Private troubles, public issues: the Irish sociological imagination

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ABSTRACT In contemporary Irish Society there is considerable uneasiness about both the existence of and threats to the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (O’Connell, 1995a: 82). It is suggested that this wider social and cultural context, characterised by male dominance of key institutions, militates against the identification of gender related private troubles as public issues. Burawoy’s (2005) focus on the public aspect of each of the four types of sociology he identifies (viz., policy, critical, public and professional sociology) is used as a framework to explore the recent contribution made by sociologists in Ireland to the identification of gender as such a public issue. The article concludes that, by not explicitly focusing on it their contribution as agenda setters has been more limited than it might otherwise have been.

KEYWORDS public sociology; Ireland; gender; Burawoy; women

Introduction

Irish society is going through a period of very rapid economic, social and cultural change. Underlying this article is the idea that gender is a key element in understanding those changes and its identification as such is an opportunity for sociologists to transform private troubles in Wright Mills (1970) terms into public issues. In this article, Burawoy’s typology (2005), and particularly his recognition of the public aspect of each of the four types of sociology he identifies (viz. policy, critical, public and professional sociology) is used as a framework to explore the extent to which recent work by sociologists in Ireland has seen gender as a key issue and thus has facilitated the transformation of private troubles into public issues.

It is suggested that the failure to recognise gender as a public issue in contemporary Ireland reflects ‘uneasiness ... anxiety, a deadly unspecified malaise’ (Wright Mills, 1970:145) about the existence of and threats to what Connell (1995a: 82) has called a ‘patriarchal dividend’ (defined in terms of ‘honour, prestige or the right to command’ and including a ‘material dividend’). Gender as an issue in Irish society to-day includes poverty amongst women – especially
amongst women who are lone parents; the difficulties experienced, particularly by
women, in combining paid work and family responsibilities in a society where
women still carry the main responsibility for housework and child care. Women's
experience of 'glass ceilings' in male dominated organisations is also seen as a
public issue, as is young men and women's experience of cultural dislocation. Yet
in the public discourses generated by the state, the educational institutions and
frequently by the media, gender patterns are simultaneously assumed to exist and
are denied – but in both cases are seen as having no relevance in understanding
Irish society to-day. This is particularly paradoxical since, until very recently, in a
society dominated by the institutional Roman Catholic Church, the differences
between men and women were 'obvious' and seen as rooted in their biological
make-up. Yet despite the rhetorical rejection of these views, gendered assumptions
still underpin state policies (O'Connor, 2006a) and are arguably part of the
'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977: 82–83) of many of those involved in state policy and in
the educational system.

Which Private Troubles become identified as Public Issues – and Why?

Ireland has been characterised by very rapid economic, social and cultural change.
In the 1980s, the economy was dubbed the 'sick man of Europe', but in the 1990s
it became the 'Celtic Tiger'; massive outward emigration in the 1980s gave way to
inward migration; high levels of respect for authority gave way to an increasing
awareness of corruption in the institutional church, the economic system and the
State. Ireland remained patriarchal in the sense that divorce was not allowed up to
1997; married women's participation in paid employment was very considerably
below the EU average up to the 1990s; and very high levels of church attendance
persisted until relatively recently within what was a predominantly Catholic
society (O'Connor, 1998 and 2000a). Irish people's evaluation of their own culture
and lifestyle has traditionally been low (Brody, 1974), a position that is popularly
believed to have been transformed by recent economic success. The consequent
'melange of modernities and traditions' has been described as a 'collision culture'
reflected in the 'multiplication of collisions between the institutions of traditional
political culture and the emerging institutions of reflexive modernisation' (Keohane

In raising the question as to which private troubles become public issues and
why, we are effectively raising the issue of power. Wright Mills (1970: 50) sees
power as having 'to do with whatever decisions men make about the arrangements
under which they live ... in so far as such decisions are made (and in so far as they
could be but are not) the problem of who is involved in making them (or not making
them) is the basic problem of power'. This view of power is similar to Lukes's
(1974) three dimensional view. It recognises that one must not only look at the
decisions that are made, but at the areas that are seen as unproblematic. It is sug-
gested that the kinds of private troubles which become identified as public issues
reveal the continued existence of patriarchal bias in Irish society – defining patriarchy in Hartmann's terms (1994: 570) 'as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base and which though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity amongst men that enable them to dominate women'. Such bias is taken for granted, and is seen as natural and inevitable. Thus the under-performance of boys relative to girls in the educational system is seen by the State, the educational system, and the media, as very different from the under-performance of working class children relative to middle class children. In contrast to the expectation that working class children will emulate their middle class counterparts, there has been no attempt to encourage boys to emulate the strong work ethic, deference, diligence and achievement orientation involved in 'doing girl' (Clancy, 2001; Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Indeed the public issue has become the character of state examinations and the ways in which they 'disadvantage' boys.

