Viral Intimacy and Catholic Nationalist Political Economy

Covid-19 and the Community Response in Rural Ireland

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ABSTRACT: Changes in the conduct and regulation of intimacy during the COVID-19 crisis in the Republic of Ireland has uncovered the legacy of Catholic nationalism in Irish capitalism. Many commentators analysed the increased welfarism and community service provision as the suspension of Irish neoliberalism. In fact, the Irish COVID-19 response is shaped by a longer tradition of political and economic approaches that have their genesis in the revolutionary Catholic state following independence from Britain. Based on ethnography of community development practices in a rural Irish region, the article describes how Catholic nationalist influences are present in the collection of institutions involved in the Community Response and its approach to spatial organisation. The governance of the response also sheds light on a lack of intimacy between citizen and state that is not only the product of neoliberal structural adjustments but is uniquely characteristic of the Catholic ethos that influences Irish capitalism.

KEYWORDS: Christian nationalism, community, COVID-19, development, intimacy, Ireland, neoliberalism

COVID-19 and the response of the community development sector in the Republic of Ireland have uncovered the legacy of Catholic nationalism in Irish capitalism. On the 27 March 2020, the full extent of the COVID-19 lockdown measures was announced. Restrictions on socialising, engaging in business, and travelling more than two kilometres from the home were enacted, as were an emergency unemployment payment of €350 per week and a ban on evictions. A policy called the Community Response – a partnership of public and private, for-profit and non-profit, voluntary and professional institutions – was created. Many commentators described this ‘new normal’ as the suspension of Irish neoliberalism. However, some of the key organisations involved in the Community Response have more-than-neoliberal histories and are still shaped by their genesis as Catholic organisations in revolutionary early-twentieth-

century Ireland. I argue that rather than signifying a radical shift in a recent Irish political economy, the COVID-19 response is better characterised as shaped by the *continuation* and *resurgence* of the Catholic nationalist ideology that has been intimately connected to Irish capitalism since the foundation of the state.

The Irish model of community development, in which responsibility and activity is distributed across a range of actors (such as in the Community Response) has been described as ‘a process through which . . . people collectively attempt to influence their life chances’ (Meade et al. 2016: 4). This may be undertaken by professional development companies through the administration of grants, or by community volunteers who maintain community centres, organise weekly events, and so on. Understood in this way, community development is a practice involving

the state, community groups and individuals in a shared partnership (Potter 2008).

In examining the effects that COVID-19 has wrought on practices of community development in Ireland, it is useful to think through the regulation of various intimacies. Many of the social transformations undertaken in the face of COVID-19 revolved around new understandings and regulations of proximity – between individuals, communities and institutions. The two-kilometre restriction created bounded communities that were insulated from the potential contagion that outsiders might bring. In her exploration of the state's role in shaping intimacy, Elizabeth Povinelli describes how governance transforms intimacy into matters of 'geography, history, culpability, and obligation; the extraction of wealth and distribution of life and death' (2006: 8). Covid regulations thus transform intimacy into a site where the entanglements of state, community and, I claim, church, can be examined.

Rather than existing universally across cultural contexts, Christian nationalisms take distinct forms that draw on local histories (Bialecki 2017). Prior to Ireland's successful war of independence against (Protestant) British rule (1919–1921), Catholicism had become inseparable from a revolutionary Irish national identity. At its inception, Irish community development was influenced by Christian nationalist ideology. *Muintir na Tíre* (tellingly translated as 'People of the Land'), was the first independent community-development institution to be established in 1931. It officially endorsed the recent papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, which, being wary of secular communist uprisings across Europe, argued that the state should only play a subsidiary role in social life, and instead promoted the self-reliance of communities (Devereux 1993). Irish Christian nationalism was thus used within the fledgling state as a political tool to express its freedom from a former colonial power through establishing a distinctly Catholic system of governance.

By emphasising Christian nationalism's place at the core of contemporary Irish community development ideology, I depart from the dominant trend of current Irish community development studies, which prioritises neoliberalism as the primary ideological thrust of the sector and analytical object of its study (Bissett 2015; Gaynor 2009). Notwithstanding the neoliberal tendencies of current community development policy, such as an increasing emphasis on audit and value for money, and unreversed cuts to the welfare budget, I claim that to wield neoliberalism as the core analytical tool risks missing an opportunity to

investigate the distinctly Irish nature of community development practice. Anthropologists particularly have outlined the dangers of presenting neoliberalism as a monolithic political-economic structure that exists independently of its regional socio-cultural contexts (Ortner 2016; Peacock 2016). I argue below that tendencies often described as symptoms of neoliberal transformation, such as the delegation of welfare responsibility to private institutions, have a much longer legacy in Irish capitalism and affect post-Covid Irish sociality in culturally unique ways.

