

A radical common sense: On the use of direct action in Dublin since 2014

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Abstract

Recent years have seen the emergence of various social movements in peripheral Europe, in response to the challenges of economic recession and neoliberal austerity policies. Many of the tactics shared by these movements constitute what is termed as direct action, with a focus on autonomous, non-institutionalised and often disruptive protest forms. The present research was undertaken in response to a perceived intensified level of contestation, and a shift towards more direct forms of resistance over the past three years in Dublin City. Activists from the Irish Housing Network were interviewed in order to gauge their perceptions and explanations of this perceived shift, in order to shed light on the macro-dynamics of social movements in the city. It was found that interviewees had witnessed an intensification of resistance, and an increase in the use of direct action. Activists attributed increased activity and tactical change to the broader context of a move away from institutionalised paths of contention and a decreased organisational role of the established left. They also pointed to processes of networking, politicisation and changing consciousness in the spread of what were perceived to be more effective and successful tactics than those used by previously dominant leftist groups. Findings pointed to a limited ability of repertoire theory or former studies in Irish social movements alone to describe this shift in dynamics, representing a new context in which to understand emerging movements, and raises a number of potential questions for further research in what is a relatively underdeveloped field.

En los últimos años se ha observado en la Europa periférica el surgimiento de varios movimientos sociales que abordan las dificultades supuestas por la crisis económica y políticas de austeridad. Algunas de las tácticas compartidas entre estos movimientos constituyen lo que se denomina como acción directa, siendo centradas en formas de resistencia autónomas, no institucionalizadas, y a veces polémicas. Este trabajo se llevó a cabo con el fin de investigar una percibida intensificación de lucha, y un cambio simultáneo hacia el uso de tácticas más directas, en la ciudad de Dublín (Irlanda) durante los tres últimos años. Se realizaron entrevistas con activistas del Irish Housing Network para descubrir como perciben y explican este cambio, y de esta manera echar luz sobre las macro-dinámicas de los movimientos sociales en la ciudad. Se encontró que los entrevistados habían sido testigos de dichos intensificación de lucha y tendencia hacia la acción directa. Atribuyeron estos fenómenos a un contexto más amplio de abandono de vías institucionalizadas de resolución de conflicto (como el pacto social), y de reducción del papel organizativo de las

viejas organizaciones de izquierda (como los partidos y sindicatos). También indicaron la importancia de otros factores, como la politización, el crecimiento de nuevas redes de contactos, y el surgimiento de conciencia crítica, para entender la proliferación de estas tácticas, consideradas más eficaces que las que habían sido predominantes en los años precedentes. En el análisis de los resultados se encontró una capacidad limitada de estudios anteriores de movimientos sociales irlandeses y de “repertoire theory” para explicar estos cambios, dado que han sucedido aparentemente en un contexto más amplio de cambio político, y que es un campo bastante poco desarrollado de estudio.

Keywords: direct action, tactics, community organising, institutionalisation, politicisation, networking, consciousness, housing, water protests

Introduction: the emergence of the “sinister fringe”

Some three years ago, in April 2014, communities in Dublin and other parts of Ireland began gathering to resist the installation of water meters in residential areas. The groups in question directly blocked works on behalf of a newly-established company, Irish Water, to install facilities which would measure usage for billing purposes for the first time. The blockades generally succeeded, and by November of that year, attempts to install meters in numerous areas across Dublin had been abandoned in the face of consistent opposition and direct action (Roche, 2014). Despite a legal injunction against interventions, actions were to continue into 2015, and to this date these areas remain without metering facilities. Meanwhile, two national “days of action” organised by the new Right2Water group in late 2014 drew what was estimated to be the largest crowds of any nationwide mobilisation in recent Irish history (Hearne, 2015, 313). A broader trend of non-registration with Irish Water emerged, and on the day of the deadline, only one third of liable households in the country had provided their details to the company. Around this time, the minister for health, alarmed by the confrontational nature of water charges protests, referred to an emerging “sinister fringe” of protesters (Irish Independent Online Editors, 2014).

The sinister fringe was not limited to protests around the topic of water charges. As contestation around the issue reduced in 2015, a number of direct actions around the right to housing appeared to take their place in the public eye. In July 2015, an abandoned hostel for the homeless was illegally occupied, renovated and put back into use by community activists from the Irish Housing Network (IHN) and local volunteers. The same would occur in December of 2016, on a much larger scale, when Apollo House, an abandoned office block, was put to the same use for the Christmas period before eviction. Beginning in late 2015, the Housing Network also began facilitating stand-off occupations by people facing eviction, particularly from public housing, mirroring groups such as the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) in Spain. One such case came to a head on the day of the Irish general elections, when thirteen families

living in Dublin City Council (DCC) accommodation on Mountjoy Street occupied their homes in the face of intended eviction, until demands of alternative accommodation were met (McNamee, 2016). These large occupations constitute the tip of the proverbial iceberg reported in the media, compared to the vast number of smaller actions which have been taking place under the radar in the intervening time.

Evidence of these mobilisations forms a stark contrast with the dominant narrative up to 2013 of Ireland being a country that does not protest, preferring to “sit on sofas rather than take to the streets” (O'Connor, 2013), and obediently taking its neo-liberal fiscal medicine (Bootle, 2012). A quick search online reveals multiple articles between 2009 and 2013 questioning a lack of protest in the country, but seemingly not one since then. The tagline of one article in 2015 even joked that “Not long ago, TheJournal.ie was publishing articles with headlines like ‘Why don’t the Irish protest?’” (Brophy, 2015).

From the rivers to the sea communities all over Ireland are mobilising, organising and getting off their barstools and onto the streets thanks to the quango that is Irish Water. (Moore, 2015)

What we can take from this is that there has been at least a perceived shift in levels of protest in Ireland since the beginning of mobilisations related to water charges and the right to housing. Reported demonstrations and actions point to the presence of dissent once noted as absent. Furthermore, descriptions of these actions and the concern of politicians point to questions about the tactics used by groups. These cases are largely examples of what we term as direct action. Although by no means non-existent in the repertoires of some Irish protest groups in the past, the past three years have brought to light an apparently new “sinister fringe” of community activists that are unafraid of using direct and often illegal tactics to achieve their ends. The exaggerated reaction to this on the part of institutional political actors was best summarised in the sensationalist reference in parliament by one member of the ruling party to a developing “potential ISIS situation” in Irish activism. (Carroll & O'Halloran, 2014). The argument that there has been a change in the dominant tactics of protest during this time draws not only on media reports, which serve as an introduction but only go so far in their utility, but also on my own perception as an observing activist, and on academic analyses of the Irish protest scene which will be outlined later in the article.