On the other hand, dramatic changes in women's participation in paid employment and their consequences have largely been seen as private issues. Thus whereas only seven per cent of married women were in paid employment in the early 1970s (reflecting the legal and cultural consequences of the Marriage Bar which excluded women from a range of occupations on marriage: O'Connor, 1998), now more than three quarters of women aged 25–34 are in paid employment, as are more than half of those women with children under five years (CSO, 2004). Indeed, the employment rate of Irish women aged 15–64 (at almost 56 per cent) is now marginally above the EU average. Such patterns have fundamentally altered the landscape of family life, and what evidence we have suggests that the burden of such change has been largely borne by women (Mc Ginnity et al., 2005). The tension between paid work and the family is particularly visible in the case of lone parents: 91 per cent of whom are lone mothers, and who are simultaneously expected to withdraw from paid employment to care for their children and who are pilloried as ‘welfare spongers’ if they do so. Yet their difficulties have been largely seen as private troubles rather than public issues.

In Ireland to-day, women stay in school longer and do better than their male counterparts yet gender differences in wage levels and the existence of ‘glass ceilings’ persist – even amongst young graduates without children (Russell, et al., 2005). Women now make up roughly half of those in professional occupations; more than half of those in associate professional ones but only 29 per cent of those in those in executive, administrative and managerial occupations (CSO, 2004). This is of course a very substantial change from the early 1970s, when women made up only five per cent of those in the latter positions, but it still suggests the ongoing existence of patriarchal privileging. Such patterns have tended to be seen as private troubles reflecting inadequate experiences or inappropriate attitudes – explanations that fit easily with women's low levels of self-esteem (Hannan et al., 1996; O'Connor, 1995). However, sizeable proportions of those who have been successful in male dominated organisations have reported discrimination, prejudice and organisational culture and procedures that are not friendly to women.
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(Humphreys et al., 1999; O’Connor, 1996). There has been a reluctance to see such phenomena as public issues.

Overall then, the erosion of the taken-for-granted status of male authority, the rising importance of women’s economic contribution and their high levels of educational participation and success have problematised the existence of a patriarchal dividend. Furthermore, its existence is in tension with an economic system which values cheap labour. Yet the existence of such a dividend is a crucial cultural element and underpins economic, legal, educational, religious and political structures. However men’s role in such institutional contexts has not been seen as a public issue. Thus the dramatic increase in lone parent families – predominantly headed by women (with one in three births now being to women outside marriage: CSO, 2004) has not led to a public discussion of the perceived value of men and their contribution to family life. In the context of mental health and suicide, social concern has focused on boys’ greater vulnerability as regards suicide, and has ignored the fact that boys and girls are equally likely to attempt suicide (National Suicide Review, 2004). In other cases women’s contribution has been effectively ignored. Thus despite O’Connell’s (1999) observation that the term Celtic Tiger ‘had misconstrued the gender of the animal’, with high economic growth rates (achieved ‘through a combination of 3.7 per cent annual productivity growth and an employment growth of 5.5 per cent’: Mc Loughlin, 2004) being premised on married women’s increased participation in the labour force, the implications of such patterns have been largely seen as private troubles rather than public issues.

The importance of gender as a focus of change, the lack of structural consistency in the mapping of gender across institutions and the related cultural tensions have tended to be seen as private troubles rather than public issues in Irish society. Using Burawoy’s schema (below), it is suggested, that sociologists in Ireland have, only to a limited degree, transformed gender as a private trouble into a public issue.

