Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies
Est 1998. Published by Social Care Ireland

Volume 10 | Issue 1 Article 3

2010-01-01

Ireland of the Illusions: A Sociological Chronicle 2007-2008 (Share, P. & Corcoran, M.P. (Eds.) 2010): Book Review

Liam O'Dowd
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast

Recommended Citation
O'Dowd, Liam (2010) "Ireland of the Illusions: A Sociological Chronicle 2007-2008 (Share, P. & Corcoran, M.P. (Eds.) 2010): Book Review," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: http://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol10/iss1/3

Share, P. & Corcoran, M.P. (Eds.). (2010). Ireland of the illusions: A sociological chronicle 2007-2008. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. ISBN 9781904541882

Review by: Liam O'Dowd
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast
L.ODowd@qub.ac.uk

© Copyright Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies ISSN 1393-7022
Vol. 10(1), 2010

Since 1998, the Sociological Chronicles, a series of edited volumes, initiated in the Department of Sociology, NUI-Maynooth, have made a sustained attempt to enhance sociological contribution to public debate on contemporary issues. This volume is the seventh in the series. In their introduction, the editors, Perry Share and Mary Corcoran, provide a useful retrospect on the series overall. The Chronicles have been a child of the Celtic Tiger and have concentrated on the pervasive commodification of Irish culture and identity. Overall the series has inclined towards postmodern commentaries rather than towards grand narratives of the transformation of Irish society.

Contributors to the latest volume fall into two broad groups. The first deploys the vocabulary of crisis, defeat, recession, empty hopes, and a consumerism out of control. Topics covered here include tourism, the Galway Water Crisis, and the landscapes of the collapsed building boom. These chapters chronicle pervasive disillusionment with respect to the economy, the environment and the political system. The second group of contributions are more diverse. Topics range from Cork GAA, to domestic violence, e-government, slimming classes, rugby and class, marketing the 'Dracula experience', 'hairy baby products', and 'living with animals'. These pieces highlight various manifestations of the consumerism which has infused the last two decades while registering glimpses of older or alternative forms of morality. The book is illustrated throughout by a series of interesting and provocative images and photographs.

In general, the contributors represent sociology as the conscience of middle class, Celtic Tiger Ireland - as a discipline that is infused with a type of social morality that at least questions the growth of rampant individualism, greed and consumerism. This is an interesting and challenging role for a secular discipline that has struggled for so long to escape the moralising shackles of twentieth century Catholic sociology. The latest volume is perhaps a sign of changing times in that the Catholic Church for once escapes criticism. Politicians, civil servants, bankers, property developers and the media replace the clergy as objects of censure and criticism.

The book, however, does suggest the need for a more radical and coherent analysis than it is designed to deliver. Behind the individual chapters lies a somewhat shadowy critique of some of the inequities, corruption, negative consequences and illusory dimensions of economic growth. This amounts to a series of critical comments on the way in which the practices of elites and institutions in Celtic Tiger Ireland have infringed individual rights and undermined the 'common or public good'. And yet,

there is a reluctance to consider in any radical way what the 'public good' might actually mean in Irish circumstances – in a society characterised by the progressive 'commodification of everything'. One might ask what are the contemporary limits, if any, to commodification, privatisation, and the corporate takeover of a society and economy regularly recognised as among the most 'open' and 'globalised' in the world? Is the solution to the current crisis simply a matter getting back to riding the tiger of global corporate capitalism – and to keeping 'the markets' happy by becoming more productive, competitive, and ever more committed to endless 'economic growth'? Is economic success to be measured solely by selling Irish assets, land, indigenous firms, and the skills of its people to the highest bidders in the market place of global corporate capitalism? And should this project be the overriding preoccupation of the Irish state and its political class?

As in the case of their colleagues elsewhere, Irish sociologists hover around the liberal/social democratic part of the political spectrum. For them this implies that it is the state that has the potential to limit the depredations of neo-liberal capitalism in the public interest. However, it is not only the corporate economy that needs analysis and exposure; it is the de-nationalised state, and particularly its Irish version, that cries out for radical analysis. Contemporary whingeing about loss of sovereignty rather misses the point. Much more problematical is the tendency to equate the 'nation' or the Irish people with the Irish state. While there are few examples of congruence between state and nation anywhere, Ireland has historically fitted into the category of 'nations seeking states' rather than 'states seeking nations' to use Charles Tilly's formulations. The history of Irish emigration, the diaspora and partition suggests that it highly problematical to assume that the Irish state represents all Irish people (i.e., those resident in Ireland) or even less so, those who see themselves belonging to an Irish nation. Against this background and the institutional incorporation of the Irish state into the global capitalist economy, public debate in Ireland should surely not accept that the Irish state, in its contemporary form, should, or indeed can, represent the 'public good'.

