

The Irish water charges movement: theorising “the social movement in general”

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“The English working class will *never accomplish anything* before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. That is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general [*die soziale Bewegung überhaupt*].” (Marx to Engels, December 11 1869)

Abstract

This paper uses participant narratives and Marxist social movement theory to analyse resistance to water charges as the driving force of Irish anti-austerity struggles – or “the social movement in general”. It locates this movement within the history of working-class community-based self-organisation in Ireland. Contemporary resistance to metering and refusal to pay are not “spontaneous”, but articulate long-standing local rationalities.

The current situation has seen the crisis of other forms of working-class articulation: union dependence on a Labour Party which enthusiastically embraced austerity in government; the co-optation of community service provision within “social partnership”, under attack from the state since the mid-2000s; and the collapse of far left initiatives for shared parliamentary representation and resistance to household charges. New forms of popular agency are thus developing; community-based direct action has enabled a historic alliance between multiple forms of working-class voice and unleashed a vast process of popular mobilisation and self-education.

Finally, the paper relates the Irish movement to the wider loss of consent for austerity on the European periphery, and asks after the political prospects for effective alliances “within the belly of the beast”.

Keywords: Social movements, Marxism, Ireland, water, class, community activism, austerity, neoliberalism, resistance

Introduction: the poverty of Irish academic theory¹

Something extraordinary has happened in the Irish movement against water charges, part of a longer struggle against austerity and centred in working-class housing estates in the major cities. Self-organised groups of friends, neighbours, family and activists have prevented, disrupted and in some cases reversed the installation of water meters across substantial parts of working-class Dublin, Cork and elsewhere. A massive proportion of the population has never registered for billing, refused to pay or cancelled their payments. Some of the largest demonstrations in decades have taken place. Ireland has joined those peripheral European countries where a political majority for austerity politics can no longer be found except by fraud or force. A greatly revitalised working-class community activism has joined together with a substantial proportion of the trade union movement that has abandoned its traditional loyalty to the Labour Party, and with various left and independent parties and parliamentary deputies.

The movement provoked a substantial crisis in the 2016 election and government formation process: at time of writing (May 2017), the issue – kicked into the long grass of a commission, with charges suspended in the interim – has returned to haunt the corridors of power. In the parliamentary committee set up to consider the commission’s report, Fianna Fáil, currently supporting the minority Fine Gael – Independent Alliance government, voted with Fine Gael and against all other parties for a report which will presumably now be implemented in legislation. This rolls back charges (and refunds those who had paid) but retains a levy for “excess use” (and hence a back door for reintroducing charges in future) as well as meters in all newly built housing – the latter good news for billionaire Denis O’Brien, the owner of much of Ireland’s private media and one of whose companies was awarded contracts for meter installation.

The intention is no doubt to demobilise the movement, which had visibly stalled other austerity-related plans, such as the proposal to impose a broadcasting licence payment on those who did not own a television.² However it seems clear that the levels of popular participation generated within the movement have spilled over into the many other austerity-related issues destroying lives across the country. People who have once become mobilised on this scale and with

¹ Earlier versions of this argument were presented to the UCC Dept of Government research seminar, the Manchester “Alternative Futures and Popular Protest” conference, a plenary session at the Sociological Association of Ireland conference, and an academia.edu discussion. My thanks are due to the organisers and participants.

² “Government backed off TV licence plan over fears of water charges-style protests, claims TD”. *Irish Times* 9 May 2017. It is significant in this context that the state broadcaster RTÉ had consistently massively underestimated the numbers of those involved in water charges protests, making the new licence fee a particular target of criticism.

such an impact rarely consent to go back home quietly and forget about the experience³.

And yet the movement is barely studied *as a movement*. Its most avid chroniclers have been right-wing journalists who seek either to demonise or trivialise it⁴. Most academic writing has consisted of drive-by punditry: a handful of partly-informed comments on the fringe of discussion of something “important”, usually economics, policy or government formation⁵.

To say this, however, is apparently an extreme breach of in-group solidarity. An earlier version of this paper received such sustained criticism for its temerity in challenging other academics that it may be worth pausing to reflect on the reasons for this. According to one commentator, all forms of research are valid in their own terms; more diffuse criticisms simply reaffirmed a sense of professional loyalty in which what is most important is to avoid being “harsh” to one’s fellow academics and to show due deference to “the literature”, however poor. This paper takes a rather different view, which is that academics should be held to serious intellectual and professional standards rather than in effect given a free pass for having a university job.

In this context, much of what has been published (as discussed below) is weak by the most basic standards of familiarity with empirical fact, logical argument, research methods and international research. The provincialism which lets this kind of writing stand as “the literature” undermines the credibility of social research as a whole. There is then a wider weakness of the Irish variants of particular disciplines in their (classed) inability to notice working-class movements in particular, by comparison with states, formal organisations such as parties or middle-class movements. Lastly, we might note the slippage where writing about policy or parties is felt to encompass popular mobilisation, thus avoiding any requirement to study the latter seriously. In this respect, the

³ For readers unfamiliar with the movement, the significant features of the “issue” are the Irish state’s decision to charge individuals (not the businesses and farms which use 78% of water) for water usage, a move widely seen as enabling future privatisation; and the official claim that charges are required by the EU. Water charges affect the vast majority of private households, owner-occupied and rented; only those on some rural group water schemes are exempt, while people in flats or where two houses share a pipe face estimated bills. Thus the charges impacted almost all social groups, regressively.

⁴ One honourable exception is Brendan Ogle’s (2016) book on the movement came out. It is no criticism to say that it is fundamentally a history of the Right2Water / Right2Change alliances which he was instrumental in helping to bring together, and not of the wider movement beyond the Right2Water demonstrations and the 2016 election. The book gives an excellent insight into the often-underlooked role of trade unions in the movement.

⁵ Early feedback from colleagues sought greater engagement with “the literature” and “existing debates”, marking the reasonable assumption that there should *be* a literature and academic debates on such a substantial movement. This paper is partly written to remedy its near-total absence at present.

criticisms which follow are intended as a call for greater intellectual standards – as well as an observation that some emperors really have no clothes⁶.

Talking about “important” things

Around the time the movement took off, two political scientists (Cannon and Murphy 2015) co-authored a paper which explained what they identified as a *lack* of protest in Ireland by factors including the Irish not being poor *enough* to protest en masse. Reality has of course already delivered a harsh critique of the article’s basic premise. However brief reflection should have suggested that if absolute levels of wealth really determined readiness to protest, we would find a neat curve mapped across human history, with its highpoint at some “optimum” level of deprivation generating maximum protest. Needless to say, no such curve graces the introductory chapters of social movements textbooks⁷.

From the politically reductionist end, activist Rory Hearne and his geography class carried out a Facebook survey focussing on the rather leading question “What kind of political party do you think the movement needs?” (Hearne 2015a, 2015b). While participants reliably reproduced the general left rhetoric that parties are good, the subsequent history suggests that this opinion does not have great effect on their actual practice: no new party actually materialised⁸. Nonetheless Hearn’s study has the great merit of existing and its empirical material is valuable⁹. A *New Left Review* piece, meanwhile, focusses roughly evenly on economics, parties and unions, and media commentary, with actual popular participation relegated to occasional asides (Finn 2015a).

⁶ Since writing this paper I was delighted to listen to David Landy’s (2017) conference paper, which is everything that research in this area should be – but, in Ireland, is not: familiar with the social movements literature, empirically familiar with the details of the water charges struggle and able to situate it in a wider context both of Irish movement history and of social movements internationally.

⁷ We should also note psychological reductionisms, such as Power and Nussbaum (2016), who explain the supposed absence of protest with the mysteries of Irish Catholicism – despite both its well-documented decline in recent decades and the contrast they see with (Protestant?) countries such as Spain and Portugal. What they actually document, it might be suggested, is people’s willingness to explain supposed Irish peculiarities in terms of national character.

⁸ Respondents themselves saw voting in elections as substantially less effective at bringing change on issues like water charges than protesting (52.3% vs 77.6%; 2015a: 24). As noted below, this is a reasonably accurate reading of the history of the Republic, which offers little indication that parties are an effective means of bringing about social justice – but repeated examples of large-scale social movements bringing about substantial change in the teeth of official Ireland.

⁹ There are obvious methodological problems which are not overcome by simple sample size (Hearne 2015a: 2). However we can note that Ireland has internationally high levels of Internet usage and Facebook in particular; that social media use is very important for the movement; and that this survey was strongly supported by movement groups. The survey’s data thus probably gives a fair indication of at least a significant part of the movement.

The notion that collective popular agency might have its own logic, or be of interest in itself, is evidently at odds with Ireland's self-identified critical academia, which is critical in the sense of acting as an alternative elite, critical of the current shape of the economy, polity and media, but not primarily interested in what working-class people are actually doing – or in a different kind of politics that would not rely on their own expertise¹⁰.

This self-referential tendency comes out strongly in the debate between Peadar Kirby and “Oireachtas Report” (2015a, b). Kirby, a soft left academic, attacked the movement for failing to provide an alternative institutional proposal to the government's newly established Irish Water, and hence (to his mind) “*actually undermining the right to water*” (italics Kirby). Tellingly, he blames “the so-called left leaders and parties which have mobilised this campaign” (2015a). From this alternative elite point of view, the only real interest in a movement is its *policy contribution*, and a movement is mobilised by “leaders and parties”. As “Oireachtas Retort” puts it on the narrowness of this “radical policy” perspective,

Since 2008, there have many earnest proposals. But here is the question.

Where are the We The Citizens, the Claiming Our Future and Constitutional Conventions. Where are the hundreds of authors who have churned out books of reform and new republics. Is this not politics too? Or are you policing someone else's limits....

On Wednesday I watched people from Edenmore, Africa, Ballyhea, Detroit - walk on stage in absolute awe at the support they have received and will just as sincerely give in return....