The Application of Burawoy’s schema to Recent Work in Irish Sociology

Many schemas have been developed for classifying sociologists activities (for example, Goldthorpe, 2003; Tovey and Share, 2003). Burawoy’s (2005) typology is generated by answers to two questions: Sociology for Whom (Academics or those outside Academia) and Sociology for What (Instrumental Knowledge – concerned with means, or Reflexive Knowledge concerned with ends or value premises). His typology is seen as particularly useful in its inclusion of professional sociology, and in its recognition that each of the four types he identifies (policy; critical, public and professional) have a public aspect so that they can all be seen, at least potentially, as contributing to the transformation of private troubles into public issues. In this article we will look briefly at some recent work within these traditions, mainly related to gender. The themes that will be focused on in each type can be seen as broadly typical (for example, the focus on poverty
in the case of policy sociology; inequality in the case of critical sociology; on culture in the case of public sociology etc). However such themes do not exhaust the content of each category.

1 Policy Sociology

Burawoy (2005) suggested that the purpose of policy sociology was providing solutions to those outside academia; its legitimacy lay in its effectiveness; its accountability was to clients and its pathology was servility. Typically policy oriented work by sociologists is intended to advise particular parts of the state apparatus; to evaluate the success of particular policies, to suggest alternative policies, and it is seen as 'a vital tool for holding the state publicly accountable' (Baker et al., 2004: 170) and providing 'the state with diagnoses of social trends that help it to manage society' (Tovey and Share, 2003: 24).

In Ireland this tradition of work has been concerned, for example, with poverty (Layte et al., 2000; Callan and Nolan, 2004). It has shown that despite the dramatic increase in standards of living overall, 21 per cent of the population are at risk of relative income poverty (assessed as 60 per cent of the average income) as compared with 15 per cent in the EU 15 (Callan and Nolan, 2004). It has shown that women's risk of poverty is substantially higher than men's even in similar situations and that it has increased since the mid 1980s (Nolan and Watson, 1999) – the proportion of women at risk of poverty being the highest in the EU (CSO, 2004). Furthermore, whereas one in three lone mothers are at risk of poverty, only roughly one in ten lone fathers are (Nolan and Watson, 1999). Such research is crucial in identifying foci for state interventions and in challenging assumptions about poverty in general and myths about the financial situation of lone mothers in particular.

Work in this tradition has also shown that despite the economic boom, Ireland has remained highly unequal in terms of income inequality – with a widening gap in the ratio of the highest income households' disposable incomes and the lowest (increasing from 11:1 to 13:1 between 1996 and 2001) in a context where wage dispersion was already high by international standards (Nolan and Maitre, 2000, Baker et al., 2004). It has also shown that those who are outside the labour force (many of whom are women) are most likely to be at risk of poverty (Nolan and Watson, 1999; Callan and Nolan, 2005) – thus illustrating both the importance and the inadequacies of income support. It has shown that amongst those who were in paid employment, women's average hourly earnings were over 15 per cent less than men's. This partly reflects the effect of children on the duration of women's participation in paid employment; and partly women's position at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy (Barrett et al., 2000). However, a study of relatively new graduates showed that although the more transparent pay scales in the public sector promoted gender equality in situations where the state's performance was tightly controlled by institutional procedures, discretionary payments (involving occupational pensions; employer sponsored training; free/subsidised meals and
bonuses) revealed male privileging (Russell et al., 2005). Furthermore, McGinnity et al. (2005) found such male privileging also persisted in the division of household labour and caring, with the majority of men doing no cooking/food preparation or cleaning/laundry, whereas the majority of women did. Women also spent on average three times longer on caring activities than men on week-days and such patterns persisted during week-ends. Other work has confirmed such patriarchal privileging in the family—with boys getting more pocket money than girls (Mc Coy and Smyth, 2004) and doing less domestic work in the family (Leonard, 2004).

It can be argued that the ability to publicly challenge government policy or to generate popular critical awareness of its implications is limited by research institutes’ financial dependence on state contracts for research and/or state support: in these circumstances ‘we become technicians, accepting their problems and aims, or ideologists promoting their prestige and authority’ (Wright Mills, 1970: 214). Nevertheless, much of the work in this tradition has been done by the Economic and Social Research Institute (in statutory terms an independent research institute) although 70 per cent of its revenue is now generated by contract research—much of it commissioned by state funded agencies of various kinds. There has been a very recent increased focus on gender in its work and this may be related to changes in the composition of management at the middle level of the civil service (O’Connor, 2006a), combined with the fact that the gender profile of the ESRI’s own researchers has begun to change at senior level.

