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*Private Troubles, Public Issues: The Irish Sociological  
Imagination*

# **Private Troubles, Public Issues: The Irish Sociological Imagination**

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### **Introduction:**

When I first read, with great excitement, *The Sociological Imagination* in the late 1960s, I was an 18 year old University student, in a society that was beginning to wake from its cultural torpor. A reluctant geographical migrant in childhood, reared in a middle class but poor family in a working class area, I had grown accustomed to the experience of 'transcendental homelessness' (Lukacs, 1971). Thus with a deep appreciation of the honour, and the irony, of being asked to give this keynote address – and perhaps an insufficient sense of self preservation- I will begin.

### ***The Title***

The title of this lecture echoes back to Wright Mills (1970) classic work. In it, he challenges those with sociological imagination to locate private troubles within a wider structural context and through the dissemination of such insights to encourage and persuade others so that private troubles become public issues. Public issues he suggests arise when 'some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened' (op cit: 15). For Wright Mills it is essential to make clear what values are threatened and by whom. Insofar as public values cannot be identified, but seem to be threatened, he suggests that there may be feelings of 'uneasiness, of anxiety.... a deadly unspecified malaise' (op cit:18). He recognises of course that the values that are believed to be threatened may not be those that are actually threatened. He also suggests that there needs to be a view 'of the levers by which the structure may be maintained or changed' (op cit: 146). Wright Mills showed little awareness of gender –either in his language or in his unselfconscious prioritising of reason and freedom as the most important themes- depicting the sociologist as 'man become aware of mankind' (op cit. p 12) in the narrowest sense of those words. With due respect to him then, I will focus on gender as a key element in the Irish sociological imagination.

### *The Focus on Gender*

At the heart of this lecture lies the suggestion that a focus on gender is crucial in understanding personal troubles as public issues in Irish society to-day. Such personal troubles include poverty amongst women-especially amongst women who are lone parents. They also include 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 and where the State has put in place very few supports to replace or compliment such activities-a pattern that is replicated right across the health and welfare areas (O'Hagan, 2005). Women's experience of 'glass ceilings' in male dominated organisations is also seen as a personal trouble and public issue, as is young men and women's experience of cultural dislocation in a society where the symbolic value of womanhood in the public arena is unclear, and where there is unease about both the existence of and threats to a 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995a). It is suggested that these various private troubles are to a considerable extent generated by the failure to recognise the importance of gender and the lack of consistency in mapping gender across institutions; with inarticulate public unease existing about the implications of societal changes for the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1995a). The central argument of this lecture is that such gendered patterns are both public issues as well as well as a private troubles.

Yet, the public discourse generated by the state, the educational institutions and frequently by the media is that gender has no relevance in understanding people's lives in Ireland to-day. This marks a relatively recent change. Thus, 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. Women were defined by their family position and responsibilities –essentially as mothers; men by their profile in the wider community- their link to the family being their status as breadwinners. Such gender differentiated patterns are no longer credible as a structural reality although it is salutary to note that despite the

dramatic structural changes in the paid employment and family arenas, less than one percent of men, but just over a third of women, still identify themselves as working full-time in the home (CSO, 2004). Gendered cultural definitions still influence state policy and are part of the ‘habitus’ of those involved in the development and implementation of social and economic policies, and they even persist in the ‘habitus’ of many men and women in their own families (habitus being defined as ‘a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as *a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions*’: Bourdieu, 1977: 82-83). Yet the public discourse ignores such gendered patterns. Thus, there has been no public discussion of the fact that although Ireland’s position on the Human Development Index at 12<sup>th</sup> has improved dramatically over the past five years, the change in its rank order on the gender related indices has been less dramatic (the ranking on UN 2000 were 18<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> respectively); and Ireland’s position on such gender indices is below its current rank on the Human Development Index (16<sup>th</sup> on the Gender Development Index: 18<sup>th</sup> on the Gender Empowerment Measure: UN, 2003).

More specifically, the paid employment area has been one of the areas that has been most dramatically transformed by changes in the position of women. Thus, in a society where a Marriage Bar existed up to 1973 (O’Connor, 1998) more than three quarters of women aged 25-34 are now in paid employment as are more than half of those women with children under five years (CSO, 2004). The employment rate of Irish women aged 15-64 (at almost 56%) is now marginally above the EU average (CSO, 2005). Indeed, Ireland’s emergence as the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s (with growth rates of 9% pa between 1994-2000 and 5-6% subsequently) has been driven by the availability of a reserve labour force, largely of women (CSO, 2004). 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. Thus even yet, parental leave is unpaid and the state provides very little child care support. The tension between paid work and family is particularly visible in the case of lone parents-91% of whom are lone mothers (CSO, 2004) 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. Women's increasing economic independence has arguably been reflected in the fact that one in three births now are to women outside marriage- in contrast to a situation where even in the 1980s, only 5% of births were to women in this situation. The category of lone mothers is of course complex and the status of men in such families is unclear-but the sheer fact that one in three children are born into such settings is a further challenge to men's definition of their role and value.