The aforementioned apparent changes formed the basis of this research, with the aim to identify, describe and explain them. More specifically, it aims to assess whether activists themselves have witnessed a change in tactics, moving towards direct action; how and why that change has occurred in their experience; how precisely tactics have spread in the process; and how this fits in with the overall picture of the mobilisations in question – that is, what in the nature of these new mobilisations is conducive to direct action. Thus I aimed to

build a clearer picture of the emergence of heightened contention, new mobilisation, and the use of new tactics in confrontation in Ireland. I have established this in contrast with the period preceding the outbreak of actions around the issue of water charges, which was characterised by smaller protests, focused around single issues and using moderate, institutionalised tactics (Naughton, 2015).

The intended value of this research is that it will add to knowledge about the dynamics of social movements and activism in Ireland – a topic which has been relatively undeveloped to date. The lack of collected information on this topic extends especially to the use of tactics in movements, which in the context of the above media reports is an ever more relevant issue. Thus it is hoped that this research will be interesting in that it will explore a relatively undeveloped area of sociological study in Ireland and shed light on very recent, and ongoing, changes affecting that field.

In the following section I will outline the basis of the research in sociological theory around social movements and direct action, and in the recent history of Irish community activism. Sections thereafter will describe the methodological approach of the study, its findings and how these findings might be applied to construct a coherent image of the changing dynamics at play in Irish protest.

Theoretical background

The research undertaken takes the tactics and actions of social movements – and more specifically those oriented around community activism – as the core object of study. To give the research a theoretical context, this section aims to establish the object of study through a review of some established theory on social movements, tactics, action repertoires and direct action.

We can establish that what has been seen emerging in Ireland in recent years is a mixture of isolated, uncoordinated, yet crucial moments of contention forming the basis of new, coordinated community organisations and broader social movements. The Irish Housing Network was set up in response to the presence of isolated instances of contention and the formation of smaller community protest groups, in order to create synergy through the sharing of resources and the linking of multiple dissenting voices in a larger organisation. It is important to emphasise that the network did not aim to co-opt these movements through the creation of a larger group, but instead operates separately and distinctively as, literally, a network of those pre-existing groups. The network, then, might be seen as the crossing point of community organisations and a social movement, where the former morphs into the dynamic of the latter.

Of haves and have-nots: social movement theory and tactics

Our core understandings of the way in which social movements operate tend to revolve around questions of power. Movements are said to be the product of the mobilisation of those who do not have access to institutional power to effectively

take that power through confrontation (Tarrow, 2011). A form of dichotomy emerges, best reflected in Saul Alinsky's so-called "science of revolution", in which social movement targets and contenders are labelled as "Haves" and "Have-Nots" respectively. Alinsky's model appears to be applicable to our object of study. For example, the basis for community organisation is centred around perceived injustice towards the community, and responded to with small-scale, community-based resistance (Naughton, 2015; Hearne, 2015). Whether our movements are *radical*, like Alinsky's, is something that can be alluded to but not explored thoroughly without entering a teleological analysis of the movements in question, which is not my intention. However, the presence of systemic critique and the use of direct action have been taken as sufficient to earn the radical label (Elbaum, 2006; Barbrook & Bolt, 1980). Furthermore, Alinsky's model professes a focus on practical gains in communities, discarding political ideas, as does the Irish Housing Network. My intention here is to draw a parallel with Alinsky's conceptualisation of community organisations, and use this to acknowledge the power relations at play, while avoiding the over-extension of his theories, and indeed the romanticising of the archetypal *Have-Not*.

Tactics are the means by which social movements attempt to achieve their aims, or in Alinsky's terms, how Have-Nots take power from the Haves (1972, 126). These tactical choices are limited by situations faced by the organising group, including time constraints and historical patterns of contention, such that no organiser or mobilised group operates in a vacuum wherein choices are made. As Alinsky put it, you "[do] what you can with what you have". Thus there are few identically repeatable forms of action (Alinsky, 1972; Carter, 2010), but patterns will tend to emerge around what forms of protest are deemed worthwhile, given their being tried and tested. What results, in theory, is a set of *modular* protest forms, forming a "limited set of routines", or a "repertoire of contention", which constrains the activist's choice of action through the limited experience from which those choices are drawn (Tilly, 1995).

The repertoire of contention that existed in 2014, as residents of various streets across Dublin gathered to resist the installation of water meters, is something we should consider. This repertoire will have consisted of a set of established protest forms which had been institutionalised as part of the "modern political repertoire" – where an institution is a "set of mutual expectations based on past experiences" (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). The most likely recourse to action judging from the very recent history of Irish protest might have been an organised march addressing either the specific issue at stake, or broader austerity policies (Naughton, 2015).

We should not consider ourselves to be in a position to specifically define the existing repertoire in this case, or to assume that direct action was alien to it. However, where DA *had* been recently used, as in, for example, contestation over the introduction of the bin tax in 2003, or the use of Shannon Airport by the US military during the Iraq war, it had proven to be a divisive tactical point, and had not been embraced by larger leftist organising groups in most cases

(Anarchist News, 2003; Flood, 2003a; 2003b). However, as is clearly illustrated in the forms of action used in and from 2014, the movements in question went outside this *seemingly* existing repertoire. To some extent this will have been in response to the specificity of the situations in question, limiting the range of modular choices available, as described above, and to some extent it might draw attention to an apparent change to the existing repertoire of contention, or even the crafting of a new one. Indeed, this is to some extent what the research aims to establish and explain.

The question here, then, is how a newly-mobilised group of people reacts to new experiences for which apparently existing repertoires do not equip them, if we are to work from the assumption that the existing repertoire of contention did not include DA tactics to a large extent. This question goes to the heart of how repertoires are created and expanded – namely, through experience of struggle. New forms of protest are said to emerge at the *perimeter* of existing repertoires, as contenders innovate in response to challenges, and where those new forms prove successful they are said to spread from the perimeter, becoming more widely used and eventually institutionalised (Tilly, 1995).

