

**An urban place in rural Ireland:  
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1841-1989**

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# **IRISH URBAN CULTURES**

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**1993**

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For the Normans in the twelfth century, "Ireland was a colony to be settled and exploited" and its "ports provided the links, both with England and with Europe, through which this could be achieved" (Graham 1977: 39). Located at the head of navigation on the River Nore in County Kilkenny, the town of Thomastown received its foundation charter around the year 1200 - as part of the Norman conquest, as part of the outward expansion of European mercantile relations.<sup>1</sup> As a Norman trade centre and military-administrative stronghold, the town served as the transshipping depot for Kilkenny city, linking it and the large, productive agricultural hinterland to the ports of the southern Irish coast and to the world markets beyond. From this time until the present, international commerce has remained central, as the town continued in its functionally specialised roles linked to, and structured by, a western European "system of domination."

This notion of domination is derived from the idea that socio-economic change within Europe, and the uneven development of its various regions and states, can be analysed according to a core-periphery model. In such a model, economic differentiation reflects directly the long-term relations that emerged and persisted between regions or states which developed ("cores") as against those which did not ("peripheries").<sup>2</sup> In the contemporary world, "the U.S. and Central Europe" are the "cores" to the European periphery." They are "the suppliers of capital and technology; centres of political, military and cultural dominance; providers of tourists and absorbers of migration" (Seers 1979: 8). In contrast, the periphery is where people are more "likely to be working in agriculture or tourism, to be unemployed, to see their families broken by migration, or to receive a very low income" (Seers 1979: 19). In other words, peripheries lack control over their resources and generate few innovations: new technologies and products are

imported. Their economies contain few internal linkages and generate few multiplier effects. Migration is outward and the state often exerts great effort to promote development (Selwyn 1979: 37-39).

This depiction points to three analytical dimensions which underlie core-periphery relations: space, function and power. The "farther from the core a place is, the poorer it is likely to be" and the more underdeveloped (Seers 1979: 19). This spatial relation mirrors a functional differentiation *cum* interdependence which results in "functionally integrated regional systems" that "interact in ways determined by power differences" (Donham 1990: 141). Ultimately, such regional systems, actualised through space, function and power, are "hierarchically encapsulated within larger systems. Any one region within its own core-periphery structure may be, on a higher level, a constituent part of a more inclusive system" (Donham 1990: 142).

Ireland usually is classed as part of Europe's periphery, along "with the countries of the Mediterranean" and the "Celtic fringe" (Seers 1979: 7; Hechter 1975). Yet, function and power do not necessarily correspond to the boundaries of the state, for it is seldom internally homogeneous. Given that eastern Ireland is physically closer to the European core, and given that places such as Thomastown, in southeastern Ireland, for centuries had trading and administrative functions in the European system of domination, it is not surprising that, in "Ireland, the east coast is the more dynamic" (Seers 1979: 19). Yet, although we know this, "[f]oo little research has been done on what might be called the geography of domination" (Donham 1990: 141). In this paper, therefore, I explore what this looks like, in the recent past, in a town in rural Ireland - in the periphery of Europe, in the semi-periphery of Ireland, in the core of the long-dominated and dynamic Southeast.

### The nature of domination: an 1845 portrait

In 1845, a visiting journalist described Thomastown as

a pretty and . . . neat town with, however, . . . evidences of the want of a town commissionership. There are a few professional men and one or two large mercantile concerns. The main body of the people, however, consist of small shopkeepers, artisans and agricultural labourers. Of the working class, a hundred or so may be employed in mills, where our corn is ground for England's consumption and in the lime-kilns, adjacent to the town, which some doth say are a monopoly. Formerly, we are told, there were near Thomastown many small lime-burners who eked out a decent livelihood. Several daily labourers live in and around the town. There is an utter absence of . . . manufactures with the exception of one tan-yard in which perhaps some half dozen of persons may find employ. On the whole

as far as trade and business is to be considered, Thomastown has not much to boast (*Kilkenny Journal* 12 April 1845).

The portrait is clear in many respects, and in it can be seen how local *underdevelopment* had become particularly marked by this time. For example, the town's navigation function was not mentioned because that had been lost in the early nineteenth century - as the River Nore silted and as townspeople failed to obtain funding to remedy it, as competition from the Barrow River and Grand Canal marginalized the River Nore, and as the southeastern ports were eclipsed by Dublin and Cork (Silverman 1992).

The town also was experiencing extensive de-industrialisation and a skewing of its industrial base towards a single industry, flour milling. For apart from the small tannery and several grist mills, flour milling was all that remained of a virtual industrial revolution which had taken place after 1770: rape seed milling, starching, chandling, brewing and malting had all come and gone, the result of changing markets and competition from other centres (Cullen 1972; Halpin 1989; Gulliver and Silverman in preparation).

Finally, the "want of a town commissionership" pointed to the political domination which accompanied the deepening economic underdevelopment at the time. In 1841, the state had abolished the town's self-governing Corporation. This curtailed severely the town's administrative and political integrity. For apart from grand juries, controlled by landowners and responsible for public works, the only other local government organ was the Board of Guardians, set up by the 1838 Poor Law to collect taxes for, and to administer, poor relief in its area or "union." As of 1845, Thomastown and hinterland were contained within the Kilkenny Poor Law Union seated in Kilkenny city. Politically and administratively, Thomastown was a dependent satellite.

For all these reasons, the town "had not much to boast." Yet, the portrait of domination, typified by underdevelopment, also contained clear elements of what might be termed *modernity*. In 1845, although flour milling had become the only industry, it was modernised and export-oriented. Indeed, the town boasted two state-of-the-art mills, one of which was the fourth largest in the county. The production of lime as fertiliser, long an important export to adjacent counties, had been "rationalised" after 1820 when a modernising landlord purchased the kilns next to the town. Moreover, although its navigation had been lost, road transport had gradually improved and the town remained a small hub, for people, the post and small goods, on an inland road network which connected Dublin and Waterford. Finally, by the late 1830s, the state had eliminated agrarian violence (O'Hanrahan 1990; Gulliver and Silverman in preparation). With law and order, and with the state increasingly regulating trade (e.g. weights and measures), the town's commerce and retailing could prosper.

