Resisting Shell in Ireland: making and remaking alliances between communities, movements and activists under fire

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Abstract

The 15-year-long resistance to Shell's pipeline project in NW Ireland has become a strategic and symbolic site for resistance to neoliberalism and the petroleum industry, rooted in the combination of a community-based environmental justice struggle with the long-term involvement of a range of Irish social movements of the left and the intensive commitment of a substantial number of primarily international ecological activists. The movement faced the external challenges of extensive state violence and media demonisation of participants as well as the internal ones of divisions within the community, tensions between ecological and redistributive movement priorities and the instrumental attitude of some political parties and unions; despite this the campaign was very long by international standards, forced some substantial changes to state policy and has contributed to anti-austerity alliance formation and popular learning processes in the resistance to fracking, as well as to raising the political and financial cost of such projects massively. If it ultimately failed on its own terms, international comparison suggests that this had far more to do with the balance of forces against it than with internal difficulties.

As against the assumption that social or ideological differences within a campaign are a source of inevitable doom (and the more banal assumption that unity is everything), this chapter explores the ways in which broad cohesion can be maintained despite such pressures. It highlights the internal learning processes of an initially conservative rural community over time; how the early imprisonment of 5 locals enabled the national left to support a campaign 'led by the families' rather than jockeying for leadership themselves; why the desertion of the campaign by parties in power did not lead to its collapse; and how Irish movements managed to educate international activists sufficiently that they and the community could work together effectively over time. It also questions simplistic notions of success and restates the importance of sustained popular mobilisation, learning through action and alliance formation as key elements of the potential needed to bring about a better world. The chapter frames this discussion in relation to Gramsci's discussion of the formation of *diverse* kinds of subaltern knowledge and organisation and contemporary Marxist discussion of alliance-formation processes in social movements.

The chapter draws on discussions with activists in the campaign about their understandings and strategies in the process of resisting Shell, and seeks to draw out useful lessons for comparable campaigns elsewhere.

A note on the complex, changeful nature of gas and oil ownership during this campaign: the Corrib gas field was discovered in 1996 by Enterprise Oil who continued as co-venturers on the Corrib project with Statoil and Marathon, until Royal Dutch Shell purchased their majority stake in 2002. Shell, Statoil and the Canadian group Vermilion, who bought out Marathon in 2009, continue as stakeholders, with Shell E&P as the operator and main shareholder on the project. The community led campaign understood early on the importance of selecting a clear target, given the corporate context of buyouts, merging and rebranding. In the wake of nationwide boycotting and picketing of Shell owned petrol stations, in solidarity with the community struggle, Shell was forced to sell its entire retail and commercial business in Ireland to Topaz.

<1>What happened in Erris?

In April 2000 an announcement in the parish newspaper informed residents of Erris that a new gas pipeline was proposed to run through the area to bring gas from the offshore Corrib field to a new refinery to be built at Bellanaboy. Erris is a strikingly beautiful, isolated and thinly populated part of Co. Mayo in northwest Ireland, surviving mostly on fishing, small-scale farming and tourism. A small number of villages, including Rossport and Pullathomas on opposite sides of Broadhaven Bay, were connected by quiet and narrow roads, which the state would soon upgrade for the benefit of the oil companies. Broadhaven Bay is protected as an EU Special Area of Conservation. Initial responses in Erris, like those in Mayo generally, were positive about the boost to local employment and the prospect of children being able to stay and find work locally. It took time for residents' questions and doubts to clarify into a realisation that this was an experimental, high-pressure gas pipeline which, in case of an accident, would destroy many of the homes located close to the planned route. Consultation was limited, and the 2002 decision by An Bord Pleanála (Irish Planning Board) to refuse planning permission for the project, was overridden in 2004 through the intervening influence of *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern. Four years later, Ahern would be forced to resign after a corruption inquiry. Construction of the pipeline and refinery continued without consent from the community and without official permissions.

