

The Origins and Development of Sociology in Ireland

Brian Conway,

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Sociology in Ireland is a relatively recent development. The first chair in the discipline was only established in 1937 at the national Catholic seminary in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. It was endowed by the Knights of Columbus and its occupant—Fr. Peter McKeivitt—had the title “Professor of Catholic Action and Catholic Sociology.” The title alone points to the strong influence of Roman Catholicism in shaping the discipline. Although sociology in Ireland has a prehistory in the writings of figures such as Karl Marx and Harriet Martineau, the Catholic Church established and institutionalized sociology as an academic discipline and university subject in Ireland.

Apart from this organizational influence, the church exerted a strong intellectual influence as well. “Catholic Sociology,” as it was then known, was different from what we understand sociology to be today. It was essentially concerned with promoting Catholic social teaching put forward in 19th century papal encyclicals. It was quite dogmatic and authoritative, was suspicious of left-wing political ideology and gender analysis, and was engaged with social amelioration. In so far as it concerned itself with the pre-history of the discipline in classical sociological writings, it was in a largely critical mode. Published output by Irish Catholic sociologists tended to be in confessional periodicals such as *Rural Ireland*, *Christus Rex*, and the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* and frequently extolled the virtues of rural co-operative living and bemoaned state intervention. Such things as low wages, poor working conditions, and poor housing, were the targets of clerical writing. In contrast to other societies where Catholic sociology was also in vogue, such as the United States, Catholic sociology in Ireland was not established as a counterpoint to secular sociological organisations—in the 1930s and right up to the 1960s it was literally “the only game in town.”

Catholic sociology was part of a Catholic action “matrix” that included confessional organisations such as Muintir na Tíre, the Christus Rex Society, the Catholic Truth Society, and many others. To take just one example, the Christus Rex Society was founded in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, in 1941 and was an organisation of diocesan priests aimed at disseminating the social teachings of the church. To achieve this the society organized such things as annual meetings, diocesan groups, annual congresses, and published its own periodical, *Christus Rex*, in which priests and religious figures wrote about important social issues such as education, religion, and family life. Curiously, the front matter of the *Christus Rex* journal showed that the Irish hierarchy gave this imprimatur to its work, helping to underwrite its legitimacy as a clerical society dedicated to the understanding of big social questions within a Catholic interpretative framework.

After Catholic Sociology

Things began to change in the 1960s. Catholic sociology was displaced; although, the sub-fields of education, religion, and family with which earlier sociology concerned itself remained dominant specialties in the more secularised version of the discipline that developed in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, Irish sociology became more subject both to state intervention and to external influence through international organisations such as the United Nations (UN). Consider, for example, that in the early 1960s, the Irish government sought the counsel of a UN expert to help in mapping the way forward in relation to the national research infrastructure. This expert, Henning Friis, wrote a report proposing that

the existing Economic Research Institute be re-christened as the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). At the same time, the direction of influence was also outbound. Young would-be Irish sociologists increasingly tended to go abroad—usually to some of the best U.S. and U.K. universities—to receive their graduate training and then return to work in newly created sociology departments in Ireland.

The first social science degree, with sociology as a subject, was established in University College Dublin in 1953. New university departments in the subject increased the visibility of sociology and brought the discipline to the attention of larger audiences with little or no prior knowledge of it during their early primary and secondary schooling. Catholic sociologists themselves began to embrace the idea of confronting normative claims about the social world with empirical research and to forge international alliances with sociologists in other national contexts. Jeremiah Newman, for example, who succeeded McKeivitt, was well acquainted with American sociologists at universities in Chicago and St. Louis and with Dutch sociologists at the University of Wageningen. Instead of transposing Catholic social teaching to an Irish context as Catholic sociologists had done before, Irish Catholic thinking on social issues tended to originate more from the home-front and to work its way outwards.

A Scientific Discipline

As a result of these influences, sociology moved in the direction of a more scientific, secular, and empirical discipline, jettisoning the earlier emphasis on theology, papal teachings, and Catholic socio-moral values. Catholic sociology's applied

orientation was carried over into the more secular version of the discipline through a continued emphasis on bringing sociological research to bear on social issues of the day. This was reflected, for instance, in the policy orientation of much of the ESRI's work and the growing media visibility of sociologists.

The 1970s saw the establishment of the Sociological Association of Ireland (1973) to promote the professional and fraternal interests of the discipline. Its membership was made up of a handful of clerics and a majority of lay people. Women were (and still are) well represented in its early membership rolls.

The recessionary 1980s was a difficult period for the discipline. A report by the National Board of Science and Technology in 1981 on the role of the social sciences in shaping policymaking drew government attention to the paucity of social scientific funding and weak labor market conditions.

In the 1990s, sociology departments tended to increase modestly in their staff sizes as state commitment to higher education improved. This helped to address funding deficiencies, especially for research, highlighted in earlier reports in the 1980s.

Now in the 2000s, sociologists in Ireland are well positioned—owing to their increased professionalization and internationalization—to bring to bear an analysis of the causes and consequences of the country's sudden transition from prosperity to recession. At the same time, sociologists struggle to achieve parity in public discourse with historians and economists. Long-standing disciplinary cleavages between university-based sociology and research institute-based sociology, empirical sociology (focused on data-driven sociological analysis) and interpretative sociology (emphasising critical social commentary often without empirical data), and Northern Irish-Southern Irish sociology also remain. 

Contact Brian Conway at brian.conway@nuim.ie