Such prosperity was tied to the fact that local people, labourers as well as farmers, were becoming more firmly tied to the market. Indeed, the process by which this occurred in Thomastown shows how the two aspects of peripherality - modernity and underdevelopment - can be interlinked because they form "part of a more inclusive system" of domination. In this case, European-wide economic depression had followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. "Emigration...through Waterford" reached "an unprecedented extent" (*Kilkenny Independent* 12 May 1827) whilst, by the early 1830s, extreme distress typified the countryside around the town. Small-holders and agricultural labourers were particularly affected. The former faced declining commodity prices; the latter faced severe unemployment and falling wages. Amongst better-off farmers too, incomes had declined, credit had become expensive and, as a result, "a large increase in the quantity of every kind of agricultural produce" was being "brought to market for export to England, because the increasing poverty of farmers obliges them to live more and more upon potatoes and to sell almost the whole of the meat, corn, butter, etc. which they consumed formerly."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, other aspects of the wider political economy were relevant: that "more cattle, by ten to one, are now fattened for export than formerly" also arose "from the introduction of stall feeding, the general improvement of agriculture, [and] the facility of conveyance to England by steam."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the market flourished as living standards fell.

In this context, the town's shopkeepers did fairly well. They controlled the distribution of imported necessities (e.g. tea, coal, sugar); they held and rented out a great deal of labourers' housing in the town; they charged "exorbitant interest" (50 to 100 per cent) for credit which farmers needed for seed and provisions; they hired labour for less than subsistence wages; and they sold increasing amounts of alcohol, a commodity which was growing rapidly in popularity at the time.<sup>5</sup>

In all this could be seen, in Thomastown after 1815, the nature of a periphery: increasing modernity as part of increasing underdevelopment. On the one hand, law and order, flour-milling, an expanding market and new technologies in transport and agriculture were associated, on the other hand, with increasing exports of labour and primary products, deepening poverty and distress, de-industrialisation, political alienation and the loss of river transport. In turn, all was part of a process by which more people were drawn into the market and by which the town reproduced itself, as did the local agents who controlled key elements of the process - commodities and capital. As the journalist noted in 1845, the town had "one or two large mercantile firms" and "small shopkeepers."

This distinction between "large" and "small" pointed in turn to a central feature at the time: the town's commercial sector was markedly stratified, as was all of urban society, with professionals, merchants, shopkeepers, artisans

and labourers. Indeed, the dynamics of class differentiation in a periphery comprise an essential part of geographical domination (Blomstrom and Helene 1984: 81-4). In Thomastown, in 1845, class - not ethnicity or politics - was fundamental. As the journalist noted:

There are two reading rooms in the town for which papers of various shades of political opinion are taken and where Protestant and Catholic, White-Repeller and Tory meet... in goodliest fellowship... [Fanaticism has no rule here - Catholics... seem to interfere with the religious opinion... [of]... those of a... different communion and... a[n] anti-Catholic] crusade... could not find supporters amongst the Protestants (*Kilkenny Journal* 12 April 1845).

### The reproduction of domination, 1841-1989

The 1845 portrait of Thomastown reflected two interdependent features of its peripheral status - modernity and underdevelopment. After 1845, failure to generate "sufficient internal impetus for... transformation" (Brend and Rank 1982: 13) meant that life in the town continued to reflect geographical and functional peripherality in the European system of domination. Indeed, by the late 1980s, the town's portrait was still characterised by modernity, located in consumption patterns, and by underdevelopment, typified by the structure of local production and political integration. By 1989, it had become possible, in Thomastown, to buy such imported commodities as computer programmes, designer dresses with shoulder pads and exotic foods like green peppers. At the same time, the one bed and breakfast place which had served a deplorable tourist trade in 1981 had been joined by about 20 enterprises oriented to tourism. Unemployment was rampant, emigration was extensive, the effects of state intervention were everywhere apparent and local political structures were atrophied. How had the town's 1845 portrait been reproduced over time?

### *Spatial-physical differentiation, 1841-1989*

The "class-character of capitalism incorporates international systems of centre and periphery" at the same time that "class domination is strongly influenced and reproduced by...the differentiation of neighbourhoods within cities" (Giddens 1979: 206). In Thomastown, the pattern of streets and buildings, and the class-based structuration of space, were established well before the mid-nineteenth century. After that time, the relation between class and space was continually reproduced, as a reflection of urban life in the periphery.

The town had long been divided by the River Nore. On the northern side, in the 16 acres which comprised the Corporation borough or townland of Thomastown, was a core of four short streets lined with buildings. Most buildings had two storeys but a few, backing on the river, had three. The latter had been merchant houses, built in the fifteenth century (Murtagh 1982).<sup>6</sup> In 1846, all but five of the town's 41 retail shops were located in these core streets. Each shopkeeping family lived in an apartment above the shop whilst, behind the buildings and beyond them, was a patchwork of outhouses, storehouses, bake houses, cow and pig sheds, yards and tiny gardens. The main commercial street was Market Street (18.5 metres wide and 107 metres long). In 1846, it contained eight private residences and 17 retail establishments (five pub-groceries, two groceries, a bakery, a hardware shop, two bootmakers' shops, two draperies, a butcher, the shops of a carpenter and of a saddler and one general shop). Market Street also was the locale for weekly, open-air pig and poultry markets.

