

**Social movements never died:  
community politics and the social  
economy  
in the Irish Republic**

This paper argues for a socialist feminist theorisation of social movements that starts from the “hidden knowledge” of situated social relations, needs and struggles. In this perspective, social movements are a constant presence in the social world, although taking different institutional forms; they do not “revive” so much as develop, or “fade away” so much as retreat. This paper discusses one example.

Community politics in the Irish Republic, largely and significantly powered by women’s activism, spans the urban working class and the rural marginalised in a challenge to official “development”. These movements use participatory praxis to articulate locally felt needs, adding a second dimension to official nationalist and labour corporatisms. This gendered focus on participation and the hidden dimension of needs makes explicit the connection between public action and private struggle.

These movements currently find their limits in difficulties with alliance-building beyond the local spheres of tacit knowledge and in a tendency to co-optation by the state, converting activists into subcontracted civil servants. An understanding of movements as the organisation of situated skills can both account for this and help activists to push the other way, challenging the official knowledge of market and state on its own terrain.

*Caitríona Mullan:*

*32 Raymond Street, South Circular Road, Dublin 8, Republic of Ireland*

*email: [calm@iol.ie](mailto:calm@iol.ie)*

*Laurence Cox:*

*Dept. of Sociology, St. Anne's, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Republic of Ireland*

*email: [laurence.cox@may.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@may.ie)*

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*This paper is a draft designed to generate debate in and around the community movement in Ireland. We welcome comments, contributions, critiques, etc.!*

**An alternative perspective on social movements**

In a widely read book, Alberto Melucci (1989) criticised what he claimed to be a dominant metaphor in social movements writing, of movements as historical personages. Melucci may or may not have been right in this – at any rate, few if any writers have bothered to take him up on the issue. Some such idea, however, seems implicit in the concept of movements “reviving”, as if a movement was a kind of animal that could be born and die – and, perhaps, “revive” after a hard night’s drinking.

We don’t need to push this literary argument very far – after all, as EP Thompson (1977) put it, it is hard to talk usefully about human processes *without* metaphors that are in some way drawn from life. But it does raise the question: what does it mean to say that a movement is dying or reviving (apart from the implication that social movement theorists might somehow be the doctors, or alternative health practitioners, at the patients’ bedside)?

The most obvious answers are in terms of what can crudely be called “top-down” theories of movements, of which “resource mobilisation theory” and “political opportunity structure” approaches are the most visible. Such approaches in practice identify movements with specific kinds of institutional manifestation, typically those represented by semi-professionalised activists, and conclude that when all is well with these activists all is well with the movement. Crudely, this is the logic by which trade unions are doing well when they support large bodies of full-time officials; an analysis which takes what Robert Michels saw as a terminal coma as being the pink of health.

This paper illustrates, more than arguing for, an alternative theorisation of social movements which Laurence has developed in previous work (1998, 2000). In essence this is a socialist feminist theorisation of social movements that starts from the “tacit knowledge” of situated social relations, needs and struggles (see Wainwright 1994 for an argument connecting tacit knowledge and social movement struggles). In such a “bottom-up” approach, social movements are a constant presence in the social world. Modes of domination and exploitation, and forms of resistance and challenge to these, are part and parcel of class societies. Industrial conflict, for example, may be expressed in corporatist arrangements, in

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence would like to thank Maeve O’Grady and Martin Geoghegan for conversations without which this paper could not have been written. Caitriona would similarly like to thank Tom Daly and Eamon Connolly, two individuals whose refusal to go with the flow has inspired many. None of the above are in any way responsible for what we say here.

wildcat strikes and rank-and-file movements, or in everyday forms of workplace resistance, theft, “hidden transcripts” and so on.

In this kind of image, social movements are the stuff of social life, and it is not very plausible to think of there being “more” or “less” of them, with the implication that when “contentious action” or “protest” are absent there is simply a void. Rather, the same grassroots conflicts give rise to different institutional forms, in a process for which a more useful language than that of conking out or popping into the world might be that of development and decay, or retreat and advance.

