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Resisting the Costs of ‘Development’: Local Environmental Activism in Ireland

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ABSTRACT *Irish environmentalism has frequently been described as characterised by ‘localism’ and compared with similar patterns in Southern Europe. Used thus, localism carries a negative connotation, suggesting that such activism does not reflect pure or genuine environmental commitment. Irish environmental activism is indeed predominantly local but these ‘defences of place’ may be far more socially and politically significant than is generally recognised. The concept of place constructed and advanced by local activists combines concerns about perceived threats and risks arising from specific projects with claims, both implicit and sometimes explicit, regarding human well-being and the quality of the natural environment. Thus, ‘place’ can act as a holistic concept encompassing notions of the good life. In this way, local-level activism can be linked to emerging political conflicts over the direction and character of modern society and globalisation.*

Attempting to examine a national environmental movement raises difficult preliminary questions of sense and reference. What do we mean by environmentalism in contemporary Ireland, given that it encompasses a broad, multifaceted set of beliefs, claims and actions that manifest themselves in the diverse domains of health, food, religion, philosophy, agriculture, art and, of course, politics? What are its boundaries so that we can identify who is in it and who is out? Is there really, as a recent study suggests (Leonard, 2006), a simple progression and continuity from one protest mobilisation to another so that we can speak of a clearly demarcated environmental social movement? In particular, how are we to categorise local mobilisations that raise, either centrally or marginally, environmental claims? Are they part of an integrated environmental movement?

In the Irish case these are important questions because of the extent to which environmental activism is, at least in its political and protest manifestations,

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predominantly a local phenomenon. Protest event data from 1988 to 2002 (Garavan, 2004) show that protest is far more likely to be employed by local actors in prosecuting local disputes. During this period, reported environmental protest mobilisation occurred exclusively at a local level in two-thirds of cases. Three-quarters of all reported grievances were sub-national in scope.¹

That Irish environmentalism is so profoundly local in its protest mode has given rise to the implication that it is defective in some way as a social movement by comparison to the northern European norm (Baker, 1990; Yearley, 1995; Tovey & Share, 2001). Localism seems to imply a narrow, 'NIMBY'-style focus on immediate issues and grievances with a concomitant failure to address wider social and political matters. Given that social movements are meant to be about structural transformation, this raises the possibility that actors with a local horizon are not the real thing. Thus Burstein *et al.* (1995) identify the challenging, outsider dimension of social movements (cf. Tilly, 1984) as their most characteristic aspect.

Virtually everyone writing about social movements agrees that they have two defining characteristics: they demand social and political change, and they are outside political institutions... Thus, we define social movements as organized, collective efforts to achieve social change that use noninstitutionalised tactics at least part of the time. (Burstein *et al.*, 1995: 277–8)

But how true is this characterisation of social movements? Many empirical studies (Landmann, 1999; Rootes, 2003) have shown that collective actors generally recognised as representative of, or as emanating from, the environmental movement are, in fact, less oriented around protest and conflict than might have been expected, and more inclined towards political exchange. Yet, drawing on a theoretical tradition from Weber and Michels, these features have often been interpreted as evidence of institutionalisation (van der Heijden, 1997) and are generally cited as a sign of decline in which movements depart from their original purity as an oppositional force to become co-opted into the conventional political process.

Much of this expectation of how social movements behave arises from their historical emergence in mass protest movements such as the labour and agrarian mobilisations of the 19th century and the anti-nuclear, anti-war and civil rights mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, the environmental movement too is frequently perceived as having arisen from the protests of these decades. The empirical validity of this claim is uncertain; contemporary environmentalism may originate as much in popular scientific writings such as those of Rachel Carson, Jane Goodall, James Lovelock and the various 'countercultural' projects of these decades. Nevertheless, the narrative account of an origin in protest has set a standard against which the contemporary movement is measured. It therefore follows that, by comparison with the foundation myth of disruption and rule-breaking, the contemporary movement

may appear sedate and conventional and, at least in part, pacified (Blühdorn, 2000).

The assertion that a social movement, by definition, does not orientate itself around political exchanges with the state has been described as a 'fetishisation of autonomy' (Hellman, 1992, cited in Gledhill, 2000: 189). It seems much more reasonable, and much more consistent with the evidence, to postulate not so much an 'institutionalisation' of an ontologically complex and variegated 'movement' but rather a continual evolution in forms of activism in response to new knowledge, new opportunities (personal, political and technical), and new shifts in the configuration of political power. It is necessary to recognise that activism, environmental activism perhaps especially, occurs within a variety of social locations and contexts and that each of these contexts presents its own logic and constraints.

The organisations that carry the environmental claim into social and political spaces are perhaps better understood as providers of opportunities for particular forms of activism within the public sphere. Grounding an understanding of the movement within personal domains and 'submerged networks' (Melucci, 1988) allows one to understand the inherent heterogeneity of Irish environmental activism which, since the late 1990s, has become increasingly characterised by flexible *ad hoc* networks of activists who cooperate and act in ways that increasingly criss-cross and transcend formal organisations. Technological changes, such as the Internet, email and discussion lists, have become crucial catalysts for these new types of mobilisation. It follows that the Irish environmental movement is a highly variegated social phenomenon in which particular organisations and actions are but the most visible expression.

