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Abstract

This paper is a sociological investigation of an alternative economic network that is active in Ireland and throughout the western world. This network is based on Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS). LETS is composed of a network of people who attempt to delink from the international cash-based economy as much as possible. They wish to trade goods and services on a barter basis, among a limited group in the local area. This research is a case study of one LETS operating in west Cork in the south-west of Ireland. Does this group of people form the vanguard of a new social movement in the region? What is the best means of conceptualising their activities sociologically? It is proposed here that the employment of Moichel Maffesoli's concept of 'neo-tribes' is the most useful framework to understand this group. They are generally counter-urban, and non-Irish, and impermanence and transience are the main features of their socio-economic activities. However, it is argued here that they form a crucial part of the changing social lanscape of rural Ireland, as they provide a social springboard for other alternative social activities such as farmers' markets. Fora such as LETS help to foster social contact between people and thus breathe new life into rural communities that might otherwise be in serious decline.

Keywords: LETS, Social Movements, Globalisation, Neo-Tribes, Informal Economy, Community, Networks.

Introduction

Social scientists have been trying to grapple with the radical social changes brought about by globalisation for some time now. Among the myriad of definitions of this process, one of the most satisfactory is that provided by Giddens:

> …the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away. (Giddens, 1990:64)

The region in which this research was conducted, west Cork in the south-west of Ireland, is now much more complex and differentiated as a result. The countryside is now subject to many competing constructions, as the dominance of farming interests can no longer be presumed. As the countryside is used more for recreational and tourism purposes, new groups have emerged which represent different sets of claims upon its uses. It is not at all unusual anymore to experience an area as both local (with its connotations of home, rootedness and emotional connectedness) and cosmopolitan (satisfying the need for exposure to wider economic and cultural influences) simultaneously. No longer does one have to make a stark choice between town and country. People may be more linked with other places because of developments in tele-communications, but that does not necessarily mean that they are less linked to their home, or place of origin. Ones identity is not a zero-sum game where more attachment to one aspect means less to another. Many people now have a lifestyle in which they can easily combine activities which are commonly associated with globalisation (like working for a multinational or using the internet) and others which evoke the local (like playing in the local (women's) football team), with no incongruity whatsoever. A potential effect of globalisation, however, is that the more pressure that is exerted by hegemonic economic and cultural forces, the more people may yearn for their local identity and seek to stress their difference to the homogeneity imposed from outside. People may need a human scale, to complement the global.

McMichael argues that it is an artificial exercise to separate the global and the local, "...as each template is a condition of the other"(McMichael,1996:50). Social life is influenced by inputs from several co-existing levels, from global level to the EU, to national, regional, local, and personal levels. The essential qualities of a particular place, then, depend upon whose ideas about the present and future of that place become dominant at any particular time. These ideas may derive from a myriad of sources, from the utilitarianism of the property developer to the romanticism of the artist. Massey (1994) insists that the places themselves in which people live are shaped by these power struggles. These are necessarily multiple and complex. Massey proposes that:

> ...what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus...each 'place' can be seen as a particular, unique, point of intersection [of movements, relations, communications]. It is, indeed, a *meeting* place. (emphasis in original)
> (Massey,1994:154)

Conceptualising place in this fashion means that there is a mutual interaction between the dynamics of any particular place or region and the individuals who live within it, and there are multiple ways in which a spatial unit may be used by social actors. If a place is defined by its inhabitants, then by definition, no place can be understood in just one way, but requires a variety of perspectives. The actors that comprise a place may represent interests, or networks of interests, that stretch beyond the physical boundaries. While the objective facts that create the socio-economic and geographic composition of a place need to be mapped out, a mental map of a place like west Cork will no doubt be made up of much more dispersed, disjunctured, dislocated co-ordinates than those we find in an atlas.

This research aims to analyse how one group of people in west Cork are attempting to find a place for themselves in this globalised world in which they feel comfortable. This group is those individuals who are involved in a global alternative economic network called Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS). LETS is a formalised barter system which uses its own currency as an alternative to cash. This paper is a sociological analysis of the social

composition of LETS in the west Cork area. It is based on a qualitative research methodology which attempts to ascertain whether LETS can properly be viewed as a social movement. The work of Michel Maffesoli is introduced here, which argues that people more often form temporary social groupings called 'neo-tribes'. These groupings are dynamic and unpredictable:

> …contemporary social and cultural change is taking place on the 'transversal', across categories and along fluctuating and short-lived networks of affinity, interest and neighbourhood between which people shift constantly, modifying their behaviour, outlook and identity in a most un-modern fashion. (Shields,1991:4)

This concept of neo-tribes is interrogated here for its usefulness with regard to LETS.

While LETS is based on an ideology of empowering the local community, it is concurrently very much a product of globalisation, for two major reasons that will be discussed in this paper. The first is that LETS is primarily the territory of incomers in rural areas like west Cork. More detailed discussion of this issue will be seen below. The second reason is that LETS is an international phenomenon which has spread as a result of global networking via travel, telecommunications, and especially the internet. Without this contact, the seeds of LETS would not have sprouted in so many different locations. The idea of locality has thus been redefined by LETS, resolutely confident in the strength of the local, yet also closely connected to many other localities on the globe.

Local Exchange Trading Systems

LETS is composed of a network of people who trade goods and services on a barter basis, among a limited group in a local area. Trading accounts are recorded by a central administrator, and then published in the system's directory. They try to maintain wealth within the locality, actively contributing to the economic and social life of their community, and trying to delink from the international cash-based economy as much as possible. People often choose to offer services which are not the same as their main

paid job, so a teacher might paint houses or a farmer might fix cars. Members receive units of local currency for their efforts, which are given local names. Other authors have provided enormous detail regarding the minutiae of the economic workings of LETS that do not need to be reproduced here (see Douthwaite, 1996; Lee, 1996; Offe & Heinze, 1992; Thorne, 1996; Williams, 1996).

