PRAXIS: Developing a popular education model in Ireland

Exploring the role of ideology and popular education as part of a community-based movement for equality and social justice

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

'From small acorns, large oaks grow' is an age-old idiom that captures the growth of this paper and the ideas contained within. In very basic terms, this paper is an attempt to document the rationale for establishing the group, PRAXIS, which is concerned with social change in Ireland using popular education. Established by a small number of working class activists and some supportive academics, PRAXIS is a group committed to developing the ideas of popular education in Ireland in the face of growing class inequalities and the complex context in which class politics is now operating.

Working closely with Cathleen O'Neill of Kilbarrack CDP, Mags Crean has utilised the financial support and other vital resources, such as time and space, offered by the CPA/ EWI scholarship to document the current context in which they work as working class activists. Most importantly, taking time out to consider this context has allowed time to reflect on possible responses. Through dialogue and critical reflection it has been possible to produce a document, therefore, that not only allows us to 'see the wood for the trees' but focuses our energy towards action. In essence, by combining this reflection with action through the work of PRAXIS, and making this process of reflection and action central to future developments to combat inequality, this paper is the foundation stone of a commitment to making popular education a part of the ongoing struggle for social change.

Section one opens with a general introduction to the concept of ideology and popular education; and how education can support and shape how we think and act. Paulo Freire is well known for his work on the pedagogy of popular education but less well cited for his theory of anti-dialogical community action. It is this theory that somewhat explains the situation that community activism now operates in an Irish context. This is described in section two of the paper. Of course, this is open to further discussion and reflection and that is the beauty of dialogue, ideas become debated, developed and more grounded in reality and experiential knowledge. If activism in working class communities has become shaped by this anti-dialogical action then it is less-well positioned to challenge the wider growing context of neo-liberal policy and practice, which essentially exacerbates poverty and inequality. This is explored in section three of this paper, by critically discussing the ideas of lifelong learning and active citizenship, concepts that are rapidly gaining currency in the community development 'sector'. The final section of the paper looks at how dialogue, critical reflection and solidarity, the basic foundations of popular education, can offer solace in light of the scene set by sections two and three.

This paper does not claim to be something it is not, it is not an academic masterpiece nor is it an easy read, and rather there is an on-going attempt to strike a balance. In other words, Mags has presented a piece of written work that is well researched yet accessible. It is also necessary to articulate the private context in which this piece of work was produced as behind any piece of written work is a real living-person dealing with the struggles and tribulations that life throws at you. In this case, in the face of a health system marked by privatisation and a lack of primary care support for those without the resources to purchase private care support, Mag's primary care role for her parents impacted heavily on the practical production of this document. However, it also influenced the passion behind this paper and her belief in the need for new ways to challenge the growth of market orientated policy and practice in Ireland, particularly for those directly affected economically, culturally, socially, politically and privately by these changes. PRAXIS, therefore, is inspired by the very basic, but revolutionary, idea of love, care and solidarity for each other in the face of inequality and injustice. It is only by reflecting on our daily struggles, making sense of them, and in the end collectivising these private struggles, that we can effect change.

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> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaull, Foreword to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1970, p. 16).

Educationalist Paulo Freire always maintained that part of the struggle for equality and social justice rested with those most oppressed in society realising their ability to transform society. This ability was rooted in the lived experience of people, and popular education is a means of supporting people to link this lived experience to critical reflection. This way people realise that they are agents of change but working within human-made structures. Freire used the term *praxis* to denote this link between theory and practice in the pursuit of radical social change. This idea of praxis is central to popular education, which is, in turn, based on a clear analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression and is informed by an equally explicit political purpose to eradicate poverty and inequality. With this vision in mind, a group of working class community activists supported by a number of academics have established a group called PRAXIS Popular Education Circle with the overt aim of reinvigorating popular education in Ireland as part of a movement against poverty and inequality.

The formation of a group like PRAXIS[1] is a simple step towards providing a space for voices and values critical of the dominant ideas of neo-liberalism, which is the contemporary manifestation of capitalism and patriarchy (Harvey, 2005). The intention to use popular education as a means of developing critical dialogue and radical social action is a direct response to the growing 'culture of silence' in Ireland, a culture of silence in which neo-liberalism is thriving (Allen, 2007). Freire used the concept of a culture of silence to indicate the means by which the oppressed loose the ability to critically respond to the culture that is forced on them by a dominant culture. Freire believed that popular education was a crucial mechanism in combating a 'culture of silence'. Of course, the term 'culture of silence' is not meant in a literal sense but rather reflects Gramsci's idea of hegemony whereby the ideas of the dominant are imposed on the oppressed. For Freire,

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[1] The following list is certainly not comprehensive but attempts to list just some of the other voices and groups that seek to counter the growing hegemony of neo-liberalism in Ireland including Kathleen Lynch; Kieran Allen; Peader Kirby; Feasta; People Before Profit; Irish Social Forum (made up of a variety of voluntary and community groups); TASC; Indymedia.

this culture of silence emerges from oppressive cultural action. This means that a situation develops whereby the oppressed cannot critically engage with the structures and ideas that generate and reproduce their oppression and instead internalise feelings of inferiority and self-blame for their own oppression. The culture of the dominant is imposed on the oppressed at all levels, and the 'culture of silence' allows this type of domination to permeate the economic, social, and political spheres through indoctrination rather than education.

The consensus-based approach to poverty and inequality that now dominates the Irish public policy climate is a key player in perpetuating this 'culture of silence'. This is informed by a liberal approach to managing inequality and poverty rather than seeking to create the conditions in which inequality and poverty are not tolerated at any level (Murphy, 2002; Meade, 2005). Such a model of governance is primarily sustained through social partnership, supported by the majority of Irish political parties, and wider civil society (Allen, 2000). This is further upheld by the research and discourse at an academic level, which serves to substantiate the success of partnership approaches to 'managing' poverty and inequality (Rush, 1999; Sabel, 1996). Added to this is the fact that 'recognition' politics is generally overtaking the 'redistribution' agenda as the prime equality issue. As important as recognition is to the equality agenda it is not enough when dealing with specific inequalities such as class, which has inherent resource and power inequalities. Furthermore, traditional politicised identities such as the working class no longer carry the same association for the majority of people who prefer to be 'ordinary' than 'working class' (Savage et al., 2001). At an academic level, some sociological theorists point to the death of class as a social identity (Beck, 1992, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, Clarke & Lipset, 2004). Although others suggest that class identities do exist but are publicly denied rather than sociological absent (Savage, 2001; Sayer, 2005). These factors combine to explain why there is no public or political outcry about the growing gap between rich and poor during a period in which Ireland had the resources to address the conditions which give rise to inequality and poverty (Kirby, 2001; 2002). This consensus approach is part of the reason why there are no street protests or outright anger at the decline of state provision of vital public services like housing. So the situation now presents whereby inherently unequal structures and systems remain intact, generating and reproducing poverty and inequality, whilst unchallenged by those with the access to power and resources to do so.

However, because those with power and access to resources were never the most reliable catalysts for change, age old oppressive structures such as patriarchy and capitalism were historically challenged outside of those in

privileged positions by the women's movement and trade union movement respectively. Likewise, the community sector mobilised in response to poverty and inequality. But even these more radical elements of resistance have been somewhat silenced by the consensus approach to tacking social and economic problems (Meade, 2005). Additionally, structural barriers located economically, socially and culturally, also impinge on a group's ability, or desire, to engage radical dialogue and action. As a consequence, the poverty and inequality witnessed in Ireland today is no longer simply part of an unequal economic system protected by vested interests, but has also been woven into the dialogue and practice of even those with a vested interest in change. Baker et al. capture this point perfectly when they discuss the central role that established ideologies play in perpetuating inequality.

> Whether one is talking of the subordination of women, the stratification of the labour force or the practice of confining and incarcerating the poor and the mentally ill in workhouses, prisons or mental hospitals, one of the reasons why these relations of exclusion or subordination became embedded in social practice is because of the acceptance of ideologies regarding the subordination, control and ordering of particular classes of persons (Condren, 1989; Foucault, 1977; Lerner, 1986; McDonnell, 2003) (in Baker et al;. 2004, p. 215).

Baker et al. (2004) and Castells (1997) also contend that education movements will play a definite role in the operation of social movements when ideology is accepted as central to the forces that generate inequality. A group like PRAXIS is essentially about acknowledging ideology as part of the battle against poverty and inequality experienced both materially and culturally by oppressed people throughout Ireland and globally. It is concerned with building a counter set of ideas that challenge the very basis of neo-liberal ideology. Popular education is a perfect tool for exploring alternative ways of creating society and social relations, and it is based on love, care and solidarity. This idea of love, care and solidarity, at the heart of popular education, and indeed, PRAXIS, is a departure point for creating and expressing a counter ideology to maximising production and profit.

So in order to explore the issues touched on above in more detail, and for ease of understanding, this paper is divided into four sections. The first of which will briefly introduce the theory of popular education. The second and third sections are concerned with illustrating the rationale for reinvigorating popular education in an Irish context. To do so, section two will set the scene by exploring the shift in activity, and power, of the community sector in Ireland whereby, it will be argued, oppressive cultural action has developed, resulting in a culture of silence. The specific focus on the community sector is

included because this is a sector that was traditionally tasked, and in fact grew out of, the aim of addressing poverty and inequality. Section three then will discuss the way in which neo-liberalism is influencing policy and practice in Ireland with little opposition. To explore this effectively, the case of lifelong learning and active citizenship, rapidly gaining dominance in the community sector, will be examined to illuminate the way in which hidden neo-liberal discourses underpinning such concepts can thrive in the culture of silence taking root in the community sector.

The forth, and final section, will discuss the potential offered by popular education to create a counter ideology to combat the poverty and inequalities caused by unchallenged and often unproblematised neo-liberal policies and therefore 'shatter the silence'. Given both the emerging 'culture of silence' that will be described in section 2 and the on-going debate over the community as a site for social change, section 4 will open with a look at the difficulties and opportunities in reclaiming the community as a space for the creation of a counter hegemonic force. The community is chosen, as stated above, because of the original association it has had with action for social change but moreso because it offers a geographic place and creative space for people denied access to other places or spaces to effect change in their interests. This is because poverty and inequality in Ireland has an obvious class basis with the poor and lower income groups experiencing the greatest material and social inequalities. Yet it also has a distinct gender dimension, and more recently a distinguishing ethnic dimension with new ethnic groups forming a large portion of those on low incomes. So we are essentially talking about low income communities and the people who live in these communities. This discussion of spaces for radical social action will be followed with an exploration of using popular education, in a community space, to shatter the silence that has emerged as a result of anti-dialogical community action.

As a whole, this paper is an attempt to contextualise the thinking for, and purpose of, the establishment of a group like PRAXIS by exploring, in more detail, the neo-liberal ideology and practice in Ireland and the ways in which it has permeated sites once tasked with more radical ideas of social change. Based on both literature reviews and interviews with key activists[2] in the community sector, sections two and three manage to analyse the current 'culture of silence' whilst section four proposes a challenge to this 'silence' through an exploration of the relationship between popular education and a movement for radical social change within both a theoretical framework for reflection and a practical framework for action.

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[2] The interviews are not used as a source of primary research directly in the text but instead indirectly informed the general development of the paper.