If this characterisation is correct then local-level activism can be seen as simply another dimension of the complex and variegated modes of environmental activism. Here we will make two arguments.

First, a preponderance of protest occurring at a local level is not surprising given the specific constraints and opportunities of the Irish political system; it is not necessarily a sign of a defective or deficient social movement. National-level groups are more likely to direct their activities toward achieving policy objectives through a repertoire of lobbying and awareness-raising. It is equally likely that the concentration of a specific grievance in space and time makes that issue more visible and therefore more easily translatable into a problematic capable of mobilising collective action. It is surely to be expected that those most directly affected by an issue are those most likely to protest and hence we should expect to see a preponderance of protest actions occurring among local-level collective actors.

Second, local-level protest is not always or merely a 'NIMBY' phenomenon or something limited and partial. Instead, this paper will argue that local-level protest often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, raises fundamental claims regarding the nature of modern society. Frequently buried in disputes ostensibly about specific grievances are claims regarding the good life, the nature of modernity and the costs of maintaining the industrial system. This

possibility makes local protest far more socially and politically potent and challenging than might otherwise appear to be the case.

In advancing this argument, we will first undertake a brief overview of Irish environmentalism, then outline some key protest event findings, and finally reflect on some features of the protracted conflict between Shell Oil and local residents in North-West Ireland regarding the location of a gas refinery and pipelines.

The Irish Environmental Movement: History and Contextual Constraints

It has been suggested that the Irish environmental movement has been shaped by three outstanding historical features (Yearley, 1995: 660). First, it emerged in response to specific threats such as fears of industrial pollution arising from the pharmaceutical and mining industries. Second, the main targets of its activities were foreign firms. Third, it was initially composed of largely local, usually community-based organisations. Thus, localism is proposed as a defining feature of environmentalism in Ireland.

This characterisation of the Irish movement as largely reactive and divided between the national and local (cf. Tovey & Share, 2001: 514–20) draws heavily on an earlier study of the movement (Baker, 1990). Baker places the origin of the Irish environmental movement largely within the same time-frame as that of most other western European movements and attributes it largely to the same type of issue – nuclear power. The proposal to construct a nuclear power plant in the 1970s mobilised an extraordinarily diverse range of protest groups, many of them politically radical.

A number of the activists mobilised in the apparently successful campaign against nuclear power (no nuclear plant was constructed in Ireland) went on to involvement in a series of campaigns in the 1980s against the chemical industry. These campaigns were particularly concentrated in county Cork, especially around Cork harbour which the Industrial Development Agency (IDA) had designated as a growth zone for the international pharmaceutical industry. The 1980s were also characterised by a series of anti-mining disputes. What these diverse conflicts seemed to have in common was their reactive nature and their local domain of contention. Therefore, they appear to be as much protests over community rights as environmental protests *per se*. Indeed, it has been observed that many of these protest actors rarely invoked a discourse of the environment at all, and if they did, it was only as subservient to the dominant paradigmatic protest discourse offered by nationalism or republicanism.

...in 1981 many of the local groups opposed to [the] toxic industry united under the umbrella of the Alliance for Safety and Health. The Alliance, like many of the more radical anti-nuclear groups previously in existence, framed their analysis in terms of nationalist ideology. They argued that the presence of such a high degree of penetration of foreign

direct investment into the Irish economy was a result of its colonial legacy. Furthermore, they argued that the solution to Ireland's toxic and nuclear problems lay not in regulation and monitoring but in the resolution of the national question, that is, the unification of Ireland and the re-appropriation of its natural resources by the Irish people. (Baker, 1990: 63)

Thus, right from the beginning, Irish environmental activists and their organisations struggled, unsuccessfully, to open up a new cleavage in the Irish political system. The environmental problematic, in its protest and political articulation, was either indelibly shaped, or drowned out, by the dominant political frame of nationalism. This, combined with the largely local domain of environmental action, imposed a certain constraint on environmental groups whereby many new activists could only be mobilised by the use of a traditional discourse of community rights over 'our' land and resources, which frequently invoked values of family and community (Tovey, 1992a: 285). This had the effect of placing 'environmental' protest in a continuum of anti-state protest activism stretching back into the 19th century.

The local and reactive character of 1970s and 1980s environmentalism resulted in considerable organisational turnover. It is in contrast to this historical background of multiple local group formations and disbandments that Baker suggested the occurrence of a qualitative change in the Irish movement from the mid to late 1980s with the arrival of 'European-style Green politics'. The groups conveying this new style were qualitatively different because 'they address a wider range of issues than typically found among the other groups we have examined'; they 'address issues across a broad spectrum of ecologism' (Baker, 1990: 71).

In 1990, Baker could identify only three national-level groups that were carriers of this new politics: Earthwatch, the Green Party and Greenpeace. She excluded the traditional conservation groups active at the time, such as An Taisce or the Irish Society for the Protection of Birds, on the grounds 'that they do not present a political analysis of ecological problems or of conservation issues' (Baker, 1990: 79, note 15).