Those interested in the area, including trade unionists who had worked on the Kinsale offshore gas field, noted that Ireland's oil and gas regime had been changed in 1987 by energy minister Ray Burke, and again in 1992 by then-finance minister Bertie Ahern, from an approach inspired by Norway's successful gas and oil industry, giving the state a 50% stake in any commercial find and applying a 50% corporation tax, to a regime which abolished any state participation in the development and a 100% tax write off. Burke, who made this decision while meeting alone with the oil companies against his civil servants' advice, remains to this day the most senior minister in a notoriously corrupt polity to have done prison time (for tax fraud).

Matters came to a head in the winter of 2005, when members of the local community refused to allow Shell access to their land for preparatory work on the pipeline. Rather unwisely, the company pursued proceedings for contempt with the result that five of those involved – three landowners and two figures in the community known to be influential in the emerging campaign,

all men, Shell choosing to ignore opposition from female landowners – were sent to Dublin's Mountjoy prison indefinitely. Under Irish law they would have to remain there until they 'purged their contempt' and agreed not to interfere with the construction of the pipeline. This proved a double-edged sword for Shell, as those involved had no intention of doing so.

The company had managed to create martyrs out of five people who looked and sounded like the western farmers and fishermen that for many symbolise the true spirit of Irishness. Even more damagingly, Mayo is an area where the Land War – a series of evictions, boycotts, mass meetings and other conflicts that led to a poor peasantry becoming landowning farmers and the end of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy – saw some of its sharpest conflicts (including that directed at Captain Boycott). Imprisoning such people for defending their land, on foot of legislation that granted compulsory purchase powers to private corporations for the first time, was not exactly a masterstroke. Mass mobilisations in the small town of Belmullet were followed by large scale marches in the capital city and at this stage the media were happy to run with the story. The 'Rossport Five' had become national figures. After 94 days in prison, Shell dropped the injunction and the five were released in a victory for direct action. However, the community led campaign, learning from the experiences of the Munster based community campaign against Dow Chemical, understood the need to pursue a multipronged approach and continued to engage with official planning processes to redirect the project to sea.

As often in Ireland, opposition parties – initially particularly Greens and Labour – as well as mainstream trade unions, offered verbal support. Green Party leaders held photo opportunities with local activists – and shortly afterwards took part in a government which used the military against the campaign. Laurence was present at a meeting with then-Labour Party President Michael D. Higgins who promised support for the campaign; once successful in being elected President of Ireland, nothing more was heard from him on the subject. A local parliamentary deputy and community GP, Gerry Crowley, elected on a ticket of defending local hospital services, sought to ensure the campaign followed his line of approach. Meanwhile, the community and campaign struggled to develop an understanding and approach which placed local people at the centre of decision-making as opposed to the traditional brokers who seek to lead and claim credit for most campaigns in Ireland.

Solidarity came from Irish direct action campaigners, product of more than a decade of collaboration between radical ecologists and anarchist activism; from British and European activists of a similar bent; from student groups; from the unorthodox republicans of Éirigi; from some development, human rights and civil liberties organisations and individuals; from international opposition to the oil industry and Shell in particular; and from Norwegian trade unions critical of Statoil's involvement.

We have documented changing police and activist strategies elsewhere (Cox & Ni Dhorchaigh 2011). For the purposes of this piece we can start by noting the damage done to Shell's image, particularly in Norway where its partner Statoil was ultimately state-owned, by film of police breaking the community picket outside gates to the proposed refinery by baton-charging local protestors . This marked the beginning of an explicit 'no-arrest' strategy, observed and experienced by Hilary who was living at the solidarity camp during this period, whose practical implication was a large amount of intimidation (in an isolated rural community where numbers of tooled-up police and private security often outnumbered inhabitants, campaigners were followed by police, under daily surveillance by private security, their wives threatened with sexual violence, police cars parked outside their houses and so on), kettling, confiscation of

cameras, and off-screen violence (beatings, breakings of fingers, people thrown into ditches and onto barbed wire). At least one British undercover police officer is known to have infiltrated the community led campaign.

