

Building utopia here and now? Left and working-class utopias in Ireland
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Abstract:

While a powerful strand of both environmental and religious utopianism has been to construct purpose-built communities “somewhere else”, usually in rural settings, a combination of lack of resources and doubts about the strategic usefulness of such projects has led most working-class or left utopias to have a different focus. Typically, these latter grew within the struggle to meet everyday needs, in the course of political campaigns or at the highpoint of society-wide struggles, and were understood strategically, as part of a broader struggle for change. This article explores some aspects of left and working-class utopias in Ireland across the 20th century, and attempts to relate them to broader theoretical questions about working-class self-organisation and strategies for social change.

Keywords: utopias, class, Ireland, social movements

Introduction: class and utopia in Ireland

A conversation late at night with two community activists working on utopian projects in the rural suburbia that covers much of Ireland: They complain about how hard it is to get the other people in the projects to acknowledge any kind of diversity as an issue, let alone class (“we’re very diverse, we all did different subjects in college”). Talk turns to a flagship environmental community which has been widely heralded in the media, and its privileged underbelly: a friend who has had to drop out because the prices have gone beyond her possibilities as a nurse and single mother; the “shareholders’ revolt” when informed that, like other building schemes, they would have to include a social housing element (the horror of sharing with the poor was averted by a contribution to the county council); the surprise of apparently intelligent and thoughtful participants that locals were not overjoyed at the enlightenment that would be brought from the cities. I say that I keep coming back to the thought of writing an article on the subject, but am held back by notions of solidarity and the thought that any eco-project which gives the outward appearance of success will open a sense of possibility for other projects. But I also wonder: when have we, on the left, ever seen any such solidarity in return? And how much of a sense of possibility is opened up for ordinary people when the most salient feature of a project is exclusivity and elitism?

In this paper, I want to extend the discussion of utopias to include the question of what characterises working-class and left utopias, drawing particularly on the Irish context but placing this within a comparative perspective. With this typological approach, distinguishing different kinds of utopia (marked by class and political orientation), I hope to expand notions of what utopia and utopian communities might

mean in practice, both for theoretical purposes (better understanding the role of utopias in left and working-class contexts in Ireland) and for strategic purposes (asking what purpose different kinds of utopia might have in the struggle to build a better world).

While this paper is necessarily polemical, constructed against a particular view of what utopia *must* mean, it is trying (as all of us in that late-night conversation are trying) to separate out and mark distinctions with a view to building alliances. The class solidarity underpinning both traditional rural Irish communities (a solidarity grounded in petty proprietorship) and that underpinning the Irish service class (a solidarity grounded in a self-understanding of that class as constituting the cultural and political nation) obliterates difference, and allows others to participate so long as they accept to be represented by those groups' use of "we"; when participants insist on the experience of difference and conflict this is typically met with incomprehension or aggression. Any real alliance-building, however, must start not from a fake sense of identity but from an acknowledgement of difference (of experience, needs, culture and purposes) and a working-through from those starting-points to a place of effective co-operation between equals.

In *The dispossessed* (Le Guin, 1975), Ursula Le Guin shows this kind of dialectic between an already-existing utopia and a popular revolution, albeit both founded on similar class bases (and drawing on her reading of early socialist kibbutzes and the Eastern European uprisings of the 1950s and 1960s). More recently, Starhawk's *The fifth sacred thing* (1997) illustrates communication and cooperation across boundaries of class, gender and race in the construction of a utopian future – but starting from the recognition of difference (and drawing on her own involvement in feminism, paganism, anti-nuclear direct action and the global justice movement). Such alliances have of course been a staple of international solidarity (e.g. Olesen, 2005 on the Zapatistas' international support base, or Midnight Notes, 2001 on their impact on social movements around the world). Similarly, if we are serious about social change in Ireland, and want something more than a private (or privatised) utopia, it is crucial to get beyond "organisational patriotism" (or simple boosterism for one's own projects), and beyond the generalisation of one's own experience and situation to cover the whole society, and it is in this spirit – of making distinctions in order to build effective alliances – that this article is written.

