

Another world is under construction?

Social movement responses to inequality and crisis

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This article is an edited version of a presentation I gave at the "[Equality in a time of crisis](#)" conference organised by the Egalitarian World Initiative and the UCD School of Social Justice (May 6 – 7) .

< http://www.ucd.ie/ewi/mariecurie/UCD_EWI_May6thto7thConfProg-revised.pdf>

Introduction: youthful mistakes

I was asked to talk for this paper about how social movements (such as community activism, trade unions, women's groups, GLTBQ organising, environmentalists, development / solidarity work and so on) respond to inequality, in Ireland and globally. In the face of the current assault on equality and on movement organisations, I also wanted to focus on what we can do to resist it and to change things for the better. I can start with a bit of personal history.

For much of the 1990s, having worked in the then left-wing and movement oriented Green Party in Hamburg, and to a lesser extent in Strasbourg, I was involved on the left of the Irish Green Party, as delegate to the European Federation of Green Parties and as editor of the Party's theoretical journal, *An Caorthann*.

I left towards the end of the decade after publishing an [editorial](#) arguing that we were fools to see the State, the EU, the media and legal systems as our natural allies.

<http://www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange/zine/sam98/state.html>

This was a period when the Labour Party and Democratic Left were in government, and many people felt that the way forward for environmentalists and other social movements was through getting the right laws passed, appealing to the EU for more harmonisation of policy "upwards", running media campaigns and fighting legal cases.

I argued that focussing all our energies on this route was in effect betting on the goodwill of elites (coalition partners, EU governments, media organisations and judges) and meant abandoning popular mobilisation to the right. A decade on, the Green Party in government has indeed sold out - there is no other word for it - its own movement allies in return for power. It sold them out over US military and CIA use of Shannon, over the M3 at Tara, and most blatantly over Rosspport, where a once movement-linked party was jointly responsible for the police occupation of a remote peninsula, the use of the Navy and serious human rights abuses in the interests of Shell.

Last year, when trade union leaders were offering massive concessions to a government which was very much split on whether or not to accept them, the Green Party ministers were among those who argued in Cabinet for rejecting the offer and instead imposing their own version of cuts against the unions. Having lost any active connection with social movements, they were taking their lead on "what the Irish people think" from Tony O'Reilly's newspapers, which proclaimed that public sector unions were the enemy of private-sector employees, and demanded blood. Over the last year or two, watching this and seeing better-known people leave the party to the left, I've felt a certain amount of Schadenfreude but also a reassurance that I was right to leave when I did.

My point in telling this story is that making our organisations dependent on elites comes at a heavy political cost – the cost of their ceasing to be in any useful sense *movement* organisations and becoming something very different.

Starting points

My argument starts from a point which I think most people at this conference will accept:

Inequality is no accident.

It is made possible, underpinned and defended by structured constellations of power, economic interest and culture. While this seems so basic as to not be worth saying, we often forget the implication, which is that serious struggles for equality involve confronting these constellations directly. The powerful, the wealthy and the culturally dominant do not want to be dethroned; in particular, their own organisations - some of which seem like "natural" parts of the social world - have been built to defend inequality.

Thus in major struggles for equality the key role falls to *independent* social movements of those who lack power, wealth and cultural status. Dependent social movements (those reliant on media, legal, state and European strategies) will find that their one-time allies desert them when the issues become too serious; and while there is always space for individual "deserters" from the coalitions of wealth, power and status, in these kinds of struggles they will always be just that – individuals.

What can movements from below use in these circumstances if they want to work for equality? Their natural strengths lie in the power of numbers, in their capacity to delegitimise the structures of power, and in the ability to disrupt "business as usual". Not all movements from below can achieve all of these, and it is sometimes a struggle to achieve even one of these, but these are our natural terrain, the place where we are strongest.

All too often, in our own meetings and organisations, we find a "bait and switch" which starts from outrage at inequality, at the injustice created by power, money and status – but then conveniently forgets both the fact of inequality and the nature of these constellations when it comes to talking about strategy, and tries to convince the powerful, the rich and the dominant that it is somehow in their interest, right or a good idea to attack the inequality that they benefit from.

The antidote to inequality is popular movements

For most of the world – even for most of Europe – democracy has arrived within living memory. Independence from the empires whose colours covered most of the globe has arrived within living memory. Where they exist, welfare states have arrived within living memory. They are not part of the natural order of the world – they are recent, and fragile, achievements.

These gains, for all their limitations, were *forced* on elites by massive popular movements which overthrew empires – the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires in Europe, the British, French, Dutch and Portuguese elsewhere – which remade states (defeating fascism, overthrowing state socialism) and forced preventative concessions (as where the right to vote, welfare reforms or independence were conceded in advance because they had been won elsewhere).

"Business as usual" depends on defusing this basic historical fact, and normalising existing arrangements, whether as eternal or as kind gifts from enlightened rulers. They were no such thing.

