

6. Wellbeing Narratives: Inciting the Pluriverse on our island of stories – It takes a movement!

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Introduction

In this paper I introduce the work of the international Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEALL) and an early intervention planned by WEALL’s Irish hub. The focus of this intervention is designed to mobilize and excite emergent conversations about alternative “social imaginaries” to counter dominant economic narratives across the island in the realm of culture and the distinct role of cultural actors as animators of social reflexivity and socio-ecological change. The underlying vision of WEALL Ireland is the conviction that the dimensions of a wellbeing economy or economies are already emergent, globally and on the island of Ireland, and must come to fruition through a *social movement* that is grounded in our own local experiences while networked and supported in a dialogue with a global movement dedicated to shifting the dominant economic narrative of capital or neoliberalism. Our challenge, confronting planetary emergencies that are both social and ecological, is to courageously name and offer analyses of dominant economic narratives associated with “capitalism” and “neoliberalism” – and their precursors in coloniality – and to bring a new visibility and coherence to emergent counter- narratives and practices across the island. It follows that central government policy work on an Irish wellbeing framework may be a necessary but insufficient condition for a truly meaningful shift in our dominant economic narrative: *it takes a movement...a wellbeing economy movement.*

The WEALL Hub Ireland² initiative was launched in late 2020 when two Irish charities, the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability (Feasta)³ and the European Health Futures Forum (EHFF)⁴ and I joined with Social Justice Ireland,

¹ Writing in a personal capacity at the School of Law, Queens University Belfast.

² <https://weall.org/ireland>

³ www.feasta.org

⁴ www.ehff.eu

Cultivate: The Sustainable Ireland Cooperative⁵ to form an island-wide hub. I was introduced to the Feasta members and the EHFF by my friend and co-founder of the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance, Katherine Trebeck, after our parallel discussions about founding an Irish hub. While members of the steering group bring generations of policy work and engaged scholarship to the steering group of the Irish Hub, we are also inspired by radical voices of leadership in Ireland, including that of the President, Michael D Higgins, who has committed a series of speeches to calls for a new economics designed to respond to the depth and scale of the planetary emergencies. Higgins has, for example, told an OECD conference that “new ideas are, thus, now required and, even more, their communication to citizens – ideas based on equality, universal public services, equity of access, sufficiency, sustainability. New ideas are fortunately available in the form of an alternative paradigm of social economy within ecological responsibility, but they must find their way on to the public street.”⁶

The WEALL Ireland Hub aims to popularise new and emergent narratives dedicated to repurposing our economy and acting as a broker of knowledge production in the domain of the wellbeing economy. We want to galvanize an island-wide and inclusive platform through a creative intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, informed by our peer-to-peer collaboration with other WEALL hubs across the world. The purpose of the WEALL Ireland Hub is not to download a prescribed vision of wellbeing from the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance but to engage critically with our international peers while drawing critically on our island’s unique cultural, linguistic, intellectual and ecological resources to inflect and work in solidarity with new thinking or “social imaginaries” inspired by an opening to the possibility of creating a wellbeing economy.

The Wellbeing Economy Alliance: Global Network

The global Wellbeing Economy Alliances (WEALL) is a leading “collaboration of changemakers” working together to realise a time-bound vision and mission to make a key contribution to the cultivation of transformed economies around the world. Their mission is to build a movement for the redesign of economies to create shared wellbeing for people and planet by 2040. WEALL networks are engaged in strengthening, supporting and existing geographic and thematic power bases, and curating and democratising knowledge production.

⁵ www.cultivate.ie

⁶ Speech by Michael D Higgins, President, OECD Conference, “Confronting Planetary Emergencies”, 9.10.20.

Fundamentally, however, WEALL is about building a movement and the co-creation of new powerful “narratives of hope” to shift the terms of the debate about repurposing our economies and the shift to a Wellbeing Economy. WEALL is a collaboration that embraces national civil society hubs engaging with organisations and individual citizens, and includes the participation of a number of governments in the “Wellbeing Economy Governments” network (WEGo), including Scotland, New Zealand, Iceland, Wales and Finland. The WEALL Ireland Hub is calling on the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to join the WEGo collaboration to help accelerate government thinking about delivering human and ecological wellbeing.