Such an approach stresses the “hidden knowledge” of ordinary people’s actions against the “one-dimensional man” suggested by a linear view of movements as either present or not in the public sphere, in acts of protest, and so on. Everyday relations, needs and struggles are not adequately captured by the question of when they happen to take particular kinds of institutional shape. This paper attempts to illustrate this point by looking at changing forms of community politics in the Republic of Ireland within this century.

In this paper, we are not positioning ourselves as doctors watching the patient for signs of recovery. Rather, starting from the assumption that other people are *in some ways* quite well-informed about their own experience, needs and possibilities of action, we are trying to learn from their praxis, without giving up our own ability to criticise in solidarity – precisely because we share the motivations driving the movements we are writing about, we think we may be able to do something that is useful for those movements by suggesting ways in which those motivations are being frustrated and diverted. To quote Piven and Cloward,

“The poor need a great deal, but they are not likely to be helped to get it when we ignore the weaknesses in received doctrines revealed by historical experience. If we acknowledge those weaknesses, we may do better. We may then begin to consider alternative forms of organizations through which working-class people can act together in defiance of their rulers in ways that are more congruent with the structure of working-class life and with the process of working-class struggle, and less susceptible to penetration by dominant elites.” (1979: xvi – xvii)

In writing this paper, Caitríona is drawing on her experience as a consultant working with community groups towards developing social economy models (discussed later in the paper), as well as on her experience as a political activist. Laurence is drawing on his experience of working with community activists in various political and academic contexts, as well as on his parallel experiences within the environmental movement. Neither of us are part of the communities we discuss in this paper, but both of us have been working in solidarity with people in these movements over some years. With backgrounds as a Northern Irish Catholic (Caitríona) and British atheist parents (Laurence), we are both distant in different ways from the particular history of nationalist communitarianism with which this paper starts, but – living in the Republic – neither of us have the privilege of being able to avoid its effects in our lives.

## Community politics in Ireland

The kind of community politics we are discussing here, often characterised as “oppositional” community politics (e.g. Curtin and Varley 1995), is based in the urban working class and the rural poor. In its current incarnation it stresses above all pressure and awareness-raising in relation to the lack of social infrastructural resources. It is powered by local women’s activism, in that the vast majority of groups are led by women. This is particularly true for initiatives in areas experiencing turf wars between community associations and for example criminal gangs, where the social infrastructure has broken down (see Farrar 1997 for an analysis of community action and criminal activity as among the alternative possible responses to exclusion and deprivation).

This movement stresses above all participatory praxis and local needs (see Hope et al. 1984 for a classic expression of this). On the former, it is argued that “process is as important as product” – what is aimed at is empowerment through people regaining a measure of control over their situation. On the latter, it is routinely stressed that the experts on what is needed are local people themselves, not outside experts.

Hence the movement is aimed at “capacity building” for local communities: building the capacity of the community to function for itself. Initially this means improving the quality of life within communities, in particular the quality of women’s lives, through e.g. access to adult and community education, training, and forms of self-development such as holistic healing, meditation etc. This emphasis on self-development and communication (O’Donovan and Ward 1999: 92) is methodological: as individuals become more confident they become more able to articulate their own hidden knowledge and to take action which is grounded in it, in opposition to structural pressures and the routines of power relationships. It is only by providing the individual with the tools to survive, develop a spirit of resistance on their own terms and cope with the effects on their own mental health that change can really happen. The characteristics of a process of articulating hidden knowledge are necessarily non-linear; “capacity building” reinforces a process which is heterogenous with respect to hegemonic cultural and political relations.