Ireland is not a conservative society

This is as true of popular movements in Ireland as elsewhere. Ireland is one of the few countries anywhere in the world where peasant movements (the Land War) achieved massive land reform. It is one of the two countries in western Europe (along with Norway) which successfully achieved independence from a neighbouring power.

More recently, the Civil Rights Movement brought the Stormont state down. The women's movement in the South defeated the power of the church and broke the "private patriarchy" of the past. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer movements have reshaped Irish sexuality. At Carnsore, Ireland became (again) one of the few countries anywhere in the world to defeat nuclear power. The scale of community action, from housing campaigns via

anti-drugs movements to contemporary community organising, is unparalleled elsewhere in the global North. In Erris, a tiny community is still holding off Shell and the state, 11 years on – and in the process massively upping the costs of any future resource grabs in the *other* oil and gas fields off the west coast.

Depending on our age, many of us remember a lot of these movements as adults: they are not distant historical rumours, and their organisations are still to a large extent part of our social, political and cultural landscape.

The Irish movement experience, then, is *different*, but it is not *less* than the western European or the Latin American. It is ambiguous – in part because some of these movements *did* gain power, and the results (of land reform, national independence, the end of legal gender discrimination etc.) have not always been what we expected. But it is utterly mistaken to say, as we sometimes do when looking for an easy explanation for our own failures, that Ireland is conservative, small, right-wing, Catholic or whatever. Many of these things are true of some Irish people, some of the time. But they have not stopped us having massive movements and achieving successes which have often been impossible to achieve elsewhere. We need to think differently about what it is that characterises Irish movements than simply to give up because we live in the wrong country to have a chance of ever winning.

Squaring the circle - for a little while

For a brief period in recent years, it seemed possible in Ireland to advance equality while avoiding direct confrontation with state power or private wealth. Some movements, for example, proved useful to elites seeking to restructure Irish society. Just as the black Civil Rights Movement in the US found supporters in Northern elites as a way of modernising the South and bringing it more effectively into the national economy, so too, for example, the Irish women's movement found supporters among employers who wanted to expand the pool of available employees; more recently, we have seen the "pink pound" become welcome in the right form, such as the rainbow flags flown by

Dublin Corporation (!) for Pride. When such movements were *not* useful to elites – as when the same women's movement demanded the provision of free universal childcare – they were not remotely as successful¹.

In other areas, EU funding and the rise of tax receipts in the "Celtic Tiger" made it possible to fund service delivery to disadvantaged communities *without* any significant redistribution. The state paid some €440 million to buy out the private operators from the toll bridge on the M50, for example; compare this to what is spent on travellers, the homeless or carers' support to get a sense of what I mean.

In this context, structural transformation went on the long finger as organisations concentrated on *relatively* easily winnable goals. Strategic thinking, and any sense of historical context went on the long finger – and were often, in training and education, forgotten entirely as social movements are airbrushed out of curricula and textbooks in favour of policy-oriented accounts of social change. So younger, college-educated activists have often been given a picture of welfare without trade unions, gender equality without feminism, or multiculturalism without anti-racist organising.

Another way of putting this is that we came to assume as given an institutional and policy framework which was in fact very recent. Probably half the activists in this room can remember a time before this situation, which is now in turn ending as quickly as it began. One really important fact of that previous situation – and one of the pressures behind a level of involvement in partnership which is fairly unique in Europe – is that in the 1970s and 1980s we had massive rates of movement participation, a huge crisis of legitimacy for state and church in many areas, and an awkward habit of disruptive politics, running from roadblocks in Ballymun protesting the absence of services via the condom train to CPAD and Carnsore. This is one of those

¹ The "free childcare" scheme, introduced some forty years after the rise of the second wave women's movement, gives such low supports that about 1 / 3 of IPPA member creches said they could not afford to operate it.

embarrassing little pieces of history that it is felt best not to transmit to new generations of activists, in case they get ideas.

Movements into "sectors"

One of the key features of the recent framework is the conversion of these large, unruly and challenging social movements into "sectors" (of the state) defined by policy, funding streams and institutional relationships. The 1970s and even the 1980s in Ireland saw a broader, sometimes chaotic but nevertheless fertile relationship between movements whose issues often ranged very widely.

Now, by contrast, trade unions, community action, women's organisations, LGBTQ activism, environmentalists, youth workers, development / solidarity groups, health / disability groups, anti-racism and so on all exist in their own separate boxes, forced to focus on those issues which the state and funders accept as relevant, operating according to the specific criteria of the moment, bombarded by new processes that arrive out of nowhere, struggling to catch up with policy documents from the Department which defines their existence, working on proposals for their own specific funding streams, and so on.

As we have become "sectoralised" we have lost track of what's happened to each other, and let the state define who and what we are – grumbling about it, but accepting the basic fact and trying to push our own organisational agenda – the small version – within their structures as best we can.

