

Forms of social movement in the crisis: a view from Ireland

Laurence Cox (13th April 2020)

Media coverage and public discussion of the coronavirus crisis has focussed primarily on what states and governments do and what they should do about it: about the relationship between epidemiology and policies. Within the global North at least, public health is seen as being ultimately the responsibility of the state, despite neoliberal strategies aiming to dodge this responsibility and a legacy of hollowing out and privatising public health.

This arises from a history of state responsibility for public health going back (in Europe) a century and a half, itself in part the product of the appalling results of poverty and pollution in the new industrial towns, incarnated in the provision of sewers and drinking water. If public drinking fountains are now mostly shut to facilitate the selling of bottled water, the wider legacy is not easily shifted, despite decades of attempts to place the responsibility onto individuals as “consumers” (most commonly, of privatised health care that benefits from various forms of public subsidy).

Writing this on the Easter weekend, traditionally a period for family holidays in much of Europe, the latest iteration of European neoliberalism is the attempt to weaponise finger-wagging about individual behaviour, to convert handling the crisis into a matter of policing one another; but even here the finger-wagging is mostly shaped in terms of pressurising your neighbours to do what the government has told them to do. The first and easiest form of social movement action, then, has been to pressure the state to take on its own responsibilities.

Forcing states to act

In many countries, civil society has been crucial in forcing states to actually bite the bullet and do something – challenging deep-seated tendencies of drawing a veil over embarrassing failures, of fear of “panic”, of concern for the national image, of boosting investor and consumer confidence of keeping the economy going at all costs, of not wanting to spend money... All the instinctual reactions of PR-oriented managers came into play at governmental level, and needed to be overcome.

While liberals like the easy and reassuring story of “science speaks and governments (should) listen”, a more accurate account of the last few months would be “civil society shouts, states decide they have to do something and *then* turn to scientists of their choosing”. In China, medics had to become whistleblowers for the state to admit there was a problem. States like Iran and Myanmar similarly denied the facts until it was impossible to continue doing so.

In Britain (according to a Nov 2019 WEF report the world’s second-best prepared country for a pandemic, after the USA), it took a public outcry for the

government to admit that its “scientific advice” was wrong – while court reporters now deny that “herd immunity” was ever part of its thinking. In this bizarre model, 60% (in fact herd immunity can require 70 or 80% of a population to be infected, and relies on immunity being acquired – which was not certain at the time) of the population of the UK (perhaps 42 million people) would catch the virus. On the death rates then reported from China or Italy, this could have meant half a million deaths in a matter of months – something which the official scientists failed to notice because they used mortality rates for viral pneumonia instead. It took a lot of pressure for the government and its scientists to take on board what the rest of the world was telling them.

In Ireland – which remains at the mercy of the control experiment being conducted next door – the state took a fortnight to catch up with civil society in terms of [public demands for action](#). A weak caretaker government, badly defeated in an election, eventually put itself at the head of the parade. Unable to act without popular consensus, it nevertheless benefitted strongly from this feeling of a national community of feeling – while making exceptions for the building industry (construction sites were only closed very belatedly) and their rich and well-connected friends who returned from the Cheltenham races in the middle of the crisis.

As states now move to restore “normality” – with varying mixes of actual success in tackling the virus as against pressure from economic interests – movements can be expected to do what they can to contest unsafe processes of capitalist restoration where the health response has been thoroughly inadequate.

Contesting *how* the state acts

A second way that movements act on this crisis – having helped to push the state into action – is around the specifics of what it does. The state naturally takes a “bird’s eye” perspective that misses the local rationalities that people actually live by and in – even before we talk about the state *in capitalism*, the interests it routinely takes into account (those of the wealthy, the powerful and the culturally privileged) and the needs it routinely ignores.

Renters are a classic example here. But this is also true for people in precarious work (often overlooked by state rescue packages), prisoners, refugees, homeless people, students in campus accommodation - and groups like people with disabilities, health workers, people in care homes and others who a top-down medical view really *should* see but often ... doesn't.

As has become clear, care homes have been in effect treated as waiting rooms for death by governments in several countries – and in some not even included in national statistics of coronavirus deaths. People with disabilities have particularly complex and constrained lives which are often ignored in general rules for what people are allowed to do in a crisis, and fall foul of the arbitrary policing that has been widespread in “lockdowns”.

This policing more generally has exposed those who are normally shielded from it to the banal stupidity of everyday policing, and led to a certain degree of backlash, in some cases successful, against police forces rewriting the law – or at times even government recommendations – into forms that make sense to local police culture.