Methodological issues

As two widely censored journalists in exile once commented (Marx and Engels 1976, orig. 1846), the class which controls the means of production typically also controls the means of intellectual production; or, in contemporary language, it is hardly surprising that even alternative media, websites, courses and workshops and so on tend reflect the activities of the kind of people who might otherwise (or in their day jobs) go on to become journalists, producers, web designers, or teachers – rather than those of plasterers, kitchen porters, bus drivers or childcare workers. This is not to suggest that those of us working in such areas should stop (in a country where the bulk of the media are in any case controlled by the State or by Sir Anthony O'Reilly)

– but rather that we should ask ourselves, more systematically, whose voices are not getting heard in our own, alternative spaces.

The issue is particularly acute in Ireland, because of the historical defeat of the Irish working-class and its subordination to the nationalist movement in the independence struggle and thereafter (Allen, 1997). By contrast with the relatively self-confident working-class movements of much of continental Europe for much of the 20th century, Ireland (which has by far the lowest vote for even nominally left parties such as Labour of any west European state, reflecting this historic weakness) struggled to maintain independent working-class means of intellectual production within this period. Contrasting the institutions discussed in Rose's recent (2001) book on the British working class (but the same could be said for France, Germany, Italy or Norway, for example) with the Irish, left and working-class publishing, newspapers, radio and television have been (at least until recently) marginal and discontinuous. The "proletarian public sphere" (Negt and Kluge, 1993, orig. 1972) can rarely be said to have existed in Ireland other than as an aspiration, or a matter of the resonance of a handful of organisations.

The net effect of this is that an effective history of working-class life in Ireland, never mind an effective history of working-class utopias, is (at the present stage of archiving) more of an aspiration than a real possibility. What exists is scattered within the small literature of the Irish Left (itself often very much a "grey literature"), the fragmentary archives of working-class community periodicals, radio stations and video groups, the practical ethnographic knowledge of participants, and a variety of disconnected fields of working-class studies (Russo and Linkon, 2005) – labour history, the sociology of class and of unions, oral history, the study of left parties, and so on. For the same reason, more can be said in this context about the relatively well-organised working classes of the big urban centres than about rural labourers or small-town working class groups, and more about Catholic than Protestant workers; the more organised were not only more productive of utopias, but they had more chance to write and for what they wrote to be collected. In this context, this paper is necessary a sketch, whose weaknesses are very clear to its author, but which I hope may inspire others to follow up with a more substantial and grounded account.

Utopias *for* the working class

To begin with, a key qualification is necessary. Within capitalism, the normal (though not universal) working-class experience is that of relative powerlessness, of being "done to" rather than "doing to". Without a doubt, the primary experience of working-class people in Ireland is as a *target* of other people's utopias: whether of Robert Owen's at Ralahine (framed within the old tradition of paternalist socialism), of Guinness's model housing for workers in the Iveagh Buildings (Aalen, 1990), of the farmers' co-ops that employed much of the rural working-class (and which called in the Free State army to put down strikes in the west Waterford and east Cork creameries in the 1920s (Allen, 1997)), or of the State's modernist utopias into which the inner-city working-class were progressively evicted, from Marino in the 1920s via Ballymun in the 1960s and onwards. Despite paternalist or populist references to the

needs of the poor, and occasional gestures towards “consultation” (Nexus, 2000), these have been institutions imposed from above, by employers or the state, working-class only in terms of their populations or workforce.

The most powerful such utopia, of course, was the remaking of Irish society in the period between the Famine and the 1930s as an experiment in nationalist utopia (an experience not limited to Ireland: see Anderson, 1991 and Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1984). Whether in the institutions of the GAA and the revived church, of Fianna Fáil or the Legion of Mary, of industrial schools or Magdalen laundries, to a large extent working-class Irish people from the late 19th century to the late 20th can be said to have lived within other people’s utopias: particularly the utopias constructed by the urban service class and strong farmers in terms of an imagined western seaboard or a religious imaginary. In this paper, however, I am concerned with utopias developed within the working class and that part of the left which has been practically connected to working-class struggles; it is these utopias which can usefully be distinguished from rural and service class utopias and from nationalist and religious ones, by virtue of the needs, experiences, cultures and goals underlying them.