Section 1 Ideology & the role of popular education

This paper locates part of a movement for equality and social justice as an ideological struggle (Gramsci, 1971; Bourdieu, 1993; Castells, 1997). Education can serve as a site for resistance (Giroux, 1983), and plays an essential part of a movement for change that acknowledges the centrality of ideology (Baker et al., 2004, p. 214). Popular education is a particularly effective education tool for critically engaging ideology, and thereby creating alternative ideological understandings (Freire, 1970; 1998; Thompson, 1993; Mayo, 1999). Indeed, popular education has been used all around the world, from Nicaragua after the revolution, to South Africa in the resistance to apartheid, and from workers' adult education to the civil rights movement in the US (Tjerandsen, 1980; Hamilton, 1992; Fieldhouse, 1996; Crowther et al., 2005). But popular education, as Jackson states, is popular not in the sense that it is well supported but that it is *of* the people (1995, p. 194). For Jim Crowther and other proponents of popular education, it is also very explicit in its aims:

> Popular Education is based on a clear analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression and is informed by an equally clear political purpose. This has nothing to do with helping the 'disadvantaged' or the management of poverty; it has everything to do with the struggle for a more just and egalitarian social order (Martin et al. 2000).

Essentially, this definition of popular education used by the Popular Education Forum for Scotland[3] not only situates popular education in the interests and struggles of ordinary people but explicitly states the overt political nature of popular education. This focus on progressive social and political change and the tendency for popular education to promote critical thinking make it a potent force in the struggle for a more equal and just society (Mayo and Thompson (eds), 1995). It is this idea of critical thinking, the most basic ingredient of popular education, which plays a central role in developing a set of ideas counter to dominant ideas that allow inequalities and poverty to grow. Popular education in its contemporary form can be traced back to the work of Paulo Freire and his programmes in Brazil in the 1960's. Critical thought leads to critical action and, for Freire, education is located at the interface between domestication and liberation. The basis of Freire's philosophy is that education is seen as a part of the process of the revolutionary transformation of society. Ideological struggle is central to changing the material conditions of humanity. This is why Freire believed

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[3] This is a Popular Education Forum in Scotland, which aims to bring together people in Scotland with an existing interest in, and commitment to, popular education (Martin et al. 1999)

that education was political, and therefore a crucial site for challenging dominant hegemonic ideology. The writings of Paulo Freire are the philosophical and pedagogical agenda for many workers, ranging from adult and community education to community development, advocating the liberatory model of education (Freire, 1970; 1973; 1985; 1994).

Like Freire, Gramsci also saw a pivotal role for education in creating a counter hegemony and the primacy of cultural activity for the revolutionary process is affirmed by Gramsci (Allman, 1988; Mayo, 1999; Fischman and McLaren, 2005). The work of Freire and Gramsci shares a similar argument, which reinforces the potential for social change based on transformative education. Just like Freire, Gramsci sees education, and the cultural formation of adults, the key to the creation of counter hegemonic action. Both Freire and Gramsci lay the foundation for the development of a radical theory of education, which can be applied to a community based movement for equality and social justice in an Irish context.

Ivan Illich (1971) also highlights the way in which education can act as a pre-packed set of ideas rather than building on, and coming from, lived experiences. For Illich, institutionalised learning removes the idea that people can be 'intellectuals' outside of established institutions. The concept of popular education gives life to Illich's ideas as it challenges the fact that knowledge and education is pre-packed in the interests of the status quo. Popular education values the ideas and aspirations of ordinary people outside of institutionalised curriculum. Joanna McMinn in her Ph.D. study (McMinn, 2000) draws attention to the fact that critical feminist theory has also played a lead role in developing a pedagogy based on the relationship between an individual and oppressive social structures. In essence, a central characteristic of feminist pedagogy is linking the private to the political, and this relationship is also at the core of popular education, which also builds on lived experience (Hanisch, 1969; 2006; Luke & Gore, 1992; hooks, 1994). Indeed Connolly (2003; 2005; Connolly et al, 2007) illustrates how the development of women's community education in Ireland, during the eighties, was underpinned by critical feminist pedagogy as much as critical pedagogy.

1.1. No such thing as neutral education

The idea that education is not a neutral process and in effect reproduces the status quo is supported by a vast body of work (Bourdieu and Passeron; 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Lynch, 1989). For Gramsci, education plays a particular central role in cementing the existing hegemony (Gramsci, 1985). Connolly draws attention to the overtly political nature that Freire applied to education.

The importance of Paulo Freire lies in the emphasis he gives to the hitherto ignored political nature of education (Connolly in Mackie (ed), 1981, p. 70).

Connolly goes on to state that, for Freire, 'power is inseparable from education' (Mackie (ed), 1980, p. 70). Power for Freire is not just something imposed by the state through the police but rather domination is also expressed through the way in which power, technology, and ideology come together to produce forms of knowledge, social relations and other cultural forms that function to silence people (p. xix). And the subtlety of this domination does not just rest with the forms that it takes but in the way the oppressed internalise this and participate in their own oppression (p. xix). Freire maintained that 'it would be extremely naïve to expect the dominant classes to develop a type of education that would enable subordinate classes to perceive social injustices critically' (Freire, 1985, p.102).

Raymond Williams, a radical adult educator, maintained in his essay 'Resources for a journey of hope' (1983) that adult educators must always ask themselves 'Who benefits?' and 'in whose interests?' rather than beginning with the assumption that adult education is somewhat neutral. Payne (in Mayo and Thompson, 1995, p. 272) adds that a concern with neutral adult education, whilst neglecting the critical questions that Williams identified, only leads to 'the hegemony of neo-liberal economic rationality and the political and ideological forces that support it'. Murphy (2001) presents two objectives for radical educators engaging civil society – one objective is to transform capitalism and the other is the furtherance of democratic practices. Although both are worthy aims, the second idea is related to Habermas's view of civil society where it is seen as crucial in transforming only itself and not the economic or political systems. This is in contrast to the Gramscian idea that civil society can also transform economic and political power. Brookfield draws on a definition by Fletcher to illustrate the difference between liberal and liberating models of education, 'liberal assumes that the person is 'free' and should be yet freer and more enlightened whilst liberating assumes bondage and the setting free of whole classes of persons' (Brookfield, 1985, p. 233). The liberating model is based on a very different societal analysis: a conflict model of society, in which communities are made up of division based on class, gender, race and other social divisions. The problem with adult education in the mainstream, is that it is informed by the liberal model and based on assumptions that the working class are culturally deprived; with the result that adult education for them is viewed as a matter of getting them to accept the offerings of the higher culture as it is selected (Lovett, 1975).

Lovett (1975) advocated the role of community based popular education and proclaimed that 'adult education must be rooted in people's views of their everyday community action groups, formed as a response to such problems, and become a more appropriate context for the adult educator to work in than formal educational institutions'. For Lovett popular community education 'does not only involve the working class in rediscovering their own cultural resources but also in increased social consciousness of how their actions are conditioned by the values, standards and goals of the so called 'higher culture'. In much the way that Freire saw the role of banking education, and similar to Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, Lovett sees the formal education system, including the compensatory education, as imposing the ideas and values of the dominant classes. For Lovett, it's not about valorising working class culture but instead making sure that all cultures are critically engaged.

1.2 Pedagogy and Politics

The fundamental claim in all of Freire's work is that education is political (Crowther and Martin, 2005). Martin and Crowther deal with the question of the need for a pedagogy of the oppressed in the era of lifelong learning. Pedagogy is nothing without the political onus Freire places education. For Freire, education was concerned with the promotion of revolutionary social change (in Mackie (ed), 1981, p.2). There are many cases throughout the world of Freirean pedagogy without the political element and this only serves to undermine the philosophy that Freire espoused (in Mackie (ed), 1980, p. 46).

The concept of banking education is central to Freire's idea of the way in which education can serve to domesticate people. It is also very akin to Gramsci's belief that education serves to reinforce the ideas of the status quo.

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (Freire, 1970, page 53).

Opposed to the model of banking education, Freire's pedagogy places emphasis on creating knowledge, and the fact that the basis of humanity is tied to the idea that people are subjects, not objects, creating and changing society, and social relations through our actions and thoughts. Instead of

depositing information, for Freire, the aim is to pose problems that allow a person link their everyday experiences to the creation and control of knowledge:

> Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings the process of becoming -- as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. Indeed, in contrast to other animals who are unfinished, but not historical, people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompletion. In this incompletion and this awareness lie the very roots of education as a human manifestation. The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity (Freire, 1970, page 65).

Problem-posing education is based on the concept of dialogue. This idea of dialogue underpinning popular education means that the category of intellectual is redefined. For Freire and Gramsci, ordinary people are in a position to theorise about oppression as much as any self professed 'intellectual'. Indeed, Freire makes this very clear in his writings.

> To criticize the arrogance, the authoritarianism of intellectuals of Left or Right, who are both basically reactionary in an identical way. . . to criticize the behavior of university people who claim to be able to 'conscientize' rural and urban workers without having to be 'conscientized' by them as well. . . this I have always done. Of this I speak, and of almost nothing else, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* And of this I speak now, with the same insistence, in *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 1994: 79).

The belief that ordinary people, organic intellectuals as Gramsci referred to them, could play a decisive role in the creation of knowledge, culture and society, is the backbone of popular education. This is what Freire calls praxis. Praxis is the fusion of theory and action and takes a dialectical formation whereby reflection leads to action and further reflection and so forth, leading to continuous dialogue.

This idea of dialogue, made up of action and reflection through praxis, as an educational process leads to what Freire termed conscientization. For Freire, once people become aware through the process of conscientization of their oppression as something that can be challenged then social action is inevitable. In this way, critical understanding leads to critical action (Freire, 1970). Conscientization refers to the process whereby people become aware of their oppression and the fact that it is dynamic and changeable and not

something within them or something deserved. So praxis, whilst feeding conscientization, is also an outcome of the process.

Highlander[4] based in Tennessee, in the United States, is an excellent example of the way in which the characteristics of popular education can be utilised to effect change in the interest of equality and social justice. The close association with the Black Civil Rights movement in the 50's and 60's made the Citizenship Schools one of Highlanders most publicly known successes. But this is only one of many successes of Highlander and Freire himself was a keen supported of Myles Horton and the work of Highlander. The founding principle and guiding philosophy of Highlander is that the answers to the problems facing society lie in the experiences of ordinary people. Those experiences, so often belittled and denigrated in society, are the keys to grassroots power. To this day, Highlander serves as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South. The Centre works with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny. Through popular education, participatory research, and cultural work, Highlander helps create spaces, at Highlander and in local communities, where people gain knowledge, hope and courage, expanding their ideas of what is possible.

1.3. Structural limits on the success of transformative education

Although this paper locates a direct challenge to poverty and inequality in the ideological sphere, it also acknowledges that this is only one aspect of the struggle because poverty and inequality are also generated, and reproduced, structurally, not only at a cultural level but also at social, economic and political levels (Baker et al. 2004). The structural aspects of inequality tend to reinforce each other so challenging any one level means simultaneously addressing the others. Making people aware of internalised oppression and creating a counter ideological argument to neo-liberalism is not enough to counter the inequality of power and resources that accompany a neo-liberal ideology. Lynch (1999) makes this idea of power and resistance to change very clear in her exploration of the powerful bodies with an interest in the education system. Likewise, Joanne McMinn (2000) argues that the ability of women's community education groups in Ireland to effect social change was limited by the structural barriers that they encountered. In addition, although Allman and Wallis stress the long and arduous task of building social

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[4] http://www.highlandercenter.org/ Highlander is funded primarily by private foundation grants, individual donors, and capital fund drives. Highlander believes in nonprofit accountability and transparency.

movements through popular education and indeed using popular education as a social movement in itself, they warn of the over expectations placed on popular education:

> Far too frequently, radical educators have disappointed themselves and invited the ridicule of others because we have lacked, or at least not stressed, a degree of realism. We should never have assumed, or permitted others to assume, a direct or automatic, sequential relation between radical education and macro level social change (in Mayo and Thompson, 1995, p. 19).

