OVERCOMING THE TROUBLES: Hybrid green identities

A personal reflection by Tamara van Ree, The Netherlands
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Recently I had the pleasure of attending the Summer School of the Green Foundation Ireland, at the beautiful site of Queen's University Belfast. The theme of the programme was 'Greening the EU in the context of the Eurosceptic debate'. As a Dutch 'green' I expected to get acquainted with the different takes on green politics across European green parties and green think tanks. I did, but the differences and similarities weren't what I expected them to be. Of course, we agreed on the importance of environmentally sustainable politics but, coming from a period of violence on the Irish island, social sustainability is given equal priority by greens. Something that can inspire the greens on the European main land.

Of course, I learned in high school about the period of the Troubles in Ireland, but my awareness of it was mostly determined by images of popular culture, like songs by the Cranberries and U2. 'The Troubles' is the Irish way of understating the period of violent conflict from the late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998, between nationalists (or republicans) who want an independent Ireland and the unionists (or loyalists) who want to stay under British rule. The violence started following centuries of unrest between the Catholic population of the island, and the Protestant population who migrated to Ireland from Scotland and England and were solidified in their power by the British Penal Laws that legalised discrimination of Catholics and Presbyterians. The Penal Laws were mostly nullified in the 18th and 19th century, but not easily forgotten. During the Troubles over 3,500 people were killed, many of whom civilians, and many more were injured.

Although the Troubles were officially ended by the Good Friday Agreement, and an important part of the physical violence was indeed stopped, there is still a lot of healing to be done in Northern Ireland. Living for years under the constant threat of violence has generated a segregated society divided by a deep distrust of 'the other'. John Barry, Professor of Green Political Economy at Queen's University, in one session described how still only five percent of children in Northern Ireland attend integrated schools. So when he is teaching first year students, most of them are in the same classroom with 'the other' for

the first time. Many children grow up in single estates (non-integrated neighbourhoods), some argue even more so than during the Troubles. 'What foot do you dig with?' is still an important question says John Barry. A question people try to answer by finding out your family name, accent, school, sports club, etcetera.

'Othering' to define oneself, to identify yourself by not being them is still happening, which is not a very positive way to construct an identity. It illustrates that the official end of the Troubles has brought about some consequential, sometimes unexpected, problems in society. One of them being the absence of a higher meaning that is often experienced in times of conflict. Other differences like gender and race, seem to diminish during conflict but tend to pop up afterwards. Another one is the rise of mental illnesses. More people suffer from PTSD now than during the Troubles according to John Barry. It seems as though they almost needed 'the luxury' of peace before being able to process the terror they endured. Perhaps a less unexpected problem is the difficulty reintegrating the segregated society, including its former combatants. Rules are set in place to protect the Northern Irish from being discriminated against because of their constitutional preferences, roots and/or religion, but of course genuine integration can only develop beyond the securing of rights. John Barry: "Democracy is non-violent disagreement, not just at a political level as a decision-making process, that is only the beginning. Democracy is a form of society and culture. In a democracy everybody is equal. That is why capitalism will always threaten democracy, because it creates inequality."

It has been very inspiring to learn how the greens in Northern Ireland are trying to bridge the gap between different groups in their region. For instance, there is only one green think tank, for both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Not because the greens are specifically for or against unification of the Republic and the North, but because they choose to advocate a hybrid form of green politics across borders. They prefer not to emphasise the border. Another typical green take on politics is their voting habits. To secure the rights of minorities, politicians have to register before each vote whether they consider themselves 'nationalist', 'unionist' or 'other'. Greens choose to register with a different group every time, and choose the identity that furthers green politics most in that particular round of voting. Again, this illustrates their hybrid, fluid identity that is based on the future rather than the past.

So what have I learned from my fellow greens? They have a very deep understanding of the importance (and complexity) of social sustainability in relation to environmental sustainability. On the continent, we sometimes take

the functioning of our democracy for granted and tend to lay too much emphasis on environmental sustainability in our policy making, sometimes even as if the planet would be a better place without people having any impact on it at all. Only when we truly understand the (importance and functioning of) interdependency of social and environmental sustainability, can we make policies that are a genuine alternative for the politics of fear that have been ruling Europe during this latest financial crisis. Only when we address the insecurity of livelihoods that many people experience in today's society, can we ask them to vote green, otherwise the green vote will stay some kind of curiosity of middle class elites that 'normal' people feel they cannot afford to consider.[1]

The Irish greens have learned this from their own experience with the debilitating effects of insecurity on society. It wasn't so much the violence, as the threat of violence that disrupted people's lives and made society disintegrate into separate groups. Fear is an easy vehicle to abuse to divide societies and, through that separatism, institute all kinds of destructive policies in politics that further the rights of the few over the rights of the many. The financial crisis and the threat of overspending have been used to erode social security and democratic rights all over Europe under the seemingly neutral politics of austerity.[2] Greens need to collaborate together to come to a deeper understanding of these processes and be in the forefront to propose a different take on society, one based on solidarity across borders, time and species.[3]

Coming to Belfast, I did expect to learn a few things about the Troubles and about Irish green politics, but I didn't think those two things specifically combined would teach me so much about my own society and how to deal with the financial crisis. The experiences of violence, and overcoming violence, that people so generously shared their stories about during the Summer School, moved me and installed a deep sense of connectedness with these greens. It reminded me that especially during hard times, like the financial crisis is for so many Europeans, we have a choice to act instead of react. Like Nuala Ahern – the chair of the Green Foundation Ireland – stated at the opening of the Summer School: "don't underestimate the human capacity to create catastrophe. But we are an intelligent species; also don't underestimate the power of individuals and small groups to make positive changes."

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[1] Reply from the audience.
[2] Maggie Chapman, Co-Convenor of the Scottish Green Party.
[3] Alex Warleigh-Lack, Professor of EU Politics, University of Surrey.