaimed her ambition to dispel the 'wild gossip' that suffrage

will cause women to ape the other sex, to adopt their clothes, copy their manners and peculiarities, that it will cause women to neglect their homes and duties, and worst of all, prevent the majority marrying. (oh.)

Of course this may be true; 'Pigs might fly', as the old prophecy says, 'but they are not likely birds.

How convincing could this have been, from an unmarried woman of twenty-eight whose horsemanship bested most of the men in the County Sligo?

Having warmed up her audience, she moved on to more serious points, quoting John Stewart Mill's 1896 pamphlet, 'The Subjection of Woman', which argued that the differences between men and women were not essential but were conditioned by society, which dictated their access to education and their role in public and private life. She applied Mill's rational approach to play on the mixed politics of her audience, encompassing Unionists, separatists, and Home Rulers

with the witty retort: ‘if women are so incompetent’, why had their never been an outcry against ‘our woman Queen?’

Reason, as she interpreted it from Mill, underpins all of Markievicz’s thinking and writing about Ireland. She demanded in one of her earliest essays from *Bean na hÉireann*, the magazine of the Daughters of Ireland, that the vote was of no use if Irishwomen did not have a parliament to use it in. This shift to separatist thinking was a product of several factors, in which suffrage was essential. Irishwomen, she believed, were ‘double enslaved, and with a double battle to fight’. In her pamphlet, *Women, Ideals, and the Nation*, she argued that the emancipation of the nation and emancipation of women went hand-in-hand. This idea is important for understanding her attitude to women’s nationalist organizations, such as Cumann na mBan. Markievicz believed that women’s auxiliary committees ‘demoralize women, set them up in separate camps, and deprive them of all initiative and independence. Women are left to rely on sex charm, or intrigue and backstairs influence’. To combat this, women must refuse to be subservient and must reject the idealization of them that was rampant in the poetry of ‘Tommy Moore’, who thought – she said – that ‘woman is merely sex, and an excuse for a drink’. In the language of the day, Markievicz argued that the barriers of gender had to be dismantled: ‘the masculine side of women’s souls’ had to be brought out, ‘as well as the feminine side of men’s souls [...] We have got to get rid of the last vestige of the Harem before woman is free as our dream of the future would have her’.

Markievicz’s attitude to suffrage is explained by understanding her idea of the people of Ireland. She was not antagonistic to the suffrage movement; she did not prioritize the national franchise over the enfranchisement of women. Rather, the two were one and the same and were both settled in the Proclamation of the Republic. That document unambiguously grants women equal rights as citizens in its address to ‘Irishmen and Irishwomen’, its claim of the allegiance of ‘every Irishman and Irishwoman’, its guarantee of ‘civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens’, and the ‘suffrage of men and women’.

Sexual equality mandated social responsibility. Markievicz believed that women must be active in civil society and not simply ‘enjoy’ the same privileges as men. We see her taking on this role in her series, ‘Experience of a Woman Patrol’ for the suffrage newspaper, the *Irish Citizen*. Publishing under the initials C.M., probably to distance her argument from her more radical politics, she appealed to the middle-class propensity for charity work. Walking a nightly ‘beat’ through the city centre and down to the docks, she described what she saw as ‘one great low saloon’; it was full of young drunken women, many violent, many committing acts of the gravest indecency in full public view. But women were not to blame; the problem was one of social conditions. The tenement houses in which these women lived gave them nowhere to spend the hours between work and sleeping:

These fearful tumble-down houses are within a stone’s throw of the houses of the most fortunate citizens of Dublin, who can afford to live in well-built and sanitary houses. We cannot be surprised if those who are born and brought up in these slums, where decency and cleanliness must

be total strangers, turn out drunkards, and become immoral at a very early age, and these are to be the future citizens of Dublin.

She encouraged other women to join her in walking a beat, hoping that then they would be motivated to intervene. Markievicz is adept at writing in different registers for different audiences; here, she kept the tone light, reformist not radical. Yet she did sneak in subtle anti-imperialist asides. For one, she made it clear that Irishmen were not the patrons of these women's trade, rather the 'ordinary Tommy leads the way' for 'foreign soldiers'.

Markievicz's best-known exercise of social responsibility was her work for the Irish Women's Workers' Union during the Dublin Lockout. With Delia Larkin, she organized soup kitchens that fed over 3,000 people each day. Here again, contemporary evidence gives the lie to Sean O'Casey's depiction of her in 'spotless bib and tucker', posing in the kitchens of Liberty Hall simply for publicity purposes. That is not to say that Markievicz did not use the privileges of her social class, at times exceptionally heavy-handedly. When two IWWU members, Annie Kavanagh and Kathleen Sheffield, locked out of Jacobs' Biscuit Factory and charged with 'a breach of the peace towards a non-union employee', Markievicz vouched for their alibi. But her social power was starting to slip due to her prominence in the Irish Citizen Army. The judge remarked, 'he did not disbelieve the testimony of the Countess Markievicz and the other ladies, but it was quite possible they were mistaken as to the time'.

