WORKING CLASS CULTURES CAN THEY ADAPT?

Bill Toner S.J. *

Introduction

When I was growing up in the 1950s I lived in Drimnagh, an area of Dublin which was on the line between working class and lower middle class. My parents were on this line too, having both left school at or before fourteen. My father had been fortunate enough to progress into a technical and then into a clerical job, so we gradually became upwardly mobile. I got a good secondary education, in a Christian Brothers school where many of the students went on to university. But my parents were not enthusiastic about university. My mother occasionally ridiculed a neighbour who talked about her hopes that her daughter "would go on to Uni", and thought the woman to have 'airs and graces'. My father used to cite the case of a cousin who *had* gone on to university and then 'had' to emigrate. He encouraged me instead to apply for a clerical position in the company where he worked, which I did, successfully.

I had thought vaguely about going to university but the matter did not bother me very much at the time. None of my friends in the area where I lived went, though a number of my class mates did. It was not the case that my parents could not *afford* to send me, though it might have been a pinch. But there was something in their culture which made them believe that university was not a good option, or, perhaps, that it was not for people like us. Perhaps a crucial factor was that my school was on the other side of the city from where we lived, so that my parents did not interact with many parents outside their own culture. If I have to 'blame' anyone for not going to university at that stage of my life I am inclined to 'blame' that culture (or sub-culture), not the system' , not my parents nor myself.

The Crisis in Working Class Culture

I am reminded of this personal experience whenever I ponder the question as to why so many of the children in the area where I now live drop out of school at an early age, sometimes as young as twelve (Note 1)

It is only one of a number of social problems in our area, but it connects into the others. For instance, many of the adults, particularly males, are not working, and second generation unemployment is now common. One also encounters teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, high levels of debt, low disposable income, vandalism, and involvement in crime. Of course there are many families in the locality without any of these problems, but in general Cherry Orchard would be regarded as a disadvantaged area.

The concentration by the media on negative aspects of working class culture should not distract us from the positive aspects of the culture. Working class people are generally warmer, more spontaneous, less given to posturing than her middle-class counterparts. They are also likely to be less concerned with material success, and less likely to sacrifice their personal happiness to the need to get ahead. They live in the present rather than the future, and have a great capacity for celebration. They support their neighbours and are tolerant of personal failings. They are less likely to retreat into the anonymity and love of privacy that characterises the middle class.

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But in recent times structural factors, many if not all emanating from outside the working-class culture, have inflicted serious damage on this culture. A child who lives in a really 'tough' area of our cities and towns is increasingly at risk of stunted intellectual development, of little or no job fulfilment and limited income, of addiction to drugs and involvement in crime, of a chaotic family life founded on the shaky foundation of a teenage pregnancy. What has happened? For one thing, the comparatively low levels of education and skills characteristic of this culture is now leading to long-term unemployment, which in turn 'marginalises' the culture. Various structural factors have contributed to this. The advance of technology, successive recessions, and the liberalisation of world trade, have wiped out many of the jobs traditionally filled by the working class in Ireland.

Unemployment is not the only cause of the crisis of lower working class culture, though there is widespread agreement that it plays a major role. Widening inequalities in society, increased availability of drugs, changes in sexual behaviour and in traditional values, are other factors. The lower working class is now in crisis. If the success of a culture can be judged on its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and to deliver a good quality of life to those who are part of it, then this culture is failing many of its members. Several recent studies have underlined the continuous distress experienced by many, especially young people in lower working class areas where there is high unemployment (Note 2).

The Place of Education

Education, or the lack of it, is a key factor. Many of the jobs formerly carried out by the unskilled working class required little formal education or training. It is perhaps as a consequence of this that education and training are seen as less relevant in lower working class culture. Forty years ago young working-class people were encouraged to go out to work at the earliest possible opportunity, in the belief that 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'.

Whatever the reasons, the last few decades have left many of the working class behind. Although over 80% of the population are now educated to Leaving Certificate standard, there are children in lower working class areas who are not completing even primary school. A recent survey of the long-term unemployed shows that 74% had not completed second-level education, and little more than 5% had proceeded beyond the Leaving Certificate. There is a significant 'step' between the clearly practical 'three Rs', and the less immediately relevant syllabus of the secondary school, and many lower working class people are not crossing this divide. But most of the newer factory jobs in Ireland, such as those in the computer and pharmaceutical industries, require operatives to have a Leaving or at least a Junior Certificate. While this is often seen as a luxury, and a case of 'qualification inflation', many factory jobs now require operatives to use sophisticated technology. For better or worse too, a more sophisticated level of service has also come to be expected in shops, restaurants, and other areas of service. All of these factors have made 'outsiders' of the lower working class (Note 3).

