The slings, arrows and survival of Irish sociology

Tom Inglis
University College Dublin, Ireland

Given that there have already been some good descriptions and analyses of the history of Irish sociology, in particular those of Fanning and Hess (2015a, 2015b), but also by Goldthorpe et al. (2002), and O’Connor (2006), this will be a more personal and perhaps an eclectic reflection.

In a peculiar way, sociology in Ireland has thrived over the last 50 years. I say peculiar because while there has been growth and development, there were times when the discipline, the Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) and the IJS were withering. But in the recent past, there has been a new lease of energy, a new generation has taken over the reins and the future now looks good. There also seems to be a new sense of solidarity. There are not the same institutional, methodological, and theoretical divisions. Sociology has become established throughout the third level sector and its perspective and insights are recognised in both the private and public sectors. The challenge, particularly in the Republic, is to see if sociology can be established in the second level sector but, given what is happening to history and geography, this could be an uphill struggle.

There have been other changes. Sociology in Ireland has become international. It attracts sociologists from all over the world both in terms of positions, contributions to the IJS and participation in workshops, seminars and conferences. Sociologists in Ireland write about international issues. And there are some who have become international figures in their areas.

There is another peculiarity. Despite its success, sociology has not gained the same level of respect, particularly within the media and the public sphere that is given, for example, to economics, politics, history, psychology and philosophy. I think it is ranked at the level of geography, archaeology and anthropology. I don’t know to what

Corresponding author:
Tom Inglis, Sociology, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland.
Email: tom.inglis@ucd.ie
extent this is different from Britain and other European societies. Given that it is the queen of the social sciences, this is a disappointing.

Sometimes I think this relates to a confusion as to what sociology is and does. I think many people don’t understand what makes sociology different from psychology. But I also think it relates to a belief, particularly among journalists, that not only are “we” all sociologists, but they are better as “they” don’t get bogged down in abstract theory and impenetrable numbers. This is reflected in the absence of any national figure who is known as a sociologist – we never had the likes of Giddens, Habermas or Bourdieu – who has a presence in public discourse, and who has a regular column in a national newspaper. The exception, of course, is our President, Michael D. Higgins but, while recognising the wealth of his intellect and his contribution to the field, I think he has always been more of a good political philosopher than a sociologist.

In the beginning

The foundation of the SAI in 1973 can be seen as an attempt to overcome the conflicts that dogged sociology at the time. The main divide was between University College Dublin (UCD) which was seen as Catholic, Irish and quantitative and Trinity which was seen as Protestant, English and ideological. The other universities in Cork, Galway and Maynooth were Catholic and Irish but less quantitative. However, the good thing about the SAI was that, from the outset, it was an all-Ireland association. In the early years, it was led by Tony (aka A.E.C.W) Spencer from Queens. Tony’s area was studying Catholics in England and Wales. Indeed it may have been his catholicity that could help explain his involvement in the new all-Ireland association. The other good thing was that, as the published proceedings of the Annual Conference reveal, the interests of the participants were eclectic. However, probably as a reflection of the dominance of the Catholic Church in the growth of the discipline, there was a notable absence of Marxist contributions which dominated the field in Britain and Europe.

One of the first annual conferences was held in Ballymascanlon Hotel outside of Dundalk. A small group of Master’s students (there were hardly any PhDs in those days) went to the Conference, partly to associate and learn, but also to protest against the exclusivity of the Association. We stayed in a b&b in the town. We could not attend the annual dinner and so we waited in the lobby while the rest dined and wined. Don Bennett came out in sympathy: he went around the tables and got donations of food from the diners to bring out to us. The big discussion at the AGM was whether we could attend. Eventually we were let in. The big decision was whether the Association should try to become a professional organisation, akin to architects, accountants and doctors, and thus limit membership to those with Master’s degrees. This idea was dropped, and it was decided to open membership to anyone with a bachelor’s degree in the social sciences. The other contentious issue was whether there should be papers given on Sunday morning as a good number of the participants wanted to go to Mass.

I was a student in UCD. I began my undergraduate degree in social science in 1969. The majority of the hundred odd students were young ladies studying to become social workers. The rest of us were oriented towards social research which, in those days, meant learning
how to do social surveys. We did not do sociology in first year. In second year, we were taught theory, but it had little to do with social research. There was an inherent, almost taken-for-granted belief that it was possible to gather social facts without theory.

