

**THE MEANINGS AND POSSIBILITIES OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR NEW LEFT SOCIAL
MOVEMENT ORGANISING IN IRELAND**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at what being sustainable might mean, or entail, on different levels for a small milieu of activists on the new left in Ireland and the UK. I gather personal experiences of burn-out, care (collective-care and self-care), support structures and identity in social movements, to try and figure out what people have learned about sustainability through their lived experiences, tacit knowledge, workshops on the subjects and peoples varied communications on the often 'en vogue' term. The findings, as to what adds to an individuals or collectives sustainability and who does that framework of sustainability represent, are complex and contextual. Many activists cite a lack of awareness; personally and collectively, of motivations around activism and the 'perfect standard' synonymous with much activist work. For many there's a lack of an understanding of the normalisation of certain ways of organising and the dominant political paradigm of the new left which leaves activist circles open to repeating negative patterns and often inhibiting their own growth and progression. There is a self-defeating idea of what care means which often leaves people feeling unfulfilled. The oft complex nature of what 'good' change means is addressed throughout where we face seemingly contradictory situations, opinions and ideas. For example, participants talk about simultaneous positive and negative elements wrapped up in some practices, making them at once sustainable and unsustainable. If the new left is to move forward *with* others, in solidarity, then an understanding of the complexities and contradictions of how individuals and groups function (or don't function) needs to be developed, collectively. Through this study I attempt to confront the lack of vision I see in this area on the new left in Ireland, and in general, by compiling specific experiences and highlighting the needs of the participants. I finish with suggestions of what might be done next coming from the research and my own reflections.

PREFACE

This research began as a personal experience of a collective situation and became an experiment, through practice, communication and thought of how certain situations could be improved for myself and others. To be less abstract, I have attempted to gain a clearer and more communal understanding of how social movement practice in Ireland (while also focusing on manifestations of similar situations internationally; mainly the UK) can begin/continue to be more sustainable for those involved and how it might become something open to a more diverse range of actors. With an emphasis on what sustainability *actually* means to diverse collectives, and how this may incorporate affective elements like care and love, I will try to bring specific experiences together to gain an insight into a certain (albeit limited) milieu of activists and culture in Ireland and the UK.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the participants throughout this year who have made up the sum of this investigation. Those who took part in workshops on the issues of Sustainability, Self-Care and Burnout. Your enthusiasm in wanting to engage more with these issues in Ireland shows me that, in little ways, we might be on the right track. I would like to thank comrades who attended *Sustaining Resistance, Empowering Renewal*, given by Eco-Dharma on a rainy March in 2012. Without this unique experience I would never have attempted to understand these issues further and might not have met the amazing people I did who are dedicated to cultivating more balanced and healthy working environments and lifestyles for themselves and others. Everyone of you who agreed to be part of this research showed a genuine interest that helped me to get over my lack of confidence at times.

A special grá and thanks for two dear friends with whom I have been facilitating workshops with. I feel it's a rare thing to find others with whom I can work closely with on topics that mean a lot to all of us, and, to collaborate, overall, quite harmoniously. They have been integral to this work. Thanks for all your conversations, insights and for putting up with me where needed.

I would like to acknowledge the part that all the staff and students of *Community Education, Equality and Social Activism* played in being part of the formation and unfolding of my work throughout the year. Our hours of debate, practice and play have really been so important, as have the special

moments we spent picking each other up and helping each other piece ourselves back together. All your guidance and wisdom has always come just at the right time. A special thanks to my supervisor, Laurence Cox, for the time, dedication and patience given to me throughout the ups and downs of writing and his own hard work and research in the areas of sustainability and burnout in social movements. And last but not least, to all of those people and collectives involved in the struggle who are giving their time and hearts to trying to create something a bit better for us all.

CHAPTER 1 – AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

What might it look like to be part of a movement that takes into account collective and self-care, support, love and self-determination? What might it take to be truly sustainable in our social movements? These are just some of the questions which have spurred me to undertake this investigation.

The opinions that will follow are my own but at times I will use the word ‘we’ to reflect that these ideas were inspired by others and created through conversation and dialogue. These ‘others’ are comrades, friends, family, and strangers that I have met over the past two years. They are people I have facilitated and attended workshops with, around the issues of sustainability, social movement organising, care and burnout. They are participants of workshops I have co-facilitated and they are co-participants of workshops I have attended. I believe that peoples ideas (my own included) are created through a multi-directional movement of dialogue and debate and through a connection to other mediums of communication (the media etc.). Because of this I do not feel that I can claim any of these ideas to be solely my own and so I do not want to take credit for them in total. But I do want to take responsibility for them and I am open to suggestions and the possibility that they will change where better versions replace them. I will expand on who I am referring to in relation to Ireland and the new left in this chapter (see *Who are ‘We’?*).

I will talk about ‘our movement’ and ‘the movement’ and in doing so I am referring to the areas of politics that the people involved in this research and I have been involved in. I use these words as an umbrella concept which includes all of the different political manifestations of the new left that have appeared throughout the research. People involved have been part of many different political circles, including but not limited to, anti-capitalist, social and environmental justice, animal-rights, women’s rights, feminist, libertarian, socialist, anti-racist, and anarchist movements. I have not recorded a representative list of what people have been involved in politically and so I may be missing out on a big chunk of what areas people are coming from. As I will explain later in Chapter 3, I didn’t ask for peoples backgrounds during workshops and so I missed out on an overview of peoples political lives.

The umbrella movement I refer to is that of the new left, post 1968’s uprisings throughout Europe, but will also refer to the old left, pre-68’, whose remnants can be felt in much of the new lefts political

struggles and analysis. There's an often unclear historical, philosophical, and analytical connection between the old and new left. Each political movement, progression and manifestation hold within it bits and pieces of things that have come before, even when unaware of it. These movement comprise many parts and many people and their boundaries are often unclear. There may not seem to be any similarities between the groups mentioned previously but I argue that there is an overlap amongst these in Ireland (and possibly further afield) and so I would class them all under one movement on the new left with connections and a closeness which is often not very apparent. Over the following chapters I will attempt to clarify what context I am coming from in order for my theories to stay specific instead of universal, where their relevance may be lost.

Ontological Position

I am coming from an anarchy-feminist perspective and so my political standpoint is one that looks at struggles in terms of domination and oppression and not just the focus of the traditional-Left on exploitation and economics. I do not dismiss this focus but I find it too narrow when looking at what needs to be done in order to achieve meaningful radical social change. My feminist standpoint is one which sees that care and support have been the remit of the female under patriarchy. Ultimately I see that these things need to become gender-non-specific terrain and that all gendered divisions in our western society need to be rethought. It is from this position that I would like to delve into what care and support could be and mean for us if we were to organise them according to anarchist principles; autonomously; cultivating agency in people; collectively, for each other and with each other and as part of a system of mutual-aid; outside of the control of the State, other social institutions, or the establishment.

I am interested in all areas of affective work, or, care and support work. Some areas which I can identify as needing to be reorganised more autonomously for the benefit of individuals and of our movement are - mental health care, self-help, therapy, care for the elderly, disability work, social work, and social reproduction within the household and involving child rearing, etcetera.

Kathleen Lynch, co-author of one of the Irish Times 100 best books of 2009, *Affective Equality: Love*

Care and Injustice, suggests-

Caring, in its multiple manifestations, is basic human capability serving a fundamental human need. Being loved and cared is not only vital for survival in infancy, early childhood or at times of illness or vulnerability, but throughout human existence. Experiencing care and love throughout the life course is also essential for human development and flourishing.¹

As a feminist I would argue that affective equality is just as important for people as other forms of equality. I believe that domination and oppression need to be understood on an inter-personal basis, as well as on a wider level. It was the Women's Liberation movement that has given us the slogan- *The Personal is Political*. Therefore, it is at the level of inter-personal relationships that I see a need for a radical culture of care. Subjectively we must pick our sites of struggle – within ourselves and amongst each other. Working to make our relationships more loving, cohesive and less vulnerable may make us collectively stronger in order to fight injustice at the objective level. Working out what it is that compels us to oppress the people on the 'same-side' as us, consciously or unconsciously, is something we need to do on a much wider scale than I currently witness. Militant investigation into ourselves and each other is, for me, a radical and subversive act. "*Killing the cop in your head*" is a phrase that comes to mind.

Any politics we create should, and does, become representative of the selves we bring to it. This is why it is integral to create a politics which has care and love as one of its core elements. A love for each other and the future of the movement. A revolutionary love that makes it impossible for us *not* to challenge each others behaviour if we are being patriarchal, racist or elitist, and to strive always to confront our own self-oppressions and inter-personal oppressions.

I believe that we recreate these oppressions mirroring how the 'normal' or 'standard' human subject is viewed under whichever system we live under. At this moment in history in the West we live under an oppressive system of free-market ideology and neoliberalism. It is a society and culture founded on patriarchy, white supremacy and imperialism, amongst other things. Under this system the 'standard' person is usually a consumer; heteronormative, white, not poor (middle-class or upward) and generally male. All the rest of us are deviant from that norm and exist at the peripheries of its

1 Lynch, K., *Affective Equality – Who Cares?* (Dublin: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) pp. 410-415.

social position and power. I do not mean that the person who fits this category essentially has an easier, less oppressive life, I mean that the objective structuring of our society with its laws, codes, governance, etcetera, are most in favour of this kind of person. I argue that the status quo, with its objective and subjective oppressions, has influenced the dominant left political paradigm. These social 'norms' or 'standards' are things we recreate inside our movement and so, in order to liberate ourselves from harmful ideology and behaviour, conscious and unconscious, there needs to be a constant and vigilant self-critical reflection and collective level of ongoing investigation and experimentation.

I do not doubt that people find the right words to describe their politics of equality and justice and that people call themselves anti-racists and feminists, but it is my opinion that often just using these words doesn't manifest in any real change in behaviour. This, I believe, is part-due to a lack of deep-understanding and experience on a personal level. It has been my experience that both reformist and radical left groups in Ireland and the UK 'talk the talk' but often fail in the everyday manifestations and actions of their politics. What I mean is that many left groups have long-running critiques of oppression, privilege, and imperialism, but, for some reason or another, are often unconsciously sexist, racist, classist, having not yet embodied their ideologies. This shows me that this is the challenge; to change at the level of action and the subjective. I do not want to castigate those who are on 'my side' and who yet have to shack off the shackles of an oppressive and constricting socialisation. I am constantly struggling with this myself. It is hard to unlearn what we have been taught and taken for granted. I am only advocating that we don't stop challenging inconsistencies and inequalities just because we have found the words and language to talk about, and critique them. We need to continue to be self-critical and critical of our movements, from within.

A Manifesto About Care, Sustainability and the Occurrence of Burnout in our Movements

We (a number of comrades and friends who have been working on issues around care and sustainability) have all come from different places in our political lives. We feel the need to be active in the struggles to affect change in our specific circumstances and beyond. We feel the pressure from the strain we put ourselves under and that we find ourselves dealing with. We have come up against

burnout on personal and collective levels. Burnout, which in most cases might have been avoidable if we had had practices, structures and mindsets in place to deal with it. The participants are one of the most valuable assets in our movements and if we cannot sustain ourselves in healthy environments then how do we envision achieving our goals short or long term? So, it is from these experiences, first-hand and related back to me by others, that I came to choose my research topic and question. It is less a question and more of a theme which I have decided to look at; *The Meanings and Possibilities of Sustainability for New Left Social Movement Organising in Ireland*.

Self-care and collective-care within movements and campaigns is an area we find to be lacking. Too often do we overwork ourselves until we either drop-out or become disenchanted with what we are doing. We see each other running ourselves into the ground in the name of some cause which is 'bigger' than us and 'better' than us. Worthy causes no doubt, but worthy of our self/collective sacrifice? If our political work is so important to us and the notion of not working toward a better society is unthinkable, then why can we not step back and put our energy into reorganising in more healthy and balanced ways? If we can achieve this then we can sustain our resistance for longer and for the better. We can plan more efficiently and we can work towards our ends, together, keeping in mind, and in action, the ethos of how we want to live 'after the revolution'.

Collective and Individual Approaches

What is it to care and why do we need it? What is it to care for yourself and others? These are questions that will inevitably have different answers for everybody and a question I am, and was, hesitant to ask. Ontologically I believe that there is a human need for connection, communication, others, care and love which are integral to how we function. I see that collective care is what those involved in the Irish activist scene (specifically but not limited to) need to be talking and thinking about. I believe that the left in Ireland need to pay attention to this because a lack of care and awareness of ourselves and each other becomes a factor in burnout. When people run themselves into the ground and burnout (and possibly drop-out altogether) this becomes a collective issue for our movement. It is something experienced on a personal level and at an organisational level, as those who burnout tend to have to leave whatever group or campaign they are involved in (even if only for a while). The personal problem becomes a collective problem because those left behind are usually left

with much more to do because someone is missing.

My notions of what it is to self/collectively care are tricky and complicated to say the least. This is why I found it an important subject to research. It will hopefully be one of the most prominent things that I will be doing in the next years in regards to my own activism and alongside others. I cannot speak for others directly but through informal conversations this is of great importance to a few people who are willing to put a lot of effort into figuring out what works best for some of us and how we can make our activism more sustainable. I have interviewed some of these people for this research both in Ireland and the UK. I should note here too that I use the words 'activist' and 'activism' to describe the people involved in, and active in, the movement, as well as the act itself. I use these words for lack of better words. They can be exclusionary and limited in themselves.

Who Are 'We'?

I would like to locate myself and the people that I have conducted this research with in our specific place and time. I talk of 'we' but what I am referring to is not a universal, or royal, 'we'. It is Ireland in 2013 on the Left - State focused (not party politics but campaigns and groups focused on affecting change at the level of the State and State-policy), autonomous, anarchist, and radical. I have already mentioned the new left and I would see an overlap in the new left and the areas I just listed. I am only giving an analysis based around those who have been part of this investigation, both formally and informally. I cannot comment on the experiences of others who did not partake in this research. Any proposals or suggestions are directed towards those who have been involved, those active in Ireland on the left and anyone with whom the findings resonate. Unfortunately I do not include any analysis of working-class community organisations which have a very different organisational form and history. This is not due to any strategic decision but it seems that our paths did not cross and I did not go looking for contact. The former list might seem like a big category but because of Ireland's size and level of political activity it is relatively a small amount of organisations and groups. I would argue that even our radical left is quite focused on State centred struggles and ways of 'doing' politics. An example of this would be the recent Campaign Against the Household and Water Tax (CAHWT), and further back the Anti-Bin Tax. Both have/had various elements of different political groups involved – from the Socialist Party (SP), the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Workers Solidarity

Movement (WSM)², individuals etcetera, as well as grassroots unaffiliated individuals and activists. It is interesting too that many of the WSM's initiatives and campaigns have been either State focused or worker focused. This may be due to it being a Platformist, class struggle, anarchist organisation. It is currently the main anarchist organisation associated with Ireland.

Our history on the left has been different to that of the rest of the world. It has also been considerably different to that of the UK. We have not had a history over the last 30 years of widespread or popular radical left movement in the same sense. There are other ways that one could look at Ireland's radical political history which Laurence Cox³ sheds light on. The UK has seen 30 years (or more) of counter cultural activity on the left; many road protests, many free parties/rave scenes, *Earth First!*'s, hippies, punks, Peace Convoys and camps, New Age Gypsy Fairs, the Exodus Collective, etcetera. All of this was happening at the same time as the miners strikes, anti-Criminal Justice Act protests, and Anti-Poll Tax riots.⁴ This growth of a new type of left politics and ways of organising, along with the continuing radicalisation of certain State-focused politics, means that the UK has had much time to experiment with, try, and test out what it means to make these structures work. It is not surprising then that groups like *Red Therapy*, *Activist Trauma Support*, *Eco-Dharma*, *Seeds for Change*, and *Asylum*, have all been born in the UK or have links there. There's a clear recognition that activists need support in many areas and I believe that it is on us (other activists on the left) to try and provide that in the spirit of equality, empathy, autonomy, anti-authoritarianism and anarchism. These groups mentioned exist, or have existed, in order to give support to activists in areas such as direct action training, autonomous, feminist, psychology, therapy, activist sustainability, burnout care, mental and physical health welfare and well-being. This shows an acknowledgement that activists on the left need to support each other. Especially because we are working on our own, without funding in any big sense, and we come up against State and systematic oppressions.

I would argue that Ireland doesn't not have the same legacy of counter-cultural political experimentation, and where we do it has been disparate or ephemeral. It is also not a side of our political history as a country that we know much about. I have been in touch with much of the small counter cultural scene for the past ten years. I have been involved in direct action, anti-road protests,

2 The WSM are an anarchist organisation in Ireland, founded in 1984.

3 Cox, L., *Gramsci in Mayo*. And, Cox, L., *Globalisation From Below*. (Cork, 2001)

4 McKay, G., *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties*. (London: Verso, 1996)

climate change protests, Occupy, CAHWT, an anarchist bookshop in Cork, the rave scene etcetera. But most people I talk to have no idea of the existence of these things. For the young person in Ireland who wants to find out about alternative politics, or where to go to find others who are involved, it is often about being lucky enough to have someone who was involved in something 'alternative' to tell you about it. It is very hard to look up this sparse history online or in books. However, Ireland's size means that once you've been introduced into that activist milieu you'll find it easy to network, although, if you don't have a way in it's difficult to enter.

Our political imaginations are dusty. It was my experience that at Occupy Cork, where the political narrative was anti-State/Bank/Institutions, people found it hard to imagine what organisation and structures could look like away from the dominant model. The CAHWT is an extreme example of how this is tough. I was organising in Cork, on a central committee, with Trotskyists, Bolsheviks and anarchists. For a while I was the only unaffiliated female member. I was also the only one who had come from a background with an influence of spirituality and Buddhism. Although I am an atheist and do not part take in spiritual practices I was very much influenced by being brought up in and around a retreat centre when I was younger where there was a clear dedication to breaking down the ageist, sexist and racist tendencies we hold within ourselves due to living in our western societies. This is what has stuck with me. The idea that we must change inside if we want to change outside has been one which I attempt to bring into my political life. For me, this is integral to political sustainability; for the long-term; healthy and balanced. It has been the lack of this kind of mentality in State left and the radical left in Ireland that has left me burnt-out and disillusioned.

