Contemporary Irish Politics and Society: Understanding the sociology of change.

Dr. Eamonn Slater

Ireland represented as an organic totality
The Course requirements

Attendance, an open mind and a term paper (2,000 words) due at the end of term

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. 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.

SECTION A: Introducing Ireland as evolving exotic ‘other’

1. Lecture

*Irish Rock Music: ‘soul searching for an identity’*

Rock music has been crucial in globalizing Irish culture. In constructing an Irish identity, through this form of cultural animation, it has also provided a challenge to the values of the status quo. So embedded in its distinctive aesthetic form is a message of revolt – a cry for change!

The Irish Rock Story: A Tale of Two Cities (2015)
SECTION B: Colonial Ireland (1169-1921) – ‘When the historical moments fall on the living and the dead’.

2. Lecture

Colonizing Aesthetic and the gardens of the Picturesque

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. It was in gardening that the romantic picturesque became spatially embedded into the Irish landscape. Consequently, the parklands of the landed estates were designed to look like ‘little Englands’. Accordingly, the picturesque landscape became 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
***Slater, E. 2007, Reconstructing ‘Nature’ as a Picturesque Theme Park: The colonial case of Ireland, Early Popular Visual Culture, vol.5, no.3

3. Lecture

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.
**Record of a speech on the Irish Question delivered by Karl Marx, 16th December, 1867.
4. Lecture

*Ireland’s Colonial Metabolic Rift*

Marx clearly identified the presence of the metabolic rift in the context of nineteenth century Ireland. The rift occurs when soil nutrients enter agricultural commodities, mostly food, and are transported to urban centres to be consumed. Thus those nutrients are lost to the soil. But with regard to Ireland, he suggested that the cause of the Irish metabolic rift was how the soil was ‘overworked and underfed’ by the peasantry. This ‘rift’ situation was itself caused by an extreme exploitative rental regime.

**Foster, J.B, and B. Clark, ‘Ecological Imperialism: the curse of Capitalism’.  
**Slater, E. 2013, ‘Uncovering the ‘metabolic rift’ in the context of Ireland’.  
***P. Baur, 2013, Metabolic Rift.  
Foster, J. Bellamy 1999 ‘Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology’, *American Journal of Sociology*

5. Lecture

*The Famine and ‘Clearing the estate of Ireland’.*

This colonial rental regime came to its end with the occurrence of the potato blight in 1846 and the subsequent Famine. The new emerging stage of the colonial process (1846-1867 onwards) was what Marx titled ‘Clearing the estate of Ireland’, where the landlords ‘cleared’ their estates of the small peasantry and the cottiers. In eliminating the peasant restorers of the soil’s fertility, soil exhaustion occurred in the Post-famine period. Marx therefore highlights how the soil of the colonised can itself be colonised by that same process.

**Slater, E. 2013, ‘Post-Famine colonial phase of ‘Clearing the estate of Ireland’’.  
*Record of a speech on the Irish Question delivered by Karl Marx*, 16th December, 1867.

6. Lecture

*The emergence of Peasant Proprietorship and Peasant Fundamentalism*

With the Irish peasantry winning the Land War, the British finally sacrifice its landlord class in Ireland by allowing the Irish tenants to buy their own holdings. Thus the peasants became owners of their own land after eight hundred years of colonial rule. But to achieve this they became embedded in a form of rural (peasant) fundamentalism.

SECTION C: Post-colonial Ireland (1920s-1960s) – Rural Fundamentalism

7. Lecture

The Aesthetic of Peasant Fundamentalism – ‘Man of Aran’

This documentary was seen to be confirming the values of self-reliance and frugal material comfort which the Irish State espoused. It also confirmed the view that the West was the repository of a pure and unfarnished culture – a form of rural fundamentalism. But was it?

*Pat Mullan, 1935, ‘Man of Aran’.
**Frances Hubbard Flaherty, 1960, ‘The Odyssey of a film-maker’.

Man of Aran (1934)

8. Lecture

Peasant Farmers and ‘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.

