Modern Ireland: A Sociological Odyssey: From Colonialism to the demise of the Celtic Tiger

Dr. Eamonn Slater

Course requirements: attendance, an open mind and a term paper (2.500 words) due at the end of term.

Is Ireland sustainable?

This course explores many aspects of a society that has evolved from the being the first country to be colonised by a modern state, to being one of the
wealthiest countries in the world. It is a complex story that can’t be told by any one discipline. So accordingly, this course critically embraces an interdisciplinary approach in narrating the ‘Irish story’, - a story woven with intricate patterns that are both local and global. We examine the economy, the culture, nationalism, colonialism, society, spatial relationships, suburbanism, car dependency, ecology, emigration, tourism, themeparking, car dependency and visual culture.

This course is an attempt to explore how a dialectical methodology can explain how a society evolves over time. To achieve this aim, we need to change our habit of observing reality as a mere collection of objects, detached from each other – as fixed constants. And in opposing this ‘common sense’ understanding of our world we should attempt to see concrete reality as a highly interconnected totality in continual motion, made up of processes that metabolise with each other and consequently determine our world and the objects that inhabit that world. To grasp this ‘new’ reality we need to embrace a dialectical methodology – a new frontier of conceptualization!

Articles and books on the reading list:

This is a reading course. The lectures introduce arguments that are raised in the readings. But crucially, the lectures give you the necessary framework to interpret the readings. Lectures serve merely as a broad introduction to the areas covered in the course. Reading will have to done in order to gain a more complete understanding. To facilitate this endeavour, extra information will be provided as handouts in class. The readings for the lectures have been rated for their importance by star symbols, a *** is the most important to read for the lecture. You should try to read at least one of these readings, if not more for each lecture. Although, no single book covers all the topics of the course, the following text constitutes background reading on the sociology of Ireland. But it is not a textbook for the course:

Perry. Share, Mary Corcoran and Brian Conway A Sociology of Ireland, (Gill & MacMillan, 2012, fourth edition)

Most of your reading material not available in the Library will be handed out in class or electronically made available to you.

Articles, which are referred to, are identified with regard to the journal in which they are found in. These sociological journals are available upstairs in the Library on open access, or as electronic journals and access to them is through the library.
**The strange case of ‘Whiskey in the jar’? Introducing the course through Rock music.**

In this lecture I want to introduce you to the course by using the medium of rock music and specifically the emergence of Irish rock music to explore the issues involved in understanding how Irish society evolved from a colonised society to being the Celtic Tiger. We begin by looking at how an Irish rock group ‘Thin Lizzy’ broke into the British charts with a traditional Irish song, - ‘Whiskey in the jar’. The band’s lead singer and composer, Philip Lynott claimed that a lot of his inspiration came from Celtic mythology. How this came about is related to how Irish rock music became a global phenomenon.

‘Clear, Cool, Crystal Water’ (documentary).

**SECTION A: Colonial Ireland (1169-1921) – ‘When the historical moments fall on the living and the dead’.**

1. **Colonizing culture and nature within the landed estates themeparks**

Here, we begin our analysis of visual culture. It began under colonialism and specifically from the landlord class. They along with other elites of Europe embraced romanticism in its many and diverse forms. But was in gardening that the romantic picturesque was spatially embedded into the Irish landscape and in its wake ecological colonialism also emerged among the native ecosystems. Consequently, the parklands of the landed estates were redesigned to look like ‘little Englands’. Thus the landscape becomes politicised!

Somerville-Large, P.1995, *Carton and Castletown* ch.18 in his *The Irish Country House*  
Carson, C. 2012, *Technology and the Big House in Ireland, c.1800-c.1930*  

2. **Feudal rent, Famine and emigration**

In the nineteenth century, a variant of the feudal mode of production was dominant in the rural economy, in which the rent relationship between the landlord and tenant was crucial. This form of commercialised Feudalism reduced the Irish population to a meagre level of existence and even starvation as occurred in the Famine of the 1840s.

Gibbon, P 1975 ‘Colonialism and the Great Starvation of Ireland 1845-9’.  
3. Colonialism of Ireland as a dynamic social process

I want to propose that Marx understood that the essential dynamic of colonialization operated through a political structure he entitled ‘the regime’. The colonializing regime tended to evolve over time, sometimes eliminating operating agencies and other times creating new ones depending on the circumstances. In the Irish case, the colonializing regime dominated not only the economy but also the native ecology, which was a crucial precondition for the emergence of the Great Famine.

