
Saint Bob and me

The experience of women's community education in Ireland grew out of the struggle to overcome the effects of colonisation, political and religious, and helped to forge a lasting alliance with the poor and oppressed of the world, writes BRID CONNOLLY

When looking at the story of women's community education in Ireland, from its beginnings in the early 1980s, it is important to understand what was happening in the country at that time, and throughout the 25 turbulent years of its development. This story provides a microcosm of the history of Ireland and its relationship with globalisation. Three very difficult milestones were passed during that period: the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland in 1981; the anti-abortion amendment to the Irish constitution in 1983; and the Live Aid campaign in 1984. This was the ground from which the women's community education movement grew.

In this article, I will argue that colonisation is an earlier phase of globalisation (see Waters, 2001, p. 95), and that colonisation can take the form of domination by another state, or the form of controlling the lifeworld through religion. I suggest that we can end poverty through learning from the experiences of colonised peoples, like us, and that we can use the process of globalisation to help in the project. Globalisation is not neutral. But neither is it all bad.

Ireland's history is the story of expelling the colonisers, our neighbours, Britain. This succeeded to some degree in 1921, resulting in a treaty that left six counties as part of the United Kingdom, and the remaining twenty-six independent. In 1949, these became the Republic of Ireland. In 1968 and '69, the struggle for independence in Northern Ireland was re-ignited by the nationalist side, who were predominantly Roman Catholic, and the war continued until the Good Friday Agreement in 1995. There were many very painful, outrageous chapters in this war, but I just want to look at the hunger strikes of 1981 and the part they played in liberation.

The hunger strikes by IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland were instigated to demand political status for those who were in prison for their political activities. Before Bush's 'war on terror', the violent, nationalist side of the political divide in Northern Ireland were considered terrorists, largely. There

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were non-violent political parties, but there were very few signs that the nationalist side could attain parity through political means. The hunger strikes were an attempt to inflict violence on the self in order to force the hand of the British government. The tactics had been used before, most particularly by pacifists, like Mahatma Gandhi. However,

the IRA were not pacifists, and as the hunger strikers died, one by one, Ireland was thrown into a state of extreme confusion. Most people in the Republic of Ireland did not support violence, but we did support the hunger strikes as an alternative to guerrilla warfare. By the time the hunger strikes were called off as a tactic, Irish people were devastated. Political campaigns did not work for various reasons. Passive resistance did not work: to grant political status to the prisoners would have huge implications for the UK. What was left? Violence was resumed and continued for another 14 years.

Powerless people

Overcoming colonisation is very difficult. The tactics need to take account of who has the power and how they exercise it. Powerless people adopt tactics that counter the rules that are laid down by the powerful. 'Terrorist' is the name applied to the violent paramilitarists, but our experience in Ireland showed that talking, not violence, was the way to counter violence. The 'war on terror' is futile. The only way to counter terror is to uncover the purposes of it, and to negotiate the way out. We know, on reflection, that it would have been better to open discussions in 1968/9, rather than allow the poisonous cycle of violence that ensued, perpetuated by all sides.

One of the key objections to independence for Northern Ireland was the concern about how powerful the Roman Catholic Church would be in public and private life. 'Home Rule is Rome Rule' was the telling slogan. Within two years of the hunger strikes, this slogan was proved right.

The Roman Catholic Church and Irishness were deeply enmeshed, with over 90 per cent of the population Catholic. The church was not content to look after the spiritual welfare of the people, rather, it controlled much of the educational and health provision in Ireland from the mid-1850s.



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The growth in its influence coincided with the Great Famine, and continued unabated until the 1960s, to the extent that political life was completely contingent on the teachings of the church. It declined somewhat with the women's movement, but the re-emergence of ultra-conservative Catholicism with John Paul II heralded the resurgence of its power in Ireland. If globalisation can be traced through three regions of public life, the economy, the polity and culture (Waters, 2001, p. 17), then the Roman Catholic Church played a crucial role in the polity and cultural arenas, which led directly to the economy in Ireland. Globally, John Paul II was at the forefront in the battle against socialism, and he – and the neo-conservative forces in Irish society – attempted to invade the lifeworld in Ireland, to consolidate internal colonisation. It had all the hallmarks of cultural globalisation.

Women's community education emerged early in the eighties, an era of breath-hold-

ing following the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979. From the late sixties onward, Ireland had moved away from the influence of Rome, particularly with regards to women's rights, and the women's movement was, at last, making an impact on the legal and civil aspects of Irish society. However, the years following the Pope's visit were very dark. A small, but very influential group of conservative Catholics, concerned about the progress of the women's movement, forced through an amendment to the Irish Constitution to give legal status to Roman Catholic teaching on abortion, in 1983. The country was utterly divided, and the bitterness that emanated from the entire campaign seeped into every corner. The confusion that the amendment caused was deeply bewildering. The campaign adopted tactics from the extreme conservative wing of the Catholic Church in the United States, which infiltrated into parish groups and other social arenas. In a very short time, conservative grass roots groups

were demonstrating for the rights of the 'unborn' in much the same way as the anti-war movement, or other liberation movements. The message of the amendment campaign implied that people were immoral and heartless if they did not condemn abortion. But many women had travelled to England to have abortions, in shame and secrecy, and did not recognise themselves as bad people, but, rather, as women who were left with no choice. The struggle of ordinary women to reconcile with one another over this issue was probably the most acute issue on the agenda of community education, at this time. Out of this morass grew the women's community education movement.