Business as usual is over

As the experience of public sector unions in particular makes clear, Irish elites are now seeing a decreasing "rate of return" from institutionalised movements. The Irish state clearly no longer wants independent advocates for equality – which is interesting in itself, and suggests that we have more of a potential than they might like us to believe.

We have seen, for several years now, a process whereby inconvenient groups have been shut down, shut up or assimilated into the state, across many different "sectors" (because the state strategically stands above these sectors, and is happy to reorganise them when it suits). Thus if we think of the Equality Authority, Community Workers Coop, the Centre for Public Inquiry, Amnesty International, Pavee Point, AfrI, the Community Development Projects and so on we can remember a series of different interventions which have all been directed at silencing whatever vestiges of independent action and voice our organisations retained. This process started before the financial crisis, but the crisis provides a wonderful excuse to generalise it.

A similar experience happened to community organising in the US, but somewhat earlier. In the context of the "War on Poverty", the federal government funded a range of community projects in disadvantaged areas, hoping to provide the energy to shake up moribund city governments and incidentally defuse ghetto unrest. Within a short space of time these groups were acting sufficiently effectively that the state backtracked and imposed increasingly restrictive criteria. Feminist researcher Nancy Naples, in *Grassroots Warriors*, interviewed the women who found themselves trapped in these impossible situations, twenty years later: running organisations under massive constraints, unable to walk away from the situation but equally unable to achieve anything beyond service delivery and individual "empowerment".

So too in Ireland, we are seeing the rules of "partnership" unilaterally rewritten. To quote socialist organiser Colin Barker, it is a situation where the state has responded to our P – K4 with a lob over the net – changing the game we thought we were playing. Our difficulty is that so many of our organisations have no alternative strategy but to try to get back to playing chess rather than tennis, pleading for the re-establishment of partnership. The behaviour of union leaders over the last while has been a particularly visible example of this.

The global context: civil society and neo-liberalism

I want to jump out of this apparently impossible Irish situation for a moment to look at the wider context – the same context which, according to politicians, economists and journalists, means that "we have no alternative" but to do what they want us to do and sit back while they wind us down.

The creation of welfare states in the West, and national developmentalism in the global South, are widely recognised as representing elite compromises with popular movements. The organised working class in some countries, anti-fascist resistance in others, had to be taken account of in the shaping of "organised capitalism", just as in the global South (including Ireland) the forces of anti-colonial nationalism – organised workers, peasant movements, women etc. – had become powerful players in the process of achieving independence.

Deals were made, sometimes openly and sometimes implicitly (as Kieran Allen has argued in *Fianna Fáil and Irish labour*). Redistribution, regulation and protection – however limited – benefitted those who had been part of overthrowing the old order (be it British imperialism in Asia or fascism in Europe) or threatening it (as with Bismarck's preventative concessions to the working class, *after* banning the SPD had failed). In particular, state involvement in the economy, and systematic benefits for particular popular groups, were a defining part of these arrangements from Peronism in Argentina to social democracy in Scandinavia.

Neo-liberalism has been slowly replacing these arrangements – from the 1973 Chilean coup and the invitation to the "Chicago boys" to try out their new theories via the years of Thatcher and Reagan to the current period of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and the Indian state's new orientation to multinationals. It has an important difficulty, however, which is that by virtue of what it is, it cannot make the same kinds of deals to buy popular acceptance. In other words, it has a constant problem of legitimacy and consent, since the only people who visibly and automatically benefit are the very wealthy.

This is a fundamental factor underlying the growth in recent decades of right-wing populism, religious fundamentalism, "opinion" as leisure activity from talk radio to the blogosphere, and so on: consent can be given by directing poor whites against blacks, men against feminists, private sector employees against the public sector, and so on.

There is also, though, a search for "progressive" consent, which in the nature of the situation cannot be the active consent of large numbers of people, but is rather the simulation of popular consent through the participation of organisations claiming to speak for various disadvantaged constituencies.

Global "civil society" as the simulation of consent

This is how we come to a situation where "civil society" now means the approved interlocutors of power – a startling change for those of us who remember the 1980s, when "civil society" means the dissident underground in Eastern Europe or human rights activists facing down the death squads in Latin America. This new civil society, in fact, is often violently opposed to what Indian activist Jai Sen calls "incivil society", the mass movements of the global poor. In South Africa, India, Thailand or Haiti we have seen NGOs, local and international, side with the state and with global "policy" while supporting the massive repression of popular movements. What happened?

The languages and processes of our movements have been borrowed to dress up neo-liberal "governance", which now consults, participates, partnerships, multiculturalism, includes and makes all the right noises except those which mean real popular power or redistribution. Instead, NGOs provide cut-price service delivery in the majority world, with occasional economic gains for small constituencies and more frequent cultural gains for larger ones. They can thus become a cheap source of legitimacy, and their support acts as a simulation of popular consent – in return for an official status and / or funding which renders them permanently dependent on elites, and focussed on those issues which are ruled "legitimate" movement issues from above.

