

# Power, Pleasure and Community in a Learning Society

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The question of power is central to our understanding of social life. But what is power and how does it operate? At one level, there is a divide between social classes, reproduced by the state through its laws and policies, the way it distributes resources, and the way it enforces it achieves legitimacy through the media, education and religion (Althusser, 1971). But, as Foucault (1994) reminded us, power is not simply about class and the state and the various apparatuses that legitimate and maintain its power. It exists in the way we think, in how we see, read and interpret the world, and in discourses and practices that create disciplined, well-controlled bodies. Foucault turned the relationship between knowledge and power upside down. He argued that it was not so much that knowledge makes us powerful but, rather, that power in the form of expert discourses – he focused particularly on human sciences – creates knowledge which masquerades as truth. For example, we live in a world capitalist system that produces economic truths that we cannot survive without limited corporations and the pursuit of profit. It was the same economic discourse that announced that there was no necessary econometric rationale for the boom to go bust; that we cannot do without private banks; that there is no other option to the free market.

The question, then becomes whether it is possible to think outside the box of truths that are taken as gospel? When, where, how and among whom is there resistance to these taken-for-granted truths? I am not convinced that resistance can emerge within the education system, particularly at third level, within philosophy, sociology or the human sciences. I think it can only come through a form of educational practice that is embedded in local face-to-face democratic communities. It is through a rigorous practice of learning together of rigor-

ous critical reflection about the way power distorts the search for truth, that organic intellectual communities can be fostered and developed.

I argue that the resistance against the grand narratives or universal truths of our age is best achieved through the cultivation and development of local narratives and truths which are subject to continuous debate and critical reflection within a democratic learning environment. I believe that the opportunity to create such a learning society is particularly strong within communities that have been brought to the brink of destruction through high unemployment, poor housing, discrimination, crime and drugs. It is through resisting power at local level that a new lasting theory and understanding of power can be developed. It may well be that a time of economic recession, in which the legitimacy of institutions such as the Catholic Church, the banks, the state and the market are beginning to be questioned, there is an opportunity for those involved in adult and community education to generate a new debate about power, to develop new ways of learning, to create new truths. There is a need, I believe, for a new agenda for adult learning. My aim in this article is to tease out some of the issues involved in fulfilling this agenda. We are in a new period of ideological turmoil which, as in the past, provides an opportunity for thinking and acting differently.

### **Thinking and acting outside the box**

Looking back over the last fifty years in Ireland, we can identify periods of what Swidler (1986) calls relative ideological calm and other periods of contestation and conflict. In the heydays of the Catholic Church's domination of Irish culture – up to the end of the 1960s – everything seemed settled. There were subaltern, alternative forms of culture, but it was difficult to act or even think outside the Catholic box. In the 1970s many Catholics, particularly women, began to develop a new image and sense of who they were (Inglis, 1997, pp.238-42; O'Connor, 1998, pp.81-108). They thought of limiting their families, remaining on at work after they married, going back to work when their children were older but, most of all, no longer being shy, demur, compliant, obedient women confined to the home. What began as a mainly middle-class urban women's movement, quickly spread around the country (Connolly, 2003).

This internal opposition to a Catholic way of being, became combined with a global flow of culture which through media and travel, permeated the remotest areas of the country (Inglis, 2008). By the middle of the 1990s, Ireland entered

into another ideological calm period. The great battles over contraception and divorce were over: there was no appetite to revive the issue of abortion. Catholics began to distance themselves from the institutional Church and its view of what constituted a good person and a good life and, instead, openly embraced the kind of materialism against which the Church had regaled for so long. In the new era of liberal individualism, people fulfilled themselves and realised themselves as individuals, not through practices of self-denial but through the pleasures of consumption (Inglis, 2006). Traditional truths about what it meant to live a good life began to be discarded.

