

Sociology in Ireland: Some random reflections

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Abstract

2021 has been a year for looking back as well as forwards. In this article, I reflect on the state of languishing induced by lockdown, and the intensification of uncertainty in our everyday lives. I offer some biographical details of the early years of my career, which has largely been within a single institution, Maynooth University. The late Professor Liam Ryan was my boss and later my friend from 1990 until his death in 2015. His (typically) acerbic insights on the state of Irish sociology were recorded in 1984 for an issue of the Sociological Association of Ireland Bulletin. Re-visiting his prognosis today, I reflect on North–South relations in the discipline, on the challenge of forging a public role for Irish sociology, and on the growth of a precariat within the academic discipline. I conclude with some comments on the enduring relevance of sociology as we come to terms with post-pandemic life.

Keywords

North–South relations, pandemic, precariat, public sociology, sociology career

Languishing

The editors of the *Irish Journal of Sociology* asked me to reflect on the development of Sociology in Ireland over my career, which now spans more than three decades (can *that* actually be true?) I blithely responded to the request and then spent endless hours in front of the computer staring at a blank screen (was that some kind of message?) I could not quite find an angle that seemed to work. Should I write sagely about the state of the discipline in Ireland, or take a more playful approach, dredging up the ghosts of Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) conferences past? Should I try to identify the core

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achievements of sociology, or focus on the discipline's continued side lining? Should the 'characters' and mentors whom I encountered over the course of my career take centre stage or should I focus on the structural position of sociology within the university and society? After several screen-staring sessions, I remained stumped.

Part of the problem has been trying to write something creative and insightful against the backdrop of the pandemic. Fifteen months on and our lived reality remains altered beyond imagining from what went before. We have had to adopt new social practices and internalise new rules of engagement. We have had to vacate our offices and confine ourselves to home. Third places effectively disappeared. Home became simultaneously a classroom (for children), a seminar room/lecture hall (for college students) and an office (for everyone working from home). Bedroom culture took on a whole new meaning. Over the months of lockdown—like many others—I vacillated between bursts of productivity (mostly of the culinary rather than scholarly kind) and periods of ennui. Scrolling through the net I happened upon the work of sociologist, Corey Keyes, who together with two colleagues from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in the USA, came up with the concept of 'languishing' to capture a state of mental health in which one is neither flourishing nor depressed, but just not feeling good about and not functioning well in life (2010). Perhaps the word 'meh' captures the prevailing mood more accurately. In the end, I have settled for a mix of personal recollection alongside some professional commentary on where I think Irish sociology is at in 2021.

A full history is yet to be written, but thanks to Brian Conway we have the outline of a historiography of the discipline in Ireland. Brian's article 'Foreigners, faith and fatherland: the historical origins, development and present status of Irish Sociology' (2006) is a scholarly survey tracing the discipline from its foundations up to 2005. He offers a granular, engaging and critical account through a cross-cutting textural and institutional analysis. A five-phase periodisation is advanced: (1) Irish Sociology prior to 1930, (2) institutionalisation 1930–1958, (3) growth 1959–1979, (4) crisis 1980–1990 and (5) expansion and public engagement 1990–2005. I will not rehearse Brian's analysis here but rather will suggest that in 2021 we are in a new phase (6) consolidation tempered with uncertainty. On the one hand, there is much to celebrate: the subject Politics and Society has been successfully introduced at second-level; at third-level, the discipline has remained resilient in the face of intense competition from cognate disciplines; graduates in sociology pursue successful careers in a wide range of fields including, for example, the civil service, advocacy organisations, the non-profit sector, education, media, research, marketing and technology; the SAI will celebrate 50 years since its foundation in May 2023 and the *Irish Journal of Sociology* founded 30 years ago this year, continues to go from strength to strength. On the other hand, we live in uncertain times, and we look ahead to uncertain futures. Questions can legitimately be raised about whether sociology has a voice in the public sphere, whether it has sufficient visibility and whether we sociologists will play a prominent role in envisioning futures.

Learning from Liam Ryan

In 1988, I had completed my doctoral fieldwork in New York City and returned to Ireland to write up my dissertation. Times were very grim and in the first 2 years I picked up some

casual teaching work at UCD and Trinity. In the summer of 1990 St Patrick's College, Maynooth (now Maynooth University) advertised a 3-year Junior Lecturer post, the first job in Sociology in Ireland advertised in almost a decade. At my interview, the late Professor Liam Ryan, Head of the Department, was his laconic and inscrutable self. But he seemed genuinely pleased when he phoned me later to tell me I had secured the job. Thirty-one years later, I am now the longest serving member of the department's staff.