In any case, through the interaction of its employees with the executive and administrative arms of the state, influential relationships that impact on policy can and have been created. In some cases they have challenged taken-for-granted state assumptions, such as that poverty or risk of poverty no longer exists or that we are living in one of the most open countries in Europe in terms of social mobility. They have generated research that can be used by lobby groups and the generation and dissemination of their research has created an awareness of such issues in the print media. They have shown sophistication in assessing audiences with an increasing stress on publications by commercial publishers so that their work is increasingly available to students; on publication in refereed journals nationally and internationally so that their work is increasingly available to fellow sociologists; on publications in outlets that are likely to be accessed by practitioners or lobby groups; and on getting TV and newspaper coverage as well as facilitating web based access. In some cases, they have set agendas that have been taken up by other sociologists (e.g in the case of the work of Hannan et al. (1983) on gendered subject choice at second level, 1983 which showed that girls’ low levels of self-esteem persisted even when class background and ability were controlled for; while the majority of the boys saw themselves as above average). It will be interesting to see whether their recent work on gendered wage inequalities (Russell et al., 2005) and gender inequalities in domestic work and caring (Mc Ginnity et al., 2005) mark a quantum change in their focus on the mapping of gender as a public
issue in Irish society. (These latter reports received front page coverage on *The Irish Times* – a newspaper that is read by the majority of high level policy makers.)

Thus despite their structurally constrained position, and their frequent focus on managerial problems on behalf of the state, this tradition of work has provided a critically important core of sociological knowledge about Irish society. Furthermore, its increasing sophistication in accessing audiences has increased its ability, at least potentially, to turn private issues into public troubles. It is increasingly a potentially important institution in transforming private issues in the gender area into public troubles.

2 Critical Sociology

For Burawoy (2005) critical sociology is characterised by reflexive knowledge and it questions the value premises of our society and the biases and silences of sociology as a profession (see also Tovey and Share 2003). Its purpose is challenging taken-for-granted academic knowledge; its legitimacy is its moral vision; its accountability is to intellectuals; its pathology is dogmatism. Behind it lies a more or less explicit vision of what can crudely be described as a ‘better world’.

The work of Lynch and the Equality Studies Group (Lynch, 1999a, 1999b; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Baker et al., 2004) is a remarkable exemplar of this kind of approach. They stress the importance of articulating an ‘utopian’ alternative in the sense of a picture of a better society; ‘identifying culturally specific sites and issues around which resistance can be mobilised’; having ‘an identifiable strategy ... grounded in the materiality of existence’; an ability ‘to engage the imagination of relevant publics’; ‘to develop ‘mobilising narratives ... to give a sense of common purpose’ (Baker et al., 2004, 216–217). Drawing on Gramsci’s work, Baker et al. see ideology as one of the ways through which the powerful establish their hegemony. However since such ideology typically contains contradictory elements, it is also a key element in challenging that hegemony and mobilising and legitimating perspectives that are rooted in the lives of ordinary ‘organic’ intellectuals. Through their educational policies and pedagogies; their outreach activity and their advocacy, the Equality Studies Group strive to create that utopia. Their work with ‘a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public’ (Burawoy, 2005: 8) gives them credibility with voluntary groups, left wing politicians and philanthropists. However, Baker et al. (2004: 209) see the affective system as the key factor in generating women’s oppression: ‘its privatised character and the masculinist codes ensuring that such work is not valued’. It is also the affective system that is identified as having mobilising potential: transforming personal problems into public issues. Thus they suggest that a women’s movement that mobilises around such affective issues is likely to be able to transcend divisions between women based on class, race, ethnicity, etc, and to have the potential to attract the support of large numbers of men. However it is also possible to suggest that the key generative factor in women’s oppression is cultural; and that it is women’s lack of cultural
value, or in Bourdieu’s terms (1999) their low levels of symbolic capital, that underpins the devaluing of their ‘love labour’ (see Lynch 1989). In this perspective, cultural sites (such as religion, education and the media) are seen as generative of women’s oppression through the cultural messages that they embody and transmit. Thus it is not helpful that, even to-day, only seven per cent of those at professorial level in Irish universities are women (HEA, 2005): the reality of discrimination in university systems being recognised by, for example, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals in the UK. A focus on women’s low levels of symbolic capital in the paid employment area also helps to make sense of the fact that the feminisation of areas of paid employment is associated with a decline in the wages and prestige of such areas (Bourdieu, 1989); and of the fact that men’s investment in relationships with other men is valued in particular circumstances (e.g in the case of networking by senior middle class male managers).

