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## Book Reviews

HILARY TOVEY and PERRY SHARE, 2000, *A Sociology of Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, IR£25, €31.74.

According to its authors, this book has two aims. The first is to offer an interpretation of the development of Irish society. The second is to provide an introduction to the discipline of sociology. Underpinning both of these is a particular vision of the nature of sociology. This regards all sociologies as in part at least national ones. The concern of sociology is to understand the particular society that the sociologist is a part of rather than interpreting it as a distorted version of some kind of amorphous modern society that is only inhabited by social theorists. As such this perspective involves taking Irish society seriously as a society in its own terms and not as an inferior or defective version of supposedly modern societies such as the United States, Germany or Great Britain. This is a useful and important starting argument all the more significant for the fact that it had to be made. It is an odd reflection on the institutional status of Irish sociology and of the status within that of work on Ireland that the authors feel the need to articulate and defend this position. It is unlikely that a textbook on British, American or Australian society would have to begin in this manner. But then senior professors in these countries would have achieved their position on the basis of research and interpretative work done of the countries in which they are employed, a situation that generally speaking does not apply in Ireland.

The first claim of the book is pursued through the argument that there is more than one way to become a modern society. There are in fact a variety of routes through which a society can modernise. The authors emphasise the importance of distinguishing the different paths to modernity and of distinguishing what is most notable about the path taken by Irish society. Here they place particular emphasis on the role of the state, rather than, for example, the market, in managing the process of economic development and in effect managing the road to modernity. Considerable importance is also placed on the development of Irish agriculture and the food industry as these have modernised in ways that are often not anticipated by what the authors' term as those working with "narrow and limiting conceptions" of modernity.

The second aim is pursued through a series of chapters that are concerned with introducing key areas of sociology. There are very good wide ranging chapters on a range of classic and conventional sociological topics such as class, education, gender, the family and sexuality, crime, and community and newer topics such as consumption and environmentalism. These are impressive works of synthesis, not least in the breadth of their coverage and in their willingness to treat the reviewed work as part

of a serious and ongoing project to understand Irish society. They are also distinguished by a respect for the work of sociologists who have written about Ireland. These include Richard Breen and Chris Whelan on social mobility, Kathleen Lynch on education, the late Vincent Tucker on medicine, and Tom Inglis on religion and sexuality. These chapters clearly establish that there is a serious, impressive and evolving body of sociological work on Ireland. The breadth and depth of their coverage means that they are essential reading for anyone interested in Irish society or Irish sociology.

There is also an excellent chapter that traces the origins of the discipline from the tradition of Social Inquiry represented by the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society to the variety of approaches that now characterise Irish sociology. In the process it is good to see the importance given to the Sociological Association of Ireland as a focus for debates about the nature of sociology and as a forum for voices and perspectives other than those from state supported research institutes. The chapter also traces how the dominance of intellectual life by economists and historians in a sense freed sociology to develop different understandings and purposes. The price of this has been that sociologists have been unable to break into the marketplace of ideas and cultural interpretations in Ireland. The perspectives of sociologists often have difficulty getting a space in intellectual interpretations of the past and policy debates about the present.

The introductory chapters are perhaps the most successful. They are also ironically the ones in which the interpretative dimension of the text is largely absent. Moreover, while these chapters are introductions they are not introductory in the sense that they will necessarily be easily read or readily comprehended by newcomers to the discipline, such as first year students. It appeared to this reader at least that many of the chapters are cast at a fairly complex level and presupposed some knowledge of sociology and its language and perspectives. In a sense the significance of many of the debates covered in the text may only be apparent to those who already have some passing acquaintance with them.

The interpretative perspective through which the book is framed is also not entirely satisfactory. It is not wholly clear what the authors mean by "modern" and "modernity". While this difficulty is endemic in the relevant literature some clarification would have been useful in the text. Is the term "modernity" an empirical description of a society, in which case it would be useful to know what its significant indicators are and why these are the relevant ones. For example, the authors say in an early chapter that modern society is urban, rational, industrial and usually capitalist. This is fair enough, though others might add characteristics such as secular. But it gets confusing when they go on to talk about varieties of modernity. Are they arguing that there are different ways to be modern, are there different combinations of the urban, rational, industrial and capitalist characteristics that can characterise a "modern" society? If this is the case then the analytic utility of a term like "modernity" seems to lose some of its coherence and much of its significance. The introduction, in a later chapter of the book, of Giddens's term, "high modernity" does little to sort out this confusion.