This process is a challenge to both nationalist (Breen et al. 1990) and labour (Allen 1997) corporatisms. In effect, the existence and very specific focus of community politics in Ireland upsets the claims of both nationalist and labour movements to representativity. They function as a heterogenous, community-based civic opposition. In particular, they challenge the claim of labour corporatisms and left-of-centre political parties which have emerged from the labour movement to be the one and only form of populist opposition / representation. They further challenge the model of nationalist politics, which is unsuited to geographically-specific concerns, and in particular blurs the problems of urban working-class areas under a general celebration of “the Celtic Tiger”. The nationalist model developed at a time when the national question was a priority, but failed to adapt after the partial resolution of the “national question”. National electoral politics, however, still run according to this model (and represent a classic case of Lipset and Rokkan’s “freezing” argument: Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

## History

The nationalist revolution in Ireland (comprising among other things the Land War, cultural nationalism, the War of Independence and the revival of the Catholic Church) stressed local knowledge for the purposes of mobilising the local to the aims of the nationalist project. The post-revolutionary state in Ireland featured the enshrinement of this national “community” as the basis on which the nation marched against its oppressors. This enshrinement enabled the creation of a hegemony which legitimated itself in terms of being based on that “community”.

The post-revolutionary state adopted “the national project”, in which various social groups had a specific place. In this process the left and feminist forces which had been an essential support to revolution were marginalised, experiencing considerable disillusionment in the post-revolutionary years. The radical left leaders were co-opted, even during the revolutionary years, by the nationalist leadership, symbolised perhaps most obviously by Connolly’s adoption of the nationalist agenda alongside the socialist. Women, even those who had organised politically during the revolutionary years and borne arms and the likelihood of imprisonment alongside their male counterparts, had a place in the new state as mothers and wives, but not as feminists or as any force in the public sphere<sup>2</sup>. The state adopted various measures to keep workers and women integrated within the post-revolutionary hegemonic concept, such as tax laws positioning women as dependents of men and the provision of housing and unemployment benefits; eventually, however, both processes of integration began to come apart at the seams.

## Community activism

As in other west European countries, there was a significant recomposition of the working class which became clear in the 1970s in particular. In Ireland, however, this has a specific history which starts not from a Fordist “golden age” but from a period of underdeveloped economic autarky which had perhaps more in common with Mussolini’s Italy or Salazar’s Portugal (both explicit inspirations of the dominant figure of the period, Eamonn de Valera) than with *Wirtschaftswunder* or *Trente glorieuses*. The break with this policy, and the shift towards attracting foreign investment capital with a view to creating an export-oriented industrial economy, is conventionally located in 1958. The new strategy started to bear fruit briefly in the late 1960s and early 1970s prior to the oil crisis, which led once again to massive levels of unemployment in the late 1970s and 1980s.

The new inward investment, while it lasted, led to the development of a new industrial culture on greenfield sites and industrial estates, often far removed from traditional Irish working-class strongholds such as docklands and food processing. Simultaneously, working-class communities were relocated from the inner-city areas associated with these kinds of employment to new areas, usually lacking all

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the position outlined by Coulter (1993) and Connolly (1996) that sees e.g. the Irish Housewives’ Association as radical simply for its existence in hard times, see Cox (2000).

infrastructure, particularly in West Dublin suburbs such as Ballymun and Ballyfermot, but similar processes happened in other towns and cities. Under these contexts, existing modes of working-class opposition in the context of such issues as environmental deprivation became more explicit and more articulate, in part because the recomposition of the working class forced opposition from the traditional and “hidden” into a context where it could no longer rely on sedimented and particular routines and had to make explicit and public some of its earlier ways of working.

More generally, previously effective modes of integration met new challenges with large-scale recruitment into the working-class, followed by widespread unemployment. Non-workplace activism, largely driven by women, appears to take a decisive step forward in this period (ultimately leading to the development of what is now a well-established culture of women’s community activism), though we know of no systematic research in the area (Martin Geoghegan in UCC is currently working on a research project to uncover some of this history, as is Laurence with Pat McBride in Ballymun). These movements expressed a strong criticism of the effects on the ground of official strategies for “development”, and challenged their valuation of economic growth above other socially relevant factors. (See in particular Tovey and Share 2000: 334 – 361 on community development in Ireland).