Gaining the post was a confidence booster at a personal level, and professionally it gave me a foothold in a career that has been immensely enriching and satisfying. Those were different days in academia. Liam disliked all forms of bureaucracy and managerialism right down to eschewing an agenda for a Department meeting! He was neither a systems man nor an organisation man. If you were planning an event and needed some funds Liam would happily fish in his trouser pockets, pull out a few notes and hand them over. There was no need to engage in a procurement process. All things considered, the department worked very well under his light touch leadership until his retirement in 2000.

In his 2006 article on Irish sociology, Brian Conway quotes a critical commentary by Liam Ryan dating from a 1984 edition of the *SAI Bulletin*. Though Liam praised the improving quality of papers at SAI conferences, he identified what he saw as three failings in Irish sociology:

the paucity of North-South comparative research, the inadequate public relations of the SAI both with the media and other cognate disciplines, and the inequitable structures of university employment with a core of permanent staff alongside a growing number of contingent workers on contract employment (2006: 23).

It's worth reflecting on those perceived failures from the standpoint of 2021.

North–South relations and comparative research

Comparative sociological research has flourished, particularly over the last 20 years, as research funding both in Ireland and in Europe has increased. Many Irish sociologists have participated in comparative and interdisciplinary studies with colleagues across the EU through FP7, Horizon and ERC funding. This has resulted in a balancing of the profile of sociology in Ireland which has become more Europeanised, a counterweight to the formative influence of British and American sociology on earlier cohorts. In Northern Ireland, the reality and later legacy of the Troubles led to many well-funded research projects including comparative studies, but the latter often focused on other conflict or post-conflict societies. For instance, Liam O'Dowd's sociological response to partition-generated parochialism was to theoretically address the border issue in a way that was pertinent far beyond Northern Ireland. He laid the groundwork for the development of a robust political sociology role in the public sphere. Recently, the build-up to Brexit and the post-Brexit era served as an inflection point for Irish and Northern Irish political sociologists who sought to understand the ramifications for both jurisdictions. The

multilevel dynamics of implementing the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol is the subject of a major ERC-funded study co-led by sociologist Katy Hayward. The focus is primarily on NI's relations with and attitudes towards the EU and the UK, but relations with the South are also under scrutiny. So sociologists North and South of the border while moving beyond parochialism have not necessarily moved towards each other.

Even if we failed in the past to produce major North–South comparative research projects, I think the capacity to maintain a unitary all-Ireland body in the SAI throughout the Troubles, and troubling times more generally, has been a major achievement. The Executive of the SAI of which I was a member for many years, has always had northern representation. The annual conference has for many years rotated around the four provinces of Ireland. On my reckoning, between 1989 and 2019, five annual conferences were held North of the border. I particularly remember the 21st Annual Conference in Derry in 1994 where we did a tour of the city walls and attended a civic reception at the Guild Hall. At the 37th Annual Conference in Belfast in 2010, we joined the Peace Line Tour, where guides from across the political divide led tours of their respective neighbourhoods. For some who grew up South of the border, these were first forays to Northern Ireland. Similarly, the editorship of the *Irish Journal of Sociology* has rotated around several third-level institutions in Ireland, including the University of Ulster, and is currently housed at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, in Queen's. Nevertheless, I know from my work as an External Examiner at Queen's in the 2010s that undergraduate students' sociological reference points were primarily the UK and not Ireland. Similarly, in Ireland, our students tend to think in 26 county terms. Their primary point of orientation (for example through Erasmus) is Europe rather than the British Isles. Individual colleagues, however, have persisted in nurturing cross-border dialogue through, for instance, reciprocal field trips.

