

SOCIAL LIFE AND LOCAL MEANING:
THE CASE OF CONTEMPORARY THOMASTOWN

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'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, ... 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.' (*Through the Looking Glass*)

Introduction

In this essay, we describe the structure of everyday life in a local area known as 'Thomastown' by looking at the key relationships and criteria which inform social life. We find that the complexity of these endows 'Thomastown' with variable meanings for different people in varying contexts. These multiple relationships and meanings are the reason why there is no simple, bounded place called 'Thomastown'. We believe that the same indeterminacy applies to other areas in county Kilkenny (such as Callan, Castlecomer, etc.), and indeed, to other areas in rural Ireland. However, to illustrate how this indeterminacy operates, we offer the case of 'Thomastown'. Our focus is on the period around 1981, although some comparisons are made with conditions since 1965.

A casual view of the area known as 'Thomastown' might indicate a small Irish town with its wide Market Street leading up from the bridge over the river Nore, a few adjoining narrow streets, and several roads leading outward along which houses have been built. Beyond 'the town,' it would appear, stretches 'the countryside' with its farms — the rural hinterland of the so-called town. 'The town' easily could be seen as a service and market centre for the surrounding 'countryside', whilst the presence of a substantial Catholic church carries the added implication that 'the town' is also the centre of a parish with fixed and known boundaries. It is all too easy then to proceed to the next step of perceiving the hinterland of 'the town' and the area of the parish as being, more or less, the same and as containing an identifiable community. Such a view might appear to be substantiated when people living in a 'town' street or in a 'rural' townland talk about themselves as 'Thomastown people' or when they sometimes refer to themselves as being members of a community — as for example, in the community council and the community centre. Thus, to talk about 'Thomastown,' we could bring 'the town' and the 'countryside' together as a parish and a 'community.'

It looks simple. Yet, not only is the reality far more complicated but the simple view considerably distorts 'Thomastown' in both past and present times. Indeed, a closer look immediately begins to produce difficulties. Most obvious is the problem of distinguishing between 'the town' and 'the countryside.' There is no legally or administratively defined town: urban streets and houses have, for at least two hundred years, expanded well beyond the old, formerly walled, townland of Thomastown and today, houses, workshops and factories straggle out along the approach roads and side roads. Moreover, some farmers and farm buildings are found in 'the town'; conversely, numerous labourers, office workers and artisans live in 'country' houses and sometimes form a greater proportion of the population than do farmers.

The difficulties of defining 'the hinterland of Thomastown' — the particular area involved and its residents — are similar. The parish boundaries will not do.² On the one hand, some people in the more western parts of the parish do not regularly shop in 'the town,' go to mass, enjoy their leisure or send their children to school there. Instead, they go to Stonyford or Knocktopher which are, for them, more conveniently situated. However, for some purposes, such as people still refer to themselves as 'Thomastown' people. On the other hand, many people who live beyond the northern boundaries of the parish — in Woolengrange and Kilfane areas — regularly use the facilities of 'the town' and have long sent their children to school there: in some sense and in some contexts they too regard themselves as 'Thomastown' people.

The situation is further complicated because Thomastown parish has two rural chapels and residents in the southern and eastern parts of the parish, along with others who live beyond the parish boundaries, go to mass there and do not come to the main church; they may come to 'the town,' however, to shop or to drink in a pub.

The structure of employment causes a similar complexity. Not everyone who lives in 'the town' or in the parish works there. Especially since car ownership has become widespread (and two-thirds of all households had at least one car in 1981),³ men and women have had regular jobs in Kilkenny, New Ross and elsewhere, just as they do some of their shopping and enjoy some of their leisure activities elsewhere. Some people employed in 'the town' live as far as 20 miles away. Although the majority of shop customers probably live nearby, particular specialist shops (the chemist and hardware, for example) draw people from considerable distances, as do some of the pubs.

It is obvious that virtually every individual who might be described as a 'Thomastown' person has social connections and interests which go far beyond a particular locality. Moreover, those connections and interests vary in their range, intensity and direction both for different individuals and according to context. 'Thomastown' is not an island clearly demarcated from other islands; rather, it blends into other similar areas or localities in a variety of ways which do not create boundaries. The only local unit which does have explicit functions and meaning for people, along with a fixed geographical boundary, is the parish; but whilst its boundaries circumscribe some particular interests and activities (most notably, the recording of marriages and baptisms

and GAA membership), its boundaries do not and cannot set limits to the vast majority of interests and activities whose range may be narrower or wider but in any case seldom include everyone resident within such boundaries. Whilst geography — more precisely, locality — is not unimportant in some contexts, it is not fixed nor can it constrain and contain the manifold and variable social relations and concerns of people.

In emphasising this complexity and the flexibility of social reality, we do not ignore the fact that 'Thomastown-ness' has meaning for people; that is, we include those genuine expressions of 'we, the people of Thomastown' which not only indicate special and valued local qualities which people wish to emphasise but which also serve to distinguish 'local people' from others elsewhere. This sense of 'we-ness' is not spurious; it does connote some felt sense of commonality, togetherness, distinctiveness. The crucial point is, however, that this sense of 'we' — of 'Thomastown' — varies depending on who is expressing it, on the circumstances in which it is being expressed and on who is being defined as 'them.' 'We' always is and remains, conveniently and necessarily, vague as to who precisely is included and excluded. Any expression of 'we-ness' is really an endeavour by which people seek to impose some recognisable identity and order upon a complicated reality.