However, this account of the origin of Irish environmentalism appears to over-emphasise its political and protest manifestations. The genesis of the Irish movement is likely to have been far more complex and multidimensional than an origin in reactive protest. Other points of emergence must include the conservation and heritage movements, various countercultural currents, religious groupings, especially those centred on 'Celtic spirituality', and the impact of new ideas and knowledge emanating from scientists and intellectuals from the 1960s onward.

The 1990s have been characterised by a significant increase in the number of new national-level groups, with a corresponding growth in the diversity of claims and forms of activism. Yet the emergence of new national groups has

not heralded an increase in protest action. Protest remains largely locally based. Why is this and what does this tell us about the Irish movement?

It is clear that environmental movements are profoundly shaped by their national settings (Rootes, 2004). A number of contextual constraints can be usefully identified to account for the nature of the movement in Ireland by comparison with many of its western European counterparts.

- Demographic constraints. There is a relatively small population from which to draw activists and supporters. This imposes a certain limit on the resource mobilisation capacity of the organisations.
- Environmental constraints. By comparison with many other western states, late industrialisation produced a low level of visible environmental degradation until the 1980s. This has resulted in a delayed awareness of an environmental 'problem' and a correspondingly small constituency for environmental claims.
- Perceptual constraints. The invisibility and technical nature of much environmental degradation has made the mobilisation of broad-based, non-issue-specific environmental groups difficult.
- Political constraints. The historically dominant political cleavage of nationalism and republicanism has resulted in a relatively weak left/labour movement. This has limited the discursive space available for radical political positions and reduced the number of potential allies for the emerging environmental problematic.
- Agricultural constraints. The economic dominance of agriculture has resulted in a conceptualisation of 'nature' as a resource to be utilised for economic benefit. This view combines with a widely held attachment to private ownership and control of land and a consequent antipathy to external regulation.
- Economic constraints. The long Irish experience of relative poverty and emigration has resulted in widespread support for policies of economic growth and industrial development.

The political weakness of the Irish environmental movement is demonstrated in its exclusion from the neo-corporatist National Agreements that the Irish state has negotiated with labour and employer representatives since the late 1980s. In the absence of a strong left, or green, political party, the political opportunities for the movement have been extremely curtailed. The consequence is that Irish environmental organisations have been obliged to operate within a very inauspicious political setting.

Applying the three aspects of institutionalisation suggested by van der Heijden (1997) – organisational growth, internal institutionalisation and external institutionalisation – the Irish movement appears institutionalised. However, this may be somewhat misleading because it may rest on a misunderstanding of the role of the nationally organised groups as pragmatic

vehicles for public action and an exaggeration of their influence on the movement as a whole.

Instead, it appears that the extraordinarily low level of material resources mobilised by Irish groups, because it forces them to rely on volunteer activists, has left the organised Irish movement more exposed than other European movements to influences from underlying activist networks and local campaigners. The weakness of the organisations in material and political terms may also leave them less dominant in the configuration of the overall movement's expressions of activism. Consequently, from the perspective of the wider movement milieu, the national-level environmental organisations must be seen as vehicles for activism within the formal public sphere and thereby bearers of an instrumental purpose rather than a representative function. If this is so, then this distinction may also point to possible sources of tension between local activists whose horizon might be limited to the grievance at issue, and national-level actors whose concerns may be far broader. The difference may ultimately rest on the differing contexts within which each operates. While the two levels are certainly distinct, there is a high level of cooperative interaction between them. However, co-operation does not extend to merger. Local groups in Ireland are not inclined to form themselves into branches of national-level organisations. The precise reasons for this are not entirely clear. It may be in order to preserve their independence and decision-making capacity, or because they wish to avoid overt association with 'environmentalism' due to its perceived limited focus or poor image in certain local settings, or it may be because of a reticence to forge any link with formal political groups possessing 'wider agendas'.

Our argument is that environmental activism in Ireland is politically manifesting itself both more deeply and more radically at a local level than might be apparent from a concentration on national-level organisations. To examine this hypothesis, we first outline some relevant protest event data and, second, one such local-level campaign.

Protest Event Data

It seems that most Irish environmental protest is local, reactive and moderate (Garavan, 2004).² By comparison, protest-oriented networking by national Irish environmental groups is extraordinarily low. Protest event data indicate that in each year of the 15-year period 1988–2002, with the sole exception of 1995, reported local mobilisations outnumbered national. The patterns of sub-national- and national-level mobilisations closely mirror each other. This suggests that the preponderance of local mobilisations was a stable feature of Irish environmental protest. This in turn indicates that Irish environmental protest activism is essentially a local-level phenomenon. The figures clearly show that the majority of protest activism occurs outside the formally organised, national environmental organisations.

In addition, the single most identifiable social category engaged in protest was 'residents'. The reported mobilisation of residents was never less than 25%

of total protests in any one year. On average over the 15 years, residents accounted for 42% of reported protests, with an increase (to 46%) in the five years from 1998.

