

## **Review Article: Sustainable Development and Rural Poverty in the Republic of Ireland**

ETHEL CROWLEY  
*University College Cork*

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A Review of Chris Curtin, Trutz Haase, and Hilary Tovey (eds.), 1996, *Poverty in Rural Ireland: A Political Economy Perspective*, Oak Tree Press in association with Combat Poverty Agency. ISBN 1-86076-03-7, pp. 321, IR£12.95.

*But the peasant in his little acres is tied  
To a mother's womb by the wind-toughened navel-cord  
Like a goat tethered to the stump of a tree -  
He circles around and around wondering why it should be.  
No crash,  
No drama.  
That was how his life happened.  
No mad hooves galloping in the sky,  
But the weak, washy way of true tragedy -  
A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die.*

(“The Great Hunger” — Patrick Kavanagh)

**L**iving in an Irish city, this is not the image that most people hold of farmers. When one embarks upon a conversation about anything to do with rural Ireland, the most common perception one encounters is that farmers “are cleaning up” or “creaming off the system”, that farmers are, for example, absorbing most of the benefits from the EU, and are still controlling politics. These perceptions have grown to the status of modern myths among

city and town-dwellers, and like most myths, contain some grain of truth but are generally blown out of all proportion. Bleak as the picture is that is painted in the above extract from "The Great Hunger", life has not changed appreciably for a certain proportion of the rural population. To get us beyond clichéd understandings, Curtin, Haase and Tovey, in this volume, provide the reader with a framework with which we can learn about the dominant trends in the contemporary Irish countryside. Their main concern is that section of the Irish rural population to whom the wealth recently generated does not trickle down, who have not been smiled upon by the Celtic Tiger. This book is a collaboration between a group of academic researchers and the Combat Poverty Agency, the Irish poverty lobby group. It joins their very impressive list of publications of solid research on all aspects of poverty in Ireland, from lone parents to the disabled to the dynamics of policy formulation. The content hence reflects both an academic concern with contributing to the theoretical literature and to forwarding policy interventions with regard to rural poverty. I intend to structure this review article around the key themes that I see arising from the book, focusing on particular chapters only when this is appropriate to the thematic discussion in each section. While it is quite unusual to write a review article on just one book, this one is so full of ideas that there is plenty of room for detailed discussion.

### *Society and the Sociologist*

The title of the book clearly states its epistemological intention, to apply a political economy perspective to the study of rural poverty in contemporary rural Ireland. At the heart of each of the inputs in this fine collection is the question of power. They each ask in their own ways who exactly has the power to shape the current trends in the countryside and what are the implications of these trends for the poorest and least powerful members of the rural community. There is a strong political concern with issues of social equity. This is "standpoint sociology" at its best. The editors and authors have no problem with wearing their political hearts on their sleeves. Not for them are the sometimes self-indulgent and self-congratulatory questions about the place of the author in the research or the impossibility of ascribing authority to the inherently subjective sociologist. The strengths of the political economy perspective herein are manifold and in this phase of often relativist and over-culturalist sociology, to see such a commitment is even refreshing. The albeit fascinating and entertaining sociological discussions we now witness about the success of Irish rock bands and the portrayal of Ireland on the Internet do not do much to increase our knowledge about old-fashioned but annoyingly persistent questions of wealth distribution; poverty; politics; welfare and power. These are perennial concerns and just because not too many young

sociologists cast them a sideways glance, this does not make them go away, or indeed abdicate the sociologist of her/his responsibility to provide informed social commentary.

This social commentary is especially urgent considering the increasing inequality that exists in the Irish countryside. Empirical evidence shows that increasing market penetration of the countryside does not impoverish agriculture as a whole, but instead, it tends to distribute life-chances more unevenly (Goodman and Redclift, 1981, p. 7). If more food is produced than is required by the market, there is a continuous downward pressure on prices over time, creating more competition between farmers to maximise their gains. The average farm size has increased in Ireland and production is becoming more concentrated. For example, the 1990 Teagasc National Farm Survey found that the top 20 per cent of farms are responsible for 39 per cent of agricultural land and 60 per cent of farm output (NFS, 1990). There is also increasing differentiation by farm size, system and region, with the West and North-West still being the the poorest regions (NESC, 1994, p. 42). Tom Boylan, in his chapter, reminds us that these regions that are still the poorest now were the same ones selected by the Congested Districts Board in the nineteenth century (p. 178). In 1995, the average family farm income in the East was £14,000, while in the West it was £6,000. (NFS, 1996.) Some authors claim that this is an EU-wide phenomenon, that it is EU policy that is creating this spatial and social pattern:

... a profoundly discriminatory and polarised structure of production has emerged with highly favoured, large farms close to the economic centre of the Community and a myriad of small farms struggling for survival in the southern and western peripheries. (Symes, 1992, p. 195.)