Extending from the northeast corner of the core, and to the roads that lead to New Ross and Graigueamanagh, was the Quay. There, river boats once had tied up near warehouses; in 1846, the Quay had a pub and a grocery. From the southwest corner, and across the bridge over the Nore, Lay Mill Street, leading to the Waterford road. In that street was Grenan Mill and, off a side road, the Island Mill - the two modern flour mills. Mill Street, and the Mall leading off from it, were lined with houses occupied by mill workers. On Mill Street were three pub-groceries and the workshops of a blacksmith, a saddler and a tailor. Other streets leading out of the core to the west and north (Marshes, Ladywell and Maudlin) contained the small houses of labourers but no retail shops. Many of the labourers worked in the tannery, located on Ladywell.

Clearly the core streets comprised the commercial centre. On the roads leading to it were industrial properties and, associated with these, residential space for labourers. This patterning of streets and buildings persisted in its essentials until the late 1980s when it was possible to trace, in unbroken continuity back to the 1840s, all the buildings and their occupants in the core and feeder streets. Of course, physical changes had occurred. These, however, had reproduced and enhanced the spatial dimensions of class and domination; the space occupied by shopkeepers and labourers continued to be differentiated and two new spaces were created - one devoted to the institutions of church and state and the other to pockets of "modern"-style housing.<sup>7</sup>

Rising above the town in 1845, on its northeastern side, was a hill on which stood the Catholic church and cemetery, together with a National School which had opened in 1840. In contrast was a small Protestant church built in 1819 inside the ruins of a large, thirteenth century Norman church. Unlike the Catholic church which overlooked the town from the outskirts, the

Protestant church was at the centre, at the northern end of Market Street. Together they symbolised the centrality and later decline of the Ascendancy and, with it, the "devotional revolution" in Catholicism (Larkin 1972). Thus, in 1867, the Catholic church was replaced by a large, new structure and, adjacent to it in 1899, a convent and girls' primary school were opened. In 1986, the Protestant church was closed.

The state and its agents also had elaborated their physical presence in the town. As part of the town's role as a centre of commerce and coercion, the core streets had long contained a courthouse and a military (later police) barracks. In 1850, as the state expanded, a workhouse and fever hospital were built on the town's outskirts. Thus, church and state had a dramatic spatial presence: their large, imposing buildings marked the northern approaches to the town.

In the streets leading into the core, many small houses fell into ruin as the town's population declined during the second half of the nineteenth century. As well, on Mill Street and the Mall, rows of decrepit, cramped labourers' houses were demolished in the 1970s after their inhabitants had been re-housed by a state agent, the County Council. Earlier too, in 1941 and the early 1950s, the County Council had built new labourers' houses. All were located within housing estates and all estates were placed on the edges of the town. In effect, urban labourers were removed from the core as they were congregated in working class neighbourhoods.

Finally, after about 1960, new and privately built bungalows were constructed, largely in strip fashion, along the town's exit roads. Some were built by workers; others by artisans and shopkeepers. Through such mixing, these strips reflected what some chose to see as modernity - comfortable people housed in "traditional bungalows."

In these ways, and through these changes, the class-based structuration of space in the town reproduced itself over time, retaining its historical basis in class difference whilst introducing a modern variation which masked, but did not eliminate, the class differences which typify peripheral places.

#### *Rural-urban difference and the agro-industrial economy, 1841-1925.*

The "class-character of capitalism" and class domination are not only "influenced and reproduced" by spatial differentiation but also "by patterns of rural-urban difference" (Siddens 1979: 206). In Thomastown, the changing nature of rural-urban difference between 1841 and 1911 was one of the processes through which modernity and underdevelopment were linked. However, it occurred in a way which perhaps is peculiar to a periphery located so geographically close to its European core. Between 1841 and 1911, a massive export of surplus labour, both rural and urban, was

accompanied by four features: a rise in living standards for all who remained, a diminution in the importance of agriculture, an expanded commercial role for the town and, by 1911, a homogenisation of living standards in both town and country.

Between 1841 and 1911, the town's population continuously declined along with the number of inhabited houses. By 1861, the 1,426 townspeople comprised 61 per cent of their 1841 number.<sup>8</sup> By 1881, the 1,067 town-dwellers constituted 45 per cent of the 1841 figure whilst their 223 houses were 52 per cent of the 1841 number. These decreases were accompanied by features which suggest a simultaneous rise in living standards for those who remained. First, the number of people per house declined: from 5.5 in 1841 to 4.8 in 1881. Second, housing gradually improved in a process by which the worst housing was abandoned most rapidly and by which, therefore, the overall quality of housing stock was slowly emended. Between 1841 and 1851, two-thirds of the fourth-class housing disappeared as did a quarter of the third class and about 12 per cent of the second class. By 1861, as a result, over two-thirds of town housing was first and second class quality.

A third sign of rising living standards was that servants formed an increasing proportion of the urban population. In 1841, they constituted four per cent; by 1861, six per cent. Fourth, literacy increased. In 1841, 43 per cent of the town's population (aged five and above) could, according to the census, "neither read nor write." By 1851, this had decreased to 39 per cent. By 1881, only 29 per cent was illiterate.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the ratio of people per retail shop gradually improved. In 1846, Thomastown Catholic parish had 181 people per town shop. In 1884, it had 93 people; by 1911, it had 67. Over time, clearly, people were buying more of what they consumed.

These demographic and lifestyle changes reflected a slow shift in the structure of the wider economy as it articulated with urban life. According to the 1841 census, almost 33 per cent of the town's population was engaged in "agricultural pursuits." By 1861, this had dropped to eight per cent. The proportion engaged in "manufacturing and trade" declined only slightly during the same period (from 49 to 41 per cent); however, the category labelled "other pursuits" increased dramatically (from 18 to 50 per cent). This suggests that the urban-based, casual or "general labourer" was less likely to be employed in agriculture and more likely, by 1861, to find work in the industrial and service sectors. Between 1841 and 1861, the town had become less agricultural and more commercial in function.

These shifts were reflected in the countryside around the town. To show this, eight rural townlands can be used.<sup>10</sup> In these, 532 people in 1861 comprised 56 per cent of their 1841 number. It was a decline greater than in the town. Yet, household sizes in the countryside (5.8 persons per house in 1841; 5.6 in 1861) were larger than in the town (4.9 persons per house in

1861). Thus, although population decline had been greater, it had not produced as high a living standard.