Neo-liberalism in systemic crisis

In this situation, it is no surprise that – as soon as the movement defeats which ushered in neo-liberalism had been absorbed and outlived – a new "globalisation from below", of popular movements against neo-liberalism, has responded to the "globalisation from above" pushed by elites. In Latin America, South Africa, India and western Europe in particular – and varyingly elsewhere in the world – these movements have faced down states and the new robber baron multinationals.

They have contributed directly to neo-liberalism's global crisis of legitimacy: for example, where Bill Clinton, visiting Ireland, was met by a sea of a quarter of a million people, and the protest restricted to a dozen of us on the corner of O'Connell Bridge, Bush Jr was helicoptered into a castle in the countryside and protected by tanks. From bathing in the crowd, the "leaders of the free world" have retreated behind enormous steel walls, to remote ski resorts or to absolute monarchies in the Arabian desert in a "retreat to Versailles" which marks a major loss of popular legitimacy².

As all viewers of independent documentaries know, the Bush administration tried to use "9 / 11" to divert attention, following Dr Johnson's motto that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. What is less commonly noted is how unsuccessful the attempt was outside the US. Instead, Arab governments which have historically been loyal clients were forced to distance themselves, while western Europe saw an outpouring of popular protest unprecedented in recent history and American elites publicly dissented from the wisdom of the strategy. The neo-conservatives' publicly announced plans for a rolling war on rogue states were bogged down in the sands of Afghanistan and Iraq. US

² When, after Genoa, the World Economic Forum decided it needed a friendlier face, and organised regional meetings, Peter Sutherland and Mary Harney were only too delighted to score the coup of bringing the European meeting to Ireland. Unfortunately it had to be cancelled following "security concerns" after the Irish Social Forum and the Grassroots Gatherings declared their opposition. After the PR people realised what had happened, the story was quickly revised to read "cancelled due to the late completion of a consultant's report".

power, in a globally central region which has been a key target of its foreign policy for decades, has never seemed so feeble; the Obama administration now faces huge problems in finding any way out of this mess which can restore some degree of hegemonic control.

Similarly, in the US' "backyard", Latin America, the recent "pink tide" has seen a weakening both of its foreign policy and the power of the international financial institutions which have essentially directed Latin American economic policy for decades. Revolts in places such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, Ecuador, Cochabamba and Argentina and the movement-linked governments of countries such as Brazil, Bolivia or Venezuela leave the "backyard" in a situation somewhat similar to Eastern Europe after Gorbachev's announcement that the Red Army would no longer intervene to prop up client governments – by no means out of the woods, but far less in the shadow of the US than has been the case for decades.

To these internal and global crises of recent historical arrangements now comes a third, which is the manifest incapacity of the neo-liberal elite to *lead* where it matters most. The financial crash – and the headless-chicken behaviour of different governments in their attempts to hold things together – the food crisis in the majority world and the official acknowledgement that global warming represents a future disaster of immense proportions, coupled with the failure to resolve this at Copenhagen, amount to a failure, on the part of neo-liberalism's key centres, to "deliver the goods" to the wider elites and popular groups whose support it needs – and hence a systemic crisis.

Why systemic?

A regime of accumulation – such as neo-liberalism, or Keynesianism, or fascism, or state socialism – is a medium-term institutional arrangement (in the last century three decades has been a typical lifetime) which bring together major states, large-scale economic concerns and culturally powerful groups with different coalitions of other actors around a particular way of organising economic, social and political relations.

Such arrangements are entered into (as neo-liberalism was in the 1970s) because key elite groups were convinced that the previous arrangement was no longer working for them, and were willing to incur the costs involved in making the switch to a new set of arrangements. Neo-liberalism, in other words, is not eternal but provisional, and (as with all previous such regimes) will eventually be abandoned by elite groups in favour of an alternative strategy.

There are of course many questions about when such elites will feel that they are losing more by remaining loyal to these arrangements than they can gain by stepping outside them and creating new ones; what alternative strategy elites will agree among themselves – and, crucially, what chance popular movements from below have of imposing either their own arrangements or serious concessions within a new arrangement worked out from above.

But elites are now visibly experimenting with defection, whether the high-profile economists and modernising politicians who are publicly doubting the neo-liberal model and calling for more regulation or the foreign-policy elites who are trying to rethink international relations in the world's crisis points along new lines. This is what is meant by a systemic crisis; and when neo-liberalism's leading lights can offer little more than the promise that a return to business as usual will satisfy all parties it is unsurprising that the EU has just agreed a very different kind of economic model, or that states were willing to invest so much political capital in the failed attempt to resolve the climate crisis.

It is not only elites who are exploring the option of defecting from neo-liberalism: at a global level, many previously loyal NGOs are now seeking to turn back into social movement organisations, to become the "respectable face of the movement" rather than the "caring face of capitalism". This, of course, brings us back to the problems of movement (or ex-movement) organisations in Ireland, and what they can do in the aftermath of partnership.