In O’Connor’s work, drawing on Connell (1995a: 104), gender is seen ‘As a fundamental feature of the capitalist system: arguably as fundamental as class divisions … capitalism is run mainly by and to the advantage of men’. Gender is seen as a property of institutions or processes, with social landscapes being more or less ‘mapped’ by gender. This perspective is not essentialist: mapping by gender is a social, cultural and psychological reality and has to do with labour, power and cathexis. This work has looked at the gendered reality (see Halford, 1997; Acker, 1998) of organisational cultures, procedures and practices in a number of state and semi-state organisations (O’Connor 1996; 1998; 2000b). In later work (O’Connor, 2001) there is a focus on the identification of individual or group ways of resisting in such male-dominated organisations. Interestingly, Lynch (1999b) envisages a much more fundamental type of resistance – involving the investment of resources by left-wing structures in higher education. The pathology of this type of work was identified by Burawoy as dogmatism and indeed both examples can be criticised as constituting closed systems which are not amenable to empirical falsification.

The public aspect of critical sociology involves presentations to Sociology and Women’s Studies Conferences as well to key groups of women (such as for example, nurses and other professions allied to medicine) who have begun to develop practical consciousness (Haugaard, 1997) generated by the dramatic changes in Irish society: changes which have undermined the idea that gender patterns are ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’. Such an awareness has also been generated by others’ studies of different organisations (Mahon, 1991; Mahon and Dillon, 1996; Lynch, 1994 etc). The identification of changes over time (such as more than doubling the proportion of women at administrative officer level in the Civil Service over an eight year period: Humphreys et al., 1999 and CSO, 2004; and dramatic increases in the proportion of women managers in Primary Schools over a similar period: Lynch, 1994) has challenged the depiction of such gendered patterns as ‘natural’ inevitable’, ‘what women want’ and has highlighted the importance of the wider organisational and cultural context. At the heart of all this work lies the moral vision of a ‘better world’ – one where women are culturally
valued in the public arena in O’Connor’s case and where equality of condition exists in Lynch and Baker’s case. Both are at odds with patriarchal and/or class privileging and so can be expected to be viewed as partisan by those structures. Women’s Studies and Equality Studies networks have made possible the dissemination of this research to relevant publics, through out-reach educational programmes, conferences targeted at those outside academia, lobby groups, non-governmental agencies and through local engagement with community groups. Such groups however have little power within the public arena.

3 Public Sociology

For Burawoy (2005) public sociology is concerned with setting up a dialogue with publics outside academia—including the media. Its form of knowledge is reflexive; its legitimacy is based on relevance; its accountability is to designated publics and its pathology is faddishness. Part of our business as sociologists he suggests is to ‘define human categories’ (2005: 5). Indeed, a focus on public sociology has some resonances with Lauder et al.’s (2004: 8) view that now that history is made ‘from below’, ‘the concept of self reflexivity suggests that agents can now be more knowledgeable about themselves and their place in the world and should be included in any debate concerning fundamental social problems’. Such self reflexivity heightens the importance of sociology being involved in this kind of dialogue with publics outside the academy (Tovey and Share 2003).

A concern with the inadequate public contribution of sociologists in defining public issues in Ireland is not new. In the mid 1990s, Kane (1996) suggested that Irish sociologists were ‘losing fact to science and meaning to literature’. In Ireland to-day, the taken-for-granted pervasiveness of an economic discourse poses considerable challenges and a traditional individualistic ethos resists the creation of categories, and hence the creation of publics. However, the role of the sociologist ‘to chronicle and understand’ (Wright Mills 1970:213) can be seen as particularly appropriate in societies characterised by high levels of risk and the disembedding of structural relationships (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck, 1992).