Live Aid

While Ireland was going through these difficult transitions, the lives of counterpart women and children in Ethiopia were unimaginable to us. When Bob Geldof forced us to look at the absolute devastation

and catastrophe of Ethiopia, we wept as we gazed at our own children.

The impact of the Live Aid event in 1984 was profound. It was most people's first experience of immediate connection with others with the same agenda from all around the world. It was special for us, in Ireland, as we were very proud of Bob Geldof and his Irish attitude, at the centre of this huge melting pot (not forgetting the part that other people played, especially Midge Ure). But we were deeply touched for a number of other reasons as well. We have a residual, collective memory of hunger and famine from 1846 to 1848 and the injustices, rather than the lack of food, that caused it. Looking back through the lens of women's community education, we can perceive that that time in Ireland was the site of a profound struggle to find our place in the world, as a people who were in a unique position to understand the causes of poverty, injustice and hunger.

Bob Geldof railed against all things Irish, in his song, *Banana Republic*. He had a lot of raw material, growing up in an Ireland that exported its problems, from unemployment to abortion, while the smug merchants stayed at home, comfortable in their growing wealth and their cosy relationship with Rome. Ethiopia in 1984 whammed home the catastrophe of hunger, oppression and injustice. But Bob and us, we looked for simple solutions – give the 'fucking money' and end the hunger. If it had been possible to garner all the goodwill of ordinary Irish people at that time, we would have ended poverty ourselves. But we know now it was not that simple. That goodwill was powerless in the face of the forces against change.

Women's community education in the early 1980s probably wouldn't have flourished except for the conditions outlined above that nurtured its development. By 1984, women formed learning groups in many places, and the 'Daytime Education', as by this time it was known, was firmly established, with courses ranging from women's studies to creative writing (Ryan and Connolly, 1999, p. 95). Religion was not mentioned, as everyone was still too raw, but there was a concerted effort to heal the wounds that could fester beneath the surface.

This battle against the influence of the conservative Roman Catholic Church on the legal and political dimensions of Irish society was undertaken not just by ordinary non-religious people, but also by the religious as well. Clerics and nuns brought popular education to Ireland from Latin America and they were pivotal in bringing Freirean ideas to the country. The model of daytime adult and community education was perfect as a conduit for emancipatory ways of working with learners. By 1985, the key features of women's community education were established (Connolly, 2005, pp. 206-207) and they continued to grow and develop for the next number of years.

Community education is a transactional, dynamic process, which is pluralistic, broad,

energising and subjective. Learning communities demonstrate that learning is not just an individual acquisition of knowledge, that it needn't only take place in the classroom. Groups are integral to the notion of community education, and group processes underpin the vitality of the arena. The key impact on learning emanating from community education, and incorporated into the literature on adult education, is group-based learning (Connolly, 2005). Feminist analyses expanded this model, considering, in particular, the location of power, and moving from the personal to the social (Connolly, 1999). However, a person-centred approach is vital, provided that it is bounded by a critical understanding of the person, especially when it enables participants to create their own knowledge and value systems as tools in creating their worlds.

Key achievement

The key achievement of community education is the way in which those most closely involved with it have shaped it. I believe this idea would not be viable in any other sector. The notion that school children and traditional students might have a say in what they want to learn, and how and where, would face fierce opposition in educational institutions. Yet, of all the initiatives in education over the recent decades, community education has been the one which has most potential for growth and development. It remains creative, flexible, dynamic, transactional and challenging. In particular, it has fostered the community and social dimension of learning, and brought with it a code of ethics, a core set of values for post-modern Ireland.

Community education is complex. It is not simply a series of techniques, nor is it about the location – and it is not just about subject matter. The White Paper on adult education considered community education in ideological terms, as:

[A] process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level ... it is an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision-making processes (DES, 2000, p. 110).

That is, an essential component of community education is its political dimension, the desire to bring about structural change.

Community education provides a learning environment, identified and located within the community, not just the physical community, but also the community of shared experiences. Community education groups retain control of the decision-making processes. The processes are rooted in emancipatory, person-centred values. The starting point of community education is the lived experience of the participants and their critical reflection of it. Community education has a two-fold, interconnected aim for the

participants: the personal acquisition of skills, knowledge and development of potential; and social and community transformation and empowerment (AONTAS, 2000, p. 7).

The era of globalisation has ushered in the notion that our social and community worlds include all those who are marginalised and excluded. Community education transgresses the national borders, and allies itself with others. Just as Freire linked us with the poor in Brazil, we connect with the poor in Africa. This is our responsibility. This is our route. Our experience of overcoming the domination of colonisation fits us precisely to illuminate and share with others our learning. And our residual memory of hunger will help in identifying the underlying causes of poverty.

'Give us the fucking money' is no longer the simple option. The slogan of the 1970s, 'think globally, act locally', is capable of being turned around in this era of globalisation. We can take our thinking about our local experience and act on it globally. Our experience of women's community education has helped us to overcome the effects of colonisation, political and religious, and to ally ourselves with the poor and oppressed of the world. The end of civilisation as we know it is civilisation as we know it, as Germaine Greer reminded us. Making Poverty History needs us.

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