Through this research I would like to see if there are others who feel that there's something lacking in left politics (new or otherwise) and if there are voices not being heard. If so, what can we do about it? How can we know if how we feel is the best way to organise, is actually the best way? Where and when might it be suitable? How can we cultivate this kind of politics in Ireland? How can we create the support systems and structures that will enable us to look at people and groups as much more than their objective parts, but also as vulnerable and fragile people? And how can we be relevant enough or open enough to either appeal to a wider audience or to show our solidarity with others in struggles

of their own?

I would argue that the left in Ireland, because of its focus on objective politics, instead of looking at the subjective nature of the political, are maintaining organisations that often do not suit some people who might otherwise be involved. They might also be cultivating environments where burnout is a factor.

I argue that most of these organisations, because of this lack of political scope or imagination have pushed people away or made themselves quite exclusive and privileged spaces. For an example of this I would look at the recent scandal surrounding the SWP in the UK.⁵ This case has shown people that sexism is still alive and well even in radical (whether you agree with that explanation of themselves or not) organisations. Ireland doesn't seem to have an overt history of politics of the personal. We don't have the experience, infrastructure or resources which the new left in other countries do. And we need to work on making our politics a place that suits a more diverse range of people.

For an insight into how the WSM organise and the issues within the organisation regarding what political focus they should take you could look at the correspondence between James O'Brien and Andrew Flood.⁶

Sustainability, Care and Support Work in Ireland on the Left

I am going to make the argument that the left in Ireland have a mainstream way of organising which generally hasn't given a lot of weight to care (self and collective) or emotional reflection within its organising structures. Where it has it has been a rhetoric of care which is problematic because it comes from within a mainstream perspective. This dominant political paradigm inherently marginalises some people, some voices and some ways of doing things. This creates an exclusive and exclusionary space where some are more able to contribute than others. This is limiting in that new perspectives are not heard and in that the left excludes some individuals and groups who it claims to represent. An example could be that some groups use the rhetoric of being anti-racist or feminist

5 Penny, L., *The SWP and Rape, Why I Care About this Marxist-Leninist Implosion*. (London: *The Guardian*, 2013)

6 O'Brien, J., *The WSM and Anarchism: A Political Analysis*, (2012), & Flood, A., *The WSM and Fighting the Last War – a Reply to James O'Brien*. (2013)

when there isn't actually a meaningful voice being heard from people of colour or women. This is problematic in that lip-service *becomes* an end in itself and actions take the risk of recreating the oppressive status quo. For me, supporting and caring for ourselves and others means looking at how we recreate societal oppressions against ourselves and each other and working to challenge and change them. I will flesh these ideas out further here.

There has been a little bit of talk and a little bit of action in Ireland around the topics of sustainability and care in social movements. Across the water, in the UK, there's a good deal of dialogue and action on the new left around what constitutes support and care. Much of which I have not had the opportunity to investigate in this research. It is slowly becoming something that's taken into account in these scenes, cultures, organisations, at events and demonstrations, at protest sites and on actions. But what's missing? I feel there are things that are being overlooked and so these attempts, great as they are, should not be left unscrutinised. Constant vigilance is needed in order for us to not fall into old patterns of recreating oppression in our social movements. If we want to be truly radical and we are aware how often radical ideas and practices can get co-opted into mainstream, reformist, or superficial ways of organising then we need to keep questioning and keep our collective critical caps on. In Ireland we are only in the foetal stages of organising along these lines and with these elements in mind and practice. This is a very special place to be even though it is a shame that it has taken us so long to get here. It is special because we now have the opportunity to put a lot of effort into not recreating old patterns or bad habits, which others, in other parts of the world, have possibly already done. We can learn from others what has worked best, what has been a mistake and what has been left out altogether.

There is resistance to this kind of work, there are sporadic attempts and experiments, and there are many conversations and the uttering of words which have not been spoken much before.

Sustainability and care are becoming terms which people are creating meanings for, individually and collectively. To me, these are all signs of something gaining a foothold and starting to flourish and so I chose to do my research on these topics and base my practice on them too.

Those that I have experienced as hesitant in looking at subjective politics are those that are used to, and comfortable with, organising along the lines of the traditional-Left. This may be party-political

Socialists, unionised Bolsheviks, Trotskyists, radical-communists, the informal male-dominated Left, the middle-class radical-left, and even organised anarchist groups. This is not to say that all of these groups are 'against' the subjective but it has been my experience that within these groups there's a certain type of politics that is dominant. This may be changing slowly of course but the mainstream ways of organising within these milieus have not been open to everyone. There are certain opinions and certain voices that get heard over others. It is up to those involved in organisations and interested in more open groups to think about whose voices are marginal and whose are not heard at all.

What I mean to say is that the dominant paradigm along the Left lacks diversity in a meaningful way; where everyone's voice is heard and taken into account. I feel that there is a stalemate along how the dominant left is organising because it has failed to be truly open to everyone to get involved. This is many faceted and complex and one area which I find might help to tackle these issues is through looking at how political organisations we are involved in do, or do not, take care and support systems into account when they organise. This is not a remedy for the overall problems but it is a practical place to investigate and with limited space it is what I will look at further throughout this study. I would like to add that there are many reasons why there may be a hesitancy to adopt self-care and collective-care into organising. Reasons which may have to do with many practical limitations or negative experiences with some practices of care. These may be valid experiences but are not excuses to drop the notions altogether. I hope to uncover why some notions of self-care and care in general are limited and therefore might not seem appealing or helpful to others.

I would like to add, at this point, that I do not advocate that care-work and support *becomes* the movement. Nor that doing this alone can build resilient communities of activists. This has to be one part of the whole. I do not have a coherent idea of what that 'whole' would look like and I have not spent my time trying to imagine it so. I feel that's a collective job. I am coming from the position of someone who has found that care in all its forms is lacking in the radical left in Ireland (and other places perhaps but this is my experience). This has left my friends, comrades and I in vulnerable positions and having to leave groups or campaigns for fear of, or actually having burnt out. It is my experience that this happens quite often and to many different kinds of people. This is what I find problematic and so this is what I will endeavour to investigate more thoroughly through this study.

I call this militant investigation⁷ because it happened at the level of activist organising; at workshops for activists and organisers on the issues of Sustainability, Burnout and Care; through communicating with people who are going through harsh emotional, physical and mental times themselves or whose comrades are being affected negatively; through witnessing and experiencing the realities of radical-left organising in both Ireland and the United Kingdom. The knowledge produced through these interviews and through these experiences belongs to the movement and not to any individual; not to me. I will try to give back to the movement all I can in terms of findings and practical information. These have been realities for years and I have been documenting them for over a year now along with two other people that I am working closely with around these issues. This process, from within the movement, and for the movement, has taken shape through much work around sustainability; giving introductory workshops on Sustainability, Burnout and Self-Care to various groups of activists and community organisers around Ireland; working closely with Pro-Choice groups in Dublin and Cork; travelling overseas to the UK to partake in courses and workshops around personal and group dynamics and sustainability with comrades facing the same issues from all over Europe; co-writing articles on how we feel our movement is lacking or what we are doing right; and many many late night and hours of conversations around all of this.

Keeping this in mind, I will document what my research participants said about care and sustainability and how they find it important on personal or organisational levels. I intend to pick through what it might really mean to be part of a community which holds care and support in high regard. I also intend to uncover some of the problems we might face individually and collectively in order to arrive, I hope, at a balanced view of where to go next. Always being aware that this study is very limited to the confines of the voluntary, informal, milieu of activists and the radical left in Ireland and the UK. I do not claim to be an expert on any of this but I feel the need to document it so that further conversations will be able to progress instead of going around in circles facing the same problems again and again through the generations.

⁷ A term I use is inspired by D. Graeber and S. Shukaitis's book, *Constituent Imaginations, Militant Investigations//Collective Theorization*. (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007)

Breakdown of Chapters

Chapter 2 will document some of the literature and writings that already exists on the subject of self-care, collective-care and burnout. I have tried to find sources that reached as wide as possible. I have looked at some books but mainly at articles that have been written from within the movement. I have omitted many peoples work for many reasons. There are very valuable pieces available on subjects that are useful to this debate but I did not have the space to go into them all here. I chose the pieces I did because I felt they spoke to me the most and to the research I did.

The kinds of debates that I will explore through the literature are from a wide range of actors. There will be voices from within the university, from the direct-action movements on the streets, from Latin America and the USA, from a feminist self-help group to autonomously written insurrectionist writing. The themes are on the harmful effects of an 'activist-identity' and culture that has been created in the West and the possibility or impossibility of changing this. There are strong arguments for change on levels other than the objective to take place and I will look at studies, experiments and experiences of emotional work within activism. I pay attention to the difference in how research and information is presented by the authors and how this can show us who is talking and to what end. Many pieces focus on the phenomenon of burnout within activism and how this can be tackled or avoided. A debate around what self-care might mean and the limits of a western idea of care will be addressed. A commonality throughout all the pieces I will look at is an attempt to develop an understanding of how people can organise and act 'better' in the future in accordance to their desires and how they want to see the world.

Chapter 3 will show what methodologies I have used throughout my research. I will look at the reasons why I have chosen to conduct the research in the ways I did and what has informed my epistemology and pedagogy. I will explain why Paulo Freire, bell hooks and Sara Motta have been influential and inspirational for me this year and throughout the research process. These, amongst others I will not mention here, have been the theoretical driving forces behind my practices because they have been the ones that have closely reflected how it is I have experienced reality and see the world. These educators, having practical experience of radical education themselves, have been examples of good praxis and knowledge production. The creation of the research methods and my

practices as a facilitator of workshops on sustainability and care in social movements have been influenced by many different things, some of which I will go into in detail in this chapter.

In Chapter 4 I have tried to compile my findings throughout the interviews, workshops and a year of participation and observation. I have done this section on my own even where I have consulted others and created my opinions and foci in collaboration. Others were involved but because of the nature of how I ended up conducting the research this is only semi-participatory. Many topics could have been covered but I will focus primarily on the topics of sustainability, activism and care and the possibilities and limitations therein.

And finally, Chapter 5 will look at the implications of this research on practice and within the activist milieu within which I am situated. I attempt to add to already existing knowledge and also to depart from it along the lines of what has come up in the research. I will document what might be useful along the lines of practice for others to look at and use like a manual. This is an attempt at being practical and giving something back to the movement and people that have directly or indirectly been part of this process. It does not attempt to produce solutions to anything that are totalising or universal. It must be kept in mind at all times that this is practice that comes from a specific context at a specific time and place. I urge the reader to keep a critical mind when reading and to take from it only what is actually useful and relevant in ones own situation.

CHAPTER 2- CONNECTING THE LITERATURE

I have tried to collect a wide variety of theory that I think speaks to my research. There has been a debate in recent years in the UK and the US around the issues of sustainability, self-care and burnout within activism on the new left. These issues are not synonymous with each other but there has been a parallel development that is unmistakable. Some of the following pieces relate burnout directly to the ways in which activists organise or how they see political change occurring. Others state that it's a lack of self-care that leads to burnout. Sustainability, being the ability to maintain and cultivate healthy organising environments, is viewed in different ways. Some give clear examples of how they try to achieve sustainability, whereas others show how movements are being unsustainable. I wish to find the commonalities and differences within these debates and so hopefully locate the Irish context somewhere amongst them. I also wish to figure out what it is we are actually missing as a movement in order for our sustainability to improve.

Activist Identity

Andrew X and Kellstadt⁸ are both situated in the Western direct action milieu of the anti-globalisation movement and are coming to the same subject from slightly different angles; the issue of 'activist' as an identity and the possibility or impossibility of changing that identification for the betterment of the movements on the new left. X is addressing the anti-capitalist, direct action movement in London in 1999, surrounding the G8 Summit. He criticises it for having bought into a limited idea and personification of activism and an activist identity which he sees as being influenced by the capitalist division of labour and so recreating exactly what it wished to fight against. X talks of the subjective nature of this identity as if it's chosen, whereas, Kellstadt talks of the objective conditions which are part of how our identities are created and maintained – problematising X's insistence that we 'give-up' this activist identity -

Certainly Andrew X considers the consequences of these attitudes, such as the tendency to self-serving recruitment to raise one's own level within the group, the reproduction within the group of the oppressive structures of the larger society, isolation of activists from the larger communities of the oppressed, and ultimately the recuperation of struggles back into capitalist social relations. But given the author's emphasis on the subjective side of the equation, these consequences come across as the secondary effects of a primary cause: individuals assuming the stereotyped and elitist attitudes of the "activist" role.⁹

8 Kellstadt, J., *The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism*. (2009)

9 Ibid,

Kellstadt notes that there are forces outside of us (objective) which need to be struggled against and changed in order for this limited and limiting identity to be truly 'given-up': **“The “role” of the activist is not simply “self-imposed”; it is also *socially-imposed*.”**¹⁰ One way in which he suggests activists should try to expand their understanding of social change and so challenge their ideas on who and what activists are, is to look at seemingly apolitical everyday life as the site for struggle – not just the protests or direct action that some activism fetishises. This focus on identity and its remit are to the forefront of many of the current debates amongst the anti-authoritarian left and so I picked these two pieces in conversation with each other to demonstrate that and to inform this element of my research. Kellstadt's understanding of the dialectical nature of change is something I want to keep close to my research too in order for it to be balanced.

Anarchist insurrectionist magazine, *Fire to the Prisons* (fttp: abbreviation in lower case following how the authors abbreviate themselves), anonymously published an article, *On Burning Out!*, in 2009, which also calls on activists to rethink their organising tactics, their identification as activists and the isolation and culture of burnout which this often creates in the anarchist and direct action milieu. Both X and fttp's pieces are similar in tone in their anger and desperation at a movement which they see as stuck and self-defeating. They passionately call on the reader, activists and anarchists to rethink how they organise and act yet their passion lacks any clear direction. They are aware of the problems but due to being embedded in their specifics they have yet to take a step back to view the possibilities.

I find this has been an issue with much of the theorising on the left in Ireland. There's a clear awareness that something organisationally needs to change and that the political imagination is stunted in a way. I find that we, in Ireland (and evidently in the US, the UK and parts of Europe) are at a crossroads. One direction is unknown and we fear the risks involved in taking it. We also do not know where it will lead or how to walk it. The other road is filled with politics that no longer serve or represent us as they stand. We've forgotten to look around us and see who's at this crossroads with us and how they are experiencing this 'crisis'. This is what Kellstadt is getting at when he refers to

10 Ibid.

struggles and areas of everyday life that need to be aligned with, and learned from, in order for the new left to stretch its political horizons, imaginations and reach new allies.

Where Does This Identity Come From?

The three separate pieces locate the problems activists face stemming from different parts of the same system. According to X, his alienated identity and culture within western anti-authoritarian activist organising comes from the capitalist divisions of labour and specialisation of knowledge which people have internalised so much that they recreate these dynamics within their 'radical' groups and actions. fftp sees our alienated, disconnected and fragmented societies recreating themselves within our isolated struggles which delineate themselves from everyday acts of subversion against the status quo seeing them as different or naive. Unity, accessibility, openness and outreach become important to these authors because they see that our social movements on the radical left in the West do not have these qualities and actually inhibit their realisation.

ftfp's piece sees the individualised search for meaning, the self and a place to fit-in, as colouring our politics in the West and so turning modern movements into restrictive cliques and subcultures:

"(...)the modern revolutionary searches for their distinction as opposed to commonality, making it difficult for them to relate with anyone but those who think or look like them on the surface¹¹."

By doing this we lose out on possible conversations with others, we lose out on relationships. We turn our communities into scenes. And we judge everyone else who doesn't fit our ways of doing things. This lack of self-reflexivity and deep understanding of why we do things is problematic but the authors do not take the necessary step back, like Kellstadt does, to look at the objective levels of identity creation and culture. An objective level which is as difficult to challenge in a meaningful way as is the subjective level of this culture. There seems to be an onus on having chosen how we are in the West, whereas, I see that we are wrapped up in a dialectical relationship between our inner-selves and outer-society and so choice becomes only one element.

The three pieces mentioned here are coming from quite similar political backgrounds and focus on an activism which I see as male-dominated, middle-class, and rational. They are asking questions that arise from this imbalance and so are at the hypothetical crossroads that I have mentioned already.

¹¹ Anon., *"On Burning Out"*. (2009) p.9

What I feel they lack is an insight into the need for subjective investigation and change on an emotional level. This is something I argue the two manuals I will look at now have.

Practical Examples, Suggestions and Feminism

As a parallel debate I look at Marina Bernal's, *Self Care and Self Defence Manual for Feminist Activists*, by NGO and women's rights organisation in Latin America, CREA. I chose this piece because it does exactly what Kellstadt argues we should do; it looks at potential allies in struggle and compares our situations. This manual is feminist in that it's focused on personal experiences and stories and on the oppressions that women inflict on themselves as mirrors of patriarchy and social violence. The women activists involved in putting the manual together have been faced with intense conflicts as part of their day to day lives. The support structures that western literature along the same lines yearns for are not overtly called for in this piece. This shows me that these structures are already there to some degree. The women talk of their connections to each other, their environment and their spirituality, all which give them strength and support. The community support structures exist in this context so there's more of a focus on the individual level of self-care. Although the other pieces I will write about are critical of the consumerism and individualism related to self-care in the West, these women see self-care as something very different. It is care for ones soul, spirit or inner-self that is important when we want to try to radically challenge and change ourselves for the better. I see this suggestion coming from CREA because they are feminists and culturally different from the West and so see the need for internal critique and struggle as well as 'objective' struggle. I also see this frame coming from women who come from cultures less alienated than ours. This is not saying they are better or more authentic, it is just locating the different critiques in their contexts.

Bernal takes some of the same questions as the Western authors mentioned already in a very different direction, not just in terms of the harshness of what people are up against but what constitutes normal support in Latin American culture which is in contrast to Anglo-American experiences. Their feminist focus highlights the legacy which feminism can offer activists on the left in showing us the necessity of our struggles to be both at the subjective and objective levels. This will inform my research and practice from the perspective of self-care and self-defence as radical steps towards an authentic feminism (for men and women) which recognises that not looking after yourself is an

internalised form of self-violence.

Only a few features have irked me in Bernals work; spirituality; sole focus on women; human rights topics. I find that I have a natural reaction towards these issues stemming from experience with them in the past and their exclusionary nature. I suspect this comes more from the specific encounters than what they stand for. And in reading around these issues I find a tone of mindfulness and clarity that points to people who know what they are talking about, both through experience and thought.