This was not because change was slower in the rural area. It was because rural living standards had been so much worse. In 1841, in contrast with the town, over three-quarters of rural housing was of the lowest standard (classes 3 and 4) and half of this was of the worst sort (class 4).<sup>11</sup> Yet, the quality of rural housing improved dramatically after 1841 as the poorest housing was progressively abandoned. Even so, by 1861, larger household sizes and inferior housing typified the countryside around the town: in 1861, over two-thirds of town housing was second class or better whereas, in the countryside, 60 per cent was third class or worse.

All this suggests a multi-pronged process after 1841. Massive emigration eliminated the lowest living standards in both town and country whilst, simultaneously, standards rose for those who remained. Even so, absolute standards in the countryside remained lower than in the town. However, by 1911, such rural-urban difference was eliminated - the result, after 1861, of continuing emigration, improvements in rural housing, and declining rural household sizes. By 1911, the population in the eight rural townlands was 37 per cent that of 1841. Fourth class housing had disappeared and average household size was 4.9. The town's population was 40 per cent that of 1841 but, because the size of urban households declined only slightly after 1861, household size in town and country were virtually identical by 1911. Furthermore, slightly over 70 per cent of both town and country housing was second class quality. In other words, differences in rural and urban living standards had been removed.

Such change had affected all classes; yet class differences in housing and, hence, in living standards, had been reproduced in both country and town. For example, 459 households were enumerated in the 1901 census in the District Electoral Divisions (DEEDs) of Thomastown and Jerpoint Church, units which contained the town and 26 townlands (about 9,500 acres). In these, 72 per cent of "general labourers" and 69 per cent of agricultural workers lived in houses with three rooms or less; only 30 per cent of farmers did so and only 12 per cent of shopkeepers. In other words, rising living standards were, for all, connected to the reproduction of class difference.

Such demographic and lifestyle patterns between 1841 and 1911 were linked to dramatic changes in local agriculture. In 1847, labour-intensive tillage land, according to the agricultural census, formed 84 per cent of the land in use in the Thomastown area. By 1851, it comprised only 38 per cent and, by 1925, only 11 per cent. This decline lessened dramatically the need for labour. Moreover, the move away from tillage to pasture was a move towards raising beef cattle and sheep for export rather than towards labour-intensive dairying. Thus, the export of both people and animals expanded rapidly after 1841, aided by the Waterford-Kilkenny Railway which

connected, at Abbeyleix, to the Dublin-Limerick line. Funded largely by English capital (Cullen 1972: 143), the line from Kilkenny reached Thomastown in 1848 (*Kilkenny Moderator* 10 May 1848). After it opened to Waterford in 1854, cattle bought at Thomastown's fair could be sold in London the next day.

The growing demand and capacity of the export market and the changing agricultural regime were reflected in the occupations of the people who remained. In the 1901 census, only 60 per cent of rural-dwellers in the parish had agricultural pursuits. In the town, the proportion employed in agriculture had declined from 33 per cent in 1841 to less than five in 1901.

This, of course, does not take into account the extent to which agriculture provided indirect employment - for artisans, such as blacksmiths, and for retailers who not only sold agricultural inputs but who also depended on the custom of farming households for non-agricultural necessities. However, it was, and had been for a long time, working class people who formed the majority of the population in both town and country. In the 1901 census, 149 people (over 13 per cent) of the 1,136 in the parish who gave their occupation were artisans; almost 52 per cent (586) were labourers and, of these, 58 per cent were non-agricultural.<sup>12</sup> For them, it was the vagaries in the town's industrial and service sectors which were central.

In 1845, along with the two modern, export-oriented flour mills (Grenan Mill and the Island Mill), the town's industrial sector contained three smaller flour mills (Little Mill, Dangan Mill and Jerpoint Mill) and a small tannery. Over the next decades, the milling sector inexorably declined. In 1873, Dangan Mill was turned into a woollen mill and was worked until about 1902. In 1920, the valuation records described it as "delapidated." In 1880, the modern Island Mill and the Little Mill, having been run as a single enterprise, were bankrupt - victims of an ageing owner, a lack of capital with which to invest in new technology (steel rollers to replace stone grinders), and competition from other mills, particularly those located in the major Irish ports, near the imports of durum wheat. Jerpoint Mill, by 1914, had contracted considerably. It milled only cattle feed for local farmers or sold milled wheat to dealers; in any case, it hired only a few labourers by that time. Grenan Mill though, continued. Between 1873 and 1886, an average of 29 workers were employed (Silverman 1990: 92-3).

The tannery too was doing well. Its ledgers show that its sales expanded after 1860, at first to buyers in New Ross and Waterford and then, by 1870, "to buyers well beyond the locality: thereafter, local sales were few and small" as orders went to Belfast, Cork and Sligo. In 1895, the operation was expanded and 16 labourers were employed full-time along with two artisans who did "spells of maintenance work" (Silverman and Gulliver 1986: 60).

Overall then, between 1841 and 1925, the changing nature of rural-urban difference and the local agro-industrial economy comprised a process

in which modernity and underdevelopment were inextricably linked. On the one hand, modernity was evidenced in the declining importance of agriculture, in rising living standards and their homogenisation in town and country, in the tannery's expansion, and in the town's growing commercial importance. On the other hand, all this had been actualised by features typical of an underdeveloped economy: the massive export of labour and of unprocessed farm commodities, the volatility of indigenous industries and the reproduction of class differences. Most generally between 1841 and 1925, modernity and underdevelopment had been interdependent features of a singular process rooted in the peripherality of Thomastown - in the domination of capital, technology and markets located elsewhere, as part of higher order systems.