Boiling a frog³

As so often, the timing of things in Ireland doesn't fit neatly with timings in the rest of western Europe – or indeed the rest of the post-colonial world. For example, the crisis of national developmentalism (the abandonment of attempts at economic autarky, the Whitaker plan and our conversion to a "small, open economy") came early by comparison with, say, India. The post-1960s developments in the welfare state were little, grudging and late by comparison with what had been won in other west European countries.

This difference in timing made it possible for many people on the left and in social movements to talk about inequality mainly as the problem of "lagging behind", the lack of state commitment to the issues, and our general failure to be more like social-democratic Europe – while conveniently forgetting the immense struggles that made social-democratic Europe possible.

Instead, the state (and even more so European elites) were seen as either being "on the side" of movements for equality (in the sense that we could get a free ride on the back of struggles elsewhere without having to win locally), or as potentially becoming so – if, for example, they could be brought to sign up to this or that policy document.

There was a generational aspect to this. As late as the 1980s and the early 1990s, many of our organisations were very much "out in the cold", refused access to government departments and run on a shoestring by dedicated volunteers, so that it made sense to demand government involvement and funding for the issues at hand, without having to think too hard about the political implications of that strategy – such as what might happen once Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the Departments of Finance, Justice or Health started to define the meaning and criteria of equality.

Waterford community activist Maeve O'Grady recalls Nuala O'Faolain, part of a women's delegation invited to the Mansion House, turning to the others and

³ Apparently when a frog is put in a pan of water and the heat turned up slowly, it doesn't get worried enough about the rising temperature to jump out in time. It is not a pleasant image.

saying wryly "It's warm in here!" To those of us used to meeting in the grotty buildings of the 1970s and 1980s, the change in pace was remarkable – and having foregrounded the demand of being listened to and supported by the state, many organisations did not have a *strategic* answer to the question "and then what?"

The result, throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, was the conversion of social movement organisations (SMOs) into non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as the creation of many more NGOs, community projects and so on *not* on the basis of popular mobilisation around issues but on the basis of funding streams created by the European Union, different government departments or more recently private foundations.

From SMOs to NGOs

The most immediate result was intense sectoral fragmentation on terms set by the state – unions here, community groups there, environmentalists in another sector, development and solidarity groups in that corner and so on.

In these changing organisations, the key figures were no longer unpaid volunteers dedicated to an issue and the much larger numbers of people willing to turn out for a demo or an action; they were the professional core, the people who specialised in policy work, funding proposals, media and PR, legal advice and so on. As organisations increasingly depended on successful funding bids, policy work, legal successes and media presence to keep going, these very specialist skills became central to the organisations⁴.

Most people – whether in a working-class community group, a rural environmental organisation, a women's project or a trade union – simply do

⁴ While many professionals are products of their own movements, and / or deeply committed to the issues they campaign on, one effect of professionalisation has also been the spread of professional activists for whom these are first and foremost interchangeable jobs – interchangeable at times not just between different organisations and "sectors", but even beyond. Some of the more naïve younger professionals, trained in universities during the era of partnership, find it impossible to think of what they do in terms of popular agency.

not have the time and resources to prepare effective bids and proposals, to run press work, to look at the detail of legal changes and so on. Nor do they have the capacity to keep up with the immense information flow among other (state, academic, foundation) professionals in the field, to come to meetings organised within the cultures of middle-class professionals and held during working hours, to find childcare and all the rest of it.

Non-professional participants' traditional areas of work – raising large issues of principle, convincing their neighbours to come to a demo, leafletting and posterling, organising industrial action or sit-ins, running volunteer projects in the evening or whatever – are increasingly marginal to the new professionalised world (and often actively embarrass the professionals vis-à-vis the civil service or ministers).

Unable to keep up, in most movements and most organisations the large mass of participants have been progressively demobilised, where they have not actually turned from members into clients. There are of course exceptions, but they require massive commitment and huge amounts of work to keep going. More commonly, groups which have not fitted the new forms and structures have gone to the wall – and never more so than during the boom years, when increased productivity meant that time was at a massive premium. This situation, of course, is coming to an end in the nastiest possible way – though it is a significant feature of the new movement situation that the state is creating a certain number of highly skilled and angry people with time on their hands.

The more general situation is what we have seen each time the state has come for one of us – with a handful of exceptions, none of our organisations can mobilise significant numbers of people for a protest to defend ourselves, none of them are able to do anything seriously disruptive, and none give the state any good reason to think that it would be unwise to take them on.

"You and whose army?"

... is what the state can reasonably ask once they have decided that we are no longer useful or worthwhile. At one point, in the 1980s or early 1990s, the answer was evident – engage working-class communities, unions, women's groups, GLBTQ activists, environmentalists ... because if they didn't, the scope for massive protest and a serious challenge to power was an everyday feature of their experience.