This paper is written in the full realisation that transforming the ideological resistance to neo-liberalism into effective social action for change, requires levels of resources and power that are currently unavailable to equality and social justice movements. Furthermore, it is written in the knowing that those with power and resources can use such to counter any gains made by movements for equality and social justice. Highlander, used above as an example of a popular education model in the United States, is heavily reliant on private foundation grants and individual donors in order to exist. So ideological struggle is never in a vacuum and is at all times shaped by the structural context in which it is created and reproduced. In saying that, whilst acknowledging the very real constraints that this means for transforming ideology into action, it does not negate the critical role that ideology can play in mobilising a very important resource; the power of people and solidarity.

Section 2 The Culture of Silence

'It is the depth of silence that worries me most'
(Caraher, S, community activist, 2008)

Before discussing the current context of community activism in Ireland, it is important to give a brief overview of the historic context in which community activism operated. The very brief overview to follow in this paper is derived from much more authoritive and informative work on these developments, well worth referencing for a greater understanding of the current working context (Geoghegan and Powell, 2004; Connolly, 2005; Motherway, 2006). The type of community activism of concern here developed into what is now described as community development and community education work. As community education and community development are interlinked and most community education occurs within a community based setting, it is plausible here to look at the historical development of the community sector in general. In very basic terms the community as a space for social action in Ireland is documented in literature as developing from a form of community activism based on a non-confrontational self-help model within local areas dominated by Catholic thinking, to a community development approach defined by tackling poverty through demanding structural change driven by grassroots and collective action (Cullen, 1994; Curtin 1996; Lee, 2003; Motherway, 2006). At this stage, around the early 1980's, community education developed in response to the community development agenda and the social conditions of the time. In the main, this grassroots and collective action at a community level was closely tied to the women's movement and trade union movement. More recent literature documents a move from this grassroots led action to a partnership model in which the community sector is recognised and resourced by the state (Meade; 2005; Meade and O'Donovan, 2002; Geoghegan & Powell, 2004; Motherway, 2006).

The growing relationship between the state and the community development sector has led to questions regarding the autonomy and role of the community sector in effecting radical social change (Meade, 2005). Yet as community education follows the lead of community development in demanding increased recognition and resources it is inevitable that it too will meet the challenge of reconciling any type of radical social change agenda with an increased level of state direction and influence in activities (Adult Learner 2004; Rubenson, 2005). While recognition and resources are well deserved and much needed in order to adequately support people and social change, the state provision of such recognition and resources needs to be considered within the wider global context of Ireland's neo-liberal policies. Mae Shaw articulates this clearly:

> How the community is constructed politically provides the discourses and practices which frame the parameters of community development at any given time; its possibilities and limitations (Shaw, 2006, p. 34).

When the neo-liberal agenda is left unchallenged it manages to seep into every institution and action of the social, political and cultural systems that are marked by an unbending subservience to the economic agenda. As stated previously, the community sector is no exception to this trend and yet, in the current climate, has no apparent organised faction to counter the neo-liberal direction and discourse compounded in government policy impacting on community work. Popple (2006), in the case of Britain, maintains that state funding and support of the community sector has been dependent on adherence to a neo-liberal agenda what he calls conditional development (p. 333). Shaw, Crowther and Martin referring to this neo-liberal direction in the community sector in commentary to an issue of *Community Development Journal* dedicated to looking at Ireland maintain that:

> As J P. O'Carroll points out 'Ireland's case is not unique': it can be understood as a microcosm, highlighting processes which are being worked through in different national contexts, often with depressingly similar outcomes (2003, p. 69).

They go on to state that the articles in the special edition of the journal dedicated to Ireland illustrate how neo-liberal policies have worked their way through the state in ways that have redrawn the boundaries of state influence. This:

> Demonstrates a serious deterioration (if not active suppression) of the very kind of debate, including the possibility of ideological difference and dissent, upon which a healthy democracy relies (2003, p. 70).

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) Paulo Freire outlines two opposing theories of cultural action, one of which is oppressive cultural action, which Freire termed antidialogics. Inherent in this type of action are factors such as manipulation, co-option, cultural invasion, and divide and conquer approaches to community action. This type of action inevitably means that a culture of silence emanates and voices once united in working class solidarity begin speaking the language of horizontal violence, thereby becoming complicit in a wholly unequal system (Freire, 1970).

> It is as if the metropolitan society were saying "let us carry out reforms before the people carry out a revolution". And in order to achieve this goal, the metropolitan society has no options other than conquest,

manipulation, economic and cultural (and sometimes military) invasion of the dependent society (Freire, 1970, p. 143).

As the following paragraphs unfold into a discussion of community activism today, Freire's idea of antidialogics help to explain what is happening in the community sector in Ireland. However, prior to exploring how Freire's idea is applicable in an Irish context, it is necessary to profile the community sector. In this way, it allows a greater understanding as to how antidialogical action can so easily infiltrate the sector.

2.1. Operational issues supporting the rise of oppressive cultural action

It would be wrong to imply that Freire's idea of oppressive cultural action is applicable in Ireland because of the complacency of the community sector, albeit the culture of silence (through internalised myths and internalised oppression) does allow this type of action to progress effortlessly. Rather it is also supported by the operational problems for people trying to work at a community level imposed by the unequal distribution of resources and power at play. Given the structural nature of the generative forces of inequality (Baker et al., 2004), it is impossible to eradicate poverty and inequality at a community level unless access is gained to effecting structural change. Maureen Bassett, as part of her research with Community Development Programme staff, found that staff believed operational constraints to fully realising the potential of a community development approach. Research respondents specifically noted the limits on activism towards more radical social change. In profiling the community as a sector it is important to discuss the funding and the staffing (voluntary and paid) of the sector. Nonetheless, this is a difficult enough challenge given the lack of baseline data for the sector (CPA, 2007, p. 24).

Policy Context

Current Government policy on the community sector is contained within the White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector (Dept. of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000). Structures, funding and general procedures for consultation and involvement of the community sector are outlined in the White paper (Motherway, 2006). Government policy on Community Education is mainly contained within The White Paper on Adult Education: "Learning for Life" (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

Funding

Community development[5] is funded by the state since 1990 (Motherway, 2006). Funding for the Community Development Programme in 2006 totalled €24m (CPA, 2007, p. 51). The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs administers the Community Development Programme which comprises of 185 projects. In addition to the CDP projects, Family Resource Centres are also involved in community development work at a local level. There are nearly 100 Family Resource Centres in Ireland and their work is co-ordinated by the Family Support Agency. Funding for the Community Development Programme and the Family Resource Centre Programme is generally provided on a three year basis and does not cover all costs incurred by projects. In this regard, most community projects manage to successfully source funding elsewhere (Eastern Region CDP Network, 2007). The Combat Poverty submission draws specific attention to the way in which funding can come under threat when there is no long-term commitment. This has included a reluctance to fund research and policy work.

> It is further asserted that there have been examples where funding lines have come under threat when there are differences between funders and 'the funded' regarding the way resources have been used (CPA, p. 52).

The community development sector operates on a basis in which only two core staff members are fully funded by the Community Development Programme. In this regard, multiple funders and multiple accounts becomes a significant problem in order to administer the level of activity that community development projects are expected to undertake (Bassett, 2007). This means that when community projects become involved in providing key community services it is no surprise that their time, energy and resources are down and hence their ability to take time to critically look at the situation whereby greater state influence, informed by a neo-liberal agenda is fast undermining a sector concerned with fundamentally challenging poverty and inequality. Community Education, given the lack of core funding for staff, is also hindered with respect to the level of work undertaken. The establishment of Community Education Facilitators by the VEC is supposed to support the further development of community education at a local level.

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[5] There are a number of community development initiatives funded by the state including, but not limited to, the RAPID programme, the LDSIP, and County Development Boards. However, this paper is only concerned with community development projects based in communities such as the majority of Community Development Programme actions and Family Resource Centres.

Community education is funded primarily by the Department of Education and Science administered through local VEC structures. AONTAS has recently spearheaded the establishment of a Community Education Network, members of which are seeking recognition for the sector as a distinct sector and resources to support such. Again, as with community development, most community education providers are restricted by the lack of core funding and in particular core staff funding. The Back to Education Initiative is another funding mechanism available to community education providers. Providers also source grants elsewhere. However, funding applications and monitoring and evaluations, with respect to various funding streams, demands time and resources that many community-based educators just do not have.

Staffing

The community sector is made up of predominantly female employees and volunteers (NDP Gender Development Unit, 2002; Geoghegan and Powell, 2006). Indeed, Geoghegan and Powell found a ratio of 2.7 women to men (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004). This gender dimension of staffing in the community sector is a significant factor for consideration when exploring the ways in which the sector is limited by access to influence and resources (McMinn, 2000). Recent research on volunteering in Ireland carried out by the Taskforce on Active citizenship also found women to be more represented in community groups than men (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007, p. 8). In a research report carried out in 2002, the NDP Gender Equality Unit highlighted the issues specific to gender in community development, particularly the lack of women in powerful decision making positions. The NDP report draws on the work of a research report Áit ag an mBord: Representation of Women in Decision-Making Structures for Local Development in Ireland. This report found that, in the Republic, the contribution of volunteers within the community and voluntary sector is hugely dependent on the commitment and work of women depicting them as the 'mainstay' of voluntary social services, community development projects and community resource centres around the country. The Áit ag an mBord report also comments that this work is undervalued:

> Women's work in their communities has in many ways been regarded as a 'natural' extension of their caring work in the home and has been treated in the same terms – lack of value and invisibility (2002).

The lack of women in higher level positions was also reflected in the research carried out by Maureen Bassett for the Combat Poverty Submission on the development of the Community Development Programme. Of the 13 CDP co-ordinators that were interviewed, 12 were women, whereas the CEO's and co-

ordinators of the national level organisations were men, with the exception of the National Women's Council (Bassett, 2007, p. 42). Geoghegan and Powell (2004) also found that the more powerful and influential the role, then the lower the relative presence of women to men.

According to Shay Cody of IMPACT, speaking at a community sector trade union joint campaign launch, there are over 65,000 people employed in the community sector. Cody raised an important point during this speech about the fact that government policy to deliver services through community organisations, as much as it is due to the ability of these organisations to do so effectively, is also linked to it being a low cost option for government. Cody stated:

> This sector is increasingly attractive to a Government that believes dedicated community-based workers will deliver vital services without decent pay, pensions, job security, careers development, training to upskill, protection against workplace hazards, or any of the other legal and negotiated conditions and protections that most workers take for granted (Cody, 2006)

The fragmented nature of the community sector is an issue in unionising the sector but so too is the gender make-up of the sector. The NDP Gender Equality Unit report (2002) concluded that, as with any field of work, the significance in the over representation of women in part-time employment lies in the resultant lower pension and leave entitlements. This is of particular importance to the community sector, which is dominated by female staff and volunteers.

2.2 Oppressive Cultural Action

In addition to operation constraints, the lack of critical engagement, at a community level, could be further explained by Freire's theory of oppressive cultural action, and the resultant culture of silence, which appears to be at work in an Irish context. The first stage of conquest is clear if you consider the fact that equality of opportunity and liberal approaches to managing poverty and inequality, focused on the individual, have become the mantra of the community sector as opposed to outrage and public activism over lack of housing and other crucial services; the second stage of divide and rule is evident in the local focus underpinning the Community Development Programme and the lack of resources allocated to policy or lobby work; the third stage of manipulation is very clearly in operation through the social partnership agenda; and the final stage, cultural invasion, is manifested in the

professionalisation, accreditation and service delivery pressures engulfing community activism.