So who is telling who about so-called politics? (2015a)¹¹

Disciplinary fragmentation and social partnership certainly play a role in generating this blindness to popular struggle (Cox 2015). This is also true in much international commentary, where an electoral focus predominates: a search not for Gramsci's modern prince but for a modern Prince Charming (Cox and Nilsen 2014: 203), a party or leader whose existence abroad could underwrite a certain kind of left intellectual activity at home. Syriza, Podemos and Sinn Féin – three radically different organisations – are often cited together here. With Syriza now defeated by the EU, Podemos having failed to sweep the

¹⁰ It is also worth noting in this context that a surprising number of writers on austerity, equality and the politics of change are members or allies of the Labour Party in particular. “Beware of Greeks bringing gifts”: or more exactly, movements should be far more cautious about taking advice on how to organise against austerity from people whose primary allegiances are to parties who have been busily *imposing* austerity against massive popular resistance.

¹¹ Kirby's response (2015b) shows a failure to grasp the realities of power (including within academia), indicated by his plaintive objection that his critics use pseudonyms: how *dare* they inhabit situations where they might suffer repercussions for their views?

board electorally and Sinn Féin somewhat less than all-conquering, it should now be possible to question this fetishisation of parties in a neoliberal era which allows them remarkably little scope.

In fact the constant insistence by “realists”, academic or party-political, on the centrality of the party-political arena misses the most obvious historical fact about Irish popular struggles: they have repeatedly won major victories *without* having any kind of political majority. The victories of the Land War, ultimately producing a massive land redistribution and the end of the landed aristocracy, and the wholesale defeat of nuclear power in 1979, are extraordinary achievements in global terms – but were achieved *despite* the parties in power. The same is true for the less unique victories of the feminist and GLTBQI movements: it is these social majorities which have forced governments to call referenda, often against their long-standing reluctance to touch these issues. If the 8th amendment is repealed, it will be small thanks to political parties. Finally, of course, nothing the Irish left has won has been due to having a parliamentary majority, because we have never had a government with anything more than a centre-left party as junior coalition partner. In other words, a “hard-nosed, realist” analysis of Irish politics has to conclude that social movements are a much *better* tool for social change in the Republic than the party route has ever been in terms of actual victories.

In contrast with a literature which appears determined to focus on formal politics as a point of principle, the present article uses the tools of social movement research to focus not on elite behaviour but on “the social movement in general”, the popular participation which has propelled this issue into the limelight – and which has repeatedly put the official system very firmly in its place, spluttering at the effrontery of the tracksuit-clad plebs but even more at their effectiveness in refusing the decisions made for them by those who know better and play by the rules of the official game.

In discussing “the social movement in general”, then, I want to emphasise that the significance of the Irish water protests is as the sharp end of a massive popular movement against austerity: as in the nineteenth-century usage of “social movement”, society beyond the enclaves of the privileged is in movement (Cox 2013a). As we shall see below, the multiplicity of fields in this struggle is crucial, resisting attempts to reduce it to a single kind of action or to contain it within the analysis of official institutions¹².

Methodology

Starting from a methodological commitment to participatory action research (PAR), my initial feeling about the movement was that it should be researched by those more closely involved; and that the scale of the movement, in particular

¹² Within this kind of analysis, social movement is not *opposed* to parties, unions, radical media etc. but rather the latter are all possible forms of manifestation of social movements, however difficult their interrelationships are at times.

its reach across different social groups, its geographical spread and the massive involvement of newcomers to movements, called for extensive ethnographic research that would be capable of grasping the multiple and at times contradictory experiences involved. However, as noted the bulk of published research related to the movement has treated it as a walk-on actor in some apparently more important discussion, and the only ethnographic research to date has been carried out by movement participants who happened to be in university at the time¹³. At present the Irish Research Council is not offering the kind of general research funding which could enable substantial ethnographic research into the movement.

Having been asked to speak on the subject in several locations, most notably a plenary session of the Sociological Association of Ireland's annual conference, on which this article is based, I felt that it was important both to challenge the representation of the movement in existing academic writing and to highlight and support the development of what research is being done. I have been contacted by several researchers carrying out activist student projects, and have been making links between them and encouraging the sharing of their outcomes. Hopefully some of these will become available more widely in the not-too-distant future, and some of their participants will go on to carry out further research¹⁴. With most participants by now already mobilised, the chance to capture this experience ethnographically has largely passed. However, life history interviews – both of previously-experienced activists and newcomers – could grasp these long-term shifts once integrated personally, and I have been working on this with students at Maynooth.

The methodology underpinning this article is perhaps best described as a form of attenuated PAR within working-class community activism, in that it arises from and articulates some discussions within that movement and slow conversations with activists over some years¹⁵. On a shorter timescale and in relation to the water struggle, my analysis draws on co-organising the 15th Grassroots Gathering in Drimnagh (where meters have been successfully resisted) with a number of local water charges groups and a series of public

¹³ Ireland does have relatively high levels both of third-level participation and of non-traditional students, however.

¹⁴ One obvious gap is an examination of the geography of direct action and non-payment (insofar as sources permit), which could usefully be mapped against older geographies of community activism, left voting etc. as well as the distribution of “days of action” protests, the location of Hearn's respondents, etc. This might show how far participation can be said to have extended existing modes of everyday action into the political sphere.

¹⁵ On movement theory, see Barker and Cox (2011); on PAR and related approaches in social movement research see e.g. Croteau et al. (2005), Shukaitis et al. (2007), or Cox and Fominaya (2009). It should be noted that the question of movement boundaries (whether “the water charges movement”, “the community movement”, “the anti-austerity movement” or whatever should be imagined as separate but interrelated, as subsets of one another or in some other way) is one which mainstream social movement theory does not handle well. Marxist arguments (Cox 2013a, Cox and Nilsen 2014) propose that we should place the emphasis rather on the social agents as they organise and reorganise in different ways across time.

events involving movement activists; and individual discussions with community activists active around water. This position enables in particular taking the pulse of the (internally leading) community-based end of the movement, particularly in Dublin, and is weaker on trade union, rural and political party perspectives.

The paper also re-analyses several published accounts by activists. Andrew Flood, probably Ireland's single best observer of social movements, gave a very thought-provoking talk on the movement drawing on his three decades of close involvement with Irish movements (Flood 2015). Two community-based activists, Criostóir MacCionnaith and Catherine Lynch, wrote excellent MA theses (MacCionnaith 2015, Lynch 2015). Both have kindly given me permission to cite some of the interview material published in their theses; these reflective discussions between peers represent some of the most insightful published accounts of the movement in terms of exploring the personal experience and transformation of its participants. There are shorter pieces by Ferdia O'Brien (2015), "Stephen" (2015), Áine Mannion (2015), Dara McHugh (2014) and others, and undergraduate theses by Brian Mallon (2016, 2017) and Owen Brennan (2016).

I have also benefitted from many discussions with and observations by movement participants and well-placed observers. Thanks are due to "Alibaba", John Bissett, Jean Bridgeman, "CMK", Laurence Davis, Terry Fagan, Fergal Finnegan, Niamh Gaynor, Margaret Gillan, "GW", Mariya Ivancheva, Jimmy Keenan, David Landy, Tomás MacSheoin, Pádraig Madden, Tara O'Donoghue, Brendan Ogle and James Quigley, as well as those whose names I don't know. I also wish to thank those activist students who have engaged with, critiqued and developed arguments made in classroom contexts, in particular Brid Comerford, Ken Connolly, Kevin O'Hara and Kathleen Ryan. Thanks as well to Carole Cusack, Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Daniel von Freyberg, Anne Kane, Galvão Debelle dos Santos and Corey Wrenn. A movement this massive and diverse can only be understood through a diversity of experiences and reflections: anything valuable here has been learnt from these activists, and I hope it is useful to them in turn. Needless to say, none of them are responsible for the paper's errors and weaknesses¹⁶.

¹⁶ Anyone involved with the movement – or with the Irish left – will also know that the movement also has its own internal tensions, with mutual accusations and hostile commentary. In this paper I have tried not to get into the details of such accusations. This is partly because it can be hard to know the truth of particular controversies (and in the Irish context they can easily derail any wider discussion). More importantly, though, what is striking about the water charges movement is that *for once* this kind of conflict is not the most important feature of attempts at collaboration on the Irish left, and it has not succeeded in destroying the movement. In other words, the remarkable thing about the water charges struggle is that these various groups have been able to come together, and largely stay together, at all.

Of course organisations (community groups, unions and parties alike) have a tendency to "organisational patriotism" – self-righteousness and defensiveness, often coupled with a cynical eye to organisational self-interest – which gets in the way of wider projects with depressing regularity. This makes it all the more important (intellectually, but also politically) to pay close

Purpose of the article

This article seeks, firstly, to establish an empirical overview of the movement in its various aspects, using the tools of social movement analysis: in other words, to study it *as* a social movement, and not as a footnote to policy, economics, media or institutional politics. In this respect it seeks to remedy both the absence of such an overview and the weaknesses of such academic research as does exist. It is thus somewhat longer than usual where one can rely on previously-published literature to provide an empirical background; it also explains points which may be obvious to participants but not to younger people or those outside the country.

Secondly, it argues that the water charges movement has to be understood within the longer history of Irish anti-capitalist movements and working-class community activism. In this sense the article may gain in historical depth what it lacks in the immediate ability to grasp a vast, disparate, internally contested movement. The Marxist theory that Alf Nilsen and I have articulated, partly on the basis of this history, seems to have some purchase: in May 2014, just after the first direct actions against meters, we wrote of Ireland that

the way out [of the crisis of resistance] must lie not in a further reassertion of the narrow interests of organisational elites, be they community, NGO, or Trotskyist, but in strategies aimed at supporting the development of active *movement* participation and alliance-building on our own terrain. This is obviously easier said than done: in all likelihood, the next moves in action from below will not come from increasingly isolated movement organisations but from new mobilisations below the radar.... (2014: 191-2)

Thirdly, the article seeks to draw attention to the emphasis placed by participants themselves on an often-transformative experience of mobilisation and learning. The water charges movement is characterised by a high level of mobilisation of people new to activism, for whom the process involves throwing off the “muck of ages” (Barker 1995), articulating “good sense” against “common sense” (Gramsci 1971). In such processes, people allow themselves to become more conscious of the tensions between their own “local rationalities” and hegemonic relationships, enabling a public reframing of their situation as unjust and subject to change through collective action, producing new kinds of social relationships and knowledge (Wainwright 1994, Cox and Nilsen 2014). Elite-focussed academic research, taking participation in the public sphere for granted, routinely fails to recognise this experience, which is not only significant at the personal level but – when repeated in very large numbers among groups

attention to those moments when wider perspectives are capable of overriding these tendencies. It is perhaps a tautology to say that such moments are characterised by the ascendancy of the wider social movement over its individual parts, the mobilisation of large numbers of people outside existing organisational frameworks and a consequent re-emphasising of the prospect of wider social change.

who are often politically passive – can represent a changing of political relationships across society.

