Reflections on sociology in Ireland. Between melancholy and hope: A mission for Irish Sociology

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The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. (Samuel Beckett et al., 1979)

As flowers turn their faces toward the sun by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives toward the sun that is rising in the sky of history. [We] must try to be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations. (Walter Benjamin, 1992)

Anniversaries are ambivalent occasions – for celebrating our accomplishments, taking stock of ourselves, looking back on the road we have travelled, and looking ahead towards a horizon of possibilities. On the 30th anniversary of our journal, Irish Sociologists find ourselves situated ambivalently between melancholy and hope, because the *Irish Journal of Sociology* is bookended by two momentous periods of crisis.

The *Irish Journal of Sociology* was conceived just at the liminal historical moment when the object that it had intended to address – ‘Society’ – was declared dead, even non-existent. ‘They are casting their problems at society, and you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families’ Margaret Thatcher said in 1987. Two years later the Berlin Wall fell, along with all of the crumbling institutions of ‘actually existing Socialism’, an event purportedly marking the ‘End of History’ and the triumph of Liberalism and the Market (Fukuyama, 1992).

Sociology’s melancholy is due to the loss of our loved object – Society. An ambiguous loss for it was not only neoliberalism that proclaimed the non-existence of Society; by the...
end of the 1980s, Sociology had come to a similar realization: ‘Society doesn’t exist, and the Jew is its symptom’. With this startling claim, Zizek (1989) hoped to re-awaken Sociology from a dogmatic slumber of reification, positivism, materialism, and historical determinism. Society is not a ‘thing’ that can be objectively delimited, measured and managed. Rather, Society exists only in the form of a constellation of discourses, symbolic orders and imagined communities, webs of significances that we ourselves have spun, suspended in historical space-time. Society is a mobile field of differences, a figuration of ambiguities, ambivalences and liquescences, and despite all of the most determined efforts to fix the boundaries of Society – from religious and supposedly sacred and timeless institutions, to purportedly immutable ‘laws of history’, and ‘determination by the economy’, to conceits of progress assured by the scientific method, to notions of secure foundations of government based on the democratically legitimated legal-rational authority and bureaucratic administration, to utilitarian political-economy as a unifying matrix of mutually beneficial exchanges through universal media of money and markets, all of these, and more, are always only partial and incomplete processes. All institutional systems and social structures and their metanarratives of legitimation remain always overdetermined – surrounded by ‘excess’ and underpinned by ‘lack’ that they are unable to master; consequently, Society as a unitary and intelligible object that grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility. The Jew, as the typical scapegoat for failed historical-political projects of totalization, all of the futile efforts to domesticate the field of differences, is the symptom of the non-existence and impossibility of Society.

Neoliberalism proclaimed the death of Society under the master signifier of the Market. Sociology answered dialectically, with an antithesis, and a hypothesis for new synthesis: Neoliberalism’s claim to singularity and totality is refuted by Society as always something more than a reductive-abstraction-simplification to the Market. Against the new dogma of neoliberalism’s economic theology, a re-awakened Sociology asserted Society as radically un-centred, plural, multiple, overdetermined, and contingent; ultimately un-governable by any authority and un-containable by any metanarrative; always open to being re-shaped by language games and political struggles for hegemony in radical and plural democracy. Amongst the consequences of this ending and beginning-again of Society, from singularity to multiplicity has been a tremendous energizing of social movements of all sorts – feminism, environmentalism, assertions for recognition and vindications of rights to equality and emancipation for LGBTQ, and for racial and ethnic minorities, and, as elsewhere around the world, sociologists on the island of Ireland have played a leading role in these social movements, identity politics, and in the ensuing ‘culture wars’, and this is the agonal theatre towards which much of the energies of Sociology has been directed.