Alternatively, there is the possibility that the terms "modern" and "modernity" are ideological ones. In this sense some societies (the usual suspects are Britain, Germany and the United States), are presented as already there, the rest of us are only along the way though, with faltering steps and on different routes. If this is the case then the debate about modernity seems to reproduce all of the problems that we had with

modernisation theory in the 1960s.

Hanging over the entire project also is a peculiar and particular absence and it is one that the book shares with much sociology in the Republic. This is the lack of any extended consideration of Northern Ireland. If gender was once the blind spot for sociology, then certainly for Irish sociology and arguably for British sociology also, Northern Ireland has replaced it. This is not an argument that the text should have covered the whole island. This would hardly have been consistent with the view of sociology outlined in the text. But any interpretation of issues such as national identity, nationalism, cultural change, crime, and the media needs to make some reference to the impact of the Northern conflict on these areas. It is, for example, relevant to ask what effect the experience of conflict in Northern Ireland has had on our sense of identity and did it, for example, frighten people, intellectuals in particular, into post-nationalism? Whatever the answer it is undoubtedly the situation that sociology in the south ignores the North and that is in itself worthy of some consideration in a book like this.

Finally, it is perhaps relevant to point out that because the book has two separate aims there are in fact two separate books here striving to get out. One is a straightforward introduction to sociological material on Irish society, the other is an interpretation of Irish society. This is not uncommon in books about Ireland. Joe Lee's *Ireland 1912-1986* was a somewhat similar hybrid. Does this reflect the generosity of publishers in that they are prepared to give readers two books for the price of one? Or is it that they are unwilling to take chances on books with an interpretative angle to them? This may require sociologists in Ireland to conceal their interpretations as introductions and in the process undervalue them.

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CIARAN Mc CULLAGH

KIERAN ALLEN, 2000. *The Celtic Tiger: the Myth of Social Partnership*, Manchester: Manchester University Press. IR£13.00, €17.76.\*

Ireland has been enjoying an unprecedented period of growth in recent years, on a scale that would scarcely have been believable fifteen or even ten years ago. The twin evils of large-scale unemployment and involuntary emigration have been abolished, for the time being at any rate. While many factors are relevant to explaining Ireland's economic successes, social partnership has been widely identified as a critical element. The combination of pay moderation and tax concessions has undoubtedly enabled the benefits of growth to be more widely shared in the form of increased employment, and the institutionalisation of a consensus-oriented process at the heart of economic management has contributed to an environment conducive to promoting further industrial investment.

Increasingly, though, the weaknesses and even limits of the model of social partnership have become apparent. The scale of income inequalities is, in comparative terms, closer to that found in the USA than that of much of continental Europe. While

\*For an earlier review of this book see Kirby (2001), *The Economic and Social Review*, Vol.32, No. 1.

this is largely explicable with reference to the nature and speed of changes in labour force composition, it does raise questions about the conditions under which people are able to participate in the new prosperity, and the distributive and redistributive effort at the heart of the political process. Indeed, the durability of a uniform and centrally negotiated package is itself in some question as various groups challenge the terms of the pay agreement. Rapid growth has thrown infrastructural weaknesses into sharp relief in areas such as housing provision, transport policy, and waste management. Rising public expectations reveal the extent of structural problems in health care provision and social services, compounded by the recent history of enforced underfunding. And finally, recent years have brought to light many unresolved problems of state reform in areas such as party funding, "golden circles", tax compliance, and political corruption. We might expect that a book with a title such as this one would cast light on some of the shortcomings of the Irish model and perhaps point to a viable way forward. But this is not in fact the case. This book provides a diffuse and unfocused survey of many of the issues identified above. But the interpretation offered of each of the issues is quite distinctive. The cover photo depicts a demonstration by Socialist Worker activists: Allen's critique is congruent with the politics of this organisation. But his argument simply does not hold up on either analytical or theoretical grounds.

For most analysts of the social partnership process since 1987, the key features involve a commitment by the trade union movement to moderation in pay increases, backed up by tax cuts, and a guarantee of industrial peace on issues relating to the agreements. This reconfiguration of centralised pay bargaining, after the dissatisfaction of all sides with the experiences of the late 1970s, was triggered by the intense and prolonged economic crisis of the 1980s. Policy debates within NESC drew both employers and unions to an agreed analysis of the main priorities facing the country – to reduce borrowing and debt, to cut inflation, to restore competitiveness, and thereby to promote the conditions for employment growth.