Insofar as this paper starts from a strong critique of what little academic literature exists, it is perhaps important to state some criteria for better research in the area. To avoid repeating the weaknesses of existing analyses, a serious social movement analysis of the struggle should be (a) centred in an understanding of the ebb and flow of popular agency, specifically how it breaks out from institutional “business as usual”; (b) historical – locating the movement within changes in working-class community activism; and (c) comparative – relating Irish struggles against neo-liberalism to struggles elsewhere in Europe.

This article is organised as a first attempt to sketch out such an analysis. The first section covers the historical background for the movement in the development of working-class community activism in Ireland, while the second covers the more immediate run-up to the movement in prior anti-austerity activism. The third section attempts a bird’s-eye overview of the movement, both empirically and in terms of its relationships with the state, specifically in terms of repression and hegemony. The fourth explores how participants have experienced the movement, with particular reference to processes of learning and development. Finally, the conclusion draws some tentative connections with anti-austerity movements elsewhere in Europe.

The making of Irish working-class community activism

A Marxist analysis of social movements

A Marxist perspective is not, of course, a mechanical materialism or a vulgar economism of the kind discussed in the introduction. As Lebowitz (2003) puts it, to the political economy of *capital* we need to counterpose a political economy of *labour*: how people meet their needs, act to defend their existing gains and to meet new needs. More relevant than comparing absolute living standards is Coulter and Nagle’s observation that the combination of tax increases and welfare state cuts in this period – about 1/5 of GDP – represented the single largest reduction in living standards in any developed country outside wartime (2015: 9). Popular agency is far more likely to respond to the *disruption* of local rationalities (“the straw that broke the camel’s back”) than to any absolute situation.

“Real human beings”, however, are not simple abstractions: they have not just pre-existing understandings of their needs and ways they attempting to meet these, but cultural judgements about how they should be met, learned ways of acting collectively when these expectations are attacked or unfulfilled, even aspirations for a better world, for themselves or for their children. We need some way of grasping this beyond identifying the exact figure at which *homo economicus* might leap into movement participation.

Conversely, a Marxist approach also rejects the assumption that the routine workings of capitalist democracy exhaust “politics”¹⁷. As MacCionnaith puts it, Hearne fails “to differentiate between a movement and a party in posing the question ... and then read[s] the respondents’ answers largely as a vote for a new party” (2015: 48). Marx and Engels’ writings are full of discussions of social movements, class struggle, popular traditions of political thought, the effect of past struggles on present-day strategies, the relationships between movements and the scope for change, and the like: in contrast with some present-day left traditions, they did not treat parties as the be-all and end-all of politics.

Recent attempts at developing a Marxist theory of social movements have argued for a developmental notion of social movement, shaped by historical context and social situation, in conflict and alliance with other movements from above and from below, capable of both advancing to unprecedented levels of political significance and of falling or being knocked back (e.g. Barker et al. 2013; Cox and Nilsen 2014).

One implication of such an analysis is that such processes of development, alliance and conflict will produce substantially different overall contexts in different places. This can be described in terms of a “movement landscape”, a concept intended to grasp the enduring relationships between movements that characterise a particular period of “business as usual” in a given location (Cox 2016a). Capable of being remade in periods of mass mobilisation and organic crisis, in routine periods such landscapes tend to reshape movements to fit within what participants understand as possible, likely, workable or legitimate. This notion underpins Fominaya and Cox (2013).

This implies close attention to the peculiarities of Irish social movements (Cox 2016b) – something which cannot be grasped without a comparatively-informed appreciation of movements in other contexts. Analyses which lack reflection on the local movement landscape are almost bound to fail, whether they start from a simple ignorance of movements elsewhere (naturalising local conditions) or from naïvely transposing US or UK models to Ireland. So too do approaches which miss the centrality of historical struggles over class and land, state and ethnicity, gender and sexuality to Irish politics, the extent to which both states are shaped by movement struggles and their ebb and flow. In particular, it is important to understand the massive presence of working-class community activism in Ireland, and its alternation between disruption and apparent subsumption within the state (Cox 2010).

Subjects and objects

One of the most challenging, and still-unresolved, aspects of a developmental approach is what could be phrased as the question of how people in movements

¹⁷ They also imply more than the reformist call for a “second republic” through refined debate and the holding of forums (a strategy which recalls Ursula Le Guin’s observation: a liberal is someone for whom the means justifies the end).

shift from being objects to becoming political subjects (Cox 2001); in more concrete terms, as how people can move from agency restricted within a framework accepted as given (hence focussing on micro-level resistance, cultural identities, reformist politics etc) to challenging it; and move from a purely defensive position, reacting to assaults by movements from above, to an offensive one articulating what Alf Nilsen and I (2014) call a “social movement project”¹⁸.

The transformative experiences discussed in the fourth section of this paper are a crucial part of this: people remake themselves, in solidarity and dialogue with their peers and in conflict with movements from above. In the process they extend the boundaries of their subjectivity from a narrowly-circumscribed (often highly-commodified) realm of action to asking about the big structures which construct such realms; and they articulate a vision of another world beyond the routine activities of professional intellectuals, however haltingly:

Working-class revolutions ... constantly criticise themselves, they continually interrupt their own course, return to what has apparently already been achieved to start it from scratch again... (Marx n.d. 272-3).

This comment does not, of course, fully resolve the shift from object to subject, any more than does Touraine’s seminal (1981) analysis. However I want to insist, with Barker (1999), that it is a crucial aspect of large-scale, radical movements which cannot simply be reduced to what a bird’s-eye analysis might reveal at a single point in time in terms of explicit power relations. As we know from earlier movement waves, this experience reverberates throughout society in unpredictable ways long after its opening scene has closed. In some ways, the history of community activism in Ireland – and its sudden, unexpected rebirth in the water charges movement – illustrates this perfectly.

The making and remaking of working-class community activism in Ireland

The Republic has historically boasted a massive degree of grassroots working-class self-organisation, in the form of a movement of community-based activism, arts and education, on a scale unknown elsewhere in the developed world outside of minority ethnicities (probably indirectly explicable by Ireland’s colonial history, specifically the impact of imperialism and ethnic/racial

¹⁸ Such projects are not alternative policy or political programmes, or the “forums”, “national conversations” or “constitutional conventions” projected by professional intellectuals as the extension of their own activity. They may *result* in some of these, but as the outcomes of far broader popular struggles articulating a radically different view of the social world defined by a *restructuring* of oppressive political structures, and hence a shift of energy away from such elite spaces and towards more organic expressions of struggles from below.

domination on working-class community identities): Geoghegan and Cox 2001, Mullan and Cox 2001, Gillan 2010, Cox 2013a, Zagato 2012¹⁹.

From the 1960s, as slum clearance led to the resettlement of inner-city populations in newly built peripheral suburbs, working-class activism in Dublin and elsewhere developed on a new basis, formalising earlier neighbourhood traditions of solidarity, consensus formation and direct action. First the Dublin Housing Action Committee and then in the 1980s and 1990s Concerned Parents against Drugs and the Coalition of Communities Against Drugs (Lyder 2005), but also many local struggles over basic services such as schools, public transport, creche facilities, housing, policing and so on, saw a practice of grassroots consensus building, tied to a critical analysis of power and willing to use disruptive tactics, generalised across much of working-class Ireland and often led by women.

While theoretical inputs came from Alinskyite theory and liberation theology, the leading protagonists were often activists leaving the – mostly centralised and statist – republican, socialist and feminist organisations of the period, who saw the benefits of organising locally, bringing the whole community with them in a process of collective self-education and mobilisation around concrete issues, and making real gains on the ground. As the strongest activism was found in the most deprived working-class areas, union membership (increasingly public-sector) and left parties drew further apart from this process, and cooperation became rarer and harder.

From the late 1980s, this movement – drawing on left nationalist discourses – succeeded in forcing the state into localised forms of “partnership”, and was subsequently included in the “community and voluntary sector” from the early 1990s under Ireland’s national neocorporatism, which embraced most movements²⁰ in a process of sectoral fragmentation, professionalisation and demobilisation offering limited funding for service delivery and some policy influence. Marston (n.d.: 27) notes the salience of partnership in activist accounts of anti-austerity protest at the start of the crisis. There were nonetheless conflicts outside the partnership framework, notably 1990s resistance to water tax²¹ using similar tactics to the current movement, and 2000s resistance to bin charges.

¹⁹ It is important to note that in the UK “community” has often been a top-down language used by the state for conservative purposes (on Northern Ireland see Robson 2000). However in the Republic working-class organising on a community basis and on a massive scale, phrased in oppositional terms (Curtin and Varley 1995), *preceded* the state’s adoption of this language and has shaped it strongly (Cox 2010). In this respect the experience of community-based organising in the Republic is closer to that of ethnic minorities in the US, discussed e.g. by Naples 1998. It should go without saying that recognising the existence of a movement which organises in characteristic ways and using this language does *not* imply assuming a pre-existent essential “community”; see Mullan and Cox 2001 for some notes on the genesis of this kind of activism.

²⁰ The women’s and GLTBQ movements had a massive and disruptive effect on state policy, while the environmental movement had prevented nuclear power in Ireland.

²¹ <http://www.wsm.ie/c/anti-water-tax-campaign-dublin>

From the early 2000s, *before* the crisis, having demobilised movements, and rendered them largely dependent on the state for funding and policy impact, the state attacked their participation in partnership. Harvey (2014: 50) shows this for the community movement, although processes of exclusion and incorporation were felt in all movements (Cox 2010). The community sector was certainly badly hit, with average cuts around 35% (Bissett 2015: 173), and many organisations closing entirely.