For WEALL co-founder, Katherine Trebeck, the repurposing of economic goals implies a deep shift in which social practices and worldviews need to change and current path dependencies that lock-in the current way of doing things need to be broken. This is a transition that must take place at all levels, at the level of the niche or micro- level, where innovation happens at the community or grassroots level; at the level of the regime or meso-level where the dominant norms, practices, policies and rules prevail; and at the level of the landscape or macro level, which is the domain of the markets, culture and political beliefs. In her co-authored book, *The Economics of Arrival: Ideas for a Grown Up Economy* (2019), Trebeck problematizes economic growth and national addictions to GDP, arguing that in the industrialised world the great challenge is not to remain competitive, or to increase efficiency or production. The challenge is to “slow down without derailing, to reimagine progress beyond more of the same.”⁷ For Trebeck and WEALL the challenge for humanity is to “make ourselves at home in the world”.

The far side of the transformation envisaged by WEALL is not a replacement hegemonic economic blueprint. The shape, institutions, and activities at the service of the transition will look different, both across countries and between communities within countries. Other names for the Wellbeing Economy transition are discussed and pursued under the signs of “the doughnut economy,” “planetary boundaries”, “degrowth” or “post-growth”, and the “regenerative economy.” On the island of Ireland there will be an important role for government initiatives, such as the wellbeing framework⁸, but the role envisaged by WEALL Ireland is one of inflection: to critically engage with our island histories, cultures and experiences of economy as the departure point for

⁷ Trebeck, (2019), p.214.

⁸ www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1fb9b-a-well-being-framework-for-ireland-join-the-conversation/

narrative shift towards new social imaginaries aligned to the wellbeing economy. A social imaginary, as outlined by the philosopher Charles Taylor, as opposed to an intellectual scheme, refers to the felt ways in which people and communities imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them, and the deep normative notions and images that underlie shared expectations. The word “imaginary” is deployed by Taylor because people do not ordinarily imagine their social surroundings using theoretical terms but carry them in images, stories and legends. Social imaginaries are also important because they enable common or shared practices and draw on shared understandings of legitimacy.

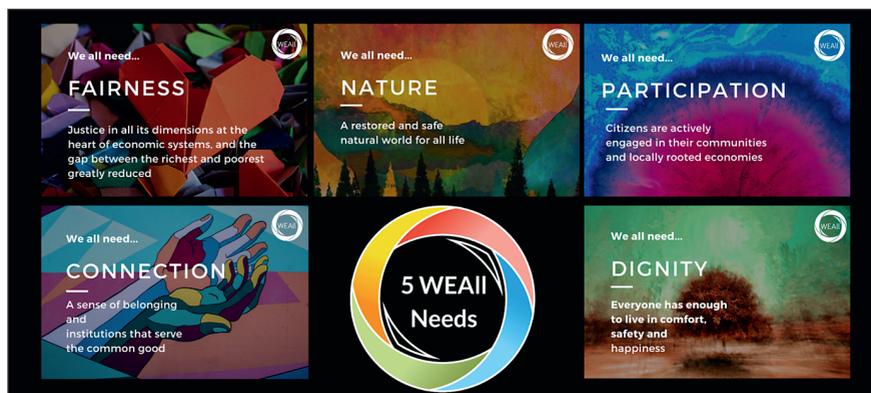
The Wellbeing Economy Alliance Ireland – Transitions via deep cultural inquiries

Examination of successful system changes shows that, in addition to good research, great communications, effective campaigning, lobbying, and pioneering practical exemplars, four other strategies are critical:

1. Leverage major crises
2. Create new power bases
3. **Promote new compelling and positive narratives**
4. Support these with a coherent and accessible knowledge and evidence base

For WEALL co-founder, Katherine Trebeck, a fundamental task of the movement for wellbeing economies is a shift away from dominant economic narratives and the promotion of new compelling and positive ones. This is an important dimension of the work for Just Transitions across the island and globally, if we are to move beyond a sacrificial paradigm: a popular view promulgated in parts of governments and the media that there is no way out of our socio-ecological crises that does not demand sacrifice and giving up valued ways of life and ways of being in the world. At the heart of WEALL is an intuition that limits can be strangely liberating. If we have reached a point in the dominant narratives of Western development where the exhaustion of our ecological systems is matched by an inner exhaustion marked by epidemics of mental ill-health, depression, addiction and pathologies associated with over-development and over-consumption, then the news about a Wellbeing Economy could prove to be both liberating and transformative.

Fig 1. *Towards an Island of Wellbeing: Animating an island-wide movement for a well-being economy*⁹



We are an island of stories. Some of them are dominant, deep-rooted and antithetical to individual and collective well-being. Others are emergent and tap into even deeper roots and demand our attention as part of a transition to a well-being economy in the context of global socio-ecological and economic challenges, as regularly rehearsed by President Higgins.

