



Co-operatives in Northern Ireland: Resisting the Neoliberal Peace

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Co-operatives in Northern Ireland: Resisting the Neoliberal Peace?

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Post-peace agreement Northern Ireland offers a perfect example of an economic recovery driven by capital accumulation instead of long-term social needs. The result is an increasingly vulnerable environment where neoliberal economic policies leave many communities behind. For those, the peace dividends promised at the beginning of the peace process have far from materialised (Knox, 2016). Left to fend for themselves, some have looked towards alternative economics to sustain decent employment and foster ways of living with dignity. Even then, we are left wondering whether social economics can be co-opted into diverting the responsibility for economic recovery away from political and economic elites. Yet, in this “toxic mix of neoliberalism and sectarianism” (Murtagh & McFerran, 2015, p. 1598), can collective economic practices forge a way towards resisting the violence of the neoliberal peace?

There is a pernicious idea about the economic system we live in — that it exists somehow as a natural entity detached from us and therefore, we cannot do anything about it. Most of us have experienced its erratic temper, helpless in the face of financial instability; increased inequality; unemployment and overwork-meets-precariousness; even environmental degradation (Harvey, 2005). We have come to know that while extremely productive, capitalism is both socially and politically unjust (Schweickart, 2011). A wide variety of economic decisions, whether they affect our workplace or our communities, are excluded from our democratic collective control (Wolff, 2012).

Northern Ireland is no stranger to the erratic temper of profit-driven economics. The peace process opened up the way to an economic recovery founded on neoliberal principles (McCabe, 2013). On the one hand, the institutional discourse portrays a vibrant economy sustained by foreign direct investments (Department for the Economy [DfE], 2017). On the other hand, criticisms are painting a bleaker picture, where economic growth in certain sectors (mainly services) conceals the rise of indebtedness, the degradation of working conditions, enduring unemployment, and poverty levels (Horgan, 2006; Kelly, 2012). All of this is combined with a dismantling of any of the traditional collective protections (trade unions, public services) that could offset this increased precarity (Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 2020; Stewart et al., 2018). Beyond the façade of high-end shopping centres and the booming hospitality sector, many deprived neighbourhoods have yet to see the benefits of what has too often been described as a post-conflict economic marvel (Coulter, 2014; O’Hearn, 2008). In fact, recent research points to a widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots, which has alarmingly contributed to the reproduction of sectarian polarisation (Knox, 2016). Moving beyond the unsettling impact of this “toxic mix of neoliberalism and sectarianism” (Murtagh & McFerran, 2015, p. 1598) is crucial. Yet, there is a lack of vision, a lack of creativity and certainly at the level of political elites, a lack of will when it comes to fostering a strategy for radical post-conflict social transformation.

Co-operatives stand in sharp contrast with the discourse that prevails in Northern Ireland on what an economic policy after 30 years of conflict should look like. In particular, co-operatives do offer means to root wealth creation locally (Ranis, 2016; Restakis, 2010). In this respect, the case for co-operatives and their economic contribution has long been made; they foster social cohesion and integration as well as economic resilience (Birchall, 2003, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2018; Majee & Hoyt, 2009; Pérotin, 2018). Yet, despite their undeniable potential for tackling structural inequalities, co-operatives tend to be cast-off economic development strategies. Instead, the social economy policy often favours social enterprises at the expense of co-operatives (none of the local councils in Northern Ireland with the exception of Belfast City Council (n.d) mention co-operatives in their strategy), in effect sidelining collective

democratic organisations. Many co-operatives have stressed their distinct identity, enthused by principles of democracy, equality, and co-operation (International Co-operative Alliance, 2018), not simply by the mere fact of reinvesting profit for social good. Moreover, the social economy policy tends to reproduce neoliberal penchants, with a clear emphasis on forging the entrepreneurial spirit of the Community & Voluntary Sector, de-facto reducing its reliance on public funding (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2013). We are left wondering if in this context the social economy can truly contribute to regenerating deprived areas through capacity-building or if many organisations are co-opted into providing care “on the cheap” while public money vanishes away (Eisenschitz & Jamie, 2011). While Murtagh and Goggin (2014) suggest that characterising the social economy as a neoliberal instrument is too simplistic, there is an undeniable attempt at institutional level to tame the re-emergence of more radical community efforts and alternative economic practices (also seen elsewhere, see Chatterton et al., 2019).

In a context where co-operatives remain unnoticed, we need to evaluate their contribution to the political economy of Northern Ireland and look at how we can support the emergence of community efforts at setting up co-operatives that aim to meet social and economic needs in a dignified way. Hence, research on co-operatives is currently being undertaken, focusing on some of the grassroots experiments that are emerging in Northern Ireland. Among those initiatives, there are nascent worker co-operatives whose experiences seem to provide an interesting insight into everyday resistance to an environment dominated by sectarianism and neoliberalism. Whether they trade in cleaning, baking, gardening, bike repair, media and design or hospitality, those worker co-operatives might have the potential to provide empowerment structures for a variety of people that would have otherwise been excluded by top-down neoliberal economics. Yet, ongoing research also suggests that some of those initiatives are driven by a rejection of capitalist, sectarian, and patriarchal hegemonies, highlighting the too often overlooked role of critical agency in the literature on Northern Ireland (Richmond, 2011). Aside from fostering employment, the fact that some of those co-operatives cross through enduring sectarian divisions suggests that they could also provide the genuine cross-community experience that is so badly lacking. This might be their most interesting contribution, where the solidarity at the heart of the co-operative project confronts the violence of the neoliberal peace. These economic practices, frequently silenced in traditional accounts of the economy (Amin, 2009), need to be better understood if there is to be a truly radical transformation in Northern Ireland.

More than fostering a social justice agenda and mitigating the bads of capitalism, we need to remind ourselves that co-operatives may also shape our vision for a counter-project, as perhaps the most pernicious idea about the economic system we live in is that there is no alternative. How many times have we been told that capitalism will have to do for now, that there is no more efficient or viable economic system out there? Not only is envisioning a counter-project within reach (see Schweickart, 2011; The Next System Project, 2021; Wright, 2010), but communities across the globe are already engaged in alternative economic practices that open up possibilities to collectively define the economy according to the human relationships that it serves rather than profit maximisation (Dinerstein, 2014; Gibson-Graham, 2006). Therefore, as Wright commends, what is needed is to bring into the limelight empirical accounts that “try to fully recognise the complexity and dilemmas as well as real potentials of practical efforts at social empowerment” (2010, p. 107). And we need to do so WITH those who have already bought into the idea of collectivism and put it into practice (Zanoni et al., 2017). After all, they deserve all the credit.

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Eleonore Perrin is currently undertaking research on worker co-operatives in Northern Ireland as part of her PhD at the University of Liverpool.

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