Slater, E. and McDonough, T. 2008, Marx on 19th century colonialism of Ireland: Beyond Dependency theory, NIRSA working papers, no.35.

‘Shadows of the West’ (documentary)

SECTION B: Post-colonial Ireland (1920s-1960s) – ‘Mere fingers in the greasy till’.

1. Peasant farmers, - determined by the cultural process of ‘keeping the name on the land’

In the 1930’s two American Anthropologists, Arensberg and Kimball, claimed to have discovered in the West of Ireland an almost classic example of a stable ‘traditional’ society. Their work provided a bench-mark against which subsequent changes in the whole of Ireland can be measured. From their work we can uncover the traditional social processes that were determining that society as a traditional, ‘subsistent economic system, strong communal institutions of the family and the community and an oral culture which
encouraged intense face-to-face interactions.

***P. Gibbon, ‘Arensberg and Kimball Revisited’.

2. Peasant commodity producers, - ‘betwixt and between’ traditional values and modern economic activities.

The commodification of farming is about how farmers become increasingly involved and dependent on markets, not just to sell what they produce, but also to obtain resources and inputs. The commoditisation of agriculture as a process has been going on for centuries through the sale of produce but input commoditisation has only developed in the period since the 1960s. The latter form of the process is linked with the increasing specialisation of agriculture and the decline of mixed farming.

***P. Gibbon, ‘Arensberg and Kimball Revisited’.
* P. Share et al. 2007, A Sociology of Ireland, pp.118-124.

3. ‘Peasant fundamentalism’ as the essential core of the Irish Post-colonial State

Here, we finally arrive at the essential determining process of peasant fundamentalism in political enactments that were brought into being which attempted to support the peasant family farm by giving financial incentives, protecting the family, etc. In short the state attempted to contain both market forces and Irish sexuality in order to sustain the peasant family farm.

* Eoin O’Sullivan and Ian O’Donnell, 2012 I Coercive Confinement in Ireland, ch.24 ‘Conclusion: Explaining coercive confinement: Why was the past such a different place?’
Ireland’s Containment Culture and the Carrigan Report (1931), in his *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment*.


**SECTION C: Transitions and Transformations 1958-1980s: ‘a rising tide that did not lift all the boats’**

1. **The demise of the ‘family farm economy’ and its peasantry.**

   According to Brody, the essential structures of the traditional family and community in rural Ireland were crucially changed with the introduction of urban values through the media and the cash nexus. In their demise, individualism began to emerge. But what is crucial to us is how he attempts to combine the culturalism of values with a market economy to explain the apparent decline of the traditional family and community.

   H. Brody, 1973, Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland, Multiple Library copies.

   ***D. Hannon, 1979, ‘Peasant Models and Irish Rural Communities’ ch.1 of *Displacement and Development: Class, Kinship and Social Change in Irish Rural Communities* (extracts).

   The Ballroom of Romance (film)

2. **Rural Industrialization and the breaking the land ‘chain link’**

   Accessing jobs beyond agriculture in newly established multi-national firms had major consequences for stabilizing the rural population and changing the gender relationships of rural Ireland. Breaking the ‘vice-like’ grip of the land was the precondition not only for the demise of peasant Ireland but also for the emergence of consumer society.


   *E. Slater, ‘Restructuring the rural – rural transformation’.


   The Irish State played a pivotal role in the emergence of dependent industrialization. As the main administrative institution in a society, the State was continuously engaged in the regulation of conflict among other structures of the society. The specific nature of the Irish State has been characterized by its
centralizing tendencies and the presence of clientelism in its structures.

*E.Slater, ‘Restructuring the rural – rural transformation’.

SECTION D: The Spatialization of the Celtic Tiger: ‘Enclaves of Late Modernity’

1. The ‘cosmopolitan’ gaze - the aestheticization of space

John Urry has argued that cosmopolitanism involves a kind of connoisseurship of places, people, and cultures. Therefore, it tends to highlight the importance of visual and of mobility in the formation of a culture of cosmopolitanism, - an outsiders perspective of a local place. But crucially this form of cosmopolitan visuality becomes ‘materialised’ in built and certain enclaves of the ‘natural’ environment.