It is fair to say more generally that sociology on the island of Ireland has internationalised and diversified quite dramatically over the past 30 years. Priests or ex-priests headed several University Sociology Departments (and cognate disciplines) when I was starting out at Maynooth in 1990. Within 2 months Mary Robinson made history as the first woman elected to the Presidency. In a smaller way I made my own history, joining a department of four men, on a campus that was still heavily male-dominated. Today the Department of Sociology at Maynooth has 18 permanent members of staff, evenly divided between men and women. Our undergraduate student population is increasingly diverse reflecting the dramatic increase in inward migration that began in the 1990s and continued unabated until the crash of 2008–2009. After the crash, there was a noticeable upswing in mature students returning to education having lost jobs and businesses in the economic fallout. There is still a distance to go, however, in terms of creating a more inclusive sociology that serves a broadening demographic and whose academic staff is truly representative in terms of class, gender, racial and ethnic profiles.

The media, public sociology and disciplinary rivals

Liam Ryan's second point about sociology's fractious relationship with the media and other disciplines has been thoroughly ventilated down the years. In some ways, things

have gotten better, and in others, they have not. Firstly, let us look at sociology's relationship with the media. There have been perennial discussions among sociologists about how to craft our message and gain greater recognition and visibility in public discourse. Sara O' Sullivan of UCD convened a Public Sociology roundtable at the 28th Annual Conference in 2001, the lengthy transcript of which I found on my PC while researching this article. Lots of issues were surfaced in that discussion including the absence of sociologists from mainstream broadcast media. Another was the conundrum facing individuals of whether to publish nationally, be locally impactful, and address a national audience, or to publish internationally and strategically, in order to build a promotable profile.

Hilary Tovey of TCD made the point that despite an explosion in sociology books none were reviewed by the venerable *Irish Times*. I have to report that not much has changed on that front. In my analysis (Corcoran, 2020) of the published Book Review pages of *the Irish Times* over a twelve month period in 2016 for a piece on women's marginalization in the public sphere, sociology barely featured. In that year, 76 history books, 16 Politics/Economics/World Affairs books and seven Philosophy books were reviewed, while just two sociology books made the grade. Failing to secure media attention has not been from want of trying. On the Executive Committee of the SAI, for instance, we produced press releases for upcoming conferences. The SAI folder on my PC contains five such releases that I carefully crafted for conferences in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011. We may have received some local coverage from time to time but it was rare to attract a journalist to any SAI event. But perhaps we should not be despondent that there is resistance on the part of journalists to attending academic conferences and events. The real challenge is how we insert sociology into the ongoing public discourse and conversation where we have something valuable to add. Journalists have a known preference for definitive, black and white sound bytes. Sociological understandings of reality tend to be highly nuanced because we recognise that social reality is itself not clear-cut, but messy and complex. Our interests as sociologists cover a very broad spectrum, and there is extraordinary expertise out there. The tendency of the discipline and the research topics we pursue towards ever more specialisation though makes individual sociologists cautious about speaking beyond their own narrow field of expertise.

In the meantime, of course, the 'comms machine' has moved on. The new means of mass self-communication (Castells, 2007) in the form of Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and other social media platforms are now frequented by individual sociologists and by sociology departments. These have created new opportunities for the curating of sociological messages to disparate publics. Producing one's own content means not being at the mercy of a journalist's agenda. But the question remains whether, in the online cacophony, sociology's voice is heard and heeded.

Stepping back a little in time, there is one public sociology initiative about which I am particularly proud. *The Irish Sociological Chronicles* series was published in seven volumes between 1998 and 2010. The first two were edited by Eamonn Slater and Michel Peillon of Maynooth University. I contributed to all seven volumes and co-edited five, three with Michel Peillon and two with Perry Share, IT Sligo. From the outset, this series sought to analyse present-day Ireland in a way that was accessible to a wider public and that demonstrated the specific contribution that the sociological discipline can make

to societal understanding. Over the course of the series, 130 essays showcased the work of emergent and established sociologists working in Ireland and beyond. The editors incorporated the visual arts into the volumes in a completely new way, presaging later boundary crossings between sociology and the creative disciplines. I believe that the *Chronicles* series contributed to sociology's development in Ireland, particularly in terms of demonstrating the discipline's versatility. Reading the essays now, I find their pithiness, prescience and playfulness remarkable. They demonstrate the vitality and insightfulness that emerges from the application of the sociological imagination to everyday life. An essay by Karen Sugrue, 'Why Prisons Fail' published in Volume 4 (2006) remains a staple of my Introductory Sociology module and is the one assigned reading that is guaranteed to be read by students!