In this context, the failure of the Campaign Against the Household and Water Tax enabled a return to grassroots protest based on the older traditions of community activism; or, put another way, a return of *social movement* as against *organisations* or *policy* (Cox 2013b).

Resistance to austerity before water charges

Levels of resistance

The 2008 financial crash was felt particularly heavily in Ireland. With the bailout, under EU pressure, of private banks, the Republic's 5 million inhabitants took on approximately 42% of the entire EU debt crisis, meaning massive job losses and pay cuts, new (mostly regressive) taxes and levies and cuts to state services. While previous distributive politics had remained trapped within the logic of interest mediation, from 2008 onwards disruptive struggles began to manifest themselves powerfully. This change in the social fabric sets the scene within which water charges would become the strategic issue around which popular resistance could unite.

Firstly, a series of large-scale trade union protests were organised by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) which, along with the largest union SIPTU, has a revolving door relationship with the neoliberal Labour Party and a fundamental commitment to "social partnership". The leadership's main concerns were to keep popular agency within bounds and negotiate "acceptable" concessions with government – on occasion, to propose them. The main events include:

- February 2009: 120,000? in Dublin
- November 2009: c.250,000 public sector workers in one-day strike
- June 2010: Croke Park Agreement bars industrial action
- November 2010: 100,000? in Dublin (official shock that union leaders were heckled)
- February 2013: 110,000? in 6 cities

These (contested) figures are best read as relative indications of scale. 100,000 is a conventional figure meaning "as big as any demonstration ever gets in Dublin in recent decades"; it is the figure routinely quoted in relation to the anti-war protest of February 15th, 2003. Thus what is being said by informed observers is that these are among the largest protests in living memory.

The turning point would be October 2014, when five unions, some of them substantial – Unite, the Communication Workers Union CWU, the retail union Mandate, the civil service union CPSU and the plasterers’ union OPATSI – broke ranks with other unions to help found the Right2Water coalition. The defection of the most radical wing of the union movement to explicit opposition to Labour policy on an issue of principle is a politically remarkable moment – a moment marked more cynically when SIPTU’s conservative leader Jack O’Connor flirted briefly with Sinn Féin.

Other sectoral protests during the crisis included:

- 2001 – present: opposition to Shell pipeline in NW Ireland (“Rosspport”), within an environmental justice / redistributive framework
- 2008 – present: rising tide of political squats, resistance to evictions, etc.
- 2011 – present: opposition to fracking
- June 2008: c. 15,000 pensioners in defence of medical cards
- September 2009: c. 12,000 people from community projects
- November 2010: c. 40,000 students
- December 2010: first “Spectacle of Defiance and Hope”
- February 2011: first weekly Ballyhea “Bondholders” protest
- October 2011: 6 Occupy camps established; some last until May 2012
- October 2012: c. 20,000 farmers
- November 2012: c. 15,000 in protest organised by left parties, trade unions and the Spectacle
- November 2012: widespread protests over death of Savita Halappanavar after being refused an abortion
- October 2013: c. 12,000 pensioners

While – following Irish particularism and unlike e.g. Spanish demonstrations – many of these were sector-specific, the Spectacle, Ballyhea, Occupy, the November 2012 protest and some housing activism were explicitly conceived as general resistance to austerity, while student protests included radical fringes seeking to raise wider issues. As Naughton (2015) shows, over half of reported protest events between 2010 - 13 focussed on austerity or the bank bailout, a substantial shift from traditional Irish particularism.

The difficult process of overcoming sectoral fragmentation, sectarianism and clientelism had been experimented in other sectors: particularly in relation to resistance to Shell, which brought together an alliance similar to the eventual water charges alliance (local community activists, anarchist and ecological direct action, republicans, socialists, trade unionists and radical democrats). Similar networking processes are a staple of the Grassroots Gatherings (Cox 2014a), which bring together bottom-up, direct action and community-based forms of social movement outside social partnership and the electoral arena –

and (more instrumentally) of Trotskyist front-building. Bissett writes similarly of the community arts-based Spectacle of Defiance and Hope:

Those involved have come to see in the Spectacle not an end in itself or a silo, but as one of the spokes in the wheel of a larger movement that is gradually building against austerity. The idea of “joining the dots” with other entities of a similar nature has been strongly endorsed by those involved. The Spectacle has worked closely with *Occupy Dame Street*, sections of the Trade Union Movement, *Anglo Not Our Debt*, and with organised political campaigns against austerity and debt (2015: 181-2).

The scale and success of the water charges alliance, however, went beyond this, reflecting a general shift in popular mood. We can trace this shift in public-sector ballots around government offensives on pay, hours and conditions:

- 2010 Croke Park agreement: SIPTU 35% against, IMPACT 23% but UNITE 65% against, INMO 84% against, etc. (all later forced to sign). The agreement passed²².
- 2013 Croke Park II: SIPTU 53.7% against, IMPACT 44% against, UNITE 84% against, INMO 95.5% against, etc. (10 unions against, 5 for). The agreement was defeated²³.
- 2013 Haddington Road agreement (all unions signed up to a minimally reworded Croke Park II under threat of legislation imposing the same terms without any prospect of eventual reversal).

In this same period, the household charge (now local property tax) faced huge difficulties in implementation. 44% of households failed to pay by the April 2012 deadline, 37% by October. The state eventually introduced legislation to collect the tax from wages or welfare.

Overall, then, reports of the death of Irish activism were greatly exaggerated and served political purposes in dismissing the feasibility of resistance. Anti-austerity protests included some of Ireland’s largest demonstrations in decades and substantial mobilisation in other forms, in the context of the EU’s largest net emigration by far, with perhaps 28% of 20-30-year-olds born in the country living elsewhere.

While not as sustained or radical as anti-austerity activism in Iceland, Greece or Spain, then, Irish anti-austerity movements have been consistently comparable to those in Portugal and Italy. Ireland also shares the latter’s domination by forces oriented towards a “business as usual” framework, in particular Labour, ICTU and SIPTU. Labour’s shift to *overt* austerity politics in government from

²² <http://www.rte.ie/news/2010/0611/132070-pay/>;
<http://www.rte.ie/news/2010/0528/131575-pay/>

²³ <http://www.thejournal.ie/croke-park-pay-deal-871574-Apr2013/>

2011 (having run on an anti-austerity platform) disrupted this but led to its Pasokification.

Electoral realignments

After a lone brick was thrown at a protest (to howls of liberal outrage), an anarchist site proclaimed “I bet this brick can get more likes than the Labour Party”. No sooner said than done:

Page	Total Page Likes	New Page Likes	Posts This Week	Engagement This Week
1  I bet this brick can get ...	11.8K 	0% from last week	38	12.7K 
2  Enda Kenny	11.3K 	▲1.6% from last week	1	1.6K 
3  Labour Party	10.5K 	▲0.1% from last week	2	193 
4  Fine Gael	9.1K 	▲0.9% from last week	3	2.1K 
5  Joan Burton	2.5K 	▲0.9% from last week	2	36 

Enda Kenny is the Fine Gael prime minister; Joan Burton was the Labour leader²⁴. Electoral outcomes show a somewhat more scientific version of the same result:

²⁴
<https://www.facebook.com/brickorlabour/photos/a.413481455470367.1073741828.413425165475996/415430118608834/?type=3&theater>

Year	Right (FF, FG, PDs etc.)	Labour	Sinn Fein	Far left, independents and others, Greens
Nov 1992 vote	68.3%	19.3%	1.6%	10.9%
June 1997 vote	71.9%	10.4%	2.5%	14.6%
May 2002 vote	68%	10.8%	6.5%	14.7%
May 2007 vote (FF + Green govt)	71.6%	10.1%	6.9%	10.1%
Feb 2011 vote (FG + Lab govt)	53.5%	19.4%	9.9%	17.2%
Feb 2013 poll ²⁵	51%	10%	18%	21%
Mar 2015 poll ²⁶	41%	7%	24%	28%
Feb 2016 vote (FG minority govt)	52%	6.6%	13.8%	27.6%
Feb 2017 poll ²⁷	53%	6%	19%	22%
May 2017 poll ²⁸	50%	6%	15%	29%

(My calculations)

The items in red here mark the salient points. For most of the state's history, the right-wing parties which emerged out of the nationalist movement shared 70 – 85% of the vote, with the rest divided between radical nationalists (today

²⁵ *Irish Times* 8 February 2013

²⁶ *Irish Times* 26 March 2015

²⁷ *Sunday Times* 12 February 2017

²⁸ *Sunday Business Post* 28 May 2017

primarily represented by Sinn Féin), Labour, and other independents and small parties. The May 2007 election, and the subsequent Fianna Fáil / Green government which presided over the crash and introduced austerity, is typical of this (despite increasing difficulty for right-wing parties in Dublin). In the February 2011 election, nearly 20 percentage points moved leftwards, roughly 10 to Labour and 10 to Sinn Féin, the far left and independents (the Greens taking a well-deserved bashing). Briefly, polls around 2015 showed a further 10% abandoning this position, but overall the right-wing bloc seems to have settled at just over 50% for now.

As Labour, in power with Fine Gael, became the primary spokespeople for austerity, their popularity was slashed to a third of its 2011 high. Sinn Féin initially benefitted, as seen in the 2013 and 2015 polls. In the 2016 election, perhaps partly due to right-wing media attacks, some of this new support returned to Fianna Fáil; however, the far left along with other independents and small parties consolidated its support.

Overall, about 20% of the electorate has abandoned automatic support for Fianna Fáil's "Peronism", a tradition of clientelist redistribution popular among much of the respectable working class (Allen 1996). Half of this group has genuinely learned something and has moved to parties or candidates with sincerely left-wing positions. The other half is nostalgically national-developmental, prepared to vote for Fianna Fáil, Labour or Sinn Féin despite the clear limitations of their actual will to oppose austerity²⁹. This is a search for a party to represent Gramsci's corporate class consciousness – seeking a return to the subaltern incorporation that Peillon (1982) identified for labour within Ireland's older national-developmental project.

