The ongoing project of Irish sociology

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Abstract
This short article provides an auto-ethnographic perspective on the history of Irish sociology. It is based on the author’s experience of Irish sociology, including: experiences as an undergraduate student in the late 1980s and later as a research assistant; a PhD in the US during the 1990s, starting during mass emigration but completed as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ emerged and sociology grew; 5 years in Ireland as a head of department, leading up to the financial crash and the decade between crash and COVID-19. Finally, the article concludes with some general observations about sociology in Ireland today, its promise and the perils that face it.

Keywords
National sociologies, institutions, state, sociology of science, biographical methods

Introduction
It is a bit of a mixed blessing when you are asked to contribute to a special issue like this on the development of sociology in Ireland over the course of your career. The honour of being asked conflicts with the mixed emotions of being the kind of age that tends to qualify you for such honours. However, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to reflect on what is now a fairly long time within Irish sociology.

My approach to this short piece is largely biographical. This runs the risk of course of making it seem that everything about Irish sociology has to do in one way or another with
myself. This is clearly, and thankfully for Irish sociology, not the case. However, my knowledge of Irish sociology is as much auto-ethnographic as it is anything else. Therefore, I tell the story of my engagement with Irish sociology to describe and reflect on how the discipline, and its institutions and social relationships, have changed during the 35 years since I first saw any mention of sociology. This reliance on the pattern of my own personal engagement with sociology in Ireland in itself says something about the nature of Irish sociology, a point that I will return to at the end.

The bulk of this short piece will consist of a trip through sociology in Ireland in the late 1980s, experienced as an undergraduate student and later as a research assistant; then through a PhD in the US during the 1990s, as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ emerged and sociology grew; then 5 years back in Ireland as a head of department, leading up to the financial crash; and finally the decade between crash and COVID-19. Finally, I conclude with some general observations about sociology in Ireland today, its promise and the perils that face it.

Discovering sociology

Like many, or perhaps most, sociologists, I discovered sociology partly by accident. At a time when little more than 20% of Irish young people went to university I started studying in Trinity in 1986 with the intention of becoming a social worker. The first I heard of sociology was in the course handbook for the social work course. However while I realised pretty quickly that social work was not for me I was intrigued from the very beginning by my sociology lectures, including everything from $2 \times 2$ tables showing class inequality in education to feminist discourse analyses of popular music. At the time my main exposure in the educational system to ideas like this had been through the study of history for the Leaving Certificate examinations. It makes for an interesting contrast with the situation today where politics and society is a growing subject at the second level.

While going to Trinity was an accident based on subject options, it had interesting sociological consequences that I was not at all aware of at the time. Cycling past University College Dublin meant bypassing a more Catholic-flavored, or perhaps more ‘empirical’, sociology to learn from a department that was dominated by the concerns of UK sociology in the 1970s and 1980s – including critiques of capitalism, feminist analysis and an emerging study of discourse and ideology. While we learned relatively little about contemporary society in Ireland, we were exposed to an exciting array of social theories and a good dose of research methodology. European social theory loomed large with a strong engagement with critical sociology but so too did the requirement to learn a range of research methodologies and modes of analysis. In keeping with most of the Irish third-level system at the time, the focus of the sociology department was on high standards in classic disciplinary studies which realistically many students were likely to end up taking out of the country during this time of mass emigration.

After graduation in 1990, I was lucky enough to get a job as a research assistant in the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Here, the sociological traditions were quite different, although perhaps not quite as different as those in the various institutions
thought them to be. The ESRI was also a lively intellectual environment and both Trinity and the ESRI had taught the value of empirical research, albeit with different emphases. Working at the ESRI brought fascinating insights into a class-based Weberian sociology, into the lived realities of statistical survey research and an immersion in everyday lively conversations about the realities and dilemmas of Irish society and economy. At that time, there was a dedicated sociology unit within ESRI, whose members had just produced a formidable analysis of the role of social class in Ireland’s development. In many respects, the ESRI tackled many of the core issues of the Catholic sociology tradition—family, community and social cohesion—in a secularist framework.

During this time, I attended many conferences of the Sociological Association of Ireland, which was always a welcoming place for a hungry young sociologist. Part of the appeal of the conferences was their smaller size and informality. Also, they were cheap, with accommodation usually in a hostel and low fees. Being one of those who discovered the pub in Termonfeckin was a particularly memorable ‘early career highlight’.