In a society where women stay in school longer and do better than their male counterparts, gender differences in wage levels, and the existence of 'glass ceilings' in what purports to be a meritocratic society are difficult to explain. Women's failure to progress to the top of male dominated occupational and educational hierarchies can be seen as a private trouble reflecting inadequate experiences or inappropriate attitudes. Indeed, such explanations 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 (O'Connor, 1996 and 2003b; Humphreys et al, 1999). Since those in positions of power in such institutions are overwhelmingly male, the existence of clientelistic ties facilitates the transmission of power along male lines. Such patterns are increasingly under pressure in the context of women's occupancy of positions of expertise. Thus women now make up roughly half of those in professional occupations and more than half of those in associate professional ones. However as Savage (1992:147) recognised this 'cannot be seen as evidence that women are moving into positions of occupational authority.' Thus women made up only 29% of those in those in executive, administrative and managerial occupations (CSO, 2004), and they are disproportionately located at the lower levels of these structures. Nevertheless, this is a very substantial change from the early 1970s, when women made up only five per cent of those in such occupations.

Overall then, despite dramatic changes in women's participation in paid employment, domestic and family responsibilities still continue to be disproportionately carried by women; and in many men and women's habitus as well as in state policy and in the educational system, gender patterns are simultaneously assumed to persist and are denied. This raises fundamental issues about constructions of womanhood and manhood; and about the kinds of institutional arrangements that are appropriate in this situation. Typically however 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 has been ignored in Irish society. Tension between paid work and family responsibilities; 'at risk ness' as regards poverty amongst lone mothers; women's experience of glass ceilings in male dominated organisations and young men and women's experience of cultural dislocation have been seen as private troubles rather than public issues; while the symbolic value of women as women in positions of authority in the occupational area and men's role and value in the society are underlying sources of what Wright Mills (1970:145) called 'uneasiness, of anxiety, a deadly unspecified malaise'. This I suggest is the terrain for Irish sociologists with sociological imagination.

### ***Public Contribution of Sociologists***

A concern with the inadequate public contribution of sociologists is not of course new. Almost ten years ago Kane (1996: 133) suggested that sociologists were 'losing fact to science and meaning to literature'. This lecture sees sociologists as having a crucially important role in identifying gender as a public issue in contemporary Irish society. It assesses the contribution made by sociologists in this area using Burawoy's (2005) classification schema and focusing on the public aspect of the four types of sociology he identifies (viz policy, critical, public and professional sociology). His typology has similarities with those put forward by Tovey and Share (2003) and Goldthorpe (2002 and 2003) although it is seen as more useful in the context of this lecture since it has an explicit focus on professional sociology.

Furthermore, his recognition of the public aspect of each type is helpful in focussing on the ways in which sociological insights can become public issues.

### **Which Private Troubles become identified as Public Issues- and Why?**

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 (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. Thus, for example, strong family ties have ensured the transmission of class privileges (since well endowed families have used every resource at their disposal to ensure the successful transmission of their class position to their children through the educational system). This has been the biggest single obstacle to the dominance of an individualistic meritocratic ethos driven by the economic system. Yet this has been seen as an unproblematic pattern and hence not as a public issue.

It is suggested 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 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. Thus, 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' (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; O'Connor, 2003a). Furthermore, explanations for boys' educational underperformance involving their valuing of physical strength and sporting prowess over educational achievement in 'doing boy' or the existence of 'streaming' in boys' schools (and hence the social subordination of less academically able boys) have evoked little critical comment or evaluation.

