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**THE POWER OF PARADIGMS:
Social Science and Intellectual Contributions
to Public Discourse in Ireland 1**

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Six score and ten years ago, a man of few pretensions and even less predictive ability said ‘the world will little note nor long remember what we say today’. The comment might have been saved for this discussion of intellectuals, if O’Dowd (1985, 8) is correct in his statement that the latter, along with academics, are seen by others, particularly professionals, technicians and scientists, as producing socially irrelevant knowledge.

My interest in this subject originally arose from a wish to have a better understanding of what we know about Ireland, how we know it, and the uses to which that knowledge is put. I accept the historian J.J. Lee’s statement that we have a poverty of thought about Irish society (whether this is ‘poverty’ or simply the muddled picture we get from the reverse side of an over-embroidered cloth is a matter of interpretation), and his exploration of some of the reasons. Among others, he mentions the lack of *demand* for ideas, and the lack of urgent threats to society. In relation to academic life, he mentions poor resources, overly-fragmented disciplinary approaches, ‘the enervating minutiae of university life’, irrelevant and inappropriate university systems leading to poor reward for effort; and an emphasis upon producing people of high but narrow intelligence. Of particular relevance to this chapter are the ‘overly-fragmented disciplinary approaches’ and the lack of ability to synthesise varieties of experience ² (Lee 1989, 562—643). I agree with these criticisms, and shall expand upon some issues that have led to and arisen from them, especially as they relate to the social sciences.

First, I look at the role of ‘intelligentsia’ versus intellectuals in a complex society. Second, and of greater interest to me, I examine the limited intellectual paradigms that have shaped the discourse, especially the social science discourse, on Irish culture and society. A misunderstanding of these paradigms by the public and by policy-makers has led to serious misconceptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge, credible evidence and therefore valuable input into public discussion and policy-making. As a result, in the crucial interstices between ‘fact’ and ‘meaning’ we – social scientists are seen to be, at best, jaywalkers, losing fact to science and meaning to literature. Finally, I look at how we might broaden our paradigmatic base in practice.

Intellectuals, inteiligentsias, professionals and technologists

O’Dowd (1985, 11), true to his sociological background, provides four groupings of intellectuals, based on the institutional areas within which their work is carried out: state-affiliated, church-affiliated, literary and sectoral. In the first part of this paper, I shall expand upon some anthropological dimensions of the subject. Anthropologists are interested in modes of meaning management as part of their interest in cultural systems. Geertz identifies common sense as one mode: unreflective, largely unchallenged local meanings shared by people when faced with common circumstances; *ad hoc* knowledge of specific, routine aspects of life, with no attempt at logical integration of multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations (Geertz 1983; Hannerz 1992). Common sense is open to all people of sound mind; some aspects of common sense are probably generic to *homo sapiens*, but much of its content is culturally or subculturally specific. There are, however, other modes of meaning management: Alvin Gouldner argued that ‘cultures of critical discourse’ in which every meaning is problematised, and which contrast with common sense, are the domain of two categories of people who are engaged with ideas: the intelligentsia and intellectuals (Gouldner 1976; 1979). I am not entirely certain that this dualism is one worth spending much time upon but, if one has to, I prefer to see these as two *modes*—of imagining, and of functioning in relation to society—that can be found, in theory, across the entire spectrum of arts/humanities/science.

Intelligentsia modes

People operating in an ‘intelligentsia mode’ might be seen to work within restricted paradigms, usually within a specific field readily

accommodated in the existing division of labour (see Lee 1989, 636 for a telling example of this in the Irish civil service), although they might, using 'root metaphors' indigenous to their own fields, colonise other areas (Hannerz 1992, 156). (Economics' root metaphor, for example, provides the problem definitions, solutions, methodologies and evaluative mechanisms for most Third World situations; accountancy for business management and direction of university planning and growth; business management for almost everything else, including spiritual redirection; and, recently, chaos theory for business management.)³

In terms of accessibility to the public, although people working in both modes could, and increasingly do, write for the general public, it is probably true to say that the public find the extension of a handy and proven root metaphor to a new area of ordinary life more seductive than literary criticism or philosophical discourse: airport bookshops are filled with self-improvement books that extend systems analysis to areas such as career planning, business management techniques, domestic conflict, sociolinguistic analyses and gender power relations.

The 'intelligentsia mode' at its most expansive is often simply territorial imperialism; at a more restrictive level it is merely extending existing railways on non-converging lines. As Hannerz (1992, 167) notes, 'by pushing ahead in various directions with little apparent concern for the no-man's land of meaning which may line their paths, or, for keeping lines of communication open to the rear, [the intelligentsia] would seem to bring out much unintended incoherence'.

In my view, the label 'professional' is a social category, which can fall within the restricted range of 'intelligentsia' as discussed above: a culturally-defined credential-based and usually class-based distinction accruing to someone who applies the principles derived from a received body of rules and conventions, such as lawyers, doctors and accountants. A technologist falls into a similar category: designing and making according to a set of largely received but evolving principles, which may, in fact, lead to needs-related invention and discovery, as in the case of steel. (Engineering might be seen as a field that bridges technology and the western conception of a profession.)