As resistance became more intense and direct action more effective at blockading construction work, so too did repression. Private security, often recruited from far-right milieux in Eastern Europe, wore badges with skulls celebrating 'battles' against unarmed locals. A leading campaigner had his fishing boat boarded and scuttled by masked men; another was assaulted by masked men inside a Shell compound and hospitalised as a result. Frontline Defenders, Amnesty International and a UN Special Rapporteur carried out investigations highly critical of state and corporate violence and breaches of the law (Barrington, 2010); meanwhile, the relatively new police ombudsman found itself powerless to act on the hundreds of complaints of police violence. Repeated calls from government ministers, criminologists, lawyers and human rights NGOs for a public inquiry into the police operation, were ignored. In 2011, an accidental recording of police joking about raping and deporting protestors drew national attention; after over 700,000 viewings on Youtube it was eventually covered by national TV and a disgracefully bad investigation carried out, which targeted the activists concerned more than the police (Dublin Shell to Sea ND).

The self-inflicted poor image of corporate and state behaviour forced the partial concession of a redrawn pipeline, further away from houses but still crossing a Special Area of Conservation and running under an area prone to landslides. Local concerns about the health and safety of the project were validated by repeated acts of negligence including one tragic incident in which an employee died during the underwater part of the construction. In 2016 the pipeline and refinery finally entered production.

Assessment

The campaign's fifteen years of resistance to one of the world's biggest oil companies, backed up by the full force of the state, marks out the 'Rossport' struggle as well beyond the ordinary. The wonder is not that the pipeline was built, but that resistance lasted so long: costs were more than quadrupled (from €800 million to 3.2 billion), massively raising the bar for any future developments of this nature. As an indirect effect, resistance to fracking in neighbouring regions marked notable successes, with an initial refusal from many local authorities being parlayed at a later point into legislation banning fracking in the Republic. Most recently, all opposition parties – including those otherwise supporting a minority government – supported a bill banning all offshore oil and gas exploration in Ireland.

More broadly, the campaign transformed the way radical politics was done in Ireland. During the extended period of 'social partnership' up to the 2007-8 crash, the vast bulk of most movements remained willing to accept access to policy-makers and funding for service-delivery activities following state priorities in return for operating within institutional channels, accepting the broad framework of state policy and acting in isolation from other movements. Broad-based alliances against neo-liberalism and direct action forms of resistance were confined to the radical wings operating within the anti-capitalist 'movement of movements' (Cox 2006). Rossport saw the coming-together of this approach with community-based struggles and extensive popular learning in a decisive way, as the recession saw the state withdraw from partnership. The practices of grassroots solidarity politics advanced during the campaign would feed into a range

of campaigns including opposition to water charges (Cox 2017), abortion rights, housing, migrant and sex worker rights.

Rossport continues as a reference point for a way of doing politics that doesn't privilege the state or the party but instead places those most affected by the issue at the centre of decision making processes. It became a strategic and symbolic site for resistance to corporate and state power, shaped by an alliance between a community-based environmental justice struggle with the long-term involvement of a range of Irish social movements of the left and the intensive commitment of a substantial number of primarily international ecological activists.

All this was achieved by a tiny and disadvantaged rural community facing extensive economic pressure (corporate money given to local projects in return for political support; local politicians and business interests scenting benefits from the pipeline); extensive state violence, exhausting legal processes from planning appeals to criminal trials, and media demonisation of participants as directed by shadowy republican terrorists. Internally, family and local loyalties were often torn when personal connections had accepted corporate money or those hostile to the project disagreed on how to develop resistance (at times, as with the award-winning film *The Pipe*, in the glare of video cameras). Local community members disagreed with activists from national organisations, while Irish and English activists fell out . Those who did not object to gas extraction per se but had health and safety concerns or prioritised benefits to the local community, or the national tax take, disagreed with ecologists whose concern was to 'keep it in the ground'. Political parties, both mainstream (Labour and Greens) and radical (Sinn Féin and Socialist Workers Party) adopted instrumentalising and at times manipulative attitudes, while trade unions also proved less than reliable allies at times.