The water charges struggle

The development of the movement

After legislation was introduced to take the household tax from wages and welfare, the coalition of AAA/Socialist Party, PBP/SWP, Workers and Unemployed Action group and Workers Solidarity Movement (anarchists) underpinning the Campaign Against Household and Water Tax (CAHWT) fell apart in 2013. By this time the United Left Alliance, which brought together the first three with other left deputies, was well on the way to its eventual demise. Thus when water charges were initially introduced, my search for information only found fossilised websites and no up-to-date material.

However, this lack of central control enabled local action and self-organisation far beyond what the CAHWT could have agreed on. From April 2014, spontaneous direct action (starting in Ballyphehane / Togher in south Cork city and Edenmore in NE Dublin) prevented meter installation in many working-

²⁹ Sinn Féin's practice in government in Northern Ireland is at odds with its stated positions in the South; see Finn 2016.

class estates, producing an effective loss of control of territory by the state. (Elsewhere, meters were removed after installation.) While the timing and geography was shaped by the installation timetable, resistance to registration and payment – with increasing poverty after six years of austerity – developed before any central organisation³⁰.

From late 2014, the five trade unions already named brought together community activist groups with left parties including those listed above, Sinn Féin, the Communist Party, the Workers Party and left independents to coordinate national demonstrations and “days of action” under the “Right2Water” (R2W) logo. This alliance between community groups, unions and left parties is unprecedented in recent memory, and in scale and significance. However it restricts itself to areas of agreement – some member unions and parties are unable to call for direct action or non-payment. When the “Right2Change” electoral pact was unveiled one union broke ranks, and there were significant internal conflicts over attempts to convert movement support into votes³¹.

Alongside direct action, non-payment and marches, activists have contested state and commercial media representations and police accounts, both around numbers (consistently underestimated) and violence (largely from the police). The moral and technical legitimacy of the charges has also been challenged, alongside electoral involvement in multiple forms (not only Right2Change).

It can be seen that this is a movement in Diani’s (1992) sense of a network of individuals, informal groups and formal organisations, and that it is mistaken to represent R2W as “the movement”, let alone to see Sinn Féin (which has difficulties with both direct action and non-payment) or any other single party as its electoral voice. These multiple fields of struggle and organisational forms represent the movement’s diversity – but also its proto-hegemonic capacity to bring together many different sections of society opposing both water charges and austerity in general³².

³⁰ David Landy suggests (in comments on academia.edu) that some CAHWT local groups or individual members remained active after its collapse and fed into the water charges movement. This seems entirely plausible, if one bears in mind that many of these individuals and groups would also have been active *before* the formation of the CAHWT. In other words, we should expect to find local activism moving in and out of formal organisations as well as less formal groups and networks. This is of course also true for members and ex-members of left parties.

³¹ <http://buncranatogether.com/home/2015/11/19/a-donegal-critique-a-microcosm-of-malaise-in-right2change-ireland>

³² It should also be noted that individual activists often move in and out of these different organisational forms, joining or leaving nationally-organised bodies as those become more or less relevant to their own primary concerns, while their own political learning and activist biographies may also lead in different directions (recruitment, disillusionment, biographical availability, keeping one’s distance, “fellow-travelling” etc.) An organisation-centric imaginary assumes that the fundamental reality is (for example) a national campaign or left party, whereas the *organising* reality may be rather that a branch is founded or becomes defunct based on

We should also note a huge growth in the practice of active democracy, with countless meetings taking place at the level of one or a few streets, on the available green spaces, in supermarket parking lots, in pubs and GAA halls, working out what to do in relation to all the different dimensions of the conflict discussed below.

Direct action

In areas like Crumlin, Irish Water had to abandon attempts to install meters after 6 weeks (MacCionnaith 2015). Protestors developed effective early-warning systems using texts and Facebook, as well as “flying column” support for other areas. Sometimes both police and installers adopted a hands-off approach and protestors could negotiate; elsewhere police were more aggressive, with people thrown around, beaten and pepper-sprayed. One highpoint was the “Battle of Rialto St” in early 2015, where the Garda (Irish police) used force of numbers to prevent disruption; however protestors could prevent machines being moved, and the tactic was not repeated (“Stephen” 2015). It is hard to estimate just how effective direct action has been, but clearly substantial areas of working-class Dublin and Cork in particular have become de facto off limits to Irish Water, a substantial victory given the high-profile nature of the conflict³³.

The state’s inability to escalate the conflict beyond a certain point is notable, and does not reflect any discomfort with police violence. Private security, used for intimidation and surveillance, was also less vicious than at Rossport. Nonetheless personal experience of police aggression, together with social media sharing of videos from recognisably similar areas and social groups, contributed to undermining state legitimacy considerably. Social media also proved fertile ground where anonymous “meter fairies” could share information on how to remove installed meters – repeating the 1990s water struggle, where working-class activists simply reopened taps which had been closed to a trickle³⁴.

Non-registration and non-payment

Official figures for registration and payment have varied wildly, whether because of incompetence or the massive scale of resistance. Socialist Party deputy Paul Murphy produced hilarious results through repeated parliamentary

whether the relevant people locally find that organisation useful for their own purposes, which may well change over time.

³³ David Landy commented on an earlier version of this paper that the more working-class an area was, the more likely it was to resist the installation of water meters effectively.

³⁴ Direct action is, incidentally, an area which most academic commentators shy away from or in many cases fail to mention, in favour of the more “civil” means of official demonstrations (Sen 2005). Here participant accounts show a much clearer sense of the realities of ground-level conflict.

questions and FOI requests. *Official* registration figures (of c.1,650k households liable) for the early period included the following³⁵:

Nov 14	Dec 14	Jan 15	Feb 15	Mar 15
800000	950000	800000	880750	990000
	900000	1031009	1220000	1200000
	920000	837000	906953	1230000
		760500		988000
		821600		990000

A December 2014 poll showed that 37% intended to pay, 30% did not intend to, 14% “it depends”, 1% don’t know³⁶; by May 2015 only 30% (229k householders) had *officially* paid³⁷. It is clear that the whole project was financially and politically holed below the water line well before the new government suspended charges. An October 2015 poll showed strong party and class correlation around intent to pay, something borne out also in social media / comments “below the line” etc. As with numbers at protests and police violence, there was a sharp contrast between official claims (“most are paying / you have to pay”) and on-the-ground experience.

Demonstrations

The main demonstrations have been as follows:

- October 2014: 100,000? in Dublin
- November 2014: 100,000+ in 106 different locations (Ogle 2016: 78 gives 200,000) At least 27 Dublin neighbourhoods.
- December 2014: 100,000? in Dublin
- January 2015: 50,000? in Dublin (non-R2W; see Burtenshaw 2015)
- March 2015: 80,000? in Dublin
- April 2015: 30,000? in Dublin (non-R2W)
- August 2015: 80,000? in Dublin

³⁵ <https://medium.com/@beyourownreason/irish-water-registration-woes-df8e62737270#.elcygvnzn>

³⁶ <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/water/irish-water-crisis/only-two-in-five-say-they-will-pay-new-water-charge-30853232.html>. The remaining ~9% is around the proportion not liable for the charge.

³⁷ <http://www.lookleftonline.org/2015/10/less-than-one-in-three-pay-their-water-bills/>

- January 2016: in 30+ different locations, lower numbers?³⁸
- September 2016: 80,000? in Dublin
- April 2017: 30,000? in Dublin

If we add these to union protests, we see that anti-austerity protests have probably mobilised between 80 and 120,000 (ie “as big as it gets”) ten to twelve times in six years.

The initial importance of the November 2014 “day of action” has to be underlined (Cox 2014a; see Ogle 2016: 73-76 on the innovative decision to hold a localised national protest). Irish people are often wary of movement participation lest they “stand out” and become targets of mockery or suspicion in communities where surface consensus has huge social value; typically, large-scale participation develops only when all concerned have satisfied themselves that they will not be alone. November 2014 resolved this, underlined the scale of non-payment (hence the unlikelihood of court action) and made it possible to estimate the likelihood of effective resistance to meter installation. Local demonstrations, of course, also took place outside the national days of action, while the Dublin-based demonstrations saw groups marching under their own local and usually home-made banners rather than merging into a homogenous mass.

We should also note the extraordinary variety of groups involved: undermining the narrative which highlights Right2Water alone, Burtenshaw’s (2015) valuable account of Dublin Says No, Communities Against Water Charges, the 1 Year Initiative and the National Citizens Movement shows a much more complex picture.

Repression

The state’s response has been one of limited, show-piece events rather than effective repression. For example, between November 2014 and October 2015, 188 arrests of protestors were officially recorded³⁹. Ethnographic data suggest that the figure is considerably higher: however, most are not charged but simply released far from home.

Of these *recorded* arrests, 75 were under the Water Services Act (criminalising non-violent direct action on water), and 91 under the Public Order Act (mainly “refusal to obey the instructions of a Garda”). A deputy and ten others were charged under the Public Order Act for failing to obey police orders to leave the area; charges against the deputy have already been struck out. Three people have been charged with “insulting language”, one for calling the President a “midget traitor”; the defendant has since retracted the word midget.

³⁸ <http://www.wsm.ie/c/dublin-marches-against-water-charges-jan2016>

³⁹ “188 water protestors arrested in 12 months”. *Irish Examiner* 9 October 2015.

More dramatically, a deputy, two councillors and 10 others were charged with “false imprisonment” (carrying a sentence up to life imprisonment), along with 14 charged with “violent disorder” or “criminal damage” (the “Jobstown 27”). The charges have served eminently political purposes, with dawn raids arresting the elected representatives and an 18-year-old; one 14-year-old was arrested by 8 guards. On the basis of these charges, the AAA political party was subsequently banned from collecting money.

In an earlier version of this piece I wrote

Since the “imprisonment” was blocking the Tánaiste (deputy prime minister’s) car, the chances of jury conviction are low⁴⁰ and it is little surprise that the main trial date was moved at least 6 times, with 97 garda statements in some cases.

In the most high-profile trial a jury unanimously found the deputy, two councillors and three others not guilty (a seventh was discharged during the trial), unleashing a remarkable, and nearly unanimous, volume of vitriol from the mainstream media. This may have had something to do with the fact that their coverage of the trial itself had largely dried up once it became clear that garda statements were repeatedly contradicted by video evidence – indeed in her summing up the judge directed the jury to ignore the statements of three gardaí whose testimony was not only contradicted by video evidence but was given in identical language. The number of police statements contradicted by video evidence, and the apparent coordination of many of these statements, were of course not covered in the mainstream media.