Now, in the face of aggressive attacks from different sectors of the state and media elites, we have a structural weakness which is visible to all. In most cases, our organisations no longer have a broader activist base that goes beyond the professionals and board members; we cannot mobilise large numbers even for one-off, last-ditch protests; and we have not just forgotten how to disrupt, we have become too tied to our respectability to want to. Community media activist Margaret Gillan quotes a professional (who shall remain nameless) at a meeting to object to the closure of several CDPs as saying worriedly "I do hope they don't all go out on the streets".

What lies behind this worry? The kinds of organisations that partnership has made us into also depend on it to survive. Without participation in decision-making at some level, the recognition of the state, funding streams and so on they will cease to exist. To this extent they have become addicted to partnership.

Ursula le Guin's definition of liberals applies very powerfully here: they are people for whom "the means justify the ends". It is worth pausing for a moment to think about the implications of our movements shrinking into this kind of organisation – by comparison with their goals of large-scale equality and justice.

In this situation, the state can happily roll up the separate, isolated and largely non-communicating "sectors" that we have become on its own terms, in its own time, and with no significant resistance. The frog has been boiled, slowly but very thoroughly.

A different kind of response

The experience of People's Global Action offers a viewpoint outside our own context to think about this in. After the 1994 Zapatista uprising, one of the earliest moves was to hold intercontinental (and, tongue-in-cheek, intergalactic) gatherings, *encuentros*, in Mexico in 1996 and in Spain in 1997.

Barry Finnegan, co-founder of the Irish Social Forum, tells the story of going to the second of these, and enjoying himself thoroughly meeting activists from all over the planet, including peasant organisers from India and Latin America. At the end of the meeting, however, he came across a group of these Southern activists looking very down in the mouth.

Asking them why, they told him "We came here to shut down the international financial institutions, and we don't want to go home until we do that". For these Southern organisers, the IFIs were no just badly working institutions in need of better lobbying and a bit of structural reform: they were fundamentally flawed, and attempts to negotiate with them were a strategic mistake.

From the meetings they held with Northern activists at the end of the *encuentro*, People's Global Action was born, and indirectly the network which would lead to the protests at the World Trade Organisation's 1999 Seattle meeting came to life. At Seattle, the combination of direct action on the streets, a new-found confidence on the part of majority world delegates refusing to be browbeaten by wealthy countries, and solidarity from the longshoremen (dockers') union brought about a collapse of the WTO meeting.

No new WTO "round" has been possible since then - the result of popular movements refusing to let elites set the terms of debate – and the leaders of neo-liberalism have been on the defensive ever since.

The strategic crisis of Irish movement organisations

I have argued that Irish movement organisations have become financially dependent on the state, the EU and private foundations, and that after two

decades of professionalisation, demobilisation and the search for respectability they now find it hard to defend themselves, never mind their broader agendas, against their sponsors.

The state, the EU and (most) donors will ultimately side with powerful, wealthy and culturally dominant groups against the poor and the powerless; a situation epitomised by the negotiations leading to the Community Platform's walkout from partnership in 2002, when community and voluntary groups narrowed down their demands to the request that the state implement its own legislation on traveller halting sites – and were refused.

Where, then, can movements for equality stand that is not dependent on the continuing goodwill and financial support of their opponents?

Is there life after partnership?

Asking this question means returning to the question of how we can win as a serious one, rather than a piece of rhetoric justifying far more minor successes. When the rules of the game are being rewritten from above, routine politics – to say nothing of the desperate attempt to re-establish routine politics in the face of a state which has no intention of doing any such thing - are a strategy for being sidelined.

A first step has to be relativising our routines, stepping outside the known world of "the sector", and making new allies on unofficial terms. We will find, as I do talking to people in many different movements, that the same conflicts, the same pressures from above, the same resistances are being encountered across the board: not just by community groups, not just by trade unions, not just by development organisations, not just by women's groups, not just by environmentalists, not just by gays and lesbians, but by all of us.

When we start to find that, we have some kind of basis for standing up to the state, together and publicly. Once it has become clear that we will be progressively wound down, even if we are good little boys and girls, stay on message, avoid criticism and hand over our assets on demand, the only real question becomes how long it will take for us to act on this realisation.

Individually, the question becomes how we can go from being dependent on elites to being movement-dependent, and becoming sustainable organisations in the new context. It may be worth recalling that we used to do this stuff, and to do it rather well; indeed the whole partnership experience has been a result of just how good at it we were.

What does this mean in practice?

We need to take our stand, not in the official legitimacy of some piece of wording which we have managed to sneak into a white paper, but in popular struggles and mass challenges to power linked to inequality. Another way of saying this is that we have to raise large themes, not just technical objections or organisation-specific concerns which few people outside our own circles understand.

Organisationally, we need to move from being funding-led to being membership-led, not only in our finances but more importantly in our activities and our strategies. We need to rethink the role of core workers, and move from what *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* calls career-based organising strategies to mass-based ones: from "working the system" in its various aspects to campaigning, mobilising and popular education for structural change.