This appears to line up with our expectations with regard to the emerging tactics of contention being studied, as they did, visibly, emerge through new forms of struggle. More specifically, we aim to study how direct action tactics came to be adopted by communities in the case of water charge and housing protests, and this will require a review of what direct action specifically entails as a tactical form.

"A potential Isis situation": theorising direct action tactics

A brief definition of Direct Action (DA) as a category of tactic in contentious action must take into account a number of different perspectives, as various authors have described it in various ways, depending on the context in which they wrote. An anarchist history describes the “direct” element as meaning “non-parliamentary” action, outside of the constitutional tradition, or even “normal action” - simply direct in contrast with the representation that is associated with making demands through a third party (Walter, 2002). Work addressing DA specifically in the 1970s echoes this, placing DA as occupying the broad spectrum between, and excluding, on one side, parliamentary or “liberal” paths to change, with actions such as leafleting and speeches, and on the other side, guerilla warfare and rioting (Carter, 2010). A recent book on community activism describes DA as the opposite of “going along to get along”, wherein outsiders to the political system take power into their own hands when taking actions (Shepard, 2015).

The concept has been divided and categorised in numerous ways. An anarchist approach tells us that DA involves mainly disruptive action and civil disobedience (Walter, 2002, 87-89). From a legal approach, DA can be divided into that which is non-violent and communicative, or obstructive, disruptive and aiming to “intimidate” (Mead, 2010, 236-238). If there is anything we can

take from this, it is that the definition of DA depends on the context in which it is understood, and this is precisely noted by April Carter (2010, 3). For the purpose of our research, direct action can be differentiated from lobbying, marches and speeches which aim to express opinion but do not effect change in themselves, but instead generally persuade a third party to make certain decisions. This definition is at risk of being overly simplistic, but to set a starting point we will take DA to be *confrontational* action, often involving disruption and civil disobedience, and disregarding institutional paths of political representation such as, in the Irish case, social partnership (addressed later).

Direct action is used because it *gets the goods* (Shepard, 2015; Walter, 2002), but it is also *communicative*. That is, it has the capacity to illustrate community values in practice, such as where the action in question involves building desired alternatives through action (Shepard, 2015; Carter, 2010). An example is the direct provision of services by and to the community, as in the case of the Bolt Hostel or Apollo House (later discussed). This brings us back to the question of power, or more specifically to the creation of situations of *dual power*, when communities act as if they were free (Graeber, 2009). In this way, communities are said to play a key role in liberal democracy (Carter, 2010; Shepard, 2015). This might be illustrated in actions around water charges succeeding in postponing the introduction of, and reducing, the charges in question. However, these “gestures of freedom” (Shepard, 2015) also set groups up as existing necessarily outside established political institutions by definition of their actions.

Unlike other forms of protest, direct action *challenges* power rather than persuading it. This makes groups that use direct action more difficult for the state to co-opt or accommodate (Carter, 2010). Direct action is to a great extent resistant to state tactics of accommodation and professionalisation. The radicalisation of a movement's tactics is the *antonym* of their institutionalisation, as they are thus incompatible with modern political repertoire (Tarrow, 2011). This does not only confirm that users of DA are in heightened conflict with the state, but the resistance to co-optation also draws attention to an important element in Irish protest – that of social partnership. As we will see in the section on protest in Ireland, the emerging groups being studied have to some extent filled a void left by previous clientelist government policies which created Community Development Projects in order to institutionalise local activism. The strategy of confrontation inherent in taking direct action is key to this dynamic in recent protest.

The Irish context: social movements since the 1960s

So far we have established a perceived contrast between the level of protest since the outbreak of contention over the introduction of water charges in Ireland and that in the foregoing years of economic crisis and austerity policies, when the *lack* of protest was a defining characteristic of narratives. The use of direct action has been identified as being *mainly* non-characteristic of the

organisational tactics of foregoing protests, in that it does not stand out as forming part of the repertoire of the large leftist organisations that dominated Irish protests in recent years, and where it was used by other movements it was in rare instances, and was a relatively divisive topic. To better understand this situation, this section aims to provide a recent historical context for the research at hand, through a summary of some key moments of struggle in which direct action *has* been used in Ireland, beginning in the 1960s, the earliest date of involvement by the oldest interviewee for this project.

Often referred to as the precursors of modern community organisations around housing rights in the city, the Dublin Housing Action Committee (DHAC) and National Association of Tenants' Organisations (NATO) were set up in the 1960s in Dublin, in response to a shortage of available housing, poor conditions in existing housing, and “anti-city” planning, which saw inner city communities relocated to the suburbs and the city centre being depopulated (Punch, 2009). The DHAC, particularly, used direct action tactics such as the squatting of unoccupied houses by homeless families and organising with communities to resist the depopulation of communities. This resistance around depopulation continued after the DHAC, into the 1980s, with communities such as that located in Sheriff Street mobilising against the mass demolition of residential areas to make way for commercial developments such as the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC).

Another key example of the use of direct action by a community organisation in Dublin is that of Concerned Parents Against Drugs (CPAD). The early 1980s saw a major mobilisation of communities in Dublin city to take action in response to growing problems of drug dealing and addiction, with which CPAD groups were formed in a number of areas (Lyder, 2001). These groups were almost entirely based on the use of direct action, where local “pushers” were called before community assemblies, and in many cases forcibly evicted from their homes. Networks were established to gather information on those who were dealing and buying drugs in communities, and patrols were organised by residents to stop these activities in a number of Dublin housing schemes. The same tactics of marching on *pushers'* homes and patrolling to stop sales from taking place in communities were applied in these numerous cases, after their early perceived success in Hardwicke Street. Meanwhile, the movement was delegitimised in the media, accused of links with the Irish Republican Army, legal challenges were brought against the communities by dealers, and the state and gardaí attempted to suppress the movement. CPAD groups continued to operate for some five years, in the face of severe police violence in response to their actions (Lyder, 2001).

