

Laurence Cox: Working-Class Dublin

Working-Class Communities in Dublin
Department of Sociology
National University of Ireland, Maynooth
[Dr. Laurence Cox](#)

Dublin and its surrounding area have a long-standing history of the (self-) development of distinctive working-class communities, going back at least to the urban Liberties of the 18th century. This history is still in progress - as Dublin expands to include neighboring towns, as traditional working-class neighborhoods are gentrified, as working-class women in particular enter new occupations, and as new generations of immigrants enter working-class areas.

Working-class communities in Dublin have not only been exposed to centuries of economic change and urban redevelopment; they have also been, as E.P. Thompson puts it, "actors in their own making". Thus the Lockout of 1913, the Irish Citizen Army, the development of socialism in Ireland, the urban struggles of the 1970s and the growth of working-class community development are part of a long history which continues today with bin charge disputes, conflicts between local activists and drugs gangs and the flourishing of community media, community education and community arts.

The first semester reading group will use the developing approach of working-class studies, which focuses on the everyday experience, cultural identity and self-organization of working-class communities, drawing particularly on work by working-class writers and writers from working-class backgrounds. It draws primarily on writing from within working-class Dublin communities to explore what this approach might have to offer for a holistic picture of those communities. For each week you will need to get the relevant text from library reserve and prepare it. It is also hoped to include a day's field trip including an oral history walking tour of parts of working-class Dublin, in conjunction with Mary Benson's "Class and Community" lecture course.

In the second semester, we will carry out a series of related projects exploring different aspects of working-class communities in the greater Dublin area. These will cover a range of areas such as economic structure; the experience of economic and social change; cultural identity; and political organizing, but will fit together to form a broader overview of the subject. This project will be jointly planned but individually executed, in that each participant will cover one aspect of the topic as part of an overall plan. As study leader I will work with you during the first semester to identify specific areas which relate to the subject; which can be feasibly researched within the constraints of a third-year special topic; which are within your personal comfort zone and skills range; and which fit in with your own area of interests. Your research proposal will come out of these discussions.

Your individual project should include about 10 hours of *direct* research time. This could mean, for example, 10 hours of participant observation in an appropriate setting (with fieldnotes); 10 hours of effective archival or documentary work; 8-10 semi-structured interviews (with transcripts); 2-3 life history interviews (with transcripts); 25-30 short survey-style interviews; or something else comparable (including a mix of the above). Note that this is a considerable amount of work once the planning and organization is included, and you need to start planning the practical details (who, where, when, what, etc.) at a very early point.

Reading list

Janet Zandy, *What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies* is the best overall introduction to the working-class studies approach. A related set of materials is available on the site of the Youngstown-based Center for Working-Class Studies. In each class we will look at a text which (except for week 1) you will need to read during the week. I will make all the texts available on library reserve if possible. Your task will be to read the text and reflect on the issues it raises. Here is an indicative list of titles:

1. Introduction to E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963)
2. Selection from John Newsinger, *Rebel City* on the Dublin Lockout
3. Selection from Seán O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars* on the complex working-class relationships to the Easter Rising
4. Selection from Terry Fagan, *Madams, Murder and Black Coddle* on solidarity between prostitutes and tenement-dwellers in the Monto
5. Aileen O'Carroll, "Picking Cherries off the Tree: Casualization and the Dublin Docker".
6. Selection from Sherry Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown USA* on Bruce Springsteen and representations of working-class experience
7. Selection from Ballymun Oral History Project, *Voices of Ballymun* on the experience of the 1980s
8. Selection from Cathleen O'Neill, *Telling It Like It Is* on the economics of celebration in Kilbarrack
9. Selection from André Lyder, *Pushers Out* on conflicts over drugs in working-class Dublin
10. Selection from Ballymun Community Action Programme, *On the Balcony* on the meaning of "consultation" as understood by state agencies and by working-class community groups

At the end of the first term you will submit an essay on working-class communities in Dublin, with specific reference to one of the four areas of research mentioned below. This should draw on some of the texts discussed in class as well as others relevant to your topic to establish an overall perspective on how we can understand (1) the structural processes giving rise to the formation of working-class communities in Dublin; (2) the individual experience of life for people in Dublin

working-class communities; (3) the formation of cultural identity and the creation of community in working-class Dublin; or (4) the development of working-class self-organization in Dublin.

Other readings

Beyond the books from which we have taken selections, the following may give you some inspiration as examples of different kinds of research in this area.

- Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*
- David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies*
- Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook, *A World Still to Win: The Reconstruction of the Postwar Working Class*
- Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World*
- Jonathan Cobb and Richard Sennett, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*
- Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*
- Scott Lash and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism*
- Michael Lebowitz, *Beyond Capital*
- John Lynch, *A Tale of Three Cities*
- Alice and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File*
- Pat Mahony and Christine Zmroczek, *Class Matters*
- Peter McNamee and Tom Lovett, *Working-Class Community in Northern Ireland*
- Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland*
- George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*
- Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *Working Classes: Global Realities*
- Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*
- Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*
- Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*
- Studs Terkel, *Working*
- Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*
- Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour*
- Pádraig Yeates, *Lockout*

A fundamental resource is *Saothar*, the journal of the Irish Labour History Society.

Possible Research Topics

Using E.P. Thompson's analysis of class construction, I suggest four broad areas of research: structural processes; individual experience; cultural identity; organized responses. Each of these offers various possibilities for research topics as well as different types of research which may be suitable for different students.

Structural processes

- New cycles of investment; industrial location
- Labour markets; skilled/unskilled workers

- Immigration; rural - urban migration
- Gentrification; "slum clearance" and working-class relocation
- Class power and status hierarchies
- Etc.

These kinds of processes could be researched using documentary, archival or statistical methods. NB that research in this area cannot simply be an extended essay but must involve genuine research using primary sources.

Individual experience

- Labour processes; employment situations
- Poverty; coping mechanisms
- Individual status; social mobility
- Gender; status at work; "street cred"
- Encounters with the welfare and health systems
- Etc.

These kinds of issues could be researched using life history methods.

Cultural identity

- Class consciousness; "rough" and "respectable" families/areas
- Sense of community; meaning of place
- Knowledge and skill, in the workplace and outside
- Gender and "respectability" for women
- Race and anti-racism
- Delinquency; gangs; drugs
- Working-class writing, music, etc.
- Etc.

These kinds of research into everyday behaviour and feelings could be developed using participant observation and/or qualitative interviews in specific locations.

Organized responses

- Working-class socialist and republican groups
- Community development; community education
- Community arts; community media
- Anti-drugs movements
- Campaigns against bin charges, water charges, incinerators etc.
- Etc.

This kind of organizational research could be carried out using a mixture of documents and interviews from the groups concerned.