The overall picture suggests individual elements within the state trying to make an example, where they lack the ability to use force effectively. With show trials rather than effective repression, the movement response was predictably one of outrage rather than retreat.

A crisis of hegemony

Discourses from establishment politicians, mainstream media and academics show a failure to grasp that popular objections to water charges are deep-rooted, founded both in material realities (widespread inability to pay) and moral outrage (opposition to privatisation of basic needs). The lack of a serious strategy to ensure payment speaks volumes about the assumption of automatic popular consent – as does the resort to conspiracy theories (the “sinister fringe” of dissident republicans supposedly guiding the movement) to explain ordinary people’s refusal to continue being governed as they have been⁴¹.

⁴⁰ A 17-year-old has been convicted in the jury-free Children’s Court and is appealing this to the High Court at time of writing.

⁴¹ Power, Haynes and Devereux’ report on media framing of dissent *assumes* that “such discourses contribute to and reproduce hegemony” (2015: 1). It does not consider whether this

Moral panics also speak to this: the throwing of a water balloon was greeted as incipient fascism (unlike the actual appearance of Pegida in Ireland), blocking a car as violence (unlike the actual use of the riot squad against children), and insulting the president as unthinkable. The token criminalisation of elements of the movement is at best an attempt to restore consent by appeal to respectability, hoping that others will dissociate themselves.

Irish Water has faced massive and continuing difficulties in securing compliance. At least 5 separate deadlines were set, a €100 bribe for registration was introduced, and attempts were made to use landlords to ensure tenants paid. Following the 2016 election, Irish Water phonelines were clogged with people cancelling direct debits; bills for charges in arrears are still being sent out despite the suspension of further charges, with threats of court orders to secure payment (from hundreds of thousands of households?)

Two different kinds of politics are in conflict here:

This protest, small as it was symbolized the coming together of a greater community good, where neighbours in our communities stood shoulder to shoulder sharing the knowledge that the greater good didn't just end at their front gates to their houses across the city, side by side they walked the roads and streets of Crumlin calling out to all who would listen to them and follow the vision of the few political minds within our community that have the wherewithal to stand up to our political masters who had taken our votes and betrayed us with broken promises and stand proud, powerful and untouchable behind the bureaucracy and the law that protects them. (quoted in MacCionnaith 2015: 223)

The hegemonic crisis is marked by the co-existence of two separate, significantly non-communicating spheres of politics: substantive (popular) democracy and formal (elite) democracy. Protestors assert a moral economy of “the right to water” against the neoliberal moral economy of “the user must pay”, within broader, classed discourses (human needs, poverty, collectivity and privatisation against governance, consumption, individualism and environment) expressing different local rationalities (economic and social situations, forms of action and lifeworlds; Cox and Nilsen 2014).

In many working-class areas, the interface between these two forms of politics is mediated through coercion rather than consent; liberties such as the right to protest are being *taken*, not given, in the face of state attempts to shut them down. There is a crisis in policing these areas. After all, recent Irish governments have repeatedly shown their willingness to use baton-charges, water cannon, behind-the-scenes violence and intimidation and private security to break social movements – if they expect to get away with it. The proposal to

intention is always successful: given the massive scale of the water charges movement, a more interesting research question might be why the media onslaught they document has *failed* to have more of an effect on popular mobilisation.

send in the riot squad to clear strategic areas of west Dublin, for example, must surely have been considered and rejected at cabinet level.

There are material reasons for this: early crisis budgets cut staffing and closed stations, leading to an effective “retreat to barracks” undermining real local knowledge and legitimacy. However my own experience and research on Irish policing suggests that the real constraints are (a) the question of whether police would in fact obey such an order en masse; (b) whether the slightly over 13,000 police are capable of holding down working-class Ireland by force; and (c) what forms of resistance might be unleashed in such circumstances. As with Ireland’s mortgage crisis, where 12% of owner-occupied households are in arrears, mass coercion is not a realistic option and limited attrition is the only available strategy.

Elsewhere, establishment and “dissident” media and academic representations exist in substantially separate spaces, weakening the credibility of traditional intellectuals. This, and the significance of social media for delegitimising police and politicians has led to repeated Labour Party calls to censor social media. Movement participants are thus correct to feel that they are asserting democracy from below.

Lastly, the coming-together of Ireland’s three main forms of working-class self-organisation and political representation (community activism, unions and left parties) is unprecedented in recent decades. Its potential in terms of class realignment and recomposition has not yet been fully appreciated. It is important to think these relationships as part of a wider dialectic within working-class Ireland; after all, a single household may have members involved in more than one of these, and there are often complex family histories. There is also a substantial biographical dimension, in that for several decades community activists have often been drawn from the ranks of disaffected members of state-oriented parties and organisations, while political parties also seek actively to recruit effective local activists. If from an organisational point of view we isolate these different types of organisation as fundamentally different, it may make more sense to see them as different aspects of a wider movement within which their individual ups and downs and their interrelationships help to shape the wider story of how working-class Ireland organises (Cox 2013a).

Understanding the movement

A moment of emancipation

One feature familiar to scholars of revolutions and large-scale social movements is the extent to which they represent a moment of “collective effervescence” (Barker 1999) or, as Lenin (1905) put it, a festival of the oppressed. If top-down research and elite-focussed disciplines regularly fail to capture this, it is primarily because such approaches start from the perspective of the institutional routines of official politics. When large numbers of people who have *not* previously experienced themselves as political subjects in their own right come to do so, however, this is precisely not a routine experience. In

creating new collective relationships, in breaking with old habits of deference and passivity, and in contesting their exclusion from or subordination within the public sphere, such new actors' experience is significant in terms of personal transformation, the formation of new collective actors and challenging broader power structures.

Genuinely large-scale movements, almost by definition, involve a substantial proportion of such mobilisation, particularly when they are grounded in social groups which do not regularly and routinely engage in active politics and when the movements are not initiated by existing actors such as parties and unions⁴². Ethnographic data collected by movement participants shows how important this experience has been in the water charges movement, and what it means for those newly mobilised, particularly in terms of the process of mobilisation, the articulation of local rationalities and "good sense", and social movement learning more broadly (Cox 2014b).

Two long-time working-class community activists carried out in-depth research with participants. MacCionnaith (2015) carried out PAR with activists from Crumlin, one of the strongest areas of direct resistance, including focus groups, individual interviews and online ethnography. Lynch (2015) carried out feminist research with women from four different regions (including Dublin suburbs, rural villages and small towns), using group interviews, focussing particularly on their experience as women – negatively in terms of internal power dynamics and positively, in emancipating themselves from socialisation into passive, unobtrusive and apolitical gender roles; as yet ethnicity has been little explored in relation to the protests.

With the authors' permission, I reuse some of their interview material here to explore participants' experience. Firstly, given the decades-long specialisation and professionalisation of "politics", union activism and community organising in working-class areas, the movement means above all the mass participation as political subjects of vast numbers of ordinary people for their first time – whether blocking meter installation, facing the fear of not paying bills, taking part in local or national demonstrations, challenging pro-austerity views online, informing themselves about the issue, sharing videos of police brutality or mocking official media claims of low turnouts.

Participants experienced this as emancipatory, particularly women but probably also older, "respectable" men and young people:

⁴² Hearne (2015a: 2) found that 54.5% of respondents had not protested prior to the water charges issue. *If* this can be generalised to the very large numbers who took part in this movement, most of the remaining 45.5% must have been involved in community or trade union action, as other than the February 2003 protest against the war on Iraq no other movements in recent years have mobilised anything like so many participants (the greatest number of his participants had taken part in demonstrations). More probably, however, this figure understates the overall picture, suggesting a more politicised group of survey participants.

When politics becomes personal you have no other choice but to get out and protest (quoted in Lynch 2015: 50).

For most this has been their first confrontational protest experience:

We did a Jobsbridge, hmm, protest outside in Wexford town. And hmm it basically freed me. That's how I felt. You know, empowered me and I felt free and that I had a say and an opinion, you know? (quoted in Lynch 2015: 37).

This emancipation has been personally transformative:

I have a lot to thank Irish Water for. My life has changed so much, and so much for the better (quoted in Lynch 2015: 46).

This is in large part the result of a widespread feeling of “cognitive liberation” (McAdam 2013):

I woke up, first off (quoted in Lynch 2015: 38).

- both in relation to the external world:

[I] sat with the laptop in front of me and I educated myself (quoted in Lynch 2015: 37)

and in self-reflection and overcoming the “muck of ages”:

I find that self-education in myself, I think I'm learning more within myself, about myself doing it this way than I think I would have learnt in school (quoted in MacCionnaith 2015: 82).

There are of course also costs associated with this:

There are times when sometimes I say, ‘Is there any way you could have blocked knowing about it and not have got involved in it? (quoted in Lynch 2015: 38)⁴³

⁴³ Newer activists routinely make comments like this, implying either that politicisation is a painful emotional experience in itself or that it implies heightened levels of conflict, effort, etc.

Anarchist writers have rightly highlighted the significance of police behaviour and social media in this process of articulating good sense against common sense:

The Irish Water story has provided ample opportunity for various parts of the system to expose their true nature. This is especially true in the case of the Gardaí, who have enjoyed a reputation of being 'peacekeepers' among much of the population. But people who have blocked water meters from being installed have discovered another reality. To many, the Gardaí are like an occupying army. There is no lesson quite like being arrested, and thanks to social media this lesson has been shared the length and breadth of the country...

