By Brian Conway

Although the origins of sociology in Ireland go back to the 19th century, the Sociological Association of Ireland was only established in 1973. An earlier sociological organisation, the Christus Rex Society, was established at the national seminary in St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, in September 1941 and had a priest membership. On 5 May, 1973, Cyril White, Conor Word, and Joy Rudder organized a meeting in Newman House, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin, then home to University College Dublin, of about twenty sociologists, from north and south, with a view to establishing a disciplinary association. One of their first tasks was the election of a committee and the drafting of a constitution for the association. A standing committee including an elected president, chairperson, vice-chairperson, treasurer, secretary, and a six-person committee was also constituted. The first president, Hamish Dickie-Clarke, came from the then New University of Ulster, Jordanstown.

Some debate took place at this time about whether the organisation would follow a professional model or an intellectual model and what the name of the association would be. A number of possibilities were considered including the Irish Sociological Association and the Sociological Association of Ireland. The latter was chosen as the organisation’s name in order to avoid confusion, and a shared acronym, with the International Sociological Association. The SAI set itself the goals of promoting sociology as a discipline in Ireland, representing the professional interests of its members, and promoting sociological research on or about Irish society. Its physical infrastructure has migrated between different university departments and research institutes and a volunteer executive committee and administrator has carried out its day-to-day activities.

The association’s members came from across the island and one indicator of its early organisational success was a growing membership distributed across the categories of full, associate, honorary and student members. An inclusive definition of “sociologist” was adopted by opening membership to people who did not self-identify as sociologists and by not requiring university employment as a prerequisite. Organisational growth and development continued into the 1970s and 80s. In the difficult 1970s, the association established a sub-committee on labour market conditions for sociologists, but by the 1980s, it had taken several initiatives. In 1986, the association carried out a small-scale study to find out about postgraduate provision and produced a report entitled “Postgraduate Sociology Studies in Irish Universities.” An impressively detailed document, it laid out such things as fees, department specializations, facilities for postgraduate work, recent enrollment, and supervision policies. By this time, most of the universities offered postgraduate programmes in sociology at the Master’s and doctorate levels and reported low staff-student ratios.

Discursive developments in the 1980s included a new book series on Irish society dealing with the topics of gender, crime, power and conflict, and culture and ideology. 1991 represented an important year for the SAI, marking the launch of its first journal, the Irish Journal of Sociology. Founding editors, Tony Fahy and Michel Peillon, took on co-ordinating responsibilities for the journal’s inaugural issue and for the first three years of publication. The journal provided a new outlet for sociological writing on or about Ireland and published work in Irish and English. From 2009 the SAI’s journal will be published by Manchester University Press.

In the 1980s there were few university positions for sociologists but in the 1990s the labour market began to improve considerably. Now sociology is taught as a degree subject to large numbers of students. The main activity of the SAI since its founding, however, has been the organization of a lively annual conference. Rotating each year between the four provinces of Ireland, the conference provides a yearly showcase of some of the best sociological research by sociologists living in Ireland and sociologists abroad interested in Ireland. The Sociological Association of Ireland has thus matured from an initial committee of literally a handful of people to a sizable organization of over a hundred card-carrying members. Over the years it has developed a code of ethics for research, launched its own journal, organized an annual conference, published booklets and monographs, and has recently gone online with its own dedicated website www.sociologie.ie.

Brian Conway is lecturer in the Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland Maynooth. Since 2006 he has been treasurer and executive committee member of the SAI. His research interests are collective memory, sociology of religion, and the history of sociology.

Letter To The NA’s

Dear Friends from the National Associations,

I would like to thank you all for being active in proposing candidates for the next ESA Executive Committee and the President. The voting was launched on the 13th of July this year. Each ESA member in good standing has received a ballot list with instructions. Hopefully you are active in the voting process.

ESA is gaining acceptance and power as a professional association among social scientists in general and sociologists in particular in Europe. To date, 30 national associations have joined ESA and according to recent information, there are 1460 active members in good standing in the ESA intending to attend the coming conference.

Although day-to-day activities of ESA are organized in the form of Research Networks and Research Streams, the National Associations carry an important role in consultancy as well as in initiating science policy discussions about sociology and sociologists in Europe and beyond. At the coming ESA 9th conference in Lisbon, the regular National Associations meeting will be held on the 2nd of September, on the very first day of the conference, at 19:00 to 21:00. The first hour and a half will be devoted to a Round Table, chaired by ESA outgoing President Claire Wallace. The Round Table will continue the science policy discussions over the internationalisation of sociology and its future developments initiated by National Associations Council in 2000.

I am extremely happy to inform you that Helga Nowotny, the Vice-President of the European Research Council (ERC) and Vice-Chair of the ERC Scientific Council has agreed to join the Round Table and will share information about the ERC, its working principles, strategies and current practices.

Franz MOLL, a Slovenian sociologist, whose research interests focus upon science policies, will speak about international orientation of social scientists and the East-West divide in social sciences. Two doctoral students, David Reimer and Steffen Schindler, will share their own experiences as early career researchers and will analyse their future career paths, by combining this with future developments of Sociology in Europe on one hand and science policy perspectives on the other. ESA Executive Committee member Pekka Sulkunen will raise the question whether to launch a European Social Science Forum.

The second part of the National Associations meeting will be devoted to regular issues - your feedback and problems related to the ESA. However, our most important task is to elect the next Chair of the National Associations Council. Therefore turn to all of you to request that you start the discussions about the candidates to the next chair. Could you please bring the names to the NAC meeting for open voting?

I am looking forward to your active participation in the NAC meeting on the 2nd of September in Lisbon. Have a resourceful summer by gathering new energy and inspiration, and see you in Lisbon.

Yours,

Dagmar Kutsar
Chair of National Associations Council and the ESA Nominations Committee