Markievicz's commitment to comradeship, the equality of men and women, is exemplified in her leadership within the Irish Citizen Army, which not only encompassed men, women, and all the working classes as the people of Ireland, but was also clear about the ownership of Ireland. The constitution of the ICA proclaimed, 'the first and last principle of the Citizen Army is the avowal that the ownership of Ireland moral and material is vested of right in the people of Ireland'. This is the foundation of the 1916 Proclamation, which Markievicz and others did not interpret as metaphorical but as a real political programme.

The land was paramount to Markievicz's idea of national liberation. In the First Dáil, there was the potential for a radical land policy. The Democratic Programme reiterated 'the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland' and sovereignty 'not only to all men and women of the Nation, but to all its material possessions', from natural resources to industry. Finally the programme 'reaffirm[ed] that all private right to property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare'. Publicly, in the First Dáil, Markievicz supported Sligo delegate Alexander McCabe (later Cumann na nGadheal and, even more terrifying, the Irish Christian Front) who pledged the Dáil to the redistribution of vacant land and ranches in the country. McCabe also moved to forbid the governmental sanction of non-residential land that had been purchased privately since Easter 1916. He argued that this would 'be a warning to those who have recently availed themselves of the crisis in National affairs to annex large tracts of land against the will and interests of the people'. The discussion was quickly suppressed, and land policy was delegated to a committee that did not include Markievicz.

Again, in the Second Dáil, another opportunity arose when Eamonn Ceannt proposed that all land ‘evacuated by enemy forces’ – with the exception of land being used as training ground for the IRA – ‘be divided into economic holdings, and distributed among landless men, preference being given to the IRA’. Again, the proposal was quickly shot down, this time by Richard Mulcahy (later responsible for the execution of anti-treaty IRA soldiers). He countered that it was not yet clear which land belonged to the British Government and which to private individuals. Markievicz, prevented from replying in the Dáil, denounced him outside of government in a hundreds-strong St Patrick’s Day meeting: ‘A few men had signed away the Republic and brought serfdom to the nation’.

Her language was not accidental. During her imprisonments, Markievicz had followed Russian politics very closely in the newspapers and studied Marxist political theory, particularly the work of Maxim Litvinov, who was Lenin’s unofficial delegate to Britain. Prior to the Paris Peace Conference, she had proclaimed ‘Ireland’s two chances were Wilson and Bolshevism’; yet almost immediately afterwards, obviously Marxist language disappeared from her public speeches: visions of a Bolshevik state wouldn’t do Ireland any favors in the eyes of the Big Four. We see Marxist language resurface during the Civil War, but rather than the semantics of the soviet, she described Ireland’s future as a ‘Cooperative Commonwealth’. Internationalist Marxism was given an Irish application in the safe ground of the national past. Connolly was her touchstone here. In her pamphlet, *What Irish Republicans Stand For*, published in 1922 by a Communist press in Glasgow, she gave an unambiguously Marxist interpretation of her fallen comrade, quoting *The Reconquest of Ireland* as an epigraph.

After the Civil War and her final imprisonments, Markievicz privately expressed doubt in the ability of any government or any politician to fulfill her idea of Ireland. Publicly, however, she kept a brave face and threw her weight behind De Valera’s vision for a new party. Even so, she focused her activities on local government rather than national politics, implementing on a small scale the ideology that had been defeated. She was most politically effective in Rathmines Urban Council, where she facilitated the building of public baths and a wash-house for the 400,000 residents who had no facilities in their homes. She was still wholly committed to public ownership. For example, she encouraged Dublin City Council to purchase the city’s tramways, and she objected to the ESB, which she believed would remove the regulation of prices from local governments and put them in the hands of a government-appointed monopoly.

The public idea of Constance Markievicz is very closely tied to the idea of the state. The particularities of her politics have been overlooked in the attempt to construct of a cohesive national narrative. De Valera was at the forefront of shaping her legacy. His speech at her graveside on the first anniversary of her death surmised, rather placidly, that ‘her heart was with the people and her desires were the same as Connolly’s’; that she stepped ‘down from the class to which she belonged [...] into the life of the plain people’; that ‘to her [...] freedom won would have meant very little unless it had brought with it real freedom for the individual’. This single speech gave rise to the three interpretive problems: the nature of Connolly’s desires (which is still contested), the homogenization of

the middle-class and the working-class into the mythical 'plain people', and a complete ignoring of the Democratic Programme which, combined with the Easter Proclamation, was the foundation for Markievicz's commitment to democratically-endorsed collectivity. Later, De Valera's speech became even more florid: 'To many she was simply a strange figure following a path of her own and not the accustomed paths, but she did that because she was truly a woman'. His diction here shares a kinship with the 'comely maidens' in that infamous draft of his St Patrick's Day speech.

De Valera helped to construct the 'safe' Markievicz – the Minister for Labor and the friend of the poor – who is at odds with the 'dangerous' Markievicz, the militant radical and, in the language of O'Faolain and O'Casey, the hysteric. As I hope I've shown today, in constructing Markievicz's intellectual history, we can reconcile these two portraits and better understand the rational basis for her political action and the international politics that underlie her idea of Ireland.