By contrast, the protest event data revealed that the volume of reported joint protest actions engaged in by national-level Irish environmental groups is very low. Of the 634 protest events coded for 1988–2002, there were only 27 where it was reported that two or more national-level environmental groups acted together. With aggregate actions by national-level groups making up less than 32% of total reported protest events, the figures suggest that in only one protest out of every seven or eight in which they engaged did national groups act in alliance with one another. This finding tells us more about what the national-level movement is not than what it is. And what it is not is a movement primarily oriented around joint *protest actions*. In other words, engaging in joint protest is not what binds the movement together.

The data from a survey commissioned by the Irish environmental organisations themselves and conducted by Sadhbh O'Neill confirm this characterisation of a largely conventional and moderate movement.

... [I]n the main, environmental organisations work through existing legal and democratic channels to achieve their goals. They rarely resort to protests or demonstrations to highlight their concerns to the general public. (O'Neill, 2001: 17)

O'Neill's survey asked groups to identify their most important area of activity. Her results (Table 1) clearly indicate how low a priority is accorded to protest action.

These various findings throw into clear relief the marginal position occupied by protest activism among the organised environmental groups. Rather than protest, the Irish groups emphasise pedagogical and policy-oriented actions. Their concern appears to be with effecting transformation through example, argumentation and knowledge rather than through confrontation targeted on the state or private corporations. It is this logic, more than simply an evolutionary decline towards co-optation or pacification, that better explains why contemporary Irish national-level environmental organisations may act as they do.

What were local actors protesting about? The most striking feature of the protest event data was the predominance of claims centring on industrial pollution and urban ecology. Only in 1993 and 1994 did these claims fail to constitute the largest single category of reported protest. Furthermore, from 1997 reported industrial pollution and urban ecology claims rose sharply. This rise coincides with the general rise in overall protest levels reported from this period. This seems to indicate that the reported rise in Irish protest can be largely explained as a response to the growth in infrastructural and development projects from the mid 1990s onwards.

This possibility is perhaps more clearly apparent if we investigate what specific issues were raised within the broad category of industrial pollution and

Table 1. Areas of activity of Irish environmental organisations

Areas of activity	No. of groups
Education & public awareness-raising	23
Lobbying & participation in policy formulation	20
Publications, information collection & dissemination	20
Networking with other NGOs & joint activities	18
Environmental projects	16
Environmental advice/EIA/planning	13
Environmental inventories, fieldwork & research	12
Practical conservation	11
Professional services	3
Property acquisition & management	3
Protest actions	1

Source: Core Funding Group Survey (2001: 16).

urban ecology. A number of key grievance types can be examined: road construction; housing and other buildings; communications systems (mobile phone masts); waste infrastructure; and pollution on lakes, rivers and seas. Taken together, these constitute virtually all the claims within this category. It seems reasonable to conclude that most of the reported industrial pollution/urban ecology grievances arose in response to infrastructural and ‘developmental’ projects, and that they occurred in reaction to perceived threats or risks.

Indeed, there were identifiable differences in the categories of reported claims raised between national-level and local-level actors. National-level actors were reported as much more likely to protest about a variety of grievances – particularly over more ‘pure’ environmental matters such as nature protection. Those centring on industrial pollution/urban ecology constituted a majority of reported claims raised by national actors in only two of the years since 1995 (1998 and 2002). By contrast, the reported claims of local-level actors were almost entirely concentrated on industrial pollution. Only in 1992 were these claims a minority of the claims raised by local actors.

However, while these data add to the impression of a ‘localisation’ of Irish environmental conflict, some interpretative caution is required. A grievance concentrated in space and time is more likely to give rise to conflict than more spatially and temporally diffused issues – as Jiménez (2003) found in his investigations of Spanish protest patterns. This is because: the grievance is likely to be more identifiable and tangible; it is on balance easier to mobilise among existing communal and local networks; the resolution of the grievance is likely to be somewhat clearer; and the interlocutor or target of the protest is correspondingly more likely to be readily identifiable.

In the absence of these factors, more global and less tangible issues may not lend themselves as easily to resolution by protest. Indeed, it can be reasonably anticipated that the majority of national-level environmental organisations are

orientated in their activities towards these larger, global issues rather than locally occurring grievances. Bigger issues require bigger solutions involving mixtures of policy changes, legislative reforms and inter-governmental agreement. This type of resolution suggests a strategy of long-term lobbying rather than protest events. It may follow that a higher level of protest among local actors involved in local-level disputes is simply what one would expect to find.

It should also be noted that many 'global' problems manifest themselves locally. Therefore, even though the specific grievance may be locally incarnated, the issue raised may form part of a wider national, or even global-level, problem. This is apparent in issues such as waste management or water pollution. For this reason too the data on this point may not be pointing to a simple localisation of Irish environmental protest. Local protesters may be well aware that their grievance is a manifestation of a larger environmental problem but, without the inclination or resources to fight the larger battle, they confine themselves, not unreasonably, to the symptom on their doorstep.

In any event, it is clear from the data that protests by local actors – the majority of all reported environmental protests – occurred largely in response to the incidence of development projects. This in turn suggests the possibility of a dialectic between levels of development and levels of protest. The increase in development projects consequent upon the 'Celtic Tiger' period of national economic growth seems to have given rise to a reactive series of conflicts with local actors who were determined either to mitigate, or prevent entirely, perceived negative consequences for local areas arising from those projects. Thus, reported environmental claims seemed to be issue-dependant and therefore largely confined to the redress of particular matters rather than addressing wider environmental problematics.