Traditional Views of the Problem

The increasing strains visible in working-class culture have led to two quite different responses from social commentators, one view coming from the 'left', and the other from the 'right'.

Those on the left have tended to blame the 'system' or the 'structures' for problems of working-class areas. For instance one can blame:

- the capitalist system, for destroying jobs in the interest of profit, and for creating huge inequalities of wealth;

- the Local Authorities, for building huge urban ghettos and failing to take responsibility for the lack of services and amenities characteristic of these areas;

- the Government, for failing to put sufficient resources into services in these areas, such as health and education, and for failing to protect unskilled workers and their families from the worst effects of the free market culture;

- The Church, for failing to speak out against the marginalisation of communities, and for supporting elitism, for instance in education.

- The Judiciary, for failing to take account of the different pressures that affect the rich and the poor, and that lead the poor to commit more 'public' crimes, while the 'private' crimes of the rich rarely come to light.

At the other end of the spectrum is the right, who blame the woes of the working class not on the system, but on the individual. This viewpoint has been famously captured in the catch-phrase 'On your bike, Norman', derived from an interview with the British Tory M.P. Norman Tebbit, in which he described how his unemployed father had got on his bike and gone out looking for work until he found it. Those on the right stress the virtues of personal responsibility and initiative. Poverty is not due to imbalances of power, but personal inefficiency.

In its more extreme form, the view from the right shows poor social analysis, and betrays a limited understanding of how people are socialised and motivated. Of course it is true in the abstract that people must take responsibility for their own lives, but their ability to do this is severely limited by the possibilities open to them.

The view from the left cannot be so easily criticized. The structures of the larger society can be very oppressive on those outside the magic circle of wealth, power and influence. Modern liberal democracies like Ireland tend to be run more in the interests of the rich than the interests of the poor. The rich have the wealth, the access to media, the networks, and will instinctively move to protect what they see as theirs. That is not to say that governments or other agencies are unconcerned about the poor, but their concern tends to be limited by their own vested interests.

However, even though 'the system' is seen to be at fault, there is a growing realization that it is very difficult to reform the 'system'. In particular, the collapse of the experimental societies of Eastern Europe has brought about a loss of faith in the ability to create a truly equitable social system.

There is also a growing awareness that reforms of the wider system will not easily solve the current crisis of the working class. For instance, long-term unemployment is proving quite intractable, with the current economic boom leading to only a small reduction in numbers. Although many new jobs are being created, many of the long-term unemployed do not have the education and skills to compete for them. The early school drop-outs of today are the long-term unemployed of tomorrow.

Micro-Structures and Sub-Cultures

Much of recent social analysis has focused on the overall structures of society. Social analysis typically looks at the economic, political and cultural structures of society (Note 4).

But take the case of Gemma, a twelve year old girl in a local authority estate who has just dropped out of school. Gemma's mother has not asked her to leave school. But it is likely that the mother, herself disadvantaged, had a bad experience of school and, although she recognises the importance of schooling in general, she does not expect it to be of benefit to her children. There is little support in the home for study. There is not enough physical space set aside, or quiet, or even light, for homework. Having dropped out of school herself, Gemma's mother is unable to help her. The television is left on for most of the evening. With Gemma's mother in a part-time job, household income is not negligible. But expenditure on school-related items, such as books, uniforms and trips, is not a priority and Gemma begins to feel more

and more uncomfortable in the school environment. Many of the neighbour's children have already dropped out of school, some to take up low-paid and part-time jobs. So Gemma drops out of school, with the acquiescence of her mother, and is likely to be among the ranks of the long-term unemployed by her early twenties (Note 5).

The reasons for Gemma dropping out of school are *structural*, not personal. But the structures in question are not, *here and now*, primarily those of the larger society, but the more immediate structures of family and culture and environment. They are the same kind of structures which, in my own case, 'prevented' me from going on to Third Level in the fifties. It is important to emphasise that these are *structures* (Note 6), which determine Gemma's life chances every bit as much as the larger societal structures.