Wright Mills (1970) suggested that in a situation where there was a lack of awareness of a cherished value, combined with a feeling of threat, uneasiness was generated. In Ireland in the third millennium, it is suggested that this uneasiness surrounds the existence of and simultaneously threatens to the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995a). 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 such a dividend. Furthermore, its existence is in tension with an economic system which values cheap labour; with a meritocratic ideology that disregards gender; and a familism that potentially values boys and girls equally (although see Mc Coy and Smith, 2004 for conflicting evidence). Yet the existence of such a dividend is a crucial cultural element and underpins wider economic, legal, educational, religious and political structures. In this context opportunities to reflect critically on men's role in valued institutional settings have been ignored. Thus, despite attempts by the institutional Roman Catholic Church to raise the issue of the child sexual abuse occurring in two parent families and despite some evidence by Mc Keown and Gilligan (1991) suggesting the existence of this phenomenon, it has not become a public issue. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in lone parent families- predominantly headed by women- has not led to a public discussion on the perceived value of men and their contribution to family life. In the context of mental health and suicide, social concern has focussed 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). Similarly, what were publicly depicted as random violent assaults and which were seen by Mc Cullagh (2004) as a



moral panic about cross class male violence in a class divided society, have not led to a public discussion about the cultural construction of manhood.

In Ireland in the Third Millennium, one of the key public issues is how we deal with difference- and the consequences of such cultural valuations for economic resources, cultural value and power. In this lecture I am particularly focusing on gender. The importance of this theme is not peculiar to Ireland- but it is particularly acute here given the tendency to define differences in biological terms (Said, 1995). In Irish society, it is suggested that there is no more defining characteristic than gender, and that the symbolic value of womanhood in the public arena is limited and fraught with ambivalence. It is to a critical evaluation of some examples of Irish sociological imagination that we now turn.

### **Various kinds of Irish Sociological Imagination**

There are two specific apologies I want to make: Firstly, although I recognise as Wright Mills' does (1970), that other social sciences and literary theory can reflect a sociological imagination, I will not address their contribution in this lecture. Secondly, although I also recognise that a failure to include Northern Ireland is in O'Dowd's terms (2002) a significant one and limits our ability to look at the changing bases of Irish identity and the changing relationship between the state, the nation, the EU, Irish communities abroad etc, it is a task for which I feel totally unequipped. Thus I am focussing on an area defined by the boundaries of the southern state, while attempting to encompass wider social processes (see Tovey and Share, 2003; and Goldthorpe et al, 2002) using Burawoy's classification of types of sociological imagination. 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; *Reflexive Knowledge*—concerned with questioning the ends or value premises). The intersection of these two axes generates four types:

- 1) ***Policy Sociology***: its purpose is providing solutions to those outside academia; its legitimacy lies in effectiveness; its accountability is to clients; its pathology is servility;
- 2) ***Critical Sociology***: its purpose is challenging taken-for-granted academic knowledge; its legitimacy is its moral vision; its accountability is to intellectuals; its pathology is dogmatism;
- 3) ***Public Sociology***: its purpose is developing dialogues with those outside academia; its legitimacy lies in relevance; its accountability is to publics; its pathology is faddishness;
- 4) ***Professional Sociology***: its purpose is to provide methods and concepts to academics; its legitimacy is in scientific norms; its accountability is to peers; its pathology is self-referentiality;

Burawoy usefully stresses that each of these types incorporates elements of the others, so that, for example, there is a public aspect to each of these types. I will particularly focus on those public aspects: looking briefly at some recent work within these traditions, mainly related to gender, indicating the extent to which and the ways in which they exemplify evidence of an Irish sociological imagination. The themes that I will focus on in each type can be seen as broadly typical (for example, the focus on poverty in the case of public sociology; on 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. Furthermore, the focus in this lecture is obviously only on a small proportion of the recent work in each area.

### ***1) Policy Sociology***

Burawoy (2005) suggested that the kind of knowledge involved in policy research is concrete; its politics are around policy interventions and accountability is to its clients. 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; see also Lauder et al, 2004) and providing 'the state with diagnoses of social trends that help it to manage society' (Tovey and Share, 2003: 24). Some policy sociology can be seen as exemplifying 'abstracted empiricism', being concerned simply with social trends, with explanations being located at the level of the individual (what Wright Mills calls 'psychologism': 1970: 78). This approach is more likely to be characteristic of policy related work

undertaken by voluntary bodies or agencies unconcerned with conceptual aspects of sociology rather than work by the ESRI.

In Ireland policy sociology currently exists in a context of rapid economic development as Ireland has moved from being the economic failure of Europe in the 1980s to the 'Celtic Tiger' in the 1990s. It has been suggested that 'sociology's public presence in Ireland has gained its profile by policy sociology' (Fahey, 2005). In the ESRI, this tradition of work has been concerned, for example, with poverty (Layte et al, 2000; Callan and Nolan, 2004). Such work has shown that despite the dramatic increase in standards of living overall, 21% of the population are at risk of relative income poverty (assessed as 60% of the average income) as compared with 15% 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 had increased since the mid 1980s (Nolan and Watson, 1999)- the proportion of women being 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. Such research is crucial in identifying foci for state interventions and in challenging assumptions about poverty in general and the challenging of myths about the financial situation of lone mothers in particular.

