

Special Topic Groups 2019/2020

Place Exploration – Dr Mary Benson (Mondays 12-1p.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

Everything that we study is emplaced. Place is not merely a stage on which we produce our lives, place itself has effects on social life. Place is, at once, the buildings, streets, monuments, and open spaces assembled at a certain geographic spot and actors' interpretations, representations, and identifications (Gyeryn, 2000). Place also exists in different layers of time and meanings. This special topic group is an exploration of place/space; place identity and identification. Students will be encouraged to carry out explorations of different places with a view to developing a sociological awareness of place as a theoretical concept and as lived experience. The aim is to develop an understanding of the complex interplay of identity and place. There are a multitude of potential sites which will be discussed in class in order to help students identify specific places that they can research and which fit in with their own areas of interest.

This type of research lends itself to fieldwork methods and visual methods and we will focus on this in class. The emphasis will be placed on interviewing and visual representation.

The Multiple Crises of the Neoliberal Era: Origins, Pathways and Alternatives

Dr. John Brown (Thursdays 4-5p.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

Society appears to be facing a conflux of “crises” in the contemporary era. Newspapers report of a deepening crisis of democracy, of debt crises, housing crises, and a migration crisis. Societies are becoming increasingly polarised and there has been a rise in support for authoritarian populists. Yet what is often lacking from analyses is an exploration of how the global turn to neoliberalism - based on a market logic that calls for economic liberalisation, reducing the role of the state, the commodification of citizenship, and increasing financialisation - has fostered and/or worsened many of the “crises” facing us today. As such, students will be encouraged to engage in case study research and to adopt a historical sociological approach to trace the emergence, development and impact of the neoliberal turn. Who supports the neoliberal agenda, why, and by what measures do they pursue their goals? Has the neoliberal turn sparked resistance movements? And if so, what do they look like and have they in turn been shaped by neoliberalism? To examine a given case, students will be encouraged to develop a theoretical framework that accounts for how the shifting balance of power between local, national and international actors and institutions has influenced the emergence of, and responses to, some of the key challenges facing society today. Students may examine the Irish context and complete fieldwork and desk-based research using qualitative methods while international case studies based on desk research and document analysis are also welcome.

Religion and Society - Dr. Brian Conway (Tuesdays 1-2 p.m.)

Are we more or less religious now than before? Why do women tend to be more religious than men? Why are strict churches strong? These are some of the core questions taken up sociologists concerned with the relationship between religion and society. In the first semester students learn about the major theoretical, methodological and empirical debates and issues in the sociology of religion literature. Special attention is given to placing the Irish case in comparative perspective. This provides a foundation for the second semester, in which the focus turns to carrying out a research project about a research question(s) derived from the literature examined in the first semester as well as becoming acquainted with some writings about writing. This module supports most research methods, except the analysis of online data.

Social Movements - Dr. Laurence Cox (Tuesdays 2-3p.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

Social movements are a central part of contemporary society, in Ireland and globally. Climate justice struggles, strikes, housing conflicts, resistance to fascism, pro-choice organising, Black Lives Matter, marriage equality activism, the water charges movement, Rosspoint, international solidarity and many more show us ordinary people seeking to assert power from below in the face of corporate wealth, state power and cultural hierarchies. Social movements have been defined as networks of formal organisations, informal groups and individuals engaged in political or cultural conflict around the shape of society. In this special topic group you will work on one such movement, looking at questions like who gets involved – and who doesn't; how activism connects to the needs and everyday lives of its participants; processes of movement formation and development; the strategies that movements pursue in alliance and conflict with other social actors; movement cultures and discourses.

Women's' Interests, Activism and Agency - Dr. Pauline Cullen (Tuesdays 10-11a.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

How can we understand what are women's interests and are they similar or different to men's interests? How and why are relations between women and men changing and what are the economic, social and political consequences? How are women's organisations and feminist movements engaging with the reality of women's lives in all their diversities? What contribution can feminist scholarship provide to understanding contemporary forms of women's subordination? This special topics course is interested in these questions in the context of Irish society. Drawing from sociological research on gender inequality, women and public policy, women's representation in decision making and women's and feminist movements this seminar will explore the gendered structures, social practices and ideologies that shape the experiences, perspectives and life-chances of women in Ireland. Issues to be examined include: younger

women and older women, intersectionality and solidarity between women in the context of race and class dynamics; women's movements and feminist activism. A specific focus will be on the kinds of political agency available to women in Ireland and the specific forms that gender asymmetry and feminist struggle assume in societies where capitalism is financialized, globalizing and neoliberal. Potential topics for research projects include: women lives as workers; women in higher education; women and decision making/political office; women's movements; feminist organising. Projects should include a focus on the forms of agency and activism that women exercise in these domains.

