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Counter culture and social change since the 70s

Introduction

What I want to do in this presentation is to set Donagh's research, and maybe the rest of the day, in a broader context, coming out of my own research on the counter culture of the late 1980s but going beyond that to think about the various counter cultures in Ireland since the 1970s or so.

And the first question that has to be answered is maybe: why does it matter? So here's a quick answer to that. If we're interested in social change, there might be all sorts of reasons why it comes about; and people are often very attracted to explanations which somehow go behind the backs of people who are alive at the time and make it look as though it was going to happen anyway. We could ask very interesting questions about why those kinds of answers are attractive, but for my purposes today the main point is that they are irrelevant. There may indeed be things going on, forces for change or against change, that are not particularly visible to us, but they aren't that relevant to our action, because we can't do anything significant about them. (This may of course be why they are attractive – because they let us off the hook, break the connection between what we feel is wrong in the world and ourselves as people who might actually take some action.)

So if we want to ask about what goes into making social change, without necessarily discounting that there may *also* be things going on that we can't see, what we need to look at most of all is ourselves and the other people we share the society with. Very obviously, we look at groups engaged in some kind of political action or social movement, and for the last few decades there is no shortage of those – the women's movement, the ecology movement, the socialist and trade union movement, the republican movement and so on –

and there is no serious doubt that these have had a substantial effect on the society we live in, even if they have lost many battles as well as won some. Of course we also look at the needs they were expressing – born out of poverty, oppression, the waste of human lives, violence, the destruction of the environment and so on – and this is also fairly easy to understand: that a movement will not be successful unless it is speaking what is in many people's hearts and enables them to say it powerfully and to do something about it.

Counter culture, or oppositional cultures more generally, are a middle term between these two – social movements and human needs. They run from the everyday ways in which people cope with a society that denies their most basic needs, to the ways in which people live when their lives are given over to the struggle for change, and everything in between, but with these two minimum givens: that they enable people to “be themselves” (express their needs and their desires) where they live now, in their own lives, and that they run counter to what is dominant in their society. So among the things that means, in Ireland, is that they don't revolve around money or property, and they don't involve buying into the cosy consensus that “we're all in it together” and we all see things the same way.

Historicising the counter culture in Ireland

Saying anything beyond this about Irish counter cultures runs into a serious problem, which is that there is very little written about them, by comparison with (for example) Germany or Italy, never mind Britain or the USA. Some part of this has to do with our own self-images: for example, the autobiographical tendency to write about individual struggles rather than the collective, or the ever-present desire to come back into the welcoming bosom of Mother Ireland and “be accepted”. Much of it, though, has to do with the historical realities, which were different in Ireland to most of the rest of the developed world.

One obvious part of this is that Ireland, in the 1970s in particular, was making the transition into full membership of the “developed world” – and, by extension, out of the world of the colonised: a process which has come full circle with 21st century racism and our involvement in the American war on Islam. (Of course, this was a period when much of the colonised world was seeing the collapse or decline of their own visions of national economic independence, but in a context which pushed them out rather than taking them in.) So for much of the last four decades, even despite the long recession which set in shortly after those initial moments of optimism, it has been possible (or if you like convenient) to confuse the struggle for basic human needs in an unequal society with the “rising tide that lifts all boats” and a general faith in industrialisation, education, TV, the EU - or any other factor which had the merit of not involving real conflict.

A second, and equally obvious, part of this is that, where the struggles of 1968 in continental Europe turned rapidly into left-wing politics, and those of the English-speaking world into a mushrooming of musical and other subcultures, the struggles of 1968 in the post-colonial world led fairly rapidly into direct conflicts with the state (as in Latin America, or India). In Ireland this was of course reflected in the repression of the Civil Rights Movement and the start of “the Troubles”, the longest and most destructive civil war in western Europe since 1945. And, as we know, in the shadow of military events politics, and cultural change, necessarily take a back seat.

Thirdly, the migration which remained endemic until the 1990s meant that to a large extent Irish radicalism, particularly Irish cultural radicalism, could more easily find a home abroad, and contribute to the development of alternatives in Latin America or London than it could in Ireland.