An important element of LETS, however, is the reconfiguration of the concept of debt. It is no advantage to the system if members build up a surplus of currency, as it is when they need goods and services that trading is encouraged. One cannot be in 'debt' to the 'bank', rather one is in 'commitment' to the 'group'. Therefore:

> Instead of using an individual's debt as a lever for extracting money from him/her in the form of interest, it is used to bind the local community together. (Purdue et al.,1997:657)

There is therefore no shame in a reasonable amount of negative credit, as this encourages trading, and contact between members. So "...needs and indebtedness drive the system...without incurring the economic imperative to redeem 'credit'" (Lee,1996:1384).

LETS generally forms only a small part of a member's overall economic activity, but one which is symbolically significant. It is as if LETS currency has been 'earmarked' for the purposes of social contact and consolidation of community. It has been allocated a symbolic meaning which extends far beyond its objective economic worth (see Zelizer, 1994). This can be seen as a means of establishing control over one's own economic activity in a dehumanised market economy. LETS (Ireland) states that:

> LETS intends to create a community being in touch with one another and gaining self confidence through the discovered demand for individual performance or services by the participants, therefore raising the region's life quality on the whole. (LETS Ireland, n.d.)

This website goes into enormous detail regarding the benefits of LETS systems, which are outlined under the categories of economic, social and environmental benefits. Theirs is a holistic perspective, integrating these three sets of advantages.

LETS systems exist throughout the western world, having originated in Vancouver Island, Canada in 1979. It is significant that LETS was born on an island location during a severe economic depression. Under the leadership of Michael Linton, it spread throughout British Colombia in the early 1980s (Offe & Heinze,1992:86). LETS has become especially popular in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK. Three hundred LETS were reported to exist in the UK in 1994 (Thorne, 1996:1361). This is now reduced to c.250, with a concentration in the south[1]. They exist in every European country, and have spawned interesting spinoffs. For example. five LETS shops called 'ruilwinkels' (barter exchange shops) are now operating in Rotterdam. Goods can only be bought or sold for LETS currency and no cash is accepted. The local government pays the shops' rental costs and the shop co-ordinator's wages.

There are currently seven LETS operating in Ireland, in west Cork, Cork, Dublin, East Clare, Galway, Mayo and Westport (see www.LETS-Linkup.com). The first Irish LETS system came into being in Westport, Co. Mayo in 1993 (Douthwaite, 1996:77). Shortly afterwards, in the mid 1990s, an active LETS system was established in west Cork, on the Beara Peninsula. Douthwaite reports that "the weekly stall did IR£600 worth of business in a single four-hour period in November 1995" (ibid.:78). However, due to problems related to distance, the core of west Cork LETS moved to Bantry (a more central location), shortly afterwards, and the Beara LETS died off completely. It is now more properly called Bantry Area Trading System, or BATS, after which the currency is named. One BAT is equivalent to one euro. LETS has been operating in the Bantry area since 1997. The relocated scheme was granted five Fás workers whose job it was to set it up. The potential local benefits are outlined on their website:

> The social benefits of such a system are enormous: interaction between isolated social groups is made possible, and small enterprises can be launched. It is of value to any community in that participation is rewarded, and self-esteem is thus increased (BATS, n.d.)

[1] See the website www.LETS-Linkup.com for enormous detail about LETS internationally, including contact numbers and addresses for each one.

Despite these ambitious ideals, membership has dwindled. There were over two hundred members at the start, but this number has now depleted and it is relatively stagnant at present, down to forty one members. A detailed discussion of the social profile of Bantry LETS follows below, which shows how LETS is currently connected to other groups in the area.

Conceptualising LETS

LETS systems are multi-faceted social phenomena, and it is possible to focus on any one of a number of aspects of their composition. From an economic perspective, LETS has been viewed as a form of "micro-Keynesianism", where local currency is used to create "an enhanced multiplier effect" (Purdue et al., 1997:655). It has also been analysed within the discourse of 'embeddedness'. This refers to a critique of economics, which tends to present a picture of market economics that is completely unrelated to its social context. Critics point to the intimate connection between the economy and broader society. LETS is thus seen as a means of "re-embedding economic relations", which is "a way of talking about resistences to the unevenness and disempowerment of an embedded global economy" (Thorne, 1996:1362). This is especially the case because of the highly conscious purposeful effort made in LETS to reinforce social contact and "enhance the collective social well-being of individuals" (ibid.:1366). However, it is also recognised that the effects of LETS extend far beyond the economic realm, becoming "a form of life politics" (Purdue et al., 1997:655). These authors, relying on Melucci's insights into new social movements (Melucci, 1988; 1989; 1996), view it as an element of a "DIY" cultural movement which:

> …rather than direct confrontation with the state, engage in cultural innovation, challenging the dominant symbolic codes or frames that give shape and meaning to everyday life. (Purdue et al.,1997:647)

LETS certainly appears to form part of something akin to a socio-cultural movement, operating within the context of the informal economy. This refers to forms of work which remain outside the confines of the paid

marketplace and also the control of the state. We can witness a huge increase in informal labour internationally, rendering official data increasingly meaningless (see Castells & Portes, 1989) While this is very evident in poorer countries, many in the western world are now also experiencing increased instability and irregularity in their employment patterns. This leads to poverty and social isolation, even for people who might appear to have 'good jobs'. This means that the middle-class often now exhibit the characteristics of an underclass (Offe & Heinze,1992:2). Castells terms this the "disaggregation of labour", producing evidence from a vast data bank for a visible increase internationally of "networkers, jobless and flexitimers" (Castells, 1996:201-326). The unofficial nature of this work does have some advantages for its practitioners, like having no tax to pay, no labour rules to obey, getting higher quality for lower cost, and the factor of opportunity cost (Cornuel & Duriez,1985:pp.167-170). So, within this context, can we describe LETS as a social movement?

