Public intellectuals: definition and possibilities

The word 'intellectuals' is used by Miliband (1982) 'to denote the people who are mainly concerned with the formation, articulation and dissemination of ideas' (p. 87). Gramsci (1971) suggests that everyone can be an intellectual, but that not everyone in society 'has the function of intellectuals' (p. 9). Implicit in Gramsci's ideas about intellectuals is a concern with ideology and the ways in which ideas and systems of ideas are used by the powerful to present social arrangements as 'natural', 'inevitable', and 'what people want'. He also refers to the existence of traditional intellectuals (such as teachers and academics, judges and lawyers) and questions their impartiality.

O'Dowd (1996) argues that Irish intellectuals were traditionally preoccupied with national identity and with "constructing" or "imagining" the nation' (p. 16). In an increasingly consumerist society, they became 'the "professionals", the bureaucrats, the producers and distributors of "culture", well paid but politically irrelevant' (p. 20).
O’Dowd suggests that the relationship between intellectuals and power bases in Irish society, including ‘class, institutional, political and gender dimensions’, was typically ignored (p. 7). It is now glaringly obvious that the market and consumerism are no longer sufficient as sources of meaning or identity, and that the political and moral role of intellectuals under these circumstances is very relevant.

Various methods of categorising intellectuals have been put forward. Burawoy (2005) identifies four types of knowledge, each of which potentially has a public aspect (O’Connor, 2006). Implicit in each of these four types is the concept of a ‘public intellectual’:

• critical knowledge, concerned with challenging taken-for-granted ideas and reflecting an underlying commitment to a ‘better world’;

• policy-oriented knowledge, which attempts to provide policy solutions and, in particular, hold the state publicly accountable;

• knowledge emerging from and concerned with a dialogue with the public around relevant issues;

• knowledge about methods and the conceptual frameworks available to those interested in the scientific status of the knowledge.

There are always contradictions in our accepted views of the world, ‘that can be exploited for ideological challenge and resistance’ (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009, p. 215). Some intellectuals, because of their background or attitude to power, can demystify these views that are taken for granted and ‘construct new forms of discourse through which effective opposition and critical
expression can be achieved' (Ransome, 1992, p. 196). Thus, they identify choices that might otherwise be ignored because they constitute 'a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker' (quoted in Lukes, 1974, p. 44).

It has been suggested that: 'If the intellectual wishes to understand the society in which he lives, he has only one course open to him and that is to adopt the point of view of its most underprivileged members' (Sartre, 1974, p. 255). The night of the banking crisis in September 2008 and the subsequent decision to create the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) involved intensive consultation between the government and the bankers. Who adopted the perspective of the underprivileged, and considered the impact of these decisions on them? The impact on women has attracted even less attention (despite the exemplary work of agencies such as the National Women's Council). Indeed, the state's endorsement of neo-liberal capitalist policies meant it had, to a certain extent, women to thank for the creation of the Celtic Tiger, though little concern was shown for the ultimate impact it has had on women's lives (O'Hagan, 2009), and the same can be said for its demise.

Theoretically, public intellectuals can be seen as being concerned with creating new agendas and raising issues that those in power currently wish to avoid. They can also be seen as concerned with transforming what Wright Mills (1970) called 'private troubles' into 'public issues'. Thus, for example, public intellectuals might be preoccupied with raising issues about the appropriateness of a total focus on the market (to the exclusion of society); about the extent to which the current social and political arrangements (including distributions of wealth) are
inevitable or about the idea that gender is now irrelevant since 'equality is a fait accompli' (Ging, 2009).

What is meant by 'Times of Crisis'?  