The WEALL Ireland Hub approach is based on a compelling desire to approach “system change” with a focus on the need to expose ways in which a dominant economic narrative has captured our popular imagination (“the attention economy”), and the opportunity to mobilize creative, life-affirming alternative practices that posit alternative world views. Other worlds are possible and emergent...in the realm of the commons, shared living experiments, zero waste and the circular economy movements, sustainable agriculture and community gardens, community wealth experiments, and the rights of nature. Practices of askesis associated with individual or subjective wellbeing, such as yoga and mindfulness, are being taken up critically and re-situated as practices of self-care alongside activism.¹⁰

The proposed objective of the WEALL Hub Ireland intervention is to mobilize a Community of Practice for “Cultural Creatives” working at all levels of society

⁹ www.weall.org

¹⁰ See my “Climate change and the attention economy” <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/author/peter-doran/>

and across sectors (e.g. local government, higher education, community development, business), together with their sponsoring bodies, to support WEAll Hub Ireland’s work of animating and curating an island-wide conversation on the well-being economy, drawing from our island histories, narratives, mythologies, traditions and epistemologies that are often communicated in song, writing, theatre, film, dance, the spoken word and other artistic/cultural interventions.

There are three characteristics of a community of practice¹¹:

1. **Domain:** Community members have a shared domain of interest, competence and commitment that distinguishes them from others. This shared domain creates common ground, inspires members to participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their actions.
2. **Community:** Members pursue this interest through joint activities, discussions, problem-solving opportunities, information sharing and relationship building. The notion of a community creates the social fabric for enabling collective learning. A strong community fosters interaction and encourages a willingness to share ideas.
3. **Practice:** Community members are actual practitioners in this domain of interest, and build a shared repertoire of resources and ideas that they take back to their practice. While the domain provides the general area of interest for the community, the practice is the specific focus around which the community develops, shares and maintains its core of collective knowledge.

Working with the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust WEAll Hub Ireland are convening Cultural Creatives as a peer-to-peer supported group or Community of Practice that is broadly defined, including artists and performers who enjoy national reputations *and* other cultural activists working at county or local level. The Community of Practice will also include those “Creatives” whose practice extends to forms of spirituality and mind/body work (“self care”).

The globally connected and informed Community of Practice (COP) of cultural creatives/performers/activists will be invited to animate an island-wide (sector specific and place-based) series of conversations about the well-being economy. A core part of the mission or “cosmovision” will be to explore the specificity

¹¹ Source: <https://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

of our shared island's responses to or island inflection of the global debate on shifting the dominant economic narrative of capitalism/neoliberalism.

Figure 2: Imagination Activism¹²



Interrogating social imaginaries from a post-development perspective

A generative dimension of the work on the wellbeing economy in Ireland can be explored as an act of epistemic solidarity with the Global South and pursued as a dimension of post-development work, drawing from two formative legacies of the island's histories and socio-ecological transformations. As an island of communities and narratives we occupy that position of “in betweenness” of which Seamus Heaney wrote¹³. In their *Twinsome Minds: An act of double remembrance* (2017), Richard Kearney and Sheila Gallagher recall that James Joyce argued that the Irish imagination was at its best when moving between

¹² Illustration: Phoebe Tickell on Imagination Activism. See <https://moralimaginations.substack.com/p/imagination-activism>

¹³ Seamus Heaney (1987), “Terminus”.

two “twinsome” minds – that is when it had “two thinks at a time.” The authors develop this thought with the observation that the Irish have always been most creative when following a logic of *both/and*, acknowledging a mix of double fidelities, including national, psychological and cultural – “doublings that call for new mediations.”¹⁴ For the authors, the key is this *between* that summons what Heaney called a “symbolic reordering of Ireland” open to new possibilities of “Irishness, Britishness, European-ness, planitariness, creatureliness, whatever.” For “whatever is given/can always be reimagined.”¹⁵

If dialogues on a wellbeing economy are to participate in and draw from the richness of Irish imaginaries, they must begin with a certain fidelity and, perhaps, risk-taking that opens up stories that even precede and exceed narratives of the nation and its fractures. Country, note Kearney and Gallagher¹⁶ marks a commons of earth and elements: a shared ecology of lands and waters: -

Country is a place of body and flesh, of brotherhood and sisterhood (Barton and Childers, the Sheehys and MacSwineys): it’s a place of daring desire and yay-saying life (Casement and Gordon, Muriel MacSwiney and her men, Winnie Barrington and hers); it is a promise of unfailing natality, which precedes the nation and seeds its reinvention.