In addressing this question, one of the few things we can be sure of is that we can no longer describe non-party collective action as unconventional, as this form of mobilisation is becoming increasingly normal (Della Porta & Diani,1999:1). If the political culture excludes certain interests, people set up their own alternative structures and networks to deal with them. This leads to the expansion of the limits of politics:

> The mere existence of a symbolic challenge is in itself a method of unmasking the dominant codes, a different way of perceiving and naming the world.
>
> (Melucci, 1988:248)

These networks often extend beyond national borders, utilising international contacts to strengthen their case athome. Globalisation tends to enhance the diffusion of mobilisation, which in turn tends to be modified to suit national conditions (Della Porta et al.,2000:9). This might mean that the collective's concerns become grafted onto existing political structures, or they could become the cornerstone of a whole new social movement.

When the question of the definition of a social movement emerges, the examples of the women's movement and the green movement are often

proferred as leaders in the field. This is because they have been in existence for a long period of time, they exist on a global scale, and they have had a visible and measurable political impact. (Oloffson,1988). While their internal variations are of course acknowledged, their permanence on the political stage is seen as a distinct advantage for forwarding their respective causes. There are many other political networks in existence, however, that arguably may not yet merit the term 'movement'. Some examples include groups that lobby for the rights of indigenous peoples, for clean and ethical food production, and various scattered NIMBY struggles regarding waste incinerators or mobile phone masts. If these networks are successful in manipulating their cultural resources, they can indeed, like their predecessors, become more permanent features on the political landscape. However, it may be the case sometimes that they remain localised, temporary and/or ineffective by measurable criteria. Oloffson casts doubt over their potency:

> It looks like a paradox to claim that this flickering organisational structure is the authentic answer to a deep crisis of a whole civilisation.
>
> (Oloffson,1988:31)

The transitory nature of some groups such as LETS may be an uncomfortable pill for some movement advocates to swallow. However, one social theorist views this ephemerality not in negative terms, but as an actual resource. In Michel Maffesoli's approach to the study of social movements, the impermanence is seen as a permanent state of affairs (Maffesoli,1991; 1996). In the following section, Maffesoli's approach to social movements will be summarised, and the archaeology of his key ideas traced.

Maffesoli argues that people form social bonds and associations of many diverse types in contemporary society. Rather than being hindered by duty or contract, people are guided more by their feelings and asserting their freedom to express them. This gives rise to what he terms *puissance*, which refers to "the inherent energy and vital force of the people, as opposed to the institutions of 'power' (*'pouvoir'*)" (Maffesoli,1996:1). The predominance of this creativity or *puissance* leads to the emergence of a new type of society

called sociality. Originally theorised by Georg Simmel (1950), sociality is "the *glutinum mundi* and connecting tissues of everyday interaction and cooperation" (Shields, 1992:106). It has a complex and organic structure which is composed primarily of "affectual tribes", as opposed to modernity, which had a mechanical structure and was composed of contractual groups (Maffesoli,1996:6). These affectual tribes endeavour to form communities based on emotional connections, seeking warmth and companionship to shelter them from an often cold and rationalised world. Building on Weber's opus, he says that these "networks of solidarity" aim towards a re-enchantment of the world (ibid.:72). He says that contemporary socio-political life is characterised by torpidity or "political saturation", giving rise to such issues as "changes in values; the failure of the myth of progress; the resurgence of the qualitative; the increased devotion to hedonism; the continued preoccupation with the religious; the significance of the image" (ibid.:32). People draw from *puissance* in order to regain control over their own lives, in a world in which they feel alienated. His term for these networks is "neo-tribes", the "neo" referring to the fact that these are fully voluntary in character, and thrive on heterogeneity and social intermingling, based on what he terms the "polytheism of values" (ibid.:110). People come together to "bathe in the affectual ambience", but only temporarily, as they insist on "pirouetting from one group to another" (Maffesoli,1991:11). Belonging to these neo-tribes provides people with "sources of identity which, like masks, provide temporary 'identifications'" (Shields,1996:*xii*). Necessarily, these neo-tribes are ephemeral in character and their operations produce a highly complex social order that can be difficult to analyse. Indeed, he says that social analysts can only "surf" over the "waves of sociality" (Maffesoli,1996:5). The reasons for their surfacing might be the sudden emergence of an environmental hazard, the implications of government planning for a local area, or perhaps a single charismatic activist recruiting new members to her/his cause. This causes "more or less ephemeral tribal groupings [to] cohere on the basis of their own minor values, and which

attract and collide with each other in an endless dance, forming themselves into a constellation whose vague boundaries are perfectly fluid" (Maffesoli,1991:12).

The archaeology of the key idea of neo-tribes has been traced by Hetherington (1992) to the work of Schmalenbach, and especially his groundbreaking essay 'Communion - A Sociological Category' first published in 1922 (Schmalenbach,1977). A key argument to be harvested from this is his critique of Toennie's classic distinction between two forms of social relations:

> All intimate, private and exclusive living together is understood as life in Gemeinschaft (community). Gesellschaft (society) is public life - it is the world itself. (Toennies,1955:37)

This distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft is made regardless of what people actually feel about it and "...experiential feeling or sentiment is actually lost" (Schmalenbach,1977:78). Toennies conflates "circumstance and rapport" (Lüschen & Stone,1977:24). By this is meant that he assumes that people feel close to those within their commuity, based on "relationships of mutual affirmation" (ibid.:19). Schmalenbach feels that this is an indefensible position. Conflict and discord are endemic to families and wider communities, creating unhappiness among their members, but without changing the objective community ties. He gives us the category of Bund (communion) to denote those forms of association in which people voluntarily engage. The basis for communion is often a religious or high ideal about which people feel strongly. So emotional expression is the lifeblood of this type of grouping:

> The stuff of which [communion] is made, the basis of its sustenance, are the actual conscious experiences of feeling. (Schmalenbach,1977:84)

By its very nature, then, communion is characterised by instability because "…the more or less ectatic flood of emotion that sustains the communion and in which it survives is, by its very nature, a fleeting thing…it is not enduring" (ibid.:96). People rarely consciously feel strongly about community, emotions usually only emerging when challenged by others or during times of crisis. The rest of the time, community is taken for granted. It has become clear

from this discussion, then, that Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribes owes much to Schmalenbach's concept of Bünde.