The rapid economic recession of the late 2000s has brought new ideological turmoil. All that was solid in the days of the Celtic Tiger has begun to melt into air. In fifty years Irish people have moved from believing in the Catholic Church, God and salvation, to believing what they were told by market analysts, business tycoons, bankers and political leaders. They replaced belief in the one true God with the false gods of mammon and now, they too, are beginning to be abandoned. What, then, is to be believed? More importantly, who is to be believed? In periods of ideological calm it is difficult to think outside the box, that the powers dominate the way people think and act. But in times of ideological conflict, when the cows are no longer as sacred as they used to be, there is an opportunity for an explosion of ideas, some of them extreme, some utopian and some simply silly, as to how people might discover new ways of leading fulsome, sustainable, ethical and meaningful lives.

Consumer capitalism has become the unquestioned orthodoxy of modernity. It has become so ingrained that we cannot think of an alternative. Since there is no antithesis, there has been little dialogue. The belief in the never ending need to consume more has become linked to the belief in the infallibility of the market and the need for ever-increasing systems of production and consumption. It has also been linked to the primacy of the individual and the belief that salvation comes through a form of rugged individualism in which the self takes precedence over the group (Elliot and Lemert, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

There is much about consumer capitalism that is fulfilling. It is closely allied to social progress. Would it have been possible to have the dramatic increases

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot and Lemert seem to believe that the more individuals radically and ruthlessly pursue their genuine self-interests the more it will be possible to develop a truly global cosmopolitan society in which we will be all for one-self and oneself for all. I am not convinced.

in health and prosperity without it, not just in the West but elsewhere? Where consumer capitalism thrives people tend to live longer and less miserable and violent lives. It is associated with mature, democratic civil societies; ways of being influenced more by reason than by authoritarian rule and unchallenged orthodoxies.

The problem, however, is that we are consuming ourselves and the planet to death. Marx may have been right when he forecasted that capitalism had sown the seeds of its own destruction, that the endless series of busts and booms would grow deeper and last longer. The economic truth seems to be that there is no other solution to the present depression other than to go back to consuming more of what, many of us, do not really need.

Consumer capitalism thrives on greed and selfishness. It colonises pleasures and desires. It weakens the social bonds that unite people into moral communities. But it is not some inevitable end to history. Human beings are structured within conditions and processes not of their own choosing. But they have the capacity to think and act differently. It is possible to conceptualise an alternative path to freedom and happiness. There is salvation beyond consumption.

The question, then, is how to learn to think and act differently. How can people come together to develop a dialogue, a way of being together, that begins to question the unquestionable that posits a new way of living. In effect, how can adult educators and community leaders help create a mature, learning society? What do people need to learn? I suggest that from the outset, any group of people who come together to learn, should critically reflect about what it is that binds them together, are they real or imaginary, and what are the forces which prevent them from becoming a social and political force? I believe that where adults learn to think and act differently they can develop a sense of trust that enables a form of bonding and belonging which transcends self-interest and enables the emergence of a lasting, sustainable form of community. But the first question that needs to be addressed is who are these adult learners, what is it that brings them together, what is it that binds them but, also, what is it that divides them. What are the truths about themselves that need to be questioned.

### Who are we?

The notion of the Irish people being a nation bound together by shared beliefs, values and practices is regularly reproduced in everyday life. It seems to be taken-for-granted that the nation is simply a bigger, perhaps less dense, form of family and community. But what makes a national community? What are the shared beliefs and values that unite people into a nation? What are the practices that create and sustain a strong feeling of being Irish? Maybe being Irish, and the belief that we are all one people, is a thin shell with no real yolk of belief and practice to sustain it (Anderson, 1991).<sup>2</sup> So if adults in a community are to think outside the box, they might begin by critically reflecting about the state and the media. It is the rhetoric and messages of politicians and those who work in the media who continually create and recreate the notion of us being a national community. The state is a major player in the images we have of ourselves. It collects taxes, develops policies, passes legislation, develops the national infrastructure, and provides education, health and social welfare services. In doing so, it regularly creates an image of us being a national community.

All of this would be palatable and worthwhile if we were, in fact, a single, strong, united national community and the state was some kind of natural embodied leader whose authority and leadership we accepted – in the same way perhaps that young children accept the authority and leadership of their parents. But whoever ‘we’ are, we are far from being a family, and our political leaders are far from being our parents.