However, this is not always the case. If the dispute is prolonged over time the possibility arises that far deeper issues emerge that render what may appear mere 'local' protest far more challenging to the contemporary social and political order than may otherwise seem to be the case. One such is the protest against a gas refinery in North Mayo.

Contesting a Natural Gas Refinery in North Mayo

The campaign of protest mounted by a group of residents in North Mayo in the west of Ireland against the siting of a natural gas processing refinery in their rural and ecologically sensitive area reveals the presence of potentially more significant meanings underlying local protest. The collective action undertaken by these local activists, as it emerged and was reflected on over time, was regarded by them as motivated by a desire to defend their 'place' from a mode of development imposed by outside actors. The concept of place constructed by the activists combined concerns about human well-being with that of the physical environment. While 'place' included conceptions of the 'environment', the latter was not always invoked in overt or usual terms. This feature points to

the complexity of the environmental problematic as it is shaped by its various settings of articulation.

As noted above, protest event data have shown that a significant proportion of Irish environmental protest is conducted by local actors apparently concerned to defend local place against external threats. This, indeed, may be one reason why nationalist or anti-colonial discourses figure so prominently in Irish environmental protests. If this is so, then the question arises as to how specifically does environmentalism, as a practice and a discourse, fit into discourses of place and community? The evidence of the North Mayo campaign suggests that environmentalism, as discursively invoked by local activists in protest settings, is integrally bound up with complementary discourses of family, community, health and physical locality to produce a hybrid discourse of dissent and opposition to dominant 'official' versions of progress and development. The different components of this hybrid become prioritised or publicly articulated according to opportunity and criteria of efficacy.

The dispute in North Mayo centred on the proposal by a consortium of oil and gas companies led by Shell, and including Statoil and Marathon, to construct a gas refinery and production pipelines nine kilometres inland on Ireland's northwest coast. The first application made by the consortium was in 2000. A significant number of the local community mobilised almost immediately to oppose it. Their campaign of opposition went through a number of distinct phases. The initial focus of the campaign was activists' attempt to stop the project by contesting the planning application to construct the refinery. This took four years to resolve until, after three separate planning applications and two appeal processes to An Bord Pleanála (the Irish Planning Appeals Board), the refinery finally got permission.

The campaign's attention then turned to the high-pressure pipeline proposed to service the refinery. This pipeline was to carry unprocessed gas within 70 metres of some residences in the small village of Rosspoint. A number of local landowners refused permission to the consortium to access their lands for the purpose of laying the pipeline. Previously, the Irish government, which fully supported the project, had granted compulsory acquisition powers to the companies over the lands that the pipeline was to cross. The refusal by the local landowners culminated in their breaching a High Court order directing them to permit access. Shell then sought and was granted a committal order against five local men, three of whom were landowners, which caused the men to be imprisoned indefinitely in June 2005. They subsequently spent 94 days in Cloverhill prison in Dublin.

The imprisonment of the men transformed the campaign. What had been largely perceived as a local issue now became a matter of national prominence. A concerted campaign to free the men developed, mobilising thousands of people in rallies throughout Ireland. Local residents picketed the refinery work-site, causing all activities there to cease. Eventually, under the intense pressure of the mounting campaign, Shell was forced to vacate its court order, and the men were released.

By autumn 2006, with local pickets continuing on a daily basis, Shell agreed to re-route the pipeline away from people's houses. However, the conflict took a serious turn in October 2006 when a large force of police escorted Shell workers back onto the refinery site to recommence construction work that had been suspended in July 2005. Local residents were forcibly removed from the entrance to the site. A contingent of police has been deployed each day since October 2006 in order to maintain access to the site and the conflict has become more intense and charged. A number of violent incidents have occurred between protesters and police, an occurrence highly unusual in the Irish setting.

What is of interest in this campaign is how a 'local' issue contained within it matters which raised significant cultural and political challenges to the status quo. This campaign, though perhaps novel in its intensity and duration, nevertheless reveals that ostensibly local protest may contain buried issues that expose the often pejorative inaccuracy of the 'NIMBY' categorisation.

In examining the community reaction to the natural gas proposal, three important points need to be recognised. First, there was no one, fixed community response; second, the community's public framing of the dispute continually shifted in the light of new knowledge and with the advent of new interlocutors; and, third, community opposition rested primarily on a visceral and intuitive sense of the project being somehow 'inappropriate' and dangerous.

In effect, the proposal forced the community to reflect on the nature of their cultural identity and the value of place. In time, as the campaign progressed, general community opposition to the specific gas refinery proposal consolidated.