Methodology and Methods:

Recognising the transitory nature of LETS membership, one needs to develop a methodology which does not reify it artificially, or grant it a sociologically inaccurate status as a movement. More satisfactory then, is a framework such as that provided by Maffesoli as outlined above. This grants it the credit it is due for its creativity and *puissance*. We can acknowledge LETS as a site of alternative socio-political and socio-economic activity, and yet foreground its ephemerality and porous borders. This necessitates a qualitative approach which prioritises member's lived experience of belonging to this neo-tribe. In this way, it is possible to compile something akin to a sociological profile of BATS members and their activities.

This research is primarily oriented towards locating Bantry LETS (BATS) in the mosaic of alternative socio-political formations in the west Cork area. It became clear from initial investigation that it did not serve a major economic role among the group, so focus was placed upon the socio-political functions of BATS, and and how it connects with other social and political activities in the region. This led me to enquire about members' social origins and connections with any other lobby groups or political parties.

Because the phenomenon under investigation is constantly changing, I was primarily interested in the meanings the members attached to their activities, and how they interpreted their own dynamic social context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with those who are most actively engaged in BATS on a regular basis, and a thumbnail sketch of each compiled as I was going along. I got their names from the BATS website and directory of names and services. Because of the heterogenous nature of the group of people in question, 'representativeness' *per se* could not be a concern. Out of a total current membership of forty one, ten members were interviewed, i.e. one

quarter of the total[2]. The interviews were virtually always conducted in their homes, so that a sense of their culture and lifestyle could be ascertained. This group were those who were active at committee level, and those who were most committed to making sure that BATS maintained its activity in the area. Broad questions were asked of the interviewees, regarding their motivations for joining BATS, the positive and negative aspects of their experience of it, their own backgrounds and their other political affiliations. Interviewees often gave me pieces of their internal literature regarding up-to-date developments within LETS. I also attended the monthly farmers' markets that occur in the broad Bantry area, in which most BATS members are involved.

Bantry LETS: A Sociological Profile

Is it possible to develop a sociological profile of Bantry LETS members, based on social class or other factors? Williams (1996) conducted a major survey of all the 275 British LETS that were then in existence. He found that the majority of members were "greens or alternatives", even though some LETS were beginning to attract the poor and unemployed. A significant sub-set was emerging which he termed "the disenfranchised middle class" (ibid.:1410). The socially excluded did not generally join LETS because of their lack of relevant social connections, demoralisation and lack of confidence and/or social skills (ibid.:1411). Lee (1996) also questions the extent to which LETS is open to the poor and unemployed, the group who could potentially benefit most from it. Is the situation any different in west Cork? The vexed question of social class cannot be separated in the west Cork context from another key variable. Virtually all of the LETS members in west Cork are incomers to the area, sometimes pejoritively denoted 'blow-ins' by local people "as a device for class levelling" (Eipper,1986:134). They are often much more interested than locals in preserving, and indeed revitalising, such traditional craft skills as thatching and basket-making (Hopkin, 2002). This immigrant group are difficult to pin down sociologically, but all evidence so far points to a

[2] Their names were changed here for the purpose of confidentiality.

preponderance of English, German and Dutch people (Crowley, 2000; Hegarty, 1994). The Bantry LETS membership list reveals virtually no Irish names. Social class alone seems too crude an instrument to analyse this nebulous group of people. Their sense of association is broadly based on ecological and/or socialist principles and a possible sense of isolation and exclusion as 'blow-ins'.

Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the individual's *class trajectory* is very applicable to this group. It refers to the importance of one's individual life path and the different values, attitudes and practices one develops as a result. Bourdieu differentiates, for example, between those who have always been a member of the bourgeoisie, throughout the generations, and the "serendipity of the autodidact", the fortune of the self-taught, who has made his/her own way up through the education system and gained accredited credentials, with an attendent rise in status (Bourdieu,1984:265). While the current (counter-urban) phase of the incomers' class trajectory has lowered their objective position on the social class 'totem-pole', they have retained enough of each type of capital (economic, cultural and social/symbolic[3]) to give them skills that could be used in their work and political activities. As was noted earlier, it was lack of social connections and lack of confidence and/or social skills that prevented people from joining LETS in Britain, so cultural capital has already been shown to be crucial in this regard.

West Cork has a reputation for a relatively high level of in-migration ranging right across the social spectrum from middle-class Irish and European retirees to young New Age Travellers[4]. These migrants choose the more robust lifestyle of the west Cork countryside, eschewing the convenience of urban life, be it in Dusseldorf, Dundee or Dublin. Hegarty

[3] *Economic capital* refers to the ownership of money, property, land and other financial assets, *cultural capital* is determined by the inheritance of educational and social resources, and *symbolic capital* refers to the domain of the prestige and renown that one, or one's family, possesses because of one's social connections and relationships with other power-holders.

[4] Some asylum-seekers now also live in the west Cork area, but no choice can be exercised on their part, due to the direct provision policy of the Irish government.