Commins, in this volume, from his analysis of the Teagasc National Farm Survey, estimates that out of a total of 159,000 farms, only 50,000 are economically viable, or about one-third of all farms. Among those 109,000 who are not, the presence or absence of another income on the farm is the main criterion for survival. Of these farm households 80,000 have no other income and of these, those 32,000 who were "demographically non-viable" had an average annual farm income of £2,400 in 1993. Those 48,000 who were "demographically viable" had an average annual farm income of £4,600 (p. 103). This, compounded by lack of access to decent social services, is a recipe for social disaster. Hugh Frazer, from *Combat Poverty*, warns that "[E]ither we invest in trying to break this cycle [of poverty] or we resign ourselves to the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged widening" (*Irish Times* 29/5/1997). The editors of this volume also raise the question of EU membership and isolate the main issue as being:

... intra-European or core-periphery conflict, in this context, [which] will centre around whether the requirements of Euro-core accumulation (which is necessary for European competitive success in the global system) can coexist with the aspirations of European peripheries to achieve upward mobility in the world system (from semi-periphery to core). (p. 29)

These hard facts of the local context, shocking as they are, must not however deter us from locating our analysis within broader debates.

### *Sustainable Development*

Since the mid-1980s, we have witnessed an ideological shift in the western world away from the hyper-productivism of Green Revolution thinking, and towards a deep questioning of the environmental ill-effects of capitalist accumulation. It began to be recognised by development policy planners that many of the practices involved in the industrial model were terminally harming the environment. The main policy statement issued on the subject was the Brundtland Report which stated that what was needed was “sustainable development”, most commonly defined as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). This concern for humankind’s relationship with the earth emerged from the growing strength of the Green movement, which sought to problematise the exploitation of the natural world by human greed. However, in the mainstream application of the idea in the United Nations and the World Bank, there is no fundamental challenge to capitalist expansion, just a concern with controlling and management of its worst excesses. Redclift reduces it to nothing more than a “development truism” (Redclift, 1987). There are internal contradictions within the sustainable development debate, because, as Adams argues, of its emergence from environmentalism. Here, there are glaring differences between the technocentrist and ecocentrist views, and reformist and radical perspectives (Adams, 1995, p. 88). The mainstream application of the concept is the technocentrist, with its concern with technocratic management, regulation and “rational utilisation” of the environment (Adams, 1995, p. 89). It is therefore assumed that science and planning can solve any problems that emerge. It also assumes that a certain amount of waste and pollution is acceptable, as long as there are not *too* many Chernobyls or Bhopals. Hence even the atmosphere is commodified in a new neo-colonial relationship (Woodhouse, 1992). This managed to become the dominant ideology in development circles from the late 1980s onwards directly because it poses no real radical challenge to the most powerful actors in the capitalist system. As Escobar so bluntly puts it:

In the sustainable development discourse, nature is reinvented as environment so that capital, not nature and culture, may be sustained. (Escobar, 1996, p. 49)

Challenges from other branches of environmentalism, like Deep Ecology or eco-feminism, have been made to appear like “loonies” who were out of touch with the real needs of the world’s population.

This book goes far beyond the remit of the title and really constitutes a case study of sustainable development in Ireland. It seeks to explain the pattern of development that has predominated in Ireland and how the rural poor get left out of the equation. The editors’ perspective is very far from the mainstream version of sustainable development described above. The concept is criticised for being too concerned about future generations rather than with equity among present ones (Tovey, p. 167). Theirs is a radical, Marxian, people-centred approach that challenges head-on the assumptions of top-down development policy. The editors show how the post-independence era can be characterised as an arena of struggle between competing and usually conflicting sets of ideas about appropriate development in the realms of regional policy, local government, land use, resource use and industry. This overall theme runs throughout Patrick Commins’ chapter on agriculture; Hilary Tovey’s chapter on natural resource development; Tom Boylan’s piece on rural industrialisation; and Chris Curtin’s and Carmel Coyle’s chapters on community development and local government, respectively.