Re-Making the World in Everyday Life: Experience, Inventiveness and Resistance

Dr. Philip Finn (Tuesdays 11-12) Auxilia Seminar Room

We are often told that the world is made by big events; the everyday world is bracketed and washed away. Individuals emerge as more or less passive recipients of norms and values, developing characteristics derived from group memberships (Courpasson 2017). This special topic begins from the premise that there is something valuable in exploring the mundane world of the everyday. It draws attention to the inventiveness of everyday life (de Certeau 1984); how individuals experience, navigate and resist dominant power as they chart their own trajectories through its contours. Previous students have explored how the monotony of employment is often punctured by workplace games between colleagues; time-theft through extended breaks and the pilfering of goods. Similarly, welfare claimants circumvent regulations through feigned compliance, concealment of information and/or undeclared working to supplement incomes. Other theses explored practices of self-formation in relation to dominant ideas about masculinity; class; queer identity; and music. A focus on the everyday is a focus on the agency of individuals to act even within tightly confined economic, social, cultural and political constraints. Students can explore how power is experienced at an everyday level across social identities and categories (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality, disability). What are the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) which emerge in response? Is everyday resistance condemned to 'decaf resistance' (Contu 2008); safe, individualised, apolitical and ultimately meaningless, or do they provide hidden critiques of an unequal system? This topic is best suited to qualitative fieldwork research methods (e.g. interviews, participant observation etc.) and/or content analysis (e.g. texts, tv/film, images etc.)

Understanding and Explaining Income Inequality - Dr. Eoin Flaherty (Wednesdays 10-11a.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

This group focuses on the quantitative analysis of social and economic inequality. In the past decade, inequality has been recognised as one of the greatest (non-ecological) threats to our collective wellbeing. As the gap between rich and poor widens, we are beginning to understand how growing inequality relates to a range of issues, such as economic growth, social mobility, and

mental and physical health. Sociologists have a role to play in understanding the causes and consequences of rising inequality. In recent years, social researchers have explored questions such as: ‘why has inequality reversed from a period of long decline in the 20th century, to rapid growth in the 21st century?’, ‘how important are different types of income, such as income from property and investments, in maintaining inequality?’, ‘what are the consequences for individuals, families, communities, and societies of rising inequality?’ In this special topic, you will work with the European Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) to conduct a small piece of research on a specific issue related to household inequality. The first part of this course will introduce you to key readings and ideas in the study of social inequality. In the second semester, you will work on a piece of quantitative survey data analysis using the analysis package SPSS.

Life since the Crash - Dr. Patrick Gallagher (Tuesdays 3-4p.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

As the century turned, the Irish Republic was lauded widely as an exemplar of how small, previously underdeveloped states might reach the promised land of national prosperity. Within a few years, however, a country that was once a ‘poster child’ for capitalist globalization would come to be seen as a cautionary tale for those tempted to tread the same neoliberal path. The global economic crash heralded most dramatically by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 had rather more severe consequences for Ireland than most other western societies. The scale of the country’s fall from grace was indexed in spiraling levels of unemployment, emigration and national debt not seen since the sour times of the 1980s. In this seminar programme, we will take a critical look at how Irish society has changed since the onset of the global economic recession. We will examine some of the debates that attended the Celtic Tiger era before turning to consider the ways in which the austerity measures introduced since boom turned to bust have been represented, experienced and contested. The series concludes by analysing whether the current claims that Ireland has ‘turned a corner’ into a period of ‘recovery’ provide grounds for optimism or signal that the tragedies of recent times are about to be played out once again as farce. It is hoped that the programme will offer a critical and engaging perspective on the nature of social change in a country that has, more than almost any other, reflected the promise and peril at the heart of late capitalism.

The Sociology of Drugs - Mr. Richard Healy (Mondays 11-12a.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

Drug use is a relatively recent Irish phenomenon, only coming to attention as a social problem in the early 1970s. There is a thin line between drug use and drug abuse. Drug use- be it hard or soft drugs- does not occur in a social vacuum and is inexorably linked to a number of sociological issues, including poverty (O’Higgins 2008), place (Punch 2005) and popular culture trends. Sociology can be a useful lens through which to analyse the causation of drug use, themes and patterns of drug consumption practices and their representation and diffusion within wider cultural & media contexts.

This special topic aims to stimulate students to inquire into the causation of problematic drug use, the construction of the drug user- for example in popular culture- the different types of recovery models available to service users, and the social, economic and human rights issues that impact on drug treatments and drug-taking practices. We will also explore contemporary Irish society's responses to drug use. We will pose questions such as: What role, if any, does society play in the governance of drug use? What are the broader sociological, economic and political contexts that propagate drug use? Is drug addiction a class-based phenomenon? Do popular culture representations (in film, music, TV shows, blogs, etc.) demonise or glamorise the use of drugs?

Ethical Standards at Maynooth University prohibit students from interviewing active drug users, primarily due to the experience required to work with vulnerable populations. Therefore, this special topic requires the student be imaginative and original in devising their research focus, collecting data, designing research questions and strategically planning their research project.