A notable example was the development of community-based environmental protests (Tovey 1993, Jones and Allen 1990), where rural communities organised among themselves to oppose the state-led introduction of dirty chemical plants in the Southwest, avoiding developing environmental legislation in core states and using locals as cheap, unskilled labour forces. (Ireland remains one of the few countries in western Europe where nuclear power was decisively defeated.) In an area such as Ballymun, community groups were able for a period to assert control over the allocation of housing, and subsequently to force a process of state involvement with local groups which ultimately led to the complete rebuilding of an estate of 20,000 people (Power 1997). More “routine” kinds of community activism over the past three decades include the development of co-ops and credit unions, literacy projects, groups working with issues like domestic violence and drug addiction, women’s community education projects, youthwork projects, “community justice” conflicts around dealers and vigilantes (see Connolly 1997), the rise of the traveller movement, etc.

The effects, in this kind of politics, of the history sketched out above, are ambiguous. On the one hand, the organisation of “community” within the nationalist project enables continuing strong mobilisation, as indeed it does in the case of minority ethnic groups in the USA or among Catholics in Northern Ireland (see e.g. Lichterman 1996 for a contrast between white middle-class modes of environmental organisation and community-based anti-toxics campaigning in black and Hispanic neighbourhoods; for a Welsh comparison, see Adamson 1997). On the other hand, given the partial success of this nationalist project the assumption is made – in the Republic – that the state is or could be “ours” (see e.g. Maher 1996

for an implicit statement of this position<sup>3</sup>). That “ours” is naturally redefined from below, against the claim of powerful and wealthy groups to represent the national community. The difficulty is – as American blacks or Northern Catholics have no difficulty realising – that the state is *not* “on our side” in the sense of representing women’s or working-class needs and interests.

The result, as Geoghegan has shown (2000), is that there is a confusion or contradiction around the *emotional* relationship of community activists to the state. One way this expresses itself is in an oscillation between resentment and a “moral economy” (Thompson 1993, Bagguley 1996) which asserts particular demands vis-à-vis the state. In Geoghegan’s analysis, activists manage this tension by personalising conflict at the expense of strategies grounded in an analysis of structural conflicts, which would imply a different relationship to the state. As we shall shortly see, the state has found its own ways of exploiting this contradiction. Thus the new situation from the 1970s on shows a breakdown of earlier modes of sustaining hegemony around the national project, particularly on the part of women and the urban working class.

### **“Partnershiping”: the new state strategy**

And so there was a problem. The cosy consensus around the national project was beginning to crack in that certain groups (women and workers) were neither happy with nor benefitting from their assigned positions as standard-bearers. The state wondered what to do. The solution it came up with was the perfect one: the manipulation and pulling back in, with a silken thread, of those torn between viewing the state as against them or *of* them. The state knew that there was a possibility that its malcontents could be persuaded not to desert the national project. So it wooed them with fine wines and offers of security, planning a wonderful future of co-operation as it whispered huskily in the ear of the exhausted and dispirited representative activists of the disadvantaged in Ireland. This new, somewhat smooth tactic was given the name of partnershiping (see Community Workers’ Co-operative 1996 and Powell and Guerin 1998; for a more critical perspective, see Geoghegan 1998).

Power can be, as they say, an aphrodisiac. And the voluntary and community sector’s response to partnershiping was one of eager compliance. Limited funding and the promises of public and community consultation to inform statutory decision-making were the carrot which was dangled by the state. The voluntary and community sector fell for it. This not only tied community organisations into the state but also to statutory policy processes at European membership level.