To describe the structure of everyday life in 'Thomastown' is to try to understand what 'Thomastown' is and has been, how it is made up and what it means. To do this, it is necessary to begin with the recognition that 'Thomastown' is a series of complex and variable social relationships, activities and ideas and that these, with a few minor exceptions, are not determined by fixed boundaries. In an important sense, 'Thomastown' is an idea, a state of mind, although it also involves material resources — buildings, farms and making a living. How can all this be described?

We have found it useful to analyse social life by using four principal criteria which are themselves used by local people to categorise and to differentiate their social worlds. These criteria are locality, class, kinship and gender. By these criteria, every individual is seen as a member of various, distinct sets of people. The sets based on these four categories, however, are not mutually exclusive; the fact that every individual belongs to many sets simultaneously gives rise to complex categorisations. For example, the kin who make up a set are often differentiated by locality and occasionally by class; a set of people categorised by class is simultaneously cross-cut by locality and gender. Thus, not only is each individual involved with at least four sets of people according to the four criteria, but every person also can be differentiated according to every possible combination.

Further complications ensue for several reasons. First, all these manifold sets not only intersect but also spread out without any clear, let alone common, geographical boundaries. Second, it cannot be assumed, nor does it occur, that all, most or even a large number of people agree on how others ought to be categorised in all contexts and in relation to all criteria. Third, not all people who are categorised together necessarily interact with each other. For example, some but not all women come together in the local branch of the

Irish Countrywomen's Association; some but not all working class people belong to a trade union. In these various ways, the presence of four main differentiating categories can lead to striking complexity.

In a secondary sense, local people are also brought together or differentiated by age and by particular interests, such as sports, politics or religion. However, we wish to argue that it is locality, class, kinship and gender which comprise the basic categories of local society and which, in interaction, provide the flexibility and indeterminacy of local life and meaning. In this essay, therefore, we look briefly at each of the four criteria to illustrate the inherent complexity of social relationships, the overlapping and blending of a variety of sets of people and the boundlessness of 'Thomastown'. At the same time, we try to indicate how and why people think of themselves as 'Thomastown people,' even though that is, and must be, a flexible and rather vague notion.⁴

Locality and Place

The name 'Thomastown' has various legal meanings which refer to different local areas. It is a townland which consists of 16 statute acres and it is the name of a Catholic parish. Although most people are scarcely aware of it since it hardly affects their daily lives, Thomastown also is a District Electoral Division (a DED, which is a rating and electoral area), a Registrar's District, a county council electoral district and a Rural District (formerly Poor Law Union). The last extends some ten miles around 'the town' and was the local government unit until 1926; it is still used for census and other purposes. In everyday parlance, however, the name of 'Thomastown' also has other meanings. Depending on the situation, people use it to refer to the ill-defined urban area, to a vague, unbounded, region which residents feel is 'Thomastown,' or to an unbounded zone whose residents tend to look to 'the town' for some of their needs or relaxations.

Despite this profusion of names, or perhaps as a reflection of it, a complex sense of locality or place is crucial to people. They use locality to describe and designate themselves and others in terms of neighbourliness and to categorise perceived differences arising out of geographical, propinquity or separation.

Neighbours, those people who live near to one another, see a good deal of each other because of that: they can exchange news and views fairly easily and regularly, they know much about each other's experiences and past history, they may express sympathy or give advice and, in general, they feel themselves to be somewhat separated, and a little different, from people of other 'places.' An example is those people who live in the same street and who therefore often meet in the everyday course of life. Not necessarily do they all like or approve of one another, and there may be periodic or permanent conflicts and avoidances. Yet, they acquire an intimate knowledge of one another, exceeding that which they have of people living in another street. They are linked together by that reason as they are, at the same time, separated from others.

A similar example can be taken from an agricultural area. Although co-

operative assistance amongst neighbouring farmers (harvesting, threshing, loan of equipment, etc.) has weakened, those farmers and their families who live near to one another continue to see and to know about each other: they attend funerals, are invited to weddings, help out in times of sickness, express pleasure or sadness in their neighbours' fortunes, and the like. There are no set boundaries to this kind of thing nor is it limited by townland boundaries; yet it is clear that farmers in more westerly townlands know little about farmers living in more easterly or southerly townlands and, other than individual kinship connections, they have few or no direct relations with them for they are beyond the practical range of neighbourliness.

Such a locality-based set of people tends also to be strengthened or muted by the additional commonality of class. For example, in Mill Street until the early 1960s, many of the men and some women worked regularly or occasionally in the adjacent flour mill and many of the men were river fishermen. Similar examples are council housing estates where almost everyone is of working class origins or Market Street where shopkeepers predominate. Conversely, because of common occupational interests and status, farmers are more closely linked with each other than they are with labourers or artisans living in the same locality.

A locality-based set of people, or neighbours, may also be affected by kinship. In recent years, it has not been uncommon for those with some ground, whether farmers, labourers or shopkeepers, to section off a house plot for their newly married children. Indeed, wherever there was once a labourer's cottage with an acre or a farmer's field next to a road, there is now likely to be a localised part of a kinship network consisting of two or more adjacent houses inhabited by primary kin.