The majority of these and other community mobilisations eventually came to be co-opted by the Irish government's “Social Partnership” programme, which set up official, funded Community Development Projects (CDPs) from the late 1980s in order to incorporate activists in institutional paths to the resolution of the problems once contested through the aforementioned groups (O'Byrne, 2012). These CDPs came to embody community processes around both housing

and drug addiction through professional community workers (Punch, 2009; Lyder, 2012; O'Byrne, 2012). The period saw a de-politicisation of community activism, as CDPs gradually moved away from approaches which espoused the building of “critical consciousness”, radical discourses, community empowerment, and a Gramscian ideology, towards “managerialism”, direct service provision and top-down, professionalised approaches to the problems at hand, with an individualist, neo-liberal ideology (O'Byrne, 2012).

Some twenty years later, the era of social partnership reportedly ended with reduced funding through new austerity policies of economic rationalisation, beginning at the time of the economic crisis in 2008 (O'Byrne, 2012). This point also saw a renewal of community disaffection, as grassroots interventions around housing and urban environment in Dublin took on a “new importance and meaning”, in the void left by the decline of CDPs (Punch, 2009). This marks a notable shift into the context in which mobilisations against water charges would eventually emerge. In the 2000s, only a “radical minority” in leftist movements favoured the use of direct action over social partnership (Cox & Curry, 2010). This was a noted topic of debate and a very divisive point of tactical choice in movements opposing both the use of Shannon Airport by US military planes during the Iraq War and the imposition of bin taxes in Dublin city (Flood, 2003a; 2003b; Anarchist News, 2003). However, three years before the water charges protests would erupt, a turn towards favouring direct action over partnership programmes had already been sensed and predicted by observers (Ní Dhorchaigh & Cox, 2011). Here it was reported that the already mentioned “neoliberal turn” in government policies and police repression of protest saw movements disempowered to the point where confrontation was *inevitable*. As we will come to see in the findings, this would be a considerable element in the spread of DA tactics.

An analysis of the years preceding contestation around water charges shows that the period from 2010 to 2013 saw a considerable number of localised, single-issue protests, which to a large extent continued to follow the repertoires and patterns of protest established during the social partnership era (Naughton, 2015). These demonstrations were mainly framed as community mobilisations to address specific problems. Those that occurred around a leftist critique of the 'bailout' of the country by the *Troika* (The European Commission, ECB and IMF), and the severe austerity policies that resulted, were still organised by the main institutionalised trade unions and leftist organisations, and limited by their repertoires. As late as 2015, one paper still attempted to explain the lack of protest of a character seen in other peripheral European countries in the Irish context (Cannon & Murphy, 2015). On the other hand, it was noted that in contrast with these continued trends, there was an increase in both confrontation and systemic critique in movements, accompanied by a continued decrease in the efficacy of social partnership policies to contain protest (Naughton, 2015).

The run-up to mobilisations around the water charges was seemingly defined by a move away from protests being led by trade unions and leftist parties, towards

more grassroots organising, and an emerging dynamic of autonomous community activism (Hearne, 2015). The movement around water charges and meter installations is considered to have been “transformative”, in having drawn massive numbers of people, the vast majority of whom were found never to have participated in a movement before (Moore, 2015). These actions are said to have mobilised and empowered a previously “silent majority” of people, who then began confronting opponents, and in a large number of cases through the use of direct action tactics (Hearne, 2015).

The context in which the mobilisations to be studied by this work occurred, as gathered from the above literature, is taken to be one of ongoing change in the dynamics of social movements and community organisations. This first notable change is in the leadership of protests, with an emerging divide between foregoing left-wing organisers, political parties and trade unions on one side, and grassroots community groups on the other. The second is a perceived change in the repertoires of contention of emerging groups, which are espousing direct action tactics to a greater degree than was described in literature making reference to the previous two decades or more, particularly since the introduction of social partnership. As the movements being considered in this research are very recent, there is a lack of literature on their emergence and tactics. However, there is also a lack of analysis of action repertoires in Ireland, and thus this review has gathered what it could from limited sources, and aims to add to a relatively underdeveloped area of study.

Methodology

The methodology adopted during the carrying out of this research was by no means selected in a vacuum, wherein the perfect selection for each phase could be made without trial and error. The research methodology eventually used resulted from a thought process around how best to address the specific research questions addressed by the study, but was also defined by decisions made in the context of my situation as a researcher and an activist. One of these contextual considerations was how I came to select the group I would study due to my own interests. Another was my desire to make the research relevant and useful, in contrast with a pre-formed idea I had of the academic high castle, wherein research is conducted for its own sake or that of the researcher, and bears no interest for those concerned in its findings. Finally, there was that of the technical strategies used to carry out the research. These considerations are outlined in this chapter.

The iterative process of group choice

My interest in the topic at hand came to a peak as I returned to Dublin after over a year living in Barcelona, and following the actions of social movements there. I felt that the political landscape in Dublin had changed to an unexpected extent. With the opportunity to conduct research at hand, I set

about a search for new groups which encapsulated this change. Most appeared close at hand, in circles of autonomous activists I already knew to engage in direct action such as squatting. However, I found that while I was absent the majority of groups of activists involved in the explosive water meter protests of the previous year (see Hearne, 2015) had begun to move on to contesting issues mainly centred around housing provision. At this point, the Irish Housing Network was taking off somewhat, after the occupation of the Bolt Hostel, with regular reported occupations and resisted evictions. The group resembled the PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca), a massive group which I had seen achieve many feats during my time in Spain. As an umbrella group, the IHN had in its membership virtually all of the smaller groups taking actions around housing in the city at the time. What's more, the network professed a devotion to direct action and grassroots mobilisation. At this point I approached a group of IHN activists with my research proposition.

Movement-relevant theory

In making methodological choices for my research, I was conscious of following a desire to study the movement in a certain way. Perhaps this is best voiced by Barker and Cox (2002), who acknowledge a distance between much of social movement theory and actual social movement practice. This calls for a balance between what are termed activist and academic forms of movement theorising, which emerge in different contexts, and produce different forms of knowledge. Activist theory – the ways in which movement participants on the ground conceptualise the same questions that academic theorists aim to address from the outside, looking in – is formed through the process of struggle, and *doing* social movements. I hoped that my participation in the movement I was researching would assist in bridging this gap. The concept of “movement-relevant theory” (Bevington & Dixon, 2005), and the professed aims of this journal (which I used for much of my pre-research study), encouraged my attempt to create a methodology through which I could be an activist before an academic, and imagine my colleagues from the movement being as interested in my results as those from university.