So for all of these reasons, “the literature” on Irish counter cultures is thin to non-existent. Having said this, what can we say about them?

Mapping Irish counter cultures

In this section, I want to take counter cultures in this period as a whole, rather than separate them out. There are of course some oral history / collective biographical approaches which start from the assumption of a separation between movements – for example, histories of the second wave feminist movement or of the environmental movement. But I would argue that, as lived realities, counter culture at any of these points in time crossed these boundaries between movements, and in fact had to in order to be workable as a way of living one's life. With the exception of Dublin and Belfast, where the "scenes" were and are large enough to sustain more or less separate lives, there is simply not enough autonomous, non-commercial, non-official space (in every meaning of the term) in most of Ireland for the separations to be too rigid. While they are obviously accentuated by national organisations and publications based in these cities, and by their relationship to international (usually English-speaking) material, both of which have increasingly focussed on developing "niche markets", at a personal, cultural and social level my impression is that (even in Dublin) we are talking more about a set of overlapping counter cultures than a rigid separation.

In the absence of much research (beyond what we are bringing together today), I am relying on my own experience: as someone who grew up in the social movement organisations of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and has been involved ever since, particularly in various forms of networking capacity (alternative media, gatherings, attempts at alliances, and so on) between and across those movements.

So while this is one person's perspective, it is very much grounded in those practical attempts to bring people together, and I offer it in that spirit. While there are obvious effects of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on in such an approach, what is hardest to control for is rather the effect of time: for example, the difficulty in knowing how far the people who are still active now are good representatives of their own generations, and how much they have

changed, or the difficulty of assessing retrospectively the extent and limits of my teenage political world and what it might look like if I were to meet it again as I am now.

With all those caveats, four moments stand out for me: one of consolidation, one of separation, one of co-option and one of rebellion. These connect to particular generations, without of course assuming that everyone in each generation operated in the same way.

Firstly, **consolidation**: it was abundantly clear in the 1970s, but less and less so as the 1980s wore on, that there was an “activist milieu” which could be found in concrete locations (10 Camden Street springs to mind as the building in which just about everyone seemed to have their offices at one point), marked by some form of engagement with socialism and feminism, with the war in the North, and with international events. It was grungy, ran on (unemployed) volunteers and Gestetners, and I never saw anything – whether it was the huge anti-Reagan protests or the tiny meeting – which happened without it. I think this is also clear from the alternative periodicals of the time: while there was (for example) a separate, “drop-out” milieu of organic farmers, people involved in new spirituality and ecologists (e.g. at the first Mustard Seed gathering), many of those involved in that milieu were very much aware of the broader political picture, and the two came together at events such as the Carnsore festivals (which could of course not have happened without this).

Secondly, **separation**: as the British and American counter-cultures and social movements turned more into commercially-transmitted lifestyles, which people living in Ireland could buy into, and as some of the earlier generations found themselves homes in the universities and the media, what was rewarded was increasingly separate identities. By this I mean not only those groups who were proud of what became criticised as “separatism”, but also those groups who practiced it without acknowledgement: for example, the academic feminists who excluded working-class community women’s

struggles from their conferences, or the university leftists who created a sort of substitute identity politics around a particular image of the left, to the exclusion of many real working-class struggles; not to speak of the simple consumption of “coolness” and “rebellion” by younger generations. For others, community organising created new oppositional cultures and consciousness in their own estates, which became by far the largest form of counter culture in Ireland from that point on.

Thirdly, **co-option**, in particular from 1987 onwards, as doors which we had been used to have closed in our faces suddenly started to open, under the double impact of “partnership” as a new policy-making strategy (forced on the state in Ballymun and elsewhere by working-class communities), and of the victories of the women’s movement and its allies, symbolised to the establishment by Mary Robinson’s election. Groups and individuals who had been “out in the cold” for years or decades found themselves (apparently) invited to form part of new policy communities in their own areas, encouraged to compete for state funding (with each other) and able to make a living out of what had previously been a labour of love. The effect, as I have charted elsewhere, was to separate out movements dealing with different government departments, to increase fragmentation and competition within movements, and to detach a layer of professional activists, able to operate in the world of funding applications and policy submissions, from their broader movements, which consequently demobilised. To this we should add a class-based faith in the effectiveness of media work and legal actions, which meant that (if you thought you could trust the media or the EU to be on your side) you no longer needed to worry about mobilising large numbers of people for anything, because it would be sorted out for you within a much smaller world.