Part of the deal of partnershiping was that, if it was going to be given a new role by the state which involved being allowed to have something to do with what the big boys were doing, the voluntary and community sector had to have the organisational equivalent of a pretty frock – particularly since it was being wined and dined. So the voluntary and community sector directed most of its energy towards writing funding applications, worrying that it might not fit the funding

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks are due to Martin Geoghegan for this reference.



criteria, taking such measures as legal incorporation, financial auditing and restructuring of organisations in order to make sure that its new partner, the State, would still want it.

And so it was that the language of state and market recolonised activism<sup>4</sup>.

### **The limitations of partnershiping for community activism**

The implications of this for activism are profound. If we start from an understanding of movements as the articulation and development of hidden knowledge, then the colonisation of the work structures and language developed by movements on the part of the logics of power and money (Habermas 1987) are deeply problematic. In practice what happens is that rather than extending their understanding of structural problems, radicalising their demands and developing broader alliances, movement organisations find themselves immediately in competition with those of their sister organisations who stand closest to them, and are thus competitors for funding and influence. Hence there is a growth in particularism and factionalisation, as networks develop around this zero-sum politics whose terms are of course set elsewhere (see Piven and Cloward 1979 for a comparable analysis of welfare rights movements in the United States).

As movement organisations restructure themselves to fit into state and EU funding criteria, they also lose their ability to move beyond pre-existing local spheres of tacit knowledge, which in effect is returned to the verbal sphere and removed from that of management committees and funding applications (Geoghegan 2000 found virtually no written versions of the radical oral discourses expressed by activists in interviews). “Hidden transcripts” are then not allowed to penetrate those areas of the work relationships – which are also political relationships – where one “level” meets another; so that this interaction operates on terms set from above.

A subtler problem lies in the demands set by state and EU on individual movement participants. The ability to read, assimilate and remain up to speed with the immense volume of material generated by programmes of state intervention works against the principles of participation and bottom-up decision-making in which community activism has been grounded, as does the ability to write funding proposals, take part in committee meetings, manage high-speed work relationships and so on. As this process develops, activists are increasingly polarised, with the selection out of an elite capable of working on these terms and hence able to participate at state and national level and the consequent exclusion of other activists from real decision-making (see Broderick 1998 and Cox 1999a on how this process operates within the environmental movement). As these become full-time and skilled jobs, such activists become subcontracted civil servants; and increasingly these positions are given, not to the “organic intellectuals” of community

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<sup>4</sup> Robson 2000 makes a somewhat different case, in which this has always been the meaning of “community” – at least, in Northern Ireland and the UK. This challenging and at times unclear analysis parallels our critique of what community development in the Republic has *become*, but differs on *origins*. Although recognising the existence in the USA of community organisations which predate the state’s colonisation of this field, this situation (which parallels that in the Republic) remains less well theorised than that in which the field is held to be *created* by the state.

organisations, but to middle-class outsiders in possession of educational credentials, to such an extent that women's community education has explicitly identified the credentialisation of activists' own knowledge as a key issue in regaining control of what started out as "community" organisations (O'Grady 1999).

Although many of these elite activists – like the vast majority of community activists generally – are women, what is recognised by the structures of accountancy and accountability as "real work" tends (here as elsewhere) to ignore or, more accurately, take for granted specifically female kinds of work, such as personal support, communication, meeting the individual needs of participants, and so on (see Lynch and MacLaughlin 1995 for a theoretically sensitive exploration of the role of women's unpaid work in the community generally). Small wonder, perhaps, that older activists notice the reluctance of younger generations to engage in volunteer activity of any kind.

### **The limits of workability of partnershiping**

Whether this new hegemonic strategy will be successful in the long term is questionable. If in the medium term it has delivered an exceptional set of corporatist arrangements and a rather less unusual politics of the middle ground. In the long run, its ability to organise popular pressure behind it has to be in doubt (Munck 1999).