Success, then, is not about an absence of disagreement and divergence – normal in even relatively homogenous communities. It is about the ability to work together despite these. Given the inevitability of internal conflict for community led campaigns, we must ask ourselves, as grassroots and community-oriented activists, how can we help transform conflict into a productive force? The eventual building of the pipeline had far more to do with the balance of forces against the campaign than with internal difficulties.

Structural factors

Before moving to focus on the community education dimension of the campaign, we might ask how community-based campaigns can maintain broad cohesion despite these internal differences and external pressures.

In the Irish context, the early and symbolic imprisonment of five local men was important in preventing other actors (local notables, mainstream parties or NGOs, urban radicals) from dominating the campaign. Following established traditions, it was agreed at the outset of their three-month imprisonment that decisions would have to be made by the families of those imprisoned, and this community-centric power remained after their release. The nature of the interests at play – the vast profits involved in oil and gas production and the state's openness both to direct corruption and to wider 'national interest' concerns – removed most of the more opportunistic supporters who might have successfully placed themselves at the head of a campaign that threatened such interests less.

At the same time, the derisory consultation, ignoring of planning process and health and safety concerns, the scale of violence and intimidation and the hostility and downright lies from state and corporate media enabled a much faster learning process among locals who might otherwise have placed more faith in established institutions' goodwill and the scope for easy resolution of the issues. The local community, and their radical supporters, thus had a clearer field for developing a genuinely community-led radical campaign than might otherwise have been the case.

'Unofficial' environmental justice movements – often centred not so much on outright opposition to development' as on the contestation of who will actually benefit from a particular development strategy – have a long history in Ireland (Allen and Jones 1990). Such campaigns, rooted in rural communities, often take time to build a broad consensus and avoid permanent breakdowns of interpersonal relations – but once started have an immense capacity for resistance and a strong capacity to resist violence and vilification.

Particularly interesting in this campaign were the prior relationships built between anarchist and other urban, class-oriented activists, focussed on issues of social justice and distribution, and ecological activists, whose primary concern was preventing environmental destruction. The long trust built up between these movements stood the campaign in good stead when it came to both recruiting and educating ecological activists from overseas into the importance of economic survival for rural communities – and the need to take the lead from community decision-making processes. Such activists brought a significant range of practical skills relevant to non-violent direct action; website development, media and research; grassroots organising and facilitation practices and permaculture.

Environmental justice and community (self-)education

One fruitful way of tracing the campaign's developing self-confidence and capacity to constitute an effective collective actor is to name the multiple dimensions of self-education that local activists went through in the process of the campaign. 'Shell to Sea started with two campaign goals, moving to three in the course of the campaign's own learning:

1. Any exploitation of the Corrib gas field be done in a safe way that will not expose the local community in Erris to unnecessary health, safety and environmental risks.
2. To renegotiate the terms of the Great Oil and Gas Giveaway, which sees Ireland's 10 billion barrels of oil equivalent off the West Coast go directly to the oil companies, with the Irish State retaining a 0% share, no energy security of supply and only 25% tax on profits against which all costs can be deducted.
3. To seek justice for the human rights abuses suffered by Shell to Sea campaigners due to their opposition to Shell's proposed inland refinery. (Shell to Sea, ND)

When translated into campaigning knowledge, these goals involved the development of counter-expertise around health, safety, environmental and planning issues; radical self-education around economic and power-political interests; and a critical engagement with policing and the courts.

Counter-expertise

Eyerman and Jamison (1991), starting from the environmental movement, highlight the extent to which social movements involve the development of counter-expertise, the capacity to credibly challenge the perspectives presented by official experts. From campaigns against pollution and the nuclear industry on, campaigners typically find themselves faced in planning, court and media contexts by official expertise co-constituted by the industry, the state, academia and journalists and which they have to be able to stand up to if they are to convince others.