Housing and Urban Life - Dr. Valesca Lima (Thursdays 2-3p.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

This course provides an interdisciplinary introduction to the study of housing and urban life. It will look at the roots and drivers of the contemporary housing crisis in Europe and beyond under the "Right to Housing" framework, with a view to understand the process of urbanisation and the consequences of living in cities. Affordability, segregation and discrimination, homelessness, eviction, homeownership and mortgages, and gentrification/redevelopment will be the main issues around which this course is structured. Students will engage these topics through assigned readings and discussing these topics and sources in class.

Private Troubles and Public Issues - Dr. Michelle Maher (Thursdays 10-11a.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

The sociological imagination that connects personal troubles to public issues is the idea advanced in this special topic group. Troubles are a private matter, while issues involve the institutions of society and their failings. Often to hide failings or crisis, governments present public issues such as unemployment, poverty, or inequality as individual private troubles rather than as the outcomes of structural or political arrangements.

Each student will be invited to select a particular public issue or policy concern that particularly interests them as a case study for their thesis. Classes will introduce students to institutionalism as a theoretical lens with which to simplify the complex interaction of actors, ideas, and institutions in influencing various stages of the policy cycle. This will allow students to construct

their own framework within which to think about and research their chosen policy area. They will be guided to assess:

- the government's formulation and presentation of the issues and solutions,
- the context for decision-making,
- who the influential actors are,
- how perceptions are shaped,
- the power of ideas, and
- how policy outcomes are experienced.

The government's presentation and framing of public issues will be unpacked to understand why some public issues are suppressed from emerging as policy problems. Threaded throughout classes will be discussions on politics and public policy, as well as practical group and individual advice on the task of researching and writing a thesis.

Consuming Celebrity - Dr. Paul Ryan (Tuesdays 9-10a.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

Celebrity culture is not new. However, in late modern society as self-identity becomes a reflexive project (Giddens 1991), celebrity has become a key resource drawn upon by individuals as they continuously reflect and work on the self. How people exercise, cook, read, vacation, dress, worship, vote, decorate their homes and even how they give to charitable causes is increasingly influenced by celebrity endorsement in an accelerated consumer world. In this group, we examine how celebrity has become a resource that helps construct cultural identities and explore the functions it performs. We locate these processes in a media and digital world where the boundaries of news and entertainment have blurred, where there is an increasing democratisation of the public sphere that, in theory, should allow for wider participation. We examine the wider political economy of celebrity that facilitates this transnational market for photos, brands and products and explore how they intersect with gender, class and ethnicity.

There are many research topics available to students including –

- Online ethnography of celebrity websites or social media like Instagram or Twitter.
- Documentary or comparative analysis of historical and contemporary celebrity production and consumption
- Interview based research with users of celebrity fora – like magazines or digital resources or live concerts or performances
- Analysis of fan forums or message boards
- Exploring aspects of gender, sexuality, ethnicity or class in the production or consumption of celebrity.

Educational Inequality - Dr. Maighr ad Tobin (Wednesdays 2-3p.m.) Auxilia Seminar Room

This Special Topic group uses our shared experience of being participants in the Irish education system as a starting point to read about different manifestations of educational inequality in the 21st century. Although the education system is often regarded as a means of equalization, it tends to reaffirm existing inequalities (Giddens1993:432). Inequalities in education relate to the same divisions of class, gender, race and ethnicity that occur in the wider society. Social divisions are also evident in the different forms of education provided within state schools and private schools, while the digital divide forms yet another source of inequality.

This reading group will use a selection of research articles to examine the lived experience of educational inequality in the present day. We will consider how different forms of educational inequality are produced. The group will particularly explore how educational inequalities intersect with class, gender, race, and ethnicity. The aim is to develop a critical awareness of the continuing presence of inequality within the education system. This will provide a basis to design appropriate research projects. Research projects carried out in this group can make use of interviews, or observation studies, or documentary data from digital sources.

Sociology of Careers and Well-Being - Dr. Nuala Whelan (Thursdays 11-12) Auxilia Seminar Room

Career and employment are important aspects of self-identity and economic security. Choosing a career is complex and is often impacted by factors such as education, career guidance, socioeconomic circumstance, skill demands and labour market policy. How we move from education into the labour market and our career trajectory thereafter will be explored in terms of major approaches in the theory of careers including personality, social-learning, developmental and structural theories. We will examine the psychological and sociological perspectives that influence these approaches. We will discuss the interaction between education, the economy, sustainable employment and the role of the state. Students will be invited to consider careers and employment within the context of labour market policy, the developing labour force, the changing world of work, unemployment and inequality, well-being and career development. This special topic will provide students with a framework within which to explore and formulate research questions based on theoretical and policy based career /employment and labour market research and will include methodological considerations in conducting this type of research.