In many countries, we have seen increasing agitation and whistleblowing by health workers who are offered national cheerleading support but often deprived of PPE (personal protective equipment) and in extreme cases even disciplined for using their own. In Italy, the closure of workplaces was forced by workers in non-essential factories repeatedly going on strike; in Dublin, bus drivers refused to accept fares after management disciplined a driver for allowing passengers on through the side doors.

In Ireland, a particular battle has been around asylum seekers in “direct provision” (at the mercy of private landlords paid by the state) who have been left in over-crowded accommodation, sharing rooms with strangers and notionally “self-isolating” in rows of beds. Despite massive numbers of empty hotel rooms and the collapse of Airbnb, the government has refused to do more than move a cosmetic number from one shared accommodation to another. Led by MASI, the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland, activists have been pushing the government hard on this issue.

Social movements, then, have often been central in pushing the state to take action at all – and have then had to push again to get it to act in ways that take social realities other than those of the wealthy, powerful and culturally privileged into account. This experience has been shaped differently in different countries, with social media, unions, NGOs, left politicians and individual activists all involved.

Of course they are not the only actors involved: they find allies among academic and media voices, people aware of the situation in other countries, sections of the public that have become increasingly worried by governments unwilling to act, acting ineptly or acting cruelly are all part of the picture, and some fractions of capital that are thinking beyond the short term.

Solidarity economy and mutual aid

And then ... we have countries where the state is doing its very best not to act, for whatever reason: ideological blinkers, debts owed to very short-term capital interests for buying elections, sheer incompetence and so on, where the general strategy can be summed up as “bail out the banks and call out the army”. The incapacity of the American federal government to respond coherently to the crisis speaks volumes about its declining hegemony within its own borders as well as internationally; Sweden is a more surprising case.

In majority world countries, the state lacks this capacity for other reasons, while the scale of the informal economy, the nature of the shanty-town environment, the weakness of health systems etc. mean that the kinds of responses to the

virus explored in most of the global North are either not feasible or not effective. In both kinds of context, we are seeing a huge upsurge in various forms of solidarity economy and mutual aid, people coming together to look after each other directly, beyond what the state can or will do.

On the fringes of popular self-organising we also see acts of responsibility by some employers, some universities, a handful of landlords etc. going above and beyond what the state mandates in different countries; but it is above all those who are on the edge, who are more used to giving and asking for help as part of their daily survival, who are helping to keep everyone afloat.

This is only partly a response to “objective circumstances” or the needs of “bare life”, which do not automatically translate into collective solidarity but can be shaped in other and much more damaging ways (clientelism, communalism, gang structures etc.) The contrast between the disaster that is the Indian situation and the level of popular self-organising visible in South Africa is one obvious indicator of this: self-organising traditions do not always survive over time to be re-activated in times of crisis.

South African poors (and US communities in struggle) have a long and recent history of acting collectively around basic needs which is not universal: people can of course rediscover what is after all an ordinary way of being human, but it is not always easy to do so at short notice. Many majority world and southern European countries have effective traditions of solidarity economy constructed in the long recession from 2007-8 as the welfare or developmentalist state has withdrawn even further from people’s lives.

In a sense the growth of solidarity economy reverses [the historical development of welfare states](#) in the global North, where the new urban proletariat initially looked for ways of supporting each other - unions, mutual insurance against injury or sickness etc., credit unions, self-organised education etc. - and states often took over these tasks.

In Ireland, although the state is far more effective (doing significantly better than the UK, for example), there are powerful cultures of active communities that range from the recent experiences of struggle around abortion, gay marriage and water commodification to less contentious forms of a nonetheless powerful imagined community. Long popular traditions of self-organising on a charity model have developed in the crisis, ranging from “checking in on neighbours” to ensuring supplies are available for marginalised groups (e.g. masks for asylum-seekers in “direct provision”). The net effect is that mutual aid groups of many different kinds – overtly politicised and “normalised” alike – have flourished as an unremarkable response to immediate suffering.

These processes develop new kinds of “local rationality” – ways of coping that people come to rely on – or extend existing ones. These local rationalities can readily come into conflict with state interventions, landlords’ or employers’ demands, etc., or indeed be perceived as challenges. They also create new bases for organising around longer-term needs and broader demands.

New forms of struggle

As always, new situations give rise to new forms of struggle. Italy like other countries has seen prisoner revolts against overcrowded prisons in times of virus, and there have been some innovative forms of outside support (involving driving around the prisons in cars, hence physically distancing) in the US. Italy (again) saw the [first \(contested\) public funeral](#), of lifelong activist Salvatore Ricciardi, followed by a memorial wall slogan being painted – in the teeth of the police.