Work by the ESRI has also shown that despite the economic boom, Ireland has remained highly unequal in terms of income inequality in the sense that there has been 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 are most likely to be at risk of poverty (Callan and Nolan, 2005, Callan and Nolan, 1994)- thus illustrating both the importance of, as well as the inadequacies of income support. Many of those who are outside the labour force are women. It has also shown that amongst those who were in paid employment, women's average hourly earnings were over 15% 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). Such research plays an important part in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions that inequality in terms of income continues to be a reality in Ireland to-day. Indeed, even in the family, it has been shown that boys get more pocket money than girls (Mc Coy and Smyth, 2004): with non-ESRI work showing that they do less domestic work in the family (see Leonard, 2004).

It can be argued that the ESRI's ability to publicly challenge government policy or to generate popular critical awareness of its implications has inevitably been limited by its financial dependence on state contracts for research and/or state support. Wright Mills (1970: 214) was himself pessimistic about the success of what he called 'appeals to the powerful on the basis of any knowledge we may have' – suggesting that in these circumstances 'we become technicians, accepting their problems and aims, or ideologists promoting their prestige and authority'. Indeed, for Burawoy the pathology of this kind of sociology is servility.

However, through the interaction of the ESRI with the executive arms of the state, influential relationships that can 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 mobility. They have generated research that can be used by lobby groups (such as CORI) and the generation and dissemination of their research has created an awareness of such issues in the media (e.g. income inequality in Irish Times, October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2004: this issue having been flagged on many previous occasions see Nolan and Maitre, 2000).

In some cases, they have set agendas that have been taken up by other sociologists. Thus gendered trends as regards subject choice at second level were initially

documented by Hannan et al (1983) and were subsequently further explored by Hannan et al (1996). They showed, for example, that low levels of self-esteem appeared early in Irish girls and persisted even when class background and ability were controlled for; while the majority of the boys saw themselves as above average. However, there has been little sense in the work of the ESRI of an attempt to understand such patterns in the context of a wider understanding of the way in which Irish society is mapped by gender. Furthermore, with a small number of notable exceptions, there has been little engagement with gendered publics.

Up to the 1980s the main focus of the ESRI's public role was the production of monographs which were characterised by considerable technical sophistication and less than assiduous concern with intelligibility to non-specialists. From the 1990s onwards this changed: firstly there was an increasing stress on publications by commercial publishers (such as Breen et al's (1990) *Contemporary Irish Society* by Gill and Macmillan, Nolan et al's (2000) *Bust to Boom*, by IPA) so that their work was increasingly available to students; secondly there was an increasing stress on publication in refereed journals, nationally and internationally so that their work was increasingly available to fellow sociologists; thirdly there was an increasing stress on publications in outlets that were most likely to be accessed by practitioners or lobby groups (through articles magazines such as *Poverty To-Day*); fourthly there was an increasing stress on getting TV and newspaper coverage, as well as web based access to their studies. Each of these initiatives not only increased the readership of their work, but also did it through targeting different publics. Paradoxically however, their Journal, *The Economic and Social Review* which had traditionally been seen as directed at policy makers and civil servants, became increasingly technical and arguably less relevant to that public.

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. Hence there is no doubt that policy sociology reflects one of the faces of the Irish sociological imagination. However since it has increasingly favoured a multi-disciplinary approach to social problems (see Lauder et al, 2004 for a discussion of this approach)-with economists and sociologists being virtually interchangeable in its research teams, its capacity to exert sociological leadership has been reduced. The extent to which it can continue to explore issues that challenge to the status quo remains to be seen given the fact that 70% of its revenue is now generated by contract research. Furthermore, since sociologists in this tradition are not infallible about the causes of social phenomena or the likely effect of different social policies, the solutions they advocate may reflect their ideological positions. Hence it is vulnerable to exactly the same limitations identified by Tittle (2004) as public or indeed critical sociology. Up to now, its interest in exploring gender has been arguably limited and tangential. It will be interesting to see the extent to which it can or will prioritise gender related topics and increase its engagement with gendered publics as the gender profile of its researchers begins to change at senior level.

## ***2) Critical Sociology***

For Burawoy (2005) critical sociology is characterised by reflexive knowledge—and questions the value premises of our society and the biases and silences of sociology as a profession (see also Tovey and Share 2003 and Goldthorpe et al, 2002:97). Behind it lies a more or less explicit vision of what can crudely be described as a better world and/or an assumption that change in key processes and practices can enable individuals to participate more meaningfully in society.

