

Challenging austerity in Ireland: community and movement responses

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Crises in themselves do not radicalise people

In the period 2008-10, many observers were surprised at how quickly and completely neoliberal orthodoxies reasserted themselves as the only substantial response to the global financial crisis. After all, the anticapitalist / global justice movement had highlighted the ills of neoliberalism (and put the term into the Anglophone political vocabulary) since the summit protests of 1999 – 2001 if not since the Zapatista uprising of 1994. Surely this crisis would bring others, especially in communities facing the brunt of the economic collapse, to agree with this analysis and look in different directions?

Unfortunately, as activists know, there is no substitute for real agitation, organising and education. If many intellectuals were brought to advertise the merits of their particular variant of political economy, the crisis in itself did not extend the reach which social movements had created in the boom years. High-profile figures who publicly considered alternative responses to crisis – Brown, Soros, Stiglitz – were largely squeezed out of the orthodoxy, for which there is no plan B (or only in the most marginal forms, as in the US or Hollande's approach). Official education, for all its variety and resources, has ultimately become a mechanism for reinforcing TINA ("There Is No Alternative").

The official mantra has been to use the crisis to reinforce fiscal orthodoxy rather than acknowledge its failure, attack the public sector for the effects of financial speculation, squeeze demand and cut essential services to those communities who were only ever touched marginally by the boom. The all-important space that lies between the conscious and strategic solidarity of elites and the struggles of movements and communities to organise did not, outside of Greece and Iceland, manage to articulate new, collective responses until the *Indignados*, Occupy and other anti-austerity movements of 2011¹.

Ireland, the conservative European province?

In Ireland, this lack of collective response was felt even more sharply than in other EU states. New Labour trade unionists and conservative columnists alike told us smugly "Ireland is not Greece / France / Spain". If the crisis saw a collapse in votes for the traditionally ruling Fianna Fáil party, too closely identified with developers

¹ Discussed further in Flesher Fominaya, C and Cox, L., *Understanding European movements: new social movements, global justice struggles, anti-austerity protest*. London: Routledge, forthcoming

and corruption, power shifted to a coalition of the right-wing Fine Gael party with a thoroughly neo-liberal Labour party, both committed to implementing a brutal austerity programme. In a very short time supposed “radical” politicians were proclaiming that unemployment was a lifestyle choice as they set about attacking “welfare fraud” and doing their best to be seen to make people’s lives miserable.

The neo-corporatist “Croke Park agreement”, which imposed pay cuts, job losses and productivity hikes in return for a promise of no further aggression, was doubled with cuts in welfare, education and health and a right-wing media barrage. Rates of unemployment soared, real wages plummeted, redistribution was squeezed and the inflated house prices of the boom turned into financial millstones around supposedly middle-class necks, while the socialisation of private bank debt led the state to take on enormous long-term debts at the expense of the vast majority of the country.

And yet, in all of this, the responses from working-class communities and social movements were minimal. Trade union marches were neatly corralled by a pro-Labour leadership and reduced to extended shopping trips to the capital (with marches timed to finish at lunchtime in the city centre). Attempts at community mobilising by the alliance of organisations under the banner of ‘Spectacle of Defiance and Hope’ showed great dramatic flair² but also demonstrated just how few people were willing to come onto the streets to resist. Adult and community educators all too often remained focussed on “telling our stories” in isolation and pursuing social mobility with no practical engagement with the new impoverishment. Capping this, massive police deployments for Barack Obama’s and Queen Elizabeth’s visits flexed black leather clad muscles while media closely controlled by the state and business tycoons portrayed opposition as marginal, misinformed, financially reckless or criminal.

Understanding our weaknesses

It has been hard to understand just how and why our movements have been rolled over so quickly. Around 2005, if it was clear that on an individual level many people were willing simply to wallow in the boom, community activism, social movements and the trade union left were arguably stronger than in 2010 when the crisis was biting hard.

It is clear, as in Latin America, that it takes time for people to join the dots between policy and their own situations. A history of clientelist politics has led many people to believe that they will be “seen right” by their own patrons even if the rest of the country goes down the tubes, and it is naturally hard to acknowledge just how much of a financial crisis one might be facing personally.

Equally important is the clientelist politics of what were once social movement organisations. Ten to fifteen years of “social partnership” – with the state, employers, farmers and unions allowing in the “community and voluntary sector”, as well as local arrangements including a wide range of “stakeholders” – had demobilised most participants in community and movement groups at the same time as handing internal

² <http://www.thespectacleofdefianceandhope.ie/spectacle/scripts/page/home.php>, accessed 14 May 2012

power to the small minorities of those able to professionalise and engage in the world of policy lobbying, funding applications, media debate and legal cases³.