In general these 'micro-structures' (the 'small' structures) are not paid sufficient attention to in social analysis. The tendency is to focus on the bigger structures, the '*macro*-structures' such as the government or the economic system. Certainly the macro-system is significant. For instance, the primary school that Gemma attends, like all primary schools, is under-funded.
    Yet even if the government were to pump millions of pounds into the primary system, it is the better-off children in the system who are likely to benefit, and Gemma is still likely to drop out. The state could also do more to 'track' children like Gemma through the school system; they could even put her in care. But there are many Gemmas, and we know that it is easier to bring a horse to water than to make it drink. It may be that previous macro-systems, such as the economic policy of earlier generations, have contributed to the creation of social classes and marginalisation, just as current social policies are contributing to their perpetuation. Yet here and now there is little point in blaming, say, the present government, for the fact that Gemma has dropped out. The micro-structure within which Gemma lives is shaping the behaviour of people in that structure, and this behaviour in turn will reproduce the same micro-structure in the next generation unless it changes.

The Role of Poverty

There is little doubt that relative poverty plays a part in Gemma dropping out of school. But it does not fully explain why children from poor backgrounds do badly at school or drop out (Note 7). Poverty is part of a 'package' that characterises this culture, and can be looked on as an 'effect' as much as a 'cause' of other aspects of the culture. There is an inter-generational cycle that can be expressed as 'poverty → deprived home environment → poor education → unemployment → poverty' but it is in the nature of cycles that they are circular, and one could just as easily start the cycle with one of the other components. It is hard to change one component without a change in the others. Undoubtedly, increasing social welfare payments above poverty levels would certainly make it easier for many families to pay for school-related expenses. But it is doubtful if an injection of cash into lower working class homes would, on its own, break the cycle. Nor does an increase in the number of jobs carry any guarantee that the long-term unemployed can access them (Note 8).

How Do Cultures Adapt?

There is not a sharp distinction between culture and structures. Culture refers to behaviour, belief systems and values; structure refers more to the rules and norms thrown up by the culture. When we talk about changing structures we are usually talking about changing the culture also. The question is: Is it possible for lower working class culture to adapt to the changing environment in a way that will give greater fulfilment to those who are part of that culture?

There has been considerable discussion of the way *change* happens in society, but the discussion has been characterised by uncertainty, and dogged by ideological issues. At the same

time there is a veritable industry dealing with change in another kind of sub-culture, namely, the business organisation. Business consultants have had no scruple about going into organisations with the message, 'Adapt or die'. Can any of the insights of writers in this area be applied to the sub-cultures of society?

In recent organisational theory (Note 9) it is common to analyse sub-cultures as made up of different 'levels', namely, assumptions, values, artefacts, and symbols. These are depicted in the following Diagram in the form of a pyramid, with each level springing out of the level below it.

SYMBOLS
ARTEFACTS
V A L U E S
A S S U M P T I O N S
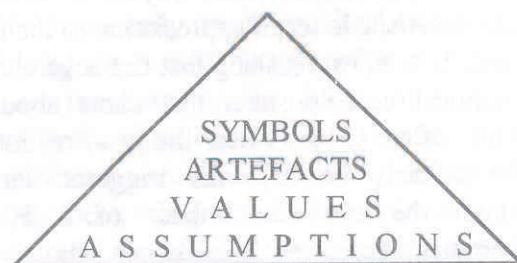
In this analysis there are, firstly, basic *assumptions* in the sub-culture. These form the bedrock of the sub-culture and are unconscious for the most part. These assumptions concern such things as: the relationship of the sub-culture to the wider environment; the nature of 'truth' and what is 'real'; human nature and the point of human activity; and the nature of human relationships. For instance, an unconscious assumption of poorer working-class people could be that they are 'outsiders'.

Values describe what 'ought' to be done, in the light of the basic assumptions. For instance, if there is an assumption that life is competitive rather than co-operative, there is seen to be a value in fighting rather than talking, and combat skills are more valued than social skills.

Artefacts include technology and art, but also visible patterns of behaviour. They derive from the values of the culture. If religion is highly valued in the culture, churches will be well-funded and well-attended. The pervasiveness of graffiti in working class areas is a mystery to middle class people, but as an artefact it must

reflect some value, or perhaps an 'anti-value' stemming from internalized oppression.