But if a country marks a space before the nation, there’s also a space beyond it – and it goes by the name of cosmos. This is a site that transcends all frontiers – a fifth province of mind that exceeds the four provinces of north, south, east and west. It is the Finistère of hope where all pilgrimages lead, going back to the navigatios of ancient Irish monks – diasporas of risk allowing for new possibilities of thought. Such a migrant cosmos was, we believe, a catalyst of the great cultural enlightenment that ignited a whole revolution of ideas in the extraordinary generation of 1916. It promised a genuinely pluralist vision witnessed in the proliferation of Revivalist writings and journals in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Brilliant imaginative work ranging from the 1916 leaders themselves – Pearse, Connolly, and Griffith all edited their own intellectual journals – to the bold cosmopolitanism of Kettle and the Sheehys. Utopian vision vowed to international emancipation and the regeneration of mind announced by James Joyce – one where everyone could say Mundanus sum: I belong to the world.¹⁷

¹⁴ Kearney and Gallagher (2017) p.15.

¹⁵ Ibid, Cited in Kearney and Gallagher, p.15.

¹⁶ Kearney and Gallagher (2017), pp.41-43.

¹⁷ Ibid (2017), p.42.

Field Day¹⁸ writers, dramatists, and activists have worked hard to remind us of the influence of the significance of the “Cultural Revolution” within Irish history in the 19th Century as a pathway to political revolution and, ultimately, constitutional change to secure independence for most of the island. Brian Friel, in particular, wrote to remind us that the colonial imperative is to destroy all memory of what went before, for the new colonial order is always founded on amnesia. And central to the project of erasure is language.

Michael Cronin picks up where Field Day left off but embarks on an entirely new chapter and journey too: an ecological and linguistic one. In his wonderful *Irish and Ecology-An Ghaeilge Agus An Éirceolaíocht* (2019), Cronin reconnects questions of colonialism, forced amnesia and political ecology. He notes that language situates people in their environment in terms of both description and narration – telling you where you are and what’s around you and where you come from – so the project of removing the Irish language from public life has – as one long-term consequence – been the alienation of people from their own surroundings. Cronin cites Brian Friel’s play, *Translations* (1980), which explores the experience of a displacement and exile when agents of colonialism impose English translations of Irish place names. The play’s school master cautions “that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen – to use an image you’ll understand – it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape....of fact.”¹⁹ Cronin adds that it can also happen that a people can find themselves imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape *tout court*:

The population shifts to a language which bears no relationship to the environment in which they find themselves. The ecological consequences are profound in that the connection to place and history – a sense of which

¹⁸ See www.fieldday.ie/about/ Field Day began in 1980 in Derry as a cultural and intellectual response to the political crisis in Northern Ireland. Playwright Brian Friel and actor/director Stephen Rea set out to identify and develop a new audience for theatre. Friel’s critically acclaimed *Translations* was the first of many Field Day plays to show at Derry’s Guildhall before travelling throughout Ireland and the world. From its beginnings as a theatre company, Field Day also developed into a publishing company. Its founding members, Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, were quickly joined by Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, Tom Paulin, Tom Kilroy and Davy Hammond. Since the mid 1990s, Field Day has become synonymous with the development of Irish Studies. It has acted as a focus for scholars seeking to question the paradigm of Irish history and literature and in so doing, it has contributed to the international debates in postcolonial theory and various strands of cultural history.

¹⁹ Brian Friel, 1980, *Translations*, p.43.

is central to the creation of a sustainable and resilient localities – is seriously fractured.²⁰

Transitional discourses are inherently preoccupied with the realm of the *in between*...the question of what is passing and what is to come, and how. The island of Ireland's transition is multi-layered, replete with double fidelities and even the tantalising prospect of a new constitutional moment of birth. Cronin captures this dilemma for the post-colonial Republic of the *in between* in an observation by Palmer, Baker and Maley²¹:

We may imagine ourselves at an angle to the Anglosphere, basking in our guilt-free positioning as both recovering colony and third richest country in Europe, but we have little countervailing sense of what exactly the absence that haunts our modernity might be.

For Cronin, it is the absences from this past that are now coming back to haunt Ireland's present in terms of our relationship to the environment. The English Tudor experiment in (language) extinction and (territorial) extraction made Ireland the ideal laboratory for a form of ecological dispossession that would be replayed endlessly in various corners of the Empire.