(1994), in her research in the area, found the incomers to be both counter-urban and counter-cultural, and not deeply rooted in the area, many surviving on the income from fragile small businesses. They often live in clusters based on nationality, e.g. like the English in Skibbereen, they live mostly on the coast, and she argues that they live according to separate socio-cultural geographies. It is probably the case that this group derive from the middle class and upper middle class in their places of origin. They have a more conscious sense of cultural association, since they have no family history in the area upon which to rely for identity. They are self-contradictory in a way, because while they may be cosmopolitan in their outlook, they are still searching for an organic community in the area (ibid.). Forsythe (1980) also found that the migrants to a remote rural community in the north of Scotland were mostly of a middle class or upper middle class background. This group, which she terms "urban refugees", "...do not come to the countryside to practice their previous professions but to make a radical change in their own style of life" (Forsythe,1980:287). They personify the counter-urbanisation trend that has become so socially significant in Ireland and elsewhere in the western world (Fielding,1989).

The incomers that are actively committed to LETS are those who have put down significant roots in west Cork. Four out of ten of those interviewed have lived in west Cork for over twenty years and two for ten to twenty years. They have bought property, they run businesses, they send their children to school, and generally have no intention of changing this situation. Eight of the ten are English, one is Dutch and one Irish. They are generally articulate and confident, and all of them are socially active in one way or another. They all have been or are currently involved in environmentalist or peace activism. Three supported the Greenham Common protest in the UK. Three interviewees make their living from organic farming and gardening. Some are self-employed, some in casual employment, some in community development organisations. Generally, this group of people live according to ecological principles. Ecology is defined as:

> ...a set of beliefs, theories and projects that consider humankind as a component of a broader ecosystem and wish to maintain the system's balance in a dynamic, evolutionary perspective. (Castells,1997: 112-13)

This group usually name self-sufficiency as a personal goal, and most are quite passionate about some aspect(s) of community development, from forestry to youth services to sewage treatment. All are very hard-working and have made brave life-altering decisions to commit to independent counter-cultural lifestyles.

Virtually all of the interviewees brought up the nationality issue of their own volition. It was felt that LETS was a means of making contact with others, and a means of counteracting isolation. One woman says:

> Locals don't need it because they already know each other. It's good for new people moving into the area. (Jane)

It is an intentional, conscious means of creating interdependence among the incomers. It creates a kind of manufactured community for this group, which has, perhaps unintentionally, become relatively exclusive to incomers with environmentalist and/or socialist views. Jan says:

> The majority of members are incomers to the area. I think they want a sense of belonging, and to be part of a community. It's all about interacting with each other and establishing trust. The parties we have are important too. They just want a simple life to sustain themselves. (Jan)

Not everybody was happy about this state of affairs, though. The following are some of the views that were expressed:

> *I think it's sad that it's mostly blow-ins that are in it*. The locals don't formalise things because they don't have to. There's an understandable mistrust of outsiders. The locals know and trust each other, whereas in the blow-in system, people have to build up confidence in each other. (Ken)

> It's not a real scheme until I can get a piece of meat from a local farmer in LETS. (John)

> I think there's a problem with English blow-ins separating themselves off and not mixing with local people. It's fashionable among 'alternative' people. (Paul)

The latter quote is from a man who is originally English himself, living in west Cork for twenty years. LETS serves as a means of establishing contact for incomers to the area. Some mentioned, however, that there was a minor

problem with some freeloaders who were not committed to the ideology of LETS.

> There's a problem of blow-ins moving in, building up negative credit on LETS and then moving on after one hard winter. (John)

> It's a problem when people come in and use LETS for what they can get out of it. (Sara)

Length of residency can therefore become a basis of differentiation among the incomers. This was also found to be important in Phillips' study of social relations in a village in the Yorkshire Dales. There, as here, there is a distinction made between those incomers who had lived in the area, say, since the 1960s, the "old incomers", or recent arrivals, the "new incomers" (Phillips,1986: 149). One incomer, in Crowley's previous research in the area, hinted that some of the people who had been living in the area for 15-20 years or more bore some resentment towards those incomers who were now building second homes, and who were not "committed" to contributing to the long-term future of the area (Crowley, 2000:356). This issue becomes especially crucial in a relatively formalised system such as LETS which is fundamentally based upon consolidating trust and delayed reciprocity between members.

Members' Experiences of LETS

The key members of Bantry LETS are strongly motivated by a politics of economic localisation. This may be defined as follows:

> ...a plausible way to reverse the instability and insecurity that trade liberalisation has wrought upon the world. The essence of these policies [localisation] is to allow nations, local governments and communities to reclaim control over their local economies; to make them as diverse as possible; and to rebuild stability into community life. (Hines,2000:29)

This very sentiment was expressed by one respondent, who explained his approach thus:

> LETS is only one part of a much bigger picture. Western consumers indirectly contribute to wars. We need to learn to live without polluting and exploiting resources. Mainstream economics is destroying the world. We have to try to localise the economy and reduce food miles. (Jan)

Two other respondents explained their motivations as follows:

> LETS is a community thing - it's about being part of something. It's a way to meet local people, and also wealth stays within the community. People get credit for their skills that they might not otherwise - it's really about social inclusion. (Wendy)

> Around the Millenium, there was a lot of apocalyptic thinking, regarding what would we do if the whole system collapsed. LETS was a low-tech answer to that based on socialist principles of promotion of talents and equality of payment. It's an idealistic thing, to work within the community. (Fiona)

According to its advocates, then, the economic imperative of LETS involves retaining wealth within the community and not contributing to the massive profits of multinational corporations and banks. This suggests that there is a strong ideological and/or symbolic element to LETS membership, providing a mask of identity which makes people feel comfortable. For example, Purdue and colleagues found that non-traders were often the first to pay their subs each year, hence they "…enjoy a sense of collective identity and local belonging"(Purdue et al., 1997:659).

The main advantage of LETS, as reported by the sample of members, was the social one "because you can meet like-minded people" (Paul). It introduced people to each other and let people know basic information from the member's list. This was stressed by virtually all of the respondents.

