

Recent movements and movement theory in Ireland¹

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Some recent Irish social movements

Studying social movements on the island of Ireland faces particular challenges. The two states represent two opposing outcomes to earlier movement conflicts. The Republic is a “movement-become-state”: not only in the form of the nationalist movement but also the Catholic church as a powerful form of popular mobilisation, and the late C19th “Land War” which forced one of the world’s most successful land reforms. The labour movement emerged subordinate to a national-developmental state (Peillon 1982), although massive levels of working-class community organising later developed independently (Punch 2009).

For much of its history, meanwhile, Northern Ireland represents the institutionalization of a counter-movement to the Republic’s nationalist and Catholic aspects. From the later 1960s to the mid-1990s, the revival of this conflict in the shape of a war involving republican and loyalist paramilitaries as well as the local police and the British Army massively shaped movement activity in one of western Europe’s longest-running violent conflicts.

Finally, from the mid-1990s the Republic’s period of “Celtic Tiger” boom, globalisation and “social partnership” - involving not only state, unions and employers but a “voluntary and community” sector covering virtually all movements except for republicans and anti-war movements - fundamentally reshaped movements. The 2008 economic crash remade movements yet again. In 2016, the distinctions between competing organisational models, particularly around their relationship to the state, are far more entrenched than 25 years ago. Easy generalisations about “Irish movements”, then, conceal more than they reveal.

Challenging Catholic power

The Catholic church’s role as a mode of ethno-nationalist mobilisation in the late C19th and early C20th century led to an entrenched power relationship, focussed on controlling sexuality in an inheritance-oriented farming society. Feminists, GLTBQI activists and cultural modernisers progressively challenged this power from the later 1960s on (Cullen 2015), and from the 1990s the state has increasingly sought to position itself as an agent of cultural modernisation. This dynamic was recently expressed in the recent referendum on gay and lesbian marriage equality; although placed on the political agenda by movements, the campaign became an official celebration of Ireland’s newfound liberalism, with government parties, mainstream media and educational establishments alike broadly supportive. Conversely, the issue of abortion has shown the limits of

¹ This piece draws on Cox (2016).

this liberalism, with repeated waves of outrage and mobilisation, often in response to the effects of the existing position such as the death of Savita Halappanavar after being denied medical treatment.

Even more disruptive, given the historical construction of Irish identity as Catholic, have been the battles over historical memory forced by the survivors of institutional physical and sexual abuse in contexts ranging from church-run Magdalen laundries for “fallen women” and industrial schools via the clerical sexual abuse to forced adoptions and symphysiotomies (sawing open the pelvis in childbirth). While survivors’ resources are often quite low, the moral outrage at these revelations has been widespread and generated a long-running series of inquiries. The reality of widespread historical collusion with these practices has provoked a battle of memory comparable in structure if not intensity to that around collaboration with and resistance to European fascism and Latin American dictatorships.

Resisting neoliberalism and the New World Order

Against this backdrop, early C21st movements challenged Ireland’s neoliberal shift in economic policy and its reorientation away from its traditional neutrality towards active participation in Western foreign policy. Direct action-oriented and anarchist campaigns which had remained outside social partnership formed new links with global justice, anti-war, ecological and feminist concerns as part of the wider alterglobalisation movement, culminating in the cancellation of a WTO regional meeting in 2003 and a dramatic EU summit protest in 2004 (Cox 2006).

In 2001 and 2008, referenda on EU treaties were both defeated in the first popular vote, leading to substantial arm-twisting to ensure the “right” result in re-votes. As war in Afghanistan and Iraq developed, direct action against the US military stopover in Shannon and mass participation in the global demonstrations of February 15th 2003 increased.

Finally, the discovery of offshore gas led to a ten-year conflict between Shell and the residents of Rosport and nearby villages in the rural northwest, with intensive local resistance and widespread support from Irish left, republican and trade union groups and from international ecological solidarity activists. The conflict substantially damaged the legitimacy of the Irish police’s response to protest and laid the groundwork for today’s extensive resistance to fracking proposals.