I shall return to the role of Sociology in social movements, the culture wars, and an ever-broadening, more inclusive, more egalitarian and just Society presently, but first to address the provocative issue of how the ‘the Jew’ as ‘symptom’ refutes totalizing metanarratives, including neoliberalism’s metanarrative of the Market. In so far as more and more people experience ourselves as isolated individuals, free-falling helplessly through the threadbare vestiges of a social fabric that is being systematically and
deliberately unravelled and disassembled under the auspices of the Market, scapegoating re-emerges as the characteristic symptom of the struggle over the death and life of Society. The ‘scapegoat mechanism’ (Girard, 1977) is an anthropologically universal and fundamental mechanism through which Society seeks to revitalize itself, to give birth to itself again, to find unity through the other: internal divisions and tensions are projected onto an ‘other’, as the hyper-individuated, differentiated, conflicted mass tries to find a point of collective identification and unity by their common hatred of a scapegoat as the sacrificial victim. This is why the Jew, Leopold Bloom, is the ambiguous scapegoat-hero of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1990).

Joyce gives us Bloom as an ideal-type, a model to emulate, to show how it is possible to live a meaningful, moral and decent life, to blossom and flourish in the cracks and crevasses between the then prevailing historical giant powers of Empire, Church, Nation, and Capital. If Ireland had been ruled by any one of those giant powers alone, any kind of good life would have been unliveable, but because powers are multiple, different and co-existing, sometimes coalescing but always competing and conflicting with one another, there are interstices, and within these spaces, in spite of the latent hostility and threat of violence against him, Leopold Bloom is able to live a fully human life, a good life. A similar problem confronts us today: if there were only one reigning power – the Market, then life would become unliveable; and indeed, under the dictatorship of the Market un-liveability is evidenced today by a concatenation of cascading crises – climate breakdown, species extinction, extreme economic inequalities, a proliferation of flagrant injustices, antagonisms and violence, the fragmentation of the political imaginary into polarizations and private languages, and the proliferation and escalation of scapegoating violence that is so characteristic of our time. But if we understand and interpret the contemporary escalation and intensification of conflict as scapegoating this can enable us to ‘open our eyes and see the mess’; and at the epicentre of the mess is a historically seismic breaking of Society and the subordination of everything to the Market. While the new plutocracy consolidates under the sign of the Market, social and bodies politic differentiate and proliferate into individualisms, solitudes and enmities. The work of Sociology through the 1990s and 2000s was of articulating chains of equivalence across intersectionalities, amongst and between a multiplicity of social movements and identities in the interests of progressive and plural democracy, and Irish sociologists played our part in not only interpreting the world but changing it too. But now, and into the future, while acknowledging ‘the constitutive antagonism of the social’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112) our work should also be, equally, and urgently, ‘to bring into a world founded on discontinuity as much continuity as such a world can sustain’ (Bataille, 1986: 19) and we can do this by doing what Sociology has always done: by identifying and clarifying our common ground and a shared horizon of radiant ideals – grounds and horizons that could unify and defend Society against the Market.

Irish Sociology needs to clarify and articulate grounds and horizons for Society because thirty years on our Journal’s anniversary coincides with the messianic populist authoritarianism of Trump and the convulsions of Brexit, the apotheosis of neoliberalism as ‘creative destruction’ under the auspices of the Market and the cult of the celebrity
entrepreneur as ‘disruptor’. ‘Move fast and break things; if you’re not breaking things you’re not moving fast enough!’ Zuckerberg told his minions, and Facebook, played a central role in ‘disrupting’ and breaking the houses of democracy and the institutions of legal-rational authority; and they almost succeeded. But then along came Covid! The pandemic – *pan demos*, affecting everyone, called for emergency measures and under conditions of emergency what has re-emerged especially is ‘Society’ – the realization that there is in fact more than ‘individual men and women and their families’; rather, we exist always and only in relation to others; that matters of life and death and health cannot be boiled down to individual behaviours and rational choices in a free market needing only to be ‘nudged’ this way or that, but on the contrary could only be protected and vindicated collectively, within overarching webs and networks of human relationships, co-ordinated through Public Health and managed by dispersed, distributed networks of knowledge-power, organized centrally and governed under the legitimate authority of the state as a democratic republic, responsible for *res publica*, public goods, the common good. The re-discovery of Society in the form of a generalized tacit agreement to a social contract dispersed and diffused and expressed as what Durkheim (1997) called *esprit de corps*, a public spirit, a sense of duty and willing compliance with social distance protocols, of ‘being together apart’, a generous, reciprocal setting-aside and ‘giving up’ of individual personal interests in the interest of the common good of society as a whole (Mauss, 2002). What Covid 19 revealed and has helped to bring back to consciousness is the existence of the common ground and the shared horizon of Society, namely the *lifeworld* and the *collective consciousness*:

**Ground and horizon: ‘lifeworld’ and ‘conscience collective’**

‘I, we, and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this “living together.” The we-subjectivity … [is] constantly functioning’ (Husserl, 1970: 108). The *lifeworld* is the ‘taken-for-granted stream of everyday languages, beliefs, assumptions, feelings, values, and cultural practices exchanges, routines, interactions, and events that make up individual and social experience and that constitute meaning in everyday life’ (Schutz, 1972). ‘There is a unstated social contract about what can be said and done and individuals have a moral right that the shared meaning of the normative order is maintained and, at the same time, a responsibility to help recreate this meaning. … While there is a freedom to be creative, there are also recognised rights, duties and responsibilities pertaining to each participant in each social interaction. The codes and conventions that operate in social interactions and enable shared meaning to be negotiated and represented are derived from the deeply internalized culture that operates through language, shared beliefs and values, about engaging in meaningful communication, recognizing and accepting difference and conveying signs and sentiments of honour, dignity and respect’ (Inglis, 2018: 232).

The *lifeworld*, as it is formulated here by Husserl, and Schultz, and Inglis, is our anthropological ground, our common moral foundation, a foundation that implies a very different, more complex, fuller and richer ‘human being’ than that of the singular
self-interested *homo oeconomicus* posited by neoliberalism. ‘For a very long time man was something different’, Mauss, 2002: 98) says. Human beings are much more than an individual rational-choice utilitarian calculating machines; we are social beings who live through reciprocal gift exchanges that are juridical, economic, religious, aesthetic and moral all at once. We are irreducibly plural and other-oriented; we are *hominæ curans*, caring people, plural, multiple, indissolubly inter-dependent social beings, persons with deep human needs, needs that can only be met through and with others. ‘Being needy is a quality shared by all of humanity … Humans call out for care as needy people, and give care, often at the same time. People are *hominæ curans* (caring people) as well as *homo economicus* and *homo politicus*, they can and do act otherwise as well as self-wise’ (Lynch, 2021).

Built upon and out of the moral foundations of a shared lifeworld is a cosmos that we have co-created, a collective consciousness, a transcendent horizon of ideas and ideals that is ‘the product of an immense co-operation that extends not only through space but also through time; to make them a multitude of different minds have associated, inter-mixed, and combined their feelings: long generations have accumulated their experience and knowledge. A very special intellectuality that is infinitely higher and more complex than that of the individual is distilled in them’ (Durkheim, 1995: 15). The webs of meaning that resonate between the anthropological ground of the *lebensweld* and the transcendent horizon of the *conscience collective* are the ontology of Society. Just as ‘the Divinity is society transfigured and symbolically expressed’ (Durkheim, 1974: 52) Society is the unifying and assimilating spirit that dwells amongst us.