Allen construes social partnership of this sort as inherently disadvantageous for employees. The principal evidence here is the decline in the wage-profit ratio in Ireland, which he takes as evidence that social partnership has functioned merely as camouflage for intensified exploitation. He fails to note that this did not quite restore the severe loss of profitability of firms in Ireland over preceding years, nor that this was an essential precondition for the expansion of output and hence employment. Neither does he comment on the growth in real disposable incomes over the course of the agreements, in contrast with the earlier phase of decentralised bargaining. He does not appear to think he needs to engage with any of the serious economic analysis of wage bargaining, industrial policy, or labour market policy. This is because he already has his mind made up about what it signifies; and his conclusions are not informed by a reasoned evaluation of the relevant evidence, or assessment of strategic choices made under constraints, or appraisal of counterfactual possibilities. This really will not do as a serious contribution to the hard choices that have to be made in advanced industrial societies. Allen does not engage at all with, indeed seems not to be aware of the vast literature on comparative political economy analysing the role of organisations and institutions in shaping bargaining outcomes, and most importantly, in accounting for the range of variations in such outcomes.

Why, then, have social partnership processes endured with majority support from both unions and employers, at least until the pressures of tight labour markets in the

recent past placed new stresses on the current agreement? For Allen the answer is easy – the answer is that social partnership has assumed the status of an official ideology, or rather the dominant ideology (p.35) of the Irish state, “much as Republicanism or Catholicism were in the past”. This dispenses him from the need to assess the costs and benefits of participation in complex political exchange deals of this kind; the people are simply being duped.

Allen is not interested in assessing outcomes because he is critical as a matter of principle of any negotiated employer-union compromises: he appears to view all bargaining relationships between employers and employees as inherently zero-sum conflicts. He takes the view that employer-labour conflict at workplace level is the only defensible way of defending the interests of working people. He is entirely uninterested in the mass of empirical evidence that the disaggregated pursuit of workplace industrial militancy, while it may yield better pay in the short term for those fortunate enough to be in profitable employments, has effects that are likely to be collectively very sub-optimal. Authors as diverse as Calmfors and Driffill, Regini, Crouch, and Soskice, have shown that the degree of organisational centralisation and bargaining co-ordination can make a very great difference to aggregate performance on inflation, growth, unemployment, and job creation. The consequences of different strategic orientations can be significant and far-reaching. These are issues of pivotal importance for the well-being of ordinary people's lives. It is surely, therefore, a matter of some political responsibility to consider what the consequences of different courses of action might be.

However, Allen does not appear to think it necessary to consider hard evidence: he proceeds from what can only be seen as an ideological a priori commitment to a Marxist analysis. In drawing attention to the manifest inequalities in Irish society, Allen claims that they constitute evidence of “a discontented majority” in the population. The source of the discontent, he claims, comes from the unacknowledged fact of endemic “class conflict” in “late capitalism”. “Workers, both blue collar and white collar, make up the vast majority” of the population (p.192); moreover, their latent power is the only force that “terrifies big business”. This really will not do as a serious account of class stratification, or the potential for collective action. Nor will it do to simply wave away the very real divisions of interest, priorities, and strategic preferences between various categories of employees, and to assume that organisation and representation of those interests is unproblematic. Neither can the many commonalities of interests between employers and employees simply be ignored, inconvenient though they may be for a theory such as his. Moreover, the contingencies of maintaining growth within a market economy are vastly more complex than Allen seems willing to acknowledge. The sole object of Allen's interest is a boiled-down conception of “class conflict”, which is assumed to be structurally inevitable. In justification of this, Allen reaches for assorted Marxist clichés such as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the inevitability of class polarisation and the prospective immiseration of the workers – all, needless to say, quite untroubled by any empirical probing at all.

Allen might not be too concerned by the charge that his conception of class and class conflict bears only the slightest relation to any empirically identifiable reality. He is ready to dismiss a range of alternative analyses not on grounds of their analytical inadequacy, but as themselves ideologically motivated. Thus, for example, he rejects the whole range of technical analyses produced by the Economic and Social Research

Institute as motivated by neo-liberalism, or a “traditional demand for more public sector cuts” (p.39). Now whether or not one agrees with particular analyses or policy recommendations, it is simply a know-nothing strategy to disregard the technical constraints of what is possible, and the likely costs or benefits of alternative policy stances.

