

Looking at the counter culture

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The concept of counter culture

I am researching in particular a Dublin lifeworld, formed *inter alia* in London squats, Dublin crashpads, a college occupation and anti-nuclear and ecological organisations, which in turn forms a context for a variety of alternative "political" and "cultural" projects. The "local rationalities" of this lifeworld stress in particular *reflexivity*, which, I will argue, appears as a means of institutionalising and extending *autonomy*.

Local rationality: autonomy as self-development

Last year I made a fairly simple case for the appearance of a logic of autonomy in this counter culture as explicitly prioritised against the sorts of instrumental rationality (in terms of political organisation and economic interests) that the "social movement" literature tends to ascribe to these settings. Here I want to sharpen the contrast. Instrumental rationality, it could be said, takes in a sense the self and its goal for granted, and asks what is the most effective means of getting from A to B. Possessive individualism, even in its hedonistic forms, takes a similar approach. The *counter cultural* logic of autonomy, however, starts from a concept of self-development, within which the self is seen as open-ended; as something to be constructed or transformed. Thus participants make comments along the following lines:

"Mick is ambitious within himself, it's himself that he wants to develop, not a career or any of that kind of stuff."

Another participant speaks of

"People who do all kinds of odd and extremely innovative things, an awful lot of people whose top priority is sorting their head out, or whose top priority is something along the lines of enlightenment."

The main theme here is that of moving away from the instrumental approach of seeking the best available employment towards an explorative approach to one's own life. This explorative sense is underlined by the relatively weak articulation of the nature of the alternatives and how to get there: this is not simply choosing an alternative strategy to achieve pre-existing goals. Rather, goals are something to be revised along the way.

The similarity of this approach to the reflexive concept of the modernist "project of the self", and its *dissimilarity* from the romantic position normally imputed to these lifeworlds (which would imply a sense of a "true" self pre-existing social conventions, is clear. There is a fairly straightforward reason for this: if one is *not* identifying with a fixed self (whether that be the given self of instrumentalism or the "true" self of romanticism), but rather treating the self as something to develop, this is itself a reflexive attitude. One distances oneself from "the self" in order to change it or observe it changing. Or, as Angela McRobbie puts it,

"Different, youthful, subjectivities ... require and find in youth cultural forms strong symbolic structures through which 'who you are', 'who you want to be' and 'who you want to go out with' can be explored, not in any finalised way, but as an ongoing and reflective social process." (1994: 192).

Reflexivity in the counter culture

The counter cultural project of autonomy, then, is a reflexive one; and for its survival it demands an active reflexivity, in the sense of the creation of meanings and practices which defend the "free space" necessary for the project, enable this exploration, and develop the projects of the self as they move from the theoretical into the practical. This is then of course immediately political, in the sense of raising questions of power and control.

This area of my research is still very much "in progress", so what I want to do here is simply indicate what seems to me a logical progression in terms of the development of this reflexivity, and illustrate it as well as I can from my research material.

Strategies of distancing

A logical prerequisite for any developed form of reflexivity is a certain measure of distancing from the "normal" and "taken-for-granted" assumptions of existing social and cultural relations. At its most basic, this is expressed in an attitude of wanting to find another path:

"People [in the Dublin suburbs] seemed to be content with just kind of shambling along, and into secondary school and out the other side, into a job, and not losing touch with their friends in the pub every night of the weekend, but that wasn't enough for me. I was looking for something other and massively more, something to quench a deeper thirst for life. Like zombies, those people."

This distancing operates in relation to the normal assumptions of people's class backgrounds:

"Even before I went to college I went 'I want to do a sort of liberal arts thing that isn't going to qualify me for one thing, so I can't just be pushed into doing a HDip [teaching qualification]', and a lot of people said 'Oh, so you're going to be a teacher'. I said, 'No, I don't want to be a teacher.' I just wanted to leave Dublin for a while, do a lot of travelling, I'm grand."

Most participants failed in one way or another to take the instrumental attitude to education demanded by conventional Irish assumptions about its role in providing secure employment. Similarly, many avoided the "obvious" strategy of taking the available opportunities in e.g. computers, translation or the music business. While this distancing from class assumptions is very general, there is also an ethnic distancing for a number of participants:

"There are things you know, but they still have to be right in front of you to be obvious, like I always knew that the entire world wasn't white, Irish, all the rest of it, you know that all these other cultures exist, but it's when you actually meet them that it's different, because they live their whole life in a totally different perspective to you, which is great."

Lastly, there is a distancing (for women at least) in relation to dominant gender assumptions:

"You know, sometimes I wish 'Why'm I not like my sister?', you know? [laughs] Why do I make life so hard for myself? Why don't I just want a normal job, and a husband, and two kids, and a house, and two cars?"

[LC: Well, why?]

"I don't know why, I just don't. [laughs] I just find it immensely boring."

As this last comment indicates, these are real choices that have to be made, and continually remade, within individuals' lives ("Why do I make life so hard for myself?"); but they are also made in relation to an alternative, counter cultural habitus

("I just find it immensely boring"). Distancing is not an easy exercise; and it depends crucially on the availability of alternative rationalities within which it makes personal and emotional sense. This very often also requires a physical distancing:

"People go [to San Francisco] from all over the world. Usually people looking for something, or people who are too weird for the small town that they live in. I mean, people come from Ohio, the Midwest, and from places where they're just too freaky for where they live, or they can't handle how racist where they are is. A lot of people say they couldn't deal with how racist it is."