The work of Kathleen Lynch and the Equality Studies Group at UCD (Lynch, 1999a and b; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Baker et al, 2004) is a remarkable exemplar of this kind of approach. They stress the importance of articulating a ‘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 (1971) work, Baker et al also 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 they strive to create that utopia. Their work with 'a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public' (Buroway, 2005: 8) gives them credibility with educational authorities, voluntary groups, with left wing politicians and semi-state organisations (such as the National Economic and Social Forum).

Baker et al (2004;70) argue that 'because all human beings operate with multiple and overlapping identities, there is no person, whose social position, and correlatively whose experience of injustice, takes a singular form'. However they 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' (Baker et al, 2004: 209). It is also the affective system that is identified as having mobilising potential: in moving 'a personal problem to a public issue' (Baker et al, 2004: 220). 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. This can be seen as a continuing attempt to maintain the idea that 'a culture of community persists' (O'Carroll, 1987: 83/84).

It is also possible to argue that the expenditure of resources on the creation of affective ties is not always devalued. Thus men's investment in relationships with other men is valued under particular circumstances-for example, the time spent on golf outings by male senior managers and their clients is seen as entirely legitimate. Indeed it seems plausible to suggest that the key generative factor in women's

oppression is cultural; and that it is women's lack of the cultural value, or in Bourdieu's terms (1999) their low levels of symbolic capital, that underpins the devaluing of their love labour (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 argued that it is not helpful that, even to-day, only 7% of those at professorial level in the Universities are women (HEA, 2005): the reality of discrimination in the Universities being recognised by such non-feminist bastions as the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals in the UK (CVCP, 1991), and by MIT (1991). A focus on women's low levels of symbolic capital in the paid employment area also helps to make sense of the fact that feminisation of areas of paid employment is associated with a decline in the wages and prestige of such areas (Bourdieu, 1989).

Following Connell, I see gender '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' (1987/95:104). 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. My own work has looked at the gendered reality (Halford, 1997; Acker, 1998) of organisational cultures, procedures and practices in a number of state and semi-state organisations (O'Connor, 1995; 1996; 1998; 2000; 2001). 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.. Such resistance included challenging the socially created opposition between work and family, creating or supporting a 'subjectivity formed around a will to resist', naming non-woman friendly aspects of organisational culture, procedures or practices, mobilising allies, targeting key structures, using negative power, whistle blowing and industrial action. Such resistance is of course likely to provoke counter resistance: 'The process of rooting out dangerous individuals helps reveal the nature and structure of power, the way domination is enacted, the strategies by which the powerful dominate' (Inglis, 2003:223). Indeed



Lynch (1999) envisages a much more fundamental type of resistance-involving the investment of resources by left-wing structures in higher education, so as to facilitate the development of critical perspectives in such settings by individuals who are socially and politically engaged.

In any case, typically attempts are made to discredit a focus on discrimination and male domination in such contexts- including suggestions that it is natural, inevitable, or what women want. These arguments can be challenged by looking at trends over time. Thus, for example, following the identification of gender targets as key wage related performance indicators supported by management and the unions, the proportion of women at Administrative Officer level in the Civil Service increased from 21% in 1995 to 56% in 2003 (Co-Ordinating Group of Secretaries, 1996:48 and CSO, 2004: Table 1:9). Similarly, dramatic changes occurred in the proportion of women managers in Primary Schools in a context where women's applications were actively encouraged by the union and the Department of Education (Lynch, 1994).

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 a practical as opposed to a discursive consciousness (Haugaard, 1997) generated by the dramatic changes in Irish society: changes which have undermined the idea that such gender patterns are 'natural' or 'inevitable'. Such an awareness has also been generated by others' studies of different organisations (Mahon, 1991; Mahon and Dillon, 1994; Lynch, 1994 etc).

It is important to recognise that some of the work in the ESRI has also been in this critical tradition. Thus for example Whelan and Layte's work has been concerned with the extent and nature of social mobility (2004: 101)-showing that 96% of the social mobility experienced over the past thirty years has been due to structural changes leading them to conclude that 'the conventional notion of increased meritocracy, involving a decrease in the origin-education relationship and a strengthening of the education destination relationship has no relevance in the Irish

case. Breen and Whelan (1996) work is unusual in looking specifically at the class mobility of women. However they concluded that explanations of the 'disadvantages suffered by women as a consequence of the gendered labour market segmentation and the lack of continuity in their work histories is likely to be developed, for the most part, independently of class analysis' (Breen and Whelan, 1996:97).