Working-class utopias in the Irish twentieth century: a sketch

Utopian thought, of various kinds, has been a consistent presence within the Irish working class movement throughout the twentieth century. It has operated in various forms: as utopian literature, from Edward Bellamy’s *Looking backwards* (1888) and William Morris’ riposte *News from nowhere* (1993, orig. 1890) onwards; as mythologised versions of other places (the Russia of the 1920s, the Spain of the 1930s, the Nicaragua of the 1980s – or simply the British NHS, Scandinavian childcare provision or French trade unions); in the subjunctive mode of “what might have been” if events (the Lockout, the Easter Rising, the North) had developed differently; or in the form of political theory, manifestoes, transitional programmes and discussions of what socialism might look like. Despite Engels’ famous attack on utopianism (1880), contemporary socialist scholarship recognises utopian thought as a consistent presence within working-class movements (see e.g. Thompson 1999 for a recent collection), and Ireland is no exception.

In terms of institutions, utopian organising can be said to have existed (and to continue to exist) at three levels within Irish working-class contexts. Firstly, it develops as an immediate response to needs which are not being met, in the form of self-provision and self-organisation. Secondly, in the form of projects arising out of specific campaigns and struggles, reflecting and developing their political orientations. Thirdly, at the high-points of social conflict, in moments when the power of the state is directly challenged, utopias strive towards the development of “dual-power institutions” (Of course, these three moments are interconnected in many ways: see Boyle, 2005 for a theorisation of this dialectic in relation to Ballymun).

Before developing each of these points with examples, it is worth highlighting their common characteristic, and what differentiates them from the dominant mode within environmental and religious utopias: they are not “headbirths” (Grass, 1993) of those

with the resources and freedom to develop elaborate plans and then put them into action (desirable though that situation is); more typically, they are part and parcel of the process of struggle, growing organically out of it, and hence less in need of legitimation as example, model, experiment and so on. Or, to put it another way, more effort goes into organising than into advertising.

Everyday self-provision

Firstly: self-provision and self-organisation. As EP Thompson (1963) and Colin Ward (1982, orig. 1973) have noted, capitalist societies become “warren’d through” with working-class organisation, if for no other reason than the need to cope in societies within which working-class people often struggle for economic survival and lack the power to force the state to act on their behalf. Thus extended families provide the childcare which the state does not (and are under threat in each wave of “slum clearance” or “regeneration”), informal networks of support come to operate between different groups within a single area (see e.g. Fagan, 2000 on mutual solidarity between prostitutes and other residents in the “Monto” of the 1920s), occupational groups such as dockers struggle for control of their own employment (O’Carroll, 1998) and neighbourhoods come to constitute themselves as effective communities (see e.g. Benson, 2006 on Ringsend).

A huge range of slightly more formal organisations take this process further in specific contexts, such as the Belvedere Newsboys Club (founded in the early 20th century and still in operation as a youth club), the network of Workingmen’s clubs for after-work socialising, community women’s groups (such as St Pappin’s Ladies Club, the first community group in Ballymun), football teams or credit unions. Levels of participation in such organisations are very high: in Fatima Mansions in the 1990s, 44% of the population were in at least one community group, while in Ballymun around the same period, 4% of the entire population were *employed* in community organizations (Corcoran, 1998; Nexus, 2000).

Campaigns and projects

Secondly, projects arising out of campaigns and ongoing struggles. Staying with Ballymun, the rent strikes of the 1970s and the Housing Task Force of the 1980s were key elements in pushing the formalization of organizations in the housing area, as well as achieving a situation where – for a time – community groups gained control of the housing list in an attempt to limit its use as a “social dumping ground” and achieve a social balance on the estate. On a smaller scale, squatting (both “political” and “economic”) became so extensive that Dessie O’Malley brought in legislation making it a felony punishable by up to 5 years’ imprisonment (a situation not found in other west European countries, where squats have remained a significant part of the urban landscape).

Also in this period, the spread of liberation theology, Marxism and republicanism led to a flourishing of community organizing and the birth of enormous numbers of childcare groups, youth clubs, drop-in centres for addicts and so on – including, in Ballymun, one of the State’s first Gaelscoileanna, founded with the combined goal of

meeting the need for schooling, finding committed teachers who would not treat it as a hardship posting and leave on the bell, and asserting parental rather than religious control over education.