Within the anti-water charges movement the mainstream media have come to be seen as couriers for government propaganda. Attendance at protests is persistently under-reported and the movement has been hounded by the 'has protest gone too far?' narrative (sometimes using outright fabrication). We have been able to subvert this by forming our own counter-media which has played an important role. A sprawling network of Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and a host of blogs and other websites provide a means to communicate quickly among ourselves. With this we keep up to date on activity around the country, digest and react to establishment spin, discuss tactics, and more. This grassroots media network has given staying power to the movement, allowing protesters who would be otherwise isolated and forgotten to link with and inspire others. (O'Brien 2015)

This is the sharp end of a wider process of confrontation with official rules (bills, limitations on protest etc.) and official voices (in the media, one's own family etc.) Such confrontation has hugely boosted individual confidence:

Just because they [elites] went to university or they went to wherever it doesn't actually make them capable of doing anything ... they don't know anything about us, they don't know how we live, who we are ... they have no connect with us as ordinary people (quoted in MacCionnaith 2015: 152)

The traditional pieties of top-down party (union, community activism etc.) hierarchies are increasingly challenged:

I am seeing left parties that are ... to me ... appear to be more for the party than for the people (quoted in MacCionnaith 2015: 87)

The net effect is a much broader experience of popular agency:

One of the things I've noticed that's brought about a massive change all over the place is people are now much more politically aware; people used to just plod along and stayed at home in and a lot of people didn't bother vote (quoted in MacCionnaith 2015: 90)

This is understood as stretching across time:

You wonder what kind of generation we're bringing up. You know, are they going to be rebels or activists or what? (quoted in Lynch 2015: 44)

and across space:

what's happening in the rest of Europe as well, there's this new thing called direct democracy and it's coming in (quoted in MacCionnaith 2015: 146)

MacCionnaith's participants understood the struggle as "a battle", "a war" and "a revolution" (2015: 82), underlining their understanding of the hegemonic challenges involved. Lastly, we can quote Quigley's experience of the first national protest (October 2014):

[Elites] played it well, with just one problem, it isn't true and it wasn't scum who rose up, it was the Demos, that part of democracy they had hoped we had all forgotten about. We rose up with confidence and humour with one message: we are here, we exist and that mob you are so afraid of turned out to be a politically literate, democratically aware population, laughing at attempts to brand us leeches....

That day was not just a show of force but of culture. Communities with shared experience, dialect, fashion, music even life expectancy, finally coming together after years of deliberate geographic isolation from each other and the shared experience of both social and geographic isolation from wider society changed the rules of the game forever once we felt the power unleashed that day. The real revolution is one of workin' class legitimacy, that day it was all possible, no more pandering to middle class ego, pull em out by the ears and let us fix this. And now that day is a memory but a shared memory, a shared experience and one which contains a huge amount of power because that was the day we were proven right. (Quigley 2015)

The old left and the new

Elsewhere (Cox 2015) I have suggested that the state-centric left used the Irish crisis to revalorise its own cultural capital in economics and policy discussion against the anti-authoritarian and movement-focussed politics of the earlier "movement of movements", but also against the diversity of issues the latter

identified with neoliberalism. However MacCionnaith argues that community-based struggles are now “comfortably enveloped” within the worldwide movement of movements, instancing links to water struggles in Greece, Bolivia and Detroit and horizontal forms of democracy (albeit with tensions around this: 2015, 85). Certainly awareness of both TTIP and environmental issues around water is widespread within the movement.

Mallon (pers. comm.) notes the presence of a significant number of activists who have *left* top-down left parties for the more grassroots practices of community struggle, repeating the 1970s and 1980s experiences at the origins of working-class community activism⁴⁴. Whether or not the parties of the left are willing and / or able to readjust, a change is happening from a leader-centric, delegating form of politics as a minority interest to one where the wider sphere of community action extends into the political in some of its most dramatic meanings. Hence a far wider range of people participate, changing their lives and social relationships in the process, and expect to be involved in decision-making internally as well as publicly. In some Cork groups, community activists now find themselves reading Chomsky and Bookchin. More generally, the movement has been marked at a local level by a flourishing of discussion and democracy: street meetings, packed events in pubs and community halls, Facebook encounters and conversations on protests. This newfound space of thinking things out collectively represents an extraordinary *collective* learning process.

The movement is prefigurative, not in the sense of small groups starting from existing theory, but rather articulates theory out of practice in a process of political learning. It is also busy shaking off the “muck of ages”, both the conservative national-developmentalism of Fianna Fáil and Labour and the top-down practice of Sinn Féin and Trotskyist activism, while recovering the bottom-up culture of working-class community organising.

Social class in the movement

An interesting question here is the proto-hegemony exercised internally by the strongest working-class communities, where direct action has become an effective and regular practice, and which can articulate their own politics most clearly. In a Gramscian perspective, the leading role played by urban working-class groups is visible in many different dimensions⁴⁵: the chronological origins of the movement in well-organised working-class housing estates; the movement’s drawing on traditions of bottom-up community organising (as

⁴⁴ It can also be noted that left parties which were opposed to direct action on ideological grounds in the early 2000s, when anti-authoritarian movements introduced them, have gradually adopted them as their own (Brian Mallon, pers. comm.) Similar processes are probably happening in some areas with defectors from partnership-era community organisations moving to more radical action strategies.

⁴⁵ Respondents to Hearne’s survey were based 45% in Dublin and a further 28% in Leinster, with highest responses within Dublin from working-class and mixed areas (2015a: 2, 17).

against the consensual forms of community action noted by Curtin and Varley 1995 as characteristic of rural Ireland, mobilising behind local notables in defence of geographically-defined interests); the involvement of left parties and trade unions; the development of complex organising networks; and the marginalisation of attempts to give the movement a right-wing inflection (Hearne 2015a: 36).

Outside Lynch's (2015) work, we know relatively little of the movement in traditionally more passive sectors – in particular, the rural poor and lower middle-class groups which have historically followed conservative political leads. However, the failure of repeated attempts to divide the movement suggests substantial support for this working-class leadership. Nonetheless, given how unusual this pattern is in Irish movement history, it seems plausible that we should look for mediating organisations which enabled this unusual transmission from urban working-class areas to rural and middle-class groups. These might include organisations such as the Right2Water campaign and political parties as well as family / friendship ties and social media; as yet there is no clear evidence as to how the process occurred⁴⁶.

However one clear finding from the oral history work I am currently doing with students at Maynooth is the *variety* of ways in which people in different areas engaged with or participated in the movement: in each context explored, students found different emphases and approaches. We should of course expect of a genuinely mass movement that it would reflect the diversity in society, but this does underline the difficulty of top-down generalisations which dismiss this reality.

Organisations and movements

MacCionnaith notes how the Right2Water coalition “is stymying their growth and inhibiting their potential” (2015: 84) and criticises Hearne for misidentifying the coalition with the perspectives of often much more radical grassroots activists, notably around direct resistance and non-payment (2015: 48). This critique can be extended to Finn, who presents matters thus:

Local protests against the installation of water meters had already begun in a number of towns when a broad campaigning front, Right 2 Water, was launched in September, with support from Sinn Féin, the socialist left and a number of trade unions. Right 2 Water built on the foundations laid by an earlier campaign against a flat tax on home-owners... (2015a: 56)

⁴⁶ Many thanks to Niamh Gaynor, Mariya Ivancheva and David Landy for discussions around this point.

Yet the “local protests” developed in the context of the *collapse* of the CAHWT – and would almost certainly not have been supported by its leadership⁴⁷. Further, by the time of R2W’s foundation local protest was both highly visible and highly effective: the Crumlin group, for example, was already in the middle of its successful struggle to prevent meter installation in the area. O’Brien writes

But people didn't throng Dublin's city centre out of nowhere. After the collapse of the CAHWT (Campaign Against Home and Water Taxes) around January 2014, crucially, a small number of people decided to stay active and stop the installation of water meters, for instance in Ballyphehane and Togher in Cork and then a few areas of north east Dublin. On this, Gregor Kerr, who was the secretary of the Federation of Dublin Anti-Water Charge Campaigns (FDAWCC) in the 1990s, opined 'I don't think it's any exaggeration to say that the huge protest on 11th October wouldn't have been anything like the size it was without the slow burn for the previous months of blockades and protests against meter installations spreading from community to community. And it was no coincidence either that many of the people involved in water meter blockades had also participated earlier in the summer in blockades of scab-operated bin trucks in their communities in support of the locked out Greyhound workers.' The initiative and hard work of these early campaigners was the germ of the huge movement which has burgeoned since. (2015)

Familiarity with the difficulties of the Dublin left, then, suggests a less top-down perspective on the relationship between community-based struggles and R2W. Not only had CAHWT’s demise seen deep divisions between the AAA (Socialist Party front), PBP (SWP / ISO front) and Workers Solidarity (anarchist) over tactics, but it followed the public implosion of the “United Left Alliance”, containing the SP, PBP and the Tipperary-based Workers and Unemployed Action Group. WUAG withdrew in 2012, the SP in early 2013 and the ULA effectively ceased to exist by late 2013. Thus, at a minimum, it was the success of the water charges movement on the ground that made a new rapprochement between these and other political forces possible.

As the earlier anti-Shell campaign shows, the competitive and sectarian traditions of the capital’s left can be overcome when its organisations take a secondary role. In Rossport this was achieved by the imprisonment of the “Rossa 5”, and the campaign’s decision that all decisions should be taken by their families – a relationship subsequently extended to “the local community”. In the early days of R2W, the rhetoric was that it was simply organising the national demonstrations (hence dodging the impossible question of how to

⁴⁷ Kerr notes: [CAHWT] “involved huge numbers of working class people but never developed a grassroots structure, and the steering committee meetings eventually became turgid affairs mired in wanna be leaders lecturing everybody else. In contrast the anti-water charges campaign has emerged from communities and the political parties and organisations have been running after it trying to ‘lead’ it. Indeed there isn’t *an* anti-water charge campaign, there are a plethora of groups organising in an ad hoc manner, some co-ordinated, some not. That’s a huge strength.” (cited in O’Brien 2015)

relate to illegal direct action, which would have broken its internal coalition). Until the formation of “Right2Change” in late 2015, then, the existence of community-based direct action and non-payment *enabled* an alliance, not only between far-left parties and with Sinn Féin but also between those parties and the unions, which could otherwise not have survived its first serious test.

For Finn, however, “The coalition of forces behind the water charges movement had real potential, but even the most optimistic left-wing activists were caught unawares when the campaign of protest suddenly took flight in the autumn of 2014.” (2015a: 56) In other words, real politics consists of national demonstrations and political parties. I hope the preceding analysis has showed that the reverse is true: we are witnessing a return of the wider *movement* as against formal *organisations*, and we should not misidentify the movement’s future with party and union leaderships which have a poor track record of overcoming their internal divisions, let alone working together with community movements. This commentary by visiting RS21 activists is closer to the reality:

For months on end working-class communities had been organizing themselves, peacefully blocking the installation of water meters in their areas, calling countless street and estate meetings across the country every night as well as local protests⁴⁸.

