

Comment

Geography in Ireland in transition

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In this short commentary I want to reflect on Irish Geography in the new millennium, and what I perceive to have been a major transition in the state and development of the discipline since 2000. I will be the first to admit that it is a convenient coincidence that the start of the story I want to tell begins at the point when the new millennium dawned, and the genesis of the tale certainly has its origins in the years beforehand. That said, I do think the date has significance as a rough temporal marker of the beginnings of a remarkable set of factors that I believe has transformed, and continues to transform, Irish Geography. I am mindful that what follows is a situated narrative, and I am sure that others will view differently the development of Irish Geography over the last five years. It would therefore be interesting to compare and contrast personal views of Irish geography and I would welcome dialogue on the health of the discipline on the island of Ireland. Such dialogue, I believe, can only be productive in thinking through the recent past and our stewardship of the future.

The successes

There can be little doubt that Irish geography, particularly in the Republic, has had a number of recent successes that have altered radically the fortunes and practices of the discipline.

Geography has been a popular discipline amongst students since the various departments were founded. In recent years the popularity of departments, particularly in the Republic, has grown considerably. As a result, undergraduate numbers are extremely healthy (some might say excessive). What this has meant is that all the geography departments in the South have grown in staff numbers over the past five years and there are now more professional geographers on the island than there has ever been previously.

Moreover, Geography as a discipline has done remarkably well at attracting large amounts of research funding, from a variety of sources, that has changed markedly the research cultures of departments. In the South, five of the PRTLIs (Programme for Research in Third Level Institutes) funded institutes have strong geographic themes and involve large numbers of Irish geographers. These are the Centre for Innovation and Structural Change and the Environmental Change Institute in NUI Galway; the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) a collaborative venture between NUI Maynooth, Waterford Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology; the Urban Institute Ireland in UCD; and the Environment Research Institute in Cork. These successes are mirrored in Northern Ireland through the funding of the Academy of Irish Cultural Heritages (AICH) at the University of Ulster and the Centre for Cross Border Research at Armagh.

Editor's Note: The references throughout this piece to 'Irish Geography' should be *generally* taken as shorthand for 'Geography in Ireland'.

In the South, these institutes, along with departments, have been successful at attracting funding for postgraduate studies, postdoctoral studies, and specific research projects from sources including the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Science, Royal Irish Academy, HEA North-South programme, Enterprise Ireland, Environment Protection Agency, government departments and agencies, and EU research funds. More recently Science Foundation Ireland has funded a National Centre for Geocomputation to be hosted by NIRSA in NUI Maynooth, opening up a major new source for funding. This funding success has meant that the research activities, research staff and postgraduate students within Irish geography departments, in conjunction with research institutes, have increased substantially. In particular the increase in postgraduate numbers is marked, growing several fold. This new postgraduate community forms an important part of Geography's new research capacity and is where a substantial proportion of the most exciting and challenging research is occurring.

Furthermore, the growth in research funding and capacity has led to increased mobility, interactions and visibility of Irish geographers and their research both on the island and further afield. In respect to the island this is reflected in five ways. First, there are a number of projects which link together staff and students in different departments and with different disciplines, fostering interaction and bringing geographic research to the attention of others. Second, for the past five years, all the departments North and South have come together to organise and take part in the Irish Postgraduate Training Consortium for Geography. The only discipline to organise such a training weekend, the consortium allows a pooling of expertise and experience, and helps to build networks between students and staff. Third, the Conference of Irish Geographers has increased substantially in size and has become a showcase for the range of exciting research taking place. Fourth, there has been a substantial increase in the organisation of seminars, workshops and conferences on the island that brings together geographers and others to share ideas and findings, and develop new networks. Fifth, the establishment of the Ireland-Geog mailing list has provided a forum for the discussion of issues pertinent to Irish geographers and a way of advertising events. These combined work to enhance the sense of geographic community and to make geographic expertise visible amongst the wider academic community.

In respect to international interaction and visibility there have been a number of developments. For example, the seminars, workshops and conferences organised by departments and institutes are increasingly attracting international audiences. These are being supplemented with visiting professor schemes and invited master classes in some locations. As a consequence, several of the world's leading geographers have visited the island to take part in events and have left with favourable impressions. Conversely, the increase in research monies has enabled Irish geographers to travel to overseas events to present their research to others. Irish geographers are also increasingly involved in collaborative research with geographers in Europe, North America and elsewhere, building and extending networks. Further, Irish research is more regularly being published in the top international journals, in international edited collections, and as monographs by international publishers (all ensuring an international readership). In addition other types of international visibility have been created by Anne Buttimer's role as President of the International Geographical Union (IGU) and the fact that one international journal, *Social and Cultural Geography*, is in part edited by Irish geographers (the Managing Editor located in Maynooth and the Book Review Editor in Queen's). In combination, these factors mean that Irish geography is more visible and engaged with internationally than at any point in its past.

In addition, Irish Geography is increasingly being recognised by government and semi-state agencies as a valuable resource. Irish geographers are contributing to national, regional and local policy debates across a broad range of social, economic and environmental topics, undertaking consultative research, and sitting on advisory boards and committees. Moreover a number perform this role at an international scale.

Alongside these more material changes, to my mind Irish geography has also undergone something of a theoretic transition, particularly with respect to human geography. While many human geographers remain rooted in the empiricism that characterised Irish geography over the past thirty years, there has been a recent broad engagement with social theory. In some respects this might be seen as the beginnings of the 'cultural turn' that took place in the UK and elsewhere throughout the 1990s. What it means in practice is a wide spectrum of exciting, theoretically informed empirical research taking place. This is particularly the case at postgraduate level, but also amongst a number of faculty. This transition, I believe, has aided the processes of interaction and visibility, particularly at the international scale.

