I must begin by thanking John Regan for his kind remarks and for his thoughtful analysis of my book – the greatest compliment any writer can pay another. As he points out, I presented the book in a spirit of debate, so I thought I should return the favour by taking him up on some of his comments.

One of the most striking things in Regan’s piece is the absence of any mention of ‘revisionism’. Far from being an error, this is a presumably deliberate and most welcome omission. For those who might not know, in Irish terms this refers to a supposed school of Irish history which, while claiming to be neutral and scientific, is in fact anti-republican, anti-nationalist and pro-British. The stereotypical revisionist talks of modernisation rather than colonisation, law and order rather than oppression and terrorists rather than freedom fighters. He or she might be Irish – in which case he or she is a conservative and bourgeois resident of the magical kingdom of Dublin 4 – or else he or she is some sort of imperialist. A lot of this had to do with the fact that nationalist history was and is one of republicanism’s greatest resources, and that republicans themselves were heavily censored in mainstream media – and academia – throughout the British Isles.

When I first arrived in Dublin to do my PhD in 1987, the revisionist so-called debate was in full swing. Many people were called revisionists by their opponents but no one ever called themself that – a sure sign of pejorative labelling. Moreover, many of the reputed revisionists I met held none of the alleged views. They might well dislike Sinn Féin and the IRA in their 1980s incarnations (almost everybody did), but they wrote with sympathy about earlier nationalist movements and very critically of British rule in Ireland.

In reality, this was less a serious discussion about the nature of Irish history or historiography, and more a mini culture war about authenticity, the right to write, who and what really represented the Irish nation, and so forth. The up side was that history and its writers got a lot of attention; politicians and novelists might read your work – amazing! The down side was that it squeezed out rational, useful debate for a long time. Not until the later 1990s did things calm down, thanks in part to the Celtic Tiger and the northern peace process. Mind you, people – including myself – are still regularly called revisionists (the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, recently commended a (blameless) historian whose book he was launching for not being a revisionist), and the term ‘post-revisionism’ has been adopted by some to suggest that revisionism has been routed.
I bring this up because John Regan’s main criticisms of my book are its lack of critical historiography and its failure to reflect on the way that partition and the recent troubles in Northern Ireland have influenced writing on the Irish revolution of 1916–23. If I read him correctly, he is arguing that the orthodox historiography of the period (which he feels that I should do more to confront) has been shaped by southern mainstream nationalism, itself allied with the 26 county state (first the Free State, now the Republic). Southern nationalists in or out of government might have talked about reuniting the country and rescuing northern Catholics, but this did not actually correspond with elite or state interests and so was never seriously pursued. Indeed, partition itself was a product of these interests as much as of separatist northern unionism, and the Irish-based historiography has reflected this by writing about north and south as two separate entities, claiming the founding revolution and civil war as a legitimising struggle for liberation and then democracy, whose product was independent Ireland. Troubling questions about the establishment of states by force (especially Britain’s role), ethnic violence and the rival legitimacy of the republican resistance are usefully sidelined as belonging exclusively to northern history.

I may have extended Regan’s argument slightly to put it in my own words, but I hope not too far. However, it may be noted that this, in a way, runs contrary to the anti-revisionist critique. Rather than taking a pro-unionist, pro-British or anti-nationalist stance, recent orthodoxy is quite firmly nationalist and perhaps quite comfortably anti-British – albeit still perhaps anti-unionist and anti-republican.

In part, Regan suggests, my book does challenge this orthodoxy by, for example, attacking partitionist history. I argue repeatedly that Ireland must be analysed and explained as a whole, not in two units and that ethnic violence and sectarianism were present throughout Ireland, not just in the black north. Similarly, I argue that the revolution can only be fully understood as a chronological whole, as opposed to the standard units of narrative and analysis formed around episodic wars and rebellions – which is in itself a way of leaving the north out, as it does not fit neatly into this periodisation.

Nevertheless, he feels that my analysis is not systematically critical and therefore contains revealing contradictions and problems. For example, while I discuss the democratic credentials of the republican movement in a possibly non-orthodox way, by calling the IRA ademocratic rather than anti-democratic, I then blithely write that ‘full democracy was restored’ everywhere after 1923, despite the warped political system and government that resulted in Northern Ireland. This smacks of orthodoxy and the desire to deny democratic legitimacy to contemporary revolutionaries. The first thing I could say is that John Regan is doing exactly what I thought was needed: ‘What has yet to happen is a conceptual discussion of how these interpretations are framed’ (p. 8), to quote from my introductory chapter (although I was thinking more of analytical concepts rather than ideological diagnosis). And, of course, he has already introduced the idea of an Irish Counter-Revolution in his excellent book of the same name covering the years from 1921 to 1936.

Regarding my being too uncritical of other recent historians, though, I was mostly just describing what had been done in the field since the 1970s: the pioneers, as it were. My main point in this chapter is critical anyway: that the traditional and still-dominant nationalist narrative of liberation, with its flawed geography and periodisation and blindness to ethnicity. In these terms, I agree with a lot of what Regan says about the shape – if not the origins – of the historiography. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with a nationalist interpretation though – I can imagine one with considerable explanatory power. But we should not make it our starting point.