In the case of the pipeline project, the initial counter-expertise required had to do with the untested and experimental nature of the pipeline. It involved identifying the health and safety risks, in particular to households located close to the pipeline route. Campaigners had to become experts on environmental issues, not only those to do with fossil fuels and climate change in general, but also those tied to, for example, fisheries in Broadhaven Bay, the SAC designation, the history of landslides in particular areas, the relationship between Carrowmore lake and water supply for the region, contamination of drinking water. They also had to develop the necessary procedural expertise to negotiate the planning and appeals process – to say nothing of the skills involved in engaging with the courts, media, politicians, NGOs and so on.

Radical self-education

The oil industry is extremely complex and operates on a scale far beyond most of our experience as everyday social actors. Grasping what it means in practice is no easy task. This can run from understanding how few local jobs are actually likely to be created long-term from a pipeline and refinery project to uncovering the ways in which the Irish state had dismantled its own royalty and tax regime vis-à-vis the oil multinationals.

So too with the operations of this kind of power politics, whether grounded in the corruption of individual politicians or in the state's ruthless pursuit of what it conceives of as its strategic interests. One obvious example has to do with relationships with politicians. Rural and urban Irish property-owners, however small, are used to seeking the intervention of county councillors and local parliamentary deputies to resolve 'problems' ranging from securing planning permission for a new house, evicting travellers, seeking roadworks, health provision or investment in community projects, and presiding over the opening of sports, school and other facilities. It can be a slow and difficult process to realise that the scale of the money involved in the oil industry, and the fundamental nature of the interests involved mean that the friendly local politician will not be your friend in these contexts.

There are some parallels here to Alf Nilsen's (2010) work on the limits of 'citizenship' knowledge in the Narmada anti-dam campaign in western India: indigenous populations which had transformed local power relationships through successfully asserting their legal rights as citizens, found that legally-oriented strategies resisting displacement by dam construction were ineffective as they challenged the very same interests which had been happy to support the enforcement of other forms of legality against minor abuses by petty local officials.

Policing and the courts

Erris is very much the sort of region from which gardaí (Irish police) are recruited. Elderly locals normally experience the police (if not always the courts) as their allies against a variety of threats and inconveniences, and are rarely exposed to the kind of aggression and intimidation that marks police engagements with urban working-class youth, travellers or republicans. The 'moral shock' of seeing once-trusted police beat, threaten and lie about oneself, one's family and neighbours is not to be underestimated, particularly given the importance of the sense of belonging to a 'national community' excluding such groups.

It is thus a strong indicator of the learning involved in the campaign that it extended its original goals (1 and 2 above) to include an uncompromisingly-phrased demand for 'justice for human rights abuses' suffered by campaigners.

More generally

The first part of this chapter questioned simplistic notions of unity and success and restated the importance of sustained popular mobilisation, learning through action and alliance formation as key elements of the potential needed to bring about a better world. The second part explored *diverse* forms of subaltern knowledge and organisation in this context. Here we can refer in particular to Gramsci's distinction between common sense and good sense; from a community education point of view this implies that a confident community, actively constituting its own political capacity rather than seeking reliance on an established political broker (in effect the negotiation of common sense) is a self-educating agent (Mayo 1999; Ytterstad 2014).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, rural communities in the southern Irish province of Munster, facing greenfield site projects for chemical plants for US multinationals, eventually developed sophisticated mechanisms of knowledge transfer, so that the immediate announcement of impending development was followed immediately by locals from a neighbouring town able to explain in comprehensible and realistic detail what this would mean in practice.

Something similar developed in Erris: the *No Consent* project (Anon, n.d.) interviewed local activists about what they had learned from the campaign that could be shared with similar communities facing the oil and gas industry elsewhere. Turned into a very readable booklet and (even more importantly) a portable exhibition of photographs and quotes, this was brought to several communities facing fracking in the 2010s, to great effect. Other networking processes helped put local activists together with those in similar, disadvantaged rural communities encountering fracking, sharing expertise and developing solidarity.

The state's retreat, marked by the passing of anti-fracking legislation and the scale of support for anti-drilling legislation, is indicative of how effective the Erris community has been – through its self-development as an autonomous political actor, its painstaking self-education, and its concern for knowledge transfer to related communities elsewhere, sharing what had been learnt from Nigeria and Norway.