At the level of national corporatist arrangements, although – unusually – the voluntary and community sector, along with farmers, are nominally equal partners with state, employers and unions, in practice they are very much junior partners, and the scope of the decision-making processes they are involved in are heavily constrained by national economic decision-making in which they do not have a significant role, by wider EU policies which constrain the national state, and by processes of parliamentary politics and civil service decision-making which in effect restrict the available agenda for real decision-making (see Breen et al. 1990 on the limited autonomy of the Irish state generally).

The net result, obviously, is that there are few gains for women and / or welfare recipients; to take two examples, state support for childcare or rises in unemployment assistance have fallen far short of what community organisations identify as necessary. Simultaneously, the gap between the massive growth in profits delivered by partnership and the slower growth in wages and the "social wage" of developments in the welfare state has led to increasing industrial conflict, exacerbated by inflation and a rising cost of living, particularly in housing. Hence the question of whether partnership can "deliver the goods" and secure continued hegemony has to be in serious doubt (see McCann 1999).

At the level of the organisations in question, the increasing integration of working-class and women's organisations (along with other social movements, such as the environmental) into the partnership process tends to detach movement organisations from their bases and fragment those movements' ability to speak authoritatively for the groups whose support they are supposed to "deliver" – a problem that has become clear in recent wildcat strikes, challenges to corporatist

agreements and large minority votes in support of anti-partnership candidates in major unions (see MacSimóin 1999 on unions and Maguire 2000 on protests against water charges). As well as this, the continued decline of the integrating force of religion and kinship leads to an increasing diversification of communities, complicating who “we” are.

As gays and lesbians, travellers and unmarried mothers assert their presence on the cultural scene, with refugee movements upsetting the complacent myths of cultural uniformity and with the politicisation of women in the home around the valuing of unpaid work, the working assumptions of a routinised “community”, delivering unproblematic support to its “natural leaders” – nationalist, religious or labour – are falling apart. This is not necessarily to be celebrated – to pose a significant challenge to hegemony, movements from below need to find a new language of cooperation and community – but rather a registering of the increasingly counterproductive nature of a narrow version of “community” that excludes or fails to connect with the everyday praxis of actual working-class people and women.

From our point of view, this praxis is a necessary starting-point for any analysis or politics that situates itself within or in solidarity with women and the working-class. On the face of it, for example, the existence of widespread forms of working-class self-organisation around everyday needs and participatory decision-making structures might be expected to attract the attention of a left which claims to place the working class first (in its radical variants) or to care about real democracy (in its liberal variants). In practice, while community activists have often served their time in socialist, republican or feminist organisations of one kind or another, co-operation between those movements and community movements is normally patchy at best and non-existent at worst: authoritarianism and class barriers routinely prevent any real communication, except around occasional issues such as opposition to water charges.

In this paper, we are interested in particular in asking what a Marxist or socialist feminist praxis might mean in terms of supporting people’s attempts to free themselves from the increasingly dysfunctional and coercive relationship we have described as partnershiping. If social movement is the organisation of situated skills, what can we contribute in the way of a politics that might encourage the further development and articulation of the hidden knowledge emerging in community politics? How can we “push the other way” against the progressive incorporation of activism into the state? One possible answer lies within the development of the social economy, as that term is used in Ireland (Zuege 1999’s critique of “the social economy” as a type of “third way” thinking illustrates the differences between community politics and the social economy in the Irish context and how these are routinely understood in Britain and the States – or at least in England and white America.)

### **The social economy: facilitating the process**

The social economy is that spectrum of activity located between the public and private sector (and so driven neither by the logic of capital nor by that of the state)

which is a form of economic organisation aimed at addressing social need. It is economic activity which has social impact, and as such embodies the principle of placing social viability on a par with economic viability, social sustainability being equal to economic sustainability and the two being interdependent.