Along with the usual forms of Irish emigration, this lifeworld also includes a number of people who have emigrated *to Ireland* (from Italy in particular), as well as a number of people who have returned from significant periods of time in the counter cultures of e.g. London, Paris or Berlin. A returnee comments:

"So after I got back from there, I ended up in college, which was like being right back in secondary school again, which was about as far removed from where I'd been as I could have got at the time. So I wasn't very well acculturated, I kind of disacculturated myself somehow from all that kind of thing, I didn't relate to it very well. I'd lost all fear of loss of social prestige or position, all the subtle motivations for the middle-class Dublin life, they're all based on social position, standing and material comfort. All those kind of values I kind of shed [abroad]."

Thus the reflexive (re-)creation of self often entails deliberate acts of distancing from one's lifeworld background.

Other cultural possibilities

One important element in making this distancing possible is participation in "mediated subcultures" which relativise the here-and-now by making present other cultural possibilities. These are rarely seen as something to be imitated verbatim; rather, they are used as a tool for opening up a sense of possibility with regard to one's own life - in other words, to enable reflexivity. Thus two participants describe the lifeworld in strikingly similar terms:

"the fact that [those involved] are very well read and are involved in, *interested* in most things."

and:

"a whole bunch of people who were interested in the same kind of thing I was interested in, which is, I wouldn't say it was overtly self-development, but at least interest in or awareness of self-knowledge and education."

These are not just individual attributes, but relate to a shared habitus of (literally) reading other ways of life as a means of gaining distance from one's own background and of creating new possibilities:

"They've taken on an awful lot of influences from popular culture and literature."

[LC: But they've selected them.]

"They've chosen the nice bits and thrown away the bits they don't like. It's I think not entirely insignificant that there's a large library of material that virtually everybody in that group has read [...] like *Fear and Loathing*, and what you said about that book about the [New] Travellers, which has been snapped up like gold dust."

Another participant shows this as linked to lifeworld practices of circulating relevant books:

"People kept throwing books at me, which was quite good too. I read a lot that summer [...] Things like *The Great Shark Hunt*, *Generation of Swine*, *The Electric*

Kool-Aid Acid Test, a whole pile of Kerouac books, Carlos Castaneda, *LSD and the American Dream* [...] So I just picked out the ones I liked [...] Bob lent me a whole pile of books [...], and I just picked out the ones I liked the look of."

The main interests, then include other ways of life, whether contemporary, semi-mythical or historical. Thus the American counter culture of the Sixties is critically examined as a sort of map of the territory:

"So then they'd started, you know, they started exploring alternatives, and as always happens with that a lot of people just spent a lot of time doing a lot of drugs, wandering round, getting fucked up, and trying to be enlightened. And of course a lot of them weren't enlightened, a lot of them ended up doing heroin, but a couple were, so it was well worth trying."

A similarly critical approach is shown by another participant:

"I read occult books voraciously for a couple of years, and whilst I never put very much of that into practice, holding back I suppose, not wanting to rush into anything, but also there was sensations of there being something missing. It was like vouchers, all these different self-development systems, they promise great things, but there was very little evidence of people actually having achieved anything with it. I suppose I was looking for the tracks of fellow travellers who'd gone before."

Other ways of life, then, are not imitated but rather used as a means of setting provisional goals, for personal development and for lifeworld mobility. Thus one participant uses the American Sixties as a reference point for finding a reflexive lifeworld:

"I suppose I had this idea in my head of coming across a kind of Merry Prankster-ish bunch of people who were interested in bouncing off each other as much as they could, rather than going to the pub."

Thus there is a move from the second-hand bookshop to practical physical exploration of other ways of life:

"I was interested in the occult at the time, I was interested in neo-paganism, and I wanted to meet people who were into that kind of stuff, also buskers, musicians. I was interested in what people were doing in Dublin who weren't in college. You know, people who were just sitting in their flats, painting or writing. I think the way I looked at it at the time was, I wanted to know bohemians."

Once again, though, the point of mobility between lifeworlds is not to identify with a new lifeworld, but rather to use the variety of different rationalities as a building block for the construction of one's own life:

"What I wanted to do ideally was be able to wander round and travel anywhere and deal with whatever I came across. That was it, more or less, just meet people from everywhere, I suppose get as many perspectives as possible, that's what I really wanted. Reality tunnels, I think Robert Anton Wilson said."

This quote neatly encapsulates the relationship between the mediated subculture, the practical activity and the reflexive intention of gaining different perspectives. The net effect is to open up a sense of possibility, which can then be translated into action:

"I might think, 'Oh, I'd really like to, say, learn guitar and busk my way round the world', but if I had never seen anybody do it I wouldn't do that. I mean, I know people who've done it, and I know people who've gone to India, so I go 'OK, it's perfectly feasible to just go to India and stay there for six months.' And that was really good. And when you meet one person like that you start meeting more and more of them, and when you find people who've spent years wandering round the globe, and you go, 'Yeah, I do want to do that, and yeah, they can do it. It's perfectly feasible.' And it's a perfectly viable alternative to having an excellent career."

A reflexive habitus: experiment, creativity and form

Reflexivity, then, involves a certain distancing from customary expectations and a greater awareness of alternative possibilities. It also involves, if it is taken to its logical conclusion, making some use of these: rather than reproducing existing social relations (albeit with an "ironic" awareness of their contingency), experimenting with alternatives.

I don't want to get into the nature of these alternatives in detail here. In this particular lifeworld, they appear in particular as a series of projects and experiments. To list some examples, in no particular order:

- * Political projects, such as anarchist and green groups, street theatre, student politics, direct action, etc.;
- * Experimentation with living forms, in particular shared houses, squats and "crashpads";
- * Economic experiments, such as coops, alternative bookshops, LETS systems, etc.;
- * Experimentation with sexual relationships, including bisexual, open and multiple relationships;
- * Experimentation with drugs, in particular hash, acid and mushrooms;
- * Cultural experiments, such as alternative music, board and roleplaying games, Rainbow Gatherings, pagan and occultist rituals and groups, etc.