Finally, **rebellion**: as people have seen the limits of partnership in their own areas, but also as the global rebellion against neo-liberalism has taken shape, we have seen new generations politically socialised at the protests in Genoa, Evian, Dublin or Gleneagles; around the issues of Shannon, Tara and

Rosspoint, in a process whose outcomes (in terms of counter culture) are still very much up for grabs.

If we turn briefly to look at this in terms of people, there are surprisingly few people left around from the 1970s, let alone the 1960s: the starting age for most Irish activists is about ten years younger than in most other countries in the minority world. The counter culture/s, as it / they exist today in Ireland, still have a certain core of people who were politically socialised in the 1980s (and a handful in the 1970s), but even here much of the weight of numbers is given by those who have identified with a single movement or issue. Often this is underlined by the particular space they have carved out around this, whether organisationally, as a commercial business of some kind, or in an academic or other intellectual identity. The gulf between this “new establishment”, or more accurately this would-be establishment, and the newer generations of activists (not to mention the large numbers of working-class youth who are organisationally, politically and culturally homeless) is large.

What can bridge the gap, and does to a certain extent in different times and places, are what I called in my own research “ordinary activists”: not the full-timers, or people who identify with politics as their life, but the people whose picture of the world is large enough to embrace a real, and critical, political and social awareness. At the time, when I was researching my own 80s generation at the end of the 1990s, I could say that every one of those I had interviewed – people who had taken part in college occupations, the London squats, the drugs and music scene, street theatre and so on – had not (as popular mythology has it) given up all of that when they grew up, but had remained politically engaged, not continually but from time to time as issues came up that they cared about.

Looking back at those people 20 years on (which is a scary thought in itself), they have been involved in Glen of the Downs and Tara, in DV work and community activism, in the Mayday protests and “pie-ing” the rich and

famous, in East Timor and sustainability, in Latin American solidarity and food co-ops, in alternative media and meditation - not to mention some very good music. And of course such people are what turns a campaign into a social movement, and what keeps counter cultures alive: people who are loyal to a broader vision grounded in their own lives, for which any individual event is an expression of what they care about in the world.

Conclusion: what should we do?

At one level, counter culture needs no help: it is something which people are going to do for themselves, anyway, to the extent that they feel the need and can see the possibility. That does not, of course, mean that there is no value in reminding people about the need and providing practical examples of the possibility, and those are probably the two most important contributions that anyone can make.

Beyond those, what draws people into counter culture is above all action, and particularly actions which create alliances across some kind of diversity - which pull people out of their existing social networks, or enable people to create networks which they did not previously have - around some kind of challenge to the way things are.

Counter culture can also be fed, through communication of different kinds (the "alternative Internet" has been hugely important in this, particularly in Ireland), through different forms of education, popular / community education and training; but (as with anything) too much of this kind of feeding can kill it. Perhaps the most difficult thing I have faced in my own practice over the years is the question of how to get this particular balance right: between simply doing counter culture as a way of life, taking action, and somehow watering the roots.

We can also ask how far any particular project is adequate to the "whole way of struggle" that it comes out of: does it push the limits of what can be done

within a world that is systematically hostile to human liberation, or does it settle for something which fits easily within the way things are? Or, to put it another way, which projects represent the strongest and most coherent realisations of what we are looking for, and which represent a falling-back from what we have already glimpsed as possible and identified as necessary?

I'll finish this with Calvino's recommendation for how to live in a society rooted in inequality, violence and lies:

"The hell of the living isn't something in the future; if there is one, it is what is already here, the hell that we inhabit everyday, that we form through living with each other. There are two ways of not suffering in it. One of them comes easily to a lot of people: to accept the hell and become part of it to the point of not seeing it any more. The other is dangerous, and needs constant attention and practice: to look for and know how to recognise who and what, in the midst of this hell, are not part of the hell, to make them last, and to give them space."