2.2.1 Conquest and mystification

In light of the operational constraints outlined above, it is no surprise that neo-liberal ideas have seeped into workings at a community level, as indeed they have in most approaches to challenging poverty and inequality (see Phelan & Norris (2008) for an excellent insight into the neo-liberal direction of homeless services in Dublin). Neo-liberalism is marked by a 'hidden' political ideology and is closely associated with a depoliticised language of economic efficiency. The influence of neo-liberal policy on the community sector has likewise resulted in a depoliticisation of the language and practice of community development and community education. The liberal discourse associated with neo-liberalism allows the development of individual and market based approaches to social problems that are themselves the direct result of economic liberalism in the form of neo-liberalism. Of course a thorough examination of policy, literature and practice would need to be carried out to make this point emphatically, but a cursory exploration of current research into the community sector gives enough of an indication of this change (Geoghegan & Powell 2004; 2006). Geoghegan and Powell (2004) carried out a large scale research project, interviewing 559 community workers, to analyse the model of community development that has emerged in Ireland over the last two decades. In the course of their research they identified four main areas of work now carried out by the community sector with service delivery and development programmes prevalent and they conclude that 'the popular perception that community work is composed of radical activists committed to the overthrow of capitalism would appear to be a throwback to the poverty programmes of the 1960's' (2006, p. 856).

> Community development appears to be now firmly rooted in liberal, humanistic values with an emphasis on value, capacity and worth of individuals, rather than in explicitly radical collective ones (Geoghegan and Powell, 2006, p. 856).

In line with the ideology of liberalism and indeed neo-liberalism, equality of opportunity and individual effort become the hallmark of individual empowerment in contrast to collective empowerment, and community services come to replace community action. The depoliticised discourse of liberalism, and the discreet politics of neo-liberalism, means that the relational character of inequality is masked. A focus on the 'disadvantaged', 'excluded', and 'marginalised', and the corollary focus on ways to 'advantage' and 'include' these groups means that the structural causes of such

marginalisation are ignored. Geoghegan and Powell (2004) found a large portion of the work carried out by community groups to be focused on 'inclusion'. Meade relates this to the rise of recognition politics where the character of social groups rather than the factors determining their circumstances becomes the object of concern (Meade, 2005, p. 359). Moreover, this focus on symptoms tends to take the spotlight off those powerful groups that are advantaged as well as refusing the 'disadvantaged' an opportunity to see their 'exclusion' as a form of oppression. Paulo Freire reminds us that reducing the discussion in terms of class inequality to 'disadvantage', a symptom rather than a cause of social class injustice, ignores the relative positions within structures of power and privilege in which class inequality is generated and reproduced in the first place. Levitas (1996) argues that these exclusion debates tend to be uncritical and aligned to the economic status quo thereby buttressing neo-liberal ideology. Margaret Ledwith writes that:

> We find ourselves driven by a form of community development that is preoccupied with sustainable local economic regeneration, but often without a holistic analysis of inequality and injustice (2001, p. 173).

These myths, which include the centrality of the market and liberal, depoliticised discourse and approaches to inequality, masking the political ideology that does exist, and the internalisation of such myths by the oppressed and those working against oppression, are what Freire refers to as the first form of antidialogic action; conquest. Essentially, a community sector subsumed by myths, suspended in mystification, indispensable to maintaining the neo-liberal status quo has been colonised, and an uncritical engagement with the conquerors removes any hope or imagination, for this type of action, in creating a different social order based on equality and social justice.

2.2.2 Divide and rule

The local focus, and the tendency for government policy to emphasise local solutions to local problems, is another aspect of the community sector which needs to be critically engaged (Lee, 2006). Over the last two decades the government has modestly increased support for and resources to community development projects and strategies that address key issues of social exclusion at a local level. But the focus has been on local service delivery as opposed to supporting policy work at a community level that could illuminate links between local problems and structural causes (CPA, 2007). Freire (1970) noted this tendency to focus on the local as a second characteristic of antidialogistic action whereby the more a region is broken

down into 'local communities' without them being seen as part of a wider totality, the more alienation is intensified.

> Diving in order to preserve the status quo, then, is necessarily a fundamental objective of the theory of antidialogical action (Freire, 1970, p. 126).

Privatisation in an Irish context such as privatisation of public transport services is seemingly less damaging to people's well being when compared to privatisation of essential resources such as water in more poverty stricken countries such as Bolivia (Olivera, 2004). Nonetheless, they are interrelated problems, and part of a macro neo-liberal policy of privatisation, being experienced at a local level. But in the same way that the local focus removes links to national policy, likewise it hinders the potential to link local problems to global policy (Ledwith, 2001).

The more alienated people are, the easier it is to divide them and keep them divided. This is because ideas of unity, solidarity and collective struggle threaten the status quo (Freire, 1970, p. 122) For Freire this means the status quo, those who control access to resources, rewarding those who play the game and penalise those who dissent (Freire, 1970, p. 125). Broderick warns of the caveat inherent in the White Paper which confirms support and resources for the community and voluntary sector. For Broderick, this may become the foundation for a two tiered community and voluntary sector with those who provide particular services or advocacy roles being favoured over other organisation (2002, p. 107).

> In general, mutuality of interest is a cornerstone in this whole area with emphasis on consultation and participation where necessary and desirable (Dept. of SCFA, 2000, p. 97).

Speaking out when oppressive cultural action is at work could mean sacrificing the very resources needed to deliver what are vital local services to counter the impact of poverty and inequality, even if the causes are located outside of the community (McMinn, 2000). Because insecurity is a defining feature of those in poverty and those suffering inequalities, it is a case of taking advantage of disadvantage in order to maintain an unequal status quo. To this end, Peter Mayo (2003) also warns against governments offloading social responsibilities, often tied to structural causes, onto the community and the individual. So a community is effectively tasked with addressing problems at a local level such as drugs, violence and anti-social behaviour, that are the direct result of macro economic policies, and over which they exercise no control.

2.2.3 Manipulation

Manipulation was the third characteristic of what Freire describes as oppressive cultural action (Freire, 1970, p. 128). For Freire, manipulation allows the status quo to lead the people into a false sense of organising and is therefore a central tool to maintain conquest. One of the most significant forms of manipulation at play in an Irish context is social partnership, the idea that the powerful can reconcile differences with the powerless through consensus (Murphy, 2002, Meade, 2005). Mike Allen (2007), a former general secretary of the INOU, in his contribution to a recent book on social partnership 'Saving the Future' argues that the involvement of community action groups in a consensus approach to social problems militates against the emergence of a radical, challenging and critical community movement. Collins (2002) contends that the interest shown in civil society by the state was a way of extending legitimacy in situations where legitimacy was strained and he maintains that there is a de-radicalising effect of partnership for the community sector (p. 96). Partnership is what Collins sees as 'the overriding concern of the state to buttress and expand its administrative and managerial capacity in areas and sectors where this was weak' (p. 97). Broderick also situated the growing relationship between the state and community development within a new governance agenda. This agenda is composed of a consensus approach to managing social relations, and a renewed interest in building social order through investment in social capital. For Broderick, the support of the community development sector is central to the success to this new agenda.

> A new context for governance that proceeds on the basis of social partnership, European and global influences that emphasise the importance of linkage with civil society, and increased community development activities in Irish Society (2002, p. 101).

In attempting to explain the hegemonic status of corporist values within Irish Social Policy and the consensus imperative that now dominates public policy debate, Rosie Meade contends that:

> Because the state has taken such an instrumental role in the initiation, funding and direction of community organisations at the local level, the actual autonomy and independence of the community sector has been grievously undermined (2005, p. 349).

Meade is essentially making the point that the community and voluntary sector have become preoccupied with the business of the state, which is witnessed as a 'disablement' of the sector as it is brought within the ever-

tightening control of the state (p. 350). For Meade, the recognition that social partnership has brought to the community and voluntary sector was recognition gained without power or influence. It is basically a case of the costs of recognition without redistribution or in the case of community participation as Dinham puts it 'over-powered' rather than 'empowered' (Dinham 2005). Meade concludes by suggesting that community organisations need to find alternative forums to voice social critique, what she calls experimenting with more 'confrontational forms of political expression'. Paula Clancy, chairperson of the TASC think tank, speaking about submissions for the Democracy Commission, referring to a statement regarding civil society and the state in the context of Britain and Australia, saw its relevance for Ireland:

> Conservative governments strongly support the role of NGO's as service providers and while sympathetic to the service delivery role of charities, the same conservative governments are hostile to NGO's when they engage in advocacy or political engagement, because they are seen as being self-serving and lacking legitimacy (Presentation to the Equality Authority, 14th November 2007).

Social partnership as an all encompassing solution to social injustice has not delivered the goods and instead the social partnership years have witnessed increased levels of inequality (Cullen, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Allen, 2007). National housing waiting lists are in the order of 50,000; 17% of the population is at risk of poverty with 7% experiencing consistent poverty; tax inequalities persist; lack of affordable childcare persists and major inequalities in health and education persist (O'Connor, 2007; Cullen, 2004). These growing levels of poverty and inequality are directly related to the rise of a dominant neo-liberal ideology in policy and discourse that a de-politicised community movement just could not challenge. Broderick (2002, p. 101), referring to community development and social partnership in Ireland, maintains that 'reflection is desirable when the deepening inequalities in Irish society are revealed':

> Never before has so much state funding been allocated to community development groups and never before have there been such startling inequalities in Irish society (Broderick, 2002, p. 102).

2.2.4 Cultural Invasion

So what has come to a head for the community movement in Ireland are these very real tensions that exist for people working within the system to change it. What Lynch refers to as the 'relatively silent colonisation of the hearts and

minds of academics and students happening in universities' (2006, p. 7), could also be applied to the community development and education sectors where the need to be recognised and attract adequate funding means accepting neo-liberal direction. This is the final characteristic of Freire's idea of antidialogic cultural action and what Freire terms cultural invasion.

> Cultural invasion is on the one hand an instrument of domination and on the other, the result of domination (Freire, 1970, p. 135).

For Freire, this occurs when the dominant have successfully imposed their world view upon those they conquered, and inhabit the creativity of the invaded (Freire, 1970, p. 133).

> Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders (Freire, 1970, p. 134).

In terms of education and social class inequality, Lynch and O'Neill (1994) illustrate how the middle class can colonise the working class when the middle class always occupy the space of researcher and the working class that of research topic. In this way the standpoint or theoretical blindness of the researcher is influenced by their social position. As a consequence, solutions to challenge educational inequality for the working class are informed by the world view of the middle class researcher.

In terms of the community sector, professionalisation is a direct form of cultural invasion. It has grown in recent years as a direct means of attracting adequate funding to provide vital services in a community setting. In addition, growing levels of service provision and multiple funding streams has increased administration and bureaucracy, which in turn demand growing levels of paid, professional staff members. For Mayo (in Shaw, 2006) professionalisation has undermined community activism and autonomous movements. Yet, Shaw (2006) sees the debate around professionalisation more about the purpose of such rather than the existence of such, because as she points out community development is professional. Likewise, within an Irish context, the delivery of services at a community level is highly professional. However, the problem arises, as Shaw argues, when professionalism becomes a tool to control community-based projects and exclude community-based people. Turner (2007) summarises the results of a case study emerging from the author's work as a community development worker in East London in which Turner uses a reflective practitioners approach and concludes that community development needs to reconnect with community defined purposes, engaging with how power is utilised to nurture participation and

radical social change. For Turner (2007) a number of factors led to a rise of top down approaches to community development including a shift towards service delivery and an emerging professional culture.