For Sharae Deckard²², Ireland's historical development has been profoundly shaped and continues to be shaped – not only by its colonial history – but by its role as a politically weak and unevenly developed semi-periphery within the European economy and the capitalist world system. Deckard draws on the work of Jason Moore, a leading theorist who attempts to integrate ecology into our understanding of world capitalist systems.²³ In Moore's environmental history of capitalist cycles of accumulation, the capitalist world-system is simultaneously a system of world ecology constituted not only through periodic reorganisation of geometries of power and economy but through the remaking of socio-ecological relations. In other words, world hegemonic systems of capital did not merely organize and re-organize resource and food regimes, these systems were also socio-ecological projects.

As such, the capitalist world-system does not merely possess an ecological dimension but is inherently constituted by ecological regimes and revolutions

²⁰ Cronin (2019), p.14.

²¹ Palmer, Baker and Maley (2019), p.15.

²² Deckard, S. (2016).

²³ Moore, J. (2011), pp.108-47

that periodically reorganize and renew the conditions of accumulation to allow intensified appropriation of ecological surpluses.²⁴



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The territory of Ireland played a significant role in the emergence of these different cycles of systemic accumulation as a laboratory for new forms of expropriation, from 16th century plantation to 21st century neoliberal austerity. Ireland functioned as a frontier and testing ground for new technics and imaginaries that were crucial to the formation of the Atlantic economy

²⁴ Deckard, S. (2019), p.148.

and to the expansion of the capitalist world-ecology. For Deckard²⁵ the island served as a geographical stepping stone for transatlantic settlement and as a laboratory in which to trial techniques of privatization and expropriation. Immanuel Wallerstein²⁶ went so far as to suggest that it was as if Ireland were the blueprint for America. Those most engaged in the colonization of Ireland – Humphrey Gilbert, Walter Raleigh, Richard Grenville – were also those who took a leading part in the planting of the first colonies in Virginia. Deckard²⁷ notes that the radical simplification of nature can be clearly seen in the context of the Irish plantation, where mass deforestation fundamentally transformed the ecology of Ireland, accompanied by radical forms of dispossession of indigenous populations and targeted destruction of non-human species and flora, including wolves and broad-leaf trees, in order to facilitate the importation and production of exogenous crops and commodities for export, and to eliminate the social and cultural bases for the reproduction of pre-capitalist forms of life. She adds that the significance of land and agriculture is almost overdetermined in Irish historiography, yet it is crucial to understand the transformation of Irish environments not merely as a product of colonialism but rather in relation to the larger early modern revolution in capitalist accumulation: “The reorganization of Ireland’s biologically diverse bogs and forests into rationalized sites of capitalist monoculture was crucial to the erosion of Irish self-sufficiency and the integration of the island into capitalist world-ecology.”²⁸ The infamous annals of Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland (ca.1598)*, composed at Spenser’s 3000-acre settlement in Munster, not only captured tales of Irish insurrection, tactical famine, conquest, and plantation, but of “the ecological plenitude of Irish nature, conveniently emptied of its indigenes, [is] released for capture as ecological surplus,”²⁹ marking a historical shift from a feudal to capitalist mode of production, embodied in conceptions of abstract social nature as “tabula rasa” ripe for social re-engineering. Spenser dedicates an abstract mathematical part of his work to the imagination of a scheme for English plantation, with plans for a grid-like remapping of the island.

Mercier and Translations

For Sinéad Mercier and her co-authors³⁰, Brian Friel’s *Translations* is a parable of how high modernist ideology disrupts local metis and knowing, detailing

²⁵ Ibid (2019), p.150.

²⁶ Wallerstein, I. (1974), p.

²⁷ Deckard, S. (2019), op.cit, p.150.

²⁸ Deckard, S. (2019), Ibid., p. 150.

²⁹ Ibid. (2019), p.151.

³⁰ Mercier, S. (2020), p. 7.

the impact of a major topographic survey on the fictional rural Irish speaking community. The play is based on the colonial mapping of the island of Ireland in the early 19th century – the first such exercise in a British colony – in what Mercier describes not only as an economic and scientific campaign, but as ‘Lawscaping on an imperial scale.’³¹ In the play, Friel describes how Gaelic place-names are recorded with anglicized names or clumsy phonetic translations. In the process, the survey, for Mercier, legitimizes these corruptions and distortions in a way that served to undermine the local sense of place and being-in-the-world. Through the resulting distortion of language and place, the land is withdrawn from its inhabitants; from the communities that have lived there for generations. In the word of one character in the play, the translations are experienced as a kind of exile.