The reason, of course, is that the state in capitalist society is always a class state. Over the last fifty years, the Irish state has increasingly favoured some social classes more than others. We were given to believe that if the rich got richer, we would all get rich: ‘A rising tide lifts all boats.’ And so, the developers, the entrepreneurs and the bankers were all given free reign and financial support to become rich. The message was endorsed by many economic analysts, government ministers, political parties; it was preached from so many platforms, that many of us accepted it as gospel. Moreover, a rhetoric was preached and a web of belief woven that we are all ‘one’ people, that we all belong together.

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson’s concept of the nation as being an imagined community created by the media and the state can of course be extended to include many smaller human groups including churches, organisations, families and communities. In effect, any human group which is not related to regular contact, not necessarily face-to-face, between individuals, is in danger of being more imagined than real and therefore ideologically constructed. Benedict Anderson 1991 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

This false sense of community is created and developed in the media. It is the media which sees itself not just as the voice of the Irish people, but as the 'social conscience' of Irish society. It not only reports the news, it investigates what is happening in Irish society on 'our' behalf. It holds court; people are tried and convicted by the media. We have become used to media gurus pontificating over the airwaves about what is good and bad, right and wrong. They no longer just report and bring us the news. They have become the social conscience of Irish society. They tell us the truth about ourselves. They have replaced the parish priests.

The media moulds as much as it reflects public opinion. The problem is that many of those who work in the media take it for granted that they are disinterested, objective and unbiased, that they are 'naturally' representative of the Irish people. Like many others, they begin to think that their interests are the same as everyone else's. They do not see themselves as an elite. As the conscience of society, they report and cover stories about poverty and equality but always reflecting an unquestioned orthodoxy that they, necessarily, will always be with us.

The other problem with the media is that it is not a disinterested public body. The media create buy and sell commodities. Like any other businesses, media corporations are sucked into attracting advertising, into marketing their products, attracting customers.

So the rhetoric from the state, the messages from the media, about us being a national community may be a myth. We are great at talking the talk about all being in this together, but the reality is that people may be more committed to aggressive rugged individualism, to maintaining our competitive advantage, to the fundamentals of *laissez-faire*, liberal individualism than they are to each other as fellow members of a national community.

### **What is a learning society?**

We might say that an individual who cannot think of alternatives, who cannot change, who repeats the same mistakes and who continually abuses himself, is someone who cannot learn. 'Men *are* because they *are* in a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it' (Freire, 1985, p.80). If this is the case, then a society which cannot think outside of never-ending consumption (particularly of goods and

services that are not essential), which continues to destroy the environment on which it is dependent, which is deeply unequal and uncaring about the poor, and which continually runs into recession, is a society that cannot learn. It would also seem obvious that a learning society would seek to explore and develop the means by which its members could lead healthy, happy, fulsome, beautiful, truthful and prosperous lives.<sup>3</sup>

The question, of course, is where is such learning taking place? If it is taking place in our schools, colleges and universities, it may be more by accident than by design. It could be taking place in churches, but the search for salvation is not always compatible with reason, dialogue and the development of a mature, democratic, civil society. I would suggest that the only long-term, viable and sustainable forms of community are local, face-to-face, and small scale. This is not to argue against globalisation, cosmopolitanism and, particularly, a greater identification with humankind. Indeed, I believe that groups working collaboratively at local level can produce goods and services that can be sustainable and economically viable both locally and globally. More significantly, these groups can become the basis of lasting, meaningful social bonds.

There are examples of people in local communities coming together to form tight-knit groups, who develop a strong sense of bonding and belonging, often in response to a social problem such as housing, unemployment, drugs, the environment and so forth. Many of these community organisations are in working-class areas. They come together not so much to discuss who they are, but rather to struggle collectively to achieve a common end. A good example of this is the regeneration of St Michael's Estate in Inchicore, Dublin (Bissett, 2009). People from the community came together to develop better housing but ended up learning lessons about the state, equality, justice and democracy. They were led into addressing the very issues which prevent communities from bonding together. They had to address issues of power, particularly the power of the state and property developers. There are similar stories to be told about communities dealing with drugs, discrimination, health and social services.