Intellectual modes

Mischa Titiev, in his study of the laws of human cultural evolution, listed, as a corollary of increased occupational specialisation and

complexity, the declining percentage of individual knowledge. A feature of such decline is increasing incoherence and lack of integration. It is ironic that these are the characteristics that intellectuals are thought to bring to the management of meaning. The work of intellectuals⁴ is to bridge and bring coherence, the very characteristics which Lee (1989, 636) misses in Irish discourse; their work, according to Hannerz (1992, 139—40), is to ‘carry on traffic between different levels of meaning within a culture; to translate between abstract and concrete, to make the implicit explicit and the certain questionable; to move ideas between levels of consciousness, to connect ideas which superficially have little in common, to juxtapose ideas which usually thrive on separateness, to seize on inconsistency, and to establish channels between different modes of giving meanings external shape’ Intellectuals are voluntarily stateless travellers, working in Victor Turner’s realm of the liminal. When the boundaries of the intelligentsia are pushed, the lines of fields may be redrawn, but the ideal intellectual knows no boundaries. Geertz (1983, 20) points to the number of people who ‘jumble discourse’, such as Foucault and Kuhn, and the number of productions whose provenance is mixed; to parables posing as ethnographies (Castenada); theoretical treatises set out as travelogues (Levi-Strauss); ideological arguments cast as historiographic inquiries (Edward Said).

It has been a convention, following C.P. Snow’s 1959 ‘two cultures’ distinction, to place scientists and technologists within the intelligentsia, and those in the arts and humanities within the category of intellectuals, although even the few, of whom I am not one, who would seriously argue this today would probably agree that the distributions have considerable overlap. Indeed, radically new approaches within the sciences, such as chaos and complexity theory, have forced some scientists to abandon old paradigms and transcend the science/humanities division, and in some cases, even the realm of religion. It has been argued, in fact, that these approaches may have a revolutionary impact on paradigms for understanding human complexity (Patton 1990, 82; Lewin 1992, 19—21).

Intellectual/intelligentsia modes and complex societies

It might be argued that in complex societies, people operating in an intelligentsia mode are often valued more than those in an intellectual mode, in terms of redistributive rewards and power. With increasing specialisation of the division of labour, and increasing

technologisation, they fit into, and often arise from, the recognised division of labour. Their credentialisation often stems from, and suits, class-based societies in which a clear-cut basis for discrimination in terms of scarce rewards is necessary. They often command a technology or processes that are an elaboration of common sense, even if they are occasionally seen by the public as engaging in unnecessary obfuscation. Finally, their products, often market-driven, are readily identifiable, particularly to other ‘intelligentsias’ in management and public administration. If the intelligentsia mode is oriented toward the production and evaluation of knowledge claims in specific areas, and the discovery of new uses for these knowledge claims, particularly in areas where the problem is regarded as given, its products are probably also less threatening than the free-floating interpretation of intellectuals. Also, should those operating in this mode prove threatening, or lose their utility, their discrete fields are more easily marginalised by lack of funding.

By many Durkheimian measures, however, modern post-industrial society (with Ireland being a special case, anyway) is becoming *less* rather than more complex, since the specialised productive sector is declining and relatively interchangeable service workers are emerging. While this is theoretically interesting, what is more important for the argument here is that this is a perception that neither the Irish public nor the government tends to hold: the professional and technological nature of the new subjects that have been added to university curricula and the growth in numbers of new specialised third-level institutions all reflect a growth in specialisation and complexity, as do the third-level subjects, largely profession-driven, that have been singled out for special support in recent programmes for government and in the most recent Green Paper on education. Whatever the reality, therefore, the government, in any event, has not re-tooled.

The consequences of this emphasis can also be seen at the level of contribution to policy-making: Breen *et al.* (1990, 215—16) argue that the Irish state’s failure to ensure sustained economic growth and its role in underpinning class inequalities have been exacerbated by lack of rational planning, abdicating responsibility for development of coherent policy to a multiplicity of state- and semi-state sponsored bodies, whose fragmented responses failed, of necessity, to produce necessary large-scale changes. If the conceptions of intelligentsias, professionals or intellectuals discussed above are meaningful, this structural fragmentation is exacerbated by the composition of the boards of these bodies: a recent study

corporations shows that it is thought that government takes particular care to choose the two-thirds of members who are not elected worker member. Specialist technologists and professional people with legal or economic backgrounds, taking a 'common-sense, man-in-the-street approach', are most desirable. Of 67 board members, only two are academics and none is from the arts, the media, education or other areas where intellectuals or members of the intelligentsia might be thought to flourish.

An interesting question is where the social sciences might fit into this scheme, and why. Anthropology, for example, more exposed to marginality than most other social sciences because of its paradigmatic brief and the breadth of the field, has produced some eminent intellectuals, sometimes to its surprise: as Geertz (1983, 4) observes, anthropologists who prided themselves on the rough and ready homespun image now find that they have been 'speaking Wittgenstein' all along. But generally, are we social scientists prisoners of paradigms and of normative values?⁶ Do we have a bridging potential or do we simply fall between the stools of humanities/science, intelligentsias/intellectuals, specialists/generalists, purveyors of fact/purveyors of meaning? To consider these questions, it might be useful to look at the paradigms that have shaped our thinking, and the consequences of employing these frameworks. It is important to emphasise that I am not referring here to the usual hierarchised dualisms—qualitative versus quantitative research; inductive versus deductive, empiricism versus theoreticism, naturalism versus the experimental approach, perspectives versus theories—but to paradigms, ways of getting access to and breaking down the complexity of the world.

The power of paradigms

For at least three thousand years, western philosophers have debated views of the mind, the ontology and epistemology of knowledge and the appropriate methodologies for obtaining knowledge. All systems of definition are arbitrary (in the linguistic sense); which ones prevail at any one time are purely matters of perception, politics and preference. Universalist, evolutionist and relativist paradigms are important in anthropology: pre-modern, modern and post-modern in a variety of fields. Here, I should like to examine three other current paradigms and explore, in terms of contribution to the debate about Irish culture and society, and indeed to policy-making, the fact that within the social sciences in

Ireland one has been dominant, one is recently emerging (except in the field of economics), and one is largely absent. (It must be said, of course, that within the three paradigms, other differences among their proponents can be at least as great as their similarities.)