**International sociologies**

In retrospect, there were signs of movement in Irish sociology around this time—the Irish Journal of Sociology was founded in Maynooth in 1991 and a number of sociologists were hired through the 1990s as Ireland’s economic situation began to improve. However, Irish sociology certainly felt like a dependent periphery when I was applying for postgraduate studies in 1992. Many departments had hired no staff in the previous 10–15 years and anyone I spoke to encouraged me to pursue a PhD outside of Ireland, in the Anglophone sociological worlds of the UK, the US or perhaps the European University Institute in Florence.

I ended up pursuing a PhD at the University of California Berkeley at a time when the only information available about distant graduate programs came from the American Sociological Association guide, posted out handbooks from the US and word of mouth. In retrospect, this was one of the last generations to rely so heavily on postgraduate study outside of Ireland. Again perhaps reflecting a society that was increasingly looking to the US rather than the UK as its cultural reference point, the prospect of US Sociology and the experience of US society appealed far more than the main alternative of the UK. This also reflected my lack of family and care responsibilities (unlike many research postgrads today) and the dominance of emigration as an option for many at the time.

I was fortunate in my experience at Berkeley with a terrific supervisor and more generally the chance to participate in a sociological world that sought to combine empirical rigour, critical theory and public sociology. My experience of American sociology, at Berkeley and later employed at UC Davis, involved little of the ‘Dust Bowl empiricism’ that dominates external views of US sociology but instead consisted of a rich mixture of critical ethnographies, comparative historical case studies and interesting and creative statistical studies.

I ended up studying the Celtic Tiger from afar, having started out with a thesis proposal that sought to explain the impossibility of development and employment growth in
Ireland. I also discovered that there was ‘no escape’ from ‘public sociology’ in Ireland, a point that was brought home to me when a good friend tackled me at our first meeting asking was I ‘the guy who was defending the Celtic tiger’. My delight at my initial publication on the Celtic tiger was accompanied by the shock of learning that you had left yourself open to vigorous questioning, not only in academic or policy circles but occasionally while having an apparently quiet chat in Dublin. The blurred boundaries between academic and public life in Ireland were a bit of a surprise to anyone used to the deeper divide between them in the US.

**Back to the future**

In 2003, I returned to Ireland after the initial Celtic Tiger boom and well into the finance and real estate bubble that was to lead to the crash some 5 years later. In many respects, it was a move typical of the middle class of the time. Having travelled the (mainly English-speaking) globe with their 1980s third-level education in hand, they returned in their tens of thousands to the Celtic tiger, many living as I did now in the new suburban towns around Dublin.

However, this was a new experience in sociology for me. As a head of department, in the National University of Ireland Maynooth, I learned a great deal more than I had ever imagined about the details of university administration and politics. It was also a time and an experience that convinced me that our broader aspirations for the discipline, for its place in society and for its contribution to the public sphere and social transformation were deeply interdependent with the micropolitics of resources, space, staffing, research infrastructure and more. In many respects, it was a time of huge opportunity when Irish higher education could have added much deeper and richer collaboration on a national scale to the large-scale expansion of higher education institutions at the time.

Indeed, colleagues in sociology across the island sought to collaborate to that end at the time, particularly through the program for research in third-level institutions (PRTLI). However, the initial state support ultimately disappeared. Sadly, the national system failed to put in place reliable funding and easily workable systems for everyday cooperation and inter-institutional collaboration, ultimately favouring instead a system based on apparent inter-institutional competition and a system built around major centres of science research. My computer files from that era reveal many folders relating to a series of scattergun innovation initiatives that left little long-term imprint despite the best efforts of those involved. The largely failed promise of PRTLI brought an unfortunate retreat to the department from the national discipline.

**From crash to COVID**

This failure of the state to develop the possibilities of the 2000s turned ugly after 2009 when the financial crash brought a severe fiscal crisis. The variety of schemes of the previous decade came crashing to a halt and student–staff ratios soared even as morale plummeted. During this decade or so, I spent 4 years as head of department and 5 years as principal investigator on a large European Union (EU) research project, two quite
different but informative experiences that provided insight into the changing worlds of universities and research.

Even when universities began to recover and staff were hired once more, the landscape had changed. Since the crash, almost all permanent positions advertised that I am familiar with have had a ‘strategic’ purpose – generally linked to new undergraduate teaching programmes although sometimes to a postgraduate course or research area. The support and development of a discipline and the reduction of internationally exceptional high student–staff ratios were not completely abandoned but were mediated largely through these ‘strategic’ concerns. This affects both the number and content of the positions advertised, with fewer ‘open area’ positions advertised even as employment started to expand somewhat and the percentage of Irish young people in the third level continued to increase rapidly. Given the funding pressures arising from national policy, meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse and rapidly expanding undergraduate student body is seen as less ‘strategic’ than attracting fee-paying international or postgraduate students.