We can also learn from the women's movement which from the 1970s involved women from all over Ireland coming together, locally and nationally, to struggle for their independence and rights. But what was interesting was how the

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<sup>3</sup> Bradley and Kennelly (2008: 185–238) develop a quite different notion of learning society. For my review of their book, see *Dublin Review of Books*, Spring 2009 at [drb.ie](http://drb.ie)

women's movement included debates and discussions about what it meant to be a woman, and how women who were divided along class, religious and ethnic lines, could come together to learn from each other (Inglis, 1994).

There is, however, a need to broaden these debates and discussions to include members of the middle classes who have become isolated and detached from community bonds, whose sense of bonding and belonging comes from family, hobby and leisure groups, but who are not members of groups who are struggling to achieve change, who do not perhaps critically reflect about who they are.

What is needed is a mushrooming of new types of community groups, which bring individuals together in such a way that helps them transcend from just living in a community to living *for* a community. The collapse of consumer sentiment in contemporary capitalism may be more than just a blip. It may indicate the desire for a different lifestyle, a different way of being in the world. Maybe it suggests the need for people to come together, as strangers, to learn to cooperate and collaborate in a new way, to achieve new goals, and to develop a sense of bonding and belonging.

However, it seems to me that we should think about developing and encouraging new forms of adult learning and education, particularly those which are specifically oriented towards community development and cooperation. The advantage of creating local learning centres is that they can bring together strangers to think, talk, debate and reflect on issues about which people are concerned. This could be for specific purposes such as to improve the quality of life, housing, social welfare, transport, environment but they might also be for leisure and pleasure, to read, walk, watch, eat and drink. Learning centres also have the advantage of being religiously and politically neutral and of avoiding power struggles. There is a need for a new beginning. What is not needed is that local community groups and learning centres be hijacked by fundamentalists who are certain about who 'we' are, what it is to be Irish, and the political way forward. The task is to avoid any learning being hijacked by existing political allegiances and their definition of the truth.



### **What is to be learnt?**

The question of what is to be learnt, and how it is to be learnt, is a democratic decision that best emerges from consensus within the group of people that come together. There are, however, two issues which seem to be central to any critically reflective or learning society: power and pleasure. While it is impossible to live outside of power there is certain freedom in trying to speak the truth about the way in which it operates and in resisting its different forms. This is central to preventing power becoming unquestioned, absolute and tyrannical. It is all too easy, especially in times of economic recession, to slip into fascism and fundamentalism. What was perhaps most frightening about the Nazi regime was the way so many Germans so readily acquiesced and actively participated in the extermination of Jews.

At the same time, while we cannot escape from power and the way it structures our knowledge, thoughts and practices, we can try to transcend it by focusing on and developing pleasures. The cultivation of intense, durable, long-lasting pleasures which revolve around regular, routine practices and which are based on bodily being in the world, is not just a virtue: it is a primary means of transcending power, particularly the colonisation of desire by the state, the market and the media.

### **Power**

Power creates knowledge, understanding and ways of being. It structures beliefs, values, practices and, at the level of the individual, one's identity and sense of self. It operates in different institutional forms such as the state, market, media, military, medical, churches and so forth. It creates discourses which regulate and control the way we think and behave. It always involves domination. It always involves illusion; people misrecognise and take for granted its institutional forms and discourses. We take it for granted, for example, that the state is the primary provider of education; it regulates and controls what is taught when and where, that there are three levels and that success at each level is based on merit. But behind the institutional discourse is the reality that education has become the primary mechanism for reproducing class inequality. But there are other misrecognitions. Why is fourth level, or adult and community education, not seen as equally important to the other levels? In terms of learning, why is it assumed that the teacher always knows best what should be learnt? A key issue, which learners need to engage with from the outset, is the ways in which they can be dominated by teachers, the curriculum, the state and its educational institutions and structures?