Methodological structure

The overall research design of the project was qualitative, due to the interpretivist nature of the questions I aimed to address, and the inductive aims incorporated in the intended research. Data was collected principally through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with activists from the Irish Housing Network and smaller groups that participate in the network, and interviewees were chosen by purposive sampling and snowballing. The interviews were treated as the key source of data for the research, and my participation in the network enabled me to corroborate the findings with a secondary data set which was not analysed. Interviews were based on an approximate guide, and interviewees lead the conversations in the direction they saw fitting. In any case,

I generally found it unnecessary to pose predefined questions, as interviewees themselves would cover the topics I wished to raise in an interesting manner. In total, one pilot interview and six subsequent detailed interviews were carried out within a period of two months, ranging from fifteen minutes to more than an hour in duration. Each interview was recorded in audio format, before being transcribed.

The participant observation element of the research took advantage of my involvement in the Irish Housing Network's media task group. These activities did not involve me working alongside all of my interviewees, as some were drawn from other network sub-groups. My participation in the media group involved me conducting interviews for the network, through which I witnessed to some extent the processes that the research aimed to describe. For example, in one meeting with a family occupying their home in resistance to eviction, the present members engaged in a discussion of specifically *why* they decided to take what they termed “direct action” for the first time, and what considerations were involved. Through the chosen combination of methods, I intended to provide more honest and useful findings, in line with the aforementioned concept of movement-relevant theory. However, I will emphasise that this was an instinctive choice at the time, due to my desire to involve myself more with the network.

The interview findings were analysed thematically, after all interviews had been conducted. The data gathered was mostly analysed descriptively, but also in part on the latent level, with the hope of revealing themes running deeper than what was manifest. An example of this is the broad theme of politicisation. This emerged on most occasions explicitly, as a respondent would simply say overtly that people had been politicised through the mobilisations in question. Yet on other occasions it emerged at the point of analysis, through descriptions of a growing political consciousness, a realisation of the nature of the state, or a turn to Gramscian ideas of conflict by people who had never before engaged in political action.

Many of the ethical considerations made before and during the research process have been outlined above. I feel that the most pressing ethical concern in my research was the question of how to accurately represent what activists communicated to me interviews, and this was dealt with in so far as was possible through my participation giving me the context in which to understand their ideas and descriptions of events. My interviewees were consenting adults, who were open about their involvement in the activities described, expressed enthusiasm about participating in my research, and seemed interested in discussion in interviews. Furthermore, to protect respondents, I gave them pseudonyms at the point of writing up the findings.

Findings: Reflections on direct action

This first section of findings aims to describe to some extent the constitution, nature and purpose of direct action, according to the reflections of those interviewed as part of the project. It is organised in four sections, which summarise interviewees' descriptions of direct action as a tactical consideration, as meaningful and effective action, and as *real* community organising, respectively.

1. Direct action as a tactical choice

The term *Direct Action* (DA) was recognised by all interviewees as applicable to some activities of movements in which they had been involved. Its use was widely regarded as a question of tactical choice, implicitly defined in contrast with other movements' limitation to non-DA tactics. The most consistently provided example of non-DA tactics was organised marches and rallies, or “waving a placard and asking somebody to listen to you”. Most interviewees did not rule out the utility of marches and rallies as tools of raising awareness. Instead, what was problematised in this regard was a total limitation to these tactics in action repertoires, overtly linked by interviewees to the tactics of the *established* left. The shift towards DA recognised by respondents was equated with groups' departing from this tactical limitation, and organising outside such limited structures of contention as those provided by institutionalised leftist groups.

I think it's great [...] the week before an election – fantastic, a great expression, a good tactic [...], but marching people up and down a road on a Saturday ain't gonna change anything. (Roisín)

The problematisation of the tactics of the “organised” left (“as they like to call themselves!” [John]) is only the beginning of a series of overt expressions of disillusionment with established leftist politics and mobilisation. This dominant distinction made between the groups with whom activists were involved (having emerged since 2014) and the established left is further discussed later.

Examples of DA tactics that had been used by participants mainly revolved around two broad forms – occupations and obstructions. Occupations took various forms, ranging from sit-ins at government and council offices to the sustained squatting of unused buildings or homes threatened with eviction. Obstructions were similarly varied, and included forcibly preventing evictions and the blocking of works such as the installation of water meters.

2. Direct action as meaningful action

While examples of direct actions tended to fall into the above categories,

differing impressions came to light with regard to what such tactics aim to achieve. A founding member of the IHN described direct actions as having two main effects: firstly, that of raising awareness by drawing attention to the problem at hand; and secondly the “substantive effect” – *getting the goods*, or stopping what the group is opposed to. A third purpose of DA then outlined was “collective service provision”, as in the case of the *Bolt Hostel*, or later *Apollo House*, which were squatted and run as homeless hostels by the IHN and other activists for two months in 2015, and one month around Christmas 2016, respectively. However, there is also an important element of meaning implied in these actions. In the former case specifically, the purpose was said to be not only “putting a roof over people's heads” (service provision), but also “taking [...] [council]-owned property and occupying it, which is a direct action” - raising awareness, confronting power and incorporating a “transformative vision” in the process. Another IHN organiser also described DA as transformative in nature, integral in drawing attention to the “root cause” of issues contested. This essential transformative vision provides a linking point between direct action as effective action and as meaningful action.

While respondents were agreed on direct action as having its main purpose in being an effective tactic (getting the goods and raising awareness), some argued that the creation of a critical consciousness in communities was a major – if not the main – purpose of engaging in confrontation. The respondent that placed the most emphasis on DA as a *process* rather than a tactic was Tony. He was the oldest of the interviewees, having been a community organiser since the 1960s, both on a grassroots level at first, and later with official Community Development Projects. For this interviewee, DA is “a learning process and a two-way agitation process”, married to the ideas of critical consciousness proposed by Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci (Tony made this theoretical framework explicit throughout, and linked it to the rationale of community development in his experience). The consciousness in question was said to emerge from an emphasised *reflection* with action. Its most tangible result, according to Tony, is sustained contention after one's ends are achieved, but it is also an end in itself, in challenging the hegemony of ideas in society and empowering communities through education and politicisation. Questions of critical consciousness and politicisation are further discussed as reasons for the spread of tactics and contention in the second section of findings.