#### *Political domination and the town, 1841-1926*

Prior to 1841, the state's main concern had been law and order: its agents were the military, police, magistrates and the petty sessions. The state and its agents, however, gradually moved out from the core streets, with their barracks, court house and bridewell, into more benign methods of control, particularly the use of local administration to alleviate the disruptive potential of poverty. The 1838 Poor Law and the 1841 abolition of the town's self-governing Corporation had made Thomastown a political satellite of Kilkenny city. However, when the severity of the 1845-8 famine induced the state to create smaller administrative units, an area around the town (within, roughly, an 8 to 10 mile radius) was hived off from the Kilkenny Union to form Thomastown Union, with the town as its seat. A workhouse and fever hospital were built and a board of guardians established to administer them.

Gradually, new functions were given to these boards, as the state expanded its jurisdiction. By the mid-1870s, boards had to establish medical dispensaries; by the early 1880s, they were building rural housing for agricultural labourers. By the end of the century, they were responsible for providing potable water and medical services, financing emigrants, abating nuisances, and enforcing regulations concerning sewers, lodging houses, dairy sheds and vaccination.

Such new functions, however, did not augment the town's political integrity. This was because the town itself had no representation on the board. Instead, the town was divided between the two DEEDs of Thomastown and Jerpoint Church, each of which - like all 27 DEEDs making up Thomastown Union - was entitled only to two representatives on the board. Town-dwellers could never be more than a small minority. In any case, each of the two DEEDs contained rural hinterland; and rural voters always outnumbered urban ones. Thus, of the 16 known guardians who resided in

Thomastown parish between 1850 and 1899, four were gentry, 11 were farmers and only one, the tanner, lived in the town. Being the seat of a Poor Law Union did not empower the town.

In 1899, a new local government act created County and Rural District Councils to be elected by all male householders. Thomastown's Union and its constituent DEDs became a Rural District, with a council and the town as its seat. Again this gave townspeople no especial say. Of the 33 parish residents who served on the District Council between 1899 and its abolition in 1926, 22 were rural-dwellers (21 farmers and one gentleman). Of the 11 townspeople who were councillors at various times, five were labourers, four were shopkeepers and two were industrialists (a flour miller and the tanner). Townsmen, of all classes, were always a small minority on the council. Thus, since the abolition of the town's Corporation in 1841, the town had been, and remained, politically dominated. Indeed, the growing modernity of local government structures (boards, councils, etc.), and their expanding functions, were all blatant signs of the town's political underdevelopment.

#### *The Irish state and the town, 1936-1989*

Until 1936, Thomastown was a net exporter of labour. In that year, however, the town began to experience a slow but consistent growth which meant that fifty years later, in 1986, its population of 1,465 was at its 1861 level. Had the geography of domination changed?

During the twentieth century, agriculture had continued to emphasise extensive systems (livestock) rather than intensive ones (tillage or dairy): average farm size increased as the number of farmers and farm labourers decreased. The slow decline in the town's industrial sector also continued. The tannery, after its brief expansion in the 1890s, succumbed to competition and government rationalisation in 1930. Jerpoint Mill continued through World War II because local wheat had to be milled for local consumption. It closed immediately after. Only Grenan Mill was left, but it too closed in 1963. It was a victim, like the town's other industrial enterprises, of competition from other centres and interests.

During the early twentieth century then, and until 1936, population decline was associated with capital-intensive agriculture and a contracting industrial base. The large number of labourers who became British soldiers during World War I was in part a reflection of high local unemployment (Silverman and Gulliver 1986: 162-5). Then, with independence and the end of the civil war in 1922, the new Irish state acted to establish control, to centralise power and to foment development. The resulting intervention proved key for the town's reproduction. For the new state not only absorbed

surplus labour and kept it at home but, more importantly, it enhanced the town's role as, yet again, a centre for actualising state interests.

Thomastown's role as the seat of a Poor Law Union after 1850 and Rural District Council after 1899 had masked its political dependency. It had, however, enhanced the town's function as a formal, administrative centre and had bolstered local commerce. Provisioning both the workhouse and the officials who came to the town had given custom to many shops. However, the town's location inside wider administrative units had contributed to the hegemonic notion that regional rather than town government was appropriate, and little local reaction ensued when, in 1926, the state abolished the Rural District Council and gave its functions to the County Council. "Local government in Ireland became...county council government" (Chubb 1970: 279). The town was again a satellite of Kilkenny city. Between 1899 and 1989, only four town-dwellers served on the council - a shopkeeper and three labourers.

Thus, the "want of a town commissionership" which the journalist noted in 1845 had never altered. Indeed, the new Irish state, after 1922, exacerbated the political peripheralization begun by the British. At the same time, its interventions had important repercussions in other domains: on the local economy, on the town's urban functions and, therefore, on the town's reproduction.

The County Council particularly, as the main agent of the state, required a great deal of labour. It provided regular, pensionable work to some labourers "on the roads" and in the workhouse which, after the mid-1950s, was converted to a geriatric facility. The Council also, in replacing the worst housing, required a great deal of occasional work from the building trades. In 1981, 40 per cent of the houses in the DEDs of Jerpoint Church and Thomastown had been built by a local authority.<sup>13</sup> Particularly, the construction of three housing estates (123 houses) provided extensive work for artisans and labourers during the late 1930s, mid-1950s and late 1970s. State concerns had clearly contributed to the town's growth after 1936.

In addition to the County Council, labour - both permanent and casual - was required by other state agencies (e.g. post office, public works office, electricity board, the nationalised railway and transport company). Through such agencies, between 1922 and 1989, schools, houses and a community centre were built or financed; streets were paved and the post office renovated; potable water, reservoirs and sewerage were provided; electricity and telephones were installed; the courthouse and the bridge were re-built. With each addition, the town became more dependent on the state at the same time that its urban functions were enhanced. In this way, a reproductive process was engendered: by the mid-1930s, state intervention enabled the town to generate sufficient waged employment to allow it to maintain itself and, in turn, to encourage the state to intervene yet again;



this, in turn, allowed population growth which, again, required the state to provide more services that, in turn, gave jobs, and so on. Yet, part of this process was the continuing export of labour. The town's dynamism after 1936 was sufficient only to reproduce itself, not to stem the outflow. Nor did the town's growth lead to political empowerment. Although dependent on the state, townspeople had little means of affecting the state's decisions in relation to it.