In community terms in Ireland, the social economy is represented in nascent form by community-driven efforts to provide essential services which improve the quality of life and to address the gaps in facilities and services which communities have been deprived of but which are essential in terms of day-to-day living. A large number of social economy enterprises constitute the adding of an economic dimension to work performed which has been historically undervalued, unvalued and unpaid: caring services, maintenance services, cultural activity and so on, reaching as far as community banking. It presents the opportunity, if developed, for services to be provided by and for communities on a basis which is more sustainable than simple subsidised service provision.

The “Third System Approaches” (TSA) strategy is that adopted by the group with whom Caitríona works, who have developed, through activism and action research, models for social economy activity which can be adapted by communities to suit their own particular needs. Part of our work involves advocacy and identification of obstacles to the evolution of an autonomous third system in Ireland. Attempts by the state to appropriate models and colonise the term “social economy” have in one sense failed, in that the state’s definitions of what the social economy was are too narrow: a demonstration of the fact that this is one dimension of community activity which will escape capture (see Wainwright 1994, chapter 6, for a discussion of the relevance of hidden knowledge in the development of the social economy).

TSA supports the radicalisation of goals and means through its work, and this extends to seeking to alter the terms on which statutory agencies become involved with the initiatives whose development we facilitate. The models which have been adopted in communities offer an opportunity for state agencies to get involved, but on the community’s terms – in other words, by providing specified support rather than driving initiatives. TSA does not work with organisations which do not have a community base in developing social economy initiatives. We have researched legal structures of community ownership of the structures developed by those communities. In a sense, the message to regional state partnership structures is “here’s how you can help make this work. If you can’t or won’t, we’ll do it anyway. It’s your choice.” In a sense this is a type of empowerment which has the potential to shift the balance entirely back to the community.

Another possible direction for the autonomous articulation of activists’ hidden knowledge, representing a layer to life in Ireland which is not represented in either statutory descriptions or in the tourist brochures, is last year’s *Ireland from Below* workshop. Bringing activists from different movements – community, environmental, left and feminist – *as activists*, we found an immediate ability to make links and communicate around needs and problems, as well as around visions of the future, once we stepped outside our routine roles as representatives for particular organisations within structures which separate one movement from another and put participants in the same movement in opposition to each other.

Tellingly, the area where it was hardest to find any language (shared or individual) was in relation to the mechanisms of politics – indicative of the difficulty felt by movements at present in standing outside the relationships they find themselves in or articulating alternatives. (The proceedings of the conference are being made available on the Web; email [laurence.cox@may.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@may.ie) for details; see also Cox 1999b for more reflections on the process).

Although grassroots approaches aren't infallible, they can and do develop according to more natural rhythms, and according to the concerns of those involved, and are most potent when allowed to develop in this way. What to us characterises the value of Marxist and socialist feminist understandings of movement is that it offers a picture of what is going on beneath the surface – the development and articulation of hidden knowledge – which enables us to find a critical standpoint that does not depend on the claim to “know it all” in the abstract, and suggests concrete means for supporting this process – TSA's work in defending and developing an autonomous third sector, IFB's development of communication outside the structures imposed by the state.

On the face of it, a certain layer of Irish society is doing very well – as suggested by the term “The Celtic Tiger” (see Crowley and MacLaughlin 1997). The image of Ireland internationally is now one of prosperity and huge economic growth. The reality is that the gap between rich and poor is growing wider by the day, and national statistics conceal the fact that there are areas of the country, rural and urban, which take more than their fair share of the dark side of the Celtic Tiger. The predictions in this situation should be a lot blacker.

Yet there are grounds for optimism, not immediately visible, but which exist in movements at community level which have a local focus and which are based on creativity and the authority of praxis. The slow but sure development of links between these movements, and of inalienable community infrastructures is a step towards some kind of alternative .

*Caitríona Mullan is an independent researcher and consultant who works with Third System Approaches. Laurence Cox is currently developing a community-based oral history project in Ballymun in west Dublin.*

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