The opposition has remained consistent all the time. You had a small number of people with a vested interest who thought they would make immediate money on it. A small number of them obviously favoured the project from the start. You had a small number of people like us who would be directly affected by the project and who had read up about it, knew what the dangers were and who were opposed to it. And then you had the mass of the people of Erris³ who were very worried about it, who didn't like the idea but who wouldn't make a fuss about opposing it. The vast majority were concerned. (O'Seighin [one of the imprisoned men] in Garavan, 2006: 74)

The key to the mobilisation of these actors was the perception that their locality was under threat from the company proposal. Hence, this group drew most of its activists from the Ballanaboy area, where the refinery was to be built, and from Rosspoint, where most of the pipeline was to be laid. The group was supported by other residents from the immediate area. Other important actors among this group were the local fishermen who feared the threat to their livelihoods arising from possible pollution from the proposed discharge pipe from the refinery. A number of the leading opponents to the refinery were

schoolteachers – both primary and post-primary. Some of these held traditional Republican political positions. Their role as teachers provided them with a measure of intellectual confidence and local authority. Republicanism seemed to instil a critical perspective and confidence in informing their assessments of the state's role in supporting a foreign multinational corporation.⁴

An assortment of distinct discourses can be identified among opponents of the refinery. Significantly, the 'environment' was merely one discourse used, and was by no means the most important or regularly employed. From the beginning of the conflict in autumn 2000, health was the most significant concern voiced. There were also concerns regarding the potential threats the refinery posed to the indigenous economic activities of fishing, farming and tourism. Discourses invoking the physical character of the area were in frequent use. As used by residents, the concept of beauty referred not just to aesthetic qualities of the area, but also seemed to encapsulate a way of life that was regarded as valuable and unique. There was a cluster of concerns that could be categorised within a discourse of marginalisation. This discourse came particularly to the fore as local perceptions of the refinery as a pollutant with little real benefit, combined with the failure of the consortium and the state to engage directly with them, caused the project to be framed as emblematic of the age-old marginalisation of the local area by outside forces.

Environmental discourses were employed but usually as an explanatory background to the risk to health. Abstract concepts of 'the environment' did not appear to carry any mobilising potential among the community. The more visceral reactions centred on evocations of the character of the local place and community.

I was born and reared on this farm. It's memories that are making us do what we are doing. My father came here in 1947. The place then was pure bog with a fallen-down house. The memories we have are of the way we were brought up. Hard times. They're the memories you have and the memories you have to keep.

To see someone coming in now and trying to destroy it, as Shell is doing, it kills you. Our footsteps are around the place since we were able to walk. (Corduff [one of the imprisoned men] in Garavan, 2006: 15)

My ancestors have lived here in Rossport for many generations, at least six generations, in the same spot along the shore on the northern side of Sruth Fada Conn, that is the estuary of the Glenamoy River that flows into Broadhaven Bay. The home place down by the shore is called Rinn na Rón, where the seals used to congregate and sometimes come ashore. That's where I was born and reared. So we've been here a long time and as you'd expect we have a strong attachment to the land and a deep sense of belonging to the place has been built up over many generations. (V. McGrath [one of the imprisoned men] in Garavan, 2006: 157)

If you think back on all we had when we were young. All the freedom we had. I could play anywhere within this whole area on either side of the estuary. That included the Ballanaboy site. We used play in there half the time. And I thought it was grand. It was like fairyland. It will never be again if this project got in. Think of this area gone forever. (M. McGrath [wife of one of the imprisoned men] in Garavan, 2006: 171)

Among those in the community who opposed the refinery and pipeline, or who had concerns about it, an early decision was made not to establish any formal organisation or structure. Instead, opponents agreed that individuals, or small groups, would pursue their opposition in their own way and that there would be occasional meetings only to compare notes and exchange information. This was a conscious decision to remain as a 'loose network' (fieldnotes, Ceathrú Taidgh, March 2001), a decision which was not fundamentally changed through the course of the conflict. There were a number of reasons for this important decision. First and most importantly, it was in keeping with a general desire to avoid creating visible division within the wider community. Second, choosing not to create an organisation allowed those opposing the project to avoid questions of leadership and organisational roles. This would have been both potentially divisive and time consuming. Finally, this flexibility of function allowed activists to vary their levels of involvement. Thus, *participation* became the standard of belonging, not *membership*, and at a level to be set by the individual him- or herself.

What does this campaign tell us about the nature of contemporary Irish environmental activism? Indeed, where can environmentalism be located in the gas refinery conflict?

Community activists in North Mayo suggested that their action was a reflex response to a perceived threat from an outside agent.

It is as if we were attacked by a virus. We reacted like a body to defend ourselves and destroy the threat. It was instinctive, natural. (fieldnotes, local resident, Ballina, December 2002)

This explanation of their protest appears to tally with the macro-perspective on protest offered by the protest event data, which indicated that much Irish environmental protest appears to arise in response to an immediately apprehensible threat or to the perception of a threat. The temporal-spatial concentration of threats suggests how it is that 'defence of place' appears to figure so significantly as a mobilisation factor in Irish environmental conflicts and hence why nationalist and anti-colonial discourses may feature so prominently. But place must not just be understood as merely designating physical, geographical and biological characteristics. Drawing on the findings of the North Mayo campaign,⁵ the meaning of place also appears to incorporate conceptions of culture, local forms of life and human physical and psychological health. In short, place seems to act as shorthand for notions

of holistic human well-being, in which health and environment become part of a wider concern with 'all that surrounds'. That conceptions of place in local environmental protest may include features of the physical and the cultural indicates that references to place, if narrowly or literally interpreted by researchers or interlocutors of such protest actions (as in crude designations of such protests as nimbyism), may obscure the presence of much deeper concerns with the character and quality of the social and 'natural' worlds.