10. Lecture

*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.


11. Lecture

‘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, 2012I Coercive Confinement in Ireland, ch.24 ‘Conclusion: Explaining coercive confinement: Why was the past such a different place?’.

SECTION D: Transitions and Transformations 1958-:1980s: ‘a rising tide that did not lift all the boats’
The Ballroom of Romance (film)

The Ballroom of Romance (1982) was a film adaptation of a William Trevor short story. This moving drama is set in the late 1950s West of Ireland and gives audiences the opportunity to explore the bleak reality of rural life through the medium of the local ballrooms. For many of the inhabitants of the rural countryside, the ballrooms represented a temporary escape from the monotony and isolation of everyday life. However, the actual reality behind the glamour facades of the ballrooms was one of despair and frustration experienced by those who attended such communal events.

Analyzing the Movie ‘starring’ Metabolized Processes of a changing Rural Ireland

Reading the film ‘The Ballroom of Romance’ sociologically from our unfolding framework allows us to identify a diverse range of processes which manifest themselves as moments, often fleetingly but conditioning the immediate interaction of the Ballroom participants.

**William Trevor, ‘The Ballroom of Romance’.
*Jim Smith, 1993, ‘Dancing, Depravity and all that Jazz’, History Ireland.

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).
Dependent Industrialization and the Irish State: ‘When Berlin and Washington sneezes...’

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, 1995, ‘Restructuring the rural – rural transformation’.

16. Lecture

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, 1995, ‘Restructuring the rural – rural transformation’.

SECTION E: Globalizing Ireland: ’The second cultural revival’?

17. Lecture

Global 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.
18. Lecture

The ‘Cosmopolitan’ Gaze

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 outsider’s perspective of a local place. But crucially this form of cosmopolitan visuality becomes ‘materialised’ in built and certain enclaves of the ‘natural’ environment.


19. Lecture

Theme-parking 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. Wallace, 1985, ‘Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World’ –
SECTION F: Suburbia of the Green Isle: ‘The green green grass of home?’

20. Lecture

Suburbanization and its Aesthetic

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.


21. Lecture

Ireland and Auto-suburbanization
The auto (automobile) suburban sprawl became the dominant form of habitation for the majority of the Irish population during the Celtic Tiger period. It unfolds as the essential process which ‘bathes’ all the other features of Irish suburbia. It determines not only the pace of everyday life but also the spaces of that life, both built and ‘natural’. Suburbia is thus 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.


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.

Freund, P. and Martin, G. 1993, Auto Space in their The Ecology of the Automobil...

** Davis, M. 2010 Who will build the Ark? New Left Review, vol. 61
Clark, B. 2003, Ebenezer Howard and the Marriage of Town and Country, Organization & Environment, vol.16, no.1
***Slater, E, 2015, ‘Rustic’ Suburbia: where the tyranny of ornamental ecology evades the increasing demise of productive ecology, (working paper)

23. Lecture

The Suburban Household of Consumption

The suburban house is a combination of social and natural processes, which metabolize to produce domestic space. The edifice, which occupies this space can be seen to attempt to control natural processes within such as water but also attempt to exclude other elements, e.g. rain, wind, cold and pollution. This is done within ever changing social processes, which tend to have differing aesthetic forms. However, beneath the aesthetic facade, the suburban house is the crucial ‘watershed’ when inputs get transformed into outputs as products become waste.

***Cox, R. 2013, ‘House/Work: Home as a space of work and consumption’, Geography Compass.
**Illich, I, 1985, H2O and the Wasters of Forgetfulness, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture.

24. Lecture

‘Suburban’ Microbes

Some scientists are beginning to argue that human health is directly correlated to the health of the soil. If this is so, we need to tackle the modern form of the metabolic rift – its suburban form.
Montgomery, D. and Bikle, Anne, 2015, ’What your Food is really doing to your body’, Nautilus.
Corriher, T. 2009, ‘How chemical fertilizer are destroying your body, the soil, and your food’

Eamonn Slater. June 2019