

Community, history, power

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Introduction

Maura asked me to talk about the history of the idea of community, which is quite a big topic. What I do for a living is basically to work with activists and social movements, and from that point of view community is often very important, both as something people fight for and as something people fight with, a source of strength.

In Ireland we can see this from the Whiteboys and the Land League up to the struggle here in Erris, the anti-fracking movement or the fight against water charges. Around the world community is central to indigenous struggles from the Ogoni to First Nations and Native American resistance to Keystone XL and other tar sands projects, but also to the movements of shack-dwellers in South Africa, farmers in the Narmada valley, No TAV in Italy and so on.

So in this talk I will look at the difficulties involved, the history and where there might be some hope.

How “community” turns against us

I want to start with a paradox and a problem. Across Irish society we celebrate the importance of “the community”, but we also find that some of our worst problems come from institutions based in “the community”. Our political parties weren’t imposed from outside, but came out of national and labour struggles rooted in “the community”. We have a history of sexual abuse and violence from a church which was at the centre of “the community”. We are attacked by a police force that prides itself on its relationship to “the community”. If we live near Croke Park our lives are regularly disrupted by an organisation that talks about “community” all day long. Fintan O’Toole puts this nicely: “It can’t be imagined that our oppressors might go to Mass, wear open-necked shirts and support the GAA.”

We know there are meanings of “community” that we do value – that express how we live with each other as equals on a daily basis, help each other out and ask for help, muck in together when there is something that needs doing, and beyond this fight to gain some real control of our own lives. But this same community is sometimes where our worst problems come from, both in the powerful institutions that start from it and in what it does to outsiders. I remember in the rural US spending some time with white Republicans and NRA supporters. They were incredibly welcoming to someone introduced by “one of their own”, and in many ways they were good people – they did a huge amount of voluntary work, some of it dangerous (rescuing swimmers and divers in trouble). And in defence of what they valued, they were reliable supporters of wars abroad and hostile to blacks, feminism, welfare and whatever else they saw as threatening their community.

So how do we make sense of these two faces of community?

What I want to talk about briefly is how we got here – how community came to be part of some of the best of our lives and a real source of oppression and injustice – and see if from that it is possible to get some sense of how we might find a way for community *not* to be part of the corporate imperium.

A very potted history

For most of human history we existed without states or social classes. The hunter-gatherer community is a very different thing to anything we are familiar with directly: it is nomadic, not based on land ownership. A leader in this context isn't someone who can tell others what to do; they are someone who other people listen to (for example, in terms of when it makes sense to move camp in order to harvest particular plants or catch particular fish or animals). Conversely, when there are disagreements people tend to split up rather than fight for control. In practice the community often has several sizes: a small group to get through the worst of the winter, large seasonal gatherings for courtship and other rituals, medium-sized groups when resources are good – so it is quite a flexible thing. Lastly, there are very strong rules of supporting each other and not setting yourself apart from others. In Ireland this was the Mesolithic, the world of the first people to arrive here after the ice.

As we know this was followed by one agricultural society after another. Agricultural societies enable a surplus and hence a ruling class; because the core resource of land is fixed, this is also built into community in various ways. As some archaeologists have observed we can see inequality and hierarchy developing through the Neolithic and Bronze Age in things like burial customs but also the physical structure of religious spaces, excluding or marginalising people to varying degrees.

At the same time, much of this was quite small scale in Ireland – Iron Age and early Christian Ireland were societies marked by sharp gender divisions, tight ethnic boundaries and steep hierarchies of class and power – but they were also very local, and this is a theme that persists through the centuries: *within* the community, our oppressors not only speak the same language, they are often neighbours and even relatives; we depend on them in very immediate and practical ways.

Colonialism and capitalism added a dimension of distance to all this – powerful and oppressive outsiders, new relationships of exploitation over long distances – but (as elsewhere) the processes of violent conquest and dispossession coexisted with processes of co-option and the repurposing of existing community structures as part of the colonial chains. Put another way, Dermot MacMurrough is as characteristic a figure of Irish history as Strongbow.

Remaking the national community

I am not saying anything new by observing that Irish society remade itself in the later nineteenth century. The Famine was conveniently interpreted as being caused by multiple inheritances, and single-child inheritance spread across the country (from the richer East) in the space of about ten years. Together with the Land War this enabled a new class of farmer-proprietors to attempt to establish themselves in the capitalist market; this was always more successful for strong farmers but

attempts to organise poor and subsistence farmers separately, against this logic of capitalist farming, never had any lasting success – unlike, for example, the Scandinavian countries where farmers’ and workers’ movements allied in powerful ways.

Only one son could inherit, and in a stereotypical family then perhaps only one daughter had a chance of marrying. What were the other eight to do? Without access to land they couldn’t start a family, unless they emigrated and left “the community”. The others were condemned to life as “relatives assisting”, lifelong spinsters and bachelors on their brother’s farm – who himself might have to wait until his forties or even fifties to inherit and thus be able to marry.

No wonder that there was a flood of religious vocations, or that post-Famine Catholicism became all about sexual control: the remaining siblings wound up policing the sexuality of the losers (those who did not inherit land and so could not have families) for the benefit of the winning brothers and sisters. Along with the viciousness of many of the institutions involved, this nasty secret at the heart of family and community was often not visible even by those who suffered it, imposed it or benefitted from it.