3. Direct action as effective action

An old slogan says “direct action gets the goods”. In interviews, the strategic nature of DA was emphasised through the description of tactical choices leading to its use. One IHN activist said that it was first and foremost *practical* and *tactical*. Other respondents seemed to take DA for granted, implying its utility for quickly achieving small-scale aims (specifically the resolution of community problems).

You've only so much time and you want to [...] allocate [it] in an effective way, and direct action is [...] the most effective way of creating the sort of change [...] on a micro level that you want to achieve, at the moment

(Anton)

This was especially pointed out by other interviewees. One contrasted organising communities around direct actions with the slower, less effective tactics of putting up posters and calling people to demonstrations. Again, in this sense, the use of effective tactics was contrasted with the tactics of the so-called established left (centred around intendedly large-scale, pacific and coordinated demonstrations). As these established tactics were deemed less effective in the short term, they constituted another reason for distinguishing oneself from groups which limit themselves in their repertoires of action.

Another key theme which arose in interviews, which pointed to effectiveness as rationale for the use of DA tactics, was the element of perceived success described in response to questions about the spread of those tactics. Respondents gave great importance to communities seeing DA tactics succeed either in other communities or in their own, and applying them more often in response. This was emphasised on the “lower level” of community activism by two particular interviewees, pointing to the blockage of water meter installations, and by two others around the example of communities resisting evictions – both spreading through their visible success in achieving short-term goals.

If one was to investigate specifically how these successes were witnessed by other groups, the internet would be likely to emerge as a major element. Anton's Facebook profile was mainly devoted to sharing videos of community resistance which he had recorded for others to see and learn from. Roisín also accredited social media with aiding these ends, as new activists were given the opportunity to watch videos of other community actions and “repeat that [action] without actually having to be there”. These observations led us to further discussion of how tactics spread through networking, which will be further discussed in second findings section.

4. Direct action as *real* community activism

A recurring theme in interviews was the commonsensical presence of direct action in communities as their natural recourse to action, and the idea that the use of these tactics therefore constitutes *real* community action. John, particularly, made reference to his youth in Ballyfermot, a Dublin housing scheme “abandoned by the state”, where anything that was achieved came through DA. He went on to clarify that DA was the “natural impulse of ordinary people”, who “know the state disregards them” and need to be confrontational in order to achieve anything. On a similar note, Tony and Kate stressed that direct action is imbued in community action, and an integral part of community

protest, respectively. The concept of *real* community activism was again interlinked with other key themes, such as the *efficacy* of action and distinction from the tactics of main left-wing organisations contesting the same issues, as here illustrated:

I was at the [Right2Change] protest on Saturday and there was 80,000 people there, but people were just – “ugh, God, we're only marching again, you know, what is the point of this on a Saturday?” – and they're absolutely right [...] You've got people who are spending weeks putting up posters, giving out thousands of leaflets, bla bla bla, where you could be organising your community where it's actually going to be needed [...] The only [way] you're going to get in-depth, proper organisation that will make change is by going door to door and doing what the water charges did, you know, bringing roads together, estates together, you know - that's organising. (Roisín)

Real community activism, as viewed by those interviewed, was found to revolve around a concept of *real* struggle, which in turn consists of conscious confrontation with the institutions of the state. It is through this necessity of confrontation that direct action becomes a key element in real organising. Furthermore, it is through established leftist organisations abandoning struggle, or the “two-way agitation process” referred to by Tony, that communities were said to have become alienated from them and moved to self-organise (John). Finally, struggle was reported to be the core element in the dynamics of spreading confrontation – the “snowball effect of struggle impacting more struggle” (Aidan). This leads us to further discussion of consciousness and politicisation which are discussed in the following findings section, on the spread of direct action.

Findings: the spread of direct action

Respondents confirmed having witnessed an exceptional rise in the use of direct action in Dublin in the past two years, and in *all* cases linked this rise to the emergence of new social movements around the issues of water and housing provision. Some stressed their surprise at the sheer quantity of people taking part in contentious action since the emergence of conflict over the installation of water meters in 2014. The key effect that this larger participation in actions has had on the use of DA lies in strength in numbers, said to have led to people feeling less isolated and more confident in confrontation as a result (Aidan). Tony also indicated the “mass nature of the movements” as central to the spreading of their tactics. The intersection of questions of numbers of participants and of tactics lies in the element of networks and learning, further discussed later. However, the change in organising after the milestone of the water meter confrontations is a matter of dealing not only with bigger numbers, but also with a larger section of society (Aidan).

The following four topics summarise interviewees responses on the specific

explanations for, and the dynamics behind, the spread of the wave of contentious collective action witnessed in Dublin since 2014, and that of the use of direct action tactics within the movements forming part of that wave. The main four distinguishable reasons given are, in order: politicisation and the spread of perceived critical consciousness in communities; the severity of the issues being contested by movements; networking and learning processes; and organisation outside the established left.

1. Politicisation and consciousness

One of the main overarching themes discussed so far in relation to respondents' explanations for the rise of direct action tactics has been the politicisation of communities and individuals. The main basis for this explanation lies in the observation that the vast majority of participants in the mobilisations that occurred around the blockage of water meter installations and later protests around housing issues were newly-mobilised people, who had little or no previous engagement with social movements or community activism. This phenomenon has been observed in previous research (Hearne, 2015), but it was also indicated explicitly by interviewees as characterising recent protests, and specifically direct actions. This is the *new* section of society described as the “normal everyday folk”, the “next ring of people” that have been politicised (Roisín, Aidan). Anton referred directly to the participation of “people who were never involved in politics in their life, or community activism” as those *driving* a tactical shift towards direct action, through their providing a sufficient number of people for that purpose. On a similar note, it was pointed out by Kate that it's this “broader support network” in communities that has made the risk involved in confronting powerful opponents one that can be assumed.