Finally, a locality-based set of people also may be modified by gender and age as well as by class and/or kinship. One council estate was built in the early 1940s and its houses allocated to young, married couples with children. Four decades later, in 1981, as a result of the logic underlying the developmental cycle of households and the longer life expectancy of women as compared with men, the estate has a disproportionate number of households made up of elderly widows generally living on their own. They are the remnants of the young, working class households of the 1940s whose male heads have died and whose children have left.

Underlying such complexities which are caused by the intersection of several differentiating categories, the fact remains that there are many overlapping sets of people — neighbours — defined largely by residential locality, although not with any great precision, and people of a set know more about one another than they know about others. Information — news and gossip — does spread outwards, especially as individual members are connected in other ways with other people with whom they exchange news. Nevertheless, it just is not true, amongst a small population such as that of 'Thomastown,' that everyone knows about everyone else. The more melodramatic gossip does, gradually, percolate around but not inevitably and not in the same detail. People in one street are often ignorant of what has happened to individuals in

These spatial and other distinctions exist in association with feelings of 'Thomastown-ness'; indeed, many categories co-exist at the same time for the same people. Particular combinations, however, are not identical for everyone nor are they the same on all occasions. Moreover, various sentiments melt away imperceptibly over space at varying rates for different people depending on context. Thus, there is no precise place where feelings of 'Thomastown-ness' end and another spatial identification begins; rather, many identifications endlessly overlap through space. Locality, then, becomes a most useful way of expressing a variety of particular connections and personal identifications. It does not mean that there is a strong, binding commonality nor a clear boundedness for the people involved. This flexibility can be further explained, and is reinforced, by other criteria by which people categorise each other and are, therefore, brought together or separated.

'Class' and 'Class-status'

The people of 'Thomastown' have long seen themselves, and continue to do so, as divided amongst a number of what they commonly refer to as 'classes.' They also see these as ranked in a hierarchy according to differences in prestige and status. Although this categorisation of people, by what we term a 'class-status' system, is based essentially on occupational differences, it also differentiates people according to standards of living, skills and life-chances.

The lowest 'class' in the hierarchy is made up of labourers and their families — unskilled and semi-skilled workers in regular or casual employment. Above them are the artisans and skilled tradesmen — those who have 'served their time' in apprenticeship but also some who have informally acquired skills — some in wage-employment and a smaller number who are self-employed. Their incomes have tended to be larger than those of labourers. Higher in status again are two equal but separate 'classes': farmers and shopkeepers. Above them again, in the nineteenth century, were the gentry — typically land-owners and landlords of the Ascendancy but for local purposes also including those with independent means, professionals and manufacturers.

This was, and is, a crude but very meaningful scheme of status classification. It also was one which permitted, and still permits, important distinctions within each 'class,' such as those between large and small farmers or between higher-paid factory workers as opposed to casual, general labourers. It has also allowed people to assign more or less prestige to individuals within a 'class' because of personal character, achievement or failure.

Households in these five 'classes,' when assessed in respect of the household head in the two DEDs of Jerpoint Church and Thomastown (including 'the town'), comprised 88% of all households in 1901 and 89% in 1981. The 'class-status' categories were, then, extensive although not comprehensive. Those who did not fit into them in 1901 were semi-professional workers, police and clergy — most of whom came from places far from Thomastown. Similarly, in 1981, such households also did not fit nor did those which straddled two 'classes,' such as the small farmer who also worked as a postman

and the artisan who had a small shop. Amongst those who did fit, labourers comprised 45% of all households in 1901 and 51% in 1981; farmers comprised 20% in 1901 and 12% in 1981; artisans' households decreased from 14% to 11.5% in those years and those of shopkeepers increased from 8% to 11%. If a purely rural area is examined, the proportion of farmers increases to something like two-thirds, as in the Pleberstown DED of six townlands to the south; but such townlands and DEDs do not exist in isolation and cannot be analysed in that way.

It must be emphasised that those figures, and local ascriptions of 'class' are made in reference to an entire household or 'family.' It sometimes happens, however, that grown children have higher or lower 'class-status' occupations than their fathers. For example, a labouring father might have an artisan son; a small farmer's brother could be a labourer; and a shopkeeper's daughter might be a clerk. In the nineteenth century, such occurrences were few as most children either took up occupations similar to those of their fathers or they emigrated. In the twentieth century the same hierarchical 'class-status' classification by household and 'family' has largely continued despite growing complications and children continue to be given the same hierarchical 'class-status' ascription as their parents. In particular, the number and variety of skilled tradesmen has much increased since World War II as new trades and employment opportunities have developed. In occupational terms, the actual number of artisans increased from about 80 in 1901 to about 170 in 1981, 50 of whom were self-employed. Most of these new artisans have come from labourers' households and they have continued their connection with their own and other labourers' families and have taken spouses from such families. The 'class' of artisans, therefore, has almost blended into the 'class' of labourers as a result. At the same time, clerical and semi-professional occupations have increased and these too do not easily fit into the old 'class-statuses.' Finally, there are a few individuals who have successfully developed businesses employing numerous workers and who, in terms of wealth, local influence and prestige, have begun to take the place of the former local gentry. Yet, in the 1980s, the new artisans, white collar workers and businessmen tend to be put into their fathers' 'class' although this may change after many years in their own households and as an older 'Thomastown' generation dies away.