Indeed, local activists themselves consciously repudiated 'NIMBY' characterisations of their campaign.

There was a core group of us who were opposed from the beginning on very good grounds because we had done the research and we were not being fooled. We weren't the usual suspects. We hadn't campaigned against any project in the past. They couldn't label us in that way. We weren't NIMBYs either. We knew the project as planned was wrong and dangerous and we didn't want it anywhere else either. Our opponents tried to make out that we were against development. I don't know of anyone around here, or any other place in Ireland for that matter, who is against development. It depends on what you mean by 'development'. (V. McGrath [one of the men imprisoned] in Garavan, 2006: 176)

Of course, in acknowledging the essentially reactive character of the gas refinery protest, as with much Irish environmental protest generally, one must exercise, in seeking to interpret such protest, due caution in moving from the particular to the universal. While it may not quite be safe to suggest that these conflicts call into question 'development' in a general sense – most people still presumably favouring 'growth' and material accumulation – nonetheless, *particular* conflicts do call into question *particular* instances of development. The implications of these localised conflicts are that, *in certain cases*, communities are unwilling to pay the environmental and social costs associated with furthering economic growth and 'progress'.

The wider implications of these localised refusals are apparent if one examines the consequences of protest actions for the viability of particular infrastructural/development projects. These consequences may take two forms. First, what might initially be a localised protest may give rise to a national protest, or, second, in what may have the same effect, a local protest regarding a specific project may stimulate a series of such reactive local protests, thus rendering particular projects unrealisable in any location. For example, the specific proposal to construct a nuclear power station in Carnsore Point in the late 1970s gave rise to a national-level campaign against nuclear power. The level of protests against waste incinerators in Ireland at present illustrate the second possibility and indicate that there is no known community willing to accept their construction in their area.

The arrival of the gas refinery proposal obliged the community in North Mayo to enter into an unusually deep reflection on the nature and values of

their 'place' and community. It was in the light of this that many of them commenced a critical reflection on the refinery and became mobilised to resist it. While initially it appeared as if the company's and the state's presentation of the project as heralding 'development' may have been rhetorically effective, it is also clear that this ceased to have significant effect for a number of local residents once they began to investigate the claims being made.

That the problematisation of the gas project implied a rejection of a *version* of development and modernisation being forced upon the community was most clearly expressed in the community activists' argumentation before the An Bord Pleanála oral hearing.

Real cumulative change is evolutionary: 20 or 30 years is an Asahi-type aberration [a reference to a previous industry nearby which had caused much visual and other pollution]... My problem with [the company's CEO] and more so with the guardians of our democracy, elected or appointed or just doing a job, is a cultural one of incomprehension... When asked what would be the position of local workers who may have got employment before the proposed terminal ended its tour of duty, [a consultant] answered that by that time they would have enough skills to move on. The whole point of community is not moving on: community is rooted and so builds up strategies and implementations for survival; fish spawn that is free moving has a tiny survival rate. In the round, [he] has made our case – there is no evident interface where these two attitudes can merge... [I do not] see any chance of a narrowing of the cultural gap between this civilised community and the flotsam and jetsam that wallow in the wake of the ship of Marathon, Statoil and Enterprise Oil. (O'Seighin submission, An Bord Pleanála Oral Hearing, Ballina, February 2002)

This submission rhetorically contrasts two forms of life: the transient, exploitative one represented by the oil and gas consortium, versus the rooted, sustainable one forged by the local community. Clearly then, two versions of being-in-the-world, two versions of development, are placed side by side and judged in the light of each other. Even more clearly, not only is the specific proposal of the consortium rejected, but so too is the *principle* of the type of development that the proposal represents.

It is therefore possible to discern in this campaign a cognitive progression among the protest actors from an initial *reaction* to the terminal proposal, towards an *affirmation* of a particular set of values, as exemplified in the local community. It is this interesting dimension to the North Mayo activists – their slow excavation and affirmation of a view of the good life – that connects what might otherwise be categorised as a local, NIMBY-style protest to a wider environmental praxis. Environmental protest in Ireland largely arises when threats emerge to places and forms of life regarded as being of value. In this sense, threats can be regarded as, to employ Paulo Freire's rich phrase, a

'cultural invasion' (1972: 129) and are resisted accordingly. In doing so, environmentalists and local communities can be regarded as sharing the desire to uphold certain conceptions of the 'good life'.

It is in this sense that local protest actions can be understood as not only defensive and reactive. They are also necessarily assertions by protest actors of autonomy, participation, and democratic rights – in short, of being subjects who possess a legitimate view of their own and a possibly distinct version of what constitutes development and modernisation.