The writing is anecdotal and emotionally intelligent (well-rounded, thought-out ideas). It gives a first-hand point of view and is free from academic jargon. This makes it very accessible and there are practical sections to interact with throughout so that the reader can see where they fit into this narrative. This manual calls for the reader to be an active participant in the reading. This is reminiscent of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and so I think very relevant to my study. Some self-awareness tools used here are very similar to the tools used by Eco-Dharma¹² in their sustainability workshops.

Another feminist manual for holistic social change (subjective and objective) comes from autonomous-socialist, self-help group, *Red Therapy*¹³ in the UK in the 70's. These women examine the politics of control and authoritarianism which have been part of the paradigm of traditional therapy and self-help. They claim that women (and all people) need to reclaim this field in order to begin to critically provide mental health, self-help and emotional support for the women's liberation movement. They look at the practical elements of how western activists and feminists can build support networks for each other in a kind of prefigurative political move towards a more egalitarian and self-aware society.

This has been one of the books that has supported me most during the year in relation to the workshops which my friends and I have been facilitating. The workshops use popular education, participatory and experiential learning tools which quite often come from the growth, or self-help, movement. These include tools and techniques which try to bring people greater depth in their social awareness and self-critique. The difference is that where these tools may have been developed in order to control and regulate reality and normality here they are being used to subvert attempts at

12 Eco-Dharma will be explored further in *Chapter 3 – Methodology*.

13 Ernst & Goodison, *In Our Own Hands- A Book of Self-Help Therapy*. (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1981)

authoritarianism and conformity.

The authors of *In Our Own Hands* pay attention to the fact that traditional therapy is often focused only on the individual, forgetting the social level of oppression, and is operating from a patriarchal and heteronormative paradigm, which this quote illustrates-

Unfortunately it is a fact that producing theory has been the almost exclusive province of men. It would be absurd to discount this. The point of writing from a feminist perspective is not to pretend that no previous theories exist but to use them as a basis for constructing a theory and practice which adequately reflect the experience of the other fifty percent of the population: women.¹⁴

Red Therapy move from in-depth examination of therapeutic techniques and their possible uses in autonomous, feminists groups, to an overall narrative of the political analysis possible in some forms of therapy. There's a clear sense that these women wanted self-help to become synonymous with the women's liberation movement because in doing so women could see how their feelings and emotions were just as much a site of struggle as the objective world. *Red Therapy* want us to keep in mind that this kind of work is not a substitute for struggle on an objective and structural/societal level. They talk about the consciousness raising groups in the 70's that led women to politicise their everyday lives. This led to confrontation with oppression, domination, patriarchy and racism. But it still left people feeling unfulfilled and so *Red Therapy* began to wonder what it was that wasn't being looked at. They claim that it was the inner, emotional life of women that hadn't been acknowledged and that was leaving them un-liberated. They call their work 'unconsciousness raising'. They see oppression as complex and something which cannot easily be 'banished' as it's tied up in who we are; our language, habits, culture, relationships etc. This clarity on how much we don't consciously choose who and how we are is something missing from X and ftp's pieces. Here it becomes a matter of deep and practical investigation into ourselves and not just a conscious decision to change, it is an understanding coming from an experience of patriarchy and oppression in a personal, subjective and emotional level. This is something which the following piece by Brown and Pickerill's¹⁵ tries to understand.

14 Ibid.

15 Brown, G., & Pickerill, J., *Space for Emotions in the Spaces of Activism*. (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 2009).

Emotions, Activism and Organisational Structures

Brown and Pickerill claim that the role of emotions in activism and in activist spaces have become more important in recent times yet they recognise that they still have not been given enough attention and are mostly peripheral parts of organising or fall to quite gendered roles – where women in particular are left to do the background emotional care work. They talk about social movements in Britain needing to practically ‘manage’ emotions at both the individual and collective levels. Similarly to X, ftp and Kellstadt they focus on activist identity. What differs is that they recognise the positive potential it has in helping to connect people to a scene which is important to the sustainability of the movement. In contrast it is also something which sets them apart from the rest of society and even turns some people off getting involved because of the perceived effort needed to be an activist; what they call the ‘perfect standard’. They go on to examine the perpetuation of gendered performances of machismo in social movements that can disrupt the emotional sustainability of all involved. This is something which is lacking in the pieces by X, ftp and Kellstadt.

*In Our Own Hands*¹⁶ is also limited and they themselves admit to being mainly white and middle-class, so, making it harder to see what relevance this kind of work has outside of these categories. They encourage other women to read this book while critiquing how much it is relevant to them and their experiences. This, I feel, is clear sighted and self-aware. This is how I read it. Some of the topics seem to be relevant in the Irish context and their analysis of traditional forms of psychotherapy seem to be apt. What I want to consider is that these women are socialists and so are coming from a different angle to me. The manual is made up of reformed, traditional practices. I cannot help but be suspicious of this kind of reformism. I feel it might be dangerous to use tools and techniques that were made within a system that sought/seeks to control and make individuals conform. Even if we see the act of taking these tools back for ourselves as subversive we still need to be clear what they were intended for and how they might end up being used in oppressive ways once again. Audre Lorde’s comment comes to mind- **“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”**¹⁷ While saying this I must add that on reading the sections about tools and techniques I found that a few of them are similar to things that I have done in workshops and so I admit that even though I might

16 Ernst & Goodison, (1981)

17 This is the title of an essay from her book, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (New York: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984)

critique reforming techniques, that come from within the traditional boundaries of therapy, I am located within a continuum that I do not always fully understand.

Nevertheless, I would like to look further at some of their suggestions and analyses. *Red Therapy* intend this manual to aid individuals, inter-personal relationships, or groups, transitioning from 'thinking' to 'feeling'. This is what Brown and Pickerill recommend needs to happen in order for social movements in the UK to become more emotionally reflexive. Therefore I see this manual as an example of how to *do* what Brown and Pickerill *theorise*. *Red Therapy* understand that it's not easy to become someone whose feelings and thoughts are balanced and so they have provided the reader with some tools to support people getting in touch with their emotions. The self-help group is the entity which will support and hold the participants in their journey, according to the authors. They focus a lot on mental health and link it to the overall mental health of their movement. This understanding of the link between the individual and the collective is what drew me to this manual. The disheartening part is that this was written in the 70's and in reading Brown & Pickerill's piece I can see that not much has changed in regard to how emotionally responsible autonomous, or socialist, movements on the left have become. This shows to me that groups/opinions like these are rare or organisationally marginal.

Brown and Pickerill look at how people become involved, stay involved and navigate their lives and their activism with an 'emotional' lens on. While this is very interesting it is limiting everything to emotions and so there's the risk of totalising this aspect. The viewpoint also shows that activism is, in some ways, a choice for these people. This makes the situations very different to that of people who do not 'chose' their activism but whose lives *are* struggles.

Why do People Burnout?

Brown and Pickerill talk about the consequences in not being emotionally reflexive. They link burn-out with this and the 'perfect standard' expected. They see that often burnout is accompanied by a crisis of emotional reflection. If people want to stay involved they then need to rethink and reconsider how they were doing things and what it is activism was for them within their lives. This is where I would locate myself and the people I have done this study with. I am now in a place (this research being a part of it) of trying to figure out what's wrong and how to do it better.

In contrast ftp and Brian Loewe¹⁸ see burnout stemming from a lack of organisational authenticity and clarity, or 'doing' the wrong politics. I choose Loewe's piece because it gives me a view of self-care and burnout from a different perspective; community organisers and activists in the US. It is also quite similar to most of the pieces already mentioned as he is working within a similar Western society and within a similar movement; autonomous; anti-capitalist; the movement of movements etc. He has been **"part of movements for police accountability, food justice, for peace, and for the past ten years, for migrant worker rights."**¹⁹ The problems that he points out around the generalised notion of self-care are familiar. The risk of activist self-care becoming solely a middle-class privilege is high if, as a movement, we only focus on a superficial level of care.

In Loewe's experience, often...

(...)self-care stands as an importation of middle-class values of leisure that's blind to the dynamics of working class (or even family) life, inherently rejects collective responsibility for each other's well-being, misses power dynamics in our lives, and attempts to serve as a replacement for a politics and practice of desire that could actually ignite our hearts with a fuel to work endlessly.²⁰

This is an interesting theory but one that is problematic because many middle-class people at once want/need collective support networks, but because they are currently resources which are lacking in these peoples lives and organisations, they often turn to themselves for support. The danger is that middle-class peoples values will dominate and define the discourse on what care should and could be. The omission of others experiences and needs then creates a narrow and individualised (middle-class values being seen as more individualised and less reliant on family and community due to social and historical reasons) version of what care is, creating a discourse which can be privileged, oppressive and elitist. Here he gives a one-or-the-other style narrative, which I disagree with. I believe that self-care and collective care are equally necessary and neither a working-class or middle-class version of care will do. He also sanctifies endless work and so ends up recreating problematic organisational practices.

Loewe quite insightfully recognises that talking about sustainability within our movements is a much needed progression but that if sustainability becomes synonymous with individualised self-care it's

18 Loewe, B., *An End to Self-Care*. (2012)

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

not very progressive. He advocates for a collective approach and response to sustainability and communities of care while recognising that current ideas of self-care run the risk of becoming just: **"(...)one more unchecked box on a to-do list to feel bad about, an unreal expectation, or a far-off dream."**²¹

Loewe's statements place burnout at the level of organisational practices which is insightful, but here at the same time he follows it with a self-defeating contradiction. For example when he says -

Even for someone like myself who has the majority of my materials needs met, I feel most alive, most on fire, most able to go around the clock, when I'm doing political work that feels authentic, feels like it pushes the bounds of authority, and feels like it is directly connected to advancing my individual and our collective liberation.²²

Here he is being self-critical and knows where his privileges are but then he advocates more non-stop work, he misses the fact that a lot of activism won't be this inspiring and authentic feeling (there may be a lot of boring work involved) and adds a sense that it's the individuals problem that they're not doing the 'right' activism and so are causing their own burnout. He also unfortunately plays into the idea of the work ethic which other authors have mentioned: **"The issue is not that movements are taxing, because truly they are. It's called 'struggle' for a reason"**²³.-This statement, amongst others, are macho, abelist and arrogant. I feel that the author has a sense of what to do but he has become his own enemy in trying to talk about it. I feel he misses the point that what the left term the 'struggle' may not be for everyone. He claims that movements *are* taxing as if he knows about all movements (I don't think that all movements are visible). On the other hand he does seem to understand organisational inadequacies when he says-

The crisis of care is also a crisis of organization. Non-profits are built to do a lot of good, but they have inherent limitations that mean they are rarely built to fulfil our visions of the transformative organizing that would usher in a world where we could feel whole.²⁴

However, he lacks a clear insight into his own role in possibly prolonging unsustainable organisational structures. At times he mentions that it's the way we organise that's not nourishing us and can lead to burnout and that it's not really about how much we do as opposed to the way we do it. I agree with him on this point in some cases, although it's not always this way. Some organisational

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

structures aren't conducive to sustainable movements.

Loewe writes that if we are very dedicated and if we can see a victory in sight or have true belief and conviction in the 'cause' then we will be sustained. It is the lack of "political clarity" that drives us to burnout. I don't agree with this at all and I think this mirrors some of the self-defeating activist identity and martyrdom which X writes about in his pamphlet. I don't think individualising the causes of burnout is of any use. We have to look at the structural and collective causes and the effects on the individual. To finish he raises some good questions, showing me that the US are experimenting with on the new-left just as we are in Ireland and in the UK-

What do communities that share responsibility for each others' well being look like? Where both our movement work and social time outside of it bring us to deeper connection and clearer purpose?²⁵

Loewe ends by claiming that maybe how the left has been organising has been something which is alienating: **"But we need more. It's not just a question we need to answer to figure out how to stay involved but one that, if we answer, will open a world for much more people to get involved."**²⁶ This resonates with my political experiences but I would make a suggestion. That instead of looking at how 'we' can open up a world for others to get more involved in, how can 'we' move outside of our world and into the world of others, in solidarity, without pushing 'our' agendas?

There have been many rich, diverse and insightful responses to Loewe's article on the *Organize Upgrade!* website, which I will not go into here.²⁷ I would recommend following the discussion.²⁸

Unsustainable?

Each author pinpoints something different as the cause of either being unsustainable or burning out. The women's groups point to patriarchy and the subjective side of ourselves suggesting inner development work as well as objective societal struggle. Brown and Pickerill talk about the need for emotional reflexivity and management on an organisational level as well as an investigation into how activist spaces and standards are at once community building and sustainable and at the same time

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 For Loewe's article see- <<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/component/k2/item/729-end-to-self-care>> [accessed 6th October 2013]

28 For an overview of the conversations on this topic see - <<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/modules-menu/community-care/item/755-a-round-up-and-re-frame-of-the-community-care-conversation>> [accessed on the 10th June 2013]

exclusionary and unsustainable. X and Kellstadt focus on the activists identity and it's limits whereas, Loewe and the fftp article point to what mainstream activists term the 'struggle' as being limiting. There are more overlaps in investigation, critique and practice amongst the literature I have chosen that I will not go into here. For practitioners interested in the areas of sustainability, self-care and burnout I would recommend further reading of the texts I have mentioned and of others I have chosen not to engage with here.²⁹

What Audiences are the Authors Speaking to?

For an academic contemporary critique there's Brown and Pickerill who have covered a lot of ground. They look at the overall debate from a height but they cover a great deal and with this height are able to make abstract and theoretical some elements which might otherwise have stayed at the level of experience. Empirical data, academic language and theorisation have made it possible for them to encompass much more in a small space and to make abstract some of the ideas in the more personal and emotive pieces like fftp and X's.

Brown and Pickerill abstractly divide their investigation into four categories; place; temporal; the self; interpersonal. These divisions are problematic as these areas overlap and cannot in reality be separated. But the authors are conscious of this. Place is seen as a space for community and similarity, yet also can become a ghetto or bubble. The temporal element is about generational gaps in

29 For an overview of the literature on movement, personal and emotional sustainability, with special attention paid to cultural and historical contexts, look at Cox, L., *Hearts With One Purpose Alone? Mapping the Diverse Landscapes of Personal Sustainability in Social Movements*. (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 2009). See Cox, L., *How do we Keep Going? Activist Burnout and Personal Sustainability in Social Movements*. (Manchester: 2009) – for an insight into activist burnout and personal sustainability. This maps movement experiences and suggestions to overcome a crippling phenomenon.

For a look at something from a different context Starhawks, *Truth or Dare: Encounters With Power, Authority and Mystery*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988) looks at power, oppression, domination and groups processes. She talks first-hand as an experienced activist and organiser. For more information see <http://www.starhawk.org/writings/truth-dare.html> [accessed on 17th October 2013].

If you are interested in the ideas of privilege, power and how they might affect the discourse on sustainability I recommend reading, *The Progressive Plantation: Racism Inside White Radical Social Change Movements*, (2011) by K.E. Lorenzo, ex-Black Panther. This short book uncovers the internal racism and classism within radical organisations. On a similar note, a small article, *The Problem with Privilege*, by Andrea Smith, shows how the rhetoric of privilege and oppression can become a pitfall in themselves if action does not follow theory and if guilt becomes a moralistic motivator. <http://andrea366.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/the-problem-with-privilege-by-andrea-smith/> [accessed on 17th October 2013]. And finally for an interesting insight into anarchist politics and collective liberations check out and interview with Joshua Stephens, *"Self and Determination: An Inward Look at Collective Liberation" -- A Conversation with Joshua Stephens*. <http://indyreader.org/content/self-and-determination-inward-look-collective-liberation-conversation-joshua-stephens/> [accessed on 30th September 2013].

knowledge and experience and the difference in activism according to age. Time spent in activism will socialise people into what emotions are suitable and acceptable in certain situations. Learning these 'codes' takes time. Some people have that time and others do not because of other responsibilities. It also makes some reactions normal and others 'deviant'.

The Self is quite an abstract concept in this piece as opposed to where it's examined briefly in the ftp piece. This is problematic as the concepts and language make it inaccessible to people who might really need it. This is of course a problem with a lot of academic literature and I do not mean that there's no space for this kind of analysis. Just that we need to be sure we are aware of our audiences when we write and aware of who would gain most from reading our pieces.

This quote sums it up their critique -

(...)the self is the space where we attempt to align our politics with our emotions, where we make sense of why we feel certain ways, and where we need to understand internalised oppression, in order to resist aligning with existing oppressive behaviours in society.³⁰

The authors mention internalised oppression similarly to ideas proposed in both the feminist manuals and here a connection grows between the people, movements and places where the subject of the self is being discussed.

Interestingly they mention intimate relationships in this category. How much our activism is our lives will be affected by how much our partners are political or supportive or not. This resonates with me as I recently lost a long-term partner because our politics were at odds and we ended up not understanding each other. This is a problem because if we cannot keep connections to those we love because we think a bit differently then how are our social movements meant to grow and be open to difference? The ftp piece talks about relationships too and the differences we draw between friends and comrades and how unsustainable that becomes, alienating us from ourselves, our own politics and our struggles; something the West has a problem with, evident in our fetishising of foreign struggles.

The interpersonal aspect of Brown and Pickerill's analysis talks of relationships within movements.

They propose the idea of an "affective solidarity" which is very important as the "glue of solidarity"³¹.

30 Brown & Pickerill, (In-text referencing King, 2005) 2009.

31 Ibid, (in-text-reference to Collin, 1990)

For participatory, non-hierarchical organising care becomes very important as it's how we act out our affective solidarity. An 'ethics of care' is something that one activist sees as lacking in his movement. Simply checking-in with people about how they are on a more formal level – not just person-to-person but practically in meetings. One activist says that his group would hold hands in a circle and reflect why they were all there. This is a scary thought to me and one in which I could imagine many people would shy away from. Some people might feel uncomfortable with touching and being touched for many reasons, others might feel uncomfortable with the perceived 'hippy' nature of this kind of work. I fall into both categories; I don't think that people need to hold hands in order to be emotional; I feel this is one way of expressing oneself in a world of many; I cringe because my experience of this kind of work has been limited to that of people who do not see outward social change as a major issue and instead are more inward looking. It's an issue that often affective work becomes about extremes which, on an organisational level, might not be effective. I feel there needs to be a balance found so that things won't become stuck in one version of how it is to be emotional and instead look at how a diversity of expression might be catered for. Because, for me, holding hands with people isn't the way to be emotionally reflexive and I feel this would exclude and isolate me and others I have talked to.