However, this politicisation was not only described as a reason for which direct action has become possible. It was also linked to the motivation to engage in direct action, through politicisation creating a new critical consciousness in newly-mobilised communities. Where it was noted before that “success breeds success” (Aidan, Tony), the once-professional community developer (Tony) goes on to explain that this only occurs when participants learn from the experience of direct action *who their opponent is*, and what their position of opposition constitutes, and furthermore, as noted by John, how change happens in society only through confrontation. This is the process referred to as the growth of a critical consciousness, and it was argued to be the main reason for changing attitudes towards direct action that have occurred as communities became accustomed to confrontation. Kate pointed to this as an *alienation process* that resulted from violent reactions to protests on the part of the gardaí, noted by Roisín to have been “a great way of politicising people and also showing people the nature of the state [and] the nature of the [...] police”.

You can turn around and say, yeah, "all cops are bastards", yeah, [...] but only [when] they encounter and they experience that themselves will they realise the

nature of the state and what it's willing to do. (Roisín)

The observable effect of this process was a change in perceptions around protest noted by Roisín as the demise of a previous “embarrassment” about protesting. This was further exemplified by Tony, who said that in his community a person jailed for involvement in direct action is now looked upon with admiration for defending their community, where before they would have been deemed “a bit of an eejit” (an *idiot* in Irish slang). This change in consciousness that was widely noted by interviewees will have had a significant impact on motivations to engage in direct action. The role of DA was said to be unique in its creation of critical consciousness through witnessed *reaction*, which in turn leads to a motivation to engage in more DA, thus creating a chain reaction largely credited with creating the shift in tactics that this research aimed to explain.

2. The issues at stake

A second major theme in interviewees' explanations for the “explosion” of direct actions across Dublin in recent years was the idea that economic and political arrangements have pushed communities into new situations where confrontation is inevitable. Economic austerity affecting disadvantaged communities, combined with the collapse of social partnership arrangements that before allowed conflict to be resolved in a clientelist manner, were credited with creating these new realities (Aidan, Roisín, Kate). As Roisín comments, “those crumbs from the cake ain't there anymore [...]; it's how far you're gonna push people, and then people will fight back”. This reality was also worsened symbolically by new topics of contestation centring around fundamental issues such as water and housing provision (Aidan, Tony).

The idea here is that new, highly contestable issues, combined with perceived injustices (eg: economic, or police violence) and abandonment by both the state (social partnership) and the established left (as discussed in other sections) constitute macro conditions which have provided alienated groups with new opportunities for contention. This would appear to fit Tarrow's (2011) description of *opportunity* as one of the central elements in the dynamics of cycles of contestation.

These opportunities were described in interviews with reference to specific cases of communities taking direct action. Kate notes that communities have found new means of “channelling anger”, and Anton and Aidan describe this as being specifically allowed by new situations. For Roisín, the case of the “spontaneous occupation” of houses on Moore Street in January 2016 could be traced to the actors in question realising “they *could*” occupy the buildings, and reaching consensus to take this action. Similarly, with regard to water meters, Roisín notes, “they gave us a gift”. This was in reference to water meter installations beginning in the “toughest” areas of Dublin, in the political context of the time, and that situation being conducive to confrontation.

This adds another piece to our macro-image of how DA contestation emerged in the cases considered. In the first findings section we established why direct action was a practical and preferred tactic in these cases. In the previous section, we discussed how politicisation and the creation of a reported critical consciousness created a mindset among potential participants which provided an appetite for contestation. Here, we have established the role of *situations* as opportunities for contention reported in interviews. What remains to be seen is how tactics were learned and spread simultaneously with these processes, and how organisation outside the established left and its associated action repertoires impacted this emergence of contestation.

3. Networking and learning: the snowball effect

Protests and direct actions around the two main broad issues of water meters and housing were by no means separate in their emergence, and the ties between the two topics were raised in *all* interviews conducted. One such tie is the direct relationship of the same actors being involved in both mobilisations to a large extent, either simultaneously or moving from one topic of contestation to the next (generally from water to housing issues, as opportunities for actions around water meters diminished). This “snowball effect” of people moving from “struggle to struggle” (Aidan) was said to be a result of networking processes that resulted from the “explosion” water meter confrontations.

The water charges has changed everything, you know, in the last three or four years, big time. [...] I think the difference is that people are networked. [...] People in given communities are getting to know one another, and also get to know, almost, the agitators in the area, who [...] now can ally with people who are newly mobilised [...] so if something like an eviction happens in an area, well that becomes a focal point for these newly mobilised people to politically engage.
(Anton)

This idea was echoed by other interviewees, clarifying that before the water meter mobilisations, other key elements were in place, and the potential activists were there, but that they simply “hadn't met up”. Mobilisations around the installation of water meters, then, created a “huge informal network [...] interested in direct action, [...] [and] civil resistance” (John). This would appear to constitute another main explanation for the spread of tactics and contestation. In the case of growing numbers of protests and confrontations with authorities, the element of networking links into phenomena such as the setting up of local text alert systems and discussion groups on social media, through which newly acquainted people could inform each other about developments. Real time communication, alerting people of attempted water meter installations, or later attempted evictions, are examples of applications of networking using these tools.

The second element of the networking process reported in interviews was the

spread of DA tactics through accompanying learning processes. This sharing of experience, within the broader dynamic of networking outlined above, allowed newly mobilised groups in communities to replicate the tactics proven successful by similar groups in other parts of Dublin and beyond, through both *direct* contact with activists, and witnessing actions and reactions through video recordings available on social media (Anton, Roisín). Tactics – particularly new direct action methods – were thus learned and repeated in separate instances with different actors. This sharing of tactics was applied to instances of resistance around water charges and housing alike. Sidney Tarrow's (2011) description of “modular forms of contention” might shine light on this process, as successful tactics become part of shared repertoires, repeated in varied instances and against various opponents. Occupations of government and council offices would appear to be an example of this, applied by multiple different organised groups, as well as by families directly affected by public housing evictions during the past year. Furthermore, the fact that interviewees themselves indicated the learning and repetition of tactics as key to the spread of DA appears to cement this.