But whatever way it is looked at, there is no doubt that professionalisation in its current form with a focus on outcomes and bureaucracy has been brought in from 'outside' but internalised by the community sector as an important way of being recognised and in turn attract funding. Service provision and professionalism combine so that community activism is now about community service replacing services traditionally delivered by the state.

> In cultural invasion it is essential that those who are invaded come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders rather than their own; for the more they mimic the invaders, the more stable the position of the latter becomes (Freire, 1970, p. 134).

In an Irish context, the provision of services is central to the state's vision of the role of community development (Geoghegan & Powell, 2006, p. 857; CPA, 2007). This is made very explicit in a department communication to all Community Development Projects in February 2007 outlining the reason the CDP is funded:

> The CDP is funded to deliver Government policies and provide service in the public interest and it is essential that this is done in an equitable, transparent and non-partisan way (in CPA, 2007, p. 19).

The Community Workers Co-operative (CWC) expressed concerns about the strong focus on service provision in the NDP 2007-2013[6]. The downside of increased funding for service provision activities means that activity is constantly under scrutiny and managerial culture demands such as performance indicators become part of community activism. For Goeghegan and Powell (2006) this means a growing bureaucratization of community work in an era of stable funding arrangements. This threatens the very definition of community development which was not only about dealing with the symptoms of poverty and inequality at a local level but linking that vital work with addressing the causes at a structural level. But if community activists are caught up in managing staff, constantly completing funding applications, returning performance indicators and progress reports as well as trying to do crucial outreach work, where is the time or even energy for the social change work? The social agenda becomes subservient to the social service agenda. As Anna Lee (2006) writes:

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[6] EAPN and CWC Seminar: NDP 2007-2013 and Social Inclusion 8 February 2007

People starting into community work expect to make changes, but get caught up in doing what's doable. When, in our work, we meet people who need services (e.g. Childcare), how do we manage that along with having a radical approach? (Changing Ireland, Winter 2006, issue 20).

Community education operating within this sector is also directly impacted by this shift, and the focus on accreditation and professionalism in community education curtails the development of any autonomous group looking to use community education for a purpose other than skills training, as important as they may be. In effect, a group of community activists trying to set up a non-accredited form of community education would meet severe resource deficits in the current climate where accreditation and progression are central to funding allocations.

Other concerns around autonomy and local ownership arise with the concept of endorsement. Endorsement means that community projects must submit there strategic plans to city or county development boards (Bassett, 2007). The CWC highlighted concerns over the references in the National Development Plan to increasing the role of local authorities, County Development Boards and Strategic Policy Committees in delivery of social inclusion measures[7]. Such a move would further undermine the idea of flexibility, autonomy and local control of community groups and needs to be seen as the form of cultural invasion that it is.

Joan Byrne, a community activist in Ballymun, Dublin, captures the mounting tensions for the community sector as a movement for social change:

At some level we have to strip Community Development back to the simplicities. We have to start talking about the essence of what it means. We have to start having community conversations again. We have to start meeting again. We have to retain the absolute right to meet on our own and make our own plans. We have to retain the right to self-governance and self-determination (Changing Ireland, Summer 2006, Issue 18).

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Section 3 Neo-liberalism thriving in silence: the case of lifelong learning and active citizenship

What is most worrying about the idea of community action as oppressive action and the presence of a 'culture of silence' in Ireland is the fact that neo-liberal policies thrive in such a fertile breeding ground. Essentially, there is no organised opposition and no collective stance to protect those most adversely affected by the kind of changes that accompany neo-liberal approaches. That is why the case of lifelong learning and active citizenship serve as useful examples in trying to illustrate how neo-liberalism can operate so effortlessly in the face of little opposition or critical engagement. So the following discussion of these concepts, both active citizenship and lifelong learning, is meant as a brief introduction to the type of critical analysis that these concepts have attracted at an academic level. It is an attempt to use these ideas, fast gaining ground in the community sector, as a way of highlighting the way neo-liberalism can seep into everyday action on a ground level when it is left unchallenged.

3.1 The growth of neo-liberal ideas

A defining feature of the last decade has been globalisation and the growth of neo-liberal ideas (Harvey, 2005). The defining economic aspects of neo-liberalism distinguish it from liberalism, and in particular progressive liberalism or what is often described as a liberal political order accompanied by Keynesian economic policies. Essentially, neo-liberalism sees the market and human capital as central to economic progress free from any interference that intends to curtail economic gain, whilst extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action. In effect, because Keynesian economics sees a role for state welfare, neo-liberalism is an attack on this type of economic theory, instead seeing the role of the state purely in terms of supporting free-market trade (Kus, 2006). The influence of neo-liberal economic theory in directing macro economic policy at a European and Global level (for example GATTS and the Lisbon Treaty) has witnessed the Irish Government endorse and drive economic and social policies largely underwritten by a neo-liberal agenda:

> A distinctive neo-liberal interpretation of fairness and efficiency based on the moral might and supremacy of the market has taken root across the public sector (Apple, 2001; Loxley & Thomas, 2001, Thrupp, 2001; Bonal, 2003). and small countries like Ireland are no exception to this trend (Allen, 2003, Kirby, 2002, Lynch and Moran, 2006). (Lynch, 2006, p. 3).

In an Irish context the neo-liberal influence on policy has included but is not limited to, the deregulation of public services, an increasing tendency towards a minimalist welfare-state, regressive taxation and flexible labour markets unencumbered by strong unions or collective bargaining (Allen, 2007). This means that on a political level we are witnessing the success of neo-liberal policies and a decline of welfare state approaches to collective well being and collective responsibility (Kirby, 2002; Kus, 2006; Phelan and Norris, 2008). In essence, there has been a profound shift from a political economy of common ownership and state provision to one that embraces and celebrates the market (Jackson, 1995).

> Neo-liberalism, therefore, is the concentrated expression of the interests of the big corporations. Its agenda is none other than a rolling back of all barriers to profit making and its aim is nothing less than the full liberation for capital by the removal of social restraints (Allen, 2007, p. 17).

Rosie Meade in her analysis of the social partnership agenda also places the rise of neo-liberal policies at the core of economic and social developments in Ireland:

> At the core of Ireland's economic triumph appears to be our willing compliance with the dictate of neo-liberalism, where flexible, unstable and low paid employment is increasingly the price of profit (Meade, 2005, p. 354).

But this rise in neo-liberal thinking and practice is not a new phenomena and the history of neo-liberalism is well documented (Doherty, 2007; Klein, 2007; Harvey, 2005). In his discussion of the rise of neo liberal direction in UK policy, Doherty presents an excellent overview of the ways in which the ethos changed from public service to private management (2007, p. 275). An even more detailed account of the rise of neo-liberalism can be found in Harvey (2005) who maintains that the greatest success of neo-liberalism was not the reorganisation of international capital after the breakdown of Keynesian economics and the fall of communism but rather the re-establishment of the conditions for capital accumulation and power to the economic elites (p. 19). Doherty's specific UK analysis, however, is adequate enough for comparison and reference when exploring the rise of neo-liberalism in an Irish context. Doherty notes how a host of economic and social inadequacies plagued Britain prior to the rise of the conservatives in power, who then presented these problems as the failures of a liberal, welfare state approach, laying the way for the imposition of neo-liberal approaches (2007, p. 274). Markets would now become part of the social arrangement for the distribution of

services and goods. Sassoon (1996) in his book *One Hundred Years of Socialism* also explores the way in which the rise of neo-liberalism was aided by the failing faith in communism after the fall of Soviet Communism. For Sassoon and Doherty:

> From Spain to Belgium, the 'rediscovery of the market' was accompanied by the discarding of utopian visions of a socialist society (Doherty, 2007, p. 278).

In much the same way, in an Irish context, the economic recession preceding the 'celtic tiger' years has meant that the neo-liberal agenda accompanying the economic boom, although challenged, has become accepted as part of the costs of economic success (Kirby, 2002; Fahey et al., 2007). The following discussion of active citizenship and lifelong learning, as new policy initiatives emerging throughout the community sector, will illustrate the main characteristics of neo-liberalism. The concepts will be critically analysed according to (1) the depoliticised discourse typical of neo-liberalism (2) the increased role of state protection of neo-liberal policy and practice, against a decreased role of state protection for market failures (3) the centrality of the economy typical of neo-liberal approaches and (4) the focus on individualisation.

3.2. Repackaged ideas in depoliticised discourse

Understanding the ideology that underpins neo-liberalism is central to grasping the theory and practice underpinning government policy nationally and globally. This is important because of the tendency of neo-liberalism to present as an apolitical approach. For Lynch the seemingly apolitical nature of the neo-liberal agenda has made the rise of neo-liberalism in education policy an uncontested affair where debates are depoliticised with ideological underpinnings hidden in a language of economic efficiency (2006, p. 7). In much the same way, and of greater relevance to the community sector, the concepts of lifelong learning and active citizenship equally have ideological underpinnings concealed in the depoliticised language of economic efficiency and democratic participation respectively (Coffield, 1999; Shaw & Martin, 2000; Martin, 2003b; McGregor, 2004; Nijhof, 2005; Doherty, 2007).

So part of the problem with attempting to encourage a critical response to lifelong learning and active citizenship is this depoliticised way in which they present and hence the need to be clear from the outset that, similar to what Freire would say, these are not neutral but political concepts. Rogers (2006) highlights the fact that two main forms of lifelong learning are articulated in policy and discourse: learning for work and learning for citizenship (p. 126).

Therefore, lifelong learning and active citizenship, although distinct policy initiatives, are interconnected. Rogers also warns that we need to be aware that the language being used in the discourse of lifelong learning, which often hides the real impact of what is happening (p. 127):

> The other major omission appears to be the socially transformative element. For it seems to me that lifelong learning has lost the radical dimension of education; it is profoundly conformist (p. 128).

Rogers is joined by many other critical commentators at an academic level who claim that active citizenship and lifelong learning are presented as neutral concepts, when in actual fact they are anything but neutral, but rather underpinned by a neo-liberal context of privatisation, individualisation and deregulation and a liberal discourse of equality of opportunity (Coffield, 1999; Shaw & Martin, 2000; Martin, 2003; McGregor, 2004; Nijhof, 2005; Doherty, 2007). However, given the tendency of neo-liberalism to present apolitically, the contradictory idea of providing equality of opportunity in a market orientated society is presented unproblematically and greeted with little criticism or scepticism from those tasked with implementing policy on the ground.

> Inside the Trojan horse we are in danger of finding cheerleaders for the enterprise culture. And that is deeply problematic. The enterprise culture is part of the problem. This is the same culture that produces unemployment and survives on the foundation of exclusion and social division (Fleming, 1999).

For Martin (2003a) the dominant discourse of lifelong learning is a political rather than an educational discourse. Martin contends that the objective of lifelong learning and the type of active citizen involved means the deconstruction of welfare through a reconstruction of citizenship. This idea of an active citizen is rooted in the neo-liberal definition of citizenship, which is highly genderised in favour of patriarchal structure prioritising economic production over care (Martin, 2003; Lynch, 2007; Lynch, Lyons & Cantillon, 2007). The encounter with such politicised concepts posits challenges for the community sector. The community sector born out of a struggle against gender and class inequalities is presented with a concept of citizenship, which is individualised and gendered and a concept of lifelong learning, which is economic driven.