Is there a contradiction in my work between such statements and my occasional agreement with John Regan’s perceived southern statist orthodoxy? The example he gives of my conclusion that ‘full democracy was restored once ethnic sovereignty or security was achieved’ is qualified by my previous statement that most, not all, of the two main ethnic groups gave their trust and allegiance to the new states (pp. 108–9) Many southern Protestants and northern Catholics were not so reconciled. But he is right – it is not a very satisfactory conclusion as it stands. In my defence I could say that the essay was about paramilitary politics, and that this was not the main conclusion, which was that ‘The introduction of paramilitary politics illustrates the difficulty – even impossibility – of a fully democratic outcome to the Irish question in the
early twentieth century’. Still, I should not have used ‘restored’ when full democracy did not exist before. And I should have said more specifically that what was restored was peaceful, constitutional politics in which elected governments were not challenged by paramilitary armies.

My argument that the IRA was ademocratic is meant to describe its basic political stance: external votes and elections were irrelevant to the existence of the army or its decision making (although it could be quite democratic internally). This is different from being apolitical or anti-democratic, neither of which terms – which have been used – apply. And I use Charles Tilly’s basic definition of revolution as a framework because it specifically talks in terms of sovereignty and a competition for power rather than legitimacy or democracy. Not that these are not useful terms, but they are also value-laden and problematic, as likely to be used as claims or labels as for analytical purposes.

Has the historiography of the Irish revolution been warped by southern nationalism or northern troubles? I do not really think so. The development of the field has depended on the work of a few innovative pioneers, the opening up of new archival sources, the rise in popularity of Irish history abroad and, most recently, the flood of new money and jobs to Irish academia that has benefited all periods. In other words, scarcity of resources gave way to relative abundance. It is interesting to note that a lot of us are/were not Irish: I am a Newfoundlander and Canadian, others are/were Australian, Dutch, German and, of course, English and Scottish. It may be true that Irish (and American?) PhD students avoided the revolution because it was sensitive, but my impression was that many were bored with it, having heard about it from school teachers and parents or grandparents, and others thought there was nothing much there to study. I do agree that most work has stuck to the nationalist framework, but this seems an inevitable consequence of being pioneers. They had to figure out what sources there were and use them for the first time in order just to figure out what really happened and how things worked in the police, the British army, Dublin Castle or the IRA and Sinn Féin.

Should I and all other historians of the Irish revolution confront the inherently political nature of our work given the troubles? Using different language, I am perhaps saying much the same thing – but the language does still make a difference. Regan’s is itself inherently political. I cannot help feeling it brings us back to the old revisionist debate or, rather, the eternal search for bias or agenda. What good would it do exactly? I certainly do agree we should be self-critical and scrutinise our assumptions about power, interest, the basis for collective action and community, the way choices and decisions get made. And we should rigorously test explanations wherever possible. But that stance is itself the best guard against ideological blindness or bias. Trying to expose or root out a particular example is always a bit of a witch-hunt and usually has another agenda on the back of it. If we are still working on assigning blame and legitimacy, it will not get us any further ahead in understanding the period better.

In my work I have adopted a few methodological rules of thumb which I think help expose and eliminate all sorts of ideological bias:

1. If you are analysing violence, begin with the victims. Look at all of them, not some preselected set. How many were defenceless? How many were noncombatants?

2. Motivational rhetoric and contemporary or after-the-fact justification counts as evidence but not as explanation. Look at behaviour instead. What people actually did or decided is what ultimately counts, not what they say they did. And do not be selective or episodic. Episodic history is false or at least incomplete history. Be systematic.

3. Be skeptical of all institutional or organised power. The state indeed, in the form of the United Kingdom, the Irish Provisional Government/Free State or Northern Ireland, but also parties claiming national or ethnic authority, insurgent groups claiming state power and – much neglected – newspapers and the interests behind them, and the major churches, all of which were political players.

4. Avoid pejorative labels. If you use them, apply them to behaviour, not to groups – and apply them to the
same acts no matter who commits them.

There are some very good historians working on aspects of the Irish revolution who are politically engaged or motivated, but applying these tests to their work quickly shows where their blind spots lie and where they are coming from. I do not think this counts as false depoliticisation: if anything, it is necessary departisanisation (if that is the word I am looking for). And, in the case of the Irish revolution, we have enough information to test any hypothesis in a systematic way.

Finally, does it really matter what biases or ideologies are operating behind problematic assumptions or conclusions? They will stand or fall on the evidence, on logic and on their explanatory power, and that is what I think we should focus on. Thus, what I call the partitionist fallacy – analysing northern and southern Ireland as two separate units even before an official border is drawn – can be criticised effectively without having to figure out whose interests it serves.

To be fair, John Regan was reviewing my book, not setting forth his full argument, so I hope he will present his views in depth and detail at some not-too-distant point in the future. I do not know if we really disagree all that much but, again, I am grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to think about it out loud.

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