Amazon and other logistics workers suddenly find themselves working in very unsafe situations, which were already extremely oppressive and poorly paid, but now are life-threatening and simultaneously absolutely necessary for everyone else, meaning that workers have more power. Union organising and strikes will tend to develop in these key industries, initially around virus-related issues but no doubt over time around pay, conditions and managerial power.

Calls for rent strikes have been spreading, particularly but not only in the US where moratoria on evictions have been patchy, unemployed workers are even less likely to find adequate support than in other Northern countries – and the lack of state intervention means that the crisis is particularly severe in other ways.

In Ireland, the older struggle – before the virus – was around soaring rental prices in particular, brought on by a failure of social housing provision, vulture fund investment in short-term (e.g. student) housing, Airbnb, and more generally the financialisation of housing markets. While this had failed to produce a mass movement (in part because of the huge range of people's housing relationships) it nonetheless produced mass anger which expressed itself in historically high votes for left parties in the last general election and difficulties in government formation. However there are good chances that the virus in itself will burst the housing bubble and defuse at least some of this pressure; and that the “next big movement” in Ireland will be something currently unexpected.

We will see many, many more struggles before this is through.

The possibility of a better world?

Putting all this in the terms Alf and I outlined in *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, social movements start from human needs and our everyday praxis, which already exists but is massively variable. People find themselves in specific situations shaped by inequality, power and cultural hierarchies, and (collectively, culturally) develop ways of trying to cope - "local rationalities".

When (as with the virus) these are disrupted, threatened or undermined, people mobilise through and to defend them in quite specific ways - what Raymond Williams called "militant particularisms". These are different for renters, prisoners, refugees, precarious workers, healthcare workers and so on – and

different in different countries. However if multiple such particularisms come together (for example, in demands on the state from similar groups across a country, or from multiple groups around related issues like housing or pay) you can get a campaign.

Of course people were already in many cases mobilised *before* the virus - and those groups will be among those most active in developing new forms of mutual aid, new kinds of struggle, making links, pushing the state etc. Bring enough "campaigns" around specific issues together - and we start to see the embryo of a "social movement project", the vision of an alternative *kind of society* which is shaped around the needs of the powerless, the poor and the culturally despised.

And sometimes, when the dominant strategy for accumulating capital was already struggling to keep the show on the road, this kind of "movement of movements" can create an organic crisis. After all, we have been in the "twilight of neoliberalism" for some time...

Against magical thinking

There is a big "but" here, though. A lot of writing currently popular on the left seeks to move from the virus to a better world without going through the messy business of popular struggles and collective debates: to resolve on paper (in the form of a saleable intellectual commodity) what actually needs to be resolved in contentious human practice.

Thus, for example, it is patently not true that things getting worse *in itself* creates a crisis that is likely to have a better outcome, however "objective" the need might seem. Anyone who paid attention in 2007-8 will have noticed this. Similarly, just because the utopia conjured up on paper seems compelling to its author (or well-grounded in "the literature", or whatever else), this is no guarantee that it will actually happen.

Reality perpetually refuses to allow individuals, or small self-selected publics, to inscribe their own self-image or wished-for future on the map of the world: between the idea and the outcome falls the shadow of power, underpinned by organised interests and buttressed by ideology (or, put another way, consent armoured by coercion). Unless these social relationships change, they can be relied on to reassert "normality" with incredible force at the end of any given crisis, just as the beautiful visions of the European anti-fascist resistance were largely squeezed out under [the pressures of Cold War](#) and the restoration of capitalism in the west and Soviet power in the East.

"We need", "we must", "we are finally realising" and all these rhetorical phrases are good for selling text by the yard to people who want to consume sermons; unless they are effective *agitation* – speaking directly to the needs, struggles and questions of large numbers of people – they are condemned to act as substitutes for the actual process of change.

So what is the relationship between crisis and transformation?

Rethinking the war metaphor

One particularly powerful form of magical thinking is the belief that there is some hidden historical logic that will automatically and necessarily produce good effects. Gramsci felt that this kind of fatalism – “I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term” – was suited to giving movements strength in periods of defeat when they did not have the initiative, but became a real danger in moments of crisis when subaltern groups develop an active subjectivity and become leading actors.