The professionals, even when their own backgrounds were in community work or activist organisations, had neither the will nor the vision to return to mass mobilisation, and in effect had no plan B other than to attempt to defend, maintain or resurrect such “partnership” arrangements with the very state that was attacking them⁴. This has in practice been little different for community education, where credentialisation and funding have created a “sector” which is fundamentally about “service delivery” rather than social change going beyond the individual.

The costs of co-option

As Piven and Cloward noted many years ago in relation to welfare movements in the US⁵, the bureaucratisation of poor people’s movements undermines their political effectiveness and takes away their key weapon of disruption⁶. It equally empties processes like community education of all content⁷; in Ireland it is now routine for Freire and Gramsci to be quoted in relation to courses written by university-trained professionals, validated by local government bureaucrats and taken by depoliticised students who are primarily seeking employment-related skills.

In these circumstances, most communities and movements had lost the habit of mass mobilisation around structural issues in favour of the press release, the research report and the funding application – and had neither the will nor the capacity to return to opposition. Fundamentally committed to working with the state at all costs, such groups had no concept of what to do when the state turned against them⁸. What has been almost entirely lacking is the distinction made by Alf Nilsen in his work on India, finding a middle ground between institutionalist faith in the system and blanket rejection and being able to engage with the state *instrumentally* while retaining a wider strategy, mobilising capacity and political analysis so as not to *have* to desperately try to be part of the system irrespective of what can be achieved or lost by doing so.

³ Cox, L. (2010) ‘Another world is under construction? Social movement responses to inequality and crisis’. *Irish Left Review* (May 17), online at <http://www.irishleftreview.org/2010/05/17/world-construction-social-movement-responses-inequality-crisis/>, accessed 14 May 2012

⁴ Symptomatically, on an issue which has defined the identity of Irish liberals as well as the left for the past four decades, the Labour Party and Fine Gael liberals all followed the party whip rejecting a private members’ bill enacting the results of a referendum and Supreme Court judgement from *twenty years ago* which legalised abortion in Ireland. NGOs continue to express understanding and sympathy for the government and to boast of their relationships with ministers.

⁵ Piven, F. and Cloward, R. (1979) *Poor People’s Movements: why they succeed, how they fail*. New York: Vintage

⁶ Piven, F. (2008) ‘Can power from below change the world?’ 2007 ASA Presidential address. *American Sociological Review* 73/1: 1-14

⁷ Connolly, B. (1997) ‘Women in community education and development: liberation or domestication?’ 40 – 58 in Byrne, A. and Leonard, M., *Women and Irish society: a sociological reader*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale

⁸ Cox, L. (2011) ‘Popular responses to the Irish crisis and the hope for radical change: organic crisis and the different meanings of counter-hegemony’. Paper to *Alternative Futures and Popular Protest* 16.

Organisation versus movement

In this situation, the fragments of organisation left outside of what has been characterised as an abusive relationship with the state – some critical working-class communities, radical educators, direct action groups and far left parties - overestimated their (our) own significance. Calls for protests, organisational alliances and new projects were defined as though the claims of coopted groups to represent organised constituencies were real, and plausible takeover bids could be mounted for these phantom groups.

What failed mobilisations, election results, and spontaneous organising processes have shown is rather that *organisation* is no substitute for *movement*: there are indeed very large numbers of people out there who realise that they are hurting in the crisis and are opposed to the direction elites are going in, but in ways that are very short of organisation, political understanding, or communication networks.

A discontented population, slowly emerging from fifteen years of the anti-politics machine that is social partnership, often does not know of, or know how to “read”, existing organisations; has no sense of the many dimensions of the situation; and is typically reproducing the particularism and provincialism created by the long history of clientelism. There is much ferment, but little real engagement; too many clever schemes and little enough strategic action. Community education has rarely made a difference to this: its overtly political content is more likely to focus on a US-style “make the system work for your community” than on a wider history of successful community struggles and alliance-building.

Thus election results show, for example, that as against the traditional 70 – 80% for right-wing party families now only 55% cast their votes for openly right-wing parties. 15% or so of traditional right-wing voters have moved further left, but often only to a Labour Party which is as keen to show its austerity credentials as its government partner. Something has been learned, certainly; but not that much.

More slowly, disappointed voters are drifting leftwards, towards a Sinn Féin which is happy to oppose austerity verbally in the South while practicing it in the North, or occasionally towards the United Left Alliance of Trotskyists and others, the only parliamentary representation of an anti-austerity feeling which is far more widespread among people who have not yet connected their personal situation with the policy picture, or distinguished between the left *image* of Labour or Sinn Féin and their actual *politics*. This, of course, is where radical education would be helpful; but it is not something which can be done overnight, the more so as this near-total occupation of the political spectrum by various shades of neo-liberal orthodoxy is replicated in the media, with one shadow-boxing show after another over *how* austerity should operate (should the public sector be cut further? Should referenda on austerity be delayed?)