I do not wish to insult my readers by defining terms unnecessarily, but I think it important to explain how the terms I am using have been defined, or at least recognised, within the social sciences.⁷ Leach (1967, xvii) once said that Levi-Strauss inspired him even when he did not understand what Levi-Strauss was saying. Not being Levi-Strauss, I do not expect the same indulgence. I am also aware that the literature on the sociology of knowledge is about as user-friendly as a tangle of wire coat hangers.

Positivism/post-positivism

Social scientists in Ireland have drawn, until recently, almost entirely from one paradigm, the provenance of which has shaped not only the social sciences, but official and public expectations about the nature of reality and what constitutes credible evidence as a basis for action. This paradigm and its various European interpretations, usually referred to as positivism is, in fact, emergent post-positivism. Positivism, fading even in the 1950s, although not until much later in sociology, argued that a reality existed 'out there', based on immutable laws and mechanisms; knowledge of it was free of temporal and situational constraints; linear cause and effect law was the aim; the observer could be separated from the observed, leading to value-free inquiry; and questions, stated in advance, could be tested empirically. I use the past tense, although the general public and policy-makers are usually 'paleopositivists' and tend to believe that God confided this method to Moses when handing over the ten commandments.

Post-positivism is a modified version: the ontology is one of critical realism; a reality, driven by natural laws, exists but is not fully accessible to the observer; objectivity is only an approximate ideal, and methodologies have to be adapted, bearing this in mind. Both hold that 'truth' is a regulative ideal, and that knowledge is accumulated in a progressive way. The public and policy-makers accept this as a fact of life in their own daily affairs but find it a rather shabby dodge on the part of people who are being paid good money to think.

Post-positivists have to face many compromises in their modification of positivism: among others, the trade-off between internal

and external validity, which has been handled largely by working in more natural settings; the imbalance between precision and richness, which they address by using more 'qualitative' methods; and the imbalance between theoretical elegance and local applicability, which they address by 'grounding' theory in local contexts.

A *pure* positivistic or hypothetical-deductive paradigm involves an experimental design, and the collection of quantitative data, which are then analysed statistically. Such purism is rare in the social sciences, where we are more likely to have mixed forms: quasi-experimental design, qualitative and quantitative data, and statistical analysis; or ex-post-facto, causal-comparative strategies and descriptive (survey) strategies, which use, in the main, quantitative, but some qualitative techniques. Less frequently, we see quasi-experimental designs, qualitative data and content analysis. In almost all cases, the variables, regardless of the discipline and theoretical bent of the researcher, are pre-determined.

Most sociological as well as most anthropological research done *in* this country falls into this category: for example, although anthropological research is often thought to be naturalistic (variables not predetermined) simply because it uses qualitative techniques, in practice, research proposals for most sponsoring agencies almost invariably involve pre-specification of variables in order to get funding. Even something as generalised as a community study is usually simply a contextual approach, in which pre-specified variables are explored. Bell (1991, 93) refers to the 'stultifying empiricism' of the *Economic and Social Review*; an analysis of some of the other journals that could be classified within the social sciences, such as the now defunct *Social Studies*, and the Irish journals of education and psychology show a similar emphasis.

Irish positivists, true to their founder within the social sciences, Auguste Comte, see their research as having a social engineering function. This has been compounded by the fact that the major audience (and source of funding and control) for social science thinking is still state agencies and powerful societal groups such as the church, seeking empirical facts in a carefully controlled agenda.⁸ Hence we have the historical emphasis in Ireland on pathology and deviance from a largely unexamined norm, emphasizing poverty and unemployment; crime and deviance, violence, drugs and alcohol, the conditions of some minorities, and, importantly, the problems of rural areas, which have symbolic and political resonance for both church and state. The target of these

studies is the lower socio-economic classes: the fact that nearly everywhere, most social scientists come from middle or, occasionally, lower middle classes leads to studying down, in class and power terms, rather than horizontally or up, because they can get readier access to groups over whom their own social peers act as 'gatekeepers' Hence, in Ireland, which is not unique in this regard, we know almost nothing from the social sciences about the upper classes (see Shanks's *Rural*

aristocracy in Northern Ireland (1988) for an exception), and precious little about the middle classes, although these groups have benefited most from the divisions that, Breen *et al.* (1990) argue, have been reinforced by government in the Irish state.

Positivism and post-positivism are the models that are thought to correspond to 'science', and positivism is the one in which most of the involved parties or 'stakeholders' in an Irish research project, including often the subjects of the study, place most credence. If policy-makers accept any intervention from the social sciences, it is expected to be based upon this approach. Irish critics of post-positivism argue that its inappropriateness to an understanding of Ireland—universalism, progress, and 'science as *nomos*' (Bell 1991, 93)—make it of little worth in understanding relativities of place and history. But advocates of post-positivism value the power of those characteristics, particularly the ability to make generalisations; they also value, as far as is applicable, the strength of the scientific method. As I hope to show later—leaving aside the question of whether social science should ape the natural sciences at all, physics being the usual candidate—both of these views are based upon a conception of science that many scientists themselves no longer hold.

Critical theory

A second approach to knowledge is critical theory, sometimes called 'ideologically oriented inquiry' or 'orientational qualitative inquiry'. 'Critical' refers to the continual cross-examination of the logical consistency of assumptions, arguments, language and procedures; and a view of social institutions as sources of inequality.