What Allen offers is a thoroughly impoverished conception of politics. He is little short of contemptuous of the politics of social reform. Social Democratic parties are dismissed as “contradictory phenomena” (p.190): like many on the militant left, he seems to reserve special venom for those engaged in the actual politics of reform. The trade union leadership, which might have been expected to see through the façade of consensus as he depicts it, are dismissed as having been bought off – hopelessly compromised in their claim to effective leadership of their members by the sybaritic delights of company cars and pension schemes. He dismisses the organisations that advance the interests of disadvantaged groups as not only duped, but worse, dupers: “CORI have played a crucial role in aligning lobby groups for the poor with structures that are designed to lower wage rises for the majority of workers” (p.40).

Allen clearly thinks that capitalism is inherently unjust; fair enough, it is an arguable point of view. But the implications of his position go further: he seems to think that the only defensible course of action is therefore to undermine the market economy at every turn. Hence, Allen dismisses out of hand the struggles to achieve amelioration on the whole range of issues that make such a crucial difference to people’s quality of life, such as better living standards and improved social services. He is quite indifferent to the fact that welfare states provide widely different kinds of coverage in different societies, and that it may matter desperately to very many people what kinds of facilities are provided and what specific kinds of improvements are made in this country. For him, parliamentary democracy itself is, in effect, a sham. His position seems to be that nothing can be changed until everything is changed, changed utterly. All he lacks, it seems, is the Archimedian point from which to gain leverage, after which the bright new post-capitalist future can begin – better, naturally, than anything that had come before.

So what is left for the left – where is this leverage point? There are two, it seems, each equally implausible to the mind of this reviewer. One involves the encouragement, indeed vigorous promotion, of workplace industrial action, as the appropriate locus of engagement between the interests of workers and capital. Allen insists that each of these two terms is an undifferentiated whole. Hence, “workers are a majority”, in an undifferentiated amorphous lump, and all “capital” has essentially identical interests, which are necessarily opposed to those of “workers”, taken as a whole. The particularistic preferences and interests of any group are to be regarded as standing for the interests of an entire downtrodden whole. What Allen in fact endorses is an unrestrained workplace-level free-for-all, and the devil take the hindmost: far from representing progressive solidarity, this is tantamount to unrestrained free-market competitive behaviour. This is the narrowest form of political “*mé féinery*”, dressed up in would-be radical garb.

The second option follows from the first, for political mobilisation is assumed to take only one form, in which any protest is necessarily progressive, and all protests are mutually complementary. Hence any manifestation of action on the part of any section of the “working class” is taken as evidence of imminent revolutionary change. This appears to be envisaged as taking the form of a spontaneous, unmediated “*levée en*

masse". Indeed, all mobilisation is flattened into the same spectrum of expectations, so that anti-racist initiatives, feminist organisation, and street scuffles in protest at IMF and World Bank meetings, are all taken as harbingers of essentially the same political crisis. Not only this, but his interpretative lens enables him to read into the manifold discontents of modern Irish society a heaving ferment with only one meaning – that of imminent revolutionary potential.

The whole edifice of Allen's thought is based on an over-simple conflation of evidence with little or no solid analytical grounding to it, justified by a grab-bag approach to theory and explanation – picking out what suits his case, rejecting what does not. This is not social science, it is ideology. It would appear that Allen is primarily motivated by an emotional hostility to capitalism in all its forms; his project is to slough off the "muck of ages", a handy and widely-applicable term, it would seem, with which to dismiss whatever displeases him. Now while contempt for the evils of the modern world is in many instances exactly the right response, it does not excuse an apparently wilful refusal to analyse exactly what is going on. And this failure leads in turn to a diagnosis of the scope and opportunity for political change in Ireland which few beyond his own circle will recognise as remotely plausible.

The institutions and procedures of social partnership that have been in place for over a decade are currently encountering new challenges. It is clear that the system of "one size fits all" pay and tax deals is under pressure. It is equally clear that a host of political and social problems, ranging well beyond the framework of social partnership itself, need urgent attention. Insofar as Allen's contribution to debates about the so-called "Celtic Tiger" adds to the diversity of opinion, it is certainly to be welcomed. But the shortcomings of his book, both theoretical and analytical, must deprive it of any claim to provide an authoritative analysis or critique of social partnership.

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NIAMH HARDIMAN

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