Recently, during the three decades of the *Irish Journal of Sociology* especially, social acceleration into hyper-modernity (Rosa, 2013) has meant that we have been losing contact with our grounds in the lifeworld, in the sense of generalized shared consciousness of deep-seated human needs – for secure attachments, for care, for trustworthy socialization, for intimacy and love, for instance; and, on the other hand, at the same time we are suffering from a loss of limits, in the sense of horizons of shared transcendent ideals. The simultaneous loss of contact with structure in terms of both grounds in the lifeworld and transcendent radiant ideals of a collective consciousness means that what Rosa (2019) calls the relations of resonance between the world and ourselves are missing, slack, and un-tuned. As the chords of our collective life are torn asunder our relationships to the world become mute, dysrhythmic, and dissonant. Neoliberalism’s rumours of the death of Society have been exaggerated. Society hasn’t gone away; Society has been here all along, alive, though in urgent need of care and attention; and attending to the body politic and the spirit of Society as an integral whole is the hopeful mission of Irish Sociology.

**Sociology’s work**

Society is ‘the web of affiliations’ (Simmel, 1964), ‘webs of significance that we ourselves have spun’ (Geertz, 1993) and the essence of our work as Sociologists is to read and decode the historically transmitted webs of meanings that are manifest in symbols, rituals, relationship, languages, materials and works of art, for instance, that
present themselves to us as palimpsests, historical accretions of layers upon layers of meanings are the essential codes of human social life, and the work that we do, the methods that we use, whether quantitative or qualitative, always lead us back to that same, commonplace, the ‘rough ground’ Wittgenstein (1994), wherein we are, as it were, he says, trying to repair a spider’s web with our fingers. Delicate work! But this is in fact what doing Sociology entails: untangling the finest threads, tacking between the warp and woof of the social fabric. This is why Marx (1974) spent weeks sifting through statistics on prices of raw materials and rates of profit on sheep and cattle and flax in India and Ireland, not as an exercise in counting the cats in Zanzibar but to weave those mundane and arcane micro details into the macro epic of Capital; why Durkheim (1966) paid similar attention to suicide statistics to show us how subtle changes in patterns of suicide can reveal the deep macro-historical transitions from the Middle Ages to Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and Modernity, and today the concepts of anomie and egoism and the paradigm of historically recurring ‘suicidogenic social currents’ during periods of transition and liminality can enable Irish sociologists to interpret the meaning of the human casualties of the Revolution of our time, the neoliberal revolution, and all of the collateral damage in those other epidemics that have been raging before and during and after Covid 19 – depression, anxiety, addiction, poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, the cascading crises that are the real origins of the virus – late Modern civilization’s voracious zoophagia, and so many other indices, as florid symptoms of social pathologies of contemporary civilization, to understand and explain how we have become a collective form of life that is hell-bent on ecocide and sociocide. To grasp and to express the scale and the extent of the rolling crisis that passes for ‘civilization’ in the 21st century, and also to become aware of inconspicuous transformations that give us hope to recover our common ground and clarify a horizon of ideals by the light of which we may reform our actions and think our way out of disasters that we have created for ourselves. That is the scale of the challenge to Sociology; this mission is given to us in the inheritance of Sociology, from Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, through Adorno and Mills, to Habermas and Foucault and Butler; and this, and nothing less than this, should be the ambition and the measure the Irish Sociology. This sociological mission is our inheritance, from the ‘French school’, from Mauss to Bourdieu; from the ‘Frankfurt school’, from Marx, Weber, and Freud, through Horkheimer & Adorno, to Habermas to Rosa; from the ‘Chicago school’, of Park and Veblen and Perkins; from the ‘Birmingham school’ of Hall, Willis and McRobbie. Is there an ‘Irish school’ of Sociology? Not yet, but there needs to be; there ought to be, with Kathleen Lynch and Tom Inglis counted first amongst it.