Critical theory, which originated in post World War I Europe, includes such approaches as feminism, Marxism and neo-Marxism, Freireism, liberation theology, participatory research and, of course, critical theory itself. For critical theorists, inquiry is a political act: nature can be seen only through a window of values: the question in

critical theory is whose values? Critical theorists share with post-positivists a belief that reality is 'out there'; they simply argue that false consciousness, usually in the direction of capitalism-imperialism-sexism has led others to emphasise the wrong reality. Thus, critical theorists, like post-positivists, are universalists. The distinction between ontology and epistemology disappears, and critical theorists use a non-

manipulative research approach, in an attempt to facilitate transformation toward a desired end. It is the deliberate transformative end that separates critical theory, as described here, from other theoretically oriented research, such as structuralism or systems theory. But, for critical theorists, truth is dependent upon historical context: it reflects a particular social, cultural and intellectual tradition; judgement of a statement in relation to its intention for the good and true life. In this paradigm, knowledge does not accumulate: it changes with circumstances over time, embedded in a social-historical context.

Critical theory can give us much needed new perspectives: if one holds to a unitary consciousness of the species, whose view represents it? Here is the opportunity for the 'subjugated know-ledges', the voices of the formerly silenced, as Foucault calls them, to emerge. This approach has sometimes been used in Ireland in the hope that a uniquely Irish cast of thought will emerge. In the end, however, critical theory is tied to universalism, so the hidden agenda, hidden perhaps even to those who espouse it, is that, because Ireland is uniquely placed in some respects (for some it is at the intersection of First and Third World), *Irish* post-colonial experience can provide the basis for a new, if still universal, model in the move away from imperialism, capitalism and modernism.⁹ In this way, it plays to the notion of Irish exceptionalism, to a privileged standpoint based upon a possibly romanticised marginality.

One other problem with this approach is that, while as post-positivists we make all the decisions about variables and appropriate interventions, as critical theorists we run the risk of crypto-paternalism by seeking to transform the world view of others, while failing to seek the insights of those whose thinking we are liberating to liberate our own. (In this, it might be argued that we in Ireland have a long tradition of spiritual imperialism to guide us.) It is others, not we, who need facilitation. Also, the ultimate aims of critical theory, i.e. determining truth through what is good, and the empowering of individuals are themselves western cultural concepts dating from the Enlightenment. Paradoxically, given the

aims of critical theory, it is odd that only an elite can advance the debate; a kind of cryptological salon language ensures that no one else can understand it, unless they give up the day job.'¹⁰

Phenomenological approaches

A third paradigm is phenomenological and can be found, with varying emphases,

under the headings of interpretivism, hermeneutics, heuristics, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and constnictivism, among others. Unlike the first two (which are based on an Enlightenment assumption of rationality versus irrationality), this paradigm, based on the philosophical approach of Levy-Bruhl (1910), and encapsulated in Richard Shweder's (1985, 28) statement that '(t)here's more to thinking than reason and evidence', holds that many ideas, some of which are central to a culture's world view, fall outside the realm of rationality; they are non-rational. This approach interprets Hanson's (1958, 7) comment that 'the theory, hypothesis, or background knowledge held by an observer can influence in a major way what is observed' as an opportunity to be capitalised upon; it emphasises that reality exists only in the context of a mental framework for thinking about it; there are multiple realities and there are always a large number of theories that can explain a given body of material, because facts are value-laden and theory-laden. There is no distinction between the observer and what the observer comes to know; knowledge is an outcome or consequence of human activity, dynamic and everchanging. Thus, ontologically, 'realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions...dependent for their form and content on those who hold them; ...findings are literally the creation of the process of interaction between the [inquirer and inquired];...and individual constructions are elicited and refined hermeneutically. . .with the aim of generating one (or a few) constructions on which there is substantial consensus' (Guba and Lincoln 1989, 27). Interpretive inquiries seek meaning, rather than law; they are context-specific in natural settings and are holistic; the investigator is the instrument, proceeding inductively, and the result is a narrative, rather than a report.

Interpretivist knowledge is grounded knowledge; it represents the inside understanding of the perspectives and meanings of those being studied (the anthropologist's 'emic'); it is holistic, comprising 'pattern theories or webs of mutual and plausible influence (Lincoln 1990); it aims not for relationships between language and reality but for internal consistency among claims within a language

(Howe 1988, 15). To the extent that it seeks truth, this truth is a correspondence between the researcher's account and the participants' views. Progress is not an ideal. Until recently, with a few exceptions, the phenomenological approach has been missing in Irish social science.

The consequence of interpretive activity is the generation of new working hypotheses; the responsibility of the researcher is not to show generalisability of results, since the research is context-specific, but rather to give enough information

(the ‘thick’ description of Ryle and Geertz), for researchers in new situations to see how much of it is transferable. The aim of interpretive research is to enrich human discourse, and, as Geertz says, ‘to bring us in touch with the lives of strangers’; ‘to render understandable the prose of the world’ (Merleau-Ponty); or, perhaps, to make sense of ‘the scattering of incoherent lives’ (Thomas Kinsella)¹¹