During this time, my experience on a large research project brought me into first-hand contact with the world of postgraduate and postdoctoral sociologists after the Crash. You could easily start a new Sociology department in the morning with excellent researchers from this and other similar projects. And yet, very very few are employed in permanent academic positions. There are of course many dimensions of precarity in the sociological, and academic, labour market but there is a fundamental perversity in a system that produces so many excellent researchers and scholars in sociology (and other disciplines) and does not provide the opportunities for them to make full use of that expertise. While the non-academic sector is supposed to provide the opportunities for and to benefit from this new set of PhD-level researchers, there are only limited signs so far of the kinds of organisational changes in either the public or private sectors that would make this possible in a serious way.

**Teaching at Maynooth**

Having said this, this time in my own department has been immensely rewarding. This is of course in large part down to a superb group of colleagues, who as President Higgins notes, are driving Irish sociology forwards with many others across the island. However, it has also had a huge amount to do with the privilege of working with a remarkable student body. Maynooth is located in the heart of the demographic boom of Irish society on the western edges of Dublin and the eastern edges of north Leinster. We have had the happy experience of working with an exceptionally diverse group of undergraduates and postgraduate who are both challenging and rewarding to teach and learn from.

The most consistent element of that teaching for me has been a compulsory class in classical social theory, a class that I started teaching when as head of department I stepped in to fill a gap in the teaching rotation. This class has convinced me even more of what sociology can bring to society as different students respond in different degrees to the Marxist critique of exploitation and alienation, the Weberian search for meaning in an instrumental and unequal world, Durkheim’s call for solidarity in the
face of differentiation, Gilman’s critique of patriarchy in the public and private spheres and DuBois’ indictment of global whiteness and its contradiction with democratic citizenship.

At the same time, it has been my privilege to learn from students’ engagement with these theories through their own experiences of class, gender and race. It has been fascinating to work with a student body that itself has shifted over time – with high percentages of students who are the first in their families to attend third level, of mature students, and increasingly of students born outside Ireland and, more recently, their children. The sociology of WEB DuBois, for example, is an interesting barometer of a changing sociology and my relationship to it. Unheard of in my undergraduate education (although we did read Wolpe and others about South Africa), unread in my postgraduate studies in the US, untaught for many years in my classical theory class and now a central pillar that speaks to many students’ experiences in a very different context from when and where it was written. Most recently, teaching DuBois in the era of Trump and Johnson has led me to include in the syllabus some classic mid-20th century analyses of fascism.

The promise of Irish sociology

All other things being equal, to work as a sociologist in a permanent academic position is a happy place to be. However, there are real challenges that come with it – a job overloaded with multiple competing tasks, a discipline under pressure, the sheer numbers of students, and the uncertain place in the public mind. Nonetheless, each of these challenges also represents an opportunity. Often, our discussions of the place of the sociologist in Ireland are framed in terms of a reference to other systems and our deficiencies in relationship to them. However there are also distinctive features of the Irish higher education system, the place of sociology within it, and the place of all of this in Irish society. If and when this system is properly resourced and organised, these features might become virtues to be maintained rather than vestiges to be dropped. Having already abused the word limit, I now very briefly review them – as I see them, in keeping with the auto-ethnographic orientation of this piece.

First, the flip side of the ‘overloaded job’ is that the dominant model of the full-time sociologist is one that incorporates serious commitments to research, teaching, institutional service and public engagement. This is not only reflected in individuals’ work but also in the ongoing discussions within departments – there are aspects of all these issues on every department meeting agenda, usually initiated by colleagues ‘from below’ rather than in response to external initiatives. There are pressures to separate these roles into star researchers, public policy experts and others to carry the teaching load but so far the individual and communal commitment is to the model of the all-rounder academic. This is broadly of enormous value to higher education and the broader society and needs to be protected and nurtured.