Social movements since the crisis

In the financial crisis, Ireland faced huge difficulty in terms of bank bailouts (assuming 42% of the EU’s entire debt crisis) and the restructuring imposed by the “Troika” (EU, ECB, IMF). However sectoral protests and a relatively long-lasting Occupy movement, drawing on earlier alterglobalisation movements, had relatively little impact so long as trade unions, tied to the Labour Party, were broadly supportive of restructuring. Despite historically high levels of protest, anti-austerity movements remained unable to effect the kind of dramatic social confrontation seen in Iceland, Spain or Greece; Ireland remained more comparable to Portugal or Italy.

This changed decisively with the introduction of new charges for water. The state’s crisis-period abrogation of partnership with working-class community activism had fatally weakened a layer of

organisations which had previously channelled popular pressures, and attempts to install meters were met with widespread direct action. Together with massive non-registration and non-payment, this detached more radical unions from social partnership, leading to a broad coalition between these, the new community activist groups and left and republican parties. Faced with a state unable either to impose itself by force or to refrain from provocative acts and statements, the movement provoked a governmental crisis; water charges remain a political timebomb.

At time of writing, very large numbers of new people have become involved in movements for their first time. As we know, many will go on to become active around other issues; despite the confident pronouncements of movement entrepreneurs, however, *what* those issues will be cannot be read off an objective analysis of social structure or policy debates, but will depend on how people interpret their own situation.

Recent social movements work in Ireland

Because of the history sketched out above, much Irish research on movements takes place in other disciplines and using other concepts. Thus, a continuous thread in Irish social history has been the exploration of agrarian protest, from secret society organisation around rent, wages and evictions, through the far larger confrontations of the Land War and into more scattered forms of post-peasant rural struggle (Cronin 2012). However, with honourable exceptions (Dunne 2016) this literature has taken a more or less empiricist approach and only rarely engages with the problematics of social movement studies. The same is true of the study of urban working-class struggles, primarily conceptualised in terms of unions and parties and the historiography of the revolutionary decade 1913 – 1923 (Newsinger 2004).

There is slightly more social movement-framed work around the Northern Irish conflict, though still a tiny proportion of the massive literature on the subject (e.g. O’Keefe 2013). Much of what exists has focussed on the relatively small numbers involved in armed organisations (within the frameworks of the study of violent conflict or revolutions) and has less to say about the wider participation of Northern Irish people in the conflict, or the (usually small) movements addressing other themes.

The Republic’s period of social partnership saw a greater official legitimisation of movements, including within academia, and a greater use of social movement framings (Connolly and Hourigan 2006). These same conditions, however, did not lend themselves to critical reflections on movement activity; activists and researchers often shared a policy and institutional focus.

Nonetheless Hilary Tovey’s long-running work on environmentalism (e.g. 2007) consistently insisted on the need to explore both those forms of movement organisation familiar from core countries with unofficial, often community-based forms that recall southern European or majority world experiences. Her work combines a clear institutional analysis of the relationship of “official” environmentalism with the state with analysis of popular environmental justice struggles and some less institutionalised forms of direct action.

Meanwhile, the “Maynooth school” has emphasised participatory action research methodologies and a critical engagement with movements’ struggles and choices. In this respect, it has been best suited to more internally democratic movements which were less shaped by leaderships tied to the

state: thus Anna Szolucha's fascinating (2016) work compares Occupy in Ireland and the USA in this perspective, in dialogue with the work of Derrida and Lacan.

Another consistent theme in this school has been understanding working-class community activism in the Republic and its peculiar mix of institutionalisation and self-organisation. My joint work with Alf Nilsen (2014), written just before the water charges struggle, draws on the experience of this massive but often subterranean movement to develop a wider theory of movement development and conflict with usually more powerful actors.

Hopefully the experience of Ireland's new wave of struggle will also bring a new generation of social movement researchers in tow.

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