Power is, then, as ubiquitous as it is misrecognised. It colonises our way of thinking and being. Critically reflecting about power is often as difficult as calling into question the air we breathe: it becomes natural and taken for granted. In settled times, we do not question the way the state, media, market, church or other institutions dominate and control our lives. At the micro level of everyday life, those in positions of power, whether they are medical consultants, civil servants, bankers, lecturers, parents often do not critically reflect about or seek to negate the tactics by which their power is reproduced, the way they dominate and control others. It is more difficult for people to make connections between the tactics they use and the strategies of institutions and organisations and long-term processes of social change which create and sustain divisions between class, gender, religion, ethnicity, race, age and so forth. These are not reproduced by chance.

It is also important to realise, as Foucault reminded us, that power is operated in and through discourses, particularly the human and medical sciences that have become central to creating and maintaining discipline and control (Foucault, 1980a).<sup>4</sup> Power is exercised over and invested within bodies. It is through regimes of bodily discipline and control that we realise ourselves as individuals. It is, for example, through recognising, understanding and resisting the way sex and the stimulation of sexual desire has penetrated so many aspects of everyday life – from dressing, adorning, grooming, dieting and exercising to treating, removing and remoulding parts of the body – that we can begin to comprehend the way power operates (Foucault, 1980b). What is it that makes us adore and idealise the bodies of the Bratz and the Barbie and abhor the notion of a plain, ordinary, unordered, irregular body?

### **Pleasure**

The trick of consumer capitalism is to keep stimulating desire which, of course, can never be fulfilled. We are socialised into the practice of our fulfilling desires through consumption. It is something that we learn from a young age. It is fundamental to being part of the world capitalist system. Although it is not part of the formal education system, we learn how to channel our desires into endless consumption. Consumption is the biggest unquestioned orthodoxy

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault began to see the discourses of truth that were produced about humans, including education, psychiatry, criminology and so forth, as discourses of power which were exercised in and through people, both instrumentally and voluntarily. Foucault did not see power as something negative that was exercised unwillingly over people. Instead he tended to see it as something as a subtle form of control that was willingly incorporated by people in their struggle not just to exercise power over others, but to realise themselves as individuals.

of our time (Appadurai, 1996; Campbell, 1987; Featherstone, 1991). We lead ourselves to believe that the good life revolves around ever-faster, ever-intensifying repetitive circles of working harder to consume more. Consumption has become the new god and, like the God which used to be at the centre of life, it cannot be questioned. What makes the contemporary world secular is that unlike before the question of God is now a matter of open, increasingly acrimonious, debate (Taylor, 2007). But what makes the contemporary world capitalist is that we cannot question consumption. Yes, there are those who withdraw from the world, whose lives revolve around trying to get beyond consumption, who seek to dissolve their egos and channel their desires into pleasures that are not rooted in buying. But they are the queer ones.

It is difficult to think and act outside the consumption box. We are continually persuaded, and we continually persuade ourselves that we need, that we have to have the latest and the best. We have developed a theology of consumption. We are the good people; we are worth it; we deserve it. We have developed an ethic of consumption. It is our duty to consume more. If we fail, the world capitalist system will collapse. Even as the environment decays around us we cannot question the notion that the way forward is through ever-increasing levels of economic growth, ever-increasing levels of consumption.

Consumption, then, has become the most subtle form of power, the most subtle form of discipline and control. We have not just become secularised and sexualised, we have become consumerised. If we are to learn to be different, if we are to learn together, then it might be worthwhile learning to develop long-lasting, fulfilling, sustainable pleasures that are not based on and do not revolve around consumption. They are as plentiful as they are varied, but they have to be cultivated. More importantly perhaps, if we are to develop the type of communities that create and sustain lasting social bonds, that provide the base for stable, fulsome senses of self, then we need to go back to fulfilling pleasures together (Scheff, 1997). Strong, viable senses of belonging, strong rugged individuals that do not dissolve into loneliness and depression emerge within communities that are caring and supportive without being rigid and dominating. And what is central to those communities is the collective fulfilment of pleasure. It is not just that people do not bowl together any more, they do not cook and eat, read and write, walk and talk, paint and sing, play and dance, plant and harvest and, worst of all, become sick, ill and die together (Putnam, 2000).