In brief, the old 'class-status' system has been subject to increasing complexities. It has been retained, with modifications, because it continues to be useful and because it continues to represent, if crudely, the reality of divisions amongst people as they themselves perceive them. In many important ways — life-chances and life-styles, the people with whom they most readily relate, common interests and the activities in which they are involved or from which they are excluded — individuals are strongly affected by their 'class' and that is a major reason for the persistence of status awareness. One local resident, born into a long-established labouring family and now a salesman, illustrated the persistence of the system: 'We have our trade unions, the shopkeepers have their Development Association and the farmers have their own association.'

The social significance of 'class-statuses' is most easily demonstrated in marriages, for people very largely take a spouse from their own 'class'. They have long done this and consider it appropriate to do so. The following table gives the recorded marriages of farmers' sons and labourers' sons according to whether they married the daughter of a farmer, a labourer or some other man.

Table 1
The Marriages of Farmers and Labourers in 1865-74 and 1965-74

Bridegrooms were sons of		Between 1865 and 1874, their brides were daughters of:		Between 1965 and 1974, their brides were daughters of:	
farmers	labourers	farmers	other	farmers	other
71%	11%	61%	18%	15%	24%
17%	69%	10%	13%	89%	1%

(Figures refer to all marriages of people resident in Thomastown parish for whom data were available.)

The preponderance of intra-'class' marriage in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is obvious. For each 'class' in each of two periods a century apart, such marriages accounted for at least three-fifths of all marriages. More significantly, farmers and labourers seldom married each other; and the exceptions tended to involve small farmers who were also in unskilled wage-employment. Rarely have sons or daughters of large farmers taken a spouse from a labourer's family and virtually never where the son was heir to the farm. This is both a matter of fact and of principle. People of higher status (farmers and shopkeepers) have been and are unwilling to take a spouse from a lower 'class-status.' This rule has only infrequently been contravened and, when it was, parents strenuously objected, even to the point of disowning and disinheriting a recalcitrant son or daughter. Such cases, from both the recent and distant past, are notorious and well-remembered.

It might be expected that changes in the 'class-status' system during the last few decades would be associated with changes in these marriage patterns. To some extent, this is true and there now occurs the occasional inter-'class' marriage with far less 'trouble' than there would have been in the past. Yet, an example from the early 1980s goes a long way to prove that the rules of 'class-status' ascription remain intact. A farm labourer's daughter, employed as a skilled clerical worker, married the son of a medium-sized farmer. The farmer and his wife were not pleased. According to the bride, 'they only permitted' the marriage because he was not the heir and because his brother had already married the 'right' kind of girl, a shopkeeper's daughter. However, the parents still found it necessary to express their displeasure by refusing to announce the engagement publicly and in not entertaining their future daughter-in-law.

Such inter-'class' marriages may now occur with less trauma than in the past, but, as in the above example, they tend only to involve farmers' sons who will not inherit and labourers' daughters who have some education. These were precisely the people who would have emigrated in earlier decades; alter-

natively, had the younger son not emigrated, he probably would have remained unmarried, living 'at home.' Therefore, the fact that individuals from different 'classes' now marry each other on occasion, is more a reflection of changes in emigration patterns, in the availability of education and in expanding employment opportunities than a change in attitudes towards the exclusiveness of 'class.'

At the same time that marriage choices are a crucial index of 'class-status' distinctions, they also have perpetuated them. For not only does marriage establish a new household but it also creates links between people which, in the next generation, become important ties of kinship. Certainly not all people of a single 'class-status' are so related: within each 'class' there are many more or less separate kin networks. Moreover, a few farmer-shopkeeper marriages have always meant some kinship connections between those two higher and equal 'classes.' However, as a result of past marriage patterns, kinship networks seldom cross the boundaries between higher and lower 'class-statuses'.

More recently, whilst an increasing number of labourer-artisan marriages are blurring the distinctions between those two 'classes,' a new 'class' of inter-marrying, medium-status, white collar people is emerging. As a result, there has been a strong tendency for the old five 'class-statuses' to become re-combined in a new way. There are now (1) labourers and artisans, (2) farmers and shopkeepers, (3) clerical/middle management workers and (4) a tiny, emergent 'class-status' of larger entrepreneurs. This remains only a tendency, however, for it is still useful and meaningful for 'Thomastown' people themselves to distinguish shopkeepers from farmers and artisans from labourers as well as to remind both secretaries and independent businessmen of their 'class' origins.

Thus, the 'class-status' system is not simply a categorisation of occupational categories. It is a central part of social reality by which some people are brought together and others are separated. The occupations, life-chances and residential stability of individuals are all much affected by the 'class' into which they were born and brought up.

This 'class variation' becomes apparent by looking at occupational histories. In table 2 below, details from the histories of 42 men are summarised. All were resident in Jerpoint Church and Thomastown DEDs in 1981; and all were born between 1920 and 1924, inclusive.