We need strong schools of Sociology because in the neoliberal revolution the very existence of ‘Society’ is everywhere refuted and under attack, and Society must be defended. Under relentless assault, Sociology should not retreat into particularisms or seek refuge behind methodologism, for ‘method’ (from hodos) means a road, a path, a way of going about something; and a method, however sophisticated, is of no use at all unless it understands itself in terms of its ends, and very often our ends are myopic, too narrowly focussed so that Irish Sociology sees mostly only particular trees, but misses seeing the forest of symbols that is Society.
The challenge for Sociology today, in Ireland as everywhere, is to attend to the question posed by Adorno (1979) and again recently by Butler (2012): ‘How can we live right life in wrong times?’ In the wake of the War, of right and left totalitarianism, and in light of his experiences of the new stupefying tyranny of mass society and the culture industry while he was in exile in America, Adorno and Horkheimer shared a despairing and melancholy worldview: ‘Only one thing is certain … the irrationality of society has reached a point where only the gloomiest predictions have any plausibility.’ 6 But the question that Adorno raised, in the darkest moment of history (at least until then!) reverberates today: ‘How to live … a good life within a world in which the good life is structurally or systematically foreclosed for so many? … If I am to lead a good life, it will be a life lived with others, a life that is no life without those others. I will not lose this: I that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and to live well. Our shared exposure to precarity is but one ground of our potential equality and our reciprocal obligations to produce together conditions of a liveable life. In avowing the need we have for one another, we avow as well basic principles that inform the social, democratic conditions of what we might still call “the good life”’ (Butler, 2012: 18). … anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world … we might even say that ‘the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics’ (Adorno, cited in Butler, 2012: 10).

The promise of Irish Sociology – of the profession of Sociology on this island, of Sociology per se – is to keep on raising the question posed by Adorno and Butler: ‘How can we live a right life in wrong times?’ Conscious that we are raising back to consciousness a question to which there is ultimately no answer we insist on the importance of raising the question anyway because it is the only important question, the fundamental and transcending moral question of the meaningfulness [or otherwise] of our Society as a form of life that gives it value as a good life, more than a merely material-biological life-form concerned with its own survival in the face of the existential threats that we have brought upon ourselves.

We ask Adorno’s and Butler’s question because of the power of that question of the good life to re-awaken what Mills (1959) calls the ‘sociological imagination’: raising the question, to posit the thesis of ‘the good life’ is to hold up a mirror to the antithesis of pervasive nihilism, the ‘heart of darkness’ in modern civilization and the amoral culture of late modernity in which the development of the modern global economy, driven by unlimited technological growth and an unbridled profit motive, irreparably damages the very tissue of social life, and to cause us to think of ways to stop this process by re-ethicizing the social and moral fabric that is necessary in order to live a responsible, meaningful, healthy and hopeful life. Between the thesis of the good life and the antithesis which everywhere refutes and denies the good life by prevailing historical circumstances – climate breakdown and extinction, gross injustices, extreme socio-economic inequalities – opens the horizon of possibility of synthesis, wherein we may recover and institutionalize that elusive entity, the spirit of human solidarity that constitutes ‘Society’ as the “I” that is “we” and the “we” that is “I” (Hegel, 1977: 110).
The promise and the hope of Sociology are to conserve and defend Society by working with the democratic tradition of collaborative argumentative dialogue by persistently asking the impossible question, knowing that that question is in the end the only question, the question that resonates between our common ground in the lifeworld and a transcendent horizon of radiant ideals.

The question of the good life or ‘how should we live?’ was first asked by the Greeks not at the apex, but at the apotheosis of Athenian civilization, when everything that had been achieved was collapsing into violence, civil war, corruption, naked greed, vaulting ambition and hyper-individualism; when democracy was sliding into tyranny, when civilization was free-falling into a dark age – just as we are today. We should be conscious too that our Journal’s anniversary occurs at a crisis of civilization in which Ireland is deeply implicated, at a pivotal moment when democracy’s public goods are being usurped, appropriated and eclipsed by titanic private corporations – Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon (GAFA) – all, and other tech giants too, H.Q.’d in Dublin – and we should remember, during this decade of commemorations and the centenary celebration of Independence, that the General Post Office (GPO) was chosen to be the ground zero of the Irish Revolution precisely because it was the communications nexus of the Empire, just as GAFA is now the communications hub of the digital revolution and the syphon of Revenue, the sink-hole of ‘Base Erosion by Profit Shifting’, undermining the collective household, and the schismatic axis of neoliberal plutocracy and generalized precarity, for it is at this precise rift in History’s time-space continuum that we are teetering on the very edge of the abyss, when ‘Things fall apart / the centre cannot hold/ mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/ … and what rough beast/ its hour at last come round / slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?’