Mercier describes how the process of translation, as captured in Friel’s play, achieves the three essential features of modernity: rationalising and categorizing all phenomena, optimising knowledge to instrumentalist ends; reducing pre-Enlightenment beliefs to mere superstition; and partitioning Nature from humans in order to better mould and instrumentalize it for the separatist ends of humans in power.³² Mercier observes how systems of knowledge, such as the law, codify these processes of modernity – largely in the form of capitalist social relations, part of an outworking of what James Scott³³ attributes to the European Enlightenment and its outworking in a high modernist ideology that sought to create civilian populations from people, and resources from nature. Friel’s *Translations* foregrounds this process of State-enforced legibility through quantification and calculation, resulting in the withdrawal from communities of landscapes and their intimate ties, meanings and relations, including landscapes of meaning. A kind of exile indeed.

The Pluriverse

In many ways the work of Field Day, Friel and others anticipated or pre-figured the emergent politics of the pluriverse: a challenge to the closures of colonial systems of knowledge and practice, now given expression in new post-development movements in the Global South. Post-development is a critical school of thought in development studies that situates our dominant economic narratives within a rich critique of Euro-modernity, thus extending our horizon

³¹ Lawscaping refers to the role of law in imposing a modern grid of calculation and abstraction on local landscapes, rendering them for conversion to the universal languages of transaction and private property.

³² *Ibid*, (2020), pp.8-9.

³³ Scott, J. (1998).

of critique beyond the confines of political economy. The focus of post-development scholarship is on a critique of modernity or Western dominance and its close association with histories of colonialism and ecological destruction; while scholars engage with indigenous and social movements offering diverse local alternatives based on their own “Epistemologies of the South”³⁴. The main figures associated with this critical movement are Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva, Serge Latouche and Majid Rahnema.

For Escobar³⁵ “Epistemologies of the South” is one of the most compelling frameworks for social transformation to emerge at the intersection of Global North and the Global South, theory and practice, and between the academy and social life, in many decades. Advocates do not claim to have arrived at a fully formed general theory but have sought to outline trajectories for “thinking otherwise:”

....precisely because it carves a space for itself that enables thought to re-engage with life and attentively walk along the amazing diversity of forms of knowledge held by those whose experiences can no longer be rendered legible by Eurocentric knowledge in the academic mode, if they ever were.³⁶

Escobar suggests that Epistemologies of the South might be useful to those who have been at the receiving end of those colonialist categories that have transmogrified (Translated?) their experiences, turning them into lacks, or simply rendered them utterly illegible and invisible. There is insufficient space to examine the full spectrum of Epistemologies of the South here. Suffice to note that Santos³⁷, one of the key organisers of the World Social Forum, has engaged in what he describes as “the sociology of absence,” effected by five “monocultures”. Each of the monocultures is derived from the dominance of capitalist modernity and has impacted our understandings of, approaches to and access to:

- Knowledge;
- Classification of differences;
- Scale;
- Temporality;
- Productivity and efficiency.

³⁴ Santos, B. (2014).

³⁵ Escobar, A. (2020), p.67-68.

³⁶ Escobar, A. (2020), p.67.

³⁷ Santos, B. (2014).

Santos has developed a “sociology of emergences,” which seek to redress these monocultures and bring to light the multiplicity of social experience based on plural forms and ecologies of knowledge, temporalities, recognition of differences, trans-scales, and productivities. He has also sought to bring to light intercultural translation across diverse knowledges and struggles, and develop a notion of cognitive justice as a necessary correlate of social justice. The framework seeks to offer a non-Eurocentric approach to social transformation.

Escobar’s work on “the pluriverse” can support a new conversation about the wellbeing economy by shifting the horizon of our imaginative encounter with these concepts (“wellbeing” and “economy”) to our contested histories and legacies of European modernity and colonialism (or incorporation into the modern world-ecological system of capital and accumulation). This would be both an act of solidarity with other colonised territories, including indigenous communities, but also an act of solidarity with our own past insofar as it has become a container of silences and absences.