Some artefacts become *symbols* for the culture, others less so. For instance in the North of Ireland, Orange marches have become highly symbolic for both sides.

The Power of Symbols

Recent research has focused on the potency of this fourth level in the pyramid, *symbols*, in expressing cultures, and in being a possible trigger of change for them. As stated above, some artefacts become highly symbolic, but others do not. In youth and gang culture, graffiti can have a highly symbolic role, and it is notable that some local authorities throughout the world have tried to subvert this role by producing 'nice' or 'artistic' graffiti.

In considering the possibility of social change, there is the temptation to start by challenging the basic assumptions of the culture. But it is increasingly being realized that this is largely a waste of time, because the assumptions are frequently unconscious and not confrontable or debatable (Note 10). Where change occurs, it is not because assumptions change. Rather the process is the reverse - symbols and sometimes artefacts change, and these affect values, and, over time, basic assumptions.

Sometimes symbols reinforce or challenge assumptions directly. For instance, long-term unemployed people who sign on at labour exchanges may not be surprised if the exchange is a dingy building and the service very curt. They may have an assumption that the government and their employees do not care about them. As long as the exchange is dingy, and the staff abrupt, it would be very difficult for anyone to persuade long-term unemployed people that the civil servants do care about them, whether in fact they do or not. If, as is happening more often nowadays, a new elegant labour exchange is constructed, with carpeted floors, piped music and customer-friendly staff, this is unlikely to change the clients' basic assumptions in the short term. Clients may simply believe

that civil servants are becoming more devious. But over time the symbolism of the new service may challenge the basic assumption.

Figure 1 shows the possible lines of influence between the different components of culture (Note 11).

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              ARTEFACTS
            ↗    ↖    ↗    ↖
          ↙                  ↘
    VALUES                    SYMBOLS
          ↖                  ↗
            ↘    ↗    ↖    ↙
             ASSUMPTIONS
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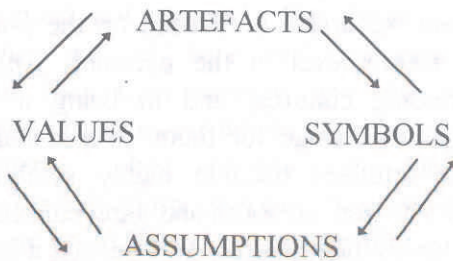
Figure 1: Lines of Influence between the components of culture.

It has also been suggested that change is best introduced by allowing new symbols and artefacts to 'cohabit' with the old ones, so that the culture is not threatened; if the new ones are found useful, the old ones, and the underlying assumptions, wither away.

What Kind of Symbols are Important for Cultural Change?

In business organisations, *leaders* have great symbolic value. If the leader (in this case, the boss) behaves in a different way from the norm, such as turning up for work in an open neck shirt, it can affect the whole culture of the organisation. In the working-class sub-culture leadership is also crucial. However it is less clearly defined; for instance, those who are leaders in the eyes of the ordinary residents are not leaders in the eyes of the teenage gangs. Potential leaders often move out of the area. Young people who go against the trend and continue into third level education have often moved away by the time they take up their first job. Nevertheless, the behaviour of leaders in the community can have a big impact on the culture. Leadership training obviously plays a part here, but the training needs to be in some way counter-cultural if the leaders are to take on a new symbolic role in the community, rather that just being a reflection of the existing culture.

Apart from leadership, other symbolic aspects of culture also have the potential to effect change. For instance the decision by the Irish government to fly flags on government buildings at half mast on the occasion of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, stimulated the Northern Ireland M.P, John Taylor, to write an uncharacteristic letter of appreciation to the *Irish Times*. It is worth recalling that the huge change in national consciousness that came about in Ireland after 1916 (when the insurrectionists were publicly booed) was triggered largely through the *symbolic* impact of a British government executing Irish people who fought for their political beliefs.

If education (for example) is seen as the potential salvation of the lower working-class in Ireland, then it seems necessary to give working class areas new symbols that will change the evaluation of education in these areas. Of course what is most needed are role-models, examples of people who stayed in education and 'got on', without becoming estranged from other aspects of the culture; a person who is educated and becomes a snob or a know-all will have only negative symbolic value.