The question for Ireland is probably not why positivism continues to have such appeal, for it is a legitimate approach to knowledge and carries enormous historical weight, even in areas as anarchistic as physics. Although all three paradigms described in this paper are embedded, as all ontology is, in romantic non-rational assumptions, positivism claims for itself the notions of law, of proof, of certainty, which are hard to resist. These may have a special appeal to a people influenced by Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy. In Ireland, until recently, appointments to a number of university chairs in subjects that might have an ‘interpretive’ brief such as sociology, philosophy and education, were influenced to some extent by the Church, and departmental emphasis on methodology, especially positivistic methodology, rather than interpretation were obvious. The growing appeal of critical theory may be related to Ireland’s post-colonial marginal position, historical missionary association with the Third World, notional subscription to socialism, and exposure by some to liberation theology. The more useful question perhaps is why phenomenology has not had much of a look-in,¹² and why disciplines that could have an interpretive brief have been so bogged down in emphases on positivistic, ‘quantitative’ methodologies. One can hazard some guesses: the first two paradigms are universalist and share a common ontological assumption about the nature of reality: each is clear about what is ‘wrong’ or ‘untrue’. Each sees facts as existing only within a theoretical framework. Phenomenological approaches see each of these paradigms as one of many possible constructions unsophisticated, perhaps, but not wrong, since facts exist only

within some framework of values. People socialised in ‘scientism’ and absolutes may find this relativism hard to take; and research sponsors who wish to advance a predetermined agenda will find it unhelpful. Also, in situations of scarce funding, people may wish, and may be expected by powerful agencies, to ‘legitimise’ their disciplines by emulating the dramatic successes of the physical sciences.

Valid know/edge in Ire/and today

Old science as ‘nomos’. Despite the fact that one of the most vicious attacks on positivism in recent times is written by a physicist (Weinberg 1992, 166—90), our adherence to it is based, in part, on a concept of science that, if examined, does not

reflect modern science at all. (Indeed, even *rejections* of positivism, as Hesse (1972, 275—92) points out, are based on a conception of science that is about a century out of date.) Positivism's linear, teleological rationality, coupled with assumptions of transparent language and innocence of 'facts', has been seriously questioned in the natural and physical sciences in ways prompted by developments in quantum physics. Chaos and complexity models of nonlinearity (Gleick 1987; Lewin 1992), language as constitutive rather than representational, power as a filter of all that we know (Habermas 1971), and the contingency of history (Foucault 1980) provide a very different paradigm from the notion of science as mirror.

This misconception is held even more strongly by the public: positivistic statements deriving almost directly from Francis Bacon are still quoted approvingly, such as one of Lord Kelvin's nineteenth-century utterances, cited recently in the *Irish Times*: 'When you can measure what you are speaking about and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind' (*Irish Times*, 8 February 1993).¹³ Statements such as this are the basis of popular beliefs that anything in numbers is more 'scientific' and 'objective' than anything in words; that numbers confer validity; that measurements measure what we think they measure, especially if they can be carried out to a good few decimal places, and that, in general, it is almost better to be precisely wrong rather than vaguely right. Definitive answers to secondary problems are preferred to tentative answers to larger ones. Credibility of evidence in Ireland today arises from this outdated model of science, so that even moral or

philosophical statements are cast as 'science' rather than as cultural frames. (In the recent debate on abortion, for example, professionals such as doctors offered as 'scientific' a variety of non-rational statements that are not accessible to the standard scientific paradigm: it was argued, for example, that 'science' shows that human life begins at conception; and the public take as 'scientific' unqualified and unexplained statements that pregnant women are twenty times less likely to commit suicide. (It seemed unnecessary to specify less likely than whom, or than when.) Or, to take an example that might be even more annoying to an academic audience, professionals with a shaky grasp of social science epistemology administer unit cost studies to measure and quantify, in an absurd parody of science, the relative weights that are to

be attributed, through funding, to the various academic disciplines.

'Fact' and 'meaning'. Sean Ó Faoláin (1969, 56) describes the early Irish mind as concrete when thinking and imaginative when creating, 'each contradicting rather than complementing the other— perhaps, in the long run, each enfeebling the other'. It may be that we, today, have a sociology of knowledge that reinforces this. In the social sciences, specifically, our concentration on positivism has led to the production of 'facts', albeit second-class ones, rather than interpretation and, true to positivism's system of establishing validity, an emphasis on refinements of methodology, usually quantitative. Larger insights into meaning in Irish life have been left to literary writers, newspaper columnists and recently, to a lesser extent, philosophers, who have given us some interpretation, but not what Irish people, socialised in positivism, regard as 'facts'.¹⁴ As a result of these limitations of social science, on the one hand, and of literature on the other, we have both the facts and the interpretations, but not coming from the same sources; we have interpretation without 'facts', and 'facts' without interpretation. Fiction is recognised as 'truth', but 'unscientific'; social science surveys are recognised as 'scientific' but not 'truth'. History, as a subject, is often seen merely as a reflection of one person's political allegiances versus another. In this respect, Ireland finds comparisons with many Third-World countries: literature criticises under a thin veneer of fiction, social science emphasises correct methodological examination of state-led concerns about social problems. All of this allows a lot of strategic leeway in terms of making statements about Irish society and culture, and even more in terms of doing anything about them.

'Appropriate' science. The failure of the social sciences to achieve the spectacular kinds of explanations associated with the physical sciences is usually attributed to our immaturity, or to ethical constraints on using such methods on human subjects, rather than to any possible incompatibility between our subject and our methods. But the anthropologist Roy D'Andrade, drawing on William James's definition of science as a body of knowledge appropriate to its subject, argues that a 'good science is one in which the scope and statements in any domain are appropriate to the order of reality that scientists assume for that domain. He sees three kinds of 'good sciences', physical, natural and semiotic: the first positing a homogeneous universe in which pure, basic or eternal law is sought; the second, in which a complex contingent universe warrants conditional generalisations; and the third, in which

different systems of meaning become institutionalised in time and space, seeking to understand phenomena that have meaning to meaning-imposing beings (D'Andrade 1986, 26—7).