Quick-fix organisational solutions have not worked, in other words: it is not by having a cleverer intellectual analysis, a new event-management concept for demonstrations, a different language or a new configuration of organisations that we will find the allies we need. People are struggling, and massively so – the sporadic outbursts of resistance to home repossessions are reflective of a far wider crisis of personal finances in the course of which banks are quietly allowing many customers to suspend

mortgage payments to avoid country-wide eviction struggles encompassing much of the voting population.

But most of those who are struggling are not “in touch” with community groups or social movements, whether organisationally, intellectually or strategically: neoliberalism and corporatism have produced people who are willing to struggle in private, go under quietly and scream in isolation rather than step outside their own social and political comfort zones. In the longer picture, the last quarter-century has seen a substantial *loss* of the self- or collectively-taught working-class cultures created in community organising, socialist, feminist and republican movements as their children have gone to college and collective, self-controlled intellectual production is at an all-time low.

The professional and political interests of the old co-opted organisational elites naturally lead them to do their best to present themselves as the new radicals, without of course severing what are often close links with the Labour Party in particular. Particular mention must go to the “Claiming our future” project, intended as a collection of particularist claims that could in theory be satisfied without going on the streets or a serious change in political policy; but each week brings new examples of deeply conservative figures attempting to profile themselves as radical, critical, anti-austerity etc. *on paper* while proposing practical strategies that amount to trusting the powers that be and the structures that have failed.

Now what?

In the last two years, events outside Ireland – the Arab Spring, the European *indignados* and the Occupy! movement⁹ – the ongoing economic squeeze and the slow processes of activist rethinking have all helped to develop new kinds of response.

The long-standing struggle over gas drilling in northwest Ireland has now been extended by fracking proposals covering much of the west Midlands, new gas prospecting elsewhere off the west coast, and oil finds off Dublin and Cork, and the campaign has rightly highlighted the absurdity of the state using the military to enable private exploitation of these resources in a time of financial meltdown. The state’s foolhardy poll tax (“household charge”) has been resisted by approximately half of all households, and it has been let slip that households are also to be charged for the meters that will be the first step towards water privatisation. The campaign has been massively popular, and if it can escape becoming simply a party-political vehicle for the ULA it is the first real breach in the power of austerity for some time.

Occupy! encampments, springing up in 6 different towns, met a surprising degree of popular support along with the predictable attacks. While some have since been evicted, new circles of activists have been politicised by this experience and are attempting to take the process further, not least through occupations of properties owned by the “bad bank” NAMA. A series of women’s community groups successfully and collectively resisted attempts to hand over control to local

⁹ See *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* (vol. 4 no. 1, May 2012 special issue on “The Arab Spring and European mobilizations”). Online at <http://www.interfacejournal.net/2012/05/interface-volume-4-issue-1-the-season-of-revolution-the-arab-spring-and-european-mobilizations/>, accessed 14 May 2012.

government “partnerships”, showing a new willingness to fight. Elsewhere, various attempts at bringing movements together (Climate Camp, Community Campaigns Gathering, Activist Fleadh etc.) have shown the potential for some kind of wider interaction.

The activists who take part in the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism which I co-direct certainly show a willingness to keep up the struggle even where funding and jobs have vanished, a capacity to work with each other across issues and “styles” which will be central in bringing about wider change and a willingness to ask big questions which bode well for the future.

Radical education and activist praxis

It is not always clear how movements can take this struggle forwards¹⁰. As noted, in some ways the idea of a quick fix at the organisational level is misleading, and the question is how these various struggles and networking processes can connect at a “lower” level, with those who are struggling in isolation, in their own lives, but without a bigger political picture, the intellectual resources they need, networks of allies or an ability to engage with broader movements.

In this sense community and radical education has become central: not for the most part in the sense of formal projects, funded or not, but in the question of how far involvement in an individual campaign or action can become a collective learning space for its participants that leads them to make the links, intellectually and practically, without which their struggles will remain “mé féin” (myself alone), focussed on trying to get the system to disgorge results for a single community, on a single issue or in a single format.

The real results of a movement lie in its participants – if they come out more confident, willing to challenge the powers that be, able to work with each other, capable of analysing the big picture, and with a goal beyond the immediate issue. The most challenging task for experienced activists is to help them do this. Conversely, the real task for radical educators is to find forms of educational praxis which deserve the name – which lead people not just to understand their own situation but to try to change it, collectively; to identify active forms of struggle in the present day which connect with the needs they have identified and make those links in practice; and to see themselves in others and vice versa in processes of mutual learning and alliance formation.

Ireland is not Greece, or Spain, or Iceland – any more than any of those countries’ response to austerity is identical to another. It is equally capable of seeing a movement-driven landslide, perhaps even one that can turn the tide.

¹⁰ Cox, L. (2011) ‘Gramsci in Mayo: a Marxist perspective on social movements in Ireland’. Paper to *New agendas in social movement studies* conference, online at <http://eprints.nuim.ie/2889/>, accessed 14 May 2012.