The failures of the CAHWT and ULA parallel the way in which community groups and unions had previously placed all their eggs in the “social partnership” basket. Community projects have suffered massive cuts (Cox 2010; Bissett 2015). This was particularly crippling since for community groups, as for unions, engagement in partnership meant a combination of professionalisation and demobilisation⁴⁹. When the state attacked partnership, the core legitimisation of this strategy was undermined, but those organisations had no alternative strategy than hoping for a return to the previous unhappy marriage.

Thankfully, there is more to movements than their organisations; and the historical organisational failures of the far left, unions and community groups alike enabled a revitalisation from below of working-class *organising*. It is to the credit of those organisational leaderships who have managed to reorient themselves to support this, though a critical analysis also has to ask about the limits of this and how far they are willing to countenance a substantive *internal* democratisation of their own organisations⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ <http://rs21.org.uk/2015/02/03/the-rocky-road-ahead-the-movement-against-irish-water/>

⁴⁹ This rendered them entirely dependent on the state for advocacy and funding, with few professional *organisers* but many research officers, policy officers, media officers, funding officers, legal officers etc. The movement was thus dependent on elite goodwill both to fund these positions and for these roles to be effective.

⁵⁰ At the time of writing, the experience of Right2Change and the 2016 general election – coupled with the downturn in movement activity as activists wait to see what will happen with

Within large-scale movements, there is often a creative tension between (informal) organising, networks, skills and practices and (formal) organisations. When people started to get leaflets saying that Irish Water was going to install meters in their estate, and decided to resist that directly, the question "how are we going to stop this?" and "who will join me on the pavement tomorrow morning?" will rarely have been answered from scratch; individuals' previous involvement in partnership-period community organisations, CAHWT, left parties, unions etc. may all have been important in different contexts. At the same time, the flourishing of new, informal groups and the huge numbers of local meetings is a sign that existing organisational forms were not seen as either available or able to deal with this issue. The intellectual challenge, perhaps, is to find a language that represents this on-the-ground reality rather than presenting the movement as the *product* of formal organisations.

The naïve rhetoric of spontaneity and surprise reflects a top-down viewpoint familiar in the history of movements. EP Thompson's famous "Moral economy" article (1971) showed the weaknesses in this approach nearly 50 years ago; more recently, Dale (2005) and Flesher Fominaya (2015) have showed what is missing in using "spontaneity" to explain the East German uprising of 1953 or the M-15 movement in Spain. "Spontaneity" often means simply that from a top-down viewpoint we lack access to what the grassroots agents who launch a new movement outside existing organisations are thinking or doing. When we do the research, we consistently find that large-scale, "spontaneous" popular movements draw on networks, political cultures, repertoires of contention etc. which are the sediments of previous struggles. Zibechi's (2010) analysis of the Bolivian water war in terms of indigenous community organisation in El Alto makes the same point in a neat parallel to Ireland⁵¹. This is the thawing (or reheating?) of frozen movement knowledge, the reactivation of learning from earlier working-class struggles (Cox and Nilsen 2014). The party, it seems, is not the memory of the class after all – or only a very selective part of that memory⁵².

Predictions?

The big story, then, is the movement: the rebirth on a massive scale of self-organised activity across and beyond working-class Ireland. This can be expected to feed back into the wider history whatever the outcome: people have been mobilised in exceptional numbers and across all generations and many social divides.

the issue – seem to have led to something of a revival of sectarian tensions (and mutual accusations between parties, unions and community groups).

⁵¹ It is important to note that comparative analysis repeatedly shows that one cannot read off the nature of a movement from the "issue" it is organised around. For a good overview of the diversity of responses to water privatisation in Africa, see Gaynor 2016.

⁵² A point underlined by some comments on this paper from party members who doubted the existence of any movement or grassroots outside of their own organisation, or presented these as simply stooges for forces trying to marginalise parties within R2W / R2C...

Whatever happens, hundreds of small groups around Ireland are engaged in networked, daily resistance to austerity. They communicate through channels on social media that are almost completely missed by the mainstream press. Increasingly, they manage impressive feats of organisation. (Burtenshaw 2015)

Six weeks before its formation, I predicted that

the new government will avoid officially abandoning water charges and Irish Water, but will kick the can down the road and put charges on the long finger, resolving its embarrassment vis-à-vis the EU with reference to *force majeure*. Indeed both FF and FG – the likely government partners-to-be – could potentially gain from a situation where FG is extricated from enforcing the charges and FF can claim the credit for deferring them. (Cox 2016c)

Thus far, experience has borne out this prediction, with the issue nearly forcing a new election and the eventual government suspending charges and referring the issue to a commission. The (presumptively) final committee outcome is clearly a fudge, in which most households will not be charged but a levy for “excessive use” has been retained (the level for which will no doubt be reduced when the political climate is held to be more auspicious).

Movement entrepreneurs are already attempting to present action over housing as the “next big issue”: while it is clear that it is a significant political issue, attempts over the eight years of crisis to turn it into a mass *movement* comparable to the water charges struggle have consistently failed, for relatively obvious reasons to do with the huge diversity of situations people find themselves in around housing⁵³.

More generally, however, movements rarely obey this kind of strategic logic. Historical experience, as with the US Civil Rights Movement and New Left, or the west European movements of “1968”, indicates that popular mobilisation on this sort of scale normally has substantial and positive effects. When people are engaged in action around something that is already a core part of their lives or that involves lots of people close to them (hence when they mobilise on a “community” basis with friends, family and neighbours); when this involves a visible and sustained confrontation with “legitimate authorities” (police, media, government etc.); when they commit themselves to more risky actions

⁵³ The stellar performance by the “Home Sweet Home” campaign, which occupied the NAMA-owned Apollo House in Central Dublin over Christmas and New Year 2016-17, was successful both in showing the degree of popular support for action around homelessness and in forcing the State to take action. However like other housing campaigns in Ireland during the crisis, numbers of active participants remained several orders of magnitude smaller than those involved in action around water. This does not in any sense make housing an unimportant political issue; it is simply to observe that attempts to talk up its potential for *large-scale* mobilisation have consistently failed to bear fruit in practice.

(confronting police, not paying etc. as opposed to simply signing a petition or going on a march); and when there is an intense democratic process of movement-making (as opposed to an astroturfing or NGO model) - that experience tends to stay with them well after the immediate "issue" is over, and they regularly go on to develop new kinds of movement which express their own local rationalities.

However, these new movement developments can hardly be foreseen in advance, any more than (say) the rise of the women's movement or movements against nuclear power could have been foreseen from a study of the American SDS or May 1968. Most importantly, the future political activities of newly mobilised groups cannot be read off from top-down considerations of what constitute the most important political issues in a bird's-eye perspective, or for that matter from ideology criticism which assumes that the "meaning" of particular issues is the same for all participants.

Conclusion: resistance on the periphery needs allies in the belly of the beast

Together with Ireland's failed referenda (Finn 2015b: 249) and union ballots, the 2016 election results bring Ireland broadly into line with Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Iceland. The scale of emigration and non-voting mean that electoral results significantly *underestimate* the loss of consent for austerity.

Across the European periphery, it is now difficult, verging on impossible, for elites to secure legitimate consent for austerity politics. Instead we have seen parties such as Pasok or Irish Labour elected on anti-austerity mandates and then induced to change their minds, technical governments in Italy and Greece (Kennedy 2015: 96-7), the Portuguese "soft coup", the EU's defeat of Syriza, the long difficulty in forming a government in Spain and so on.

The EU can evidently keep going even with this massive loss of legitimacy on the periphery; while there is an equally substantial loss of legitimacy in the core (and EC Europe) it is largely expressed on the far right. The question is where anti-austerity movements in the periphery can find comparable allies in the core for alliances capable of dislodging austerity and, beyond that, neoliberalism. Hyman's perspective (2015), which calls for an anti-austerity alliance between unions, new social movements and parties, fits within this problematic, as do the various AlterSummit, Blockupy, DiEM25, Plan B etc. initiatives and conversations between these (Björk 2016, Baier 2016)⁵⁴.

However, as in Ireland it is more likely that if the kind of large-scale movements needed do develop, they will come from the grassroots rather than as top-down initiatives. This does not, of course, mean that we should not attempt to support organisation-driven initiatives and infuse them with real grassroots content. It

⁵⁴ See e.g. Blockupy's call to use protests against the G20 in July 2017 as a "stage and step of our struggles for a Europe from below": <https://blockupy.org/en/6832/lets-use-the-anti-g20-mobilization-as-stage-and-step-of-our-struggles-for-a-europe-from-below/>

means that we should avoid confusing this necessary organising with an actual pan-European movement. Wider success depends on effective international alliances between *movements*, and a mutual recognition of ourselves in each other's struggles; and we are far from this point at present⁵⁵.

In Ireland, the real-world meaning of popular decision-making exists in the practical *attempt* to make or shape decisions collectively (Szolucha 2016) and in asserting an alternative logic of the purpose of politics (moral economy) and its standpoint ("people" vs elites). Individually, the movement represents a sharp learning curve in terms of *substantive* political understanding as this logic meets the reality of inflexible policy, police repression and media attacks.

Participants' experience of mobilisation, participation and radicalisation is a powerful one and increases the likelihood of involvement elsewhere. The experience of winning, or even substantially challenging *formal* politics is also hugely significant here. What is important for this is not so much the election itself or policy decisions as whether participants interpret the outcome as a victory or defeat. For now what is being glimpsed, in many local meetings and housing estates across Ireland, is the possibility of a different kind of democracy from below, grounded in living practice and tackling the many hidden and not-so-hidden injuries of class as experienced in the Republic.

⁵⁵ Past learning from earlier waves of the anti-neoliberal "movement of movements" can be important here, in that such alliances were more effectively made (in Europe) in the early 2000s; however, it is clear that we need to go beyond even that level of cross-national mass mobilisation if we are to defeat neoliberalism.

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