This article is based on ethnography undertaken with Golden Fields Development, a rural development non-profit company that took part in the Community Response, where I have been employed for 12 months. The company is based in a rural region in the south of Ireland, and data was collected through my daily engagements with community members and activists, and through interviews with staff members (ten in total). In order to protect the privacy of my interlocutors, individuals' names, the company and the region have been anonymised.

I first outline below how the Community Response to COVID-19 has regulated intimacies by providing care services through Catholic institutions and within Catholic spatial imaginaries. I then describe how the dispersed responsibility for governance amongst the stakeholders involved in the Community Response works in a time of crisis to remedy the lack of an intimate space shared by state and community that is not just characteristic of neoliberal political economy, but that is also a hallmark of Irish Catholic capitalism.

Community Intimacy and Catholic Space

In mid-June 2020, five months since the Irish general election, government formation talks wear on. *Fianna Fáil* (a centrist party) and *Fine Gael* (centre-right), the old rivals representing opposing sides in the Irish Civil War (1922–1923) that have dominated every government since the foundation of the state, are in historic coalition talks, finally forced together by the urgency of COVID-19, Brexit, and an ascendant leftist Sinn Féin. Caretaker *Tánaiste* (meaning Deputy Prime Minister) Simon Coveney tells a breakfast radio show that the process is 'like two neighbouring parishes who had been defined by intense rivalry joining forces to form a new team for the better good' (Clarke and Bray 2020).

The team in Coveney's analogy would be part of the Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA). Founded in 1884 with the mandate of promoting Irish national

values under British rule, GAA teams are organised by parish. In Ireland, this refers to a small administrative Catholic district typically containing just one church. This small size and the popularity of the national games means that almost every community in Ireland has its own team or shares one with its closest neighbour. As part of the Community Response, GAA teams took on a new responsibility within their respective parishes. No longer permitted to train, teams were encouraged to volunteer locally. In the region where I work, GAA players became delivery drivers for local shops and pharmacies. They also drove people to and from village post offices and banks to pay bills, as the two-kilometre rule restricted the usual car-pooling arrangements for many.

In rural Ireland, the centrality of the GAA to the Community Response coupled with the two-kilometre restriction has reinforced the Christian nationalist ideology at the heart of Irish capitalism in a number of ways. First, there is the reliance on community voluntarism as the foundation of local-level care. As the COVID-19 lockdown was announced and employees of Golden Fields began working remotely, the first task of development officers was to phone community leaders to ask how they were coping, or whether there were gaps in local services. As I did this, I was taken aback at the speed and level of the response. Within days, the volunteering framework and delivery services had been fully rolled out. Somewhat belatedly, the government launched a phone line centralised in each county, which was to be used by people in need of urgent repairs, food or other supplies. 'We haven't been using it here at all', I was told by one Community Council chairman. 'We've done our own COVID-19 information newsletter with a local number on it and we have our own volunteers. The centralised number just adds a step'. Two or three weeks into the lockdown, local elected officials were readily admitting that communities were making a better job of the response themselves. My co-workers and I were told informally that we no longer needed to encourage all COVID-19-related correspondence to be funnelled through the central number. The parish was looking after itself.

Second, the importance of the parish as an informal boundary zone has created a notion of care and localism based within a Catholic spatial imaginary. In the post-COVID parish, transformations in intimacies of proximity have had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, the decentralised nature of the Response has been very effective. The volunteers of the GAA and other community organisations are rightly celebrated in rural Ireland for the service

they have provided for hard-to-reach communities during the crisis. On the other hand, the strict travel regulations and lack of external help created deep suspicion of outsiders, often taking problematic racist or nationalist forms. In one coastal village, police were forced to investigate after letters were posted through the doors of holiday homes stating 'If you do not leave, when the crisis is over, you may not have a holiday home to return to this summer' (Flynn 2020).

In her foundational work on the anthropology of intimacy, Ann Stoler (1989) describes the moralisation of inter-community intimacy in colonial contexts, and how such invisible borders fix divisions between 'us' and 'them'. The Community Response to COVID-19 demonstrates just how quickly this can happen. With contagion spreading from person to person, intimacies of proximity have shrunk to the parish level. What has long been a boundary of sporting rivalries and Catholic space has become an exclusion zone of the potentially infected. As Irish society awakens to the post-COVID world, it will be important to maintain new community intimacies that the Community Response has created without constructing and vilifying new categories of dangerous 'others'.