Some of these projects are relatively successful, for a variety of internal and external reasons; others are stillborn or die rapidly. I am interested here in the cultural habitus, in the sense of a general orientation to the world, that enables this experimentation, that makes it possible to "try out" the implications of reflexivity. The best way of summarising this is seems to be in terms of a general valuation of creativity and "makeability". A starting point for this is of course the logic of autonomy I have referred to earlier, where the focus is not on instrumental action to get the best results in predefined terms, but where the self is itself seen as a kind of project:

"It comes back to this idea that the way in which people perceive ambition as *not* a material ambition, which again links back to the ideas about people's property and that. While they have fuck all of it, I don't think that is entirely responsible for their attitude. The development is sort of personal development, it's not material development. So the idea of going away to make money isn't really, you're not going to impress anybody, really. 'Oh wow, he's earning fuckloads of money, good for him, so what?' "

Thus reflexivity neatly links back to the logic of autonomy as self-development: the creative and experimental attitude applies to the self as much as to the external world. I will come back to some of the implications of this later.

One way in which this habitus appears is in a fascination with form. This is of course a very visible feature of contemporary social movements, where the effort devoted to formulating and implementing an organisational form will often exceed the effort devoted to its ostensible purpose. Alberto Melucci, for example, has written that

"The *self-reflective form of action* is another specific feature of the emerging collective phenomena. Action is a message sent to the rest of society, which speaks through its own forms and with a high degree of self-reflexivity. Organisational forms, patterns of inter-personal relationships and decision-making processes are themselves meaningful signs addressed to the society as a whole. But they are also a goal in themselves: actors consciously practice in the present the objective they pursue." (1995: 113 - 114)

Here I am interested in how this reflexive focus on forms operates in people's lives when they are *not* actively creating something new. One manifestation is the constant creation of purely verbal projects - the extensive development of elaborate schemes which are never intended to be acted upon. The enjoyment is again simply in the playing with form and ideas. A typical example:

"Bob had this plan, where you know he wanted to do this, set up a retirement fund, basically, which would pay for a retirement home for old druggies [laughter], free, like, to all of the people we know basically, for your dope-heads, you know, and, who'd like to be wrecked off their heads for their latter days, when they can't move any more, you know, and they're bedridden, so [laughter] I think if Martin makes a million he'll probably build that you know."

Another participant describes this attitude as follows:

"[I liked] anything that would just stimulate your brain a little. I mean, even if you just sit down and plan something completely bizarre, plan it from start to finish, even if you never do it, if you plan it flawlessly, it's like Bob used to do. Bob would plan something through flawlessly, and it would never happen. And then he'd plan something else flawlessly. And after you knew him for a while you'd think 'Well, it doesn't matter that he doesn't do it, cause that's not what he wants, he gets a kick out of just planning it."

Something similar is expressed in the enjoyment of formalistic "mind games" - the interest in things such as the nature of consciousness and artificial intelligence, theoretical physics and mathematics, the more elaborate brand of conspiracy theory and alternative reality books and the psychological "mind games" of e.g. Zen and Sufi stories.

"What I was interested in was ideas. [...] And I was reading about a lot of different ways of viewing the world, the different ways of viewing the inside of your own head."

Another participant said:

"I was going a little crazy one afternoon and wrote a long, very rambling email to somebody and got a mail back, 'Oh, I see you're pretending you're mad just in case people realise that if you don't pretend you're mad, you might actually be mad!' [laughter] Yeah, there is an element of that. There's certainly an awful lot of mind games go on, but everybody does it for fun."

A final symbolisation of this valuation of creativity is the fascination with elegant and baroque technical solutions to what are very often non-problems. If play is a means of flexing particular kinds of muscles, this is another way of maintaining a creative orientation to the world. An off the cuff discussion sparked off by the interview microphone falling down:

"Mick'd probably build something [...] Can you, can you get into the attic and drill a hole and [laughter] Boom mike from three empty yoghurt cartons [laughter] A man who builds heart-lung machines from empty yoghurt cartons."

This "techie trip" is an attitude of play and appreciation rather than of immediate usefulness:

"With me it's just a fascination with anything clever. Somebody comes up with a solution to a problem that is clever, I will admire it."

Clever solutions and creative play with forms: these are modes of leisure of a reflexive lifeworld.

Tolerance and lack of commitment

A corollary of this experimental and playful attitude is a combination of tolerance and lack of commitment. The world is seen as in a sense a series of not entirely binding projects and attempts at "getting things together", with a generalised expectation that different people will be "into" different projects at different times. Tolerance of these different experiments is thus a natural virtue, as one participant observes:

"I think the fact that these people have the laid-back attitude of allowing people to do their own thing is a mechanism which allows very strong personalities and very strong individuals to be able to interact with each other without stomping on each other's toes, and the sorts of ambitions that those people have, and the way in which they allow that ambition to be fulfilled, doesn't involve getting a group of people to centre round you."

This attitude enables not just coexistence with other people's reflexive projects, but also appreciation of them and drawing on them:

"Magnus had all kinds of odd obsessions, but he was also very into some things and he was right about some things too."

Related to this tolerance of each other's experiments is a refusal of commitment to them:

"Most people I know don't want to be committed to anything. Or anybody, because they're so desperate to get their lives together, get whatever it is that they want to do together that that takes up an awful lot of time, so they don't want to compromise that by being stuck in one place or one job or with one person or in one country."