Of the 12 farmers' sons in this sample, only three had held non-farming jobs during their lives: one small farmer also worked as a labourer; one farmer's son became a driver, not a farmer; and one farmer inherited a shop. Only four farmers' sons in the age cohort had ever worked outside 'Thomastown.' Farmers' sons, therefore, seldom had non-farming jobs nor did they work away from 'Thomastown.' Moreover, farmers' sons had generally held only two jobs during their lives — that of farmer's son and farmer. Similarly, sons of shopkeepers stayed to become shopkeepers or businessmen or to take up comparable occupations of 'shopkeeper kind' (e.g. bookmaker, insurance agent). Shopkeepers' sons generally had held about three jobs

Table 2
Occupational Histories of Men Born between 1920 and 1924

Number of men, their origins, and their 1981 occupations (N = 42)	Average number of jobs held.	Number of men who had worked outside Thomastown Rural District	
		In Ireland:	Overseas:
Sons of farmers (12):	2.1*	2	0
9 farmers	}		
1 farmer-labourer			
1 shopkeeper		2	0
1 lorry driver			
Sons of Shopkeepers (4):	3.2	3	1
4 business men			
Sons of Artisans (3):	3.7	1	2
3 artisans			
Sons of labourers (unskilled and semi-skilled) (23):	4.8	1	2
5 non-labourers	}		
(3 builders, 1 clerk, 1 machine operator)			
18 labourers		4.2**	8

* With one exception, one of the jobs held by each farmer's son was that of 'farmer's son' on his father's farm.

** 10 of these 18 labourers had held four or more jobs and two had held only one job.

during their careers. In contrast, sons of artisans or labourers had held many more jobs — 15 out of 23 men in the sample had had four or more during their lives. In addition, sons of artisans and labourers were more likely to have worked elsewhere in Ireland or overseas. At its most general level, the information in table 2 for all the men demonstrates the marked tendency for men to follow an occupation in the same 'class' as that of their fathers: 35 of the 42 men had done so.

More generally, people say that in a shop, children of farmers were employed as shop assistants, daughters of labourers as domestics and sons of labourers as porters. In fact, labourers' sons have very rarely become farmers and only a few have become small shopkeepers. In the nineteenth century, almost all labourers' children also became labourers, as the majority still do, despite the increasing number now acquiring artisanal skills. Associated with all these kinds of life-chances are differences in incomes and, therefore, in standards of living.

The reality of the "class-status" system is demonstrated in formal associations. Some organisations not only specifically cater to particular 'class' interests and activities, they also exclude members of other 'classes'. Trade unions, farmers' associations and shopkeepers' associations are the most obvious examples. Yet, even when organisations are not based on explicit

occupational distinctions, they may still reflect 'class-status' alignments, as for example, the Gun Club (farmers), the Community Council (labourers and artisans), the Development Association (shopkeepers and businessmen), the Credit Union (labourers), Gymkhana (farmers), the Tennis Club (shopkeepers), etc. However, such organisations are not exhaustive: not all members of a 'class-status' belong to or participate in such organisations if only because each 'class' is itself divided. As one small farmer put it: 'The Irish Farmers Association is not intended for people like me.' Moreover, 'Thomastown' people are well aware that they do have valuable associations that are not 'class'-oriented. Yet, even then, 'class' can sometimes enter. The Hurling Club, for example, attracts its membership and great, on-going interest from all 'classes,' but farmers tend to control its management and team recruitment, or so many labourers believe. Said one shopkeeper's son whose close kin are also farmers: 'I'm related to most of the Kilkenny hurling team.' In contrast, the vast majority of 'Thomastown' labourers would be unable to find even a distant cousin on the team.

Household, Kin and 'Family'

The ties created by blood and marriage underlie the basic unit of 'Thomastown' social life: the household. These ties also underlie kinship networks and 'family' reputations.

New households form in 'Thomastown' when two people marry, although in recent years the availability of council housing, house plots and jobs have meant that fully-fledged households of 'outsiders' have come to 'Thomastown.' Newlyweds have a decided preference for setting up a separate household and, as the 1981 survey indicated, very few married people had lived with other relatives in their early married years. This strong preference was also reflected in the structure of 1981 households: almost 70 per cent were made up of a married couple with or without children or a widow(er) and children. Of the remainder, more than half were of people alone — spinsters, bachelors and widow(er)s — and fewer than ten per cent had an elderly parent or an unmarried sibling living in.

This low incidence of complex ties within households simplifies to some extent the process by which domestic roles are allocated. Until marriage, children are subordinate to parents and, given that most children set up new households after marriage, there are only a few cases where authority has to be negotiated between two generations. Instead, the main role differentiation within the household is based on the distinction between husband and wife; and in the vast majority of 1981 households, the husband earned the livelihood while the wife managed the home. It is this division, and the economic importance of the husband, which promote the idea that the husband is the 'head' of the house. Indeed, in many households, wives do not know how much their husbands earn or the content of their bank accounts. Even the 'egg money' earned by a farmer's wife is seen by many people as a subsidy from the

husband: after all, said an informant, where does the grain come from to feed the hens and the timber for the hen house? Thus, the expectation is that husbands control despite the fact that, as people readily admit, there are many households in which personalities severely alter this ideal.