3.3 The role of the state and consensus

Contrary to popular talk of a diminishing role of the state associated with neo-liberalism, what actually occurs is a decrease in state control of the market whilst the state remains central to the legal and political success of neo-liberalism, whereby the market becomes the organising and regulative principle of the state and society. The centrality of the economy to the lifelong learning and active citizenship agenda is well documented (Coffield, 1999; Martin, 2003; McGregor, 2004). In Ireland, the state has played a significantly active role in developing neo-liberal approaches to social, cultural and economic policy (Allen, 2007). Lifelong learning is the new mantra of policy with seemingly widespread consensus (Borg and Mayo, 2005; Rogers, 2006). The Irish Government has played a proactive role in endorsing active citizenship and lifelong learning as key policy directives (White Paper; Learning for Life (2000); Report of the Taskforce of Lifelong Learning (2002); Towards 2016; Taskforce on Active Citizenship). The role of the state is a distinguishing characteristic of neo-liberal policy; in describing the difference between classic liberalism and the neo-liberalism of today Hill (2003) states that:

> *Neo-liberalism* demands a strong state to promote its interests…The strong Interventionist State is needed by capital particularly in the field of education and training--in the field of producing an ideologically compliant but technically skilled workforce. The social production of labour-power is crucial for capitalism. It needs to extract as much surplus value as it can from the labour power of workers, as they transform labour capacity into labour in commodity-producing labour processes.

Writing in a Scottish context, Martin (1999) has warned that in reconstructing the welfare state approach to collective well being, the state is playing an active role in deconstructing the idea of citizenship. Marinetto (2003) uses Foucault's idea of governmentality to explore the rising discourse of active citizenship in state policy. In doing so, Marinetto also examines the relationship between civil society and the political realm (p. 104). For Marinetto, Foucault's exploration of governmentality means that community involvement is an effective means of social regulation (p. 104). Foucault's idea of governmentality includes the range of ways the state now governs beyond central administration, and using this concept Rose (1996, p. 332) notes how 'government through community' defines a new sector for government where communities are seen as a focus for dealing with established social problems, a self-help policy. Notably, Marinetto (2003) raises the fact that 'the

adoption of active citizenship by recent governments is yet to encompass the actual redistribution of political power' (p. 118).

With the active citizenship agenda attracting critical analysis for its association with social control, the lifelong learning criticisms follows suit. Olssen (2006) argues that lifelong learning is a form of neo-liberal control. He uses Foucault's conception of governmentality as a tool for understanding learning and education and the link to politics and economics in developed Western Societies:

> Lifelong learning is a model of governing individuals in their relation to the collective. More specifically it constitutes a technology of control (p. 216).

Coffield (1999, p. 486) also contends that we must view lifelong learning as a political concept and claims that 'it converts deep seated economic problems into short lived educational projects'.

> In short, in the rest of the European Union, lifelong learning is not a self evident good but contested terrain between employers, unions and the state. Lifelong learning is being used to socialise workers to the escalating demands of employers, who use 'empowerment' to disguise an intensification of workloads via increased delegation; 'employability' to make the historic retreat from the policy of full employment and periodic unemployment between jobs more acceptable; and 'flexibility' to cover a variety of strategies to reduce costs which increase job insecurity. Such a critical approach exposes both 'the fiction that workers and management are on the same team', and the 'new structures of power and control' introduced by flexibility, such as 'the discontinuous reinvention of institutions (See Richard Sennett, 1998, p. 47) (Coffield, 1999, p. 488).

3.4 Centrality of the economy

Coffield, in the above quotation, has not only indicated the role of the state in promoting consensus to neo-liberalism but has highlighted the centrality of the economy to this neo-liberal agenda. In a neo-liberal context, the economy becomes a core driving force in public policy and active citizenship and lifelong learning are no exception to this norm (Fleming, 1998; 2004). As stated earlier, Irish policy must always be taken in the context of wider policy at a European and Global level and it is at this macro level that the link between the economy and concepts such as lifelong learning are overtly stated. At a

European level the Lisbon Agenda is an explicit commitment to this idea of lifelong learning:

> The Union must become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion (European Council, Lisbon, March 2000).

Following from this, the chapter on Human Capital Priority contained within the National Development Plan (2007-2013) states clearly that the commitment to lifelong learning as the guiding principle for education and training is developed in the context of the Lisbon Agenda. Minister for Lifelong Learning, Sean Haughey, in launching the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007 – 2013[8] linked the pursuit of this principle clearly in line with economic objectives:

> In the global knowledge-based economy, there is increased recognition that human talent and creativity are our key resource. Lifelong Learning Strategies will play a major role in facing future challenges. The Lifelong Learning Programme will be a cornerstone in enabling our Irish participants to engage in the pursuit of continued education and training, on a lifelong basis. Ireland's participation in the Programme cannot but enhance and contribute to our status as a knowledge-based economy (Haughey, Monday 30 Apr 2007).

The language of human capital is central to neo-liberal ideology. Contrary to their overtly contrasting political and economic viewpoints, neo-liberal economists agree with Karl Marx on one very important point regarding the importance of human labour in terms of a model of human capital as central to economic efficiency. For neo-liberals, political economy had forgotten the centrality of labour and therefore misrepresented the process of production (Olssen, 2006, p. 219). But unlike Marx, the centrality of labour, for neo-liberals, does not mean increased resources and power for the worker but the opposite in favour of the employer or corporation. In actual fact the percentage of GDP going to workers wages has decreased during the economic boom years of the celtic tiger as between 2001 and 2007 only 54.3%

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[8] The Lifelong Learning Programme comprises four sectoral programmes on school education (Comenius), higher education (Erasmus), vocational training (Leonardo da Vinci) and adult education (Grundtvig), and is completed by a transversal programme focusing on policy cooperation, languages, information and communication technology and dissemination and exploitation of results. The programme budget will be € 6.9 billion for the total period 2007-2013. as outlined http://www.hea.ie/index.cfm/page/news/category/134/section/details/id/309

of GDP was going to wages compared with 71.2% between 1980 and 1990[9]. In line with this newfound focus on the centrality of human capital for production and ultimately profit, the exploitation of workers has also reached a new level with migrant workers suffering most explicitly as in the case of the GAMA workers and the Irish Ferry case (Allen, 2007).

The Purpose of Ian Martin's article (1999) is to show how the idea of lifelong learning can be articulated to very different conceptions of citizenship and the implications that this can have for what it means to be active citizens in a socially inclusive society. Martin maintains that two dominant ideas of citizenship inform policy and these are fundamentally economistic in that they posit at the centre of lifelong learning the idea that human beings simply produce and consume. To this end, an active citizen is a worker and producer or a customer/ consumer.

> We have created a society that promotes active consumerism rather than active citizenship. A society that pays lip service to community without giving thought or debate to the structures or systems that prevent people from being actively involved in their community, is not promoting active citizenship (Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy, The Irish Times, 2007).

Lynch and Lyons (2008) have also drawn attention to the gendered dimension of the 'ideal active citizen' as one lacking responsibility for the care of others. Any inclusive notion of citizenship must recognise a non-gendered 'ethics of care' as a key dimension of citizenship (Martin, 2003). Doherty (2007) also states that we must listen to argument from feminist and disabled people regarding care and citizenship. Therefore, in order to look beyond consumer and producer definitions of citizenship, critics caution that it is important that 'we confront the politics of citizenship and the conditions in which we are expected to act as citizens' (Doherty, 2007). In essence a non gendered ethic of care must be central to citizenship (Lynch and Lyons, 2007; McGregor, 2004; Levitas 2001 and Martin, 2003). In addition to gender and disability issues, this means also considering class and economic issues.

> Education for citizenship seems to be preoccupied with rights and responsibilities rather than the social and material conditions in which people are expected to act as citizens (Martin, 2003, GET PAGE NO.).

In her paper 'The Second Chance Myth: Equality of Opportunity in Irish Adult Education Policies', Bernie Grummell manages to very skilfully draw

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[9] European Commission Statistical Annex of European Economy, Spring 2006

on a range of sources to highlight the growing neo-liberal control of adult education policy. Grummell quotes Fleming (2004) to show the direction of adult education policy in Ireland, whereby he claims that adult education 'has particular difficulty acting in the interests of the community or civil society because, some would say, it has been seduced, maybe corrupted, by the economy to act in its interests' (Grummell, 2007). In essence, the economy is central to lifelong learning and active citizenship, typical of neo-liberal policy and practice. This is typified in a speech made by Sile De Valera, Minister of State for Education and Science, at a recent AONTAS Community Education Conference. She explained how it is not sufficient for adult educators seeking funding to talk about the worthwhile nature instead she said what is needed is:

> Accountability for that money and an end result, not just a process. It is becoming increasingly obvious that, if education sectors and initiatives within them are to continue to attract and grow their funding, outcomes must be documented in terms of objectives achieved and the concrete gains for the participants (in Fleming, 2004).

3.5 Deregulation and privatisation

Lynch (2006) contends that with the rise of the New Right, neo-liberal agenda, there is an attempt to offload the cost of education, and indeed other public services such as housing, transport and care services on to the individuals. Active citizenship sits very comfortably with this neo-liberal agenda of deregulation, and like Doherty (2007), Martin (2003) links the rise of lifelong learning and citizenship education with the change from welfare to market based strategies. For Martin (2003) the deconstruction of welfare is actually reliant upon this reconstruction of citizenship. For Martin, citizenship is a political category:

> Like all contested concepts of our time, [citizenship] can be appropriated within very different political discourses and articulated to very different political positions (Hall and Held, 1989 in Martin, 1999).

On a global level, Lynch (2006) notes that the increasing pressure to move education from a public service to a tradable service is very much part of the ideology of the World Trade organisation General Agreement on trade and Services. The idea of lifelong learning very much suits this agenda. As part of the Lisbon Strategy Heads of States and Government asked for "not only a radical transformation of the European economy, but also a challenging programme for the modernisation of social welfare and education systems"

(European Council, Lisbon, March 2000). It is this modernisation of pivotal social services in the interest of a principle of lifelong learning, which itself has the economy as the primary concern, that is most striking about the unproblematic endorsement of such a principle (Herrmann, 2005). When responsibility rests with the individual there is clear rationale for government to cut spending, which is in line with neo-liberal policy. The OECD, exploring the costs of lifelong learning for the state, point to the need to privately finance learning, with a minimal role for co-financing from the state (OECD, 2005).

The role of government is seen as creating the conditions in which individuals are most likely to maximise their own learning. But the ultimate responsibility lies with them. This is consistent with the individualism of the competitive market economy, but also with the idea that the state should interfere as little as possible in the lives of individuals. The close integration of lifelong learning with the reform of the welfare state along these lines in Britain (DFEE 1998) suggests that lifelong learning itself is part of a wider government strategy to privatise the welfare system (Griffin, 1999).

3.6 Individualisation

As Lynch (2006, p. 3) states 'neo-liberalism has inherited the core values of liberalism in both its humanistic and economic forms'. However, compared to more traditional progressive liberal practice, which saw a role for state responses to social problems through welfare provision and public spending, neo-liberalism sees a greater role for the individual and the market in solving social problems. Allen notes that the neo-liberal viewpoint 'assigns business the historic role of solving society's problems' (2007, p. 25). The association of neo-liberalism with individual freedom has played a critical role in appealing to mass support and masking the more sinister ways in which this individual freedom impinges of collective rights and collective responsibility. In an Irish context, the idea of individual rights and responsibilities is at the centre of the active citizenship agenda. As Taoiseach, Bertie Aherne, in his speech at the first public consultation meeting of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship, defined citizenship as 'a powerful concept…it captures the concept of both rights and responsibilities' (The Irish Times, 14th September 2006). True citizenship for Martin (2003) and Miliband (1994) demands equality of condition not equality of opportunity. The individualised view of citizenship as presented without an analysis of conditions is akin to a neo-liberal agenda of individualisation. This individualised view of the citizen also extends to the concept of lifelong learning. The OECD (1996) view, formulated in 'Lifelong Learning for All' is based on the same economic grounds. In the OECD

Observer (February 2004) also places the individual at the centre of the aim of lifelong learning:

> To improve knowledge and competencies for all individuals who wish to participate in learning activities (p. 1).