In city centres, worker co-ops such as the Quay Co-op in Cork and the Well Fed centre in Dublin (see Quay Co-op, 1982 for a broader listing) were founded as part of the broader left of the 1980s; later developments in this tradition have included the (now sadly defunct) Giro's in Belfast and Garden of Delights in Dublin, and most recently the Seomra Spraoi social centre. In this same period, battles over "regeneration" have led to the formation of alternative projects for whole estates, most notably Fatima Mansions, where residents elaborated a complete alternative plan for the estate's development (Fatima Groups United, 2000). At moments such as these, Thompson's formulation of "a whole way of struggle" (Hall, 1989) has seemed appropriate, highlighting a very different sense of utopia: located in conflict, lived in the everyday, and grounded in concrete needs (see Mullan and Cox, 2000 for a socialist feminist reading of this history).

Highpoints of struggle

Thirdly: utopias arising out of the highpoint of social struggles. As in Europe as a whole, the two most powerful such moments have been the "red years" from 1916 – 23 and the years of student and worker uprisings in 1968 and 1969 (Albanese, 2006; Mitchell, 1970; Fraser, 1988). Ireland, of course, missed the utopian moment of the anti-fascist resistance (Wilkinson, 1981; Thompson, 1982) except for left volunteers in the Spanish Civil War (outnumbered by the Irish volunteers for fascism).

In the "red years", the highpoint of council communism on the continent and of the IWW in the USA, the Irish counterpoint is to be found in Larkin's struggle for "one big union", defeated in the Lockout (Newsinger, 2004), in the participation of the Irish Citizen Army (Europe's first working-class militia) in the Easter Rising (Nevin, 2005), and in the Limerick Soviet of 1919 and its echoes in the broader strike wave across Ireland and Britain in that year. Each has its utopian moment – the construction of solidarity, the vision of union power, Connolly's contribution to the Proclamation of Independence, or the institutional framework improvised in Limerick – and each, decisively for the future of working-class organization in Ireland, is comprehensively defeated.

Within the phase of "organized capitalism" (Offe 1985, Lash and Urry 1987) that runs in political terms between the defeat of the red years and the revolts of 1968, the utopian impulse is, if not completely stifled, then heavily muffled, by organizational developments on the left (see Cox, 2001 for an analysis). With the development of greater state intervention in the economy and society, political attention across the northern hemisphere shifted to the role of the state, and those tendencies (anarchist, syndicalist, libertarian Marxist, council communist and so on) which emphasized direct self-activity were progressively marginalized on the left to the benefit of those which emphasized gaining control of, or influence over, the state – whether within a social democratic or Stalinist framework, or, as often in the newly independent Free State, within the framework of a populist nationalism.

The next major phase of social conflict, in the late 1960s, erupted (not by chance) in that part of Ireland where the state could not claim general legitimacy. Without going into the familiar details, here I want to emphasise the general point that “Free Derry” (McCann, 1993) and (in some ways more importantly) the self-organisation of republican West Belfast, from the rebuilding of housing burnt by Orange mobs to the “black taxis”, need to be resituated within a broader understanding that working-class self-organisation and self-provision, albeit on a less visible level, is in some ways the norm rather than the exception in capitalist societies (for Northern Ireland in general, see McNamee and Lovett, 1992).

A final vignette to close this section: on Mayday 2004, in the context of opposition to the EU’s drive towards privatization, racism and warfare, the effective banning of Dublin Grassroots Network’s march provoked a far larger mobilization than we could ever have hoped to achieve on our own, in defence of the right of assembly, which the left has to fight for again and again in each decade. Marching from the GPO through working-class Dublin, the crowd took up the simple chant “Whose streets? Our streets! Whose streets? Our streets!” Nearly a hundred years after the murderous baton-charges of the DMP on strikers during the Lockout, trapping people in the alleyway between the GPO and today’s Penney’s, and followed up by a massive raid on Corporation Buildings, the same utopian visions – of owning our own world, of not being subject to the arbitrary power of others, of asserting ourselves in solidarity with others - remain alive, even when they can only be expressed as a momentary chant.

Reflections

In what sense are these moments utopian? How would it affect our conceptualization of utopias if we allowed not only the consciously-planned, more or less well-resourced, highly visible intentional community but also the revolutionary improvisation, the mundane organization and the subterranean bonds of recognition and solidarity to enter the picture? What is specific to the Irish working-class and left experience in this respect? And, perhaps most importantly, what are its implications for the future?