Some of the same themes and topics are covered in different ways by these authors. The audiences are different in each piece and this is mirrored in the fact that some pieces miss out on some quite important elements of the debate. It seems to me that they are missed out on because that 'audience' has yet to become politically engaged in, or aware of, those ideas. This is not to say that awareness and the ability to theorise (as with Brown and Pickerill's piece) means that practical change will actually happen. Often this is not the case and so I find that there's something missing. What is it that changes theory into action? When does knowing about something mean acting towards that or being informed by that knowing? For this I feel we need to come back to the two manuals for autonomous self-care and self-help which work on delving into ourselves in more depth but keeping in mind that these practical examples are not magic cures and that using tools and techniques should always be used with a critical and reflexive mind.

In my opinion Kellstadt, X and ftp are all talking to similar audiences; Western, anti-authoritarian, direct-action and possibly quite patriarchal activist scenes. They find their voices there amongst the

often middle-class activists who have located the struggle outside of themselves, recreating alienated subjectivities. Bernal and *Red Therapy* are similar in that they use feminist, educational and experience based practices and exploration techniques. They are both quite practical yet they still come from different cultures; one where I would argue community and interconnectedness are often abstract concepts (as with *Red Therapy* and the UK in the 1970's), and the other where there's less of a need to focus on support structures as they are already somewhat in place (as with Bernal et al. in Latin America). This is reductive and generalising but a point with a grain of truth we can learn from. The reader needs to be aware who is writing what and from where so that they can situate themselves within the different struggles and contexts.

What's Missing?

I feel that there was not enough coverage given to the ideas around Western privilege, individualism and the idea of care and self-care. Some forms of self-care just recreate hierarchies in activism. Some people can afford to take time out for care or pay for some self-care while others cannot. The idea of taking time out also might not be viable as the activist community might be someone's only support network. In the literature I have found on the matter there's too few calls to a collective community or organisational approach to care. The lack of supportive care structures are something which inhibits sustainability on an organisational level and just recognising that activists burnout, become alienated, isolated or have mental health issues isn't enough – it's progressive action which needs to follow these statements which is, for me, the most important part of the investigation and debate.

Brown and Pickerill and Loewe focus a lot on positivity, making some emotions more acceptable than others. They claim they don't want to make some emotions bad and others good but the emphasis on being a 'happy activist' is something that misses the often negative effects of repressing emotions. It also privileges some mental health states over others; playing into the very psycho-normative ideals the West has. Activism may be integral to your life and so you're always in struggle- Then how are you going to be happy all the time? Pessimism may not be a sign that you're not dealing with your emotions -it might just be your emotion because of the situation you're in. Milan Kundera, in his politically tinted love story about Stalinism in the private sphere, *The Joke*, writes that “**Optimism is**

the opium of the people.”³² With this in mind, intersectionality, sustainability and care is something missing from a lot of the literature. I would very much like to read about people’s experiences of sex, race, class, and physical or mental ability. I feel there are many voices that are not being heard and so we may be only seeing things from one angle. Sustainability and care might mean very different things for people who have different needs to the ones we are used to seeing written down.

32 Cucu, Sorin Radu, *The Underside of Politics: Global Fictions in the Fog of the Cold War*. (Fordham: Fordham University Press. 2013) p.84.

CHAPTER 3- METHODOLOGIES

The more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and why, the more the people participate in the development of their selves. The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy. The less people are asked about what they want, about their expectations, the less democracy we have.³³

The methods I have attempted to use in this research have been a source of confusion for me. I find it hard to locate myself as sticking faithfully to any methodology. I was not interested in using quantitative methods and at times I find that much qualitative methods are not what they claim to be; may I be as bold as to say that many qualitative methods still buy into a quantitative ideology. What I mean by this is that once the qualitative research is done we could technically go back and analyse it under codes and terms that have already been created prior to the research and so have become in some way representational. For me a truly qualitative approach is difficult because of power dynamics tied up in the researcher-researched relationship and the effects of academia on the process. To some degree I believe qualitative research within the university will always be limited because as researchers we have been educated in a certain schools of thought and so have been conditioned by it's ideas and ideologies. I don't believe we can be unbiased or objective but what I do believe is that we can try our best to be faithful to what we try and do and for me that means not sticking to any one methodology in research terms. I guess everything I do will at some point have come from one background or another as I will have soaked in it's influence at some stage whether I am conscious of it or not. I will try my best to uncover what it is I'm doing and from what tradition I am working with. If I was to chose some methodology to work with it would be Participatory Action Research (PAR), with a feminist and anarchist perspective (I will explain this further below). Let me explain how I went about collecting data.

Workshops, Interviews And Eco-Dharma

I began by conducting what I termed then (November 2012), Pilot Interviews, but which have subsequently become the main body of my research interviews. They have become so due to their richness; I felt they were so full of things that needed to be conveyed to a wider audience that I had to focus more on them. I conducted 6 interviews that were all approximately half an hour long. I asked

³³ Freire P., & Horton M., *We Make the Road by Walking, Conversations on Education and Social Change*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) p. 146.

about half a dozen questions about their experience of Eco-Dharma, specifically a course they had attended called *Sustaining Resistance, Empowering Renewal*. I asked them what they experienced, how it was for them and what they have taken out of the events during this specific week long course. Depending on the answers I led them in the direction they chose to talk about themselves. Then towards the end of the interviews I asked them if there was something specific they would like to see done/researched around the topics of activism and sustainability.

My research took an interesting turn after the 2nd semester. My co-facilitators and I began to plan and do workshops which also turned out to be full of interesting themes and discoveries and so this kept our hands full as we communicated, analysed, and figured out what it was that was going on and how we could tailor our workshops to suit the needs that were arising out of each new encounter. I have chosen to include an analyses of the workshops, the discoveries made during and around them and the changes made according to the need of the participants. These workshops are only documented through my own reflections on them. I feel it would have changed them irrevocably to have asked people to take part in my research within the workshop space. I will not allude to specifics in keeping with workshop confidentiality. I will however recall themes and attempt to pull out the useful knowledge and understandings which were developed throughout.

A lot of the reason why workshops function at getting people to experience, think and feel things that they do not usually experience, think and feel is due to the environment of trust that is built between participants and facilitators from the beginning. Therefore, if I was to ask people to be involved in research then it would irrevocably change the nature of the experience and workshops for us, the facilitators, and the participants. So, instead of using the workshop space *as* the research I will use my reflections on those spaces as the body of the research and analysis. This, I admit, may be flawed as memory is never as good as a direct recording of the events would be but this is the risk I took. The bodies of data which I will use for this research are interviews, my own reflections on workshops, my own reflections on conversations and communication with the two facilitators who I have been doing the workshops alongside and my further reflections throughout the year through participating in activism in Ireland and my changing ideas on sustainability and social movements.

The research has been a mixture of 4 interviews done with participants (all between 20-35 years old) and 1 with a facilitator (over 35 years old) of a week-long workshop/course called *Sustaining Resistance, Empowering Renewal*, (Sus Res) in Devon, England, in 2012. The interviews were done between 6 months and a year after the Sus Res course. This was put on by Eco-Dharma³⁴ who, in their own words,

(...) offer courses, events and retreats which support the realisation of our human potential and the development of an ecological consciousness honouring our mutual belonging within the web of life – drawing on the Buddhist Dharma and the emerging ecological paradigms of our time.³⁵

This collective has a background in UK theories of deep-ecology, activists sustainability and western (Triratna) Buddhism.

This workshop was about self-care, burnout and cultures in activism. It was geared towards developing understandings of what sustainability meant to all of us. The methods they use are participatory, non-hierarchical and based on the idea of experiential learning (EL). The participants were mainly white, middle-class, young activists from the UK and Ireland. All of us were/are involved in anti-capitalist, direct action, or the environmental movement. We were all familiar with and working with the organisational structures of the new left. What I mean by this is the left which has been growing around the world since the sixties. This left is about justice, equality, anti-oppression, autonomy, and often, an attempt at prefiguration. I would argue that this left has also been organising along anarchist lines, even where they don't identify as such. By this I mean that they focus on participation, autonomy, D.I.Y., are anti-authoritarian/State/oppression, and have been reconsidering what it means to use power or not. The new left is mostly not party political and many groups involved have been characterised by having a distrust in State-politics. The experiences are nuanced and diverse between the UK to Ireland and so presenting these together is problematic. But there is a cross-boarder community of people now communicating and working together to collectively figure out what can be done next by the new-left in order to challenge unsustainable practices and so attempt to recreate our structure along more sustainable lines.

34 For more information on what Eco-Dharma is/does visit – <<http://www.ecodharma.com/>> [accessed on 18th June 2013]

35 Ibid.

To some degree or another all the participants of Sus Res that I have interviewed have practised some form of Buddhism or spirituality and most practice either yoga or meditation on a regular basis. None of the participants in their 20's get paid for their activism. They work voluntarily and support themselves financially through either social welfare or part-time jobs. This often adds to their workload and stress. Only the older activist gets paid for her activism.

We could describe the participants as cultural radicals as they are people who see an aspect of their politics in how they are culturally. This is seen through their dress, their lifestyles, their hobbies, how they practice self-care (yoga, meditation etc.), the social lives they have and how politics becomes something as subjective as it is objective or structural. They do not fit into the more traditional cultural stereotypes of the Irish, English or Eastern European. There's been a clear break away from past generations culturally and politically.

Myself and two friends (all of us participants of Sus Res) have been facilitating workshops in Ireland for the past year on the same topics. Currently we give a 5 hour workshops. It was only 3 hours before. The title of the workshop has changed many times but we are now calling it *Sustaining Resistance* as it appears to be the most neutral and effective. We have changed the title to make it more accessible and open to as many people as possible. We found that having 'self-care' in the title put those off who were less inclined to want to talk about their feelings or caring for themselves. We also thought that if we only had that in the title that we would attract a whole different range of people. Not necessarily our target audience. Conversely we found that having 'burnout' in the title appealed more to the people put-off by 'self-care'. We wanted to appeal to a wide range of people; those interested in digging into their emotions and those who wanted solutions to practical problems. *Sustaining Resistance* seems to suits both for now. No doubt it will change in the future.

We do not see ourselves as working along the same lines or ethos as Eco-Dharma but we do see ourselves as part of a bigger community of people doing sustainability work. Keeping in mind that we were all involved in some element of sustainability work before we attended Sus Res in Devon, we were also spurred to do these workshops, in part, by our experiences there. For this research I will reflect on my experiences of those workshops which have come out through facilitating the workshops, many conversations with my two co-facilitators, conversations with participants before, during and after the workshops, and with many other people who have been interested in or doing

sustainability work in Ireland and the UK. As I mentioned before I did not want to irrevocably change the nature of the workshops by making them research and so I take responsibility for any lack in quality due to this decision.

Workshopping, Experiential Learning & Radical Education

Experiential learning (EL) can be defined as the making of meaning by direct experience.

Experiential education (EE) is the process of being facilitated to come to conclusions of your own through a dialectical relationship with theory and your own experience. Through using the theories of David A. Kolb who developed the EL model, James Neill states that with EL an-

(E)mphasis is placed on the nature of participants' subjective experiences. An experiential educator's role is to organize and facilitate *direct experiences of phenomenon* under the assumption that this will lead to genuine (meaningful and long-lasting) learning. This often also requires preparatory and reflective exercises.³⁶

This theory of learning was developed by Kolb as part of his work as a Professor of Organizational Behaviour and is commonly used within "**adult education, informal education and lifelong learning**"³⁷ circles, as well as amongst some radical education organisations, such as Seeds for Change in the UK. It is also used for "**career development and executive and professional education**"³⁸.

Our workshops, for me, are an example of EL in action through a process of EE. This is not to say that all workshops use EL but that we use it and it was the method used in Sus Res in Devon as far as I'm aware. Facilitating people to come to their own conclusions and understandings is something we have tried to do as part of a prefigurative politics, a way of collectively researching as activists and as a way of figuring out how we might make our activism more sustainable for everyone.

As facilitators we want to do workshops because we feel that a 'banking system'³⁹ of education isn't the best method of eliciting emancipatory or deep learning. We feel that people learn best when an understanding around a topic comes from themselves. This is what we try to facilitate through the

36 Neill, James, *What is Experiential Learning?* (2005)

<<http://www.wilderdom.com/experiential/ExperientialLearningWhatIs.html> > [accessed on 13th May 2013]

37 Smith, Mark K., *David A. Kolb on Experiential Learning*. (2010)

<<http://infed.org/mobi/david-a-kolb-on-experiential-learning/>> [accessed on 14th October 2013]

38 Ibid.

39 When I talk about a banking system of education I mean the institutionalised system of education that we have in our schools where the student is passive and teacher active, so creating an unnatural and unhelpful hierarchy in the learning space. This is a Freirian theory which fits my world-view and can be looked at in more detail in Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

workshops. We try not to give too much theoretical analysis and instead facilitate people to uncover things about themselves and their groups on their own or in smaller working groups. We find this kind of learning to be more horizontal, anti- authoritarian and long-lasting, and so, fitting with our politics. It stops us from becoming perceived experts in the field and so people deferring to us for answers (this is problematic; see - *Some Limitations Of The Methods*, below). We do not feel that this would be helpful. For one we don't have the capacity to have all the answers for people and we don't have the training to deal with emotional or traumatic issues if they do arise. We can only be of minimal support as we exist now. On another note, we feel that it is imperative when speaking about sustainability to practice sustainable methods. It is not sustainable for us to be doing this on our own for the next few years until we burn out ourselves. Facilitating knowledge production in this way opens up a space for others to come on board with us because we are not experts. This, for me, is radical activist research. We are creating knowledge in our own term and through our own methods (workshop tools for 'going-deep' into our emotions, behaviours, beliefs and values). The workshop is free/donation based making it much more accessible for those not being paid for their activism. I think this has been a very important element of the good attendance. Each workshop has varied between 7-15 participants, usually around the higher mark.

Some Limitations Of The Methods

There are many limitations to my research. One is that I have not done enough interviews to come to any conclusions that I might call representational of the people involved, their groups or political environments. This is a problem that may be found with all kinds of research and so is not limited to this specific study. I make only anecdotal claims to feelings and thoughts that might be wide-spread in activist communities. I try to back this up with my own observations (and observations of others as I mentioned above) having facilitated six workshops in Ireland on the specific topics of self-care, burnout and sustainability. I have also been part of facilitating two other workshops using ideas and methods around how to make care part of organising. Both of these were with a new women's rights organisation in Dublin.

I have been organising with many people who come from the same political world (the new left) as I

do which is also limiting. I feel this makes it harder to learn about what might be relevant for others. This is due to my lack of connection to other political spheres and my fear of approaching them with my work. I do not feel confident enough in myself or in justifying my academic research. I also fear that the topic which I'm researching will be seen by many as naive or innocent (which I know is my assumption but one based on years of organising with various groups on the left in Ireland). The topics I have chosen to investigate more are very close to my heart and so I feel a personal connection to everything that I write/do. I feel, as someone doing academic research, that I wouldn't be taken seriously if I approached groups or that I wouldn't be fully trusted. It is my experience that academics are often viewed like this by activists for many reasons, one being that there's a lot of study being done *on* groups (not *by* them) and not a lot being given back. I feel that there's often a paternalistic and disempowering relationship between researcher and 'researched' which is hard to break away from, even when using non-traditional methods such as Participatory Action Research (PAR). All of this has been limiting because it has inhibited me from making this research broader and so more balanced. Again, I understand this but it is interesting because this becomes a problem for many political groups; how do we reach out and become relevant to others? Or how do we join in solidarity with others? It is one of the criticisms I have throughout this research; that groups are exclusive and closed. Maybe some of the reasons that I have just cited are applicable to others experiences. It is my mission to understand this, and my place within it, more and to challenge myself in the future.

I have used PAR-like methods throughout the year and have been in communication about my research and findings with the two people that I facilitate *Sustaining Resistance* workshops with. They have not had any formalised role as co-researchers so they did not make any commitments to me or this research. They have however been reading through my findings and sending me back their comments and ideas which I have included here. The research is therefore not just mine but there are no formal co-writers.

Not all people will come to a workshop. Either people do not enjoy this kind of process, they are hesitant due to past experiences or they are not willing/ready to reflect on emotions. All of this is completely understandable and people do things in different ways. This means that the diversity of voices and range of opinions is limited by the fact that I am relying mainly on workshops and their participants for information. The people who attended were all around the same age group (20-30's),

Irish, middle-class⁴⁰, activists organising on the new left and in communities. The gender balance was quite good. But I miss out on conversations with people on the more traditional, or State centred left, working-class community organisers and activists of older generation. This shows who is interested in these workshops but also who they are being offered/accessible to. On saying this there were a few participants from the Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM; anarchist and non-party political but organises often around State and workerist issues), the Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) throughout the year.

Another limitation is that although we try to create a space where we are not perceived as the experts who are there to teach people the best ways to do things, it is how people are conditioned to look at educators. I feel that at times we are looked at as knowing more about these things than others. People have asked me what's the magic trick to sustainability- all I can say is that I am not yet a sustainable activist or person. The nature of this work is that it's an ongoing process and one which I see as valuable only if done alongside others, or collectively. It is also valuable individually but on an organisational level and within our movements in Ireland and the UK it needs to be collective too. Trying to facilitate in a way that takes as much influence and power out of our hands has been tricky but a valuable learning experience. I have never appreciated good facilitation more so than this year. It is not an easy thing to do well.