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 my own case; where equality of condition exists in Lynch's case and equality of opportunity in Whelan's case. All three are at odds with patriarchal and/or class privileging and so can be expected to be viewed as partisan by those structures. In the case of the first two networks (in Women's Studies and Equality Studies) have made possible the dissemination of this research to relevant publics- whether through out-reach educational programmes; Conferences targeted at those outside the academia; lobby groups or non-governmental agencies as well as through active local engagement with community groups or with students. The continued importance of middle class families in class transmission to their own children, and the fact that working class families, who potentially have most to gain, are not always convinced of the value of education so that the identification of publics, other than the State and students is particularly difficult in the case of Whelan and Breen's work relating to social mobility.

### **3) *Public Sociology***

For Burawoy (2005) public sociology is concerned with setting up a dialogue with the publics outside academia and its form of knowledge as reflexive (op cit. p 17); its legitimacy being based on relevance; its accountability to designated publics. There is an implicit concern with the media (op cit, p 49). Part of our business as sociologists he suggests is to 'define human categories' (p 10). For Wright Mills (1970:213) the role of the sociologist 'to chronicle and understand' was legitimate in so far as 'blind drift', luck, chance, fate affected many of the most fundamental aspects of our lives i.e. that it is characterised by high levels of risk, unintended

consequences and the disembedding of structural relationships (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck, 1992).

In Ireland to-day, the taken-for-granted nature of the economic discourse poses considerable challenges; while a traditional individualistic ethos resists the creation of categories, and hence the creation of publics. A focus on public sociology has some resonances with Lauder et al's (2004: 8) view that 'history is now 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 (see also Tovey and Share 2003, and Goldthorpe et al, 2002). Implicit in it is a very different concept of sociology- one closer to literature than to science.

In the mid 1990s, Kane (1996) noted that this tradition was weak in Irish sociology. Recent work in this tradition with the specific intention of enhancing sociology's public role includes the Sociological Chronicle of Ireland Series (Peillon and Slater, 1998; Slater and Peillon, 2000; Corcoran and Peillon, 2002; Peillon and Corcoran, 2004). Gender has only occasionally featured in this work, for example in Liston's (2002:235) work on football as a key site for the expression of masculinity –with the increasing participation in Ladies Football encouraging the development of new concepts of femininity. This piece (like the others) is short and accessible and is designed to provoke reflection and debate on cultural issues within a wider public. Keohane and Kuhling (2004: 52) have adopted a similar kind of approach (albeit addressed to an audience that is highly literate) in a more sustained discussion of what they call 'collison culture'-reflected in the 'multiplication of collisions between the institutions of traditional political culture and the emerging institutions of reflexive modernisation.' Although there is a gender dimension to a small proportion of such work, the impact of their analysis of, for example suicide, is

reduced by a failure to recognise that although suicide is predominantly male, attempted suicide is not.

Work in the public sociology tradition has paradoxically both potentially increased the public 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 my own work on young people's construction of narratives of identity in so far as it also side-steps issues related to power and resources. 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, 2005; O'Connor et al, 2004)- while recognising that the consumer society is eroding gender differences in specific areas (with references to part-time jobs, clothes, consumption of alcohol etc not being gender differentiated). Building on a traditional cultural validation of relational strength, it argues that girls reflexively constructed their identity in terms of relational discourses that see heterosexual relationships as fun, impermanent relationships (such relationships were the closest approximation to pure relationships in Giddens' (1992) terms, although there was no evidence that they were intimate). Girls' same sex best friends were intimate and long-standing. Furthermore, arguably reflecting an enhanced sense of their categorical identity as women, they, like the boys, also described side-by-side activity based categorical friendships. The boys constructed their idea of themselves hierarchically: reflected in accounts of attempts to establish hierarchical dominance either competitively through football or physically, through fighting; and/or through their presentation of themselves as authoritative interpreters of a wide range of economic, political and social phenomena. There were occasional insights into the fragility of their self-esteem.

Uncertainty surrounding gender is not of course the only source of cultural dislocation but it is arguably an important one amongst young people. Gray's (2004:

42) work suggested that in most of the accounts of migrant and non-migrant 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 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). Thus the assumption that manhood involves hierarchical struggle with other men and/or domination of women has persisted (Clare, 2000).