Firstly, I would argue that we can indeed see the kinds of informal activities, projects and revolutionary moments as utopian. They are utopian in that they do not fit within a capitalist society, but are generated out of its failures and in direct conflict with its operating principles; in this sense they are “nowhere” to be found, including within most writing on Irish society and politics. They are practical utopias, in that they are typically long on the hard work of organizing and short on advertising and rhetoric, to the point where it can be hard to find enough “literature” to allow them to appear in academic publications. And, perhaps most interestingly, they are developmental utopias: even at their highpoints, few if any of their participants would have claimed that they embodied the way the world should be. Rather, they are steps in what was felt to be the right direction, and practical demonstrations that “it doesn’t have to be this way”. Utopian, then (but within a different mode).

Part of this mode, as in any utopia, is the living out of particular ethical choices: solidarity and mutual support, for example; autonomy and a willingness to resist powerful modes of silencing and incorporation; self-respect and courage; practicality and the valuing of skill. Much has been written about left intellectuals' supposed romance with the idea of the working class and the search for an agent of change; in my own experience, and I suspect that of many members of the service class who have chosen to align themselves with the left, the decisive factor has been the encounter with the deeply impressive human beings who live out such utopias, and the stark contrast to the social and professional worlds we know.

Theoretically, I have suggested in the previous section that we should see the key feature of working-class or left utopias as being their growth out of everyday needs, public campaigns or the highpoints of social struggle; in other words, they reflect the developing (or declining) practice of a social movement, or a class-for-itself, and their primary mode of operation is directly within that movement. This marks a sharp contrast with those forms of utopia which are aimed at the rich and powerful (as in the kinds of "utopianism" that Marx and Engels criticized in the *Manifesto* - utopian because of their misplaced sense of who had an interest in changing the structures of power and exploitation within their society); it also marks a contrast with the greater or lesser apoliticism of those utopias which are aimed at the media or at the general public as a model or example, with no strategy for contributing to a broader social movement; and (naturally) with those kinds of religious utopia which are intended as entirely self-sufficient.

This kind of distinction is then interesting if turned back on other utopias: it distinguishes neatly (for example) the Carnsore festivals, the Glen of the Downs or Rosspport Solidarity Camp from a project such as the Eco-village; or (come to that) the Camphill communities and the Catholic Workers from pure retreat centres. In other words, rather than drawing sectarian boundaries between (say) socialist and environmentalist utopias, we can draw more useful divisions between those utopias which are part of social movements (and will often have both socialists and environmentalists, as well as anarchists, feminists and community activists involved) and those which are intended to be sufficient unto themselves.

Another way to put this is to say that there are strategic utopias, located within social movements, and exemplary utopias, tendentially located (if not quite outside time and space) then certainly outside of real social struggles or any systematic relationship to agency. It is then perhaps not surprising that the latter tend to wither rapidly unless they are driven by a strong authoritarian religious basis (see e.g. Pepper, 1991).

The most obvious feature of left and working-class utopias in Ireland has been the sheer difficulty in sustaining either vision or practice in the face of long-term historical defeat, and the tradition of "elsewhere" as utopia (whether that elsewhere be an apparently successful revolution or simply a more welcoming capitalist labour market and a freer culture). Ramor Ryan's *Clandestines* (2006) expresses the problem lyrically, and tellingly, at what may be the end of that particular era.

Furthermore, as Gramsci puts it, in peripheral contexts (such as Ireland) “the state is everything and civil society is nothing” (Gramsci, 1975, orig. 1920s - 30s), and it is only in the neo-liberal context, as the state is rapidly bidding farewell to its developmentalist role, that it is becoming possible for younger generations to move from the everyday *practice* of self-organisation to a utopian *vision* that recognizes not just that the state in practice has failed them, but that it is never likely to do anything else.

In terms of broader strategic issues, then, the question for the new period will be whether it is possible for social movements to continue generating utopian practice, and for utopian visions to connect directly with movement practices and understandings. In this context, the tendencies to step “outside of history”, or simply to import models from elsewhere without reflection, are liable to failure; what will work is what is rooted in existing struggles for change and aims to take them further. To quote Italo Calvino:

“If there is a hell, it is what is already here, the hell that we inhabit every day, that we form through being 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 recognize, who and what, in the middle of this hell, are not part of it, to make them last, and to give them space.” (Calvino 1993 orig. 1972).

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