The Sociological Chronicles of Ireland series (including Peillon and Slater, 1998; Peillon and Corcoran, 2004) has had the specific intention of enhancing sociology’s public role. However, gender has only occasionally featured in this work (for example in Liston’s 2002 article on football as a key site for the expression of masculinity as well as a site for new concepts of femininity). Work in this tradition has paradoxically both potentially increased the publics with whom sociologists might engage in dialogue and has limited it, since there is no obvious constituency that can be mobilised to engage with such work. A similar criticism can be made of O’Connor’s work on young people’s construction of narratives of identity in so far as it also side-steps issues related to power. Thus, rooted as it is in a cultural analysis of reflexive constructions of the self, and
reflecting a 'weak cultural feminist tradition' (Evans, 1995: 91) it argues that gender had become a repressed but crucially important framework in the construction of young people's sense of self (O'Connor et al., 2004; O'Connor, 2006b) while recognising that the consumer society was eroding gender differences in narratives concerned with part-time jobs, clothes and the consumption of alcohol. Uncertainty surrounding gender is not of course the only source of cultural dislocation but it is arguably an important one amongst young people. Indeed Gray's (2004: 42) work suggested that in most of the accounts of migrant and non-migrant Irish women she studied: 'the category "Irish women" is unintelligible outside the interplay of Catholic Church and state regulation which produced a martyred relationship to the self which they identify with their mothers and refuse for themselves'. Indeed one might suggest that in an Irish context middle aged, middle class (white) men have managed, through male dominance of key institutions (such as the Church, State, schools, media etc) 'to get a stranglehold on meaning. What it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman' (Edley and Wetherell, 1996: 107).

Inglis's (2003: 226) work is unusual in that although it is clearly in a tradition of public sociology it prioritises gender and is concerned with exploring the nature and effect of 'a patriarchal order centred on the sexual oppression of women'. It suggests that the story of one lone mother was 'a story about Irish women ... the way in which the established orders in society produce truth' (2003:3) – such 'established orders' being predominantly male and including the Roman Catholic Church, the police and the judiciary who all played key roles in what became known as the Kerry Babies case. The argument that one woman had to be punished for challenging 'a patriarchal order centred on the sexual oppression of women' emerges with terrifying clarity. Thus although its focus on an individual woman raises uncomfortable issues about exploitation and privacy, by locating her vilification in the context of both long-term processes of secularisation and individualisation in Irish society and the perceived threats to the state by paramilitaries and their effects on practices in the Gardai, it is a vivid and impressive critique of Irish society. However its publisher is a university press – and so the extent to which it is likely to be accessed by wider publics is problematic. Furthermore, since Inglis is not concerned with the question of whether public honour (in Bourdieu's terms symbolic capital: 1999:166) can be acquired by women from participating in the public arena, he limits his contribution.

For Burawoy, the legitimacy of public sociology lies in its relevance. Much of the work in this tradition has cultural relevance although for the most part it has contributed little to generating a dialogue with the public about the importance of gender in Irish society. It is impossible to assess the extent to which it has avoided what Burawoy (2005) called the pathology of faddishness. However, Inglis's (2003) work, limited though it is to a concern with sexuality, is a powerful example of the way in which a qualitative concern with gender can be located within a wider structural context and written in a style that is accessible, disturbing and enlightening.
4 Professional Sociology

For Burawoy (2005) professional sociology is concerned with providing methods and conceptual frameworks to academics; its legitimacy is in scientific norms; its accountability is to peers and its pathology is self-referentiality. In its public aspect it is concerned with the public image of sociology as well as the writing of textbooks for its students. Implicit in the concept of professional sociology is a recognition that the process of converting private troubles into public issues demands some kind of mobilisation not least amongst sociologists themselves. This raises the wider issue of the role of sociologists as intellectuals in contemporary Irish society – defining intellectuals in Eyerman’s (1996: 33) terms as those who ‘arouse and stir public debate around issues fundamental to society, and in the process ... help create the concepts through which we understand society’. It seems plausible to suggest that a world where credible public narratives of identity could be constructed by historians and literary figures around State, Church and nation is fading (O’Dowd, 1996). Ireland, as a rapidly changing society, is increasingly penetrated by global entertainment and consumer culture; by a taken-for-granted market economy that is expected to make few concessions to family or societal concerns; and one where paid work and family are in increasing tension as women’s position in both is transformed but the old patriarchal structures remain largely intact (O’Hagan, 2005) albeit invisible.