In other words, "getting it together" - creative and reflexive activity - is potentially threatened by too great a degree of commitment to any specific project. The breadth of areas that this applies to in the comment just quoted is echoed by another participant:

"It wasn't a sort of a group with any specific aim, like. Except having fun, and being yourself, or doing your own thing, or whatever you wanna call it [...] At the moment I don't think it amounts to very much except [laughs] an excuse for doing exactly what you want, when you want, not caring about anybody else."

[LC: Does it get in the way of other people?]

"No, I wouldn't put it that way, as getting in the way of other people, but you don't put yourself out. I mean, I'm not saying that nobody ever does, you know what I mean, but you don't, they're, like I mean, people that can be and are very nice and help and this kind of thing, you know, but I think all this thing about doing your own thing loads of times was basically 'I don't want to commit myself to anything' " It's used very much for breaking up with somebody. You wanna be free."

[LC: And you don't think that was sincere?]

"It probably was at the time. I'm sure it was. I mean, I've used it myself."

I will return to the difficulties caused by this attitude later. For the moment, I want to point to the logical conclusion of this: it is normal for participants to see the counter culture as something that is ultimately provisional and external. Rather than re-identifying with the new lifeworld, the reflexive attitude is maintained. As one participant comments:

"It's kind of paradoxical to want to be part of a group and at the same time not yet part of the group. To want to create a comfortable subset or define its boundary or something."

The lifeworld, then, is legitimated by its contribution to reflexive projects, and if it moves towards becoming "taken-for-granted" in its turn it needs to be ditched, and for the same reason it was initially entered. Thus it is always an open-ended exercise: too tight an articulation would defeat the purpose. The fascination with experimentation and the double-edged tolerance and refusal of commitment are ways of structuring interaction within this "free space", the skills of living together in a particular way. This may be formalised at times in particular institutions, but exists primarily as a way of doing things, a common "structure of feeling" geared towards reflexivity.

The paradox is underlined by the fact that virtually all participants have spent considerable periods of time outside Ireland. One participant says of his decision to emigrate:

"The advantage of [being abroad] is you're not stuck in a certain context. You can't say 'I can't do this, because everybody who knows me knows, and I'm not the sort of person who does this.'"

And another:

"[The difference new people make is] new influences, new ideas. If I can be excused using a sort of Americanism cliché, personal development, in the sense that my interaction with these people, whilst it is completely wrong to suppose that I can't get anything more out of interacting with these people, I had got caught in a rut, where my relationship with them was such that something had to change before I could get more out of my interaction with these people. That something needed to be other people bringing new attitudes, new ideas, fresh outlook on old ideas, anything, into it, would have possibly changed that and sort of got me out of that rut."

Thus if life-world reflexivity and self-reflexivity are blocked, "creativity" turns to "stagnation". But I want to argue that there are also other reasons why "creativity" is likely to generate "stagnation".

The paradoxes of everyday reflexivity

Lifeworld reflexivity implies that all activity, not only work processes or political organisation, require clear reasons and articulate decisions. Giddens (1994) has recently explored the pathological effects of the impact of reflexivity "from outside" on lifeworld contexts in the generation of compulsive and obsessional activity. What I am researching here, however, is a lifeworld where the demand for reflexivity comes very much "from within".

It is something of a sociological commonplace (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1967) that routine, convention, tradition, ritual and so on are enabling mechanisms: they enable the regular production of action without much need for prior thought and discussion, they enable a sedimentation of "how-to-do-it" knowledge and skill, and so on. For the same reason, of course, they privilege means rather than ends, exclude the operation of reason, reinforce local power structures, and prevent the exploration of new possibilities. Yet consider the implications of this critique.

If a reflexive orientation to the lifeworld demands a focus on ends and the elaboration and coordination of reasons for action, democratic agreement on the forms of activity, and the exploration of all the possibilities that can be imagined or read about by the educated and computer-literate in western societies in the 1990s, this makes activity of any kind an extremely demanding business.

The interest in other ways of life and other ways of thinking about the world, the fascination with form and technique, the interest in talking about impossible projects and so on then acquire another, immediately practical meaning, as ways of discovering problems in play and talk rather than in action and conflict. As one participant puts it:

"It does help you if you've got a slight idea about something but it's vague, and you're really not that sure, and then you'll be sitting in a room with somebody who'll be talking about it and you'll go 'Yeah, that's it, that's exactly what I was looking for. Where is that?' Or 'What book was that in?' And they can tell you. [...] From that point of view, yeah. If you find somebody who's already done what it is that you're about to do you can get a lot of advice from them. You can get some pitfalls, as well. It's like 'I did this for ten years, and it's not worth it. Try something else instead.'"

At the same time, the stakes are very high in contexts where neither the nature of the self, nor its goals, can be taken for granted, and people are prepared to deliberately

disqualify themselves from conventional employment, to live on the streets abroad, to emigrate to another hemisphere and so on. Where reflexivity widens the range of actual options to include all *possible* choices, with no fixed yardstick to evaluate these possibilities and their consequences, choice becomes difficult, if not impossible. Choosing itself becomes an almost impossibly high barrier:

"If you do have that amount of choice, if you sit down, like for instance, at the moment I'm in completely the ideal situation, because [...] I've got no ties whatsoever, I don't have to be back in Dublin for anything, I don't have to come back for a course, I don't have to come back for a job, I've got a job where I don't have a contract. I could leave tomorrow [...] my only limitations are money, that's the only thing. There's nothing else. Which is great. But it also means 'Oh no, what should I do next?' Cause if you can do anything at all, it's difficult to narrow it down."

Or, as another participant says,

"I could get a job now, if I decided to, that I want [a professional job]. That's what I mean about getting it together [...]"

[LC: So what would the kind of job be that you want?]