> The benefit of LETS is mainly social. It's better to buy and sell to your own community. (Ken)

> Its biggest advantage is the social side – it's a way of connecting with people that doesn't involve money. (Mary)

> It just seemed like a good idea to have people help each other out. (Sara)

Another reported advantage was that one was positively encouraged to perform services in LETS that were very different to one's everyday job, thereby cutting the oft-seeming inextricable link between one's job and one's identity.

> It's a way of trying out a new skill that you mightn't be too sure of. (Mary)

> It helps to get things done, like carpentry and the garden. I've sold beds, boat engines, vegetables, jams, all sorts of things. (Fiona)

The disadvantage of this, though, is that the work done might not always be to the most professional standards. One respondent questioned the actual skills of the people involved, and provided examples of shoddy work done by unqualified people.

As one would expect, members do not always agree on certain aspects of LETS. An advantage for one can be a disadvantage for another. For example, one respondent, Paul likes the formality and accountability of LETS. He says:

> The way people help each other here can be a woolly arrangement. With LETS, there are clear figures involved, and you don't feel like you owe people. I like the structure of it. (Paul)

On the other hand, John feels that LETS measures things too much, which goes against his understanding of the Irish principle of '*meitheal*', which is less concerned about precise reciprocity. He feels that the quantification involved is too like the money economy. He adds:

> That's an inherent flaw, it's a mirror of the other system. (John)

This small disagreement hints at the idea that a spectrum of views can be accommodated within the remit of LETS.

When asked what the disadvantages of LETS were, the responses largely had to do with the difficulty of maintaining such a system during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger. Even though its effect in west Cork was indeed limited, it did have a positive impact upon the construction and retail sectors, both of which employ a significant number of people. It has been found elsewhere that LETS will only work well among a group of people who are "time-rich and cash-poor" (Offe & Heinze, 1992:1). There needs to be an economic benefit in it for people to stay with the programme, because "...if everyone is fully occupied and finds that their activities are not seriously restricted for lack of cash, why should they bother to join a LETS?" (Douthwaite, 1996:86). As two respondents put it:

> If you're short of money, you have to be inventive. (Mary)

> People are running after the Celtic Tiger madly and don't have time for LETS. Fiona)

However, the Celtic Tiger economy is not quite as reliable as it was before 2001, and some LETS members think that this less certain economic climate will yield some more interest in LETS:

> The Celtic Tiger has nearly killed it around here. When people can get jobs, they have enough money, and they have no time for LETS. So there's a connection with the mainstream economy - when people can find 'real' work, they don't have the energy or motivation to join LETS. With the downturn in the Celtic Tiger, I think LETS will pick up again. (Wendy)

> A slump in the real economy would be needed for people to feel they needed LETS to fall back on. It's quite easy to get work around here now, if you look for it. (Sara)

When membership falls off, as it has in west Cork, from c.250 to 40 members, the whole system suffers in terms of how it is perceived by existing and prospective members:

> It is weak at the moment because there is not a sufficient range of goods and services to sustain it. (Jan)

> It's a problem when you accumulate a surplus of BATS and then can't spend them. There's nothing on offer that I want. (Jane)

> People need cash...it's habit. Sometimes I will trade for part BATS, part cash, because you have to be realistic. (Paul)

Some also reported that there are not enough practical skills on offer, and that the more 'alternative' aspects come to the fore:

> You could get someone to give you a massage, but no-one to dig your garden. (John)

The difficulty of maintaining such a system in a rather large, scattered rural area was also reported as a rather major problem.

> You need a small pocket to be sustainable and to grow awareness. (Jan)

> There's no incentive to go all the way to Bantry [30 miles away] to do work for someone you don't know, or who isn't likely to become part of your community. (Mary)

> I mean, what does local mean? It used to mean townland, but not anymore. The distance you have to travel turns people off. There's a reluctance to get involved in the committee as a result...Communication can be a problem,

> because divisions emerge between different areas. Bantry LETS covers a huge area and realistically, people trade in pockets, with people who are near them. (Fiona)

Another side-effect of decreased membership, and a problem for every voluntary effort, is that a very small core of people tend to end up running it:

> It gets very heavy when only a few people do all the work. (Fiona)

> At Committee level, people bicker about the amount of work they're doing, and that depletes the energies of LETS. (John)

> The complexity of the accounting is a problem too. It needs to be user-friendly, because if two or three people end up doing all the work, they're going to grow to resent it. Mary)

> It's gone a bit stale and there has been talk of disbanding. We need new faces, people to do the organisation and to come to meetings. (Wendy)

The committee of Bantry LETS is re-grouping at the moment to try to deal with some of the problems raised above. They are attempting to make it more attractive for more people to get involved. There is a strong committment on their behalf to keep the system working as effectively as possible. However this works out in practice, a very important aspect of its evolution is that it serves as a basis for network-building among a group of people who are interested in strengthening the local economy and reducing their dependence on the mainstream economy. It has served as a social springboard for involvement in other political groupings. It is to this aspect that we now turn.

It is virtually impossible to speak with this highly socially conscious group of people solely about their involvement with LETS, as nearly all of them are or have been otherwise politically engaged in one way or another. LETS is intimately connected to some other activities in the area. Some members met up years earlier in Earthwatch, for example, and joined LETS afterwards. Earthwatch is an environmentalist group which was founded in 1980 in Bantry by an English man, Jeremy Bates, and the town in fact served as the national headquarters until recently. The majority of members have been incomers, both Irish and foreign. Earthwatch had many conflicts with

local business interests over the years locally, especially as Bantry was a locus for Gulf Oil[5]. O'Keeffe says that they were usually interpreted by locals as "anti-progress hippies":

> The outsiders' attempts to protect the local environment had been interpreted by the insiders as an attempt to stifle local development. (O'Keeffe,1995:156)

One of the interviewees, John, was involved with Earthwatch, whom he criticised for alienating local people, to such an extent that they could not speak to local councillors to work on local issues. He said that their catchphrase could have been 'Think Global, Ignore Local' (John), instead of the environmentalist slogan 'Think Global, Act Local'.