The Impact of Housing Policy

One significant barrier to the creation of good role models in poor areas is housing policy and the operation of the housing market. It is usually the better-off children in a local authority area who receive the best education, and these families are often most likely to move away. The Department of the Environment continues to give them incentives to do so, since there are waiting lists for houses. Another factor which encourages the more 'successful' families to move out is the differential rent system. In

principle this is a fair system, whereby tenants contribute according to their means. The downside is that tenants who gain good employment can end up paying quite high rents which they may regard as bad value in the circumstances.

The local authorities and the Department of the Environment have a strategic incentive to have a rapid throughput of local authority tenants, but this conflicts with the community's goal of building a stable community. If they were to take the long view, and were to try to build up local communities and encourage permanency, there would be more leaders and role models and subsequently fewer 'problem' estates. Ways of doing this would be to confine incentives for house purchase to the house the tenant is actually living in, and to put a ceiling on rents. Another step would be to allow tenants of flats to buy them, which they are not allowed to do at present. In short, the present system of incentives to leave should be replaced by incentives to stay (Note 12). There is also the wider question of the peculiarly Irish bias in favour of owning, rather than renting, housing. One effect of this is that local authority tenants may have less esteem for their housing, and consequently lower self-esteem, than those in purchase houses.

The Symbolic Aspect of Service Provision

The government and other agencies should also consider the symbolic content of their actions and inaction in local authority areas. In the above schema there is a 'short circuit' between symbols and assumptions, whereby symbols directly reinforce or challenge assumptions. In the parish in west Dublin where I live there are over 5,000 people, with about half the population under fifteen. Yet there is no school within the parish boundaries, even though the estate, consisting entirely of local authority housing, is over ten years old. Consider the symbolic power of this, and its role in confirming people in their view that they are outsiders. It is

not that surprising that our parish has seen serious social unrest in recent years.

In two important articles in the *Irish Times* in July, the Provost of Trinity College, Thomas N Mitchell, proposed a Community Education Centre situated in the heart of an area of disadvantage, as part of an educational *blitzkrieg* aimed at breaking the vicious cycle of poverty in urban ghettos (Note 13). In fact the establishment of Dublin City University near the disadvantaged area of Ballymun is already having some impact there, both through its symbolic value and by providing easier access to Third Level education.

Many agencies outside the education area are giving increased attention to the symbolic impact of their buildings and the way their services are delivered. For instance some new labour exchanges are a model of design, and the new Civic Offices in Dublin are a shining example of a user-friendly building. But many school buildings are still old-fashioned, usually because of under-funding, and do not symbolise the kind of vitality and freshness which appeals to the young.

It will be interesting to observe the symbolic, as well as the practical, impact of the new Equine Centre, to be built in Cherry Orchard, on the local culture there. Funded by the Corporation and the Department of Agriculture to the tune of nearly £2m. the Centre symbolises an acceptance at the highest level of the local 'horse culture'. The fact that it is the brainchild of local activists, and that it also incorporates a strong educational component for the youngsters who participate, is particularly significant.

Does Community Education Have a Role?

Community education can play a key role in raising consciousness in disadvantaged and oppressed areas. It is important in community education that participants be allowed to critique

their own micro-culture as well as the wider culture. It has been noted that trainers sometimes tend to divert criticism 'upwards' towards the 'system'. For instance, residents who criticise graffiti will be subtly encouraged to criticise the Corporation for neglect rather than ask how the behaviour of graffitiists could be modified. There have been cases where local professional workers have advised residents of badly littered areas not to participate in 'clean-ups' on the grounds that this is the job of the Corporation. But the outcome of this is simply that the area remains littered and the community is discouraged from bringing about change in an area where it could do so.

If community education can lead to practical outcomes which are also symbolic of community empowerment it can do much to combat apathy and defeatism. Otherwise it can have aspects that are disempowering. (Note 14)

Conclusion

The above analysis has attempted to underline the importance of micro-structures in social analysis. It also highlights the potential of symbols in bringing about a change of consciousness.