While sociology definitely is more recognised than it was 30 years ago, we have I believe lost ground in the contest to have our public voice heard as behavioural economics has come to the fore. Ironically, behavioural economics (similarly to social geography, business and criminology) is colonising what used to be sociological space. I have previously written about this in the *Irish Journal of Sociology* (Corcoran, 2012). For instance, a perusal of a single issue of *The Economist*, reveals two stories with headlines that would definitely set any sociologist's teeth on edge. 'Economists discover the power of social norms to influence decisions' (*The Economist*, Feb 8, 2020, p. 62) showcased new work by economist Marianne Bertrand on gender gaps in earnings. She suggests (surprise surprise) that 'the decision to participate in a market is not simply about maximising utility given a set of tastes and constraints. Markets, rather *are part of a suite of fluid social forces that shape behaviour*'. Students of Sociology 101 would not disagree! 'The world is messier than conventional economic models assume' is the headline of the other story about superstars Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee. They are deemed 'different to most economists in that they *grapple energetically with the complexity of real life—getting their boots dirty in the process*' (*The Economist*, Feb 8, 2020, p. 76). Welcome to our world, guys. For journalists and policy-makers alike, behavioural economics is deeply seductive even though many of their insights spring from sociological observations. I found it particularly regrettable that in the throes of the pandemic no one in government or the civil service deemed it appropriate to include a sociologist in NPHE's sub-group on behaviour change. That group is made up of three behavioural economists, two psychologists and one communications specialist alongside the senior civil servants. This despite the fact that sociologists are perfectly placed to provide insights into human attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and practices. Many sociologists have contributed timely and apposite insights on aspects of the pandemic to RTE's Brainstorm website. The *Irish Journal of Sociology* augmented two issues in 2020 with special debate sections where sociologists responded to COVID-19. Theory, political economy, politics, generation, religion, disability, home and housing, social control and technology are just some of the themes touched on in these rapid response contributions.

Academic precariat

Liam Ryan's third insight related to the inequalities he saw emerging in the institutional academic system. It is very salutary that this issue was first signalled almost 40 years ago. In the intervening decades, the discipline of sociology has grown exponentially as the numbers going to third-level education expanded dramatically. Two-thirds of young people can now expect to enter higher education compared with a mere 5% for those born in the 1950s (Clancy, 2015). The promotion of fourth-level education through successive rounds of PRTL funding in the early years of the 21st century, and the establishment of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, which became part of the Irish Research Council in 2012, had a significant impact on the number of postgraduate students in sociology departments. However, funding as well as opportunity structures for those with, or undertaking, higher-level qualifications contracted sharply as universities made swingeing cuts. Clancy (2015) has noted the irony that state control of education was increasing in the last decade while state funding accounted for a smaller percentage of income. That remains more or less the case today. This amongst other factors has produced what O'Keefe and Courtois describe as the normalisation of reliance on temporary and short-term labour such that casualisation is now a significant problem in the sector. Citing the Cush report of 2016 they note that the current proportion of non-permanent core teaching university staff is estimated at 45% (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019, p. 466). Moreover, O'Keefe and Courtois argue that the precarious nature of academic work is feminised. As sociologists, we need to be alive to this issue and use our power to challenge and resist the creation of a precariat within the university.

Beyond the pandemic

One of the biggest lessons of the pandemic is the importance of the social. It took the enforced removal of sociality from daily life, rather than the insights of 200 years of sociological analysis, to really bring the overlooked and unsung role of 'the significant other' into people's sightlines. I have lost track of the number of times in the last year people have said that they had never truly realised how important social interaction was for maintaining equilibrium in their everyday lives.

As we inch towards the ending of restrictions and the re-opening of social and public life, uncertainty about the future continues to overshadow us. Can we as sociologists turn the crisis into an opportunity to properly press our case for the importance of 'the social'? In the wake of an unprecedented human experiment in living without the kind of daily encounters, interactions and exchanges which hitherto made up part and parcel of everyday life, can we identify fruitful new lines of sociological inquiry? What does the future now hold and how best can sociology answer that question? The pivot to digital platforms for work, play, leisure, worship and sociality generally, creates a real challenge for how we conceptualise society post-pandemic, as does the rise in algorithm-driven, surveillance society. I believe that sociology is still the best-placed discipline not only to answer the question of whither modernity, but

also to be part of the process of identifying how we can begin to rethink society, social structure and social practices in ways that can be truly value-based, justice orientated, solidaristic and renewing.

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