A 'Thomastown' household does not exist in isolation. It has many kinds of outside links, two of which concern 'family' and kinship. Although in 'Thomastown' usage, 'family' refers to a person's children, it also categorises together people who have a common surname, the same putative origins and, most importantly, the same reputation. 'They are all the one' is a common way of expressing the observation that certain people are related by blood to each other, even when they cannot trace the precise connection. The fact that individuals can be grouped loosely into such 'families' means that the reputations of individuals are, in some measure, dependent not only on their own behaviour but also on the behaviour of all those who are seen as part of their 'family.' 'Thomastown' people, therefore, try to ensure that household members and near kin, as far as possible, behave in ways which maintain 'family respectability.' However, since it is impossible to control more distant kin or those simply reputed to be part of the 'family,' people resort to an additional tactic — that of avoidance and disengagement. It was often expressed by people who had recently experienced 'troubles' that, for example, 'my mother was one of them, but sure, they pretend not to know us now.'

'Family' reputation derives from a complex process. It is both ascribed by the past yet altered by the present. Reputation is ascribed to a 'family' because of its roots (its 'mythical' history) and its 'class' (its material, recent history). A newcomer, for example, may be told, with a touch of reverence, that 'she is a Cantwell.' The newcomer will not be told that the landowning Cantwells were dispossessed by Cromwell more than 300 years before and that this effectively ended their importance in local history.⁶ Yet its hue persists for contemporaries who share the name, although genealogical connections are unknown. Second, and more important, is a general 'class' ascription which is associated with particular family names. Some surnames connote farming 'families', others belong to labourers, masons, carpenters or millers. When a farming and labouring 'family' have the same surname and someone says that 'they are all the one,' it is intended either to lower the farmer's status or to raise the labourer's.

With this ascription as a criterion, 'family' reputation is added to, maintained or lost in two inter-related ways: how new members are recruited and the presence or absence of stigma. Marriage must recruit an appropriate partner and recruitment by birth must involve marriage. A failure in either of these realms, because of a 'poor match' or an illegitimate child, is regarded with great dismay and can result in ostracism or emigration.

Stigma, however, is associated with more than marriage and birth: it is also linked to the presence of tuberculosis in 'families,' to mental illness, familial violence and alcohol abuse. A smaller dowry allegedly was given if a woman married into such a farming 'family' and, as one informant put it, it was one

way a small farm girl could 'marry up.' It is also said to be a way in which a labourer possibly might marry into a shop.

Control of household members and close kin, 'proper' behaviour in key areas (attending mass, controlled alcohol use, etc.) and avoidance of others so as to disengage from a stigma — these are the behavioural tactics used in the politics of 'family' reputation.

Whereas the domain of 'family' is cultural, that of kinship is social; and whereas 'family' reputation involves politics, kinship is more concerned with economics. Everyone has numerous relatives by blood or marriage and therefore is involved in a dispersed network which ramifies almost endlessly outward. The extensiveness of these nets has varied over time and amongst 'classes.' Using the instances of Thomastown parish people who married during two decades, each one hundred years apart (1865 to 1874 and 1965 to 1974), we can show how far people went for their spouses and, as a result, how ramifying were their kinship networks. For table 3 below, the second-order field was defined as consisting of those DEDs adjacent to the DED of the parish person. The third-order field was defined as those DEDs immediately adjacent to the second-order field; and so on. The table omits marriages which occurred outside the county and abroad in an effort to exclude the marriages of emigrants no longer resident locally; however, a few parish residents did marry spouses from beyond the county.

Table 3

The Formation of Kin Ties Through Marriage: Variations by 'Class' and Locality.
1865-1874 and 1965-1974

	The Thomastown person's marriage partner came from —			
	1st order field (same DED):	2nd order field:	3rd or 4th order field:	Another Kilkenny Rural District:
<i>Farmers:</i>				
1965-1874....	21.7%	30.4%	34.8%	13.1%
1965-1974....	20.0%	—	60.0%	20.0%
<i>Artisans:</i>				
1865-1874....	58.1%	25.6%	14.0%	2.3%
1965-1974....	13.8%	32.7%	32.8%	20.7%
<i>Labourers:</i>				
1865-1974....	55.5%	30.1%	8.4%	6.0%
1965-1974....	36.7%	26.7%	23.3%	13.3%

Clearly, the networks of resident 'Thomastown' labourers were, and still are, the most localised, whilst artisans' networks were more restricted than those of farmers. Indeed, one hundred years ago, farmers' kin reached well into the third and fourth-order fields and even outside the rural district: almost half married in this zone in contrast with labourers and artisans where fewer than one in five or six did so. A similar pattern has persisted into the present day,

even though all 'classes' have experienced an expansion of their kin networks outward.⁷

However, a glance at the map (fig. 23.1) shows that DEDs in the third and fourth order fields are only seven or eight miles from any one of the DEDs which overlap Thomastown parish. Even farmers and artisans, therefore, found the large proportion of their wives, both in the last century and this, from within that limited area.⁸

Kin are important to people: 'We are friends with our relatives,' said one informant. Marriages over several generations have created for most individuals, however, a large number of kin and people therefore must select for 'close' interaction some relatives rather than others. The way they do this is, first, by avoiding those who lack 'respectability' and, second, by categorising the others in the network according to whether they are 'closely connected' or have common economic interests.

Certainly siblings, and often the children of siblings, tend to feel a moral obligation of responsibility towards each other. Labourers help brothers to secure a job and, over time, the labour force in a particular place, such as the old flour mill or the creamery, may consist of groups of closely connected kin, usually siblings and their children, and 'outsiders' may complain of being unable to get work. Amongst farmers, there are examples of men who reputedly put off marriage until they could provide fortunes for their sisters. Marriages between two sets of siblings were encouraged in the past and seem to have occurred in most kin networks, regardless of 'class.' It was said to cement ties, to make work easier for the matchmaker and to provide for several children at the same time.