Reclaiming our own Knowledge and Territory as Activist Researchers

The methods of doing this research has been a very important and political process for me. I believe in collective forms of research, investigation and knowledge production and so doing this alongside others, however informally, was a necessity from the start. I would like to think that my methods are feminist in the way that they were influenced by bell hook's ideas around education and pedagogy. She takes much of her influence from Paulo Freire and Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. From Freire she takes the idea that emancipatory education shouldn't be based on the 'banking-system' of education which sees people as passive recipients of knowledge but instead we need to recognise

40 By this I mean they come from economically and socially more comfortable backgrounds than others. They have a high level of education and an ability to express themselves in a language and style that shows this. It also means that their 'type' of activism is usually in areas that they did not directly inherit but that they 'chose' to some degree or another. I agree that the idea of choice in western activism is problematic because I often feel that I have no choice in doing what I do, as it's either this or depression, but I was not forced to do what I do.

everyone's ability to be the active creators of their own meanings and, therefore, worlds. She claims that Freire focuses mainly on the mind and so she balances her pedagogy (making it feminist) with the influence of Thich Nhat Hanh's ideas that the educator is like a healer. That all educational practice needs to be holistic; taking mind, body and soul into account. This is like linking praxis with awareness, or mindfulness. I would translate mindfulness to practices of reflexivity. For hooks this helped her to connect her political idea(s) as a feminist, her life experiences and her teaching. I would call my research practices feminist because of they have been influenced by hooks, and so, Freire and Thich Nhat Hanh.⁴¹ I would also term my methods feminist because of the focus on peoples personal experiences and an emphasis on feelings and emotions; the 'private' world. Sara Motta was another feminist influence on how I went about my research. Her ideas on what she calls prefigurative post-representational politics,⁴² in her article *Notes Towards Prefigurative Epistemologies*, have inspired me to push the boundaries of traditional research methods. Through her study of the Urban Land Committees, CTUs, in Caracas, Venezuela, she maps out strategies undertaken by this group to maintain community involvement in land control and services. The CTUs attempts,

(...)to develop collective knowledge forming processes through which to forge the movement's strategy, identity and analysis. It is explicit in its aims of breaking with the patterns of traditional Venezuelan politics, as well as the orthodox left, wherein political strategy, identity and analysis were developed by movement intellectuals.⁴³

The link the CTU have between their political practice and their epistemology is something which resonates with me in regards how I see the workshops that we facilitate. The methods are importantly post-representational and so have a great capacity in being able to produce authentic social movement knowledge, un-dictated by intellectualism, theorisation, or territorialism which is separate from the grassroots movement. Motta argues that there is an,

(...)epistemological and ontological dualism erected between the concrete knowledge (of particular places and communities) which is relational, and universal knowledge (in the space of structures by intellectual experts) which is fixed.⁴⁴

Motta feels that doing research in a 'fixed' way would, for her lack reflexivity, whereas the politics she espouses would transcend this stagnation. Mottas practices and ideas have been influential in the way that I perceive my research and politics. The workshops being spaces for people to create their

41 hooks, b., *Teaching to Transgress – Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

42 Motta, S., & Nilsen, A., G., *Notes Towards Prefigurative Epistemologies, Social Movements in the Global South, Dispossession, Development and Resistance*.

43 Ibid, p. 179.

44 Ibid, p.180

own theories and understandings in a way that is in keeping with their politics and in the hope of recreating these moments of reflection and learning within their struggles.

I would call my methods anarchist because I intend for the findings to add to a discourse around autonomous organising on the radical left. I try to adhere to these principles throughout in a way that I hope stops me from being paternalistic, authoritarian, or elitist. I would be interested in anarchist education and experimenting with the workshops as an educational space in an alternative sense has been a project in anarchism for me. An influence on my ideas around alternative anarchist education has come from the studies of Paul Avrich.⁴⁵ These are my ideals but I accept that hoping to achieve these standards doesn't always mean I will achieve them.

I believe that, as activists, it is important that we are the creators of our own research and knowledge. This is a subversive act in a world that tells us only to consume what we are given and to abide by the rules prescribed to us from above. If we are to be radical researchers we could consider working with PAR methods while trying continuously to imagine even more apt ways of doing research. If we do not at least try to imagine new ways of working then we hazard falling into the trap of recreating an oppressive status quo. Graeber et al. warns us -

From census surveys and marketing research to even sometimes the most well-intended social movement research, research finds itself used as a tool to categorize and classify; it becomes part of the process of organizing forms of knowledge that are necessary to the maintenance of alienating structures, from the most horrific to the most mundane.⁴⁶

Opening up (or knocking down) the borders where research has traditionally been conducted is in itself an act toward social change and one which challenges and fights the institutionalisation of knowledge. Institutionalisation that encourages hierarchy, inequality, privileging and maintenance of the status quo. Any move that redistributes this power over knowledge production more egalitarianly could only be positive or at least a step in the right direction. I hope that this research can in some way redistribute that power.

45 Avrich, P., *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States*. (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1980)

46 D. Graeber and S. Shukaitis's book, *Constituent Imaginations, Militant Investigations//Collective Theorization*. (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007) p.32

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

I have attempted to organise the findings from the many methods of research throughout the year in a type of narrative which will represent the main themes that came out on all levels.

1. Activist Identity and Representational Diversity – a Question of Sustainability.

I've been involved in political activism for quite some time at this stage so I – Ireland's not a big country and the political scene isn't very big either, so you become kind of highly networked overtime very easily like, em....and I suppose that's kind of part of the thing that people who aren't particularly in touch with one another, there's still contact and there's still a circulation of ideas and eh, contacts.⁴⁷

The above quote is an example of how certain ideas, cultures and type of politics can become the norm for a whole milieu of people country-wide. If it is hard for someone to enter into this 'world' then it is also hard for their ideas to filter in too and so often a scene is set-up which holds some ideas in high regard due to their relevance for those involved in that scene. The new left (and often politics in general) tends to regard itself as representing a society, or community, when often there isn't any real diversity of representation within the politics. The statement shows how important the political scene is for keeping people networked and connected but also points to this being a restrictive factor if one were to think about how a diversity of movements, ideas and experiences is represented, or not. This makes up part of one of the big themes that came up this year throughout the research; the theme of the 'activist identity and culture' and its boundaries, necessity and limitations. What I mean by this is peoples identification as an activist; this is how they perceive themselves and often what they call themselves. This becomes their identity and the activist culture becomes their culture. People refer to it as something that is positive for them, keeping them feeling like they have a connection to others within its boundaries, while in another way it's something negative and which excludes and isolates people from a public outside of its remit. The co-existence of these two seemingly different experiences was something people talked about. Many people cited a lack of numbers as problematic within autonomous politics and showed an understanding of the necessity to reach out to more people but they also saw that the protests and new left culture can be alienating for people and push people

⁴⁷ Said by one Irish male interviewee.

away from getting involved in national and international struggle. This becomes integral to a conversation on sustainability because this is one of the things that keeps some people going, makes others burnout and excludes others altogether.

What defines an activist? How does one begin to feel like they fit into this category? In relation to the workshops there has been a handful of people who have asked if they could come even though they weren't activists. I found this strange because most of them were either working as community organisers or had a clear interest in oppositional politics. This shows me that there isn't usually a clear definition as to what will make you identify as an activist even though there are certainly unwritten standards which people measure themselves and each other from.

For some people that I talked to it has been sustainable to have an identity as an activist. People are able to find a niche that suits their politics and others to feel a companionship with. They become part of a community which sustains them and an informal support network goes hand-in-hand with this. At other times this identity is limiting because it comes with practices that were isolating for them individually, or their groups, collectively. There are positive and negative aspects to this. Some sustaining and others depleting.

In the quote above the man explains how he feels he is part of a network, or community, of activists (he described this with pride and a sense of security). He identifies as being part of the political scene in Ireland. He also identifies as an activist in a small community of activists around the country. He feels that the culture, ideas and contacts that one gets from this scene are spread through this network. This would show that there is a certain activist identity and culture which he has become part of. This is in one way good as it keeps him networked and in touch with peers but it also points to something which is quite exclusive; seeing some as politically active and in this scene and everyone else being outside of it. I would argue that the political scene in Ireland is bigger than this man says but it is the specific type of politics that he refers to which is small. I find this rhetoric normal for people on the new left. It seems as if the view of what relevant political action or struggle for social change is is quite narrow. Some people might be labelled as supporters of politics and not as activists in their own right because they do their politics differently. One example being what some on the left call 'lifestylism' which can often be a dismissal of a form of politics based around everyday life decisions, culture and desire. Another example might be the small numbers of young people who don't vote; this

might be a political act which doesn't label itself as such. This separation, of the politically valid from the not valid, becomes an important question if the new left in Ireland want to talk about what it means to be sustainable. If sustainability means numbers, strength, relevance to others and an ability to support various needs then a culture and political identity which is both supportive *and* alienating needs to be rethought and renegotiated.

The Activist 'Work-Ethic'

Too many things, too little time, too few people we can trust⁴⁸

One element of identifying strongly as an activist which can be harmful is the work ethic associated with much of it. One woman describes what she discovered about herself during a Sus Res workshop with Eco-Dharma and as part of her ongoing work on sustainability. For her, looking at what having an activist identity was doing to her was vital in attempting to break negative habits-

Going to Sustaining Resistance (*Empowering Renewal*) is like the start of the journey, kind of an exploration and a support for other people to see where...? "Where do I need to do some work? (*rhetorical question*)" You know, what are the particular things that are my patterns that are about burnout. For me it was very much a springboard for looking at things like activist identity, I have a very strong identity as an environmental activist and what that was doing to me in terms of overwork and workaholism and maybe it was probably when I came back from there that I realised I was probably a workaholic. I needed to really do something about that.

This woman connects her strong identification as an environmental activist and her tendency to over-work. She also says that she realised after the course that she was probably a workaholic. It's not clear whether she blames her over-work on her identity or if her identity was one of over-work that drew her to activism. If either is the case it shows that new left activism and over-work are things that are seen to go hand-in-hand or that feed into each other in their current form. I have seen this to be true for others involved in various areas such as immigrant and asylum seeker solidarity work, environmental and animal rights activism. If she had a tendency to overwork it may have been

⁴⁸ Anon- cited as one of the reasons that people burnout. During a workshop we gave on Sustainability, Activism and Burnout.

exacerbated by her activism. This woman is from the UK and so she is talking from that perspective but I also feel this to be the case in Ireland due to similar experiences people have related during workshops here.

I got a sense from many people that they felt like 'activists' have to be seen to be doing enough activism. Within some of the Irish and English activist cultures on the radical left, those who work hard, or even too much, are seen as good activists in the eyes of others. There may also be other rewards such as getting results in your area of activism, benefiting you or others, or just getting some work done, because with activism there can often be a lot to do. There is a lot of pressure on people to be constantly doing things. This non-stop activity is often to the detriment of critical reflection about what it is they are doing and at the cost of their health. People said that they are used to skipping meals, sleep, leisure time and friend/family time in order to get things done. Over a long period of time this lead some to burnout.

Linking overwork with an activist identity is problematic. At times it seemed as though people created their own problems by voluntarily taking on too much. These seemingly individual choices are tied up with cultural and identity norms and even family histories outside of activism. It may be linked with how we perceive work in the West; hard administration work done by interns and younger people in order for them to work their way up the hierarchies of their job.

People have to be a certain way (or feel that they do) in order to be part of a group or because it's how they have learned how to be. They are also attracted to groups that they feel some connection to or have some similarities with. The cultures are comprised of many different intersections; family, religion, capitalism etcetera. The ways we organise politically may be influenced by the wider cultures in which we're brought up in. This is alluded to in one man's comment-

Interviewee- I find that even though I'm really busy and there's a meeting and they're like – 'look guys, we need somebody to do this' – and you know I wouldn't volunteer straight away but then nobody else is volunteering I put up my hand and say – 'ok so ill do it' – even though I know I don't have time to do the stuff, I'm already doing and taking on something else....I shouldn't do it because I won't be able to do everything well and I put undue stress on myself but I still do it because...it's just the way I am. Ill do stuff, I just want everything to be done. I'm too nice. I find it hard to say no to people.

Interviewer- But even there, even when you're not asked directly you'll still volunteer for it even though you know you can't do it. So why do you think you do

that?

Interviewee- Catholic guilt! (laughs) no no...I just kind of feel an obligation. I think it's something I get from my mother, that she'd always do everything like, you know she wouldn't want to leave anybody down. She was always involved in – kind of activism but more community groups- like raising money for stuff and selling raffle tickets for the church and all the time she spent. She used to work full-time and he used to do all this stuff and like that's where I get my social activism from. From my mother cause she was always involved in the community and always involved in stuff. That's defiantly where I get it from.

Making our social movements in Ireland as open to, and relevant to, others as possible can help us try and make them more sustainable. A lack of numbers is one issue which came up again and again when people talked about why they needed to take on so much. They believed that there was too much to be done and not enough people to do it. This may be objectively true but it may also be an example of people creating their own problems and workloads. Many of the people I talked to give themselves extra work, often unconsciously or down to some skewed notion of how much 'needs' to be done, even when it's counterproductive as with the man quoted above. The feeling of obligation this man cited isn't unique when people talk about how they feel when it comes to activism and this sentiment also came up quite often in the workshops we facilitated. At times it appears hard to see the wood for the trees when we get stuck in organisational and personal patterns.

It is also true that there is a lot to do and not enough people to do it. The new left, and the left in general, is small; at times too small to implement the changes it wants to see in society. Ireland may have a culture of people complaining yet not doing anything proactive to confront the problem. I'm not going to go into possible reasons for this here but I do want to acknowledge that I am not dismissing activists who have gallantly chosen to do something about injustices. What I want to confront is the ways in which we can organise better, with more awareness and in more healthy or balanced ways. It isn't enough to think of ourselves as trying to wake other up from their passivity and ignore the part we may play in not seeing the activity of others just because it doesn't fit our notions of activity.

Activism as a Support Network

Activism is often intensely emotional. Of all those involved in this study most of us are working with people or in situations where there's a lot on the line for ourselves and others. We work closely with

social, environmental and economic injustice. Being bombarded constantly with the inequalities of society is not easy. Some of those involved were up against physical State repression for prolonged periods of time. This all takes its toll on people. One woman described herself as having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that still effects her now even having left the campaign months ago. It was a mixture of things that led her to burn out and leave the campaign she was in. The trauma experienced while involved as well as the lack of support for dealing with these experiences afterwards were significant reasons. Now that she is no longer living with the community of people who understand the day-to-day events of that specific direct action campaign, or who have similar politics to her, it is difficult to figure out how to process the after effects of being involved. She hesitantly identifies as an activists since the campaign because it became who she was and how she could feel like she belonged to a group with whom she felt close to. This was necessary for her to be able to be part of the campaign. Identifying like this also admits her to a small and select group of activists with whom she can talk to openly now that she has left. Having very specific experiences, which are related to being an activist (i.e. direct action), links you to others who have experienced the same things. And distances you from people who haven't been through such experiences. The activist herself was isolated from a wider public and so accepted the security of being called an 'activist' within an activist group. This in turn admitted her to a group that was isolated, albeit together, from that same public. If you cannot battle your isolation it's better to be isolated with others. This doesn't tackle the fact that there's a disjoint between the activists and the public but it does create a temporary solution. The implications of this identity are many fold. It is vital to peoples sustainability on one hand and detrimental on the other. The woman explains this in her own words-

I still would have been refusing to call myself an activist when I moved to live near the campaign because I wanted to do acupuncture and direct action and just living with the community there, eh, but I just got like really sucked into the activist community and I slowly stopped being able to connect to people outside of that because I have been very specific kind of environment that I live in and...am...just like going anywhere else was really isolating and I wasn't able even to have a conversation with people and feeling just really frustrated and isolated so I ended up just being with an activist community and kind of stopping fighting to being called an activist because ya I guess that's what I invite on, the term activist, because I think it's part of how we create that isolated bubble, which is sometimes useful but not always.

Even though this woman talks about having a choice in how she identified, I do not claim here that

identity is something that's chosen. I will not try to understand here how identity is formed and how much of it is choice or how much of it is unconscious or socially constructed. Certain cultures and subcultures seem to be attracted to, and get involved in, activism and social movements. This is not new. Subcultures have long been the ones who, having been on the margins of society, have had to find ways of networking with others and find a collective voice together. They have been the ones who have had a different view of society, from 'below' or from the 'outside'. This alternative perspective has the ability to give people an awareness of what's missing or of alternative points of view, or politics.

It may be that the formation of an activist identity and community, which is often selective and closed, is a way of tackling the isolation people feel being activists or having alternative, non-mainstream politics. When family, friends or mainstream society are uninterested in your politics it is important to find others who believe in the same things. This is invigorating and essential for the continuation of our movement. But at the same time this often creates a group with specific language, rituals, dress and spaces, that others find alienating or impenetrable.

One man, who has been working on sustainability issues for years, said during a workshop we facilitated - **"Living outside social norms is made really hard by societal pressures, and this can have long term effects."** This was surprising to me as I hadn't thought of things in these terms. It's easy to blame ourselves for the seclusion our activist bubble experience, but it is necessary also to see that it is not just up to activists to do all the work and outreach. At times society just isn't going to be receptive or interested and so we must be able to sustain ourselves in the face of apathy and indifference or even judgement. Finding people who are willing to work with you to achieve something that you all find important is sustaining when wider society thinks you're naive, innocent or lost. This is interesting in an Irish context because often Irish society is comfortable only in well known surroundings and often dislikes or dismisses things that seem alien to it. This often means that activists are pushed outside of mainstream society. The new left is not readily accepted in a big way in Ireland. This same man said that-

Intense activism is not necessarily part of a division between oneself and others – e.g. community activists are often incredibly busy with family care, supporting others, fire-fighting and meetings.

If this is true then even integrated, or community activists find that they have a lot to do. It is possible that community activists, as opposed to new left activists, have more organisational structures which sustain them due to many years or experience in the field and may often have a helping hand from the State in terms of funding.

Activism and Life or Activism as Life

Where your life is your work and your work is your life things can get very complicated. You don't have the luxury of leaving your work at the end of the day. Your culture and identity get caught up in this. Your 'work mates' become the people you live with, look-up to, hang-out with and love. This leads to the solidification of the circle and the often perceived incestuous nature of it from the outside. This insular, in-group is at once important for sustaining activists and at the same time creates unsustainable cultures. Thinking about group dynamics is quite important here. On a practical level it is vital to keep connections and communication amicable because friendships rely on it, as well as the sustainability of the movement/s. It's an almost functioning contradiction that activists live through in their circles. I feel it would be good to begin questioning this phenomenon collectively so that we can try and change these contradictory terms and conditions which end up isolating activists in scenes instead of on their own. One man I interviewed was already looking at this question after having experienced burnout. For him burning out was a catalyst to looking at the causes and, although not cited directly as the main cause, isolation came up as a significant factor-

I didn't want to kind of, eh, isolate myself from politics or from society or from the world, if you like. And be in a kind of a bubble of that kind of action, I wanted to have some way that I could improve things for myself and also remain involved.