To an outsider, it is truly remarkable that, in an age of globalisation, in a state which is regularly deemed to have one of the most globalised economies in the world, that intellectual debate in Ireland takes the form of an intimate, and often personalised, national conversation which imagines the Irish state-nation as a self-contained society tossing on the high seas of the global economy. Of course, the wider world does impinge on the debate – in the apportioning of degrees of blame for the current crisis, or in justifying obeisance to the *deus ex machina* of the 'markets' or the 'EU'. Missing in this volume and elsewhere, however, is a sense of the way in which global capitalism and its system of governance actually constitutes the Irish state.

As O'Riain points out here, the middle classes (to which sociologists largely belong) have expanded dramatically with economic growth. Their public conversations move to the rhythm and priorities of media news reporting in a small country and is embodied in the more prominent celebrity commentators. Dublin-centred and self-preoccupied, the debate seldom registers sustained comparative or historical analysis. For example, traditional comparisons with the UK have been out of fashion for decades, not to mention comparisons with Northern Ireland, which were never in vogue.

Above all, public debate is shot through by the ideology of professionalism which has deep roots in Irish history. Its contemporary variant brings with it notions of self-regulation and elitism that relegate to the margins any notions of accountability to a broader public interest. The various 'professions' – politicians, lawyers, doctors, gardaí, teachers, bankers, economists, civil servants and academics are networked to the institutions of the Irish state which they implicitly see as synonymous with the Irish nation. However, in practice the Irish state is also part of a wider European and global political economy. The often short-term benefits of the latter have been appropriated by the most successful professional elites in Ireland. The appeal of these elites to the Irish state/nation occludes their sense of entitlement and sectional self-interest. In the process, the whole issue of wider public accountability remains underspecified or else is ignored completely.

Sociologists, as represented by the contributors to this volume, are far from the worst offenders, even if they cannot easily escape their socio-economic and cultural context. O'Riain provides an admirably succinct account of the demise of the Celtic Tiger, arguing that Irish governments had policy options and took the wrong ones. His solution is a rebalancing of the economy towards productive enterprise and innovation. A more comprehensive account, however, would need to interrogate factors such as the impact of the financialisation of Western capitalism, of the availability of low-interest finance from the EU, as well as the meaning of economic growth and innovation. For example, online betting and computer games may provide improved economic growth and innovation but are they substitutes for the demise of the Irish sugar industry? Considerable sociological scope remains for deconstructing contemporary myths of 'economic growth' and competitiveness.

Mary Corcoran brings us back to the crucial question of power, using Max Weber to question Irish politicians' pursuit of power for power's sake. In her introduction with Perry Share she notes a preoccupation of the earlier Chronicles with the analysis of cultural and symbolic change. She goes on to suggest the need for a closer look at the continuities in power and privilege which underlie all the changes which have occurred. Indeed, this volume underlines the urgency of re-locating cultural analysis in the kind of historical and comparative analysis which recognises the durable patterns of power and inequality embedded in the structures of class, gender, age and ethnic origin.

Public accountability is addressed in a hard hitting piece by Ciaran McCullagh. Instead of vague allusions to 'system or regulatory failure', he names culprits. He is scathing on elite discourses which suggest that 'we are all to blame for the crisis' or that 'we should move on' – these he suggests are simply ways of fireproofing the overlapping networks and crony capitalism of the power elite who are well placed to ride out the crisis, while its victims will pay the price for its resolution. Yet, unaccountable power is even more pervasive than he implies. It is widely and deeply embedded in the hierarchies and bureaucracies of 'professional' Ireland. Self-serving appeals to 'professionalism' still retain considerable legitimacy despite the tribunals and exposures of recent years. Even elected politicians claim autonomous professional status with its own rules and entitlements. Professional ideology has too often diminished debate on the public interest and on the need for broader democratic accountability to the people rather than to the 'state'.

This volume suggests that, for sociologists, like a growing number of their fellow citizens, the seduction of neo-liberal capitalism is rapidly dissipating. The book's limitations are also a useful reminder, however, of the huge effort needed to mount a sustained and radical analysis that might imagine an alternative social morality and a political economy more accountable to Irish people. Sociologists can do much to challenge the myths of market fundamentalism, economic growth and the facile equation of state and nation. While states remain crucial vehicles of democratic accountability, actual states can do more to hinder than realise such an objective. Intellectual debate in the Irish Republic too often confuses the actual Irish state with the nation. For example, just as it is dangerously misleading to equate the contemporary Israeli state with the Jewish people, for somewhat different reasons it is highly problematical to imply that the Irish state in its current form represents the common good of the Irish people.