However, such moral obligations amongst 'close kin' also bring conflict — over property and over the contradictions of moral behaviour. A man may feel he wasted his life as an unpaid labourer on his brother's farm while the farmer feels that he provided his brother with a home and status. An artisan may 'fall out' with a sibling whom he feels has not properly acknowledged his generosity in providing a job and income whilst the sibling may feel that the artisan could have given more. The children of labourers may disagree whether the one who cared for an elderly parent should inherit the cottage. 'Close kin' may quarrel over economic resources, but much depends on the interpretation given to the situation and to the moral claims and counter-claims which underlie the dispute.

'Close kinship,' however, may not simply be a blood tie buttressed by economic interests; it may be an economic concern rationalised by kinship. An economic interest may be a business, a shop, a farm, an acre of land or a house. If the owner is elderly and alone, then a nephew, niece or cousin may take care of him/her with the anticipation of inheriting the property: such relatives would consider each other as 'close.' Conversely, the same cousin or nephew/niece may not be 'close' if the property owner is a younger household head who does not need immediate help and is unable to offer present or future benefits.

The extent of acknowledged, persisting kinship ties and the recognition of who are 'close kin' varies a good deal for different people and these can change

with the emergence of conflict and disapproved behaviour or with the success of co-operation and assistance. Finally, 'closeness' of acknowledged kinship is not necessarily correlated with relative closeness geographically. A 'Thomastown' person may feel 'closer' to kin who live some miles away than to more 'local' kin with whom relations have deteriorated or where no common interests have existed.

Male and Female

Gender differences affect people's attitudes, relationships and activities. 'Thomastown' life, therefore, is experienced very differently by men as compared with women. Indeed, being male or female may be crucial in deciding whether a 'Thomastown' person continues to live in 'Thomastown' at all. In 1981, almost 60 per cent of married men, including widowers, had been born in Thomastown parish but less than 40 per cent of the married women. This difference was a reflection of a residence pattern in which women tend to move to the home places of their new husbands. An unmarried woman in Thomastown parish, then, may very well leave when she marries; a married woman in 'Thomastown' very likely was born 'outside'. This means that men are more likely to have close kin living near to them than are women.

Differences between male and female also are expressed in expectations and behaviour. The most fundamental relate to work and employment. Women's work is located in the home; men's work lies outside. In the 1981 survey, almost 83 per cent of married and widowed women gave their primary occupation as 'housewife.' This high proportion is partly related to attitudes: women are expected to leave paid employment when they marry whereas men are not. Of the employed women in 1981, over 70 per cent were unmarried. This married-unmarried dichotomy as applied to women's work outside the home is very explicit. It is expressed not only in the idea that women should be at home to rear the children because they are the natural caregivers, but also in the attitude that if a woman is working outside the home and has a husband who is also employed, then she is taking work away from an unemployed man and she should be made to give up her job. A married woman who works outside the home, except when in financial difficulty or as her husband's unpaid partner in a self-employed venture, is regarded as personally selfish and socially irresponsible. In contrast, only a man who is 'not fond of work' is accorded the same negative attitude.

The low proportion of married, employed women, however, is not simply because of negative attitudes; it is also a realistic reaction to the very poor material returns which female labour commands. In one establishment, in the late 1970s, the average weekly wage for all male employees was £67; for females, it was £36. Elsewhere, a male shop assistant worked full-time and received £52 while his female counterpart earned £36. In a third enterprise, a female book-keeper received only three-quarters of the salary of a male clerk. Negative attitudes thus rationalise the exploitation of cheap female labour and both contribute to keeping women at home.

Contrasting Lives: A Farmer's Daughter and a Labourer's Son

In order to illustrate some of the points made in this essay, and to bring together some of the ideas in a way which sheds light on the experiences of individuals, we now briefly describe 'two lives.' However, we must emphasise that these lives should not be taken as typical; nor are they the inevitable result of a particular class-status, locality, gender and/or family kin. For every person experiences idiosyncrasy in the events and people with whom he or she is involved; the general can never be altogether perceived through a particular person. With that in mind, we use two lives to show how our four criteria intersected to create some of the experiences of two individuals. We show the varying patterns which kinship connections can assume and we link these to 'class-status' membership; we also show how kinship and class are manifested in gender differences in 'Thomastown' society.

It is useful to begin by outlining the careers of our two individuals up to 1981. The farmer's daughter, Mary (a pseudonym), was in her early thirties in 1981; the labourer's son, John (a pseudonym), was in his early forties. Mary's father was a successful, medium-sized farmer. The farm, and Mary's residence, were in a townland in the northern part of the parish. John's father had been an agricultural labourer who had received a cottage and an acre of land on one of the main approach roads on the northern edge of the 'town.'

Mary had had several years of secondary school and one year in a commercial college. She took a temporary job as a shop assistant in Waterford followed by a secretarial post for a few months; then she returned home to live on the farm and to help her mother in the house. At age 23, she married a farmer's son from beyond the parish. He too had had some tertiary education — a year of draughting in a technical college. As the eldest of two daughters and the probable heir to the farm, Mary and her husband, Jim, built a bungalow next to her father's farmhouse. Jim continued in his work as a draughtsman and Mary worked part-time as a secretary.