There are a few different levels that people talked about in regards to doing your activism on one hand and having your 'other' life on the other. This may be a phenomenon experienced by those who 'do' activism voluntarily or as a choice of some kind. Their activism is outside of their locality or community and they may not have much support from family and friends. It becomes something external to their day-to-day lives (or their social reproduction- housework, earning money, looking after your home/family etc.) Activism then becomes 'extra work' out of choice, ethical necessity or

solidarity. One man, post-burnout, talks about trying to deal with this by attempting to bridge the barrier between his activism and his life and so attempt to become more sustainable -

I would have had quite a kind of a- 'Politics' and 'Life' (gestures that both are in different areas)- sorry you don't have visuals on that (Dictaphone) - very very clearly separated spheres between those things whereas I'm attempting to kind of meld them a bit more.

This man later said to me - **"I Think that people who are active in a sustainable way are often those who do their political work in a social way, i.e. Putting on events, meals etc."** This statement was said quite a while after the initial interview and so it shows that he is figuring out what sustainability means to him and different people and that this work in an ongoing process but if time is given to reflect on the issue positive suggestions might appear. His suggestion is that to meld ones 'politics' with ones 'life' in a social way, or organising outside of the box, is something that might tackle the unsustainable nature of a life with separations.

Many people I talked to got quite caught up in their activism to such an extent that their whole lives revolved around activism for prolonged periods of time. This became detrimental to relationships and jobs outside of their political activity. One thing one man I interviewed did to counteract this was to try and dedicate time to his 'non-political' friends and seeing family. This suggestion came up in a couple of workshops that we facilitated when people were brainstorming around what they could do to avoid burnout. People talked about consciously doing things that weren't overtly political to give themselves a break. Others did this through other means such as getting away from activism by taking some time off. People do things such as meditate, yoga, dance, sing and other body based work which they say takes them out of their heads and back into their bodies. They find this gives them energy. One woman, who has been facilitating workshops on sustainability and burnout for a few years spoke of her experiences with what helped people through their burnout and so what might be good for keeping ourselves sustainable-

A lot of it involves things that are related to the body which meditation is very much about being in the body. And similar things like Tai Chi and other kinds of body work are very important to a lot of people to help their recovery. Dance. Music. Singing. You know, things that use the physical body. Like singing. That kind of work. Music. Seem to be really important. Because you get out of yourself. You get totally absorbed in the thing that you are doing, in what's happening. Rather than thinking processes going on.

This statement resonates with me because I would consider much of the political organising on the radical left in Ireland quite head-based, rational, intellectual and pragmatic. As opposed to being an emotional, body or feeling based space. I do not mean that people don't experience things at an emotional level, I mean that there isn't much awareness of emotions, ways of dealing with them supportively or constructive reflection. Being politically active has an effect on us both at the level of the body *and* the mind. This above quoted woman sees that being in your head too much can be a factor in burnout. This sentiment is not uncommon during workshops we have taken or facilitated. It has also been quite a gendered conclusion; one which women seem to cite more so than men. Direct action, for example, is a head and body experience but one which we organisationally deal with in a head way. If we do deal with it or reflect on it at all. I have rarely found organisational support structures in place for processing the emotional side of experience. The experiences of the people I have interviewed and those who have attended the workshops have been overwhelmingly from this perspective. This tells me that there are *not* structural support systems on the new left in Ireland which give as much time to the emotional as they do the intellectual. This means that half of us is being neglected.

2. Individual and Organisational Care

“**You can't do everything yourself**” - was one revelation that kept coming up again and again during conversations and workshops with participants. The idea that we need each other in order to function better is something that wasn't necessarily obvious to people from the beginning. Some reached the conclusion by witnessing others burnout and questioning their inactive role in supporting them. Others figured it out by taking on too much work on their own and forgetting to delegate, often leading them to overworking themselves and so harming themselves.

I think that many of the participants have a sense that the individual is connected in some way to the collective and that the functioning of the whole depends on the health of its parts. Many people who attended *Sustaining Resistance, Empowering Renewal* (Sus Res) in Devon came there in order to learn how to deal with collective burnout and group sustainability. They seemed shocked and hesitant when they found out that the week was going to be much more focused on how they themselves were. One woman explains what she thought the workshop was going to be like-

I guess I expected much more of that 'how to apply this' because I feel that I'm quite self-aware and aware of the emotional and mental effects of how we live and how does it relate to our work and how does it affect the movement, so I probably felt like we are going to talk about not only ourselves as individual but about how do we relate to groups we work in and with. And like really practically talking about more tools and...ya you know, organisational stuff.

All of the people I interviewed who attended Sus Res understood by the end of it that they needed to be able to deal with their own inner workings if they were to be able to deal with the workings of their groups. Of the four I interviewed they all expressed a desire to have done more organisational stuff which they could bring back to their group. This was in part due to the frustration people felt around not knowing how to implement this information organisationally or with groups that wouldn't be totally open to these ideas; either rejecting it or ignoring it.

Another thing that shows me that people are looking towards a collective approach to issues such as care and sustainability is that many of the people who attended Sus Res went on to do workshops around the topics for their groups or others in their areas. People found the week so useful that they wanted to pass it on to others but they also saw themselves as part of something bigger than just their own week in Devon. This collective approach to knowledge sharing and facilitating demonstrates that people understand the need for change on more levels than just the individual. It also shows us that this kind of work is not already being done on any large scale and people feel they could take some responsibility for being the ones to do work that they see as important.

One woman spoke about the necessity to do sustainability or care work on a collective level-

(...)because often when I find people coming with the idea of self-care it's very much about - you have to stop doing things and look at yourself and that's it and that's not what I agree with. Or like... It's not that I disagree with it I just feel that if there's not another way how to go about doing things then we are just never going to be effective and going to have always a new generation of people doing something who burnout and then there will be somebody new and we're never going to be growing beyond what we've been.

As the literature I've covered points to, a lot of the care and emotional work in social movements is being done behind the scenes by women or sections of the queer community. If left unchallenged then we leave patriarchal gendered stereotype unchallenged and so miss a chance for radical change which benefits those doing the invisible social reproduction of our movements. Repeating patterns generationally, which this woman suggests is happening, could be showing us that we need to rethink how we are organising and why we aren't learning from it. I think this is much more complex than just that we need to do it collectively but it might be one of the

reasons.

Many people involved peripherally in this research alluded to doing things that sustain them or looking after themselves while still being involved. It's not as black and white as you have to either drop out or burnout. I don't want to assume either that burnout is only a symptom coming from a collective problem. It isn't uncommon that stresses in peoples lives outside of their politics (friends, family, intimate partners, jobs etc.) can have an effect on them in how they organise. Emotions and stress are not things that you can keep in separate parts of your life and often they overlap, affecting many parts of your life. The idea that we need to focus on the collective aspects has been the opinion and experience of only a few I have talked to.

Doing sustainability work with other people and in a community is something which people found very sustaining in itself and something they wished to see more of. Just like peoples desire to bring this work into their groups, this tells us that there's a lack of this kind of community or groups work. People got inspired by it because it was out of the ordinary for how they are used to organising politically. This is what one participant experienced during the Sus Res week -

That was the society that I...that like we're trying to build. And it was happening there. There was so much like...caring, compassion, feeling of community and like, and not like people trying to get their own way or to get one up on people. Sorting themselves out, like a real...a real community. And that was kind of inspiring.

Group Dynamics and Sustainability

Two women I interviewed, neither from Ireland, one man, from the UK, and one man from Ireland all talked about the importance of group dynamics. My questions were quite focused on how individuals perceived self-care and burnout and so were not directed at a collective analysis. It's interesting that these people answered with an emphasis on the importance and difficulty of groups dynamics.

I interviewed a male from the UK and he spoke about group dynamics. He described a workshop that he gave on his return from Sus Res -

And it was with a group that organises together, so a group that already know each other. And interestingly a group that had done quite a lot of work in the previous months with their own dynamics, internal dynamics, something that was sparked off by gender issues; some of the women in the group had issues with gender dynamics in terms of gender power dynamics in the group. Then the whole group did a lot of work on that. So, there's an incredible respectfulness and trust in the group.

He connects the groups dedication to working on their inner dynamics and the level of trust and respect they have. Working together collectively in this case has made the group much stronger and because of the nature of the work it has made it a much safer environment for women. The commitment by a group to work together around issues that affect the more vulnerable members is an example of how groups can try and become more sustainable places for all of their members. The UK has a history, within activist circles, of men organising together in trying to confront their sexist attitudes. This has taken many forms, one of which is the all-men's feminist reading groups I know many male comrades in the UK are involved in. However you view this- problematic or progressive – it's an example of a conviction to working together towards more diverse and safe groups where everyone's existence is accepted/respected.

This can be seen as an example of people in a group, who felt oppressed or vulnerable, being able to speak up and demand that the group take their needs into account. It is an experience that I feel might be commonplace. I have experienced both myself and others feeling vulnerable or out of place in groups. We usually end up staying quiet and not voicing our opinions. This may be due to a lack of confidence, or ability to communicate in the dominant fashion (intellectually or otherwise) or due to a number of factors from socialisations to patriarchy. This might be a good example of how sustainability work can be done in our groups but it doesn't give us a way of introducing methods like this where a group doesn't want to do this kind of work or where it would be inappropriate to do this work because of a lack of supportive resources in place.

An example given by one of the women I interviewed of how good group work could be done was-

(...)that's much more about learning skills really like how to deal with conflict or how to get good group processes going, in your group how to support eachother, how to participate in decision making. It would be a bit more skills focused.

These are issues that have come up quite a lot throughout the workshops myself and two others have been facilitating. We are not able to give much else other than saying that these are areas people need to work on. We do not have the capacity or resources to give people training in these areas. All we can do is elicit suggestions from the groups themselves as to what has worked or not worked for them.

This is an unfortunate limitation we face in Ireland. It would be much more conducive to good group

functioning if there were training resources the radical left could access or if self-sufficient and autonomous education became more widespread. We may need to start thinking about providing our own training resources, figuring out how to fund them or how they might sustain themselves without funding.

One of my co-facilitators for the workshops has found it hard to bring the practices around sustainability into the groups he organises with in Ireland -

The difficulty of integrating these practices within groups that eh... ya, integrating the kind of more sustainable practices, that we do in our workshops and that we did in Devon and stuff, into our groups on a kind of a day-to-day level. You know, in a kind of environment that's, you know, some people might be a little bit hostile to it, more people are just gathered up with the urgency with whatever task is at hand and don't see that the time exists, you know, everything is so kind of urgent that the time doesn't exist for this kind of stuff, or else it's all common sense.

There seem to be many obstacles when it comes to sustainability work in Ireland and the UK (according to those interviewed from the UK and those who attended Sus Res in Devon from the UK and Europe). There's the hesitancy and unwillingness that this man mentions above. There's the ways in which we organise that create spaces where everything is always urgent and there's never enough time to stop and reflect. Or else people dismiss it because they already know they should take care of themselves and each other and in 'knowing' this they seem sure that they are working towards it, or worse, already doing it. This is a kick in the face for anyone who suffers or burns out within these groups because often it's harder to address an issue when people think they are already addressing it. It's as if talking about it is actually doing it.

More Than Just Talk or Theory

For one participant there's much more to really addressing these issues than just acknowledging that they're there. If that were the case then we should all be perfect by now. She talks about going deeper into her own behavioural patterns-

For me anyway, that's been the key to resolving it. To changing my habits. To look at what's underlying and why those habits are there. So those habits around work and staying in the office late, all of those. But what's underpinning them?

Another Sus Res participant reflected on his learning during the course in relation to the idea of going deeper into topics. A depth that often elicits action or change because of the evocative nature of that learning -

(...) so rather than being therapeutic (*the learning experience*), which I guess is the point is that burnout has so much to do with our attitude towards what we're doing and our feelings towards what we're doing and not just what that...I guess it was sort of necessary to explore things at that (*emotional, hidden, deep*) level and to get some space to find out what was going on those levels. And also I think that working on those levels makes it more like you can actually change. If I just like... if someone had given me a lecture on the theory of burnout or something I might have said – well that's really interesting- and I might *even* have remembered some of the ideas and concepts, but working on an emotional level, I think made me take stuff on board or it's kind of a deeper learning.

Many people who have attended the Eco-Dharma workshops, our workshops in Ireland and those I have interviewed have spoken about the necessity of going deeper into issues and figuring out what's behind them. The workshops have been just one space which is geared towards this kind of exploration. The spaces use a kind of collective research model where all participants can delve into themselves and each other in a very different way than in everyday communication. This is facilitated through the use of specific tools, techniques, and skills that a facilitator can bring into a group. It's not necessary but from what the people I have interviewed have said, facilitation is a skill and so recommend training or looking at online resources. Many of the Sus Res participants have showed an awareness of the importance of facilitation to groups work and deep learning. One man from the UK said-

I was already interested in facilitation and into how to do it and I've been trying stuff out for a little while and I was blown away by the facilitation that week. The skill and the adaptability to the group, like the...that sense of community and safe space that we felt there and the ability to allow those things to kind of come-up and be dealt with by the group. I think that had a lot to do with the facilitation as well as a lot to do with the group. And that really inspired me to think about the significance of facilitation and how powerful it can be and has made me more sure with this project we're doing now which is all about facilitation and stuff.

At the same time as people acknowledged the importance of good facilitation they also understood that it has a lot to do with the group themselves being actively involved in this work too. One of the facilitators of the week tells us that -

The group seemed to gel really well and that made it really easy to facilitate the group. The group was facilitating itself very quickly. I don't know if you know the word Container? - this sense of creating a space where the group feels safe with each other and people feel safe with each other. Safe enough to talk about personal things. That happened very quickly.

This shows how this work needs to be done on more levels than are currently being thought about and acted upon. It's not enough for people to just talk about these issues but people have needed to understand, deeply, what it was that they were experiencing and why.

3. The Challenges People Face with Sustainability Work in Their Groups, Organisations and in Everyday Life

Sustainability work takes many forms for different people. It might be about work on themselves as an individual and it might be trying to change group structures or bring into place group process and dynamics work. The people who have attended the workshops we have facilitated and who attended the Sus Res course in Devon weren't necessarily working together although many of them come from a similar political scenes and similar activist cultures on the new or radical left.

Participants mainly represented *themselves* even where they talked about group issues. The intentional and ephemeral communities created during the workshops generally only lasted until the end of the workshop and so people are faced with going back to their groups which generally did not have a culture of talking about the workshop issues openly. People have been given a space and opportunity to reflect on what sustainability, burnout and care means to them and what organisational structures or practices might be adopted in order to cultivate more balanced groups. If they find that these things are important and that there needs to be changes made at some level then it's up to them to go back and figure out how to attempt this collectively in their groups. This is problematic. It is not easy to bring these issues up with people. Often it takes confidence in ones own voice. A confidence not all of us have when it comes to going against the grain of the dominant organisational paradigm. Many people either alluded to, or guessed that, their would be resistance to work at this level. Even though it is problematic it is still seen as a necessary to figure out how to do this work practically and in our groups. A co-facilitator talks about her opinions on, and the necessity of, doing

work with others, even where difficult-

Working with people who are not necessarily the same like you is for me much more valuable than being with 5 people who think the same. Well, maybe not valuable... but basically to convince someone to pay attention to these things, whatever they are, was something which I thought was the most important thing in the long term.

For her and other participants throughout the year the problem was not convincing those who already agree with you, but more it was a question on how to convince or communicate this to people who were less inclined to think along these lines. This was a reflection which many of the workshop participants and almost all of the interviewees came to when asked about their experiences of self-care and their own groups or organisations. There was a common feeling that if we had structures in place around sustainability, burnout and care then some of us would be less at risk from burning out. But there was a lack of clarity as to what those structures might look like.

A Lack of Structures and Resources

One man interviewed reflected on his experiences on returning from the Sus Res course in Devon. He found that he had gotten in touch with some emotions that he had repressed for years-

I am a repressed...an emotionally repressed person. You know, it's just kind of what we do in Ireland, I don't know about other countries but most men anyway in Ireland we're very emotionally repressed. We bottle up all our emotions. But at this camp (*Sus Res*) it really opened me up and got me much less emotionally repressed. Even a bit too unemotionally repressed because for weeks after it I was like telling people the intimate details of my life and I feel about stuff. To random strangers and my friends and it was kind of a bit- once you open that barrier it takes a while to shut it down. And I felt that that really helped me in the future...just the realisation that getting your emotions – that bottling up your emotions doesn't help – obviously. But just letting them out and just talking about them with people really helps you deal with the stresses of campaigns and just makes it easier all around to deal with life.

Looking at these emotions in depth and working through them instead of burying them was something that helped him. He felt that this kind of work might enable him to be more sustainable in his political activity and decided that he wasn't going to bottle his feeling up any more and instead try to acknowledge them and deal with them. Taking this on himself as an individual task didn't help him in his activism and he just ended up opening up to strangers and friends who were confused about

where this change had come from. There was no structure to do this politically and he felt that doing it in his everyday life was necessary too but he didn't know how to do this in any way which wouldn't just alienate him from others. He eventually talked about having to figure out how to not be so open any more and that this took him a while. This shows that it's not just activist organisational culture that doesn't necessarily include emotional reflexivity but it might be activist culture reflecting mainstream society. This man concluded that - **“(p)eople kind of back away from you and stuff because you're being emotionally open like and that's not ok in our society.”** (this man was talking about Ireland).

This proves a difficult issue to figure out in terms of practical suggestions. If the culture (activist and mainstream) doesn't exist for work which entails emotional literacy, reflexivity and awareness, as well as an acknowledgement that care, love and support need to become part of how social movements organise, then where does one start trying to make changes. Cultural change is a slow and complex process. One which I will not try and tackle in this research. What is apparent is that many of the workshop participants and interviewees have found this a challenge when constantly going against the grain of the dominant organisational and cultural paradigm. I have found that people who have come of their own accord to workshops to discuss and develop understandings of these issues have overwhelmingly been in search of a better way to do things while also feeling a bit lost because the path isn't an easy or clear one. This shows me that there is a lack of political discussion and action around the issues of sustainability, care and burnout in Ireland, on the left in particular, and for a few people in the UK the action that is happening is still being critically engaged with.