If any serious strategy for equality entails a confrontation with the power that underpins inequality, then any successful confrontation starts with how we organise ourselves. This also means reasserting equality *within* movement organisations: from being a transmission belt for priorities and structures set from above, back to being grassroots-controlled organisations.

In our training and education, we need to move from the skills of convincing elites and securing funding to the skills of mobilising people, radicalising campaigns and winning against the determined opposition that we face. We need to start relying on our natural strengths as popular movements: delegitimising power, disrupting business as usual, and setting alternative agendas – rather than continuing to bet on strategies which depend on the

goodwill of those who have been showing us for several years that they do not possess it.

Another way of saying all this is that we need to start seeing ourselves as part of *movements*, not a subcontracted, cut-piece and disgruntled part of the state.

Organising against the cuts

What does this mean in terms of resisting cuts? Above all it means strategic realism: recognising that however much we keep the head down (or suck up) the chances are that they will still come for us; we do not, at this point, really have anything to lose. Conversely, we should avoid the mistake of thinking that if only we organised well enough we could force a return to a partnership which really satisfied nobody - neatly analysed by Rosie Meade as "We hate it here, please let us stay!" Five years from now, our organisations are going to look very different from their present shape, if they survive at all. So what can we do?

Resisting cuts is obviously going to have to be an immediate priority for many or most organisations. But if we want to survive the likely defeats, the important question is how to use the battle against being cut to reshape ourselves for the future. That means above all organising against cuts in ways which help the kind of organisational shift I have been talking about, rather than doing so through the routine professional relationships which are being attacked. In other words, if we do the most obvious thing – the thing which is most in keeping with our current routines – this increases the likelihood of us failing to survive at all.

So when we mobilise, we need to mobilise around a language that people who are not currently active can understand, and around demands which make immediate sense to them – *not* in the technical jargon of policy or the organisational issues that are most visible to us. When we analyse what is going on, we need to find a language that is ours to stand in, rather than one

which constantly requires the state and EU as the willing partners they no longer are.

When we organise, we need to do so in ways that are geared to broadening the numbers of those who get active – which means above all highlighting things that people can do *without* being professionals in our areas: going on the streets (a normal mode of democratic action, though we have rather forgotten the fact), publicly criticising elites in terms that everyone can understand, placing everyday needs and stories first, disrupting when we can, debating how we can win.

There are a lot of initiatives responding to the cuts at the moment, but many (not all) look like desperate attempts to re-establish the normal working relationships of what is now a bygone era, and like ways of doing things which keep us doing things we are used to doing with people we are used to working with. This is not a recipe for effectively responding to crisis!

What role for NGOs and service delivery after partnership?

Service delivery, lobbying and so on are of course going to remain useful and necessary – but they are no substitute for mobilising. Like academic work, media campaigns, legal cases and party-political interventions they are useful add-ons to movements in the struggle for equality, and in the case of service delivery they also do some direct good for individuals. Their effectiveness, however, is directly dependent on how much popular support is mobilised behind them.

One valuable role that NGOs can play in the new situation is that of being "respectable interlocutors" for the state, complementary to more "incivil" popular movements. Environmental movements have sometimes played this "good cop / bad cop" game well – one organisation disrupting things, another organisation being someone the state could sit down with.

But this only works *if* there is a popular, disruptive movement to force the state to sit down at the table (which is after all the problem at the moment!) and *if* NGOs etc. are acting out of solidarity with popular movements rather

than seeing themselves as being in competition with them, and resenting the unruly upstarts as threats to their claim to a monopoly of representing "the sector", "civil society" and so on.

Learning to be loyal to each other

If "the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house" (Audré Lorde), then it is certainly true that the state's new priorities cannot be effectively challenged in the field of policy proposals, funding bids, PR campaigns and court cases. There is no clever-clever, elite-based route to reversing what has happened, or getting round the basic fact that we have made our organisations dependent on elites which no longer need us and are now setting out to attack us.

Instead, as EP Thompson said long ago, we need to learn to be loyal to each other. That starts by learning to talk to each other again, outside our technical specialisations and sectoral languages. A new "ecology of knowledges" and languages (as Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes of the World Social Forum experiment) has to be developed in struggle, and from below. As movements, we now desperately need each other as points of reference if we want to move outside the realities defined by the state, the mainstream media and most of academia.

Most fundamentally, if our core goal is equality, we have to get back to an agreement that "your struggles are also my struggles", and find ways of talking, not just about the issues facing one set of organisations in one sector, but of speaking about *popular movements in struggle*.

Learning from each other's practice

We stand to learn a huge amount from each other. In recent years, new movements have developed a very interesting range of creative practice that goes beyond the approved and credentialised skills I have been discussing:

The struggles of survivors of institutional abuse have highlighted the massive structural violence underlying Irish society in the very recent past, and the collusion of many of the core institutions of that society – in a process whose reverberations are only starting to be felt.

The Rosspoint campaign has built a remarkable alliance across movements and issues (community, environmental, trade union, anarchist, socialist, republican etc.) in the face of overwhelming force – and is still going.