#### Commerce in the core, 1841-1989

Although politically dependent, the town had a particular kind of independence from the state. For it was a commercial centre - a node in a hierarchical, and international, distribution system. This role had persisted over centuries. It had often induced state agents to use the town for their own purposes and, by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to underwrite those public works (e.g. roads, bridges) which were required to maintain trading networks and, by implication, the town.

The town's shopkeepers also contributed to the reproduction of other urban classes. Many hired at least one labourer, some of the larger ones, at times, hired more. In addition, through self-employment and casual employment, often for shopkeepers, many of the town's artisans and labourers cobbled together adequate livings. In any case, people of all classes had long been dependent on the town's shopkeepers for their consumables. Thus, the trading sector, in the core streets of the town, was integral to it; and as commerce altered during the twentieth century, along with consumption patterns, the town grew.

Despite the massive population decline after 1841, the number of retailers in the town barely altered: 41 shops in 1846 and 45 in 1981 (see Table 1).<sup>14</sup> This clearly reflected increasing involvement in the market, rising living standards, changing consumption patterns and a growing penetration of commodities.

There is no extant description of the town's shops at any time. In the 1911 census, over half the retail buildings were of first class quality. Nevertheless, shopping spaces themselves were probably small. At the turn of the century, for example, a prosperous pub-grocery was about 15 to 20 feet each way. That size typified most shops in later years as well. In 1928, a long-established pub, described as "average" by the District Court judge in his licensing capacity, had a single bar room measuring eight feet by six feet, including the bar itself. There, the proprietor sold 25 gallons of whiskey a year and 12 dozen bottles of stout a week: not a large amount (*Kilkenny Journal* 15 September 1928). A larger, more prosperous pub-grocery in the 1930s occupied a room of about 30 feet by 10 in which were sold between 30

and 40 gallons of spirits a year - and a little less in the 1950s. The owner's wholesale purchases (spirits, beers, groceries and some hardware) was about £1,300 a year in the late 1930s. A successful drapery which continued for more than a hundred years measured about 150 square feet.

Table 1  
Thomastown's Retailers, 1846-1981

Main Retail Specialism	1846	1856	1884	1911	1945	1981
Pub-grocery, etc.	14	17	14	11	9	3
Pub only	1	2	1	3	7	9
Grocery only	6	3	5	6	3	6
Grocery-bakery	2	2	2	2	--	--
Drapery & clothing	3	5	2	5	7	6
Bakery only	2	3	4	1	2	1
Butchery	4	2	2	3	3	2
Hardware	1	2	2	2	2	2
Saddler	3	1	1	--	--	--
Bootmaker/seller	4	3	3	3	2	--
Newsagent, etc.	--	--	--	1	4	2
Electrical goods	--	--	--	--	--	2
Garage (petrol, cars, parts)	--	--	1	1	1	3
Other	--	--	--	2	1	9
Not known	1	1	--	--	--	--
TOTAL:	41	41	37	39	41	45

Despite their small sizes, the town's shops consistently supplied, at least since the mid-nineteenth century, the regular and repetitive needs of local rural and urban people: groceries, coal, liquor, bread, meat, clothing, footwear, hardware, seeds, tools, newspapers and tobacco. A few shops, catering for gentry, also held special stocks. In 1904, the account book which a small carter's household had with a baker-grocer showed regular purchases of bread, butter, milk, eggs, flour, sugar, tea, tobacco, candles, matches and, occasionally, bacon and jam. The shopkeeper baked the bread in an oven behind the shop and he blended the tea and smoked the bacon. He obtained the butter, milk and eggs from local farmers and his other commodities from Waterford and Dublin wholesalers.

The changing range of retail shops between 1846 and 1981 (Table 1) points to three alterations in the town's commerce during this period. First, a growing centralisation occurred in the retailing of staples. Until the early twentieth century, grocery shops predominated, whether on their own or linked with some other retail specialism. However, the number of groceries decreased after the middle of the twentieth century, especially when most publicans closed their grocery sections. They were unable to compete with new, self-service groceries and convenience shops which, in several cases,

were tied to regional and national chains and which were far larger than had ever been the case. In other words, the distribution of staples became, over time, specialised, centralised and the prerogative of fewer but larger retailers.

Second, alongside rising living standards and increasing consumption, new commodities became available for sale in the town as new kinds of specialist shops were opened, particularly around the turn of the century: china and housewares, newsagents (papers, tobacco, sweets, stationery) and, a little later, a shop specialising in factory-made footwear. Then came shops which specialised in petrol, pharmaceuticals, electrical goods, cars and spare parts. In addition, most local retailers gradually expanded their stock. In the later 1960s and 1970s, factory-made bread and cakes, bottled gas, sports goods, frozen foods and ice cream, housewares and kitchen fittings were increasingly to be found in the town's shops. By 1981, the town's shops sold, amongst other things, Japanese cars, German radios, Dutch flowers, tinned English mackerel and Waterford bacon.

This pointed to a third alteration: over time, an increasing number of commodities came from outside the local area, displacing local production and producers. Most drastic, perhaps, was the penetration of manufactured goods during the first half of this century: established town shops belonging to artisan-vendors simply disappeared. Tailors, dressmakers, bootmakers, saddlers, blacksmiths and a cooper all saw their products displaced by mass-produced goods made elsewhere and stocked by the town's other shopkeepers. The role of shopkeepers in processing commodities also was virtually eliminated. Such value-added activities as blending teas, smoking bacon, bottling beer and dressing turkeys were displaced by pre-packaged commodities increasingly supplied by wholesalers. By the early 1970s, even eggs, milk and butter no longer came from local producers. Victualers no longer butchered pigs and bread sellers no longer baked bread. People in town and country had ceased involvement in the production or processing of what they consumed, as had those who did the retailing.

