



NATIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Following on from our previous feature on different national associations, this issue of “European Sociologist” focuses on Ireland.

By Brian Conway*

Although the origins of sociology in Ireland go back to the 19th century, the Sociological Association of Ireland was only established in 1973. An earlier sociological organisation, the Christus Rex Society, was established at the national seminary in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, in September 1941 and had a priest membership. On 5 May, 1973, Cyril White, Conor Word, and Joy Rudd organized a meeting in Newman House, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin, then home to University College Dublin, of about twenty sociologists, from north and south, with a view to establishing a disciplinary association. One of their first tasks was the election of a committee and the drafting of a constitution for the association. A standing committee including an elected president, chairperson, vice-chairperson, treasurer, secretary, and a six-person committee was also constituted. The first president, Hamish Dickie-Clarke, came from the then New University of Ulster, Jordanstown.

Some debate took place at this time about whether the organisation would follow a professional model or an intellectual model and what the name of the association would be. A number of possibilities were considered including the Irish Sociological Association and the Sociological Association of Ireland. The latter was chosen as the organisation's name in order to avoid confusion, and a shared acronym, with the International Sociological Association. The SAI set itself the goals of promoting sociology as a discipline in Ireland, representing the professional interests of its members, and promoting sociological research on or about Irish society. Its physical infrastructure has migrated between different university departments and research institutes and a volunteer executive committee and administrator has carried out its day-to-day activities.

The association's members came from across the island and one indicator of its early organisational success was a growing membership distributed across the categories of full, associate, honorary and student members. An inclusive definition of “sociologist” was adopted by opening membership to people who did not self-identify as sociologists and by not requiring university employment as a prerequisite. Organisational growth and development continued into the 1970s and 80s. In the difficult 1970s, the association established a sub-committee on labour market conditions for sociologists, but by the 1980s, it had taken several initiatives. In 1986, the association carried out a small-scale study to find out about postgraduate provision and produced

a report entitled “Postgraduate Sociology Studies in Irish Universities.” An impressively detailed document, it laid out such things as fees, department specializations, facilities for postgraduate work, recent enrollment, and supervision policies. By this time, most of the universities offered postgraduate programmes in sociology at the Master's and doctorate levels and reported low staff-student ratios.

Discursive developments in the 1980s included a new book series on Irish society dealing with the topics of gender, crime, power and conflict, and culture and ideology. 1991 represented an important year for the SAI, marking the launch of its first journal, the Irish Journal of Sociology. Founding editors, Tony Fahey and Michel Peillon, took on co-ordinating responsibilities for the journal's inaugural issue and for the first three years of publication. The journal provided a new outlet for sociological writing on or about Ireland and published work in Irish and English. From 2009 the SAI's journal will be published by Manchester University Press.

In the 1980s there were few university positions for sociologists but in the 1990s the labour market began to improve considerably. Now sociology is taught as a degree subject to large numbers of students.

The main activity of the SAI since its founding, however, has been the organization of a lively annual conference. Rotating each year between the four provinces of Ireland, the conference provides a yearly showcase of some of the best sociological research by sociologists living in Ireland and sociologists abroad interested in Ireland.

The Sociological Association of Ireland has thus matured from an initial committee of literally a handful of people to a sizable organization of over a hundred card-carrying members. Over the years it has developed a code of ethics for research, launched its own journal, organized an annual conference, published booklets and monographs, and has recently gone online with its own dedicated website www.sociology.ie.

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