For Escobar³⁸, while the occupation of territories by capital and the state implies economic, technological, cultural, ecological and often armed aspects, its most fundamental dimension is ontological. From this perspective, what occupies territories is a particular ontology, “that of the universal world of individuals and markets that attempts to transform all other worlds into one single world.” It is from this position that we derive the Zapatista dictum: “A world where many worlds fit.” Political ontology refers to the power-laden practices involved in bringing into being a particular world or ontology i.e. a way of being in the world. For Escobar, a crucial moment that helps us to understand the persistence of occupying ontologies is the conquest of America, considered by some as a point of origin of our current modern/colonial world-system. He notes that the most central feature of the single-world view doctrine has been a twofold ontological divide: a particular way of separating humans from nature (the nature-culture divide); and the distinction and boundary policing between “us” (civilized, modern, developed) and “them” (uncivilized, underdeveloped), those who practice other ways of worlding (the colonial divide). Escobar adds³⁹:

These (and many other derivative) dualisms underlie an entire structure of institutions and practices through which the single world is enacted. Many signs, however, suggest that the globalized world so constructed is unravelling. The growing visibility of struggles to defend mountains, landscapes, forests,

³⁸ Escobar, A. (2020), p.73.

³⁹ Escobar, A. (2020), p.73.

*territories, and so forth, by appealing to a relational (nondualist) and plurio-
ntological understanding of life is a manifestation of this crisis. The crisis thus
stems from the models through which we imagine the world to be a certain way
and construct it accordingly.*

This conjuncture and the questions it raises define a rich context for Escobar's approach to political ontology and the pluriverse. On the one hand he seeks to understand the conditions under which the idea of a single globalized world continues to maintain its dominance (the dominant economic narrative). He seeks to engage with, record and support the emergence of projects based on different ontological commitments and ways of worlding. For Escobar and his colleagues, the pluriverse is a tool for making alternatives to the one world plausible (to those of us living in the "one world" narrative), and second, for providing resonance to those other worlds that are interrupting the one-world-story, including some that are already emergent in Ireland (e.g. experiments in commoning).

The notion of the pluriverse has two main sources, according to Escobar. The first is theoretical critiques of dualism and "post-dualist" trends in scholarship associated with the so-called ontological turn in social theory. The second is the perseverance of nondualist philosophies (or cosmovisions) that reflect a deeply relational understanding of life, such as Muntu and Ubuntu in parts of Africa, and Pachamama or Uma Kiwe among South American indigenous peoples. Relational ontologies are also current in Buddhist philosophies and practices of mind-body. Movements in Europe to restore practices of commoning, energy transitions and the relocalization of food are also linked to foundational critiques that push back against the dominant narrative of capitalist modernity.

Buen Vivir and the Politics of the Pluriverse

A central premise of this paper is that new and old knowledges produced in struggles for the defence of "relational worlds" are often the most farsighted and appropriate to the present conjuncture of modern problems. A proliferation of transition discourses, including calls for civilizational transitions (e.g. China's discourse of Ecological Civilization), twinned with the depth and scale of climate and ecological crises, have underscored the critical work of Escobar and others in successfully questioning the very idea of "development" together with its core assumptions about economic growth (which has become an alibi for systematically deferring urgent action on inequalities), progress and instrumental rationality. In parts of the Global South the idea of alternatives to development has become more concrete. In South America, for example,

notions of Buen Vivir (“Good living”) or collective well-being in accordance with culturally appropriate ways and the rights of nature have emerged as living practices. Buen Vivir implies an alternative philosophy of life that enables the subordination of economic objectives to the criteria of ecology, human dignity, and social justice. This relational approach to wellbeing is expansive, embracing relations not only with other humans but with the more-than-human (Nature) and with the constitutive relationships of interiority or relations with the self. Deep attention to those relations with the self help integrate the quality of our “self-care” to the integrity of our relationships to other beings. In the words of the Vietnamese Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, the “way out is in.”

Escobar notes that debates about “degrowth”, the commons and Buen Vivir are “fellow travellers,” constituting important areas of research, theorization, and activism for both Epistemologies of the South and for political ontology. Another area of discussion, debate, and activism in South America, linked to Buen Vivir, is that of rights of nature. To think wellbeing or Buen Vivir in the register of the politics of the pluriverse, navigating new ontological horizons, is to have two thinks at a time (at least two): wellbeing is no longer confined to the notion of the human or the collective but is caught up immediately in considerations of our entanglement with fellow beings and communities.