Little information exists on early shopping habits but oral histories indicated that local shops had a near monopoly. Although it was possible to travel by train to Kilkenny city after 1848 and soon after to Waterford city, this was relatively expensive and time-consuming and seems not to have affected local shopping habits. Rather, the opposite occurred. Trains made it easier and cheaper for shopkeepers to obtain their supplies and gave them an advantage over shops in towns and villages in the region which were not served by the railway.

However, at least since World War II, the town's retailers have faced increased competition from shops in Kilkenny city and, to a lesser extent, in Waterford. Not only were more shops and especially new kinds of shops increasingly available there, but Thomastown people gradually acquired cars. According to a 1981 survey,<sup>15</sup> two-thirds of households could drive

elsewhere to shop. Nevertheless, the town's shops appear to have retained their near monopoly. People in both town and country claimed to prefer local shops for most purposes: groceries, meats, hardware, appliances and clothes.

The history of the town's commercial sector after 1845, then, is an ironic success story. As living standards rose, the town's retailing sector expanded and, along with it, the town. Yet, this same process encouraged the consumption of non-local goods and caused local production to decline. This was associated with a world economy in which, until

the end of the nineteenth century, . . . in spite of growing overseas competition . . . the export opportunities of the more backward Ford and raw material producing countries of Europe were growing by leaps and bounds. All this . . . went hand in hand with . . . growing industrial exports to the markets of the periphery (Berend and Ranki 1982: 24-25).

Thomastown, at the periphery of Europe, was involved in this process. It exported people and primary goods and it imported consumables. Its increasing underdevelopment ensured its own reproduction.

#### **Modernity and underdevelopment: a portrait from the 1980s**

Economic conditions in Thomastown in the 1980s reflected clearly how modernity and underdevelopment co-existed as consumption and production increasingly diverged. Men's occupations in 1981, for example, exhibited a decided modernity: only 19 per cent in the DEEDs of Thomastown and Jerpoint Church (containing the town and 9,500 acres) were in farming (54 farmers and 32 farm labourers). Instead, men were skilled (26 per cent), semi-skilled (11 per cent) or unskilled labourers (13 per cent), shopkeepers or businessmen (11 per cent), shop and clerical workers (8 per cent) and professionals or semi-professionals (12 per cent).

Educational levels too reflected modernity: all people under forty had some secondary education, the result of the vocational school built in the town in 1958. As well, about a quarter of the adults had tertiary education: apprenticeships, technical college and, occasionally, some university. In contrast, in 1911, about a quarter of the household heads enumerated could not sign their census forms.

Finally, living standards had risen dramatically. In Thomastown parish in 1981, average household size had declined to its lowest level: 3.7 people per house. Of the 507 households in the 1981 survey, virtually all had piped water, electricity and television. Nine out of ten had refrigerators: only a third had been bought before 1965. Half the households had washing machines and two-thirds had cars, but only since the 1960s. Between 1979

and 1981, sixty per cent of the households had holidayed away from home; half had left Ireland to do so.

Alongside these indices of modernity were those of underdevelopment: 21 per cent of the adult men in the two DEEDs were either unemployed or retired, and over two-thirds of the adult women were homemakers. About a quarter of the working population was self-employed or, more accurately, underemployed. These were, apart from shopkeepers, people who tried to make a living using their particular skills in sales or the trades - as masons, electricians, plumbers, insurance agents, welders, carpenters or "handymen" in the case of men, or as seamstresses, hairdressers, cooks or domestics in the case of women. Others had accumulated enough capital to invest in lorries, taxis or farm equipment which they worked on short-term contracts.

Moreover, although the last flour mill closed in 1963, several town enterprises continued to absorb local labour. In 1981, apart from the state-run geriatric facility, eight enterprises each employed more than eight local people. However, the nature of these enterprises was a portrait of persisting underdevelopment: two of the eight were foreign-owned; virtually none manufactured anything; lateral spin-offs were very limited; and business histories were volatile. Thus, the two foreign factories assembled foreign-made components whilst a stud farm served an international clientele, a garage sold foreign cars, a supermarket related foreign foods and a heating firm installed foreign components. Only a bakery actually made bread; to do so, it used foreign flour. An abattoir, though, did process local livestock.

Lateral spin-offs from these enterprises, and others in the locality, had a late twentieth century familiarity: the vast majority of self-employed artisans in Thomastown did not make commodities but instead provided the transport, installation and maintenance services which allowed the consumption of foreign goods to continue. Also familiar was the volatility of most of the nine large enterprises: by 1989, one foreign firm was gone and the other was greatly reduced in size, as was the garage; the central heating firm and stud farm were bankrupt whilst the bakery had been bought by a Cork company. The supermarket and abattoir had expanded, however, as had the geriatric facility.

Meanwhile, class differences in the town persisted, reflected not only in space but also in the structure of local kinship networks, educational levels and consumption and emigration patterns (Silverman 1989; Gulliver and Silverman 1990: 610-614). Overall, the 1980s portrait of the town exhibited, simultaneously, persisting modernity and underdevelopment as a reflection of the European domination of a vibrant, peripheral town.

### Conclusion: domination and historical ethnography

Countries of the periphery, it has been said, "all demonstrate problems of dualism, that have both historical and international roots." This dualism ostensibly occurs when a so-called modern sector, with high living standards, bureaucratic relations, etc., co-exists with an impoverished rural sector (Seers 1979: 3; Silverman 1979). However, in Thomastown, rural living standards had mirrored urban ones from early this century whilst, in any case, dualism and sectoral difference did not typify the locality. Instead, a number of other historical and structural features were key and these showed, clearly, that modernity and underdevelopment had long been mutually interdependent parts of a singular process of domination. They also showed the hierarchical organisation of that process, best illustrated perhaps by the town's changing relation to its surrounding countryside as the economics of each gradually became linked, not directly to each other, but to and through a higher order system. This was expressed in 1989 by a local farmer: "Thomastown is not a farmers' town," he said. "You don't feel welcome there. The hardware shops are concerned with builders' hardware, not farmers. ...It's also an attitude. Thomastown is not farmer-oriented. It has its own internal industries."