Inglis' (2003:226) work is unusual in that although it is clearly in a tradition of public sociology it both prioritises gender and is concerned with power: specifically with identifying and exploring the nature and effect of 'a patriarchal order centred on the sexual oppression of women'. It suggests that the story of Joanne Hayes and the Kerry babies' case 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. Inglis (2003: 9) is particularly concerned with personal honour – arguing that only by 'identifying the constraints placed on their sexuality in each historical period [can] women's true status in society.. be ascertained'. He locates the vilification of Joanne Hayes in the context of both long-term processes of secularisation and individualisation in Irish society, and the perceived threats to the state by paramilitaries with their effects on interrogation practices in the Gardai. The argument that Joanne Hayes 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, it is a vivid and impressive critique of Irish society. However it is ironical that the publisher of this very accessible and subversive book is a University Press-and so the extent to which it is likely to be accessed by wider publics outside the University is problematic.

Inglis (2003: 153) suggests that a concern with public honour -the respect that comes not so much from what you do but 'who and what you are' 'tends to be a male obsession'- such honour marking out a person 'as superior'. Paradoxically although he is concerned with exploring the ways in which traditional definitions of women's personal honour are being challenged, he is not concerned with the question of whether symbolic capital- 'the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others (Bourdieu, 1999: 166) can be acquired by women from participating in the public arena. Indeed although he does refer to aspects of her family's public honour he does not explore the extent to which her cultural vulnerability could be related to the fact that her father had 'married in' to his wife's farm- a structural position of weakness in the context of patriarchal definitions of 'proper' manhood in rural areas at that time.

For Burawoy, the legitimacy of public sociology lies in its relevance. Much of this work 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 Burroway (2005) called the pathology of faddishness (the average size of the print run for the Chronicles of Ireland Series would be an interesting indicator). However Inglis' (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 methods and conceptual frameworks whose legitimacy has been established by scientific norms, and validated in anonymous peer reviewed publications. In its public aspect it is concerned with the public image of sociology as well as its relationship with students and the writing of textbooks for them. In the US, professional sociology

(with policy sociology): 'dictates the direction of the discipline' (op cit, 33). By a focus on professional sociology, we recognise that the process of converting private troubles into public issues is not simply an individual one, but also 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'. As we struggle to become the mirror that reflects and makes sense of who we are, as sociologists our relationship with the power holders and with the wider publics is equally problematic. However, 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, 1996:20). Our 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 wider family or societal concerns; 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.

In a society where women are increasingly participating in paid employment, and increasingly in the professional, associate professional and managerial areas, a sociological imagination that prioritises gender, addresses structural issues related to power as well as exploring the symbolic value of womanhood in the occupational arena and/or the cultural uneasiness about the patriarchal dividend is an important task for professional sociology.

Tovey and Share's (2003) mapping of the emergence of the discipline was a relatively unusual exercise in professional reflexivity. Professional sociology is weak in Ireland despite the fact that the Sociological Association of Ireland is now over thirty years old, and has published a refereed journal for almost 15 years (although it is still not listed in citation indices). Yet despite, or maybe because of its

professional weakness, the Sociological Association of Ireland has been relentlessly inclusive in its criteria for membership. Furthermore, while it remains in a state of professional paralysis, its conceptual frameworks and methods are regularly borrowed by geographers, psychologists, market researchers etc.

The public face of professional sociology is strongest in relation to its students. Perhaps not surprisingly then, in the 1980s, leadership was shown by the Sociological Association of Ireland in fostering the publication by commercial publishers of a number of sociology textbooks including *Irish Society, Sociological Perspectives* edited by Pat Clancy, Kathleen Lynch, Liam O'Dowd and Sheelagh Drudy (1986): a second edition was produced in 1995 from the royalties given to the Association. This kind of professional altruism is unintelligible in Brady's (2004) narrow individualistic view. In 1987, a reader on *Gender in Irish Society* edited by Chris Curtin, Pauline Jackson and Barbara O'Connor was published. It critiqued Irish sociology as embodying 'in large measure the values of the patriarchal society in which it was practiced' with most of the articles focussing on women and 'the ways in which they have been politically, economically and ideologically oppressed' (Curtin et al, 1987: ix and viii). However 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.