"Well, if I knew the kind of job I wanted, Laurence! [laughs]"

Given the costs of reflexive action, then, it is hardly surprising that life in this counter culture alternates between bursts of enthusiastic activity and new projects which do fit the bill of reflexive creativity, and lengthy stretches of "null-space", of talk and play, of understructured inactivity. EP Thompson (1993) argued that an alternation of intensive activity and relative inactivity was normal prior to the imposition of industrial labour discipline; its reflexive variant, however, carries with it an alternation between elation and depression that was presumably foreign to the annual agricultural cycle. One factor behind the emigration of many participants was precisely a desire to redress the balance between this "stagnation" and the "creativity" that they sought:

"The people who have come back have all changed quite a lot as a result of their experiences. More than anything else, I think they've got themselves together quite a lot [...] They're much more together, they get jobs, they hold them down, and they get their act together. And that has a significant influence."

This is also true even of those who have remained, in that they have made use of external structuration to keep the possibility of creative activity open:

"He now has himself, at the moment he's still officially temporarily employed by [a removals firm], which he has said himself is doing him an absolute world of good in that there is a degree of externally imposed discipline which has a knock-on effect in that he's able to achieve whatever the hell he wants to do, he values his spare time, he uses it efficiently, he gets things done, whereas previously he had so much bloody time to do anything he achieved nothing."

For those who do overcome the barriers of action on a regular rather than sporadic basis, this is achieved at a very high cost, that of forcing themselves into action, choice and commitment by placing themselves under extreme moral pressure. The levels of burnout among such activists are then very high, since the amount that needs doing is effectively infinite once reflexivity is applied to one's political persona, and because reflexive modes of organising are not just extremely labour-intensive but also extremely emotional, since they place one's own personal project continually in question and depend on self-exploitation and the mining of this very insecurity (Cox 1997).

The social technologies of the self

Reflexivity, then, is not easy to live with. It might be impossible to maintain without the social creation and deployment of "technologies of the self" which enable its institutionalisation at the heart of the lifeworld. In this section I want to examine some elements of this. One is a straightforward sharing of interests in activities that can enable an exploration, not just of form, but also of interaction and inner experience:

"A lot of them have a background in either computers or roleplaying games, fantasy novels, science fiction, music, they all play guitar, and they listen to the same kind of music, maybe books as well."

Thus for example:

"Music is definitely a very strong, it's a binding force among everybody. Those that don't actually play themselves are certainly into hearing it [...] So the fact that certain people are musicians after a fashion and others aren't isn't exclusive. The music thing is not exclusive to those that do actually perform."

So music is used to structure interaction, and in specific forms: the emphasis is on "sessions" of creation, improvisation and interactivity. Such sessions are themselves a form of reflexive interaction, but they are also organised around a particular type of music:

"It was a lot of the kind of music I liked, I mean, there's a lot of sort of ballady stuff and folk stuff, and then there was your kind of John Martyn, Tom Waits, that kind of thing [...] But that is always all part of it, I mean, the music is very much part of it."

In other words, the type of music involved - apart from technically lending itself to impromptu sessions - is relatively verbal, often quasi-literary, music, focussed primarily on exploring the subtleties and uncertainties of personal interaction and inner experience.

Something similar appears in the case of drug use: the drugs preferred are themselves suited to a reflexive approach to interaction and to the self, and they are taken with very specific orientations:

"The people over there do smoke, as much as people over here [in Dublin], and yet the attitude and the lifestyle is quite different. They are still a very tolerant group of people, but the attitude is quite different, so I would definitely refute the idea that the use of drugs is a significant factor for the way in which these people behave."

Or again:

"Other people [in London] would go on doing acid and going to raves, and sort of going out into the city at night, but I tended to do it on my own, all night and watch the dawn. And I continued on going into myself until I kind of got to the point of ego death and rebirth."

Contextualising reflexive practices

These apparently isolating activities in fact imply a whole social context. In each case a social body of knowledge is entailed: chords for songs are exchanged, and shared books and "folk science" discussions orient expectations and techniques in drug use. Music is created in sessions, and drugs are often if not always taken together. Similarly, books are borrowed, tapes copied, and drugs circulated through the network. All of this depends on a very specific mode of lifeworld organisation:

"There's a very laid back attitude to property. People are not particularly possessive or protective of what is their property, you know, people borrow things from, there's an awful lot of kipple that transfers and ends up in various flats. It's not uncommon to arrive in somebody's flat, 'Oh, can I have a look through your tapes?' - 'Yeah, sure, go

for it.' - 'Oh fuck, that's mine, where'd you get that?' - 'I dunno, oh, take it back.' - 'Oh yeah, well haven't seen that in years'. You know, people don't get wound up about it, they just 'Ah shit, I haven't seen that, I was wondering where it went' "

In other words, the technologies of the self depend on specific local rationalities, as another participant stresses:

"The only philosophy I thought that was behind all that group of people was, you know this thing, 'What goes around comes around', you know, the idea of like, at a simple level, somebody bums a cigarette off you, you bum a cigarette off somebody else? This kind of thing, at a really low level, but it's true, what goes around comes around. You do things for people, the idea is, instead of, I was brought up with a favours system, you know, I do this for you therefore you have to do this for me. Somebody gives you a Christmas present, you're morally obliged to give them one, this kind of thing, whereas I just liked that, you know, that people would do things for other people for no apparent reason. It's like, I have something that I don't need. You need it, take it."

Such local rationalities are created in appropriate contexts. Thus one participant comments of a college occupation that it set

"a framework of the way in which the social interactions that that particular group of people have subsequently continued to use: a lot of music, people sitting round playing music, talking, often about trivia, but there have often been, you know, *good* serious discussions as well".