In Ireland, we are all acutely aware of a banking crisis, a wider economic crisis, a political crisis and an unemployment crisis. Underlying these is a crisis concerning the power of the market and its relationship with the state—and ultimately the priority given to the creation of private wealth over all other social or economic objectives (Cronin, Kirby & Ging 2009). In the future in Ireland, it seems clear that poverty will continue to increase and long-term unemployment and civil unrest will be realities. There will be an even greater lack of trust of those in political positions and of those professionals who are thought to be 'in the pay of' organisations that are seen as solely committed to advancing their members' interests. Satires such as Scrap Saturday (an RTÉ Radio One sketch show that ran from 1989–91) problematised the definition of the ‘national interest’ and everyone enjoyed the joke. Now, faced with ever more revelations involving high-profile people in the context of a deepening economic crisis, the question of the legitimacy of the state’s authority is being raised. The fact that the political elite and, indeed, the business elite are male-dominated adds a further filter in terms of their concerns and priorities. We are arguably on the brink of a crisis of legitimacy along class and gender lines. Even before the economic collapse, the legitimacy of institutional power, the overwhelming majority of which was held by men, was in question. Thus, Connell (1987) identified ‘a crisis of institutionalisation’, reflecting ‘a weakening of the ability of the institutional order of family-plus-state to sustain the legitimacy of
men’s power’ (p. 159). Connell suggests that the long-term political source of this is ‘generalisable claims to equality’ as the basis for the state’s legitimacy (p. 160). Large portions of state expenditure (for example investment in women’s education) directly or indirectly increase the likelihood of challenges to the legitimacy of male power. There are tensions too arising from the ongoing patriarchal nature of the Irish political system, where geographical representation is seen as essential and unproblematic but where the issue of women’s representation by men is seen as unproblematic and warrants no public discussion.

Gender as an issue in Irish society today includes poverty amongst women—especially women who are lone parents—and 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 (Lynch & Lyons, 2008). Women experience ‘glass ceilings’ and homosocial organisational cultures in male-dominated organisations, with sizeable proportions of those who have been successful in such organisations reporting discrimination and prejudice (Humphreys, Drew & Murphy, 1999; O’Connor, 1996, 2010). We know that, per hour, women still earn less than men (86 per cent per hour: see Russell, McGinnity, Callan & Keane, 2009, p. 45). We know that, even amongst young graduates in the public sector, patterns of differential privileging of men and women are apparent within the first five years (Russell, Smyth & O’Connell, 2005), and that these patterns are even more pronounced in the private sector. Gendered patterns persist, unnoticed, even within family life (where boys are likely to get more pocket money than girls
(McCoy & Smyth, 2004) and are less likely to undertake domestic chores (Leonard, 2004)). The underperformance of boys compared to girls in education is seen by the state, the education system and the media as reflecting the inadequacies of the education system, while the achievements of middle-class children, as compared to working-class children, are seen as reflecting their greater ability. Thus, in contrast to the class-based message, there has been no attempt to encourage boys to emulate the strong work ethic, deference, diligence and achievement orientation involved in ‘doing girl’ (Clancy, 2001; Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Why do you think that is?

In the public discourses generated by the state, educational institutions and, frequently, the media, gender patterns are simultaneously assumed to exist and are denied since they are seen as reflecting essentialist and immutable realities, which are not amenable to state intervention (Ging, 2009). Thus, existing measures of economic growth (Gross National Product (GNP)/Gross Domestic Product (GDP)) under-estimate women’s contribution by excluding unpaid work in the home (thus effectively ignoring 25–40 per cent) on the grounds of technical difficulty, although this has long been challenged (Fahey, 1990). Similarly, during the Celtic Tiger period, construction (an area of predominantly male employment) became a particular focus for state support, rather than, for example, nursing services (an area of predominantly female employment), arguably reflecting gendered prioritisation (O’Connor, 2008c). Such patterns need to be located in the context of a society where the political system remains male-dominated and clientelistic, and hence one where politicians may be more likely to respond to lobbies from the construction industry than
from nursing services. However, in a context where two-thirds of those in employment are in the service sector, and where the export of traded services is a potentially major source of international revenue, the export of nursing services is an area where Ireland might have a competitive advantage. Yet this was not even considered, whereas domestic construction was seen as an obvious focus for state support, arguably reflecting the ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 82–83) of many of those involved in state policy and in the education system who grew to manhood when the Marriage Bar (O’Connor, 1998) was in existence. Interestingly, the area in which women are most likely to be in senior positions is civic society and the organisations related to it. Women constitute the majority of those heading Community Development Projects in disadvantaged areas, whether as programme co-ordinators or as chairs of the voluntary management committees (O’Dowd, 2009). Interestingly, such programmes were early targeted for cutting.