Professional sociology is weak in Ireland, with Tovey and Share’s (2003) mapping of the emergence of the discipline being an unusual exercise in professional reflexivity. Yet while sociology remains in a state of professional paralysis, its conceptual frameworks and methods are borrowed by others including geographers, psychologists and market researchers. The Sociological Association of Ireland is now over 30 years old, and has published a refereed journal for more than 15 years. Despite, or maybe because of, its professional weakness the Association has been relentlessly inclusive in its criteria for membership, while senior positions in the Association have typically been drawn from the lower levels of the university hierarchy. This may be associated with the longstanding perceived lack of interest by many senior figures in understanding Irish society. The public face of professional sociology in Ireland is strongest in relation to its students. Perhaps not surprisingly then, in the 1980s, leadership was shown in the Sociological Association of Ireland by fostering the commercial publication of a number of sociology textbooks including *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives* edited by Clancy et al. (1986), a second edition being produced in 1995 from the royalties given by the editors to the Association. In 1987, a reader on *Gender in Irish Society* edited by Curtin et al. was published. It critiqued Irish sociology as embodying ‘in large measure the values of the patriarchal society in which it was practiced’. However, it was produced by a university press, the quality of the printing was poor and the circulation limited and hence it did little either to enhance the professional status of the discipline or to mainstream a focus on gender. At the
level of professional sociology it is easy to feel that in higher education, the students who enrol on sociology courses are more confident than sociologists themselves about the status of the discipline. Within research institutes, the status of professional sociology can be seen as somewhat higher, although it is constantly under pressure to defend its theoretical premises and interests. The Economic and Social Research Institute has been the institution that has been most concerned with the development of standardised national and international measures. However the absence of students, and the tendency for its work to make few references to sociologists outside the institute has reduced the possibility of it acting as the public face of professional sociology. Furthermore, since it has increasingly favoured a multi-disciplinary approach to social problems, it is in an ambiguous position as regards fostering a disciplinary focus on public sociology.

Finally, possibly because of the slowness with which sociology appeared to embrace more radical perspectives in the 1990s, those who might have been the professional core of the discipline embedded – and continue to embed themselves – in related but more interdisciplinary areas (such as Equality Studies, Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies etc). Thus the 1990s marked a blossoming of Irish Women’s Studies publications, much of this driven by sociologists whose casual disregarding of their discipline, while making sense in terms of an attempt to create a counter-discourse within a male dominated academy, sat uneasily within a discipline that was struggling to define its professional area of expertise. Thus, *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader* (1997), edited by Byrne and Leonard, was an attempt to redefine the field of sociology by using social science and women’s studies as alternative descriptors of it, with less than half of the contributors making any reference to sociology in the notes on their backgrounds. It is probably not co-incidental that the overwhelming majority of these contributors were women, many of whom were increasingly uneasy with the male dominated nature of their disciplines and of the wider academy and increasingly committed to normative perspectives. The focus on masculinities in the most recent edition of the *Irish Journal of Sociology* (Cleary, 2005) may signal a change, although it is striking that only one of the contributions from Irish sociologists was by a man, prompting one to conclude that this focus on gender is seen as problematic by male sociologists in Ireland.

There is little sense of the Sociological Association of Ireland ‘seeing itself as a public that acts in the political arena’ (Burawoy, 2005: 5) – with sociologists, either individually or collectively, contributing less frequently than psychiatrists, psychologists or lawyers to traditional public dialogue in the media (although the left wing positioning and value orientations of journalists could be seen to facilitate this: Corcoran, 2004). Within the Sociological Association there have been attempts from time to time to develop a more public aspect, for example through the Working Sociologist section of the *Irish Journal of Sociology* and through the development of a media bank. Overall however it is almost as if there has been a subliminal desire to avoid political activity lest it undermine its professional status.
For Burawoy, sociology is a ‘field of power’ (2005: 13) where the various types of sociology compete for dominance. In Ireland, conflicts about methods and theory have given way to what one might call a kind of mutual indifference and loss of confidence in the discipline. This is most overtly reflected in the weakness of professional sociology other than in its relationship to students. Reluctance to embrace professional self-interest and ‘the pathology of self-referentiality’ (Burawoy, 2005) can at one level only be applauded. However, the weakness of professional sociology has effectively colluded with a narrowing of a focus on the social in a society dominated by a valuation of the market. It has also meant that the contribution of sociologists to understanding the importance and the implications of gender in a rapidly changing society, has been less audible and less influential than they might otherwise have been.