When I finished my degree, I began my career as a social researcher first as an interviewer on Michéal McGréil’s comprehensive (over 2000 in-depth personal interviews) study of prejudice and tolerance in Dublin (McGréil, 1977), and then as an assistant on Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig’s equally comprehensive (over 2500 interviews) study of religious beliefs and practices followed by my own survey of the religiosity of over 500 university students (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 1976). This was my immersion into the world of positive empiricism and quantitative data.

It was while I was studying for a Master’s degree that I first became interested in sociology and this was related to the 4 years that I spent with Don Bennett. He was my supervisor. He had little or no interest in survey research. He was devoted to theory and oral history. It was during those years that I started to into post-graduate seminars in Trinity. We did not have seminars in UCD. There were people there who did and talked a very different type of sociology. A lot of it was Marxist oriented. There was no interest in social surveys. It was there that I first heard of Foucault and Bourdieu.

The antipathy between UCD and Trinity was large. The two departments had no formal, and little or no, informal relations. Trinity was a strange place. They did sociology differently there. It was around that time that I began to realise that no amount of survey research would ever explain how the Catholic Church had become so powerful in Ireland. But I also realised that no amount of Marxist theory would ever help provide an explanation. Religion was an ideological irrelevance.

The divide between Trinity and UCD lasted well into the 1980s. There was an opinion in Trinity that sociology in UCD was Catholic, that it was oriented towards social policy and social work, that it was conservative and structural–functional in its theory and that it hid behind a positive empiricism that gathered data in the same uncritical way that historians gather facts about the past. Within UCD there was an opinion that the type of critical Marxist theory being propagated in Trinity was ideological and that it was better to stick to the facts.

**Stagnation**

The initial flurry of excitement that characterised the 1970s, gave way to a period of stagnation that lasted well into the 1980s. There were very few new appointments made in the universities or elsewhere. There were hardly any PhD students. There was little or no funding for post-graduate research, so to do a PhD it was necessary to have at least a part-time job. For many people like myself, the only chance of progressing was to go the States. I went to Southern Illinois University where many students from University College Galway had gone in the past.

When I returned on the scene in the mid-1980s, there had been little change. I went into adult education for 6 years. The emphasis in the universities was on undergraduate teaching. There was no imperative to publish. There were a few notable efforts in the form of edited collections such as *Power, Conflict & Inequality* (Kelly et al., 1982),
Ireland: A Sociological Profile (Clancy et al., 1986), and Gender in Irish Society (Curtin et al., 1987). The only journal was the Economic and Social Review, but it had very few sociological articles and those that were included were of the positive-empirical variety. The sociological community, at least in terms of the SAI, was small but quite strong. The Annual Conference drew the usual regulars. But there were many sociologists, particularly from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), who hardly ever came.

The ESRI was the research powerhouse. It produced a series of important monographs, mainly under the direction of Damian Hannan. He was one of the few people to have published a book. He had strong views about sociology. He came from the Goldthorpe side of British empirical research. He had little time for interpretive sociology, feminism, Marxism or critical theory. Because he was on so many interview boards, for the few positions that did come about, he had a strong influence on the direction of Irish sociology.

In 2000, on the occasion of the publication of Tovey and Share’s A Sociology of Ireland (2000), I posed five questions to John Goldthorpe, Liam O’Dowd and Pat O’Connor about the attempt by Tovey and Share to provide a sociological overview of Irish society. Goldthorpe referred to the divide between the sociology of the research centres and the sociology of the universities. He said the gap that had begun in the 1960s and evident throughout Europe, was growing. He took issue with the claim that sociology must remain relative to the cultural and social/institutional context in which it is produced and, in that sense must be national. He pointed out that the theories and methods that are used in sociology in Ireland are international.

This is a valid point. But I see theories and methods as tools that have to be used in a flexible, dynamic, and adaptable manner. Goldthorpe also took issue with Tovey and Share’s argument for reflexive sociology which, he claimed, in its “innocuous and vicious versions” smacks of the type of post-modernist epistemological relativism that was typically found in the universities (Goldthorpe et al., 2002).

However, all that Tovey and Share were doing were reminding sociologists of the need to be inclusive and reflective of the theories and methods they use and not to be pompous and arrogant enough to think their approach to doing sociology was the best.

Goldthorpe argued that the way to overcome a limited national approach to sociological investigation was to do cross-national comparative research. This, he argued, required a knowledge of quantitative methods, particularly odd-ratios and hierarchal datasets and models. This may be of importance when doing research on social mobility, school effects, poverty and so forth but, I would argue, is not so relevant in researching mother and baby homes in Ireland, pubs, the oppression of women, the role of the media, the state and the origins of the power of the Catholic Church.