The 2007–11 Fianna Fáil-led coalition government was consistently and actively disinterested in gender equality. It fused the Department of Equality and Law Reform with the far larger and more conservative Department of Justice in 1997 (O’Connor, 2008c) and in 2008 imposed a cut of 42 per cent in the Equality Authority’s budget, at a time when cuts of 9 per cent were being imposed elsewhere. It showed no willingness to ensure that proportionate gender representation exists in the political system. It was less than assiduous in implementing the state’s 40 per cent gender balance recommendation as regards the composition of boards in key areas.

There are fundamental tensions at the heart of Irish culture today. We have lost faith in the traditional source
of moral control, the institutional Roman Catholic Church. We are becoming an increasingly individualised society of ‘me and mine’, whether ‘mine’ is defined in terms of family, class-based friendships or political tribes. The valorisation of the market dominates public discourse, endorsed by the state, and it has begun to impact on higher-education institutions. The fact that, through NAMA and the Special Purpose Vehicle, we are effectively transferring massive resources from the tax-payer to organisations (i.e. banks), which are staffed at the top predominantly by those who have brought about the collapse and whose main responsibility is to increase private profits, raises fundamental questions about the future of the state and its legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

To summarise, in addition to the commonly identified crises, there is the ongoing tendency to see gendered patterns—if they are seen at all—as a reflection of biological reality and beyond the responsibility of any structure. Beneath this kind of thinking, arguably, lie fantasies about a return to a male breadwinner model (a fantasy that sits uneasily with the fact that 43 per cent of the female labour force has third-level qualifications: Russell et al., 2009). In a context characterised by a decline in confidence in both the market and the state, an ethos of ‘looking after your own’ may constitute some kind of a positive lever if the definition of ‘your own’ is extended by public intellectuals to include all Irish citizens.

**What facilitates the development of public intellectuals?**

In a sense, the most obvious place to look for public intellectuals is in the universities because of their role in the creation and transmission of knowledge. And yet, in many
ways, universities are problematic sites for such intellectuals, partly because of the current perceived nature and purpose of education and the kinds of structures that facilitate it.

It has been suggested that ‘universities have been transformed increasingly into powerful consumer-oriented corporate networks, whose public interest values have been seriously challenged’ (Lynch et al., 2009, p. 296; also Sullivan, 2009). Paradoxically, this has been done in the name of increasing their public accountability. However, the patriarchal character of such institutions has been ignored. Gramsci (1971), writing in the 1930s, saw education as a process involving not only the acquisition of specific skills but ‘the development of intellectual self discipline and moral independence that enables people to make sense of their own experiences within the broader context of society’. In Wright Mills’ (1970) terms, it helps people to see ‘private troubles’ (whether these are unemployment, poverty, distribution of wealth and privilege, discrimination) as issues that need public action. Lynch et al. (2009) suggest that there are many structural and cultural obstacles to universities working this way, including their disciplinary focus and their concern with distancing themselves from normative activities and depicting normative concerns as an unworthy politicisation of knowledge. They argue that universities inhibit the development of critical public intellectuals concerned with challenging taken-for-granted ideas and putting forward conceptions of a ‘better world’.

There is a tension between the increasingly specialist nature of knowledge required in universities, and the activity of the public intellectual, whether in critical reflection or public dialogue. Measures of research excel-
ulence that rest on assessments made by other professionals (reflected in citation rates mainly generated by international, refereed journal articles), as opposed to broader indicators of societal impact, further undermine connections with the wider society and potentially absolve academics from responsibilities as regards societal transformation. Paradoxically, the result can be that those with no specialist social scientific or humanist knowledge at all are the most comfortable adopting the role of the 'generalist humanistic intellectual addressing a broad social constituency' (O'Dowd, 1996, p. 1).