Tovey, Curtin and Haase still maintain some hope in the idea of sustainable development, which should be used, they claim, to support small-scale organic farming, especially in the light of consumer concern about food safety. Considering, however, the dominant trends in agriculture towards concentration of production and land itself, the question remains open as to how optimistic we can be in this regard. Only approximately 400 organic farms exist in Ireland. The number only began to increase substantially when EU initiatives were introduced under REPS (Rural Environmental Protection Scheme), from circa 68 in 1988 (Tovey, 1996). Also, the Scheme of Grant Aid for the Development of the Organic Sector was launched in July, 1995. Farmers can now get grants of up to 50 per cent of approved investment, subject to an upper limit of £70,000 (O’Sullivan, 1996, p. 167). While it is true that there is a lot of potential for the development of the artisanal food industry, focus on this alone will not fundamentally challenge the concentration of wealth that is becoming so rife in the farming sector. Organic farming is primarily located in the “marginal” areas, primarily in the west, as an alternative earner for those who have the wherewithal to convert (CSO, 1991). It will never be a substitute for intensive, ecologically exploitative

farming, which is likely to intensify, as is evidenced by the recent controversy over Monsanto introducing genetically engineered sugar beet to Ireland. Neither will it serve the interests of the poorest, who will no doubt be excluded again from this sphere. Instead it serves a complementary market, those that can afford the high prices of artisanal food products. We can see the emergence of the twin trends of continuity and change throughout the western world, meaning that the mass-production of cheap, highly processed foods will continue because these are the staple diet of the poor, and the changing tastes and concerns of the middle class are reflected in new types of food production, which are either fully organic or use the minimum of biotechnological inputs (Goodman and Watts, 1994).

### *Multi-Layered Analysis*

A methodological question that is a constant thorn in the side of rural sociologists is how to deal conceptually with the fact, that farmers and rural dwellers interact with the world on various levels. Sociologists of various “persuasions” usually choose to prioritise analysis of one of these levels, on a continuum from the macro-level of global economic processes to the micro-level of decision-making at a local or perhaps even individual level. The editors of this book are very conscious that any analysis of Irish rural issues needs to be multi-layered, that the *mille-feuille* nature of society needs to be acknowledged. Changes occurring at a global level percolate down through the filters of the national and the regional and are played out in local life. Every facet of social change therefore ultimately becomes local. Bennett (1982) adopted a similar stance when he employed the concept of the “agrifamily system”. By this is meant the acknowledgement of the fact that most farms in the Western world, whether possessing a capitalist orientation or not, are still run by families. There exists, then, at the micro-level, both the household and the enterprise. These exist within the context of the community, which is a source of information, contacts and kin networks for the members of the farm family. This community in turn is part of a larger context of the national structure, which is the realm of state politics and national institutionalised forms. Bennett stops here, but in the Irish context, the fourth layer of this type of analysis would have to be the structures of the EU. By being conscious of the need for a multilayered approach, we can thus bridge the gap between the different layers of activity and perception. Between them, the contributors to this book give us a clear picture of these layers, from Tovey’s political economy of world food production; to Commin’s dissection of EU policy; to Coyle’s paper on the various levels of politics from EU to local; to Boylan’s concern with regional industrial policy; and to Curtin’s chapter on rural community politics. Inherent to this is the political recognition that

individual actors are subject, to a lesser or greater extent, to larger structures that are more or less beyond their control.

### *People not Places*

The editors object to the common assumption that areas can be ascribed the labels of being “well-off” or “poor”. They insist that this type of emphasis hides more than it reveals. We must constantly keep in mind that “an area that contains many poor people may still be a source of wealth for specific individuals or organisations outside it” (p. 14). Hence it is not strictly accurate to term this a “poor” area, just as it is naive to expect that increasing the wealth of an area means that the wealth is going to be equally distributed, or “trickle down”. The editors are thus firmly located within the critical tradition, as we can see from their assertion that poverty is integral to capitalist economic development (pp. 17, 51).