Can we develop a 'good', or, better yet, an 'appropriate' science for the social sciences? Can we meet the specialised information requirements of a complex society and yet fulfil the generalising functions of intellectuals? Must we move toward the most restrictive end of the intelligentsia mode, narrowing our horizons to the occupation-based divisions that complex society fosters, or can we become utilisation-focused without abandoning the vital function of providing interpretive meaning based on a broad integrative base? I should like to argue that we can. If I read the Irish situation correctly, we social scientists should be looking for greater relevance and perception of relevance; more equitable representation of all the parties to research (Guba and Lincoln's (1989) 'stakeholders'), particularly a voice for those whose interests have been submerged in the evolution of the modern Irish state; and finally, timely, usable and valid insights.

These practical aims can be achieved without sacrificing the larger role of the intellectual. A 'good science', drawing on all the approaches described here and on others as they emerge, can 'weave a nomological net' (Halpern 1992, 247) through the creation of a 'paradigm of choice' (Patton 1986; 1990).¹⁵ But getting caught in the cross-fire between advocates of the paradigms described in this paper is not for the fainthearted, and such a suggestion that we might call upon all of them, ¹⁶ draws, if not blood, red ink (see for example Guba and Lincoln (1989, 17)). I

believe, however, that a more powerful social science in Ireland will incorporate all three approaches (post-positivism, critical theory and phenomenology), and that models in two areas of practical and immediate importance already exist: programme evaluation applied particularly to problems of education, but also to welfare, corporate analysis, environment and energy (see for example Patton (1986; 1990), and Guba and Lincoln (1989)); and Third World problems, where rapid assessment procedures (see for example Chambers (1992)), are now incorporating all three.

This is a considerable position shift for each of these fields: Third World research, until recently, was characterised almost exclusively by universalist, evolutionary assumptions and an empirical form of positivism modelled in part on agricultural science and in part on economics. Educational evaluation was characterised by measurement, description or judgement of variables identified by the client.

Now, both fields (largely independently—they do not cite each other’s literature) call for situationally-responsive research designs, rather than pitting experimental versus naturalistic approaches; fairness and balance rather than an objectivity-subjectivity polarity; both deduction and induction; questions and issues of concern to all the stakeholders in a situation, rather than forcing a choice between independent and dependent variables versus holistic systems analysis; collaboration versus detachment; developmental action-oriented research versus ‘freeze-frames’ on the one hand or constant ongoing dynamism on the other; hypothesis testing or generating, as appropriate, and both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Patton 1986, 216).

The practical advantages of a mixed strategy or paradigm of choices are obvious, both within projects and across a discipline: post-positivistic research can tell us what happens, in specified circumstances; critical theory gives a variety of angles from which to specify the circumstances, and phenomenological research tells us what these circumstances mean to those experiencing them. In the case of gender-related issues, for example, recent scientific research looking at differences in cognitive abilities has benefited enormously not only by internal correction, such as improved experimental design, but also through input from critical theory, reshaping the questions asked, arguing that differences are not deficiencies, that the generic ‘man’ means ‘woman’ about as much as ‘flesh-coloured’ means ‘brown’; and by phenomenological approaches that question what constitutes cognitive ability, the

validity of tests, and the fact that simple numerical answers cannot capture the complex nature and interaction of the multiple variables involved.

And there are many ways in which we, in our social science research projects, can expand our repertoires, not only of apprehending but also of *representing* phenomena. We might, for example, drawing upon the physical sciences, use insights from complexity theory to shape our questions about change and stability in levels of urban complexity, in revolutionary movements, in institutional organisation. In a project on youth culture we might not only involve perspectives and approaches from across the physical and social sciences and humanities, but we might also draw upon literary works (rather than simply open our chapters with apt quotations). We might use demographical, economic, historical and sociological insights and methods to paint a broad picture; look in detail at selected aspects that emerge through anthropological and psychological techniques, and invite artists, musicians and playwrights to complement our mode of reporting with other ways of representing the interpretations that we offer. If one thinks of the depth and extra dimension that

James Agee's account of post-depression US sharecroppers, *Let us now praise famous men*, gave to the studies of the US Soil Conservation Service, we get an idea of the impact that even this simple kind of multi-representation can bring.

'*For interpretation*'. I want to close by making a special argument for interpretive approaches, since they have received so little emphasis. In particular, because this conference has concerned itself with practical contributions to public debate, I discuss one approach, constructivism, not because it recommends itself more than other phenomenological approaches, but because its applicability is obvious. The term constructivism, created by Guba and Lincoln (1989), is a practical adaptation of phenomenology, created for research in areas such as educational evaluation and international development, where situations tend to elude controlled, experimental frameworks, as, indeed, most situations do.'¹⁷

In the constructivist approach, the researcher identifies and solicits the collaboration of all those involved in order to introduce the claims, concerns and issues of the 'stakeholders' In the case of an applied project in which a change is proposed, stakeholders are the agents/sponsors, the beneficiaries and the victims. (Victims are frequently omitted in research projects—the term can include the

potentially displaced, the disadvantaged, those who have suffered opportunity costs, or even people who desired an entirely different project, or none, such as the parties in the currently fraught issue of where, or whether, to site interpretive centres in Ireland). Agents or sponsors do not unilaterally determine the issues of study: an attempt is made to elicit this from the wider group.

In the next stage, the researcher collects the views of stakeholders and stakeholder groups, identifying both items of consensus and issues requiring further information and discussion. This is done through open-ended dialogue with each group, seeking their perceptions. Individuals and/or groups are asked to identify other respondents who would hold views that are very different, and the process is continued with these, to determine consensus and difference.