Although purporting to encourage the public accountability of universities, the state is implicitly fostering a managerial ethos rather than one focused on social justice/human rights issues. One of the features of a managerialist system is the development of executive groups, who, to a large extent, are appointed by and report directly to the president. In that context, there are strong pressures towards homosociability (i.e. presidents appointing people like themselves: Grummell et al., 2009; O’Connor, 2010). Since the majority of the funding for universities is received from the state we have to ask, how likely is it that senior academic management will challenge state policies or actions? Individual factors, such as reluctance to becoming involved in public fora, lack of time, limited leadership capacities and a sense that such activity is not institutionally valued, also exist. Furthermore, even if university-based public intellectuals do emerge, raising of gender-related issues may still be problematic in a situation where the overwhelming majority of those at professorial level (89 per cent) are men; as are the overwhelming majority (82 per cent) of those in senior management positions in the universities. In a recent study
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(O'Connor, 2009a; 2010), senior management culture in Irish universities was found to be characterised by male homosociability and conformity.

For Gramsci (1971), each type of economic production creates a stratum of intellectuals, including technical people as well as those that legitimated that kind of economic production politically. Currently, the state is very much concerned with the production of graduates with narrowly defined skill bases, who can facilitate the development of industry today—particularly those in the areas of science and technology (O’Connor, 2008b). The accepted importance of these areas has become the mantra of powerful lobbyists, such as Science Foundation Ireland, and has been reflected in the investment of substantial levels of research funding, focused on potential exports rather than on employment. Even while accepting that scientific or technological ideas are important for economic development, it is by no means clear that innovations in such areas are the exclusive prerogative of science or technology graduates. Nonetheless, education policies seem directed primarily towards producing graduates in particular areas of science and technology—the sustainability of which areas has been questioned (Sheehan, 2005; Jordan & O’Leary, 2007). During 1997–2004, the Celtic Tiger era, some employment sectors identified as experiencing considerable growth were health professionals, teachers, care assistants, financial accountants and clerks, craftsmen, builders, labourers and sales assistants (Turner & D’Art, 2005). It is by no means clear how such areas created a need for university-educated science and technology graduates. Yet state officials and influential intellectuals saw such investment as key (O’Connor, 2008b). If graduates from these areas continue to work in state-funded univer-
sity projects, the relative cost and benefit of such employ-
ment creation needs to be balanced against alternatives. In
2007, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD) report found that Ireland had the
highest child-care costs as a proportion of earnings in the
26 OECD countries—almost a third of the average
family’s expenditure. State payment for workers in child-
care centres would therefore greatly reduce that burden,
and equally create employment. Yet this strategy has not
even been considered. Nor has there been any considera-
tion of the idea in the National Development Plan’s Mid
Term Review (Fitzgerald et al., 2005) that, in a knowl-
edge-based society, investment in subjects such as history
could be traded internationally just as easily as any other
kind of knowledge, with obvious outcomes such as state
support for universities to attract international students
in such areas.

Baker et al. (2009, p. 227) highlight the importance of
‘naming and claiming an intellectual space for new narra-
tives in public discourse’. The ability of social scientists to
claim that space has long been questioned (Kane, 1996).
The absence in Ireland of a clearly defined public arena in
which to put forward ideas must be recognised. There has
never been an equivalent of the agora and forum of Ancient
Greece and Rome: a public space for discussion of ideas.
Perhaps the nearest contemporary equivalent is the media,
but its audiences are fractured by age, class, gender and
region. In the printed media, the ‘gatekeepers’ (Husu,
2006) are working for commercial entities who have vested
interests in the perpetuation of certain taken-for-granted
views. Ging (2009) noted that in such outlets ‘the broad
acceptance of the myth that equality has been achieved…
[has] ultimately served to gloss over the substantial material
inequalities between men and women’ (p. 69). The democratisation of sources, reflected in the development of blogs such as The Irish Economy (www.irisheconomy.ie), does offer interesting possibilities. Indeed, as Baker et al. (2009) recognise, blogs are likely to become ‘one of the primary engines of change (or resistance to change) in contemporary societies’ (p. 214).