4. Community empowerment: organising outside the established left

As pointed out earlier in both the literature and findings, mobilisations around water charges in Dublin involved a vast number of people who had not been involved in social movements or politics up to that point. One implication of this is that to a large extent the actions taken around these issues, whether blocking water meter installations or occupying buildings and government offices, were organised and took place *outside* of what is termed the established left – that is, pre-existing left-wing organisations such as main trade unions and leftist parties.

In interviews, this was largely described as communities taking power into their own hands, without recourse to the organising capacities of these formerly dominant organisations. Kate and Aidan emphasised particularly this process, by which communities became the organisers and participants in actions simultaneously. This was said to have constituted a process of *empowerment*, whereby communities came to be “directly asserting control” in their struggles, which also led to greater levels of involvement and confidence in protest (Kate). She added that the voices of unions and parties are still there, but that the organising power has been taken from them by grassroots groups.

Respondents linked this distancing from leftist organisations to the emergence of direct action tactics, through the fact that the actions of communities in the past two years took on a radical form that had not been espoused by the organisations in question. John remarked that “only direct action confronts power”, and that the refusal of trade unions to engage in these forms of protest meant that their undertaking involved a necessary distancing from those unions (this tactical point is further evidenced in the theory section with reference to direct action protests at Shannon Airport and around the Bin Tax in Dublin). It

was furthermore clarified that not only did the use of DA require a distancing from trade unions, but that abandonment by trade unions (for example, through the Irish Congress of Trade Union's decision to cease calling for protests in support of the Labour Party's presence in government) also led to communities taking DA, as they no longer faced limitation to the tactics espoused by these organising bodies.

A consistent critique of the established left has emerged throughout these findings, especially with regard to the ability of these organisations to mobilise people for *real* activism and confrontation of power, and their tactical limitation to marches and leafleting, among other moderate activities not deemed as effective as direct action (Roisín, John, Tony). As Tony remarked, the *organised* left is unable to see how it is “part of the problem”, through its lack of effective engagement. The perceived abandonment of communities by these bodies was seen as leading to the initial establishment of informal networks of local activists such as *Dublin Says No* to take on contestation outside of these organising bodies. This started with earlier issues around austerity policies, and exploded with the spark of the water charges, leading first to the undertaking of isolated direct actions, and eventually to the formation of local community groups that would coordinate action around the water charges and housing, from Blanchardstown to North Dublin Bay.

Reflections on findings

One key realisation on my part, while conducting interviews, was that activists did not respond in terms of how they *moved* from certain tactics to others. Instead, it emerged that admittedly new tactics were being used by *newly mobilised* groups of people defining their own rules of engagement, or repertoire of contention. Firstly, it became clear that they had specific reasons for choosing these tactics (because they were effective, meaningful, real, successful, empowering, etc.). Secondly it became clear that these reasons extended to constitute explanations for the spread of the tactics, because they achieved short term goals, and created a consciousness such that participants wished to be involved in continued contention after these short term goals were achieved. Thirdly, respondents provided explanations for why new people were being mobilised and pushed to confront power, centring around disadvantaged communities being pushed too far by government policies, and left to their own devices through the lack of institutional paths to resolution of conflict and decreased engagement on the part of the established left.

Interviewees had clearly considered their actions tactically, theoretically and in national and historical contexts. Yet, they generally did not state a point where they *chose* to start using direct action, as such. Instead, where a first experience of direct action was emphasised, it had occurred in the context of confrontational tactics becoming *feasible* and *necessary* in their views. The basic social movement axiom stands – *you do what you can with what you have* (Alinsky, 1972). As Alinsky pointed out furthermore, there can be no

excessive moralising of means and ends in community activism, as it leads the activist to endless inaction. This appears most in line with respondents' perceptions of the established left, who have seemingly been left behind while new groups took opportunities and expanded the Irish social movement repertoire through tactical innovation on what at least began as the periphery. Only one respondent acknowledged a very conscious choice of tactics. This was Tony, the community organiser of some fifty years' experience, for whom the conscious choice was a return to direct action with the decline of social partnership. Other respondents had been mobilised for the first time in approximately the past two to six years, and their tactical choice was seen to be a momentary one in light of new opportunities.

Conclusions

The findings outlined and summarised above indicate a notable shift towards the use and legitimisation of direct action tactics witnessed by interviewees. This shift was described in the experience of activists as having occurred mainly through the recognition of the efficacy and necessity of confrontational tactics. These tactics were said to have spread through networking in communities, witnessed success, the mobilisation and politicisation of new groups of people, and the growth of a critical consciousness through the initial use of these tactics which has led to the appetite for further contestation around other problems in newly-mobilised communities. Furthermore, the emergence of new opportunities for contestation and tactical innovation emerged as simultaneous conditions which allowed these dynamics to evolve. The use of mainly new tactics was described as being made possible by a growing divide from established leftist parties and unions, and declining social partnership initiatives, leaving communities to organise themselves, and effectively define their own rules of engagement.

To put this in terms of established social movement theory, it shows, to some extent, the limited capacity of repertoire theory alone to describe the changes taking place in these cases, as they are not limited to conditions internal to movements but largely occur in a broader context of socio-political change. The lack of visible lines of continuity in Irish repertoires of contention may point to changes being better described in terms of an emerging *cycle* of contention (Tarrow, 2011), with its own new actors, early risers (such as the water charges movement) and followers (such as the housing groups considered), redefining the Irish contentious political landscape and rendering previous studies into these topics less applicable to the current scenario. This study, due to its limited scale and scope, can only point to these questions raised around established theory, and they are worthy of further investigation.

Further limitations of this study include that it is confined to a small section of Irish protest groups, specifically those that have emerged in recent years to contest housing issues in Dublin, however dominant they have become in narratives around protest in Ireland. It also addresses perceived reasons behind

changes in tactics on a noticeably *macro* scale. Further research could explore in greater detail how tactics are adopted on a micro level – that of the individual participant – and furthermore what meaning these new mobilisations hold for those who partake in them. Given the concentration of the movements described mainly in North and Inner Dublin, it would be interesting to establish which influences on the emerging dynamics of protest are specific to these areas, and how they differ in other parts of the city and the country, as well as how they fit in with broader European trends in social movements.

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