So the new “traditional community” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century left its winners - the farm-inheriting sons, their wives and children - in tension with their own siblings as well as in tension with the cottiers, landless labourers and travellers who gradually ceased to exist as classes; and in tension with the new movements for women’s rights with the urban poor. This was also an ethno-religious remaking of community: structured around a religion which held both this central *internal* power around sex and money and in a world where religiously defined ethnicities were struggling for their own states: Catholic-Irish, or Protestant-Unionist, or Hindu-Indian, or Buddhist-Burmese and so on.

The state built around this powerbase had particular implications for social movements. As in southern Italy, the Irish rural poor tended to line up politically behind rural notables, and attempts to organise otherwise – on a class basis, for example - were not long-lasting. Women, workers and the rural poor were all subordinated to the new alliance of rural wealth wrapped up in the green flag and waving the cross. Put another way, a strong sense of “community” was achieved but at a high cost.

Where are we now?

From the 1960s and 1970s on, this more traditional sense of “community” started to shift its position rather than simply fall apart. National capital allied with multinationals, newly-educated service classes came to identify with global capitalism and in a series of battles the power of religion as sexual control has been massively displaced by women’s and LGBTQ movements.

But the double-edged nature of “community” hasn’t ended – our managerial elites still boast of their community links and yak about sports, while others still defer to doctors and teachers, hope for jobs from the local wealthy or resent the feeling that other towns and countries are being given more. In life history exercises many students from the Midlands in particular say that “in my community everyone is the same, there are no class differences”, and believe it. In many, many institutions

people prefer to turn a blind eye to abuse and bullying rather than step out of their comfort zones; and a surprising number of people *do* still vote for the same parties that impose the austerity they are suffering under, even today.

We see the effects in movement struggles too. On the one hand community-based struggles are the most powerful in Ireland, from Carnsore to Rosspoint and now fracking and water charges. At the same time there is a massive fear of being different, standing out - and so checking out what way everyone else is going to jump before saying or doing anything, meaning that on rare occasions we get massive, collective protests and the rest of the time it is left to the usual suspects.

The fear of being different is partly rooted in our long history of violence and trauma inflicted *within* the community, and partly on our fear that other people's support in our daily lives is conditional on our not saying anything that might give offence. Something similar lies behind the fear of confrontation, the tendency to try and avoid situations where we might have to articulate disagreement. Seamus Heaney was talking about the North, but he could equally have been talking about much everyday life in the Republic: "Whatever you say, say nothing".

Where to from here?

For many people in Ireland – but not everyone by a long shot – community represents at a very immediate and practical level much of what makes life worth living, as well as much of what makes it possible: place, family, friends, mutual support and a sense of meaning. At the same time it can easily become exclusionary to outsiders, oppressive to insiders and a source of support for powerful and destructive institutions – the corporate imperium as expressed by your friendly neighbourhood Guard, county councillor, local journalist, man-of-the-people businessman, your brother-in-law, and all the rest of them.

How do we get out of this? How can communities remake themselves in struggle? Erris has a lot to teach the rest of Ireland in this respect, and it is hugely important that the effort is being made to share what has been learnt with communities facing fracking in particular. I know about this from other times and places, but at the simplest it is that under tension we come to see more clearly who people really are. Sometimes we lament how "divisive" this is – meaning that it is better to go through our lives knowing just what certain people are like but not being able to say it openly. In struggle we get to see who jumps which way and it is often fairly clear why. At the same time we have to look at ourselves and see which of the things we do are really expressions of the good community that we want, and which are not.

In other places and spaces we make new communities, starting from a commitment to a different kind of society: communities of activists, lesbian communities, communities growing around alternative education or food politics, and so on. Many of these turn out to have the same inner tensions and the same struggles to go through – do we want "community" at the cost of everything else, or are we going to challenge the people who want to use community as a cover for their own careers, abusive relationships, exclusionary behaviour and all the rest of it?

I want to finish with a note of hope and confidence. *Human beings make community*: it is what we do, how we are, literally part of our DNA. This means too that we *remake* community, when things change. After the Land War and the Congested Districts Commission, people on Clare Island went from being highly mobile (shifting between the island and the mainland, getting evicted here or squatting there) to settling down in one place and making a new kind of fixed community. After inner-city families were moved out to Ballyfermot, Ballymun or Darndale, they had to remake communities in these new places; and it didn't take them long. Even under the kinds of pressures those people were under, they did it. I think we need to lose some of our fear that if we step out of line, try to change things, challenge the corporate imperium, we will lose our community. The community-making part of us is pretty resilient.

On the other side, the corporate imperium only works because it can be parasitic on community. Capitalism cannot pay for all the care work that is needed; that is why it likes to keep women caring for children, sick people and the old. In our jobs, we do far more than is written on the contract (this is what we make clear when we work-to-rule and withdraw goodwill). We don't do it for our bosses: we do it for the people we work with and for our own self-respect. We look after each other, we live together and we do what needs to be done. Capitalism, Marx said, is a vampire: it lives on the blood of others. There is life without it; and that is why, once in a while, the peasants get together and burn down the castle.