The Partnership Model and Intimacy with the State

The partnership approach seeks to foster co-operation rather than conflict or competition between stakeholders. There is a commitment to sharing the benefits from collaborative projects – partners are willing to participate in 'win-win' strategies rather than situations where one stakeholder might receive all the credit. (Potter 2008: 56)

In Ireland, many of the responsibilities for local development – organising funding for public amenities such as parks or managing the *Tús* unemployed work placement scheme, for example – are not the responsibility of the statutory Local Authorities as they are in most other European countries (Potter 2008: 54). A 1977 government decision stripped Local Authorities of the ability to raise funds through local taxation. Instead, community volunteers and community institutions such as *Muintir na Tíre*, Community Councils, and then-emerging non-profit development companies jointly took responsibility for pursuing funds directly from the central government and the European Union.

'The partnership approach', defined at the outset of this section, is the name that has been given to this policy of responsibility- and expertise-sharing in Irish

community development. As part of the COVID-19 Community Response, this materialised in the establishment of county COVID-19 Task Forces. The Forces were overseen by representatives from the county Local Authority, and invited members included development companies, approved social housing providers, local charities, and other similar institutions. They conducted weekly virtual meetings with the aim of assessing emerging needs and responding appropriately.

This approach to governing the Community Response can be seen as an attempt to design policy using the intimate relations between partner institutions and their respective sections of communities as sources of knowledge: 'You are the ones with the community contacts, you know best what people are struggling with', was a claim made by the Local Authority that set the tone for many Task Force meetings. The structure of the Forces functioned to reduce the distance between state and citizen characteristic of Irish Catholic nationalist capitalism by having the intermediary community organisations represent the citizens on a weekly basis. This functioned well to bring the emerging needs of individuals and groups into a space where regional COVID policy was designed, although identifying the partner responsible for small-scale 'soft supports' such as fixing a roof, or cleaning the homes of elderly people who could no longer receive visitors, became a source of tension with so many voices at the governing table. As intimacy creates knowledge of others (Sehlikoglu and Zengin 2015), it creates the possibility of forms of governance that are highly relevant locally. In doing so, however, the governance apparatus is slowed down, as individual issues compete with each other in the formation of policy. This created difficulty in the context of the COVID crisis when rapid response was equally desirable.

The ways in which states attempt to regulate intimate relations between citizens is well established (Povinelli 2006; Stoler 1989). The structure of the Task Forces and their weekly activity nevertheless demonstrate that states may also express a desire for intimacy themselves. In this case, a crisis has exposed the distance that has grown between state and citizen at a time when rapid and deep intervention, and so proximity, is required. Certainly, there are distinctly neoliberal tinges to the reduction of state interventionism described thus far. As in Ireland, the economic downturn of the late 1970s was used as an excuse to radically reduce the size of the state in many countries worldwide (Mason 2015). However, the partnership approach and the COVID-19 Task

Forces are contemporary results of a process of state separation from community affairs that began as an explicitly Catholic project in the early twentieth century. If intimacy between state and citizen in Ireland has grown shallow, it is back to this period that we must look to appreciate the shape of the divorce.

Conclusion

Changes to the practice of various intimacies during COVID-19 have uncovered the Christian nationalism that makes Irish neoliberalism distinct. On the ground, the organisation of volunteers by parish coupled with the two-kilometre travel restriction situated the COVID-19 response in rural Ireland in a Catholic spatial imaginary. Within the parish, normal intimate practices were disrupted: The lack of intercommunity travel limited the physical social encounters of community members. This helped to reduce the spread of COVID-19 but also constructed new social barriers and ideas of dangerous 'others'.

While the distributed governance of the COVID-19 Task Forces effectively gathered the knowledge of various community institutions in the production of policy, it also betrayed the lack of intimacy between the Irish state and the needs of its citizens created by a mixed political economy – neoliberal, Christian and nationalist – designed to create distance between state and community. A consequence is that the pressing issues facing rural Ireland – increasing inequality, COVID-related unemployment, and underinvestment – will not be remedied simply by reversing neoliberal policies. The decentralisation of taxation and legislation would give further power to local government and legitimacy to the localised power networks that have been cultivated through decades of the partnership approach. This would close the gap between community and state while maintaining the strong local organisations that are already in place. The creation of a political economy in Ireland that works better for rural communities post-Covid will require working through aspects of Catholic nationalist as well as neoliberal structural legacies that make Irish political economy unique.

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