These "*good* serious discussions" are of course fundamental technologies for the institutionalisation of a reflexive attitude towards the self and the lifeworld, and more indirect forms are possible. Another participant in the same occupation says:

"I got into tarot cards and palmreading and stuff like that, you know just kind of basic psychology sessions, like sitting down and just kind of trying to sort each other's problems out, that kind of thing."

There may be limits to the effectiveness of such interaction, as one participant comments:

"Well, ultimately you have to do it yourself. You know, people can sit you down and say 'you're this sort of person and that means this is what you should be doing'. You'll say 'yeah, yeah, I know, you're absolutely right' but till you get to that point you're still not going to do it. But yeah, people can help people. To a certain extent. You can say, you can help them along."

Yet the net effect of this cooperation with each other's projects of autonomy is a reflexive lifeworld built on strong personal links:

"I think it was like a support group. It was one of the closest groups of people I ever came across. I hadn't come across groups of people who knew each other that well and were that close, which was really nice. Knew everything about each other, had been through lots together."

These socially organised practices, then, enable an apparently individualistic mode of life to continue its separate existence rather than submerge back into the mainstream. There seems to be a close relationship between individuals' continued involvement in such practices and the networks that sustain them, and their continued development of personal and lifeworld reflexivity.

Reflexive lifeworlds and intellectual activity

Clearly, the kinds of interaction I have described depend partly on access to culturally valuable resources (obscure books and music, drugs, tarot cards and so on). They also depend, naturally, on developing appropriate means for communication and

organisation within a very transient population and a city of a million people. Most importantly, perhaps, they rely on the creation and sharing of skills and knowledge:

"I think it was like a mutual support group, cause if you are a certain kind of person and you meet other kinds of people like you, you go 'Great, there are other people in the world like me' and you can discuss the things together and come to conclusions that you mightn't have otherwise, and somebody will know something you don't, and you'll know something they don't, and you can exchange information and stuff."

The intellectual organisation of social movement milieux is discussed in similar terms by Eyerman and Jamison:

"A social movement is not one organisation or one special interest group. It is more like a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by a dynamic interaction between different groups and organisations [...] It is precisely in the creation, articulation, formulation of new thoughts and ideas - new knowledge - that a social movement defines itself in society." (1991: 55)

Hilary Wainwright's discussion emphasises the reflexive nature of such activity:

"The extraordinary political energy of [the late sixties] demonstrated in a concentrated way the power that people potentially have to dissolve constraining structures which in 'normal life' they passively reproduce. It encouraged a reliance on self-organisation and direct action, and with this a pooling of their own knowledge, extension of it by direct contact with potential allies with different vantage points, rather than acceptance of an acknowledged authority." (Wainwright 1995: 75)

This grassroots intellectual activity of rethinking and reorganising everyday life links, as she writes for the women's movement, "transformation of self and transformation of social structures" (1995: 79). In her argument, it forms a fundamental resource for social change.

Conclusion: radicalising reflexivity

From this point, it becomes possible to criticise the limited nature of contemporary notions of reflexivity. If the reflexive attitude has a general value as a presupposition of communicative action, yet it is deformed in the normal run of things by the colonisation of the lifeworld by the agencies of capital and power (Habermas 1984, 1987). Thus we arrive at a situation where social relations are commonly "consumed" reflexively, but "produced" unreflexively. In other words, there is a diversity of "negotiated" readings, which in another perspective is a *precondition* for effective cultural hegemony - the ability of the dominated to find their own value in the cultural construction of their own domination (Gramsci 1991: 12 - 14). The counter culture then offers the possibility of a radicalisation of this notion of reflexivity, within which we do not simply monitor "how we are doing" or adopt various attitudes towards our own action, but rather (attempt to) change the way in which we construct our selves, our actions and our lifeworlds.

Within the cultural politics of post-1968 western states, the challenge to the previous "taken-for-granted" modes of cultural domination has led to a "reflexive" shift which makes "business as usual" possible once again, now with an ironic air, or perhaps a conventionalist legitimisation. If Touraine (1981) is right that the struggle between social actors is what constructs the stakes of "historicity", then there has been a shift from a "hegemony of closure" (within which the centrality of the conflict between the dominant "old right" and the subordinate "old left" enabled a marginalisation of other actors) to what can provisionally be defined as a "hegemony of openness" (in which the conflict between the dominant forces of disorganised capitalism and those of the subordinate "new left", or the counter culture, over the question of *just how far* openness and reflexivity are to be taken, defines the new stakes at issue, and marginalises other forces). This in turn creates the conditions of plausibility of post-structuralism and post-modernism.

In other words, one of the key issues at stake in contemporary conflicts is precisely over the meanings of reflexivity and autonomy, and over whether they can form part of a new hegemony containing social conflict or whether they can be radicalised to the point of rupture. The conflicting meanings that can be attributed to "individuality" (as possessive individualism or self-development), to "distance" (as an instrumental orientation of exploitation and domination (Williams 1985) or a reflexive strategy of not taking socially-defined goals for granted) and to "change" (as modernisation and rationalisation imposed from above or as the micro-politics of social transformation from below) are then key stakes of the politics of hegemony and counter-hegemony.

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L. Cox, Counter culture and social change since the 70's

Introduction

If we're interested in social change, there might be all sorts of reasons why it comes about; and people are often very attracted to explanations which somehow go behind the backs of people who are alive at the time and make it look as though it was going to happen anyway. There may indeed be things going on, forces for change or against change, that are not particularly visible to us, but they aren't that relevant to our action, because we can't do anything significant about them. (This may of course be why they are attractive – because they let us off the hook, break the connection between what we feel is wrong in the world and ourselves as people who might actually take some action.)