Following this, the claims, concerns and issues of each group are introduced to the others for response. Unresolved issues and competing constructions then become the basis of the research agenda. Depending on what these are, documentary materials, including professional literature, records, observation notes, surveys, interviews, are

added to the research, perhaps to test claims or determine the extent of a concern. There is no reason why literary works might not be included for interpretation, as well. The results are then introduced to each of the stakeholder groups for their response. This process should lead to new and more sophisticated constructions.

Representatives of each of the stakeholder groups meet, finally, to reach consensus on shared perceptions, to decide which issues need more information, which derive from fundamental differences, and which may be unresolvable. More information is collected on the contentious issues, so that stakeholders may reconvene their own groups to reach consensus. This information may arise from interviews, surveys, documents or observation. If unresolved items persist, at least the participants have a better understanding of what they are.

If the research involves the need for negotiation, this new information will be presented to stakeholders who have been empowered by their groups to act on their behalf. Negotiations end when and if consensus is reached, and a new construction is created, which is then tested with other stakeholders. The ‘final’ document or documents that emerge from this process, perhaps varying ones to meet the needs of different stakeholders, are more an account of how the researcher and stakeholders made sense of

the situation, and why, than a conventional report. ‘Final’ in inverted commas is appropriate, since the process can be repeated as necessary. Through this process, reality has been constructed, not discovered: knowledge has emerged as a result of stakeholder interaction.¹⁸

Now it becomes clearer why such an approach might not find powerful champions: politically, determination of the agenda no longer rests almost exclusively with an elite. Involvement of all from a position of knowledge, rather than ritual involvement, serves no political end. Methodologically, researchers may be concerned about the technical adequacy of the research when ‘non-expert’ stakeholders play such important roles. The results are usually project-specific, and cannot easily lead to sweeping solutions applicable to other projects.

On the other hand, one can argue that the notion of universal solutions is a construction, itself, and a failed one. The notions of greater accountability, transparency and empowerment are ideas whose time is already here in Ireland; people are becoming increasingly aware that information withheld is power diminished. The involvement of all stakeholders broadens the base of inquiry beyond that which any funder or researcher is likely to envisage. In the constructivist

paradigm, all of these notions arise from ontological assumptions rather than from political correctness. A constructivist approach actively and explicitly incorporates into the inquiry process the social/cultural and the political as basic characteristics of any circumstance.

In a society the size of Ireland, divided by class, tradition, serious issues of gender, an increasing imbalance in age demographics, leafy suburbs versus virtual no-go areas, and integrated versus alienated segments of the community, a constructivist approach makes eminent sense. Some speak of one nation, of two traditions, of the 'fifth province', of a unique perspective. How many voices has Ireland, how many perspectives? Constructivism argues that it has as many as there are people: the aim, therefore, is to see which constructs are shared, which are not, when and why. Every situation is novel, developing and marked by multiple, often conflicting meanings and interpretations. Capturing the core of these interpretations and contradictions is the essence of this approach. The task is to discover the diversity and commonality of

Irish meanings and experiences, and what the lived life is like.

In whose interests, one might ask, is it to do research like this? Everyone's, and no one's. Adding this approach to our paradigms is a political, a practical and an intellectual act. Elites, whether they be intellectuals, the intelligentsia or policy-makers, are not only 'experts' but also stakeholders along with all other parties. The 'social partners' are all of us, and we all need a voice. By recognising this, and using our knowledge to convince others, we may re-empower ourselves as well as others, in contributing to Irish public discourse.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to the following people who provided comments on this paper at short notice: Dr Michel Peillon, St Patrick's College, Maynooth; Dr Jamie Saris, Harvard University; Professor Ward Goodenough, University of Pennsylvania; Professor Richard Kearney, University College, Dublin; Professor Martin O'Donoghue, Trinity College, Dublin; and Dr Maiy Howard, St Patrick's College, Maynooth. Constraints of time, more than disagreements of substance, have prevented me from taking full advantage of their suggestions. I am particularly indebted to Professor Goodenough for reminding me that God gave Moses, rather than Noah, the Ten Commandments, thus saving me considerable public embarrassment.

- 2 He missed one, if a recent notice on a university student bulletin board is anything to go by: ‘What is the difference between God and Professor X?’ ‘God is everywhere, while Professor X is everywhere but here.’
- 3 For economics, see almost any World Bank study of the 1960s to 1980s; for accountancy, see most company director job advertisements in the mid-I 970s to I 980s and the unit cost studies of Irish universities; for business management as spiritual guide, see Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven habits of highly successful people* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); for chaos theory, see Tom Peters *Liberation management: necessary disorganization for the nanosecond nineties* (London: Macmillan, 1992), or Ralph T. Stacey, *The Chaos frontier: creative strategic control for business* (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 1993).
- 4 This conceptualisation of ‘intellectual’ may, using an anthropological distinction, be an ‘emic’ or ‘insider’s’ locally meaningful category, because it is very difficult to know, for another culture, how fields of meaning are delineated, and whether someone is transcending fields, or merely seeming to, by western norms of demarcation. For the purposes of this paper, however, most discussions of intellectuals appear to be appropriate to intellectualism in Ireland.
- 5 Currently, there is no more comprehensive analysis of the composition, currently or historically, of state-sponsored bodies, advisory councils, and the many government-established commissions, review groups or working groups by sector or education. Some government departments maintain data banks of suitably qualified persons, the analysis of which would in itself be interesting, but ministers are not bound to draw from these lists. It is my sensing that, while the composition of bodies such as those studied by O Nualláin has always reflected an emphasis on professional/technical expertise, which emphasis has not changed much over the past two decades, the composition of commissions

and review bodies has moved toward a greater stress on professional/technical expertise, and not necessarily even *related* expertise: the taoiseach’s current 32-member Special Working Group on the Film Production Industry, for example, contained 22 civil servants/state and semi-state executives/business executives/accountants (*Report of the Special Working Group on the Film Production Industry*, appendix I)