The OECD endorsement of the centrality of the individual is based firmly on the individuals' economic gains from participation in lifelong learning:

> Investment in education and training in the pursuit of lifelong learning strategies serves to address these social and economic objectives simultaneously by providing long term benefits for the individual, the enterprise, the economy and society more generally. For the individual lifelong learning emphasises creativity, initiative and responsiveness – attributes which contribute to self fulfilment, higher earnings and employment, and to innovation and productivity (p. 2).

For other commentators tasked by the state to establish a firm basis for the interface between the individual and the economy, the issue is also unproblematic:

> Central to this goal is the model of an individual as a self-directed learner capable of assessing his own learning needs and taking whatever steps are required to satisfy those needs either independently or by plugging into the education system or other available sources (O'Donoghue & Maguire, Programme for the University Industry Interface[10]).

Beyond expected levels of endorsement, support for this individualised, economic driven agenda underpinning lifelong learning is also enthusiastically endorsed and pragmatically supported by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions:

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[10] The Programme for University Industry Interface (PUII): The Programme for University Industry Interface (PUII) is a unique collaboration between Irish Industry and Higher education. PUII is funded by the HEA under the Information Technology Investment Fund 2001-2006 (Measure 1.2) from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the National Training Fund.
The aims of the Programme are to:

- Identify the skills and technical competencies needed by individuals to guarantee the future economic development of Ireland
- Research and pilot new and innovative learning models that will deliver in-company education and training for next generation employability.

The global economy has largely made extinct the notion of a "job for life". The emphasis now is on employability and adaptability. People need access to lifelong learning to ensure they have the core skills needed to remain employable. In addition, they need access to lifelong learning to help them keep pace with the fast changing skills needs of a dynamic economy (Lifelong Learning - A Union Perspective[11]).

The dominant language of lifelong learning is about learning to be self sufficient and self interested citizens and in this essence it is highly individualised (Martin, 2003; Fleming, 1998). But the individualised focus of lifelong learning raises serious questions if it is not explicit as to who will bear the cost for this 'lifelong learning'. Griffin maintains that the policy discourse of lifelong learning usually projects it as an expansion of learning opportunities, but not always as the expansion of public provision:

> Is it, for example, possible to construe lifelong learning as a form of educational privatisation, as nation states adopt a neo-liberal and market-oriented stance towards the provision of all kinds of public services? If this is, indeed, the case, then the consequences for access and equal opportunities in education may be serious, since only governments can redistribute in these directions, and markets reproduce inequality (Griffin, 2000).

Preston (1999) claims that the liberal language hides more sinister changes in the economy such as the recasualisation of labour and the rise of flexibility. The focus on individuals 'excluded' or 'deprived' or 'disadvantaged' by this system takes a focus away from the excluding structures, those that 'deprive' and those that are advantaged. It follows that the aim is to become 'included' and 'advantaged' in an unequal system rather than a claim for equality for all. The solution then has not been to change the class based system but to equalise opportunities for individuals 'excluded' and 'disadvantaged' to participate. In this type of approach the individual is the blame for social problems (McDonald & Marston, 2005; Dean, 2003).

3.8 A critical encounter

Neo-liberalism was explored in this section as a system of ideas and practices that place the economy at the core of social, cultural and political policy. It is a system associated with an unprecedented disregard for the negative effects for social justice and sustainability caused by structures intent on maximising

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[11] http://www.ictu.ie/html/services/lifelearn.html

profit and production (Cullen, 2004, Harvey, 2005, Allen, 2007). It transpires from analysis that the general characteristics of neo-liberalism are at play when the active citizenship and lifelong learning agenda is explored in a more critical manner. In essence, at the core of discourse and policy underpinning these concepts is the centrality of the economy, the supportive role of the state of an economic agenda, individualisation, deregulation and privatisation. But this critical analysis of active citizenship and lifelong learning has been generated at an academic level. This could of course be put down to the fact that academics have access to time and resources to conduct this type of research, but this is fast becoming a freedom under threat given the growing demands on academics to sacrifice this public intellectual type activity to the demands of the neo-liberal driven restructuring of universities (Lynch, 2006).

Gramsci's idea of organic intellectuals is relevant here as the same level of critical engagement of concepts such as lifelong learning at an academic level must be matched from a community level. There is a pressing need for community activists to critically engage with these concepts and place them, as Fleming (2004) has done at an academic level, in the context of changing political and educational trends in advanced capitalist societies whilst challenging the dominant ideas and interpretations. Critically reflective action is not new to Irish working class communities and as the brief overview of the community sector illustrated as early as the 1980's in Ireland, when the economy was in a slump, there was a huge demand for adult education that doubled as community action (The Irish Times, 13th November, 2007). The same article maintains that adult education was a 'stomping ground for political action'. The article goes on to explain that community groups, especially women's groups, got together to learn about political lobbying and representation. But the article concludes that that demand 'has all but disappeared'.

All in all, when all forms of antidialogic action are in operation as they are in Ireland. Freire's idea of a culture of silence is also evidently established. When this culture of silence compliments and allows the rise of neo-liberal policies, which serve to increase poverty and inequality, then a real need emerges to give voice to this silence for the critical voices and moral standing of those still committed to challenging poverty and inequality. Freire always maintained that within the culture of silence there are forms of accumulated experience that can potentially take the form of critical knowledge through dialogical learning. This is usually within those most oppressed, with little to gain in maintaining the status quo. The next section of this paper will attempt to address just that; the potential for challenging the current neo-liberal agenda and the development of a movement for equality using critical dialogue through the medium of popular education.

Section 4 Shattering the silence

As this paper comes to a close, it is important to re-cap on the most important aspects of the discussion in considering a strategy for change. Firstly, this paper rests on the premise that people suffering oppression are best placed to challenge it but they need the space, resources and strategy to do so. This paper has also placed that struggle in the realm of ideology so the strategy must include a method capable of creating counter ideas. As stated in the introduction to this paper, neo-liberalism is the latest manifestation of capitalism and patriarchy. Because of this, it is inevitable that such a system continues to perpetuate the worst aspects of capitalism and patriarchy, which includes class and gender oppression. The discourse and practice of neo-liberalism has the ability to infiltrate the economic, cultural, social and political agenda. This paper illustrated this tendency by utilising the community sector as an example of a sector in which neo-liberal practice is taking hold and a 'culture of silence' has emerged. The case of lifelong learning and active citizenship were drawn on to make the case more clearly. This dominant ideology of neo-liberalism, seeping into all aspects of policy and practice, needs to be challenged with a counter set of ideas. Popular education has long been associated with critically engaging dominant ideas through dialogue and reflection.

Proposing that society is organised around our most basic human function of caring for one another is one such counter ideology as it is a proposition that implies removing the production and profit focus from the core of human activity and replacing it with values that support a world based on love, critical dialogue, sustainability and equality (Baker et al, 2004). Developing a narrative like this that cuts across diverse social groups in order to challenge neo-liberalism is the greatest task that faces any group concerned with creating a world in which humans can live securely according to social(ist) values and conditions that support full equality and the elimination of poverty.

Freire (1970) referred to this ideal situation as *humanisation* and he firmly believed that people could reach this level of existence through critical dialogue and solidarity, a process of *conscientization*. So a cross cutting narrative like that stated above, based on love, care and solidarity, is at once opposed to class, race, and gender oppression as it is based on the very premise, that to live in solidarity, all people are entitled to conditions that remove inequality and poverty from their lives. Solidarity can not exist if conflict is presence and even the most minimal form of inequality means that conflict is inevitable.   PRAXIS as a group is based on the very idea of solidarity and working together for a world beyond neo-liberalism and the ills

that it brings. Love, care and humility are central to the dialogical relationship that characterises popular education. To this end, PRAXIS is in the process of making this narrative of love, care and solidarity central to a community-based movement for equality and social justice.

This final section of the paper is concerned with a strategy for building this community-based movement for equality and social justice, informed by Freire's ideas, feminist pedagogy and a narrative based on love, care and solidarity. It will commence with a discussion of the community as a space for building a movement for equality and social justice, followed by an exploration of popular education as a tool for engaging dialogical action opposed to the oppressive cultural action. It concludes with a brief note on the development of a group such as PRAXIS as a popular education model for Ireland that could engage dialogue for radical social action.

4.1 The community - a space for action

There are many proponents of creating spaces for social change through radical adult education, social purpose community education or community development (Fleming, 1998; Lovett, 1975; Thompson, 1979; Mayo & Thompson, 1995; Martin et al., 1999; Ledwith, 2001; Crowther and Martin, 2005). This paper, as was made clear in section one, is specifically concerned with claiming a space in the community for popular education, including both community education and community development spaces. Because urban working class communities were traditionally a site of radical social action in Ireland, it may seem more accurate to speak of reclaiming the space. However, the idea of claiming rather than reclaiming has been used purposely because of the envisaged difficulty with reclaiming community education or community development fully from the more functional roles that they now encompass. The second chance component of community education is necessary in a society where the mainstream educational system is structurally unequal, and in much the same way the community service aspect of community development is crucial in a society where poorer people, and other oppressed social groups, are unequally served by mainstream health care, housing and other vital public services. Therefore, based on an analysis of the current climate in which community action operates, what is more realistic than reclaiming, is the possibility of claiming, a space alongside the more instrumental aspects of community education and community development.

4.1.1 A contested site – contradictions and limitations

The community is, of course, a contested site for radical social change (Mayo, 1994; Broderick, 2002; Shaw, 2006; Craig, 2007). As section one illuminated, action at a community level is very much dictated by a state agenda influenced by neo-liberalism, which in turn compromises more radical elements of action. But even leaving aside the current neo-liberal policy and practice influencing work at a community level, arguments have always existed that dispute the community as an ideal site for radical social change in the first place. Justifying the choice of this space is the first step in articulating a community based movement for equality and social justice.

Williams (1976) states that the idea of community is part of two opposing traditions, the liberal tradition and the communitarian tradition, a duality of individual freedom and the common good. Mae Shaw (2004) argues that the notion of contradictions is a fundamental one in any discussion of community work. Shaw asserts that the contradictory roots of community development make it attractive to all but equally give it a 'functional ambiguity' which makes it difficult to pin down:

> While the socialist discourse of transformation and empowerment has tended to operate at a rhetorical level, it has generally concealed a much more conformist and conservative reality (2006, p. 3).

Craig (2007) warns that any discussion of the community as a space for social change needs to acknowledge the diversity of needs and interest within specified geographic area. Coupled with diverse needs are diverse agendas and this is why Craig maintains that not all community action is about radical social change. Craig and Mayo note that community development came to mean many different things in the 1990's with the World Bank recognising ways in which it would ensure third world development projects reached the poorest in the most efficient and cost effective ways (1995, p. 2). As highlighted through Freire's idea of oppressive community action, the tendency can arise to disconnect local problems with structural or global issues. In line with Gramsci's idea of civil society as a site of struggle, Craig (2007) highlights the fact that the community is not a neutral space and is about power and ideology and how these are negotiated. Shaw (2008) quotes Cain and Yuval Davis (1990, p. 7) in an attempt to illustrate the difficulty in defining what 'community' means by raising the question as to whether the 'community' actually refers to those excluded from feeling part of the community. Craig (2007) also highlights the fact that community can refer to communities of identity within particular areas and issue based communities.