The contemporary form of this fatalism lies in a lazy reading of history which sees wars as somehow automatically producing positive effects – British examples are the granting of votes for women after WWI and the development of the welfare state after WWII. Akin to theories of wars as engines of technical progress, this account erases the agency of first-wave feminists and inter-war socialist and trade union organising – in part because those who repeat it have known far more elite agency than they have effective, organised popular struggle.

The metaphor of war for societies’ responses to the coronavirus has been widespread, and justly criticised for its inappropriateness to the actual measures involved and its centring of (male) leader figures in a story which (following not actual wars but recent war movies) the performance of masculinity is somehow what brings victory against all the odds – a theory which was mown down by machine guns on the Western Front over a hundred years ago but is oddly appealing to certain people.

However (as with the “war brings good things” theory) there is a half-truth partly obscured by the verbiage. Like wars, the virus has combined non-routine forms of state action with significant degrees of popular mobilisation: while most attention has gone (as always) to the state, historical experience suggests that it is the popular mobilisation that is most important. Lenin – who knew what he was talking about in this respect – had some interesting things to say on the subject, in 1915:

To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the “upper classes”, a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for “the lower classes not to want” to live in the old way; it is also necessary that “the upper classes should be unable” to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to

be robbed in “peace time”, but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis *and by the “upper classes” themselves* into independent historical action.

Failures of rule

Taken on its own terms, this describes the conditions for a revolutionary *situation*, which is no guarantee of a revolutionary *outcome*. The late Colin Barker, as a leading scholar of revolutions, was fond of this analysis. Its first element, in Colin’s gloss, is the rulers no longer being able to carry on ruling as they had done.

Lenin was thinking ahead in the context of WWI, but also of the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, which helped lead to the 1905 revolution, and probably above all of the Paris Commune. In 1870 the French empire had manifestly failed at the basic business of empyring, by starting and badly losing a war with the Prussians. Paris had suffered a siege and the Versailles added insult to injury by seeking to remove cannons paid for by popular subscription.

So one element of this is the ruling classes failing in something that is core to the business of “ruling” – as we have seen, public health is historically this, and doubly so once the state takes on the role of leading the “war” on the virus. The central issue will be how far people actually feel that states (and employers, landlords, private health care systems etc.) are looking after them or not in this crisis.

Any fool can make a sonorous speech; but can they actually carry out the tasks that follow from the pontificating? Johnson and Trump have clearly failed (to our eyes); but will this be clear to their voters?

Centrists, by contrast, are oddly happy to have this kind of crisis, because they like managing things. In Ireland, as noted, Varadkar has found himself – and his party – a new lease of life in the face of the crisis.

The difficulty for centrists is that tackling the virus involves large-scale investment, and health care systems which have been often systematically run down for decades. Will they be up to the task?

So far, the indications are that despite their very different systems, the states in China, South Korea and Italy are largely receiving popular support, well into the crisis. Iran, perhaps not. How England / Wales and the US fare may be a different question again.

A crisis of local rationalities

Clearly states that fail in their front-line response to the virus, in whatever way, will be made to pay for it. But I suspect greater weaknesses will show everywhere else, as the (necessary) response disrupts everyday life massively and people's needs aren't seen or met. The social dimension of life under extended curfew, rationing, isolation etc. with loss of jobs, housing, family

connections etc.... not all states will see this, or deal with it well. And what's the betting that the reconstruction will pay far more attention to the needs of business and banking than to the "heroes" and "heroines" who have been praised by official rhetoric and made the real sacrifices?

Lenin's second dimension is that the local rationalities of the "oppressed classes" are under even more pressure than usual – or, as Colin put it, people are no longer willing to go on being governed as they have been.

Resistance to WWI started (with India's Ghadar and Ireland's Easter Rising) in 1915 and 1916 in an effective way, but by the end of the war armies and navies were mutinying across Europe, strikes were building and peasants were occupying the land. The Russian Revolution comes at the midpoint of this process.

The end of the war - with bitter winters, Spanish flu, food shortages, unemployment etc. - saw revolutionary waves develop even further. Four empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, Russia) fell in these years, and the British Empire lost much of Ireland. This was the period in which the nation-state became the wave of the future; but there is nothing automatic about the process. Starting in Italy, fascism rolled back most of those revolutions.

"Independent historical action"

A key part of all this is Lenin's third point, about "independent historical action". States mobilised people into war - not just into militaries, but in the fields and factories, through rationing and a thousand other transformations of daily life. People had been told "we are in this together against the common enemy", "you must make these sacrifices for the common goal", and "you are an actor on the stage of history". Many people took this rhetoric seriously at first (as today's liberal pundits still do).