Yeats’ ‘rough beast’ is everywhere amongst us now, and has been for some time already.

The ‘rough beast’ of The Second Coming is a figure of ‘laughing, ecstatic destruction’ as Yeats (1927) said, and this demonic power is celebrated today by the neoliberal principles of ‘creative destruction’ and ‘disruption’. The demon’s work has been to deny the existence of Society, to unravel the social fabric and to systematically dissolve the tissue of all human relationships. At this time, our present, crucial historical moment, rather than take refuge behind particularistic topics and generalized techniques, our work, the mission of Sociology, ought to be to keep on raising to consciousness the sociological-moral-political question that is an anthesis to the pervasive, generalized culture of materialism and nihilism that Arendt (2003) identified as the deep cause of Europe’s descent into totalitarianism, fascism, and Holocaust, a Vichian historical ricorso of which, all be it in new guises, is the same general problem that confronts us today. In our melancholy time, rather than grieving for the death of Society, or picking through its bones and squabbling about scraps of its carcass, we should, in a dialectical spirit celebrate the hope of a resurrection of the body politic, and the assimilating, unifying and vivifying spirit of Society, and thereby strive to realize the promise of Sociology. And in keeping with our vocation, as Weber (1978) says in the Science and Politics as vocations essays (that is to say, for it was Weber’s intention) – our mission entails ‘reaching out towards that which is impossible in the world’, and then ‘boring down through thick planks, with passion and judgement combined’.
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Notes
1. Zizek – along with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Bauman, and many of the leading figures in social and political thought during the 1990s and 2000s and on into the present.
2. Zuckerberg (2012) ‘The hacker way’. Letter to investors published on the occasion of Facebook’s launch on the NY Stock Exchange, May 2012. Available at: https://www.wired.com/2012/02/zuck-letter/ (accessed 15 December 2019).
3. What was shown very clearly during the convulsions of the Trumpian attempted coup d’etat, the Brexit campaign and similar events of the very recent past was the struggle between the concerted powers interested in the colonization of the lifeworld by money and power, advanced in the form of ‘systematically distorted communication’, raised by a quantum power by digital social media. In the struggle between ‘systematically distorted communication’ and the ‘public use of reason’ at stake was nothing less than ‘Truth’, whether a post-truth society, deliberately designed, engineered and planfully executed by evangelical market fundamentalists, their billionaire funders in the Koch Foundation, and their strategists (Bannon, with Cambridge Analytica) in collusion, or at least sympatico with Sukorov’s post-propaganda ‘non-linear war’, wherein the new Russian geo-political strategy is not to spread any particular ideology or propaganda, but simply to sow confusion and to foment trouble and internal dissent and mistrust, to amplify already existing and latent conflicts, thereby dissimulating, debilitating usurping and dissolving the institutions of reason and democracy.
4. During Covid, we also learned that purportedly ‘free Market’ private enterprise is in fact dependent and enabled only by virtue by a vast system of interdependencies, of public subsidies, co-ordinated through national and European Central Banks and Revenue apparatus.
5. The emerging post-covid constellation is overdetermined with ambiguities: a necessary restoration of legitimate legal-rational authority in the face of dissimulation of ‘post-Truth’ ‘alternative facts’, but also a swarming of panoptical bio-power and technologies of governmentality – Discipline & Punish 2.0!
6. Horkheimer, letter to Adorno, cited in Müller-Doohm (2008: 175).
7. (or what Martin Jay calls the ‘dialectical imagination’).

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