

1. Do Tovey and Share provide an adequate understanding of contemporary Irish society? (How does their work compare with previous attempts at a sociological overview of Irish Society?)

Tovey and Share provide an extremely readable, accessible and informed overview that explores established topics; sets agendas in emerging areas and acceptably reflects areas of personal competence and perceived relevance. Its strength and its weakness is that the focus in terms of change is less explicit than in some other texts (e.g Breen et al, 1991: concerned with the effects of State activity; Heath et al, 1999: concerned with convergence and divergence; O'Hearn, 1995: concerned with dependency; O'Connor, 1998: concerned with gendered realities: see also question 3). Tovey and Share are also less concerned with documenting the persistence of class inequality and poverty than others (e.g Breen et al 1990; Heath et al, 1999; Nolan et al, 2000). They (plausibly) argue that this focus has limited the sociological imagination by being implicitly directed to State policy makers who may well be little interested in a radical critique of the educational system; in the nature of equality; in the process of class formation; or in theorising about the lived experiences of everyday life or capacities for collective action.

Such a criticism could apply equally to gendered realities. However, although references to gendered patterns are far more common in Tovey and Share's work than in most other texts (with the exception of Clancy et al, 1995 and O'Connor, 1998) it is not a key element in their model of change. Indeed, no attempt is made to critique or develop existing work; with theoretical ideas about gender being only briefly discussed at the beginning of *Gender, Sexuality and the Family*. Tovey and Share's sure touch falters in this Chapter- although the speculative discussion of masculinity is strikingly animated.

Inevitably, although it explores many of the same elements, it is more integrated than edited collections (such as Clancy et al, 1995). Less attention is paid to some topics,

such as work and family; more is paid to cultural phenomena such as personal and national identity; to social movements such as Catholic Fundamentalism, (as well as the Women's Movement: see also Mahon, 1995). Tovey and Share provide a more sustained reflexive account of the emergence of Irish Sociology (initiated by Clancy et al, 1995): being critical of what they see as sociology's concern with social acceptability. Ironically, their own concern with the cultural and agentic aspects increase their accessibility and their acceptability. They address the issue of post modernity (only explored by Peillon and Slater 1998). They touch on topics that intuitively seem important in understanding Irish society to-day: the body; holistic/alternative approaches; medicalisation; professionalisation etc. They do all this in an engagingly erudite and informed way.

2. Tovey and Share argue: 'In effect, all sociologies are 'national' sociologies'

(p.4). **Do you agree?**

It is difficult to improve on the quotation from Turner with which the book concludes: viz an exhortation to focus on the local but to attempt to encompass global processes. Of course, as Tovey and Share recognise, that task is fraught with difficulties not least because of the tenuous nature of 'nations' and their less than clear-cut relationship with societies. However, their focus on the 'national' is particularly important since it is increasingly depicted as provincial within the academy. (Many journals, such as *Sociology* or *Sociological Review*, appear to have no national focus but are in fact mainly concerned with the UK).

Especially in specific substantive areas, Tovey and Share do try to explore the crucial aspects of the context that creates key trends; the processes involved in their creation; and the similarities and differences with processes operating in other contexts. They challenge official taken-for-granted assumptions by locating such beliefs in the context of international trends (e.g Ireland's depiction of itself as a highly educated nation, with international OECD comparisons focusing on completed second level education: p153). Thus although their focus is national, it most certainly is not

parochial. In certain circumstances a specific focus on North/South comparisons may be particularly useful (Heath et al 2,000). However Tovey and Share's focus on a contextualised social and cultural reality rings true as the starting point of real sociological analysis.

3. Does their model of internal and external processes of social change provide an adequate understanding of Irish modernisation?

Tovey and Share see modernisation theory as providing a partial understanding of social change. Like those whom O'Hearn (1995) refers to as the new modernisation theorists, they argue that there may be various paths to modernisation (suggesting that industrial development has been over-emphasised relative to agricultural development). They favour what they see as a form of dependency theory - globalisation- 'one that shifts the focus from dependence to interdependence' although they recognise that it 'remains theoretically eclectic and relatively underdeveloped' (p 49). In fact, they are little concerned with issues related to power; inequality; exploitation etc at any level; being more concerned with the cultural consequences of globalisation than its economic reality. They do present a brief clear overview of issues related to global capital and the implications of globalisation for state autonomy. Nevertheless, O'Hearn (1995) and O'Dowd's (1995) dependency framework seems much more likely than their model to be able to make sense of effects on Irish society of the downturn in the US economy in 2001.