Goldthorpe’s certainty about the superiority of the sociology of the research centres led him to conclude: “Yet more seriously, in so far as in sociology departments post-modernism and other current irrationalisms are now being underwritten – in the name of ‘reflexivity’ or otherwise – the pluralism that Tovey and Share are still able to exploit in A Sociology of Ireland will appear as an increasingly indefensible sham, and the rupture with the sociology of the research centres is likely to be complete” (Goldthorpe et al., 2002: 108).
The universities

There was a slow explosion of sociology in the universities from the 1990s. Queen’s had always been a powerhouse, but a rake of new appointments around that time led to a new energy and enthusiasm, first in the universities and, later, in the Institutes. Student numbers were up. Postgraduate courses began to emerge. There was a raft of new appointments. There were new professors with fresh ideas. When Stephen Mennell was appointed Professor in UCD in 1993, hardly anyone had heard about Norbert Elias.

To understand the history of Irish sociology, it is necessary to understand the extent to which the forces of the Catholic Church exerted ideological control within the humanities in the National University of Ireland and, in particular, within sociology. Fr Liam Ryan, who was the Professor in Maynooth for a long time, was part of that control. But he was a shrewd maverick. He knew how to keep his religious masters on side. Unlike some other professors, he had a genuine interest in sociology and was able to recognise potential.

Liam Ryan was not the only reason why Maynooth began to punch above its weight in the field, it was the combination of Michel Peillon and his colleagues. Peillon (1982) was the first to provide a comprehensive overview of Irish society. He and Tony Fahey had the nerve to start the *Irish Journal of Sociology*. One of the reasons for establishing the IJS was that it was difficult to get an article about Irish society published in an international journal. Ireland was seen as an oddity; it was not representative of Western society. Writing about Ireland best belonged in anthropology.

The establishment of the IJS was opportunistic, but it caught the crest of a new wave that had grown within the field. Peillon went on to develop – first with Eamon Slater and then other colleagues took it on – *Irish Sociological Chronicles*. The seven volumes provided sociological insights to various aspects of Irish society. They were unique: contributors had to write short essays which were sociologically informed but easy to read and avoided dense theory or complicated data. I cannot remember any contributions from sociologists in the ESRI.

The communications, disciplinary and perhaps emotional gap between the research institutes and the rest of the field continued well into this century. Some sociologists in the institutes did attend SAI conferences and did publish in the IJS, but rarely. They did a different type of sociology. They published their own reports and articles in other journals. They had access to more funding to work with big datasets and to develop international networks. They became leading experts, for example, in how to measure poverty. Most of these involved complicated statistical models that would mean little to those living in poverty.

The divide between the ESRI and the universities began to heal from around 2010, when the ESRI began to change direction and concentrate on economic research. A number of their leading sociologists jumped ship and applied for jobs in the universities which, mostly, they got because they had published more.

Sociology for whom?

Looking back over some of the issues of the IJS, there is a sense of Irish sociologists engaged in a large variety of research projects, publishing professionally sophisticated
articles, and helping to build up a good body of knowledge about various aspects of social life in Ireland and elsewhere. It is good that there is an increasing number of articles based on quantitative research, many written by sociologists from the ESRI. Because it is a general journal, the articles tend to be eclectic. But looking through the journal and beyond to other publications, there seems to be an absence of articles and books about the broader, long-term transformations taking place in Irish society. This means that the space is taken up by other social scientists and commentators.

This leads to the question what is sociology, for whom it is written and if there is a need for a sociology of Ireland? It has always seemed to me that sociology should try to provide an explanation of how society and social life has come to be the way it is and this, generally, focuses on Western society and global capitalism. I think it should be emancipatory in that it helps people understand the nature of power and the conditions of their existence. To achieve this there is a need for a long-term historical perspective and, at the same time, putting the personal and the local into a global perspective. The nature of power, the state, media, the market, the environment, family, religion, sexuality and everyday life are global phenomena, but they can only be understood locally.

Conclusion

I sometimes think that sociology, including the IJS, has survived because of the growth of third-level students who have wandered into the discipline in much the same way I did 50 years ago. I get the impression that they are exposed to a variety of sociological topics by lecturers who have become professionalised by researching and publishing. They have developed an expertise which allows them to undertake small-to-medium research projects. Some are bound together by the topic, others by a method and others by a theoretical perspective. There is a sense of belonging but, as in the past, it is fragile. I don’t get the impression that the IJS is overwhelmed with submissions or the SAI with membership applications. There were many days in the past when it seemed that they were both on the edge of going under. But it would seem that each generation brings a cadre of volunteers who are willing to come together and do whatever they can to promote and develop the discipline.

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