But the most important thing is that people had learned to become public actors, initially mobilised and transforming daily life behind someone else's leadership. The more the war went on, the more their own and their families' needs went unmet, the more critical people were of the leadership – and the more they started to mobilise on their own behalf.

This is the critical moment: in 1916-23 as in 1870-1, top-down mobilisation for the state's goals gave way to bottom-up mobilisation for ordinary people's own needs. Workers seized factories. Peasants seized the land. Soldiers and sailors mutinied for an end to the war and to go back home. Oppressed nationalities sought independence.

Of course we aren't in 1914, or 1870, and right now the crisis is immediate. Unlike 1914, no sane person would want to stop states responding to the crisis - mostly we have wanted them firstly to step in and secondly to do it well. But that doesn't mean all those other issues are gone - they can't be avoided. States are choosing who to support and how - as landlords or renters, as businesses or

workers, and in a million other ways. They will take our needs more or less on board in different countries.

And there are already so many pieces of unfinished business.

Now that people have seen how much can be done - how many things we were told were impossible but are actually entirely doable with the political will - they may not be happy to wait for ever. They may see some other things as also being important enough to act on even if it doesn't fit the economists' theologies.

However it takes *time* to get to this point, because the crisis is largely constituted by what millions, and today tens of millions, of people do and think.

Lenin continued (and remember, this is only 1915):

It was generally known, seen and admitted that a European war would be more severe than any war in the past. This is being borne out in ever greater measure by the experience of the war. The conflagration is spreading; the political foundations of Europe are being shaken more and more; the sufferings of the masses are appalling, the efforts of governments, the bourgeoisie and the opportunists to hush up these sufferings proving ever more futile. The war profits being obtained by certain groups of capitalists are monstrously high, and contradictions are growing extremely acute. The smouldering indignation of the masses, the vague yearning of society's downtrodden and ignorant strata for a kindly ("democratic") peace, the beginning of discontent among the "lower classes"—all these are facts. The longer the war drags on and the more acute it becomes, the more the governments themselves foster—and must foster—the activity of the masses, whom they call upon to make extraordinary effort and self-sacrifice. The experience of the war, like the experience of any crisis in history, of any great calamity and any sudden turn in human life, stuns and breaks some people, *but enlighten and tempers others*. Taken by and large, and considering the history of the world as a whole, the number and strength of the second kind of people have—with the exception of individual cases of the decline and fall of one state or another—proved greater than those of the former kind.

Far from "immediately" ending all these sufferings and all this enhancement of contradictions, the conclusion of peace will, in many respects, make those sufferings more keenly and immediately felt by the most backward masses of the population.

When I posted the first version of this, on March 18th, I wrote:

"For now, many ppl are still in shock, esp those who haven't had to face these kinds of threats and uncertainties before - but also some who are being retraumatised.

Most are struggling to reorganise their 'local rationalities' to cope with how their specific situation is changing, and to try and meet everyone's needs in that situation.

And watching what their ‘leaders’ are doing in their name, measuring it in different ways.”

And they may decide that having all pulled together, they want to carry on pulling together on their own behalf. Meanwhile states and corporations will come to make themselves at home in the new normal, and try to use the crisis for their own interests, in a thousand different ways.

However, as people adjust and have time to think - or find themselves in new and unresolvable crises - their reactions will change too. Already many, many people are going from "object" to "subject", taking action in all sorts of creative and unexpected ways for themselves and others.

It’s also worth remembering that for many, their contribution is driven not by fear for themselves, or even for elderly / sick / disabled relatives, but for unknown others. That's ... a different and powerful kind of mobilisation.

Finally

If we used this formula to predict possible outcomes, we would expect to see the greatest movement surges come in those countries where (1) the government has initially refused to act, and then acted in ways that are widely seen to be ineffective and that privilege the interests of capital, of the security state and of culturally dominant groups against those of the vast majority; (2) where the local rationalities of the majority – as renters and shanty-town dwellers, employees and workers in the informal economy, welfare recipients and incarcerated people, and a thousand other situations – have been pushed to breaking point by the virus and the lockdown; and (3) where “independent historical action” – bottom-up self-organisation, social movements – have been strongest, before and during the crisis.

Many societies were shot through with collective struggle before the virus. In the current crisis, people have been pushing states to act, and to act better; they have been developing new forms of solidarity and trying to change impossible situations.

They won't stop there. Because people don't.

This future is yet to be written - if the wars of 1870 and 1914 ended in revolutions, not every war does. But that history is worth remembering, and today's movements are worth supporting, participating in, developing.

Do we want to go back to the old world just as it was?

About the author

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