The challenges

Despite these successes Irish Geography still faces many challenges. Indeed, these successes in and of themselves have created a number of challenges for departments and institutes. The large increase in undergraduate and Masters' students in the South has not been met with commensurate increases in staff. As a result, while staff numbers have increased, staff student ratios have remained very high (and certainly amongst the highest in Europe). In addition, as detailed, research postgraduate and postdoc numbers have also increased, alongside the need to increase individual research loads and pressures to publish. The pressures to increase research, despite very heavy administrative and teaching loads, are persuasive, driven by central administration, which in turn are under pressure from government to drive-up research capacity. One manifestation of this is that it is now almost impossible to gain promotion without a significant research and publication profile. Moreover, given that in the South departmental funding is based solely on teaching numbers and not research outputs, the research successes of Geography receive no reward in terms of staffing. What this means is that the teaching, administrative and research loads of staff members has increased dramatically. In short, Irish geographers are meant to produce as much research, to the same quality, as international colleagues while having substantially higher teaching and administrative loads. How sustainable this situation is in the long term is unclear.

Which brings us to the next problem, in that those in the South might not need to worry about how sustainable trying to balance teaching, administration and research is, because the research part of the equation might become more difficult as government funding policy changes. In the past two years funding for the PRTLTI programme has been paused, monies to funding agencies such as the IRCHSS capped, and the budgets to the universities cut. While the pressure to take on more research students and undertake worldclass research continues, the financial means to undertake such research is under enormous threat. What this means is that it is increasingly difficult to obtain research funding and to maintain research capacity. It also means that Geography as a discipline has invested enormously in training postgraduate students, and yet unless funding is maintained its means to provide a progressive route into a research career is limited.

The challenge with respect to these two points is clear: to alleviate the competing pressures on staff to enable them to balance more effectively teaching, administration and research, and to secure research funding that allows the successes of recent years to continue and to grow. How to address these challenges is, as yet, unclear, but it will be to our benefit as a discipline to take a sectoral response that ensures that geography maintains its present position.

The other main challenge that faces Irish Geography concerns the development of the geographic community. There is no doubt that, at present, Irish Geography is a vibrant and dynamic arena in which to teach and research. However, the extent and nature of this community is variable. There is certainly a group of scholars who regularly attend seminars and conferences outside of their institutions and who act as stewards of the discipline by organising events, running societies, sitting on national committees, and so on. However, there are others who are much less frequently visible. Having co-organised the Conference of Irish Geographers (CIG) this year it was noticeable how few staff members from some departments presented or attended (despite the conference being attended by over one hundred delegates). There may well be very good, individual reasons for absences, but as the premier event of the geographic community it might be expected that professional Irish geographers would want to come together to celebrate their successes, present their research, and meet their fellow geographers. Here the challenge is to extend the active, wider geographic community by encouraging more participation by those who at present restrict their activities to their own departments or specialisms.

Perhaps what was most noticeable in organising the CIG was the lack of any Northern Irish staff (although there were a few postgraduate students). This lack of attendance, I think, is one part of a broader trend which sees relatively few interactions between geographers North and South. This is not to say that there are no interactions, just that they are relatively small in number and weak in nature. This lack of cross-border interaction is clearly problematic and deserves attention. While, geographers either side of the border are working within different administrative structures and forms of institutional governance (such as the RAE in the North) they nonetheless share the same island and have much in common. Consequently one of the largest challenges for the geographic community on the island is to develop a space in which to examine Geography and geographers on the island and to forge new alliances. The all-island training weekend is one strategy that seems to be paying dividends, but there needs to be other sectoral responses to this issue. Perhaps a workshop needs to be organised that brings together geographers from across the island to discuss the relationships between them and to construct some kind of shared future for the discipline.

One potential challenge that looms on the horizon but is at present difficult to assess is the effects of proposed institutional restructuring within some universities. The role and position of geography institutionally, intellectually and financially is likely to be affected by any institutional restructuring, particularly if departments are merged or assigned to new faculties. We need to be careful to steer geography departments through such restructuring, if it occurs, to the benefit of the discipline.

Conclusion

Perhaps some will think it is too soon to reflect on and document Irish Geography since the new millennium. They may well be right, but we live in the here and now, and it is perhaps useful to think about and celebrate how far we have come in such a short space of time and

to reflect on how we, as stewards of the discipline, might build on these advances. To my mind Irish geography has gone through something of a renaissance. The discipline is in transformation. There has been a massive increase in research funding, the numbers of people engaged in geographic research have increased dramatically, more geographers are involved in policy work, Irish Geography has become more visible internationally, and so on. That said, there are challenges that need to be further addressed, in particular, how to continue the successes in the face of the retrenchment of funding and how to enhance the interactions between geographers north and south of the border (and depending on how things unfold, the position and role of geography within new institutional structures). The challenge then over the next five years and more is to continue to grow the discipline and build bridges between geographers working across the island of Ireland. These are substantial challenges, but recent progress and transformation demonstrate that they are possible and worthy of the effort. By continuing to invest in the discipline, we will reap the rewards.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Denis Linehan, Ulf Stromayer, Brian Graham, Mary Gilmartin, and Jim Walsh for comments on an earlier draft of this commentary.