4. Choices and Privilege

Well, I think it's quite important to learn about ourselves and get more self aware and so I think that that's something that Sustaining Resistance does, it helps us see what those places are. But for me that's not a negative thing. I'm not saying that there aren't tears or despair or things that go on when we are looking at those things, especially for the first time. We see the kind of patterns. Ultimately it's kind of liberating to look through those things and have choices again. Because that's what it feels like to me. I got choices now: I could work, or I could not work. Whereas previously I could only work. So I feel freer now to make the choice to stay late at the office or not. I don't feel driven in quite the same way.

The idea of having a choice when it comes to self-care came up when I was talking to people about their experience of burnout. This woman talked about having a choice about how much she was going

to work or not as being a big deal for her now. She says that before, when she was more prone to burnout, that it didn't seem like a choice. I see this as her taking control over an area of her life through critical reflection on what it was she was doing unconsciously. Her work on sustainability, through the Sus Res workshops, the work she does with a grassroots training collective in the UK, and her personal work, have all been a process of critical reflection and critically minded action. Partly this reflection has been assisted by attending and facilitating the Sus Res courses -

For me anyway, that's been the key to resolving it. To changing my habits. To look at what's underlying and why those habits are there. So those habits around work and staying in the office late, all of those. But what's underpinning them? So I think the Sustaining Resistance course kind of points at those things and helps you spend a bit of time to reflect on those things but I think a lot of the work of Sustaining Resistance comes after the course.

There are two dimensions to this, one being that this woman's activism and attitude towards work are things that become choices once she confronts her unconscious behaviour. The second dimension is that, even though it took her a while to come to the conclusion that these were choices she had, it still shows that she is coming from a place where there is some kind of choice tied up in her activism and how she does it. It may not be the choice to engage or not, because for many activists it's the choice of either doing something or depression. Often the idea of not doing something is unthinkable or would lead to a darker version of life. Choice is a concept that may be more applicable to some struggles than others. Some people do not have the choice and do not look at what they're doing as something that was chosen. What is clear from this woman's quote is that there's a choice in *how* she does what she needs to do in order for her to take care of herself and ensure longevity and health in the struggles she's involved in.

Western privilege and its manifestations are complex issues to look at as intersections of privilege exists just as they do for oppression; sex, race, class etcetera. What doesn't come up in the Sus Res course is how this is linked to ideas around sustainability, burnout and self-care. This is an issue because, in failing to look at sustainability as something everyone needs, regardless of privilege, we risk recreating hierarchical and oppressive social structures within our radical spaces. This is not to say that we shouldn't be able to look after ourselves because we have privilege, but that we should be

aware how open and relevant our ideas of care are to others. *Sus Res* becomes directed at middle-class western activists because other cultures and classes tend to have ways of integrating care and community into political practice much more or they look at these issue differently. It may be that one persons ways of doing things doesn't suit someone else and so they won't engage in the process because it has nothing to do with them, doesn't speak to their struggles or offers nothing to them. Western activists, being brought up in alienated societies, are possibly bringing their alienated subjectivities into activism and so inhibiting radical social change from taking place. It is also possible that western activists, living in more fragmented societies, have also become alienated from the direct connections that their political activism has on their lives. This means western activism comes across as more of a moral act or a choice of some sort. I don't want to dismiss that there are interconnections between activism and the activists life that might not be very obvious. This is not to pathologise western activism but just to try and navigate our sites of struggle.

Self-oppression, in terms of workaholism, became an issue for this woman quoted above. Under capitalism people are seen as workers or tax-payers and so working hard is seen as the right thing to do. To see the evidence of this you just have to listen to people talking about the unemployed. This sentiment in part stems from the industrial revolution and even religion ethics and morals.⁴⁹ We are conditioned and socialised by the society we grow up in and so it's no surprise that we internalise a capitalist work-ethic and patriarchal view of emotions and rationality. This is our challenge in the West; to decolonise ourselves from oppressive narratives and structures and so begin to see what a world outside of our current system might look like. Emotionally reflexive work which aims to uncover things that people have never looked at before collectively becomes much more than just sharing emotions, it becomes about practising a prefigurative politics.

49 For information on how a work-ethic could be related to religion see, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, by Max Weber, (New York: Dover Publications Inc.) 1905.

CHAPTER 5. IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

I would like for this section to be useful for practitioners and activists in some way that hasn't already been done and overdone. This is a complex task as much of the topics covered in this research have already been covered in literature (as partially seen in the literature review), and possibly in practice. So what can I give to this field of research that is new or helpful? What can this study give to people interested in sustainability and next steps? I am afraid that this work will be taken out of context or used as a blueprint in situations that it doesn't suit. So, I would like to add a warning – to keep critical and self-reflective when doing this work and reading these words in order not to transfer specific knowledge and practice onto unsuitable contexts.

My research doesn't strongly break away from international theories on what causes burnout amongst activists but it does look at the specifics of how this happens in Ireland and what we need to do about it. It also places burnout as one symptom of unsustainable activism, but definitely not the only outcome. It might even be harmful to focus so much on the phenomenon of burnout as it might create a hierarchy of activism – 'if you haven't burnt out then you're obviously not a good enough activist'. I would suggest that activists need to do this kind of work collectively rather than individually although I do not dismiss the need for people to take care of themselves too.

In the appendix I will show and explain some of the tools, techniques and methods we use to elicit development of our ideas on sustainability, self-care and burnout during workshops. These may be useful to practitioners who want to learn and practice more about Experiential Learning and workshops. But this is not to be used as a handy transferable list of things to do. I would argue that all these tools have very specific uses and are only good in some contexts. We have been using them during workshops but it is not just the tool which creates the space. It is quite a nuanced experience of facilitation, intuiting what is right when and constant checking-in with the co-facilitators along the way. I would encourage anyone to look at the tools here and then to take a look at the resources and links I will add for more information about their origins and uses. In this section I will only give examples of parts of the workshops which speak to what has come up strongly throughout this research; activist identity, emotions, the need for an understanding of diversity, challenges with bringing this work to your group and the ideas of collective and self-care. Using these tools will not necessarily end up with people understanding or connecting with the issues but it might be a suitable

way to attempt this.

Firstly, I will look at what has been missing this year in our workshops and so what might be missing in the overall discussion and action around sustainability. I will go onto looking at what the possible actions and next steps might be in Ireland. And I will conclude by giving some of the suggestions which came directly from the research regarding sustainability and how people might 'do' it better. These came straight from the interviewees mouths and I wanted to represent them as much as possible as being integral to this research.

1. Our Learning This Year and What's Been Missing?

There have been many limitations to the workshops my friends and I have been facilitating and the courses given by Eco-Dharma. It has been a slow but insightful learning process over the past year and it has only been recently that we have attempted to structurally change the framework of our workshops to include some of the areas which we see lacking. I would like to briefly outline what these areas are and what we have been doing about addressing one of them. This might resonate with others who find a lack in their political organising.

The Newest Addition to the Workshop-

Diversity – Step With Me

This is the newest addition to the workshops as we have seen that there's something lacking in how we are portraying sustainability. I find there was too much of a focus on burnout and self-care and if these were going to be the only options for sustainability then there's a risk of furthering and recreating hierarchical and privileged social and political structures. Without a whole change of how our society, or activists in the West, view the individual and what care means then we cannot just leave the critique as it is.

Through workshops I have taken and facilitated I have noticed that there is always a dominant/mainstream paradigm. This paradigm often dictates how people relate to each other, how things are spoken about, the communication style, the political agendas and ways of organising. It's this dominant voice which I find hard to get around because it's the most confident and also most

defiant at being challenged or changed. People come to the workshops wanting to make themselves and their groups more sustainable but not willing to really change themselves and their behaviours. These people were often the ones that wanted sustainability on an instrumentalised level – so that they could all go back to being fully functioning activists and get the job done in the same ways as they were doing it before. I find that these are the people who are most unwilling to go into depth, possibly because it will be emotionally hard to do so or because within the dominate organisational paradigm that's not a comfortable or well-known position. This is of course very limited in research scope and not a totalising truth by any means. This is not a damning critique as it's totally understandable that people are unwilling to open up the proverbial 'can of worms' (who knows what it might lead to?), it's just an observation.

So, we found this tool from *Training for Change*, a social change training collective based in the US. It's from the section on anti-oppression and diversity. These are two areas which I feel were missing from Sus Res and from the workshops that we were facilitating up until recently.

We used it and found that it was quite good for getting people to open up to each other and so give everyone a chance to see the often hidden sides of their comrades. Something I argue is important if we are talking about sustainability for everyone instead of just for the mainstream of a group. I do not know where it will lead people but that's because I cannot speak for the oppressed, or marginalised, in groups. It's only through their collective liberation will they be able to articulate and communicate their needs to the wider group. This is one thing I feel has been missing from the workshops and something which is missing in Ireland, and to some degree in the UK, when talking about sustainability. This is one simple way of trying to attempt a discussion on diversity within groups. Not just about how un-diverse the group may be but how the diversity within any group may be ignored or quietened unconsciously. This tool has proven to be one way of getting people to an understanding of the margins and the mainstreams of groups and how voiceless some people are. We lack any solid critique on anti-oppression in Ireland that has manifested itself into action and I feel it's inhibiting us to move forward in an open, accessible and egalitarian manner. I do not mean that we are not doing things to tackle oppression; some groups, especially some anarchist, feminist, anti-racist, and immigrants rights groups in Ireland are doing a lot of good work in this area. What I mean is that organisationally we are not tackling these issues in ourselves and at the subjective level enough and

this is where I see many problems with sustainability stemming from.

Further use of this tool will surely show us its problems or limitations. I understand this is not tried and tested enough to get a clear insight.

For an explanation of the tool and specifics of how it works visit the *Training for Change* website.⁵⁰

Other Aspects of Sustainability Not Being Covered Yet

There are other things that I feel need to be talked about and explored in order for us to re-think sustainability for everyone. These are relatively new ideas and so I am still in the early stages of thinking about them. I would still like to share these 'baby-ideas' -

- I feel that we need to challenge and change what care and self-care means to people, asking how we can organisationally/collectively support each other. What support means to everyone will be different and how can we provide these networks for each other from where we are now?
- I feel that educational spaces need to be rethought within social movement organising. Education along the lines of EL, participatory learning, workshops and skills development. For an authentic dialogue to occur between the mainstream radical left politics and the margins both voices need to be accessible. If the margins have been denied a voice then they are may not be in a position yet to represent an authentic and articulated subjectivity. Conversely, they may be representing themselves authentically and it is the mainstream who have yet to listen properly. Either way creative educational spaces would give people a chance to develop these voices and validate their own existence. This is something which our workshops have not been doing because they have been focused on the dominant narrative around burnout and self-care instead of facilitating a space where alternatives to this narrative can come up. It is hard to set-up a workshop with a theme and at the same time try and make that theme as fluid as possible People also need a space where they can come to discuss and explore their experiences of burnout together. This is important but I do not want to do it in a way that actually inhibits a more rounded understanding of sustainability on many levels.

50 <<http://www.trainingforchange.org/tools/Diversity%20%2526%20Anti-Oppression>> [accessed on 20th June 2013]

These are things I am still struggling with.

These are things I need to take into account along with other elements of learning I have had along the way, e.g. that this kind of work might just become another thing to do on an already endless list of things to do; that this might not be suitable for people who have deep emotional issues to deal with if we cannot yet provide the support networks they/we need; that focusing on the emotional sides of ourselves might be never-ending and so totally distract people from their politics; that this might become one more thing to feel guilt about because we're not doing it enough or well enough; that sustainability might get co-opted into mainstream politics and lose its radical edge or its in-depth meaning, becoming superficial or tokenistic; that just recognising and confessing that we might be in the mainstream of a group and so benefiting from the oppression of other groups (consciously or unconsciously) might become an end in itself or just another moralistic branch to beat ourselves with. The list goes on but I feel that this is a much needed area of work to be done and so it will inevitably be a work in progress, full of experiments, failures and eventually, hopefully, successes.

2. Next Steps in Ireland?

I would hope that an implication of this would be that we could, in Ireland, and as part of a movement, begin to start focusing on how sustainable or unsustainable we are being. I am very interested in working in the area of care and support within our movement but I don't think there's any use in doing this on my own. I would be very interested to see who else in Ireland has been having similar experiences or has already been working on issues of sustainability either with positive outcomes or not. I feel that one way forward could be the setting up of an activist training collective along the lines of those that exist in the UK⁵¹. This would entail discussions around funding, collaboration, networking and what we mean by care and support. This is a long-term view suggestion of what could be done next in this area.

In Ireland at the moment we lack the resources and organisations that activists have in the UK and the USA. This is problematic as any talk of sustainability in our movement's has to start from where we

51 See Appendix – *Links and Resources for Practitioners and Activists*.

are now and what we have or what we lack. Therefore, we have a long way to go if we are to provide these services for ourselves on the new left and for communities and the left in general. There are groups and organisations which have experience with providing these kind of supports on structural levels. Community groups, trade unions, and feminist groups are all areas which would be good to ally and network with. Asylum seekers, anti-deportation and anti-direct provision activist groups are all in need of support and solidarity in Ireland right now and so it would be invaluable to attempt a dialogue around how we could mutually consider what support means. Learning from each other, our experiences and experiments would be a very worthwhile project. Often we think about reinventing the wheel, and often it needs to be done, but this shouldn't stop the new left from reaching out from its often restrictive boundaries to others in search of advice, support and guidance. This project could also entail reaching out to older activists in trying to figure out what has come before, what has been tried and tested already and in what contexts.

How I see this progressing would be a weekend long gathering of people, organisations and groups, involved in or interested in sustainability work (very broadly defined) and in creating more solid and intersectional support systems. Beginning a conversation about where we all are and what we all need would be eye opening. It might result in collectives forming and taking on roles or researching options. It might be that no one is interested at the time or has enough energy to take this on. But either way it would be practical to try and get people together in one place to have this conversation.

3. Suggestions Coming From the Research

Practical Next Steps, Suggestions and Questions -

Questions to Ask Ourselves and Each Other

I would like to suggest some question that we might ask ourselves and our groups in order to look a bit deeper into our behaviours, attitudes and values which may be adding to unsustainable working environments and to ask ourselves what values are given precedence in our organisations. These questions come directly from the research, peoples experiences and suggestions throughout the year. Practically, these questions might be asked of a group or campaign to ascertain whether or not organising and action is sustainable or unsustainable. This is of course specific to the contexts of the

people I have talked to and should not be seen as a check list.

- 1- Do you or your group structure time for **reflection** into your organising? Reflection on what you've been doing, how it has effected you, how you feel about it, how others feel about it, if it was the best thing to do or not? Is that reflection suiting everyone in its form or how do we reflect when people are resistant to doing so?
- 2- Does your group **socialise** with each other and try to get to know each other on a personal level rather than just a political one? If not then why not? If so then how much do we work as a group to understand those who are less outgoing or confident than others?
- 3- How much **rank** (position based on privileges of many kinds and usually represented by the mainstream attributes of a group. Hierarchical) do we hold in our group? How does this rank affect (benefit or dis-benefit) others? How does other peoples rank affect me? (about learning about **privilege**).
- 4- Who is setting the **work pace** in your group? Whose **political agenda** is being met? And whose isn't? What are those agendas? (what campaigns, politics, ideas are supported? And are they representational of everyone's politics and desires?).
- 5- How much of what you do in your group is reflective of how you want to be perceived? How much of it is tied up with your **self-worth**? Could you imagine not being an activist? Why or why not?
- 6- How can we recognise the **symptoms of someone/ourselves burning out**? And how can we turn this into an early warning system for ourselves and each other?
- 7- What are the things that make us feel **sustained**? What are the things that **deplete us**?⁵²
- 8- If we reflect on our **political history** or our involvement in radical politics, can we imagine a time when we felt really high and a time when we felt really low? Think about those situations and why that was. (see: *River of life* in the section – 'Tools and Techniques for Workshops' above)

This set of questions are only some of the things we could be asking ourselves and our groups. They are meant to be ways of getting a deeper understanding of how we do things, not just the surface level analysis. I would hope that they elicit a critical reflection. Again, these are only suggestions and they

52 For a workshop session for this that we have found works well
<http://new.trainingforchange.org/sustaining_self_care> [accessed on 20th June 2013]

have been picked because they seem important questions from the point of view of where I have been organising. This does not automatically make them relevant for the reader.

Recognising Symptoms of Burnout

At this stage I would like to restate that I do not think that burnout is the only symptom of being unsustainable. It is my experience that not everyone has a tendency to burnout and so it's up to us to figure out what else being unsustainable as individuals, groups and a movement looks like. Burnout as a theme has come up in the literature as an obvious example of problems with sustainability on different levels and it was one of my questions in the interviews I conducted and has been a focus in the workshops that friends and I facilitate. This has been slowly changing because we have realised through practice that focusing on burnout is like fire-fighting instead of getting at the real issues. It may actually be counter-productive to keep the focus at this level at all and so one of our next steps as facilitators is to figure out whether or not it should be kept within the workshop space or if focusing on other issue would be more useful. These might be some of our next steps as practitioners.

Although recognising symptoms may be seen as fire fighting when we should really be looking at preventative work, it is useful to start from where we find ourselves now. The existence of the communities of care that I envisage in Ireland are fictional at the moment but I believe that we should be working towards making them realities. For now, we have to learn ways of looking after each other and ourselves as best we can, with a short-term and long-term vision in mind and in our actions. This entails much more than being able to recognise the symptoms of burnout but here I will stick closely to what came up in the research.

I would like to quote some of the interviewees who talked about what burnout was for them. It might be helpful in beginning to enable ourselves to recognise symptoms. Then again it might not be helpful as burnout is experienced differently by everyone. Keeping this in mind I would like to mention what one woman said about herself-

I can only speak for myself. I guess burnout for me was that classic thing of sitting in the office, got a yoga class to go to, working at my computer and I decide not to go to yoga. So that's a kind of classic symptom for me. Not doing the things that I know will support me. Like yoga or hanging out with my friends, that kind of thing. Choosing work over doing things that are fun or like helpful to me like going to 5 Rhythms dancing, whatever it is. Getting really cynical about...anything we're doing

like work or...but still doing it. You know still driving myself to do it regardless. And...the other things gone out of my mind. Ya, not knowing what else to do. It's like, if I had a spare moment id forgotten what it was just to relax, do something, I would just turn to work to fill my time. And that's why the course is really good. I got to reflect on that, that it was really damaging to me.