Local protest activism is therefore, even if only in part, a refusal to accept versions of 'reality' (reinterpreted as 'threats'), as well as an effort to intentionally transcend political and discursive limits in order to create new possibilities. The North Mayo campaign evidence, together with the evidence from the protest event data, indicates that environmental collective action does occur on quite a wide scale in Ireland, and that some of the costs, and versions, of development are, in practice, continually contested. Implied here is a dynamic and positive account of human agency.

Conclusion

We have argued here that a preponderance of local-level protest is, first, what one might expect to find in an environmental movement, but that, second, such protest may be far more significant in its political and cultural implications than it might otherwise appear. The contention is that what we are witnessing is not a simple institutionalisation of the movement but an evolution towards a greater complexity in the construction of the environmental problematic. Rather than the 'environment' having become a resolved and domesticated issue, it appears more likely that it will remain centre-stage in various local and 'cultural' battles, though perhaps it will do so increasingly under the guise of 'place' or 'development' conflicts (cf. Curtin & Varley, 1995; Goldman, 1998).

The consequence of this is that battles for control of place may not necessarily invoke discourses of the environment, or, even in the cases where they do, activists may not necessarily be committed to a broad environmental problematic. Indeed, the discourses of many anti-pollution protests in Ireland in the 1980s were of the family and community rather than of modern environmentalism (Tovey, 1992a, 1992b). The pluralism among Irish environmental activists, to such an extent that they may even resist being labelled as 'environmentalists', was also noted by Tovey in her study of organic farmers. She reports that a 'discourse of "environmental protection"' hardly appears at all in what participants in the organic movement say about their motivations for engaging in this form of farming (Tovey, 1997: 27). All of these findings substantiate the view that 'environmental' protesters are heterogeneous and that 'different environmental campaigns do not comprise a movement in any centrally co-ordinated sense' (Curtin & Varley, 1995: 394).

Contributing to this impression of discursive diversity is Tovey's (1992b) suggestion that environmentalism is employed in two different senses in

Ireland: a populist and an official sense. Official environmentalism, she suggests, is mainly led by academic 'experts' who usually work through state bodies and established environmental organisations. Populist environmentalism can be understood as reflecting local communities' experiences of development struggles.

...[P]opulist environmentalism...represents a relatively independent movement of dissent, by ordinary people working at the local level, from the dominant ideologies of modernisation, development and growth. Populist environmentalism reflects the activities of a different set of organisations, such as the community development movement in rural Ireland, and its activists may not see themselves as environmentalists (though they are increasingly likely to claim this label as it becomes more politically legitimate). (Tovey & Share, 2001: 461)

What appears to be particularly distinctive about local environmental protest in Ireland is that the lines of conflict are frequently drawn over control and defence of place. The categorisation of much of this protest as 'NIMBY' fails to recognise the significance of this growing social phenomenon of resisting the physical costs of maintaining the industrial system. However, similarly, categorising such protest actions as 'environmental' (in accordance with a semiotic convention) may obscure the wider pluralistic issues involved in protests over place. Particularly in Ireland, environmental discourses are blended with discourses of community, of nationalism and of health to produce a hybrid discursive construct. The balance of emphases within this hybrid differs from case to case, and is often the product of contextual features such as the structure of discursive opportunities open to protesters.⁶ Thus, environmentalism must take its place as one voice in the choir of resistance. Frequently, what harmonises these different voices, apart from their grounding in complementary visions of the 'good life', is the identification of a common adversary. The extent to which this is the case demonstrates how outside 'elites', perceived as threatening a place, can unintentionally forge reactive alliances and thereby create new social networks of resistance. If this can occur on a local and national scale, it is not unlikely that we are at present witnessing the beginnings of a global network of resistance corresponding to (and unintentionally created by) the contemporary global configuration of power.

Notes

1. In the seven EU states covered by the TEA project (Rootes, 2003), this degree of localism was exceeded only in Greece.
2. The protest event research was conducted as part of a broader investigation into the patterns of Irish environmental activism employing similar methodologies to the Transformation of Environmental Activism project coordinated by Christopher Rootes, University of Kent, Canterbury. The Irish research was carried out under the aegis of the Environmental Change Institute, NUI Galway (Human Impact Cluster).

3. Erris is the barony name of the local region.
4. As noted above, the presence of republican and nationalist views among Irish environmental protesters is one frequently reported in the literature on Irish environmentalism. See, for example, Allen and Jones (1990).
5. The author undertook close study of this campaign from its inception in 2000 to 2003. From then on the author has had a close involvement in the campaign including acting as a spokesperson since 2005.
6. The concept of discursive opportunity structure can be defined as the extent to which, in the course of conflict, actors are permitted by various institutional and political structures not only to produce discourses which allow them address what they regard as the causes of conflict but also the extent to which these discourses are recognised as legitimate by their interlocutors and, therefore, are permitted to have an effect on policies and decisions. Much of the extent of this opportunity structure depends on the openness or closedness of the institutional rules which govern the decision-making process (or the grievance resolution process), particularly the levels of genuine participation permitted to 'informal' interlocutors. Implied in the concept is the contention that discourse is shaped by various rhetorical considerations. In short, actors have their interlocutors in mind when speaking (cf. Edmondson, 2007).

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