Some other respondents feel that the everyday work they do is political. Fiona is trying to improve the community she lives in, through her work in youth outreach and education. John used to run a logging business which operated as a co-operative in the 1970s. This was based on workers being paid in firewood, an alternative currency called Logs. He still occasionally trades firewood, plants and crafts for work done. Mary works for the National Association of Health Food Stores, lobbying that they be recognised as legitimate by the government. She is also passionately concerned about alternative energy, declining water quality and sewage treatment. She is interested in anaerobic digestion, where slurry and other organic waste is converted to methane and soil conditioner. Along with Jan, another LETS member, she is lobbying through a local community development organisation to have this taken seriously by the County Council.

A new development in recent months has been the establishment of a Cork branch of the Irish Social Forum by some of the Bantry LETS members: Cork Social Forum (CSF)[6]. This in turn is part of a global network based on co-operation and solidarity. It is an encounter between different social movements, non-governmental organisations and activists who are concerned about the injustices caused by neo-liberalist global economics and development policies. They aim to create a space in Irish civil society to

[5] For detailed discussion of this development, see Eipper,1986.

discuss issues that might otherwise be ignored. The Cork branch express their goals thus:

> CSF is a meeting point for anyone opposed to war, globalisation, environmental destruction and political corruption; for anyone in favour of co-operation, positive action, sharing information and working towards a better world. (CSF Newsletter, Sept.2003)

The issues that have been raised so far at CSF meetings include single father's rights, gay rights, immigrant support, water quality, neutrality and picketing Irish arms factories. An invitation to a conference in March '04 read:

> Whether you are a farmer, a doctor, or a teacher; a parent, a builder a traveller or an immigrant; gay, straight, young or old; white, black or red. If you want to help your own, and the collective situation by working with others towards just, sustainable, compassionate solutions…

As well as addressing these disparate issues, the forum has also been used in an attempt to re-invigorate LETS locally. This is the type of forum referred to by Melucci which are independent of government and can create a "democracy of eveyday life" (Melucci,1988:259). These are:

> ...soft institutionalised systems favouring the appropriation of knowledge and the production of symbolic resources; and open systems in which information can be circulated and controlled. (ibid.)

One interviewee, John, is very enthusiastic about CSF, and he thinks that the issues of corruption and rural housing could be ways of building links between 'blow-ins' and locals. He says:

> I think groups like this are like yeast, and a way to spread the issues to the locals. (John)

Since it is such a new development, it is too early to attempt to measure the social impact of such a group.

Another network that is intimately connected to LETS is the growing number of farmers' markets in County Cork and elsewhere throughout the country. This is part of a growing trend in Ireland, which suggests that some people are growing more concerned about the traceability of the food they eat. Since the several food scares experienced in Europe and the US in recent years, the politics of food has become much more sensitive and indeed

[6] See their website www.irishsocialforum.org for more information.

potentially explosive. In the context of global consumer society, producing foods with connotations of the 'local' has now been re-evaluated as a potential developmental niche. Some producers are thus now selling their goods at farmers' markets in order to gain competitive advantage. The environmental benefits of this approach are outlined succintly in the following, by one of its main Irish advocates, chef Darina Allen:

> Farmers' markets benefit the environment by encouraging sustainable agriculture and small-scale, less intensive production. They reduce the effects of long-distance transport of food and the need for excess packaging. (Allen, 2003:6)

She goes on to extol the social benefits of face-to-face interaction:

> They provide a thoroughly enjoyable opportunity for the consumer to meet the person who produces their food and *helps to rebuild the bond of trust,* which has been so badly damaged over recent years. (my emphasis)(ibid.)

The issue of trust was raised also by one of the main local ideologues of LETS:

> We need food in the circle and that is why we have started a farmer's market. In that way, trust can be established and we can then do more things. (Jan)

This appears to be a way for a group who would often have been dismissed as 'hippies' or 'blow-ins' by local people to carve a niche for themselves in the local social structure, and thereby to achieve more social acceptance and integration on their own terms.

Discussion

Schmalenbach's concept of communion is indeed very applicable to LETS membership. This group has a relatively loose sense of connection with each other, but are very committed to LETS for a period, be it 2 years or 20. They also use it as a means of getting to know other people, with whom they may share ideas about other types of political activity. LETS is a relatively recent phenomenon in west Cork, and only grew out of the actions of a group of people who were new to each other and not native to the area. Among them we can witness what Schmalenbach noted back in 1922, that is "…a diffuse yearning for community-in-general" (Schmalenbach,1977:91). Having moved to rural Ireland, these incomers have now developed a group identity

based on their 'blow-in' status and their common goal of economic localisation. As Schmalenbach explained:

> The communion emerges among them as soon as those confronting each other after being "touched" perceive the common bent of their feelings and excite one another on this basis. The communion does not emerge before this instant. It emerges out of a new feeling that is now a communion of feeling, now social for the first time. (Schmalenbach,1977:87)

Their communion is based on " their embrace of the 'local authority' of what is 'close to home', based on local territoriality; dependable and micro-social" (Shields, 1992:108). LETS is the ultimate expression of these very ideals.

The values that hold neo-tribes together often are not directly political, but have more to do with the aesthetic realm. As Maffesoli says:

> …after *homo politicus* and *homo economicus*, are we not confronted with the arrival of *homo aestheticus*? (Maffesoli,1991:19)

This is what he terms the dionysiac form, which has to do with spiritualism, sensuality, emotions, and often the valuing of local cultural life and other features which add enjoyment and happiness to people's lives. LETS certainly can be viewed as part of this general *puissance*, whose (broadly ecological) goal is to inject new life into localities and increase people's self-sufficiency and sense of connection to the environment.