As part of this process of domination, class difference remained fundamental, visible in space and lifestyle. In this process, the town's political dependency was continually reproduced, as was the volatility of local productive enterprises, whether local or foreign-owned. In this process, labour remained the chief export, the economy failed to generate lateral growth and intervention from the state was ubiquitous and essential. In this process, by the late twentieth century, what was consumed was not produced, and what was produced, if at all, was sold elsewhere. All this reflected life in a periphery of Europe.

It has been argued by some, incorrectly I believe, that the period after 1961 in Ireland "marked a period of extensive social and economic change." First, according to that argument, the institutional basis of the "Irish economy was substantially altered by the augmented role of the state and the increased presence of foreign firms" (Pyle 1990: 18). Second, "Ireland changed as the proportion of employment in the agricultural sector fell and that in industry and services rose." Third, a "marked break with...the past" occurred as growth rates and manufactured exports grew, associated with the state's "export-led strategy; the influx of foreign direct investment" and membership in the EEC (Pyle 1990: 20-21).

However, this present ethnography of domination requires such conclusions to be amended, particularly in the light of its historical approach in the context of a particular locality. For, in Thomastown, the above-noted

changes were neither "extensive" nor recent; they also did not constitute a "marked break." Rather, they were a continuation of an historical process of domination which was discernible in the mid-nineteenth century and which was rooted, in turn, in earlier colonial and capitalist relations. Shoulder pads and green peppers, in other words, were simply contemporary manifestations of such long-term domination and of the on-going reproduction of modernity and underdevelopment. In saying this, however, it is essential to recognise a central point: that domination - and the continuing reproduction of underdevelopment and modernity - is what had allowed the reproduction and persistence of the town itself. This, I argue, was because of the geographical and functional nature of core-periphery relations as they were manifested through time in the long-dominated, dynamic Southeast of Ireland.

What all this suggests, of course, is the simultaneous necessity and centrality of an historical approach when anthropologists "do ethnography." Such an approach not only deepens our understanding but, importantly, it addresses a question which has concerned anthropologists far more than it has other analysts: "How and why did the present come to be?" By addressing this question, either implicitly or explicitly, and by applying anthropological models, ideas and techniques to both the present *and* the past *simultaneously*, anthropologists are able to produce one kind of "historical ethnography."<sup>16</sup> That is, they produce analytical case studies which expand the conceptual horizons of social science itself, which go beyond the normal purview of social history, and which enhance our anthropological understandings of societies cross-culturally.

#### Notes

1. Field and archival research in Ireland and Thomastown was carried out by myself and P.H. Gulliver during a 14-month period in 1980-81 and for another 12 months, intermittently, during the summers of 1983, 1987, 1989 and 1992. Research was funded, at various times, by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC); the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Faculty of Arts, York University.
2. Numerous versions and revisions of so-called core-periphery or dependency theory exist. An excellent review is Blomstrom and Heine (1984).
3. The descriptions were given by witnesses from Thomastown (gentry, farmers, shopkeepers, professionals) to an 1833 Parliamentary Inquiry (HC 1836).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. It is not known when most of the buildings in the core streets were constructed. Plisworth suggested that "a good deal of building" occurred about 1790 (1953: 26). This corresponded with the economic boom in the town as in Ireland. He also cited a "traveller, Atkinson, writing in 1815" who described the town "as being composed for the most part of tolerably good slated houses" (1953: 28). This probably referred to

the core streets and suggests that most of its buildings were extant by at least the late eighteenth century.

7. The changes to the core itself after 1845 were very minor: some improvements in amenities (lighting, heating, plumbing), the occasional amalgamation of adjacent buildings, the demolition of two, unsafe shops in the 1970s, the replacement of a shop destroyed by fire in the 1950s and the refurbishment of shop fronts. Outside the core, the distribution of shops remained virtually unchanged. In 1989, Mill Street still had its three pubs and the Quay had its pub but also a grocery built in 1950s. A small grocery had begun in 1947 on Maudlin Street and another, in the 1970s, on Ladywell.
8. Censuses of Ireland, 1841, 1851, etc. Emigration from Thomastown pre-dated 1841 (e.g. H.C. 1836). However, the 1841 census provides the first reliable statistics which can be compared with later periods.
9. The figures differed for men as compared with women, with the latter having higher illiteracy rates throughout.
10. These comprise the three "civil parishes" or census units of Ballyinch, Jerpointabbey and Pleberstown. They are not contiguous to the town but are all within Thomastown Catholic parish. They contain about 3,000 acres.
11. In the town in 1841, under seven per cent of the housing was fourth class and 36 per cent was third class.
12. These computations exclude 151 unmarried young men who enumerated themselves as "farmers' sons." This was because their adult occupations were yet to be established and, with the norm of impartible farm inheritance, only a small minority would ever become farmers in their own right. Most would emigrate and some, from the smaller farms, would become labourers.
13. Although "labourers' cottages" were built before 1926 by the Board of Guardians and Rural District Council, most state housing was built by the County Council after 1926.
14. This stability in shop numbers contrasts with a reported general increase in post-famine Ireland (Cullen 1972: 138). It is likely, though, that the increase occurred in the west and in cities. In southeastern Ireland, excluding large urban centres (e.g. Waterford and Kilkenny), Thomastown was not unusual. In the comparably sized towns of Graigueenamanagh and Callan, shop numbers were similarly stable (Gulliver and Silverman in preparation).
15. A survey of the 507 households (1,932 people) in the DEDs of Thomastown and Jerpoint Church was part of the research project (see note 1 above).
16. The idea of "historical ethnography" and its variations was elaborated in Silverman and Gulliver (1992).

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