Organisations such as The Equality Authority of Ireland or the Combat Poverty Agency have been vital in commissioning research to challenge hegemonic realities, and providing structural contexts to legitimate it. However, this seems unlikely to continue, and independently funded structures such as the Think Tank for Action on Social Change (TASC) may become increasingly important. Given the current economic crisis, space outside the institutional structures will exist, but it seems likely that this will encourage issue-related action, rather than reflection on the power structures and their consequences, and the emergence of Irish pensioners as a power bloc in opposition to the medical card issue was an example of this.

It is very striking that, despite huge economic, social and cultural changes in Irish society, the basic institutional structures and the profiles of those at the top have changed very little in terms of class and gender. It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that the culture of privilege and entitlement also remains within them, and that they provide a less than fertile terrain in which to find public intellectuals concerned with problematising such patterns.

**So what can public intellectuals offer?**

Kirby et al. (2009) suggest that public intellectuals are important in challenging common sense understandings,
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in mobilising people within broadly based social movements, and ultimately in impacting on institutional structures. At the most fundamental level, the role of a public intellectual is to question the value premises, power structures and resource allocations of Irish society. Behind it is a more or less explicit version of what can crudely be described as a ‘better world’—a world that is at odds with patriarchal and/or class privileging. The work of the School of Social Justice in University College Dublin (Lynch, 1999a, 1999b; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Baker et al., 2004, 2009) has been particularly concerned with such a normative approach. In a number of universities, including the University of Limerick, gender is seen ‘as a fundamental feature of the capitalist system: arguably as fundamental as class divisions. Socialist theory cannot any longer evade the fact that capitalism is run mainly by and to the benefit of men’ (Connell, 1995, p. 104). In this context, gender is seen as a property of institutions or processes, with social landscapes being more or less ‘mapped’ by gender at social, cultural and psychological levels. Thus, despite some similarities in the lives of boys/girls and men/women, an overwhelming amount of the highest political, economic and religious power in western society, for example, is held by men; the majority of unpaid work in the home is still being done by women. Even clothes for young children are still colour coded by gender (blue for a boy, pink for a girl). In Connell’s (2002) terms: ‘These facts form a pattern which we may call the gender arrangements or ‘gender order’ of contemporary society’ (p. 3). Of course, individuals may reject these ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, ‘taken-for-granted’ roles, but the key point that Connell is making is that such gendered paths continue to exist. The nature of these paths them-
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selves may, of course, also change over time to reflect wider social, cultural and economic changes. Thus, for example, the dramatic increases in the proportion of female principals in primary schools (Lynch, 1994), in the context of campaigns by the unions and elements in the state, challenged the depiction of gender patterns in this area as ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, and ‘what women want’. However the degendering of particular paths co-exist within the overall context of gendered continuity within the educational system—with women constituting the majority of those in primary teaching and men the majority of those in university lecturing, and in executive and senior academic positions within the universities.

So, what can public intellectuals do? Firstly, public intellectuals can challenge the hi-jacking of discourses that facilitate a concern with ‘a better world’, for example the concept of fairness that is currently being used to justify the cutting of child benefit—a universal benefit paid in recognition of the fact that wages paid to individuals do not take account of the needs of children. This kind of argument raises the question of whether those who do not have children should be favoured over those who do. With child-care costs at €1000 a month in Dublin, are women in paid employment being forced to give up that paid work because they cannot afford to pay for child-care? Parents in Ireland spend roughly 20 per cent of their incomes on child-care (Lynch and Lyons 2008), as compared with an average of eight per cent in other EU countries (McGinnity and Russell, 2008). In effect then parents in Ireland pay up to 90 per cent of their child-care costs in comparison to 33 per cent in Denmark and 20 per cent in Sweden (NYC1, 2010). Is the fact that child benefit is paid to the mother, who is almost always seen as the
person responsible for meeting child-care costs, at all relevant to those wishing to cut it? We know that channelling money through the mother increases the likelihood that it will be spent on the children (Rottman, 1994)—is that important in a society where the level of child poverty is already significantly higher than the OECD average (16 per cent versus 12 per cent: McDonough & Loughrey, 2009, p. 3) and likely to increase? The state has long provided tax relief on payments to farm managers who are filling in for farmers, but it has never provided tax relief on child-care. Why not? The argument that it would be fairer to withdraw child benefit from well-off families begs the question about why the taxation system is not used to promote income equality while leaving universal child benefit intact, since it is the only benefit that is paid directly to the mother and it is known that such monies are most likely to be spent on the children. Public intellectuals can play an important role in raising questions about the extent to which policies surrounding child-care reflect patriarchal interests (and indeed implicitly endorse the view that child-care is women’s responsibility and is best discharged by the woman withdrawing from the labour force and being financially dependent on her husband/partner).