Community-based environmental justice *despite* the professionals

Paid professionals, in the campaign against Shell, were mostly prominent by their absence – with the exception of one or two NGOs, who used the issue to pursue legal cases of their own and abandoned the campaign once these had been concluded . This of course parallels the actions of party politicians noted earlier.

A couple of honourable exceptions can be noted. The small and radical development group AfrI (Action from Ireland) retained a genuine connection to the campaign throughout. Returned development worker Sister Majella McCarron, with a history of involvement in the Ogoni campaign against Shell's operations in the Niger Delta, was a consistent ally. Some of the 'outside activists' involved in the campaign were trained or employed as community workers of various kinds, though their actions in Erris were not carried out on this basis.

There were specific Irish contexts to this. 'Social partnership' has already been mentioned: the involvement since 1987 of trade unions, farmers and employers in corporatist decision-making, extended in the 1990s to include community, environmental and most other social movements – or at least their formal and funded manifestations – meant that by 2005 most community groups were structured around state funding and involvement in 'consultation', in return for abandoning direct confrontation with the state and not directly criticising state policies. Similar situations obtained for environmental groups, who consistently avoided mentioning the Rossport campaign within Ireland. While not identical with the US reliance on private foundation money criticised by INCITE! (2007), the net outcome is the same.

We can also highlight an even longer-standing distinction in Ireland between 'consensual' forms of community development in rural areas, geared to advancing local claims around the distribution of mainstream rewards, and 'oppositional' community development – largely in urban working-class and traveller contexts (Curtin and Varley 1995). In a 'consensual' context, it was easy for Shell to distribute small amounts of money to 'community' projects and the state to remind existing groups of favours owed and salaries still being paid. Such relationships place strong limits on what community workers can advance politically.

In *No Consent*, some local campaigners did feel in retrospect that some of those they had condemned as being 'bought off' by Shell money would have been better understood as slow learners, who could have been won to the campaign in time and should not have been written off entirely. However it has to be said that few if any such individuals managed this learning curve from their own side, so these reflections may rather represent common feelings of regret at ruptures within small-scale communities.

Leaving Irish specifics aside, when the state understands its core interests as being at stake – as has been the case for the last 100 years when the oil industry is in question, it will always be hard for those whose professional position and organisations depend on state funding to seriously oppose it. Criminalising movements is particularly effective in detaching this layer of professionals. Such professionals as were able to engage *as professionals* in the area were rather a handful of journalists, trade unionists and academics.

This does not, however, mean that professionals *employed by the community* rather than by the state might not have contributed more strongly to the campaign if such people had existed. One line of critique, then, challenges professionals as such and seeks to restore the central role of

unpaid local community activists; another asks whether and under what circumstances it might be possible for community organisations with their own staff to become independent from state and corporate money.

Conclusion

However none of this means that solidarity and agency are absent. Solidarity was very widely expressed both nationally and internationally, in important practical ways. The development of popular agency – as opposed to relying on official processes, corporate consultation, elected representatives or NGOs and professionals – was central to the actual learning process involved.

In many ways this represents a return to some of the foundational approaches in community development, which are about asserting the development of popular agency rather than the insertion of paid professionals as a goal in its own right. This is perhaps particularly significant where the issues at stake are such as to pit what the state perceives as its core interests against very different perspectives on the part of the community. Rossport stands as one of the key reference points of contemporary grassroots community-led campaigning in Ireland today. Its lessons and practices ripple outwards and onwards into the development practices of residential, cultural and issue based communities.

Finally, it is worth considering how far we are now within the dying days of the fossil fuel industry, with renewables taking the lead in many countries on economic as well as ecological grounds, and support for extraction in new and vulnerable areas (tar sands, Arctic exploration, fracking) now the prerogative of hard conservative governments such as the UK, US and Australia. In this context, environmental justice activism in disadvantaged rural communities raises new kinds of issues, of what will constitute a viable future survival strategy in the context of peak oil and climate change.

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