So if we want to ask about what goes into making social change, without necessarily discounting that there may *also* be things going on that we can't see, what we need to look at most of all is ourselves and the other people we share the society with. Very obviously, we look at groups engaged in some kind of political action or social movement, and for the last few decades there is no shortage of those – the women's movement, the ecology movement, the socialist and trade union movement, the republican movement and so on – and there is no serious doubt that these have had a substantial effect on the society we live in, even if they have lost many battles as well as won some. Of course we also look at the needs they were expressing – born out of poverty, oppression, the waste of human lives, violence, the destruction of the environment and so on – and this is also fairly easy to understand: that a movement will not be successful unless it is speaking what is in many people's hearts and enables them to say it powerfully and to do something about it.

Counter culture, or oppositional cultures more generally, are a middle term between these two – social movements and human needs. They run from the everyday ways in which people cope with a society that denies their most basic needs, to the ways in which people live when their lives are given over to the struggle for change, and everything in between, but with these two minimum givens: that they enable people to “be themselves” (express their needs and their desires) where they live now, in their own lives, and that they run counter to what is dominant in their society. So among the things that means, in Ireland, is that they don't revolve around money or property, and they don't involve buying into the cosy consensus that “we're all in it together” and we all see things the same way.

Historicising the counter cultural in Ireland

Saying anything beyond this about Irish counter cultures runs into a serious problem, which is that there is very little written about them, by comparison with (for example) Germany or Italy, never mind Britain or the USA. Some part of this has to do with our own self-images: for example, the autobiographical tendency to write about individual struggles rather than the collective, or the ever-present desire to come back into the welcoming bosom of Mother Ireland and “be accepted”. Much of it, though, has to do with the historical realities, which were different in Ireland to most of the rest of the developed world.

One obvious part of this is that Ireland, in the 1970s in particular, was making the transition into full membership of the “developed world” – and, by extension, out of the world of the colonised: a process which has come full circle with 21st century racism and our involvement in the American war on Islam. (Of course, this was a period when much of the colonised world was seeing the collapse or decline of their own visions of national economic

independence, but in a context which pushed them out rather than taking them in.) So for much of the last four decades, even despite the long recession which set in shortly after those initial moments of optimism, it has been possible (or if you like convenient) to confuse the struggle for basic human needs in an unequal society with the “rising tide that lifts all boats” and a general faith in industrialisation, education, TV, the EU - or any other factor which had the merit of not involving real conflict.

A second, and equally obvious, part of this is that, where the struggles of 1968 in continental Europe turned rapidly into left-wing politics, and those of the English-speaking world into a mushrooming of musical and other subcultures, the struggles of 1968 in the post-colonial world led fairly rapidly into direct conflicts with the state (as in Latin America, or India). In Ireland this was of course reflected in the repression of the Civil Rights Movement and the start of “the Troubles”, the longest and most destructive civil war in western Europe since 1945. And, as we know, in the shadow of military events politics, and cultural change, necessarily take a back seat.

Thirdly, the migration which remained endemic until the 1990s meant that to a large extent Irish radicalism, particularly Irish cultural radicalism, could more easily find a home abroad, and contribute to the development of alternatives in Latin America or London than it could in Ireland.

So for all of these reasons, “the literature” on Irish counter cultures is thin to non-existent. Having said this, what can we say about them?

Mapping Irish counter cultures

In this section, I want to take counter cultures in this period as a whole, rather than separate them out. There are of course some oral history / collective biographical approaches which start from the assumption of a separation between movements – for example, histories of the second wave feminist movement or of the environmental movement. But I would argue that, as lived realities, counter culture at any of these points in time crossed these boundaries between movements, and in fact had to in order to be workable as a way of living one’s life. With the exception of Dublin and Belfast, where the “scenes” were and are large enough to sustain more or less separate lives, there is simply not enough autonomous, non-commercial, non-official space (in every meaning of the term) in most of Ireland for the separations to be too rigid. While they are obviously accentuated by national organisations and publications based in these cities, and by their relationship to international (usually English-speaking) material, both of which have increasingly focussed on developing “niche markets”, at a personal, cultural and social level my impression is that (even in Dublin) we are talking more about a set of overlapping counter cultures than a rigid separation.

In the absence of much research (beyond what we are bringing together today), I am relying on my own experience: as someone who grew up in the social movement organisations of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and has been involved ever since, particularly in various forms of networking capacity (alternative media, gatherings, attempts at alliances, and so on) between and across those movements.

So while this is one person’s perspective, it is very much grounded in those practical attempts to bring people together, and I offer it in that spirit. While there are obvious effects of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on in such an approach, what is hardest to control for is rather the effect of time: for example, the difficulty in knowing how far the people who are still active now are good representatives of their own generations, and how much they have changed, or the difficulty of assessing retrospectively the extent and limits of my teenage political world and what it might look like if I were to meet it again as I am now.

With all those caveats, four moments stand out for me: one of consolidation, one of separation, one of co-option and one of rebellion. These connect to particular generations,

without of course assuming that everyone in each generation operated in the same way. Firstly, consolidation: it was abundantly clear in the 1970s, but less and less so as the 1980s wore on, that there was an “activist milieu” which could be found in concrete locations (10 Camden Street springs to mind as the building in which just about everyone seemed to have their offices at one point), marked by some form of engagement with socialism and feminism, with the war in the North, and with international events. It was grungy, ran on (unemployed) volunteers and Gestetners, and I never saw anything – whether it was the huge anti-Reagan protests or the tiny meeting – which happened without it. I think this is also clear from the alternative periodicals of the time: while there was (for example) a separate, “drop-out” milieu of organic farmers, people involved in new spirituality and ecologists (e.g. at the first Mustard Seed gathering), many of those involved in that milieu were very much aware of the broader political picture, and the two came together at events such as the Carnsore festivals (which could of course not have happened without this).