There have of course been other text books since then (particularly and importantly, Tovey and Share, 2003) but 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 us 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. Thus, the ESRI 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 ESRI 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 (see Lauder et al, 2004 for a discussion of this approach), it is in an ambiguous position as regards fostering the development of professional sociology. Finally, possibly because of the slowness with which sociology has appeared to embrace more radical perspectives, 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 for example, the 1990s marked a blossoming of Women’s Studies publications in Ireland (O’Connor, 1998). Many of these were driven by sociologists whose casual disregarding of the professional basis of sociological knowledge, while making perfect 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, *The Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader* (1997) by Anne Byrne and Madeline Leonard was an attempt to redefine the field of sociology by using social science and Women’s Studies as alternative descriptors of it (op cit, 1-4); while *(Re)searching Women: Feminist Research Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (2000) by Anne Byrne and Ronit Lentin was inspired by a similar attempt at the level of methods. Less than half of the contributors to both made any reference whatsoever to sociology in their backgrounds. It is probably not co-incidental that the overwhelming majority of the contributors to these collections 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.

There is little sense of the Sociological Association of Ireland ‘seeing itself as a public that acts in the political arena’ (Burawoy, 2005:10)-with sociologists, either individually or collectively, contributing less frequently than other professionals (such as psychiatrists, psychologists and 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). It is almost as if there has been a subliminal desire to avoid such political activity lest it undermine our professional status. 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 the development of a media bank. Nevertheless, perhaps not co-incidentally, senior positions in the Association have typically been drawn from the lower levels of the university hierarchy. This may also be associated with the longstanding under-representation of senior figures in the profession at Annual Conferences and their perceived lack of interest in understanding Irish society. (The creation of a forum for Heads of Department at the Annual Conference is a creative attempt to change this pattern.)

For Burawoy, sociology is a 'field of power' (op cit, 32) where the various types of sociology compete for dominance. In Ireland, the conflicts about methods and theory at Annual General Meetings in the 70s and 80s 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' (Buroway, 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 and to a lesser extent the state. Even more importantly from the point of view of this paper it has meant that the contribution of sociologists to understanding the importance of and the implications of gender in our rapidly changing society has been less audible and less influential than it might otherwise have been.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

It is suggested that the lack of structural consistency in the mapping of gender across institutions and the related cultural tensions is a private trouble in Ireland today. It affects a variety of aspects of women's lives including lone mothers' risk of

poverty; women's experience of glass ceilings in male dominated organisations; the tension between paid work and family responsibilities; and young men and women's experience of cultural dislocation. For the most part there has been a reluctance to see such phenomena as public issues: reflecting an ambivalence about the recognition of the importance of gender; uneasiness about the symbolic value of women in the occupational area and about the continued existence of the patriarchal dividend.

Buroway's (2005) four fold schema was used to look at evidence of an Irish sociological imagination, drawing on recent Irish sociological work and focussing particularly on the extent to which it dealt with gender related issues. Thus some of the ESRI work was looked at as illustrative of policy sociology highlighting the ways in which it has diversified its relationship with publics. However, although Hannan set an agenda on gender through his 1983 work, and although some of the ESRI subsequent work has identified important gender differences in poverty and wages, there has been little interest in developing a gendered analysis of Irish society. In the area of critical sociology the focus was mainly on the work on Lynch and Baker in Equality Studies and my own work, influenced by Women's Studies. Work in this tradition has been more concerned with gender –but it has been treated with some scepticism as reflecting a normative vision. Public sociology is typically exemplified by the Chronicles on Ireland series. However such work has paid little attention to gender. It contrasts vividly with the terrifying reality of Inglis (2003) analysis of the ways in which the patriarchal forces in Irish society impacted on the life of one lone mother, Joanne Hayes. With the possible exception of Inglis, paradoxically although such work has potentially increased the publics with whom sociology might engage in dialogue, it has also limited it 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 was weak being characterised by a rather naïve approach to the consolidation of professional power, and a failure to grasp the implications of the male dominated nature of the discipline and of the

academy. Thus potential leaders have found more conducive publics in interdisciplinary areas that were more sensitive to such issues.

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. However since a key element in understanding the extent and pace of change in Ireland to-day 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 have been.

Buroway's challenge is for each of the different faces of sociology to develop their public face- and to see each other's contributions as mutually enhancing. His questions: *Sociology for Whom; Sociology for What* are a salutary reminder to all of us of the need to involve a wider range of sociological knowledge and audiences. In doing this, a useful place to begin may be to explore variation in the extent to which men are differentially invested in claims to superiority, authority, privileging; the extent to which such ideas are under pressure in the family, in the educational and occupational system; the ways in which gender continues to map young people's lives, although its impact is denied- thus contributing to cultural dislocation; the structural and cultural processes through which women and their work continue to be devalued in our society; and the ways in which the economic system and the health/welfare systems are in tension because of the refusal to face the social and cultural implications of women's economic participation.

Such an agenda is true to the spirit of Wright Mills *Sociological Imagination* and suggests a bright future for an Irish sociological imagination. But will we embrace it?

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