Second, sociology in Ireland is relatively pluralistic – internally in terms of its range of interests and methods and externally in terms of the range of institutions, departments and settings in which it occurs. At the Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) conference of 2021, roughly about 3 in 10 presenters were from university sociology departments,
almost 4 in 10 from other university departments, 1 in 10 from Institutes of Technology, 1 in 10 from think tanks and similar institutions and just over 1 in 10 were from institutions outside of Ireland. This is an uneasy pluralism, and can be hierarchical and conflictual at times. Nonetheless, there are great potentials here to make more of the connections between ‘qual’ and ‘quant’, between Institutes of Technology, universities and research centres, and between a strong disciplinary community and a diverse set of places where it is practiced.

Third, sociology remains a popular subject with students and a lively second-level curriculum in politics and society is likely to boost this interest. More than that, it is a meaningful subject for the bulk of the students who take it – the awakening in students each year of the sociological imagination remains one of the great joys of being a sociologist. There are pressures – the national statistics show that even as our numbers grow, our proportion of overall graduates seems more tenuous. However, sociology remains a vibrant and meaningful subject for a very large number of students. Even more than that, the society and our students are changing faster than we are. Given the stop–start nature of hiring in sociology, my generation of sociologists are ‘aging out’ of the world occupied by our students – the challenge for us is to ‘learn’ from them so that we can better ‘teach’ them.

Fourth, sociology in Ireland is part of the public conversation in the society. While the overall rhetoric may be of markets and efficiency, sociologists are everywhere engaged and involved in discussions about multiple aspects of Irish society. A rough and ready search of Irish newspapers’ online archives finds as many references to community, society and equality as to markets, efficiency and competition. This hardly scientific evidence shouldn’t be too reassuring – clearly sociology does not provide the dominant narratives for Irish society. However, public engagement is harder to avoid than to get involved in – in marked contrast to many other societies. ‘Impact’ is a natural part of almost all sociologists’ work in Ireland.

A national sociology?

Let me finish then with a broader reflection about Irish sociology, based on my own ‘lived experience’ as a privileged ‘senior figure’ in the field.

Three years ago, I participated with Paul Ryan and Frances McGinnity in a discussion of Irish sociology as part of the Annex Sociology podcast, based in CUNY-Queens. Throughout the discussion, I felt an unease about the object of our discussion. What was this ‘Irish sociology’? Did it even exist? If it didn’t, what might it be?

This for me is a different question from whether it makes sense to have a sociology of a national society in this era of globalisation – national societies are ‘cases’ forged from transnational and local forces and also from our theoretical lenses. Often, it will make sense to make them our focus but often not.

Instead, I want to focus on the practices of a national sociology as lived by those within it – one that takes me back to the key point that our principles and visions are rooted in our everyday practices. There seem to me to be two centres of gravity that draw on most Irish sociologists. One is the everyday life of the department where the demands of teaching
and service dominate our working lives, particularly the more that we pay attention to the needs of our students during the varying crises of crashes, COVID and more. Indeed, the regional nature of Irish higher education where students tend to attend the closest university intensifies this further. The second is the transnational world of intellectual specialisms, where the small scale of Irish sociology dictates that we look internationally for our specialised discussions (avoiding in the process the insular nature of some of the dominant larger ‘national sociologies’).

Somewhere in the middle sits the uncertain world of ‘Irish sociology’, with relatively few institutional supports for ongoing rich interactions. As noted above, there was an opportunity to build these institutional structures of cooperation in the 2000s and that opportunity remains – particularly as the level of actual rather than imagined competition between institutions is relatively small. However, there seems little prospect right now of the state helping in this task in the coming years.

In practice, the SAI has attempted valiantly to fill this gap and sustain a national sociological conversation. It seems to me nonetheless that there is a chance to reimagine this conversation and the institutional spaces that sustain it. What should the national sociology of a small society look like? There are strong pressures to emulate the structures of larger associations but this is perhaps a dubious goal and a futile one given our scale – we cannot be a mini-American Sociological Association, and would hardly want to be. At the same time, there is arguably relatively little need to insert the SAI in to national policy and political conversations – sociologists are already in these conversations and they typically participate through existing personal and institutional networks.

Instead, as I see it, the SAI is pursuing a variety of strategies to provide a public space, somewhat separate from the political and policy dramas, for understanding Irish society, in its broadest and most fuzzy boundaried sense. This, it seems to me, is a suitable goal and one that we should consider in relation to the best ways to organise cooperative postgraduate programmes, annual conferences, and more. Given the central role of departments in everyday sociological life and in garnering resources for sociology, a close relationship between departments and the SAI would seem essential to the success of that project. It is not an easy task, which I well recognise given the experiences I have discussed in this short piece. However, it is one that is important to the ongoing project of making and remaking Irish sociology.

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