For another man it was closely related to his state of mind and how he felt about the campaign he was involved in. He mentioned feeling angry, lost and erratic at the time and only on reflection did he realise that these feelings were all connected to his burnout and need for time away from the campaign -

I would have started to come to the realisation that when I left the campaign I was really burnt out and that you know, a lot of the feeling, like guilt, and betrayal and stuff that, that...I felt because...just for the simple reason of leaving the campaign were, you know, strong symptoms of burnout ya and, I suppose, like a lot of the kind of symptoms like disillusionment with the campaign and with people.

Not all feelings of guilt and disillusionment will be symptoms of burnout but if we are trying to figure out how to catch ourselves and others in the early stages of burnout then looking at examples here might be helpful.

Another woman describes the collective burning out of many people in a campaign and also some of the members of the community in struggle. She describes people as having mental and physical health problems due to the objective and subjective pressures felt. For others it was dropping out of projects and groups they were in, or varying degrees of disillusionment.

One worry I have is that looking after ourselves and each other will become instrumentalised and that it will become about people *talking* a lot about care and self-care but still not being able to *do* it. I have seen this happen to people and it only adds guilt to peoples lives for failing at something. I think there's much to be done on a deeper level than just "taking time out", and we must try to figure out what it is that drives us so that we can change our oppressive/repressive patterns. Simply taking time out might mean that someone's only support system, however informal, would be taken away and they would be expected to stay away until they were healthy, 'normal' people once again. This model isn't enough and it might even prove to be a step-backwards; stigmatising those who are not healthy, balanced people and putting an abelist emphasis on happiness, positivity and ability to do things as others do them We need to take these issues into account when thinking about structural support

systems within our movements.

If we don't do this at an emotional level as well as an intellectual level then we risk just adding to our to-do lists. One woman who has been doing sustainability work for years now highlights this very well with a story -

Before I went on the course (*Sus Res*) I did all that stuff (*referring to self-care practices at work*). I had my own support network of people who would nag me not to do this or that or the other. I had a little buddy through work with who I wrote a little agreement that I would only work 6 days a week and try to go home when it's 6 o'clock and I wrote this long list for myself but I could never really keep to it. I think a close friends description of it is like making a set of new years resolutions but kind of knowing what we need to do but not being able to do it.

You know, knowing what we should do but not actually being able to do those things. I guess that's what burnout is for me. I'm very clear what helps me, I know what self-care is, and I know how to do it....but burnout is a situation of not being able to do it. There's some other kind of thing driving you so much that the self-care aspect doesn't seem important enough. And of course part of that is about being passionate and caring and there being so much to do but I think there's a personal aspect that kicks in somehow which is – how I perceive myself in the world – and the sort of identity aspect of – “well I'm an environmental activist so that's what I do”. “And if I don't keep doing that”... - because that's about self worth.

So it goes to a much deeper..self worth essentially....deeper levels of how we see ourselves in the world. Well at least that's how it's been for me. I think it must have been the same for everybody, I don't know, or different perhaps. The things that drive people...to burnout?

Suggestions from the Interviews

I have asked all interviewees what they would like to see happen in this area in terms of research. At the end of each interview I have asked what really useful knowledge in this area could be. I would like to document their thoughts here as to be as representational as possible. I will paraphrase-

1. Having a way to measure how successful or unsuccessful you're being in terms of political work.

The participant who thought that this would be a good area to research also mentioned how hard it would be because at times the effectiveness of your work isn't evident until much later or somewhere else completely. This is a difficulty to keep in mind when thinking about this further.

2. What helped people to break the habits that caused them to burnout?

3. What do you think underlies your tendency to burnout or something? What are the kind of deeper

causes? The woman who suggested this wondered whether or not everyone would pinpoint self-worth or identity issues or other issues completely.

CONCLUSION

I have tried as best I can to present my research, practice and experiences in as representational a format as possible. A year full of investigations into sustainability and its meanings for diverse people has passed and what will be found on these pages is a collaboration of the findings, common themes and relevant issues. I hope that this can be an addition to peoples ongoing work in the area and hopefully even give insights into this specific context. I have shown how complex the issues of sustainability and care really are when looked at through a feminist, intersectional and anarchist lens. There are no easy answers as to what can be done in order for people and groups to cultivate sustainable working environments and to challenge oppressive structures that are in place and between us. This is all a project of prefigurative politics and comes from a strong belief that if we do not look at this now and act accordingly then we might be doomed to recreate oppressions amongst ourselves and so damage ourselves unnecessarily as we fight to see a better, more egalitarian and equal world, together. For me this becomes a project in pushing our boundaries, in ourselves, in our society, with our imaginations; how we perceive the struggle and how things are organised. It will take courage to let go of what we think of as 'true' and 'known', to let go of our inherited comforts and to be open to critique and the possibility that we haven't been doing things in the best ways. The goal, as I see it, is not to fall into despair and guilt, which are disabling, but to start from where we are now and try and do things better with the values of equality and justice for all in mind

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PARTNERS: Training for Transformation

<http://www.trainingfortransformation.ie/>

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International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)

<http://www.inebnetwork.org/>

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The Self Care Project

<http://theselfcareproject.org/>

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Training for Change

<http://new.trainingforchange.org/>

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APPENDIX

Links and Resources for Practitioners and Activists

Due to the lack of movement resources and training in Ireland we are limited in cases of need to giving people contact information for international resources. Some links we would recommend people looking at themselves, passing onto others and for collective use are here:

Ireland

Active Link: Online Network for Irish Non-Profit Organisations- this online based group provide links to community and voluntary activity around Ireland. They are mainly promotional and a communication space.

<http://www.activelink.ie/>

Praxis- this group "is a mix of community activists, academics and other individuals working collectively to reinvigorate popular education in Ireland." They are a popular education collective organising and meeting in Ireland. They might be useful as a contact/resource for popular education and participatory learning closer to home.

<http://praxiseducation.weebly.com/index.html>

UK

Activist Trauma Support – "*Trauma work is part of resistance*". Mental health and trauma support for activists dealing with the affects of State and protest violence. This is good for those not involved in confrontational, or direct action, activism too. Good article, guides and manuals.

<https://www.activist-trauma.net/>

Seeds For Change – A not-for-profit resources for activists. Giving trainings, workshops and grassroots support. Working mainly with environmental and social justice activists. But a great tools for anyone interested in putting on their own workshops and facilitating their own events.

They do workshops on Consensus, Facilitation, Campaign and Action Skills, Strategy, Setting up a Co-op, and Training for Trainers. Mostly they are free or cheap.

<http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/>

Rhizome – this is *“a co-op providing facilitation, mediation, consensus building and training to grassroots activists and communities across the UK, and to those organisations that support activism in all its forms.”* They have good online resources and a blog which gives a personal view into things going on in the UK and what work they are doing.

<http://rhizomenetwork.wordpress.com/>

Tripod- these are a training collective based in Scotland. They give training for trainers, support taking direct action, organising effectively, and learning campaign skills. They do this through participatory workshops tailored to specific groups needs. They try and give these workshops for free where possible. They have a good range of links and online resources.

<http://www.ecodharma.com/>

Asylum Magazine- is a magazines available online along with an online forum for anyone interested in psychiatry or mental health. Run by the Asylum Collective it gives a space for discussions to happen around what a mental health system based on equality and real democracy might look like.

<http://www.asylumonline.net/>

Europe

Eco-Dharma- this centre is located in the Catalan Pyrennees. They offer courses and events on diverse topics; they provide courses like Deep Ecology and Permaculture, Engaged Buddhism, or Sustaining Resistance, Empowering Renewal. For more information visit their website.

<http://www.ecodharma.com/>

USA

Organizing Upgrade! - this website brings together independent news from the US on the issues affecting community organisers and activists. There's an emphasis on strategy and communication. For an interesting debate on the issues of self-care and care in general within movement organising

look at -

<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/modules-menu/community-care/item/755-a-round-up-and-re-frame-of-the-community-care-conversation>

<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/>

Training For Change – an organisation which has been training activists since 1992. They have a great collection of online resources, publications and workshop tools for those wishing to do their own workshops.

<http://www.trainingforchange.org/>

Mindful Occupation: Rising Up Without Burning Out.- follow the below link to this free online booklet and manual written recently in the Occupy movement in the US as a response to the needs people saw around mental health and care work. The manual gives support and advice to those looking to do healing work within social movement's.

<http://www.mindfuloccupation.org/>

The Icarus Project: Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness- this is "a radical mental health support network, online community, and alternative media project by and for people struggling with extreme emotional distress that often gets labelled as mental illness." They have online publications, links, articles, resources and action guides.

<http://www.theicarusproject.net/>

And others...

Organizing for Power, Organizing for Change: Resources for Organizers and Trainers.

-<http://organizingforpower.org/>

Alliance for Community Trainers: offering knowledge, tools and skills to individuals, organizations and communities to empower sustainable transformation. - <http://trainersalliance.org/>

Other things beside training and educational collectives, put some of things above in here -

<http://files.creaworld.org/files/self-care-brochure.pdf> -Marina Bernal, CREA manual

<http://www.wlum1.org/node/590> – What's the point of revolution if you can't dance?

Tools and Techniques for Practitioners and Workshops

A. *River of Life*

This is best used at the beginning of a workshop to quickly bond a group. It allows people to share their personal stories, experiences and lives. We have directed people to begin where they want to; either their whole lives, their political lives or from the start of their involvement in a specific group. They are to mark on their rivers the ups and downs, the high points and low points (in energy, sustainability, emotions etcetera). They can add in their personal lives interaction with their political lives in order for them to see overlaps and connections in how they felt at different times.

We find this good for creating a trusting space where people can feel like they have been validated as people with their own experiences from the beginning of the workshop. Giving everyone a chance to speak about themselves from the beginning also will help everyone contribute and speak out for the rest of the workshop. This technique helps people visually map out where they felt sustained and where they felt depleted. Doing this might help them to see what was going on at that time or not. It might also help them to recreate sustainable situations and to avoid depleting ones.

Problems- People may not want to share things that are deep or personal to them in a space like this for many good reasons. One being that a workshop often isn't the place to delve into repressed feelings unless you feel you can be supported after.

Some people haven't connected with this tool because they feel they cannot draw and are not creative enough to do it. We found it good to demonstrate that you don't have to be an artist to do this by showing some of our own rivers.

It's important here to reiterate if needs be that each person gets an equal chance to describe their rivers to each other without interruption and that it's not the space for suggestions or questions from the others, just listening.

RIVER OF LIFE – more information

Name	Objective	Method	Materials	Time
<p>River of Life</p>	<p>Sharing stories and experiences, group forming/bonding, emotionally connect with yourself and others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give everyone a piece of paper and pens. • Each participant draws their own river representing their lives -political and personal. • Explain that rivers can draw turbulent waters for turbulent times or calm for calm, etc. • They can be represented however people want- with words or pictures etc. • Get into groups of 3/4 to share the rivers. Each person takes 5 mins while everyone else is only listening, not commenting. 	<p>Flip-chart, paper and pens, markers, pencils.</p>	<p>15/20 mins to draw 5 mins per person to share rivers.</p>

B. The Burnout Wheel

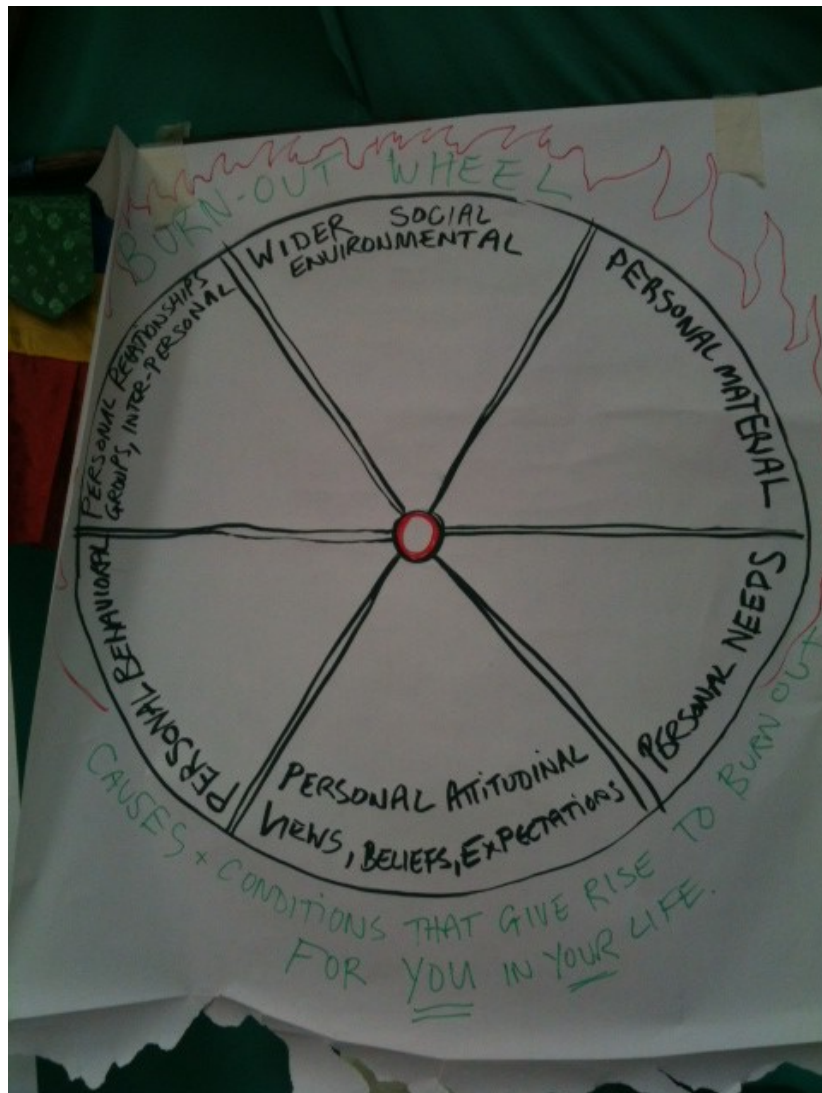
This is a good tool for people to develop a deeper understanding of the different elements that effect peoples sustainability; wider society, personal needs or group dynamics. It's about examining the causes and conditions of ones *own* burnout collectively. The wheel is a group tool that's also visual so works for people on a different level than just talking about it. The headings are broad and so people connect with the idea that burnout is effected by many things in ones life. It might also be a good tool for getting people to work together in a smaller group but still collectively. People get a glimpse at what similarities and differences they have when it comes to stresses and situations in their lives. I find this invaluable when talking about truly representationally diverse groups although, at times it's hard to ascertain whether everyone had an equal opportunity to contribute or knew what they wanted to contribute.

Method- In groups of 4/5 draw the wheel and write the headings on each section. In the group write out what comes up for each person. Each person should have a chance to discuss and write-out some element which makes sense to them.

E.g. On the section which says – Personal Material– one might write Rent or a Job/Wages.

Problems- This is limited for those who have not experienced burnout as they might be unwilling to contribute in a group of people who have had personal experiences of it or whose friends/comrades have. This might create a hierarchy of activism based on who burnt out the 'best' or the hardest. It also seems to create an understanding where burnout is the main effect of being unsustainable. This is reductive and inhibits people from delving further into an understanding of sustainability.

BURNOUT WHEEL DIAGRAM



C. Task, Process, Relationship Triangle

This is more of a theoretical approach in comparison to other tools we use. We try to mix up the styles so we can appeal to more types of people. It changes up the workshop too and keeps people focused. We use this diagram to explain the importance of the personal and inter-personal elements of political organising. Putting relationships in the same category as tasks and processes has been an eye opener for people. Many people say how obvious it is but that they don't do it in their groups. Seeing it laid out visually is helpful. This tool can be used for sparking a collective group debate around what importance relationships have in political organising and why.

We have placed an emphasis on the fact that anti-authoritarian activists in Ireland often only go between the task and the process sections, forgetting the relationships and how integral they are for good group and action functioning. We found it good to get people to interact with this by asking how true this was for them and if they have examples or explanations of this happening.

Problems- We find that this needs to be placed very specifically throughout the workshop. It's best mixed in with dissimilar activities where people get to move around or interact with something.

Otherwise we find people get tired and when there's too much sections just about listening and people zone out. We have also found that connecting to a subject on a cognitive level tends to work for those who have that disposition anyway and possibly the level of actual change post-workshop will be low where this kind of learning is involved. However, this is a speculation because learning is very hard to measure in any meaningful way.

TASK, PROCESS, RELATIONSHIP DIAGRAM



D. Experiential Learning Cycle -see appendix for image.

This is another diagram tool which needs explaining by the facilitator. Keeping in mind the problems with the above tool in terms of timing and style of presentation, this tool usually keeps people more engaged. We tend to start with half of the page hidden – just showing the Action – Experience habitual cycle. We explain that a lot of activism is just a reactionary cycle between these two elements. We say that this can become unsustainable as we do not process or reflect on our experiences, either personally or collectively. This means that we repeat negative or harmful patterns and that we take traumatic experiences back into our actions, making them emotionally, psychologically or physically unsustainable. Then we uncover the rest of the page and say that this is one suggestion of how to make ourselves more sustainable which is informed by the experiential learning cycle.

The suggestion is about creating a space for reflection after experiences and actions. This space can be undirected and without any aims or goals. It's just so people get a chance to reflect on what happened and how they are with it. This can then become more formalised when we begin the analysis of the fruits of the reflection and create new understandings together. This analysis is then taken into a 'Planning' period for the next action which is now informed by the experiences of the last action. This hopefully creates actions which learn from each other, do not repeat negative patterns and are as healthy for people as possible because they get to process their experiences and act accordingly.

Problems – We have found that people already do this to a degree in their organising and yet still repeat negative patterns and ways of acting/organising. This points to something else which needs to be explored and challenged in order for people to turn their learnings into new plans and actions. We have not found a way of getting at a deeper understanding in this section. All we can do is ask people if they have examples and experiences of this or if it makes sense to them and then try and facilitate a discussion from there which might problematise peoples examples in order to reach new understandings. Often people do not have the time for this kind of process and so need to figure out how to act and experience in healthy ways in situations which are time/resource-limited.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE DIAGRAM

