On Men and their Tractors

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In a recent post, Suryapratim Roy discusses the Irish fuel price blockades that took place in April. The protests were physically and symbolically dominated by agriculture. Most of its leaders identified themselves as farmers or as farming contractors, and the blockades were agglomerated agricultural machinery: rows of tractors, combine harvesters, dumper trucks, juxtaposed into urban and industrial environments. At the same time, the protests had a far-right element. Some of those associated prominently with it expressed far-right or racist views, or appeared to have connections with international far-right causes. The protests caused immense disruption: motorways were blocked, hospital appointments missed. Fuel ran out across the country. For a moment, the state appeared to lose authority.

In his post, Roy identifies the protestors as a "fossil elite" of wealthy farmers, engaged in a form of lobbying or rent extraction to preserve their own economic interest. The protests themselves he characterises as "a marriage of fossil capital and racial capital". Protestors sought not just to maximise economic advantage but to leverage a form of racial power: to offer up Irish identity as a form of "whiteness" that can be appropriated and exploited by the transnational far-right. In this post I reflect and respond to a part of Roy's argument. I explore in symbolic terms why the fuel protests took the form that they did, and why the response to the protests of Irish society in general – and the broad political Left in particular – was ambiguous. The answer, I believe, is at once more complex and more domestic than Roy allows. It lies in the appropriation by the far-right of a hitherto innocuous indigenous Irish archetype: the Men with Tractors.

Men with Tractors

When I was three, perhaps four, years old, I was told to grab a stick and walk down the narrow lane from my grandparents' house in Meath. It was important not to wear red: red aggravates the cattle. I was given wellies for the look of the thing. My grandfather, who must have been in his mid-eighties at that point, had finally accepted that he was too old to be a farmer, and, in the absence of a son to take up the mantle, a truck was coming to collect the last remaining cattle. The truck sat at the bottom of the lane, ramp down, gaping like a basking shark. We shook sticks at the herd until they ambled in.

This moment is one of my earliest memories. My ancestral memory of farming is not unique. Nor, of course, is it universal. Ireland rapidly urbanised from around the 1970s onwards. Though there will be many, like me, who are just a generation away from farming, there are likely far more now who would find this kind of anecdote completely alien. Nonetheless, the politics and imagery of farming exerts, in the year 2026, an outsize influence on Irish national politics. Men with Tractors occupy a space in the national psyche that hasn't quite been filled by anything else.

My hinterland called out to me when I read Roy's account of the fuel protests. Not because I think that the protests were anything other than deeply problematic. The protests were, to a distressing extent, far-right organised and far-right coded. Their apparent triumph was also highly dubious: an expensive howl at short-term market fluctuations, done at significant environmental cost. My concern, however, is that Roy's account flattens the politics of the protests. Roy writes as a lawyer, with skill and a focus on the broader intellectual sweep. He writes, nonetheless, with a lawyer's sensibility, and a lawyer's tendency to discount the political and the emotional. In attributing the protests to a near conspiratorial nexus of wealthy elites and the international far-right he misses, I wish to gently suggest, the point.

The Symbolism of the Protests and the Birth of a Domesticated Far-Right

The point of the fuel protests – their symbolic power – is that they set two pastiched archetypes of Ireland against one another. In the psychogeography of the protests, the Men with Tractors (and, yes, the overwhelming maleness of the protestors is part of this) are set against plate glass corporate buildings and a franchised Starbucks on O'Connell Bridge. Rural is set against urban. The *real* people of the country are set against the jackeens up in Dublin. These are all crude clichés, of course, which do a disservice to everyone they caricature and everyone they ignore. But that is precisely the point: this is politics at its most deliberately simplistic; nuance and consequences be damned.

In the fuel protests, in other words, we witnessed the birth of a domesticated Irish populism: far-right populism with Irish characteristics. The archetypes differ slightly from than those in other countries. In place of White Van Man, Joe the Plumber, the Canadian truckers, or *les Gilets Jaunes* we have the Men with Tractors. In structural terms, though, the narrative is the same. There are (to draw on the analysis of Jan Werner-Müller in his excellent *What is Populism?*) all the markers of populism: insurgent "saviour" leaders who defy the normal rules of politics, appeals to the needs and values of the "real, decent, people", and so on.

Here is where the complexity kicks in. Because the far-right populists didn't invent Men with Tractors. Men with Tractors already existed. Every few years they kick up about something – they agitate about tax or subsidies or an environmental rule – but mostly they coach hurling down at the GAA and keep the village going when there's a storm. You don't live in the village, of course, but your parents used to, and a cousin still does, and the emotional pull is real. Plus farmers produce food, and Ireland is very proud of its food.

The National Archetype as Far-Right Trojan Horse

We thus have two overlapping Men with Tractors archetypes: the "real people" of the far-right populists, and the "ordinary farmer" lying deep within the Irish political psyche. It's not an accident that the broad Left (a tricky category in Irish politics at the best of times) were flat-footed by the protests, or that the public reaction to a blockade was more ambivalent than one might expect given its effects on ordinary life. Men with Tractors were ordinary guys protesting to show a right-wing government that their livelihoods were being demolished. This was not an imagined complaint, an elitist one, nor the machination of a global conspiracy of race and capital. It was (and remains) very real. Moreover, it speaks to pain felt up and down society, urban and rural, by the kinds of people the Left worry about. Yet the far more unpalatable *far-right* archetype was present in the protests too, along with all the tropes of the global far-right; including, as Roy emphasises, a repellent focus on whiteness as a facet of Irish identity. All of these, together, at the same time. We have just witnessed, and with unusual clarity, the far-right appropriation of a national archetype.

This is what the far-right do. They find a crack in the door and prise and pull at it until it breaks open. Previous protagonists in Ireland's hitherto small and shambolic far-right have been thuggish or ridiculous in their affect and obsessions. Not so the Men with Tractors. The danger of the Men with Tractors is not that they were confected by a wealthy global capitalist elite for appalling ends. The danger arises precisely because they were not: because this national archetype is real, and relatable, and has now been repurposed as a Trojan horse for internet-brained far-right politics.

This bivalent creature is now at the door of Irish politics. This is the danger we face. It's easy to be against an abstracted alliance of racial and fossil capital and all the rebarbative aspects of the global far-right. They sound awful! How much harder is it to be against the guy you sometimes see having a laugh down the pub, who tells you he's lost his job to fuel prices? How confusing to find yourself ranged against that old friend of your dad's? Against Miley from Glenroe? Against a friendly and avuncular Trojan horse?

How hard is it to be against an image of your grandfather that you've held in your head since you were four years old?

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