In many policy interventions, the presumption of “trickle down” wealth is persistently made. This is allied to the “consensus model” of community development explained by Chris Curtin in his chapter. The basic premise of this approach is that co-operation comes more easily to rural communities than urban. This idea was built upon by Muintir na Tíre shortly after independence. Driven by nationalism and an organic model of community, it sought to minimise class differences and work on the satisfaction of complementary interests. This was rekindled in more recent years by the LEADER I programme, with its emphasis on partnership. It was widely acknowledged among rural-dwellers that most of the EU ideals were not met and the net effect of this was that the benefits most usually accrued to the already established petty bourgeoisie. (This was recognised in the design and implementation of LEADER II.) While it is probably true that more wealth was distributed to the poor under Muintir na Tíre than under LEADER I, the basic philosophy was the same, that wealth would naturally be distributed fairly within the community. The editors would prefer to ally themselves with the “conflict model”, which prioritises the needs of the poorest. Curtin provides the example of the First Poverty Programme in Connemara to illustrate this. Inevitably, conflict emerged between programme directors and local representatives of the Church and the business sector. This is the quintessential coalface of power struggles over needs definition at a local level. If class, gender and other differences are not acknowledged at the early stages of policy construction, a lot of time and resources will inevitably be wasted and/or siphoned off by those who need help least. O’Shea, continuing this theme in his chapter on services provision, emphasises that the most disadvantaged groups and classes should be serviced first, and again, that services provision should be people-centred, not area-centred. Linked to this

of course is the need for reform of local government in rural areas. Coyle cuts through the main reasons for the problems here, asserting that clientelism has fundamentally weakened civic culture in this country. Used as a career stepping-stone by candidates for national politics, local government lacks financial autonomy and technical expertise. The editors disagree with her perspective that there is room for hope in this realm in the future, and feel that the culture of complacency and contentment runs too deep for reform to occur.

### *Rurality*

The question of rurality is also a recurring theme in the book. However, instead of sinking in this postmodern conceptual mire, the authors amply deal with the real everyday impacts of this protracted debate. Simply put, in this post-productivist era, rural areas are now being used in many more ways than simply for agriculture. This means, obviously, that differences continue to emerge about the uses to which the land should be put. Rural areas can now represent a greenfield site for industry, a place of rest and recreation for the urban-dweller; a site of conservation; a retreat for burnt-out rock-stars; or a place for farmers to make a living. In the words of Marsden *et al.*:

These competing representations are not free social relations but negotiated by networks of actors, linked through relations of power, and able to utilise differing sets of resources — material, cultural and symbolic. (Marsden *et al.*, 1993, p. 32.)

Murdoch emphasises how ideas about rurality are central to the formation of the middle-class in England, because the countryside literally becomes one of their owned assets (Murdoch, 1995). This collection fills a gap in the literature, applying some of these concepts to Irish rural life, adding to the already extensive work that exists on this in England.

### *Alternative Resource Use*

In the late 1990s, an income can no longer be guaranteed solely from farming, so quite a lot of experimentation is occurring. Many farming households, especially in poorer areas, now survive on incomes from other sources, in other words, pluri-activity. The 1995 NFS shows us that almost two-thirds of farms had an off-farm income. (NFS, 1995.) Tovey, in her chapter, deals with each of the more important alternative activities, i.e., agri-tourism; forestry; aquaculture; and mining. She finds, on closer inspection, that these are not quite as problem-free as they might appear. She assesses each from the points of view of (a) job and wealth creation and (b) local environmental impact. She comes to the overall conclusion, from the available (admittedly localised) evidence, that these usually benefit those who



are already reasonably well-endowed financially, that they do not really reach the poorest (p. 168). The final analysis of this issue is relatively bleak:

Achieving sustainability may well demand more state intervention, more regulation of ownership and of the social forms used in developing specific natural resources, more use of various sorts of market support and incentive — none of which seem likely to be very acceptable in the current policy context for rural resource development. (Tovey, p. 138)

In economically marginalised areas, rural employment is the biggest issue and has not yet been resolved. This is the case throughout marginal areas of the EU (Bonanno, 1993, p. 560). In Ireland, many smaller farmers living in these areas now have invested their resources in tourism-related activities in order to survive on the land. Many of the policy measures that have been introduced in order to “save rural Ireland” are based on a very instrumentalist view of the function of the countryside. The LEADER I programme, for example, has funded many developments such as holiday homes, golf courses and recreational fishing. The economically “unviable” part of the Irish landmass is being packaged and marketed in such a way as to remove all of the messy reality of country living. Instead of doing what they always have done, many farmers’ jobs are now based on producing “landscape, like any other consumer item” (Whelan, 1993, p. 54). “Nature”, which is perceived to be devoid of humans, is “preserved” to suit the tastes of urban dwellers who want to consume country life for a weekend. Restrictions are being placed, for example, on the activities of hill sheep farmers in scenically beautiful areas in the West of Ireland, now termed Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs). The self-same agricultural policy is largely responsible for damaging parts of the countryside on the one hand, and repackaging it into a sanitised, grotesque version of itself that is frozen in time, on the other. Says Slater:

... the local sense of place is being replaced by an outsider’s view of what is significant in the locality, i.e. the outsider’s sense of place. (Slater, 1993, p. 10)

The commodity becomes fetishised as an “ecological Disneyland” (Cronin, 1996, p. 10) and the inconvenient inhabitants of this commodity become objectified within its confines. Instead of this short-sighted quick-fix therapy, the communities that are affected by these huge changes need to be consulted in order to shape their own futures, to be transformed into subjects, rather than objects.

In their concern for the prioritisation of the poor on the development agenda, the editors introduce us to the idea of “social auditing”, which is a rather jingoistic shorthand term for ensuring that social as well as economic

costs are counted in any development policy. Even though one is baffled as to why the language of accountancy must be used, the basic idea is a good one. It captures the need for social accountability which badly needs to be addressed in this country. Even though they assure us that the idea has become quite popular among policy planners, the evidence they present for this is relatively thin, and the proposal of its adoption in Ireland is also rather obscure. Of course, not everything can be included between these covers, so perhaps this baton needs to be passed on to the next person(s), to take the idea a bit further.

### *Efficiency vs. Equity*

Since independence, the custodians of the Irish economy have adopted various strategies for wealth creation, ranging from the protectionism of DeValera's regime to export-led development, which still predominates. Understandably, there has been a preoccupation with wealth creation, but the editors ask, for whom? Poverty is usually seen as a product of developmental problems rather than distributional problems, that is, concern is more concentrated on national wealth creation than individual welfare (p. 30). The key political philosophical difference here is between the liberal and radical perspectives. The former assumes that the rising tide will raise all boats equally and that the market is the best mechanism for sorting out who gets what, whereas the latter totally denies the autonomy of the "free" market and its attendant philosophy. Boylan illustrates to us how the tension between the two has been played out in terms of industrial policy. Spatial power became very evident in the heady days of the 1960s, when it was thought that dispersal of industry would reduce growth, due to the extra costs incurred for transport and infrastructure. When the current changed in the 1970s towards industrial dispersal, this was proven to be untrue. Also, vestiges of economic growth seemed to absolve national government of any responsibility in terms of social policy. This was left to "Europe", the anonymous and omnipresent benefactor. The impact on women in general has been relatively positive, with at least some opportunities for work outside the home being available in the local area. His overall conclusion, however, is that industrialisation has not reached the non-farm poor and has not, *again*, "trickled down" to those who need it most.

### *Population Shifts*

Related to this also is Jackson and Haase's critique of the lack of population distribution policy in this country. They firstly object to the idea that emigration and depopulation cause rural decline, but instead that causality goes in the other direction, that depopulation is instead a

consequence of rural de-development. They argue that this is ultimately an argument for social stasis and cultural inertia and instead we should allow for more dynamic population shift. Is this to imply that Irish communities must have newcomers in their midst in order to formulate any cultural change? The editors, in their critique, rightly point out that this idea of dynamic population shift is no panacea. The question of who exactly moves into an area to "replace" the young emigrants needs to be addressed, and what are the local effects of such change. This will increasingly become an interesting political issue in the Irish countryside, if current trends of in-migration are anything to go by.

These authors in general prefer to focus on the positive aspects of rural life, deriving evidence from Carmel Duggan's and Pat O'Hara's work (respectively) on pluri-activity and how small farmers have used the education system very efficiently. While these are important aspects of the overall picture, focus on these alone tends to obscure the real deprivation experienced by thousands of people. Where are Patrick Commin's 80,000 farm households that neither have economically viable farms or any other source of income? Unfortunately, I feel that a rather sanitised view of rural decline has been presented in this chapter, which runs counter to the hard-hitting approach that prevails in the rest of the book. While of course we need, as sociologists, to look at the modes of resistance used by people who live in dire circumstances, that must not preclude focusing also on those structures that create the inequality in the first place.

#### *The Question of Reflexivity and the "Cultural Turn"*

It is a general rule that the better somebody performs a task, the more is expected of them. There is so much in this book that the reader is left wishing that the authors included just a few more aspects of the problem, to make it a truly definitive source.