Summary and Conclusions

It is suggested that structural inconsistency in the mapping of gender across institutions and related cultural tensions is a private trouble in Ireland to-day. It affects a variety of aspects of women’s lives, including lone mothers’ risk of poverty; women’s experience of ‘glass ceilings’ and patriarchal privileging in male dominated organisations; the tension between paid work and family responsibilities; and young men and women’s experience of cultural dislocation. In raising the question as to why such private troubles have not become public issues we are effectively raising the issue of power and the continued existence of patriarchal bias in Irish society. This is related to the way men have managed, through dominance of key institutions (such as the institutional Church, the State, higher education and the media) ‘to get a stranglehold on meaning’ (Edley and Wetherell, 1996: 107). Thus although whereas in the recent past, differences between men and women were depicted as ‘obvious’ and seen as rooted in their biological make up, now in the face of rapid changes in women’s position in society, such views are no longer credible. Now such male-dominated structures endorse a rhetoric of choice while simultaneously creating and maintaining policies which are underpinned by gendered assumptions. They foster a view that gender is not a structural reality but is rather a ‘zombie categorie’ while simultaneously, through the creation of structural contradictions based on gender necessitate a search for ‘biographical solutions to systemic contradictions’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 27). Such a context inhibits the linking of ‘emancipatory politics’ with a focus on life chances, on exploitation, inequality and oppression, with ‘life politics’ with a focus on choice and lifestyle (Giddens, 1991: 215). Thus despite rapid social and cultural change, including changes in gender roles (Whelan and Fahey, 1994; Fahey et al., 2005) which can be seen as conducive to private troubles becoming public issues, the continued importance of male dominated structures legitimating patriarchal bias and simultaneously denying the structural reality of gender has inhibited this.
The public aspects of Burawoy’s (2005) four-fold schema was used to look at recent Irish sociological work, focussing particularly on the extent to which it dealt with gender related issues. Thus some of the work done by the Economic and Social Research Institute was looked at as illustrative of policy sociology, highlighting the ways in which it had increasingly developed its relationship with publics and its ways of accessing them. However, with a small number of notable exceptions, up to very recently there has been little interest in developing a gendered analysis of Irish society, although recent publications and the changing gender profile of senior staff may alter this pattern. In the area of critical sociology the focus was mainly on the work of Lynch and Baker in Equality Studies and O’Connor, influenced by Women’s Studies. In both of these areas, the development of a conversation about the nature of Irish society is with those on the margins of power (such as women, the poor, the unemployed, disabled etc). To varying degrees there is a more or less public network through which the research can be disseminated, in addition to its student base. Work in this tradition has been more concerned with gender but it has been treated with some scepticism as reflecting a normative vision and the pathology of dogmatism.

Public sociology is typically exemplified by the Chronicles of Ireland series and, with the notable exception of Inglis’s (2003) work, has paid little attention to gender. Although work in this tradition has potentially increased the publics with whom sociology might engage in dialogue, it has also limited them since there is no obvious constituency that can be mobilised. Finally it was suggested that, other than in its relationship with its students, professional sociology is weak in Ireland, partly reflecting a rather naïve approach to the consolidation of professional power and partly a failure to grasp the implications of the male dominated nature of the discipline and of the academy.

Nevertheless sociologists in Ireland have contributed to the identification of private troubles as public issues by naming; by direct and indirect influence on policy makers; they have encouraged generations of students to reflect on why these patterns exist; they have raised cultural awareness about a variety of new phenomena; they have heightened awareness of inequality of various kinds and they have set agendas inside and outside the academy. A variety of strategic ways of relating to various publics were identified – including textbooks, refereed journals, articles in magazines directed at lobby groups; the Chronicles of Ireland series; advocacy; educational initiatives; academic and non academic conferences, meetings and seminars; newspaper articles; working sociologist series etc. However since a key element in understanding the extent and pace of change in Ireland today involves a concern with the way in which mapping by gender is changing at the social, cultural and psychological level, by not explicitly focussing on this and creating a dialogue with all parts of the society on it, sociologists’ contribution has been more limited than it might otherwise have been.
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