It can be seen also that macro-structures can help or seriously inhibit the potential of micro-structures. For instance, although positive local role models are part of a micro-structure, housing policy (a macro-structure) can rob an area of its role models. Macro structures do hold the dominant role in society, but their impact is mediated through micro structures, and for this reason the latter must also be included in social analysis and policy. Thus to answer the question posed in the title, - Working Class Cultures, Can They Adapt? - it is difficult for them to adapt without changes in the macro structures. But these changes must be ones that bear on the mediating *micro-structures*, not just on individuals. In creating policy, legislators need to ask, what impact will this change have on the local culture, not just, how will it affect the individual.

There is some evidence of increased government advertence to the role played by the culture of the local community in shaping behaviour patterns in poorer working class communities. Recent years have seen the setting up of *local* Partnerships, community development projects, money advice centres, employment service centres and other initiatives funded by the state or by Europe. There can be little doubt that these initiatives are set up with the object of modifying aspects of the local culture.

Nevertheless, in its recently announced anti-poverty strategy, five of the six key strategies are targeted mainly at the macro-structure. The principal strategy is to "continue the general thrust of macro economic policy which has contributed to significant increases in employment in recent years...". Only one (though an important one) of the strategies is targeted directly at the micro-structures of the working class, namely, to "ensure that the unemployed can *do* the jobs by ensuring that they have the opportunities to acquire the skills necessary to take up the jobs available through progression through a suitable range of interventions..." An anti-poverty strategy will only succeed if, as well as encouraging reforms of the macro-system, it imaginatively addresses the crisis of culture affecting working-class micro-structures. As part of this it may be the creation of new symbols which will do most to make education and training more accessible to working class children.

Notes:

Note 1: This area and its problems are described in detail in *One City, Two Tiers- A Theological Reflection on Life in a Divided City*. Cherry Orchard Faith and Justice Group, 25 Croftwood Park, Dublin 10. 1996.

Note 2: See *Pathways to Adulthood in Ireland*, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute Paper No.161, especially Chapter 8: 'Explaining Psychological Distress: The Role of Mediating Factors'.

Note 3: At the same time, as the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed pointed out in its recent pre-budget submission, while current government emphasis is on those doing Leaving Certificate, there is also a need to emphasise the characteristics of those *not* doing it. Otherwise there is a danger that the current generation of young long-term unemployed will be 'written off' and their current training needs ignored.

Note 4: See for instance Holland, J. and P. Henriot S.J., *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Washington: Centre of Concern. 1980, Pp.24ff.

Note 5: See 'The Underlying Societal Causes of Disadvantage' in *Education and Poverty*, Dublin: Conference of Major Religious Superiors. 1992, Pp.12-13.

Note 6: By 'structures' here are meant observable patterned social practices (roles, norms and such like) that make up social systems or societies (see e.g. Marshall, Gordon (ed.) *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*. Oxford University Press, 1994, p.518.)

Note 7: As in Note 5, p.8.

Note 8: For a recent analysis of this cycle, see Thomas N. Mitchell (Provost of Trinity College), 'The Blot on Our Affluent Society', *Irish Times*, 23 July 1997.

Note 9: See in particular Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1987; and Mary Jo Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern Symbolic and Post-modern Perspectives*. Oxford University Press. 1997. Mary Jo Hatch has added the additional 'level' of symbol to Schein's original schema.

Note 10: Schein, *Op. Cit.*, p.18.

Note 11: Hatch, *Op. Cit.*, p.363. Mary Jo Hatch turns Schein's pyramid into a loop, with feedback from Symbols to Assumptions.

Note 12: A number of NESC reports in the 1980s expressed reservations about the sale of local authority houses on the grounds that the scheme, since it usually benefited the better off, was regressive; and also that the local authorities were going to be left with the worst of the housing stock to maintain. However curiously they appeared to be more approving of the 1981 scheme which enabled tenants to buy private houses elsewhere. In retrospect the focus seems to have too narrowly economic, and little consideration was given to the impact of various schemes on the cohesion of local communities. See for instance: National Economic and Social Council (No.62), *Economic and Social Policy 1981: Aims and Recommendations*. Dublin: Government Publications. September 1981, p.48.

Note 13: Thomas N. Mitchell, 'A Community Education Centre - a Proposal to Address Educational Disadvantage'. *Irish Times*, 24 July 1997.

Note 14: American anthropologist John Burdick has concluded that base Christian communities in Brazil are less able to meet people's needs than the new Pentecostal churches partly because they focus on huge impersonal forces and structures, which the local community has no immediate chance of changing. See John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: the Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1993.-