First, some basic sociological assumptions are left unquestioned in this collection, particularly with regard to question of reflexivity. While it is perfectly acceptable to argue against the importance of this element and for the primacy of other aspects, at least it needs to be addressed, deconstructed and reconstructed. The question cannot be simply ignored. There has been a general shift in recent years in social science away from positivism towards culturalism. A crucial element of this "turn" has been a concern with developing a sociology which is fully cognisant of its own origins and the impact it has on the classification of aspects of society. For better or worse, the individual who has the power to write about social classes and social change and make these classifications public, to publish them, is engaging in politics. By adhering to one set of categories over another, one is being

political. One is striving to have one's own version of events rendered the official version, to be believed by the largest number of people, for political reasons. The sociologist is also a cultural producer of ideas, of "politics" in the broadest sense. Since the researcher is embedded in a realm of social life that potentially possesses a lot of power, it is clear that this is bound to affect the way research is conducted and how research subjects are viewed (see Bourdieu, 1988). If the researcher cannot transcend her/his own biases, s/he can at least admit that they exist, in order to problematise them methodologically. This applies as much to the researcher "doing" rural sociology in Ireland as it does to any other context. While the question of subjective definitions of poverty was introduced by the editors on p. 6, this was not fully addressed throughout the text. There was no input from the richness of ethnographic methodology, we hear no *voices* of rural-dwellers in the text. Woodward (1996) emphasises the centrality of people's lived experiences of poverty and deprivation to get at a deeper understanding of everyday social life. The experiential dimension must be included *alongside* the underlying structural considerations.

#### *Other Contexts*

This collection is a very contemporary one which addresses various aspects of rural poverty in great detail. However, it would have been greatly improved by referring both to the historical context of this problem and also the contemporary geographical context. To the reader who is uninitiated on Irish issues, it would be very useful to locate contemporary land ownership patterns, for example in its historical frame. This could be done either in one introductory chapter or a part at the beginning of each chapter, as we see in Boylan's and Coyle's inputs.

Considering the importance of EU agricultural policy for shaping patterns of land use in rural Ireland, it would also be very interesting to make comparisons with other EU countries with similar problems as Ireland. For example, have the different histories of other "peripheral" EU countries produced different results in terms of land and resource use, or local politics or services provision? In recent years, Mediterranean regions have seen prices for their staple products of olives, fruit, wine and sunflowers fall because of the huge surpluses that exist. They are now also experimenting with agri-tourism, as an alternative for other Europeans to the traditional "Costa" sun holiday. The landscape looks very different but the structural features are very similar to Ireland. Comparative research work like this is still in its infancy and one looks forward to seeing it develop. By extending this type of analysis, we can build a sustained critique of what Symes terms "off-the-peg solutions" which are applied to very different places (1992, p. 195).

### *Conclusion*

Perhaps when the EU price and structural financial supports inevitably change, reduce and/or dry up completely, then we will witness Irish farmers being proactive about their farming practices. The welfare element of EU policy, embodied especially in headage payments to the Western counties, is of course a major income component for many farmers. Without these, poverty would be substantially worse for many farming people. There is no doubt that these should be continued, but by themselves they do not contribute much to the revitalisation of rural life. This "band-aid" approach of providing short-term relief needs to be supported by more ideas for long-term action, instigated and set up by those who are set to gain from real positive change, the poor themselves. These measures could be in terms of education, alternative farming practices, re-training in other economic spheres, development of social services and generally, making a positive contribution to their place, being transformed into creators not just receivers of policy. This of course is always a difficulty, as it is often those who already possess certain amounts of cultural and economic capital who usually get in on the act of local development. The question of how the the poor can best be mobilised is still very much open to debate. Local power, after all, is all about who gets to define what an area and its people needs. If real democratisation, real development, is to take place, structures need to be set up where poor people can get to define their own needs. It shows a distinct lack of political imagination not to use the enormous human resources that *already* exist in Irish society, to make real progress on long-term poverty alleviation. Overall, we may not be nearer anything like a solution to rural poverty, but at least this collection of thorough social science provides us with a synthesis of the forces one is up against in the struggle towards one.

On one final note, we spoke earlier of the multi-layered analysis utilised in this book. Perhaps another layer that could be addressed is the politics of publishing, another major site of power struggles. It would be a shame if the fine scholarly work contained in this book were underestimated because the editors chose to publish with a relatively small Dublin publishing house. They can be secure in the knowledge that they do not need to rely on the prestige of a large publisher in order for this book to make a significant impact both inside and outside academia.

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