We used to praise and value the simple pleasures in life, but then they got subverted by marketing and advertising. There was a time when conspicuous consumption was frowned upon in Ireland, when any form of self-indulgence was seen as a sin. It was a time when the Catholic Church reigned over Irish social and cultural life. It was repressive. It was all about self-denial. Then we moved rapidly to self-indulgence, perhaps too rapidly and, in doing so, lost the sense of enjoyment and fulfilment that comes from simple pleasures. We have kicked religion, priests and God out of our daily life, shopping has become the new form of salvation. We have bounded into lifestyle choices, ways of being and presenting ourselves that are created for us by marketing and advertising gurus.

There is, of course, a need for many people, not just in Ireland, but around the world to consume more. But they are not the well-fed middle classes who will never know when they have enough. Hundreds and thousands of people live below the poverty line in Ireland. The gap between the rich and the poor in Ireland is still enormous. Around the world it is worse. At least 50,000 people, of whom 30,000 are children, die each day from poverty related illnesses. They desperately need to consume the basics for which we the rich, have long lost the taste. We have lost the art of 'making do' of 'making things last', of repairing rather than replacing.

When, in the poem she read at Barack Obama's inauguration, Elizabeth Alexander referred to someone 'stitching a hem, darning a hole in a uniform, patching a tire' she was perhaps evoking a nostalgic remembrance of times past. How many of the younger generation would know what darning is, let alone how to darn? And whose fault is that?

Despite all the cookery programmes television, and all the cookbooks that are sold along with them, the amount of time people are spending cooking and preparing food continues to decrease. It used to be said that a family that prayed together stayed together, then it became eating together. If present eating trends continue the family could be in trouble.

There is, then, a need to learn, to debate and discuss, how we might develop new, lasting, sustainable forms of pleasure which do not necessarily involve consumption and which if shared could become the basis of strong social bonds within which a strong sense of identity, self and belonging are developed (McWhorter, 1999).

It would, perhaps be as inadvisable as it would be unacceptable, to go back to the days when fulfilling pleasures and desires was often seen as a mortal sin. On the other hand, to return to mindless, rampant consumption seems equally unethical and, in the long term, environmentally unsustainable. In the absence of religious restraints, it is becoming imperative that we begin a debate, that we teach our children a new viable, alternative art of existence, of living life, which revolves around cultivating pleasures and fulfilling desires and balancing these with our responsibilities to our families, community and society.

We are then living in an anomic state of being. We have, or at least should have, begun to reject the type of consumption in which 'no expense was spared' in fulfilling pleasures. We should move slowly to seeing those who engage in unrepentant, conspicuous consumption, who boast about what they have bought, who display their wealth, as being unethical. We should, perhaps, see those magazines that reveal the secret, hidden interiors of the homes and lives of the stars as pornographic magazines which people would feel reluctant to be seen looking at in public.

We need to create a new vision of the good life, of what it is to live a beautiful, rewarding, fulsome life. We have been willingly led astray into a mixture of hedonism and consumerism. We need to find a new way forward. There are many examples of community groups who have come together, who have developed a sense of bonding and belonging from struggling against poverty, drugs, unemployment and bad housing. They are the remnants of the Celtic Tiger which we need to build on to create a new society. To do this, those of us who are well-off need to be courageous and self-sacrificing. We need to pay more taxes and find alternative, responsible and environmentally sustainable forms of pleasure. The question, then, is how can we learn to think and act differently. How and among whom can we begin a dialogue, a way of being together, that questions the unquestionable, that posits new ways of living?

### **Conclusion**

We are living in unsettled times. Nothing is sacred or certain. Questions are beginning to be asked. People are beginning to wonder is there another way of living life beyond consumer capitalism. The challenge for everyone, but particularly perhaps for those involved in adult education, is to respond to these new opportunities. I believe that there is a need for people to come together in new and innovative ways to question and learn. Obviously it is up to each group to

decide what it is that they need to question and learn. I suggest, however, that one way of beginning is to think about power, its different forms, the way it operates in their lives and the way in which it colonises their sense of self and ways of being in the world. I also think that, at the same time, it might be good to focus on what it means to live a good, fulsome and pleasurable life.

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