2. Media representation of romantic Ireland! – ‘Cultural globalization’

Ireland has been represented through various forms of media, especially rural Ireland. But in representing the physical reality of Ireland, they have tended to idealize it by emphasizing the aesthetic. This aesthetic in its various forms has inherently attempted to transcend the mundane, constructing Ireland as an exotic other.

***S.Ryder, 2009, ‘Modernity’s Other: The Quiet Man, the Field and Commitments’
Justin Carville 2009, ‘A Sympathetic Look’: Documentary Humanism and Irish Identity in Dorothea Lange’s Irish Country People’
The Field (2000) extracts
The Quiet Man (1952) extracts

3. Theme-parks of Ireland

Theming is about representing our Irishness as an ‘exotic other’ as a way of creating an identity which is different from other global societies. Theme-parking is physically realizing these themes on the spatial plane which consequently symbolically embellishes our immediate environment, both built and natural.

***M. Gottdiener, 2001, ‘From a Themed to an Anti-Themed Environment and Back’ in his Theming of America.
**E. Slater 2000, ‘When the Local goes Global’ in Memories of the Present, edited by Eamonn Slater and Michel Peillon, Multiple Library Copies.
SECTION E: The Global enclaves of intensified modernity: ‘local and global spaces’

1. ‘Speed’ – the compression of space and time.

Ireland is increasingly becoming a place in which people have no choices, but to use a car to participate in normal life, whether this means going to work, shopping, engaging in extended family life, or just entertainment. In a real sense Ireland has become a ‘car dependent’ society.


J. Wickham, 2006, ‘Car dependency and the quality of urban life’, Ch. 6, in his Gridlock: Dublin’s transport crisis and the future of the city, Multiple Library copies.

2. ‘Faster lives’

Contemporary society promotes a new level of highly individualized and intensified consumption – hyperconsumption (Freund and Martin). In transport, mass autobilization fosters overdriving and suburban sprawl. In cuisine, the growth of fast food outlets and super-sized meals promotes overeating. These and other types of consumption and new work practices have caused a reconfiguration of time and space in modern Ireland.


***P.Freund and G.Martin, 1993 ‘Auto Space’ in their The Ecology of Automobility,


2. Financialization of everything: ‘Drowning in the greasy till’

During the Celtic Tiger and its demise, there was an intensive penetration of the process of commodification into aspects of Irish culture which was either community orientated or existed outside the market economy. From sport, to dancing, and to even the homes
became areas for financial investment and speculation.

***J. Wickham, 2013, ‘After the party’s over: the Irish employment model and the paradoxes of non-learning’.

**M. Byrne, 2013, ‘We’re facing a housing crisis, not just a mortgage crisis’ The Journal.


SECTION F: Suburbia of the Green Isle: ‘When the Idealistic dreams of the future became the financial nightmares of the present’

1. The Suburban aesthetic and the aestheticization of everything within.

The aestheticization of everyday life refers to the growing significance of the aesthetic in the processes of commodification and consumption. Lifestyle products and services combine to shape our modern identities. It is through processes of cultural production that now determine of our personal identities.


E.Slater, 2014, ‘The Photograph and the Dolmen’ NIRSA working papers

2. ‘Accelerated Suburbanization’ – When homes became commodities!

The accelerated suburbanisation of Ireland is one of the key legacies of the Celtic Tiger. Population growth and a robust economy have contributed to an unprecedented demand
for housing. Suburban expansion, particularly on the periphery of large cities, has been largely developer driven, leading to concerns about the viability and the sustainability of these communities in the long run.


3. ‘Is Suburbia ecologically sustainable?’

Suburbia is an ecological contradiction, where it extols the virtues of plant greenery as its defining spatial characteristic but only on the ornamental level, while in the reality of its subterranean ‘pores’ it is creating an ecological wasteland.

** Davis, M. 2010. ‘Who is going to build the Ark? New Left Review, vol.61
Slater, E. 2015, “Rustic” suburbia or “Soil” city

‘We live in a culture with a propensity for seeing things. To make sense of the world around us, we process information by detaching parts from the context and applying formal processes to assess them. Our culture tends to objectify that information as opposed to seeing relationships. […] This leads to discreteness and separation that work against the inherently continuous experience of the built environment.’ (Renee Chow, 2009)