- 6 Jules Henry (1963, 287) made an interesting observation, which still holds: while science students are rewarded for ‘playing’ with systems, social science are not encouraged to ‘play’ with new family forms, values, relationships, economic redistributive systems, new forms of the State or religious reformation. Is, as he asks, ‘learning social studies...learning to be stupid’?
- 7 Although most social scientists would recognise the usages employed here, this is not to argue that there is agreement even within any one discipline: Halfpenny, for example, in his work *Positivism and sociology* (1982), gives twelve different common usages of ‘positivism’ among sociologists. Cohen (1989, 44) points out that use of the term in sociology ranges from a ‘specifically-defined philosophical position’ to ‘an unanalyzed curse’.
- 8 Michel Peillon points out that in France, for example, other audiences exist, such as secondary school teachers, who see themselves as intellectuals/professionals, and seek to

- read the social science literature because of interest in systems of social interpretation.
- 9 Another critical theorist might argue, of course, that it is Irish men who live in a post-colonial society; Irish women do not.
 - 10 I have heard Edward Said and Declan Kiberd, among others, argue that, to be effective, the colonised must write in the language of the oppressor. From much of the literature one can only conclude, therefore, that the oppressor is a critical theorist.
 - 11 We have a fourth approach, which we might call confusionism, adherents of which believe that they are not using an approach at all, but are simply getting on with the job; and a fifth group, modelling themselves on de Valera perhaps, who do not bother with research at all but simply look into their own hearts.
 - 12 The following illustrates the milieu in which phenomenological research finds itself: a few years ago, a student of mine carried out an interpretive study of what two classes of Catholic ten-year-old schoolgirls knew and thought about Protestants. One point to emerge was that the Dublin class believed that Protestants would not work in Marks and Spencer's or Dunne's Stores, because, they explained, the shop brand labels (St Michael's, St Bernard's) were offensive to people who did not believe in saints. They also believed that, since Protestants did not believe in 'Mary', their Christmas crèches contained all the usual figures minus one: instead they had a 'photograph' of Mary with an X drawn through it. Despite the fact that this research provided, to my knowledge, the first such account of a group of children's constructions, when I mentioned it to a prominent academic, he dismissed it as being not 'objective' and as inaccurate, since these ideas did not correspond to orthodox Protestant doctrine. Also, he pointed out, there were no photographs of Mary. On the other hand, the public may be ready for such approaches: Vincent Dowling, a former director of the Abbey Theatre, referring to a statement he made about some now long-forgotten contretemps, said 'It bears very little relationship to the facts, but it is the truth'.

THE POWER OF PARADIGMS

153

- 13 Some of his other comments, all known to be wrong-headed, even in his day, receive less attention: 'Heavier than air flying machines are impossible'; 'radio has no future'; 'X-rays will prove to be a hoax', and a misdating of the age of the earth by over four billion years, for example.
- 14 In recent years, a new group of commentators has begun to emerge who have tried to take broader perspective: social scientists such as Michel Peillon and Liam O'Dowd, some of whom rely in part on literature to illustrate their arguments, and others, including newspaper columnists such as Fintan O'Toole, who draw upon a wide range of social science findings. And we have always had civil servants, economists, etc. writing novels, but, unlike Douglas Hurd, in semi-secrecy. The biographical blurb on a recent novel, for example, lists every occupation that the author ever had except the current, quite senior one.
- 15 I do not want to suggest in this paper that paradigmatic limitations are the sole reason why social science intellectuals have had less than optimum impact on public discourse in Ireland, or indeed elsewhere. Other reasons include big delays between field research and publication, inadequate analysis of data collected, and lack of communication between researchers, policy makers and others influencing social action. Another is the fact that our response to social issues is not seen as one of immediacy and relevance. Tovey (1992) illustrates this beautifully when she (correctly) describes the 'seismographic shock waves' that Gibbons's rethinking of Arensberg's *Family and community in Ireland*, published in 1937, had, forty years later, among the Irish rural sociology community. (Arensberg

- himself at a 1987 conference, was surprised to find that he was still read in Ireland.)
- 16 It might be argued that Irish social scientists already do this 'serially': I am indebted to Michel Peillon for the suggestion that an analysis of social science productions in Ireland would show a paradigm segregation by venue: papers presented at meetings of professional associations are more likely to include calls for paradigms other than post-positivism; papers for professional journals are likely to have a post-positivistic base but some may elaborate on non-empiricist theory; and reports for sponsoring organisations are likely to be based on a strongly empirical post-positivism.
 - 17 Constructivism has its critics: Lee Sechrest (1992, 4—6), 1992 president of the American Evaluation Association, succeeding in office one of the founders of constructivism, calls it 'the Disneyland of evaluation' and claims that the main characteristic of its adherents is their inability to surmount innumeracy. Weinberg (1992, 188), in a passing swipe at all philosophies, says of this one '[no] one would ever give a book about mountain climbing the title Constructing Everest'.
 - 18 So, to alter (rather seriously) a story recounted by Richard Shweder (1991,356-8), on how baseball umpires call balls and strikes, a positivist says 'I clls 'em as they are'; a critical theorist says 'I calls 'em as I sees 'em'; and the partners in a constructivist endeavour say 'They ain't *nothin* ' 'til *we* calls 'em'.