

Introduction to the
Anthropology of Ireland
Anthropology
AN303
5 ECTS Credits

AN303SS: Special Topics: Area Studies: The Anthropology of Ireland

Maynooth University Department of Anthropology

What is Ireland? What is Irishness? This seminar series will consider the multiple dimensions of Ireland and Irishness. In the popular imaginary, Ireland continues to conjure up images of a timeless, mystical landscape, and simple, chronically alcoholic folk (and Enya). Ireland has had to contend with this image for centuries, yet its culture and people have been constantly shaped and defined by global forces, from initial contacts with continental invaders, to English colonisation, and contemporary stereotypes. Anthropology has played a role in this complex politics of representation, often eliding the reality of life here.

Students will also explore the development of cultural anthropology on both sides of the Atlantic, and encounter important concepts and theories that will enable them to think critically about Ireland, Irishness, and questions of identity, tradition, community, nationalism, and race. This seminar aims to look beyond representation and stereotypes, and explore Ireland's economic, social, and cultural challenges, and how its present and future look in the twenty-first century. We will look at how Ireland's present-day multiplicity intersects with the traditional image of rural, monocultural, and Catholic, examining recent trends such as multiculturalism and GLBT+ activism. We will explore manifestations of Irish culture such as contemporary drag performance, seeing how Irish tradition is reproduced, reformulated, and what meaning such practices hold for practitioners and spectators. Ireland has multiple and often conflicting identities, most obviously with Northern Ireland. We will look at the outline of division there, but also how gendered and class divisions shape these dynamics in the North and elsewhere.

Learning Outcomes: • Students will have been introduced to the development of anthropology in Ireland and its main themes that continue to be of concern. • Students will be familiar with shifting ethnographic approaches and methods to the study of communities, notions of tradition, and distinct shades of nationalism. • Through a variety of case studies, students will understand functionalism,

structural functionalism, interpretative anthropology, political economy, and postmodern approaches to anthropology. • Students will have engaged in critical thinking

Topic One: Introducing Anthropology, Ireland, and thinking about identity

In our first seminar, we will introduce ourselves, discuss our diverse backgrounds, and why we are all here discussing Ireland and anthropology. We will then think critically about identity itself, using critical theoretical tools, and some (light) group work. We will also discuss the origins of anthropology, encounters with difference, and become familiar with some key markers of the discipline.

In our second seminar, we will think about Ireland, and how the country and its people have been framed as the 'other' in both colonial and anthropological discourses. We will also consider the contemporary valence of certain notorious stereotypes about the Irish (looking at a selection in class). Anthropological theories of stereotypy will also be discussed, in order to help us think critically about the enduring appeal of certain inaccurate caricatures. Students will also view the classic work of ethnofiction, Robert O'Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) in class.

Topic Two: Political Anthropology: Race and Nationalism, Historical and Contemporary

In seminar one, we will consider the issue of race, both in the construction of the figure of 'the Irish' in colonial, anthropological, and international sociocultural discourses, but also consider the political currency of the 'white slaves' myth in contemporary public discourse. There will also be an examination of how anthropologists have engaged with questions of racial difference over time.

In seminar two, we will think about the political ideology of nationalism, through an anthropological lens, but also with specific reference of Irish identity. How has Irishness been shaped by this nineteenth century movement? Did Irish identity exist before nationalism? Can you be Irish if you were not born here, or your parents were not born here? Can you be Irish if you are born here? Can

you be Irish if other Irish people can't pronounce your name?! We will consider these questions and more.

Topic Three: Field Trip to Kilmainham Gaol

In our second meeting this week, and following on from our trip to Kilmainham Gaol, we will consider the culture of Ireland in the twentieth century, a place struggling to define itself against its former occupier, as an independent, Catholic state. We will think about how anthropologists recorded a shifting Irish culture over the decades, as well as reflect upon the sectarian violence that erupted in Northern Ireland in the 1960s. In addition to issues of religion and colonialism, we will also pay attention to questions of gender and class in the conflict.

Topic Four: Dragging* Ireland into Modernity

In our first meeting, we will engage with anthropological theories of memory and historical remembrance in relation to national trauma. We will pay specific attention to Ireland's history of institutionalisation, and how this dark period of our collective past is being recovered, reckoned with, remembered, and shapes Ireland's political present.

In our final seminar, we will consider Ireland's (relatively) recent embrace of same-sex marriage, as well as liberalisation of reproductive rights. We will consider – using critical theory – Ireland's adoption of a progressive attitude towards GLBT issues, amid a turn towards a social conservatism across the globe, and what it means for Irish identity. To illuminate Ireland's recent social history, we will critically analyse *The Queen of Ireland* (2015), a documentary portrait of Panti Bliss, a drag queen who has become the accidental face of the marriage movement in Ireland ahead of the 2015 referendum.

*see what I did there?

**Readings will be available on Moodle and in the Maynooth University Library
(online and offline)**

**The module will be evaluated through a 2000 word paper, due at the end of
the module. Details will be available on Moodle.**

ENDS