Book Review

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Peter Murray and Maria Feeney (2017) *Church, State and Social Science in Ireland: Knowledge, Institutions and the Rebalancing of Power, 1937-1973* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

On Sunday 7 January 2017, RTE 1 Radio's flagship current affairs programme, *This Week* broadcast an interview with Archbishop Dr Eamon Martin. The context was the ongoing debate in Ireland about proposals to liberalise the country's laws and regulations around abortion. Archbishop Martin urged Catholics, still, by far, the majority religious denomination in Ireland (78% in 2016 Census), to mobilise politically to protect the right to life of the unborn, thereby promoting the Common Good. The Catholic Church, indeed all the denominations, have been entirely consistent for decades in opposing abortion provision. Nonetheless, opinion polls suggest a significant majority in favour of liberalisation. It was put to Dr Martin that this said something about the limited impact a Catholic education appears to have in shaping social attitudes. Dr Martin responded that the purpose of any good education system was to equip "people to debate, to discuss, weigh up maters, to have a balanced view, not to be too one sided, particularly for a public representative…" He went on to lament the failure of public representatives, TDs, Minsters, to commend the work of "Catholic education". Indeed, Dr Martin's plaintive appeal was from the position of someone for whom Catholicism's moral values, the Church's appeals to the "conscience of society", are rarely heard o over the din of the dominant liberal narrative, the purveyors of which were largely educated in Catholic schools.

Whilst the relative breakup of the Catholic Church's moral monopoly has become part of modern Ireland's dominant narrative, the institutional changes underneath this are less clear. Peter Murray and Maria Feeney's *Church Sate and Social Science in Ireland* provides a detailed, deeply researched analysis of a pivotal period in the weakening of the Catholic Church's "grip of unique strength" on Irish education, in particular sociology and sociological research. It is a work that would prove valuable to final-year and post-graduate students of social science as well as modern Irish history. It does assume a level of prior knowledge about key developments and individuals in Irish political and social history, and implies rather than explains a theoretical framework, Nonetheless it is an empirically grounded and nuanced analysis of how and why the church lost control of the production, interpretation and dissemination of sociological knowledge. In so doing, the authors present a fascinating paradox, an example perhaps of unintended consequences. The apparent failure of the project of independence seemed clear from the numbers of Irish people migrating from rural areas to urban centres – primarily outside Ireland. Whilst religious vocations reached their high in 1961 this was also the year independent Ireland recorded its lowest ever population. The forces underpinning the increase in clerics were haemorrhaging people. Recording the scale and patterns of emigration was one thing, identifying its causes and proposing solutions required much deeper empirical investigation. Sociology was dominated by clerics for the four decades after independence and the discipline was effectively socially applied ethics. The scale of social dislocation however forced a turn towards empirical investigation. The Catholic Church clearly advocated a rural idyll, made up of self-reliant, family owned farms, as a morally preferable way of life; more conducive to the common

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good than urban-based, materialism. However, the authors show how the priest-sociologists were motivated less with enforcing doctrinal adherence than investigating what practical measures were needed to support rural Ireland, and what economic and social benefits might follow. The work for example, of Jeremiah Newman (derided in the early 1970s as the authors show by Conor Cruise O'Brien as the "mullah of Limerick") drew on comparative research from France according to which rural community development, funded by the state if necessary, would act as a counterweight to the problems of over urbanisation. This was the type of recommendation, based on comparative social research which did not need doctrinal endorsement. Indeed, the contemporary debate around decentralisation, regional imbalances, etc. echoes this earlier debate. Priest sociologists might well have preferred the rural idyll but they could advocate for its retention and funding on secular grounds. There was nothing therefore necessarily incompatible between the recommendations of clerical social scientists and their non-clerical counterparts. The key chapter, at least for this reviewer, is Chapter 3, the appropriately titled: *Facing Facts: the empirical turn of Irish Catholic sociology in the 1950s.* The developmental state of the 1960s, with its focus on economic expansion, informed by the newly created entities such as the ESRI resulted in the expansion of social science research. From the late 1950s, driven by the needs of the developmental State, the provision of 'free' post-primary education and consequent higher numbers at third level, plus a decline in vocations, by the early 1970s social science was peopled by laity. What the chapter examines in great detail is how, notwithstanding the energy and influence of the hierarchy, particularly Archbishop McQuaid, academic social science had become a numbers game. Fewer and fewer priest sociologists influenced the direction of social science research.

This is not to say Catholic social thinking didn't continue to shape public attitudes to morally loaded social questions. This influence was shown as Murray and Feeney argue in the 1983 rejection by referendum to allow divorce in limited circumstances. As the authors show, clerics appealed again to social research, echoing Newman's earlier research and advocating rural development on socio-economic grounds. The impact of divorce, again drawing (selectively) on international comparative research, was that it would have deleterious social consequences. The authors further show how the reception of clerics' factual evidence reflected perceptions of status. They cite survey data on the dramatic decline in Church attendance, data which correlate to the decline in perceptions of clerical status. Indeed, more recent survey data confirm the decline in attendance. Correspondingly, divorce, contraception, same sex marriage, and now, potentially, abortion have been accepted by an Irish public largely indifferent to what the Church prescribes.

A brief review such as this cannot hope to do justice to a work of such depth and detail. The range of sources, primary and secondary is impressive, marshalled to provide a rich analysis of a fundamentally important shift in institutional power over the production, generation and interpretation of social research. The key overview is of the Church, as the State's primary provider of education, turning to embrace empirical social science research for mundane, pragmatic reasons and subsequently losing control of the narrative as the need and scale for research grew in tandem with the increase in the State's role in society.

The Church's loss of social power is one of the most significant features of recent Irish social history. It is a loss clear in Archbishop Dr Eamon Martin's plaintive appeal to those educated as Catholics to mobilise politically to reject abortion. Peter Murray and Maria Feeney's book helps us to understand the institutional, economic and social developments which contributed to this loss.