Tenants First, St Michael's Estate and other community groups have made major steps outside the "sector" in finding allies and creative ways to protest, rather than accepting their isolation as given.

Migrant-led organisations have brought a surprising new element to Irish politics, capable –as in the Bloom! project – of combining struggle on local issues with campaigning on global justice.

More generally, we have seen a return of disruptive tactics and genuinely popular "voices", beyond the boardroom and debates over criteria.

Delegitimising the elites

We are seeing a massive loss of popular legitimacy for state policy in a wide range of areas. Now, more than ever, we have little excuse for claiming that we should not move too quickly for fear of alienating the mainstream.

The Government, RTE, the Dept of Finance, the EU, the *Irish Independent* and *Newstalk*, all claim to speak for the general interest, and this enables them to attack our organisations, create new inequalities and deepen existing gulfs of inequality. If we want to challenge this, we have to set *popular* terms of debate, rather than remaining on a hostile terrain which is defined by statute, administrative practice and academic specialisations – and mostly comprehensible only to our immediate opponents, not to the people we need to make alliances with.

We also need to find ways of standing outside, and no longer taking for granted, our immediate national or European setting. The value in the past of

learning from struggles in Latin America, South Africa or elsewhere was not in suddenly doing the same as them: it was in realising that we did not have to do the same as what we had previously been doing.

"Another world is under construction": some proposals

I want to finish by making three proposals which may help us above and beyond the immediate organisational strategies I have been discussing. Briefly, they involve (1) finding a way of making our opposition public, visible and collective; (2) finding ways of working together as activists; (3) finding ways of connecting again with a broader public.

A counter-summit

The first proposal is to visibly challenge and delegitimize the practice of the state, with a counter-summit linking us across movements and sectors – perhaps held opposite the next Budget deliberations or other major decision-making events. To be effective, this needs to be more than the conventional conferences with invited speakers talking the technical language of professionals. It needs to be movement-based, with large-scale participation, democratic processes and focussed on *popular* priorities, not technical ones, which are capable of mobilising large numbers of the currently demobilised. To be worth people's while participating, it also needs to be tied to strategic mass action for equality *outside* the usual channels: not simply a policy proposal, but a manifesto for *movement* action.

A summer school

A summer school offers us the possibility of bringing activists from different movements and sectors together in spaces that are both self-controlled and self-funded (a rare experience these days!)

The purpose is somewhat longer-term than the campaigning one of a counter-summit: it is to build collective strength, self-confidence and a shared

perspective for the long haul. It is also to change our sense of "we" from "professionals in the sector" to "popular movements in action", and to learn from experiences abroad as well as the familiar situations that we have been staring in the eye for so long.

I am particularly inspired here by the history of the Highlander Folk School, best known for its role in training the volunteers of "Freedom Summer", but with a much longer history, part of which is brought out in Myles Horton's book-length conversation with Paolo Freire, *We make the road by walking*⁵.

A national conversation outside the state

Finally, a still broader kind of mobilisation is that of those who are no longer involved beyond their own local and immediate struggles and tensions. Here I am thinking of the possibility of a slow, non-party tour of the country whose main goal is simply to *listen* to communities, workplaces, local campaigns and others – on the model of the Zapatista's Other Campaign or, as radical documentarist Yuvi Basanth tells me, the ANC's original Freedom Charter.

This gives us the chance of holding a conversation with each other about needs, equality and power which, as Jai Sen says, can enable us to move "beyond alliances of activists ... to building general cultures of politics and life". Or, again with the Zapatistas, remaking the country "from below and on the left".

Hanging together - or hanging separately

Benjamin Franklin is supposed to have posed this alternative during the process of US independence from Britain, but it remains a central one for

⁵ There was a lot of interest in this proposal at the conference: Cathleen O'Neill, Maureen Bassett and I are hosting a meeting tomorrow with some of those who expressed interest and see where we can take the idea. Anyone interested can email me at laurence.cox AT nuim.ie to be kept in the loop about whatever develops.

popular movements in times of crisis. If we do not find new strength in stepping outside our previous routines, the only interesting question is *when* we will be rolled up, shut down, shut up or absorbed.

Our practice has conceded elites the right to set the agenda – freeing them, as now, to take equality off the table. If we want to fight for equality we have to step outside their terrain and become independently powerful actors again, on our own terms.

There is no textbook for doing this – but plenty of historical experience, movements elsewhere and indeed our own activist history that we can learn from.

We can do it, ourselves

I finish with a quote from Scottish socialist and writer Ken MacLeod:

"Our liberties were won in wars and revolutions so terrible that we do not fear our rulers: they fear us. Our children giggle and eat ice-cream in the palaces of past rulers. We snap our fingers at kings. We laugh at popes. When we have built up tyrants, we have brought them down."

We do not need to be afraid of the neo-liberal hatchetmen. Their time is running out. They bought us off because they needed to; now we should be fighting not to get back in there but rather to win.

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