Next, public intellectuals can mobilise wider community awareness through their own media presence (Vincent Browne’s columns in the Irish Times on income inequality in Ireland are an excellent example of this). It has been widely recognised that there was a widening of the gap between the incomes of the top and the bottom 10 per cent in the 1990s, with McDonough & Loughrey (2009) showing that income inequality in Ireland was one-third higher than in Sweden or Denmark. Furthermore,
although most incomes have decreased since the recession, there is a similar ratio between the incomes of those at the top and the bottom. There have been assertions in the media that ‘fairness’ was likely to undermine the stability of the state. Implicitly, to suggest that social welfare payments should be cut is simply to legitimate the low pay, gender discrimination and poor pension provision of those at the lowest levels of the private sector. Nevertheless, there is evidence that almost three-quarters of adults are concerned with the extent of income inequality, with 85 per cent feeling that the government should take steps to reduce it (TASC, 2009). However, with the effective disembowelling of the Combat Poverty Agency and the Equality Authority, we may not be able to mobilise factual arguments like this in the future.

Lastly, public intellectuals can show solidarity and extend the boundaries of ‘me and mine’. The ethos of ‘looking after your own’ (family, political colleagues, class-based friends) is simultaneously Ireland’s greatest strength and its Achilles heel (since it potentially legitimates corrupt practices). Kirby et al. (2009) argue that this very recognition of ties and obligations is a key element in the ultimate creation of social solidarity. Indeed, in a small society of less than 4.5m, it is possible to imagine a broader definition of ‘our own’ than that implied by family or tribe. For this to happen demands that the needs of the underprivileged and those without public voices be included in that definition of ‘our own’. The threat of cutting Community Development Programmes provoked an example of cross-sector mobilisation involving academics and those in the statutory sector, as well as those in the civic and voluntary sector, in defence of programmes predominantly led and managed by women, where those being served were also
part of the management structure. It may well be that this kind of initiative will become more common and it offers interesting possibilities with regard to extending the definition of 'me and mine'. In this context, the intention of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to wind down and close the Community Development Projects in the most disadvantaged areas of the state (and the clearest example of institutional leadership provided by women) offers no reassurance about the state's ability to work with, rather than against, such forces.

Inevitably however, in the absence of violent political upheavals, the pace of change is likely to be glacial. Hence it is important to take a very long view and to focus on small achievements and particularly on consciousness raising and incremental change.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

It seems reasonable that the kind of society most people want for themselves and their children is one that is genuinely fair: one that values children, sees women as equal partners in the home and workplace, is equally involved in the construction and transmission of knowledge and recognises the structural inequalities that still exist in our society, whether on the basis of class or gender.

Yet that very notion of fairness is being eroded. Given that our social, political and economic structures are in crisis, with confidence in both private and public power (as reflected in the market and the state) at a very low ebb, the role of public intellectuals has become increasingly important. How far such public intellectuals will be drawn from the academy remains to be seen. The extent to which they will reflect a diversity of perspectives in terms of social class and gender and will put forward visions of 'a
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better world’ is even more problematic. If they do, they are more likely to foment informed debate and to contribute to a fundamental transformation of Irish society—eventually.