Secondly, separation: as the British and American counter-cultures and social movements turned more into commercially-transmitted lifestyles, which people living in Ireland could buy into, and as some of the earlier generations found themselves homes in the universities and the media, what was rewarded was increasingly separate identities. By this I mean not only those groups who were proud of what became criticised as “separatism”, but also those groups who practiced it without acknowledgement: for example, the academic feminists who excluded working-class community women’s struggles from their conferences, or the university leftists who created a sort of substitute identity politics around a particular image of the left, to the exclusion of many real working-class struggles; not to speak of the simple consumption of “coolness” and “rebellion” by younger generations. For others, community organising created new oppositional cultures and consciousness in their own estates, which became by far the largest form of counter culture in Ireland from that point on.

Thirdly, co-option, in particular from 1987 onwards, as doors which we had been used to have closed in our faces suddenly started to open, under the double impact of “partnership” as a new policy-making strategy (forced on the state in Ballymun and elsewhere by workingclass communities), and of the victories of the women’s movement and its allies, symbolised to the establishment by Mary Robinson’s election. Groups and individuals who had been “out in the cold” for years or decades found themselves (apparently) invited to form part of new policy communities in their own areas, encouraged to compete for state funding (with each other) and able to make a living out of what had previously been a labour of love. The effect, as I have charted elsewhere, was to separate out movements dealing with different government departments, to increase fragmentation and competition within movements, and to detach a layer of professional activists, able to operate in the world of funding applications and policy submissions, from their broader movements, which consequently demobilised. To this we should add a class-based faith in the effectiveness of media work and legal actions, which meant that (if you thought you could trust the media or the EU to be on your side) you no longer needed to worry about mobilising large numbers of people for anything, because it would be sorted out for you within a much smaller world.

Finally, rebellion: as people have seen the limits of partnership in their own areas, but also as the global rebellion against neo-liberalism has taken shape, we have seen new generations politically socialised at the protests in Genoa, Evian, Dublin or Gleneagles; around the issues of Shannon, Tara and Rosspport, in a process whose outcomes (in terms of counter culture) are still very much up for grabs.

If we turn briefly to look at this in terms of people, there are surprisingly few people left around from the 1970s, let alone the 1960s: the starting age for most Irish activists is about ten years younger than in most other countries in the minority world. The counter culture/s, as it / they exist today in Ireland, still have a certain core of people who were politically socialised in the 1980s (and a handful in the 1970s), but even here much of the weight of numbers is given by those who have identified with a single movement or issue. Often this is underlined by the particular space they have carved out around this, whether organisationally, as a commercial business of some kind, or in an academic or other intellectual identity. The gulf

between this “new establishment”, or more accurately this would-be establishment, and the newer generations of activists (not to mention the large numbers of working-class youth who are organisationally, politically and culturally homeless) is large.

What can bridge the gap, and does to a certain extent in different times and places, are what I called in my own research “ordinary activists”: not the full-timers, or people who identify with politics as their life, but the people whose picture of the world is large enough to embrace a real, and critical, political and social awareness. At the time, when I was researching my own 80s generation at the end of the 1990s, I could say that every one of those I had interviewed – people who had taken part in college occupations, the London squats, the drugs and music scene, street theatre and so on – had not (as popular mythology has it) given up all of that when they grew up, but had remained politically engaged, not continually but from time to time as issues came up that they cared about.

Looking back at those people 20 years on (which is a scary thought in itself), they have been involved in Glen of the Downs and Tara, in DV work and community activism, in the Mayday protests and “pie-ing” the rich and famous, in East Timor and sustainability, in Latin American solidarity and food co-ops, in alternative media and meditation - not to mention some very good music. And of course such people are what turns a campaign into a social movement, and what keeps counter cultures alive: people who are loyal to a broader vision grounded in their own lives, for which any individual event is an expression of what they care about in the world.

Conclusion: what should we do?

At one level, counter culture needs no help: it is something which people are going to do for themselves, anyway, to the extent that they feel the need and can see the possibility. That does not, of course, mean that there is no value in reminding people about the need and providing practical examples of the possibility, and those are probably the two most important contributions that anyone can make.

Beyond those, what draws people into counter culture is above all action, and particularly actions which create alliances across some kind of diversity – which pull people out of their existing social networks, or enable people to create networks which they did not previously have – around some kind of challenge to the way things are. Counter culture can also be fed, through communication of different kinds (the “alternative Internet” has been hugely important in this, particularly in Ireland), though different forms of education, popular / community education and training; but (as with anything) too much of this kind of feeding can kill it. Perhaps the most difficult thing I have faced in my own practice over the years is the question of how to get this particular balance right: between simply doing counter culture as a way of life, taking action, and somehow watering the roots. We can also ask how far any particular project is adequate to the “whole way of struggle” that it comes out of: does it push the limits of what can be done within a world that is systematically hostile to human liberation, or does it settle for something which fits easily within the way things are? Or, to put it another way, which projects represent the strongest and most coherent realisations of what we are looking for, and which represent a falling-back from what we have already glimpsed as possible and identified as necessary?

I’ll finish this with Calvino’s recommendation for how to live in a society rooted in inequality, violence and lies:

“The hell of the living isn’t something in the future; if there is one, it is what is already here, the hell that we inhabit everyday, that we form through living with each other. There are two ways of not suffering in it. One of them comes easily to a lot of people: to accept the hell and become part of it to the point of not seeing it any more. The other is dangerous, and needs constant attention and practice: to look for and know how to recognise who and what, in the midst of this hell, are not part of the hell, to make them last, and to give them space.”

SOURCE: *Everyday creativity, counter cultures and social change*
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Maynooth, October 13th 2007