This group of people take their role in community building extremely seriously. They take "personal responsibility for multiple aspects of their collective existence" (Maffesoli,1996:33). They blend modern and traditional goals to create a "dynamic rootedness" (ibid.). Because its origins are conscious and voluntary, the survival of a neo-tribe (such as LETS) is founded upon self-monitoring by their members (Halfacree,1997:86). This can, of course, produce difficulties and tensions which can contribute to their premature demise. People have to be very committed to active trading to keep the system working. This can be difficult enough, especially considering the long distances between members in a large area like west Cork.

This urge to identify with others, to 'belong', may have been latent for years in many cases, and hence can mobilise very quickly once the wheels are set in motion by one or more key social actors. The latent period can thus be

part of the process of mobilisation, because "...what nourishes it [collective action] is the daily production of alternative frameworks of sense, on which the networks are founded and live from day to day" (Melucci, 1988:248). This is not a smooth process, and the peaks of activity are sporadic and temporary in character. The fluctuations in BATS membership are an indicator of this, which went from over 200 in the mid-1990s to just 41 now. We also need to be sensitive to social context, and it is no accident that this occured during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger. With the links that are now developing between LETS and other networks as described above, it will probably revitalise LETS and appear more attractive to new members. The context of this change is a renewed committment on behalf of the EU to encourage ecological farming practices and care for the environment (see Crowley,2003).

It is often only when conflicts emerge that the parties involved are forced to clearly articulate their positions. Melucci terms these "moments of mobilisation" (Melucci, 1988:248). An example of this was seen in recent years in Bantry after an impromptu street market started to become a regular occurance, especially on the first Friday of every month, which had traditionally been the Fair Day in the town. The local business owners objected to its presence, and a court battle ensued. One of the casual traders represented himself in court and ultimately won the case. The Fair Day is now a bustling affair and undoubtedly brings more business to the shop, pub and hotel owners who objected to it in the first place. This is a major coup for the 'blow-ins', who have a history of conflict with the locals in the town. Melucci says of such conflicts:

> …they can prevent the system from closing in upon itself by obliging the ruling groups to innovate, to permit changes among elites, to admit what was previously excluded from the decision-making arena and to expose the shadowy zones of invisible power and silence which a system and its dominant interests inevitably tend to create. (Melucci, 1988:254)

This counter-urban group, being rich in cultural capital, are likely candidates for such forms of cultural innovation. Another side-effect of such types of engegement is that people learn a lot along the way, empowering themselves

with new talents and skills (Hetherington,1992:94). This leads to the situation where lifestyles that in the past were profoundly countercultural and *avant-garde*, now being stabilised and part of the mainstream, as hobbies transmogrify into thriving businesses.

A particular vision of the role of the countryside is at stake in the symbolic struggles in which these neo-tribes inevitably engage. This vision forms part of what Frouws terms "the hedonist discourse", which is of urban origin and is concerned with quality of life issues such as deterioration of the aesthetic and cultural qualities of the countryside (Frouws,1998:62). This set of concerns is shaped by some ephemeral combination(s) of socialist, anarchist, conservationist, deep green, pluralist and egalitarian ideals. Conflicts are inevitable because these ideals often appear to the local population to be Luddite, anti-progress and anti-farmer. This is a key issue that needs to be addressed by this socially active group, before they can gain more widespread social acceptance in the locality.

Conclusion

This research has found that while LETS is not exactly thriving at the moment in west Cork, it nevertheless has spread its wings and given rise to other types of contact between people where different issues are addressed. This group of people are socio-cultural innovators whose actions and strategies do not always appear coherent to established social actors. However, Melucci warns:

> Without the capacity of listening to these voices, new forms of power may thus coalesce, though multiple and diffuse and no longer reducible to any linear and easily recognisable geometry. (Melucci, 1996:1)

While appearing to be transient and disorganised, they nevertheless are a strong indicator of the need for new intellectual spaces to be created in rural Ireland.

At a more practical level, a crucial question for the flourishing of LETS in Ireland and elsewhere is its level of social inclusiveness. In the British context, Williams asserts that several changes need to be made to LETS before

it can become more socially inclusive. However, the single overriding factor there is that LETS income is treated as earnings by the state for those in receipt of unemployment benefit. Until this changes, other internal changes are less crucial. These are, nevertheless, firstly, that the range of goods and services needs to be expanded, so that people can get what they need from it. Secondly, it needs to become less like an environmentalist club that spreads by word-of-mouth, and a broader membership targeted through local publicity campaigns. Thirdly, there needs to be more equity of payment for work performed by all members so that social inequality is not reproduced within the LETS (ibid.:1411-12)[7]. These suggestions point to the counter-cultural nature of LETS, which may be off-putting to many people, whose inputs could be just those that are required to revitalise LETS. This is important in the Irish context, where the barrier of state regulation does not exist. So far, the Irish state generally leaves LETS members alone, because they have so little impact on the mainstream economy (Douthwaite, 1996:117).

To return to the question of whether LETS is a social movement, we can now conclude that this is probably too formal a term for it. However, it forms part of a growing constellation of groups who are concerned with the future of the Irish countryside. Its members are a neo-tribe who connect with each other on the basis of shared ecological values. They use LETS as a social springboard from which they launch other political activities. Their enthusiasm is infectious as they signify for rural areas "an irresistible renaissance" (Maffesoli,1996:35). However, he also says that the activities of neo-tribes are not the most effective:

> This is a thoroughly tragic perspective, which is aimed less at changing the world than getting used to it and tinkering with it. (Maffesoli,1996:51)

This 'tinkering', however, can produce fairly profound local effects by opening peoples' minds regarding the best type of future for rural areas, and instilling some hope where despondency may previously have been the order of the day.

[7] For reported gender differentials in types of work done and amount of pay, see Lee,

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