As competing texts have done (e.g Breen et al, 1990) Tovey and Share stress the key role of the state. Carefully framed and surrounded with caveats, there is a strong suggestion that they see an explanation involving the existence of a power elite as convincing; with professionals underpinning the legitimacy of the state. Their model does not help us to understand why economic growth in the 90s was combined with increasing inequalities, despite corporatist mechanisms such as social partnership.

In fact, Tovey and Share's model (Chapter 3) becomes lost in the dense description of the path of Irish agricultural and industrial development. The globalising context

needs to be operationalised more explicitly; the links between it and the processes through which state policies are formulated and the relationship between the (predominantly male) State and social classes, groups or movements needs to be much more explicitly made. The question as to whether the Celtic Tiger was driven by what O’Riain and O’Connell (2,000: 324) call ‘a new class, combining entrepreneurs and technical professionals’ created by the state is not posed. The contrast between the growth of such, predominantly male, prestigious occupations and the other area of employment growth (poorly paid predominantly female personal services) is not explored -nor are its implications as regards understanding the gendered nature of the State adverted to. The sustainability of the economic boom, is also not questioned-an issue that post September 11th cannot be avoided. Equally, the State’s ongoing failure as regards redistribution, and the implications of this as regards understanding internal processes of change is also not explored. In fairness to Tovey and Share, with a small number of notable exceptions these issues have generally not even been recognised. Indeed, Kelly’s (1991) challenge to explore the processes whereby State policies are formulated and the relationship between the State and civil society has moved on very little since Peillon’s (1982) classic work.

4. To what extent does the book succeed as a sociological analysis as well as a textbook?

The book does succeed at many levels as a sociological analysis. It does have a clear perspective on the nature of Irish society and its cultural reality. It critiques the limited nature of a policy oriented sociology and challenges the substantive focii of non-indigenous key works. It moves beyond the typical UK canon to include, for example, *Community* (Chapter 13) on the grounds that this is an important reality. In most of these areas it is very successful. It is informed, reflective and eminently readable.

As one might expect in a textbook, each chapter is typically concerned with introducing sociological concepts as well as with presenting Irish trends and data

(frequently locating these in a wider European or world context). One of the very refreshing aspects of Tovey and Share is that, unlike many textbooks, there is no sense of closure (There are no summary sections and no conclusions). Thus, *Class, Inequality and Poverty* ends by noting that there is still a great deal to be done on ‘the cultural realm and how it shapes the experience both of individuals and collectivities’; with ‘the analysis of social processes as class dynamics’(p150) seen as being still in its infancy. Some chapters (e.g *Consumption 16* and *Environmentalism 17*) explicitly focus on subjects that have attracted very little empirical attention from Irish sociologists, but which are popularly seen as key phenomena in a modern or post-modern society. Thus they set agendas and encourage further research.

5. Is a Sociology of Ireland a good summation of the field of Irish sociology and its current strengths and weaknesses?

Yes I think it is. As has been noted elsewhere (Tovey, 2001; Bonner 1996) the sociology of Ireland has been most consistently and energetically concerned with challenging taken-for-granted assumptions: such as that poverty no longer exists; that levels of social mobility are the highest in Europe; that gendered patterns have disappeared etc. Such work is important in a society where the class and gendered consequences of state activity has frequently been ignored by the State. Paradoxically however, sociology’s focus on issues of concern to policy makers, rather than to the wider public, has ultimately limited its efficacy in policy terms since it has been possible to claim that it lacked embeddedness in a wider public discourse. Indeed, it can be suggested that sociologists attempts to influence the State reflected a rather naïve view about the nature of power: an issue that has not been fully faced either by Tovey and Share. This is particularly obvious in their treatment of gender. Thus although they document gendered patterns, they are ill-at -ease with the idea of the socially created and culturally valued gendered nature of public power.

Tovey and Share are gently subversive. They question popular assumptions- such as the perception of Ireland as having high crime rates and the simple association

between crime rates and modernisation (showing that e.g. Japan, although modernised has retained low levels of general crime, albeit high levels of corporate crime). Drawing on McCullagh's work (1996) they suggest that 'abnormally low' rates of crime in the past reflected the over controlled and controlling society prior to the 1960s with high levels of emigration of young working class men. Some Chapters try to do too much- presenting descriptive historical trends as well as general theory and Irish data –and in the process not making their contribution to important emerging areas such as the body (e.g. *the Chapter on Body, Health and Illness*).

It is surprising how frequently what the authors see as the most interesting work has been done by those whom they identify as being in other disciplines (such as anthropology, history etc). The very focus in Tovey and Share's work on topics that are associated with agency, identity, culture etc increases its intelligibility to many people who, for various reasons, have little interest in structural realities such as power; the state; international economic dependencies, gendered state agendas etc. Because of this and its elegantly erudite style, this book is very likely indeed to generate interest in sociology as a discipline. This is very much to be welcomed.

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