The pluriverse is not a template nor a decisive or pre-determined outcome but an orientation, inspired by the Epistemologies of the South, and informed by an acceptance that we are facing modern problems for which there may be no modern solutions limited by the closures and blind spots that have been part of the ontological investments of Euro-modernity. Ontologically speaking, Escobar continues, one may say that the current crisis is the crisis of a particular world or set of world-making practices with origins in the European enlightenment. Transition implies a movement towards the opposite or alternative, posited as a multiplicity of worlds (the pluriverse)...a multiplicity of possibilities that have not been exhausted by the Eurocentric experience. A world of “both-and”, a world that is both European and open to thinking and being otherwise, not least as an act of epistemic and ontological solidarity. On the island of Ireland that solidarity is not limited to a relationship with others but is a deep act of solidarity with an opening to our own past, an opening to an undoing of our coloniality where that experience has been one of closure.

Ontologically, Escobar continues, the invisibility of the pluriverse points to a sociology of absences: what does not exist *is actively produced as non-existent* or as a noncredible alternative to what exists, notably relational ways of being. The colonial attack on the Irish language and attempt to erase memory was one

example of these attempts to actively produce the “non-existent.” Writers such as Cronin and Manchán Magan are deeply engaged in excavating and recalling deep patterns of thought and relationality that remain part of our linguistic heritage.

Summary and recommendations

Ireland can occupy a special role in movements towards a pluriversal response to calls for Just Transitions⁴⁰, including solidarity with movements linking decolonial politics with the positing of Buen Vivir and related notions of wellbeing based on a profound shift to relational ontologies (“ways of being in the world”). Ireland has always been between stories...a place “in between” where histories of colonialism have partitioned memory, language, ecology and territory but only up to a point. Just transitions on the island of Ireland can embrace not only our socio-ecological crisis but afford opportunities for re-imagining ways of belonging across the island.

There are already signs of an emergence of pluriversal politics on the island, with the recent irruption of demands for a relational turn in our recognition of Rights of Nature. It is interesting to note that these early calls for a pluriversal politics have emerged in the borderlands of Donegal and Derry. Local authorities in Derry and Donegal, among others, have embarked on public consultations on what a Rights of Nature approach would mean for their local policies. The Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss has received a number of expert submissions also calling for a recognition of Rights of Nature as an appropriate response to the biodiversity crisis, including calls for an amendment to the Irish Constitution.⁴¹

- Wellbeing in the context of pluriversal politics is a call to human / non-human conviviality. According to this approach, Buen Vivir, for example, is not solely a political alternative for redistributing economic resources or providing a more sustainable and cleaner environment, but also a proposal to open up life to a cosmos of worlds that would be intra-connected through respect, a proposal for

⁴⁰ Ireland is confronting calls for two just transitions: one is the familiar transition to a new socio-ecological order; the second, convergent transition, refers to the prospect of constitutional change on the island under the terms of the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement. These transitions and narratives will, ultimately, converge and inform one another.

⁴¹ See the Peter Doran et al. (2022), Rights of Nature submission to the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss submitted by the Environmental Justice Network Ireland, available here: www.ejni.net

a politics that, rather than requiring sameness, would be underpinned by new departures, to the far side of difference.

- Buen Vivir, in the context of the wellbeing policy debate in Ireland, is a call for a solidarity with social movements posing alternative responses to the modern challenges of climate change and ecological breakdown, in ways that respond to the claim that solutions couched in modern epistemologies and ontologies cannot produce answers to the problems that modernity-as-closure has presented. The wellbeing policy debate must become an invitation to think otherwise; to bring something new into our world. For this reason, wellbeing and transition discourses share something profoundly in common with the work of art and cultural creativity.
- This is not solely a response to the urgent contemporary need to find dialogues, convivial well-living, and understanding between increasingly polarized ideological extremes, but also to the modern yearning for connectedness with oneself, other human beings, and earth beings. There is a deep longing for a renewed life of interiority, even the contemplative, as we increasingly encounter the fact that the physical exhaustion of the earth's capacities and boundaries has an index in our experiences of mental exhaustion, which shows up in epidemics of tiredness, depression and addiction in response to disconnection. Wellbeing in the register of the pluriverse is a call to reconnection and entanglement that includes a mindful embrace of the re-enchantment of life as we cultivate a return to our senses and with the sensual.

If our reception of wellbeing narratives in policy deliberations does not herald a disruption of the dominant stories that silence and subjugate the strange and unfamiliar landscapes of the pluriverse, we must look again. Let wellbeing become an invitation to render the familiar unfamiliar in the anticipation of the unexpected. There are contemporary cultural and political narratives and openings, including the work of Field Day, Seamus Heaney, Brien Friel, and others that have already disturbed what was once thought to be the stable languages and practices of our post-colonial landscapes. These can be new departure points for a pluriversal celebration of stories and possibilities that we have not dared to dream for too long.



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