4.1.2 Much more than a 'place' of diverse interests – overcoming contradictions

But distinguishing between space and place allows the concept of community to rise above these difficulties. For Shaw it is 'about defending the creative space in which people can assert, celebrate or contest their 'place' in the world' (2006, p. 11). This idea of using a geographic place as a space for political and social action is particularly important when the focus is challenging inequality and poverty. Because inequality has a class based component it goes without saying that the working class, particularly the low-income working class, must be an integral part of any movement for equality. Exclusion from key sites of influence to effect change is part of the inequality of power and resources experienced by the working class in Ireland. This is why a community based movement is the only practical means of incorporating the working class outside of more traditional, yet limited, workplace organisation. When the community is approached as a 'space' rather than simply a 'place', then the diversity of groups can be analysed for specific experiences and aspirations that are unique to a particular group or groups. For Jackson (1993) a community movement then is the joined up actions of these groups based on the commonality of their problems. Using the community as a space then means building a movement with a shared consciousness.

Traditionally, in urban communities, local authority or council estates have housed a large majority of working class people in Ireland but this demographic has changed significantly over the last decade with the housing crisis. Although there are still specific estates with higher incidences of poverty, there is also a need to look outside of council housing, within a particular community, to rented accommodation where a growing number of those traditionally reliant on council housing now find refuge. This does not remove the community focus of building a movement but instead widens that focus outside of local authority housing estates. A community space also allows others on low incomes or out of paid work an accessible space to dialogue and critically engage with the issues that present in their lives. Because low income communities have a distinct gender dimension with single households, mainly headed by women, experiencing higher levels of poverty, using the community as a space gives these women, otherwise alienated from empowering positions, a space to find solidarity and act collectively. This also means that minority ethnic groups in a community setting, again those on low incomes or out of work, can access a space to effect change, when other spaces are denied to them. Essentially, then, the community, despite debates over definitions, is a practical and tangible site for people, such as the working class encompassing gender and ethnic

diversity, to challenge the oppressive structures that affect them on a daily basis.

However, even in seeing the pragmatism of using the community as a space, it is important to be wary of the contradictions that do arise, as outlined above, and more important to be aware of the rise of oppressive cultural action within communities, which section one illustrated to be the current case for the community sector in Ireland. This is why popular education, as a tool, is essential to realising the full potential of a community based movement for equality and social justice rather than relying on some type of organic development. Without the pedagogy of popular education, which includes critical reflection, dialogue and conscientization, it is likely that the contradictions of trying to utilise the community, would become, as they have already, too powerful a force to overcome. In essence, popular education is a way of ensuring that oppressive cultural action or anti-dialogical action is avoided and at best challenged when it does arise.

4.2 PRAXIS – a resource for action

As stated above and outlined in detail in section one, popular education and critical feminist theory are ideal tools for challenging ideology. PRAXIS was established with the primary aim of reinvigorating popular education in Ireland. This has a two-fold effect of challenging the 'culture of silence' through critical engagement with neo-liberal discourse and practice, whilst offering community activists a source of solidarity. Given that most work undertaken between people for the collective good requires trust and solidarity, PRAXIS also offers community activists a circle of allies based on care for one another and care for the equality and social justice agenda that unites them. Freire maintained that to be authentic, revolution must be a continuous event (Freire, 1985, p. 89) and the presence of a space for continuous critical reflection is an important aspect of continuous revolution. So popular education is not just a tool, which people can use to link their lived experiences to structural and systematic forms of domination, but also stands as a pivotal force in making dialogue part of a continued revolution in which humans consistently create and change the structures and relations that exist in their lives. This means that people do not just use popular education to achieve a certain end aim. In this sense popular education becomes part of a movement, whilst acting as a movement in its own right.

Broderick maintains that the challenge for the community development sector is to 'articulate their difference' and to 'wrest themselves free from the smothering embrace of partnership' (2002, p. 107). For Broderick they need to 'treasure the flicker of dissent in a landscape of benign consensus' (2002, p.

108). Interestingly, in 1971, similar words were written by Saul Alinsky when outlining his strategy for organising in *Rules for Radicals*:

> There's another reason for working inside the system. Dostoevsky said that taking a new step is what people fear most. Any revolutionary change must be preceded by a passive, affirmative, non-challenging attitude toward change among the mass of our people. They must feel so frustrated, so defeated, so lost, so futureless in the prevailing system that they are willing to let go of the past and change the future. This acceptance is the reformation essential to any revolution (Alinsky, 1971).

Likewise, Freire maintained that within the culture of silence there are forms of accumulated experience that can potentially take the form of critical knowledge through dialogical learning. It seems timely then that PRAXIS should be initiated in the current climate of consensus and structural constraints to resistance. At a community level, PRAXIS is a space for radical and critical reflection and action in the face of continuing inequality and injustice. The final paragraphs of this section are devoted to an exploration of the key aspects of theory and practice that guide the work of PRAXIS in countering antidialogical action.

4.2.1. Dialogical action

Popular education is a tool for engaging and sustaining the type of action that Freire termed dialogical action, which is concerned with building a movement for equality and social justice. Drawing on the work of Freire and Gramsci supports the development of a theoretical framework for popular education as the basis for a community-based movement for equality and social justice (Mayo, 1999). This paper also draws on the work of feminist theorists (hooks, 1984; Lynch 1989; Lynch and O'Neill, 1994).

Demystification

The lack of space for critical reflection in community settings means that people do not have an opportunity to reflect on their positions and relate their lived experience to an understanding of how the world operates, and the structures and systems that they encounter as part of their existence in the world. This makes the process of hegemony, as Gramsci sees it, or the process of mystification, as Freire termed it, an effortless achievement for the dominant class in society. In the face of growing economic inequality, people see social mobility as their only opportunity to escape poverty or inequality. This social mobility model also feeds off a hegemonic ideology that presents

one class as subservient and 'less than' the dominant class (Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 2004). This inequality of respect and recognition is a driving force for social mobility, the irony being that the idea of equality of opportunity feeds off another inequality, equally problematic, but hidden amidst a hegemonic ideology that presents upward mobility as the ideal. The fact that this is made all the more impossible as economic inequality widens is a myth that can only be exposed through a process of conscientization. The culture of silence, or some would say the noise of the dominant culture, reinforces this idea of an inevitable fate. Critically engaging with concepts such as equality of opportunity and social mobility, and other such as lifelong learning and active citizenship as illustrated in section two, is only possible using praxis in a community setting, where dialogue will allow people to demystify their individual understandings in a collective way thereby creating solidarity. For Gramsci the use of popular education as a means of mobilising ordinary people to oppose dominant ideas is a 'war of position', which is a process of wide ranging social organisation and cultural influence where civil society is seen as a site of struggle.

Taking the idea of citizenship as espoused in the active citizenship discourse and demystifying this concept is a perfect example of identifying a reality hidden from the majority of social groups, no mater how diverse. According to the pedagogy of popular education, the initial step is to problem pose, and then decode the situation. The fact that human beings are interdependent and reliant on care, and also love, for significant portions of life is something that people can relate to on a day to day basis. This is a problem when posed with respect to neo-liberal ideology. Linking this to a neo-liberal agenda in which care is secondary to production and profit and spending on public services such as health, welfare and education, central to care in society, is one example of the way in which lived experience could be tied to a wider theoretical understanding. Action based on this understanding would mean a demand for increased spending on services central to our real lived experiences as human beings opposed to demands for low taxation. Individualised gains, which make sense when human existence is taken outside of the realm of interdependence, begin to make less sense when praxis is utilised to link our actual lived experiences, which require collective gains.

Unity in diversity

Divided people make oppression easier for the oppressor to impose and divided ideas and understandings of oppression make it more difficult for the oppressed to resist oppression. Gramsci's idea of a historical bloc whereby an alliance of social groups and social movements act collectively for change is an essential part of a movement for equality and social justice in Ireland. It is

also a central feature of dialogical action or community action based on the characteristics of popular education. As stated at the outset to this paper, finding a narrative that unites diverse social groups is possible using the pedagogy of popular education. Freire believed, informed by liberation theology, in the process of humanisation whereby people reach the highest state of being human and thereby live by social values opposed to the rules of the jungle. This idea is closely related to work of feminist theorists that link human existence to our interdependency and reliance on love, care and solidarity, opposed to competition, resource accumulation and inevitably conflict. Uniting diverse groups and linking local and global problems is a defining aspect of popular education.

Creating a movement of shared consciousness is very much about linking individual experience to collective experiences and very much about making the private, political, by linking lived experience to theory. Critical feminist theory places significant focus on the link between lived experience and oppressive structures (hooks, 1994). Common experiences of inequality and oppression are key components of building trust and solidarity between people. But the centrality of care, as stated above, to every human relationship is also very much a unifying concept for any movement for radical social change (Baker et al., 2004). In much the same way, in making sense of her work and the work of other radical educators, Thompson (1993) maintained that finding a space for challenging oppression was about the links between the social and material conditions of oppression and the possibility of education as a tool in the pursuit of personal and collective liberation. Connolly (1996) maintains that the strength of community education as a mobilising tool for collective action is premised on the personal empowerment that it generates. This is because the socio-psychological aspects of lived experiences are explored as part of an educational approach that allows people to create knowledge and what is useful knowledge from their own lived experiences. Purely structural understandings of oppression have ignored this aspect of normative living. Popular education, combined with critical feminist theory, is a way of allowing this neglected aspect of lived experience to become a unifying element in a movement for equality and social justice.

Cultural synthesis

For Freire, cultural synthesis is the opposite of cultural invasion. The idea of synthesis is that people are supported by educators using popular education pedagogy to engage praxis, conscientization and eventually humanisation. Like Gramsci, Freire believed ordinary people to be every bit as capable of theorising about society and oppression as 'intellectuals'. Cultural synthesis is

the means by which educators work *with* people through dialogue to realise change. In this way, educators and students explore the contradictory ways in which their lived experiences counter the policy and practice of neo-liberalism.

> Cultural synthesis (precisely because it is a synthesis) does not mean that the objective of revolutionary action should be limited by the aspirations expressed in the world view of the people. If this were to happen (in the guise of respect for that view), the revolutionary leaders would be passively bound to that vision. Neither invasion by the leaders of the people's world view nor mere adaption by the leaders to the (often naïve) aspirations of the people is acceptable (Freire, 1970, p. 163).

Mayo (1999) asserts that the one thing that comes clear from a reading of Gramsci and Freire and their concept of revolutionary change through education is the role and commitment demanded of educators and organisers. The political nature of education situates educators as agents of the state or as agents of transformative change (Ledwith, 2001, p. 171). The educational relationship is underpinned by the guiding principles of love, humility, care and respect. This belief and focus on the emotional aspect of the educational process further promotes the idea that love, care and solidarity are fundamental guiding factors in the development of a movement like PRAXIS to effect radical social change for equality and social justice.

4.2.2 Going forward

For PRAXIS to realise the potential of popular education to effect the type of cultural action outlined above, PRAXIS needs to grow slowly but steadily. This means starting with a group of committed community activists and supportive academics, a core group, who wish to use a space to critically reflect on the current climate in which they are operating. The space offered by PRAXIS would be one underpinned by care and solidarity for this encounter. This way people can share experience, knowledge, skills whilst working together to achieve equality and social justice by progressing popular education in Ireland. The core group will progress the short-term aims of PRAXIS. At the early stages this will require a level of time and energy commitment. However, as time progresses it is envisaged that this group can promote popular education as a tool for other community activists and it is at this stage of development that resources will become a key factor. The overall objective, and last stage of development, requiring even greater resources, is to create a network of committed community activists interested in reinvigorating popular education in their communities. Using the

community as a space, such a network, whereby ordinary people are reclaiming the aims and tools of education would constitute a new form of education for social change in Ireland. This could quite accurately be termed a communiversity, a distinct popular education model for Ireland.

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