In contrast, both John and his wife Breda had had only elementary schooling. At a young age, John left primary school and became an agricultural labourer. After several years he emigrated to Britain. There, he held a succession of unskilled jobs and eventually became a lorry driver. He met and married Breda who had emigrated from county Wexford several years before and who had been working as a cashier. After an absence of five years, John returned to Thomastown with Breda. He took a semi-skilled job and, with his savings, built a bungalow on his parents' acre. Breda found part-time work as a cashier in a shop.

As of 1981, the life-styles of the two couples differed in some respects, although not as much as they would have done in an earlier generation. Each couple lived in a newly-built bungalow of about the same size and with more or less the same amenities — although Mary's house had a freezer and a clothes dryer. In addition, after completing their bungalow several years before, John's

mother-in-law had lived with him and Breda for a year until she obtained a council cottage in Wexford.

In 1981, Mary and Jim had a five-year old car and a new pick-up — one for each of them. In contrast, Breda did not drive and John's one car was 13 years old. Mary and Jim had taken two holidays in the previous two years — one was by air. John and Breda also had had two holidays; but they had travelled by car and had focussed on Breda's home area where her mother still lived. Mary's husband belonged to the GAA and he was active in sports; Mary herself belonged to no local associations. John, in contrast, took little interest in sports, but he was much involved in the Credit Union, and Breda did considerable charitable work in the parish — helping out with senior citizens and the handicapped.

Both couples shopped for groceries in Thomastown 'town' — although they favoured different shops. Both couples also bought their clothing and larger items in Kilkenny and Waterford. Neither couple were more than week-end drinkers. However, Mary and her husband favoured pubs in villages to the west, beyond the parish, whilst John patronised a couple of pubs in the 'town.' Mary, like her father, voted Fine Gael — although neither she nor her husband were actively involved in politics. John was a committed member of the Labour Party — as had been his father before him.

Skeleton genealogies of Mary and John are given in the accompanying diagram. For the sake of simplicity, and to illustrate especially the significance of locality, we focus only on their siblings, first cousins and second cousins who, in 1981, were living in county Kilkenny. To show how all were inter-connected, we include parents and grandparents on the genealogy.

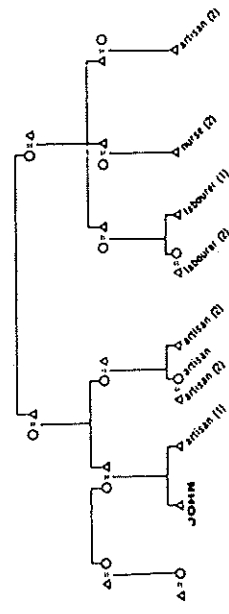
John had fewer cousins in the county than did Mary. This was the result of emigration, not fertility. For John's parents and grandparents together had had 22 siblings who had been born and had lived locally; Mary's parents and grandparents had had 26. Essentially, John's local kinship network reflected more extensive emigration in the previous two generations than did Mary's.

Second, John's local first and second cousins all lived geographically close to him and to each other. Of the seven cousins, one lived in the same DED and six lived in his second-order field (see table 3 for an explanation of 'fields'); but all were in or near 'the town.' In contrast, Mary's cousins were more dispersed and more 'rural.' Fewer than half lived close to her: three out of the 13 lived in her own DED and two lived in her second-order field. Five, however, were living in her third/fourth order fields, and three were in another Rural District. Indeed, three of her male cousins (marked with an *) also had sisters, although their number is unknown to us, as we did not collect genealogies of persons so far removed from the Thomastown locality. However, these sisters have perhaps married within the county — thereby expanding Mary's network of first and second cousins even further. John's net, however, contains no unknown kin, for all were 'local' and all their genealogies were collected.

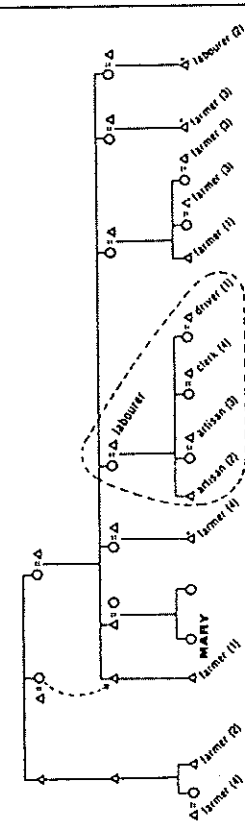
These contrasting spatial distributions point to a third major difference in the kinship nets — that of occupation. John's cousins were all children of unskilled labourers although, in John's generation, this pattern had altered some-

GENEALOGIES: How Cousins Are Created And Located

John's 'local' kinship network



Mary's 'local' kinship network



KEY
 Location of cousins: (1) same DED (2) adjacent DED (3) 3rd & 4th order DED (4) other rural district in Co. Kilkenny
 Location and occupation in 1911: (1) same network (see text) (2) adjacent network (see text) (3) other rural district in Co. Kilkenny (see text) (4) other rural district in Co. Kilkenny (see text)
 * In these cases, Mary's network may have included additional second cousins who had married within the County.
 * marriage line

Fig. 23.2: How cousins are created and located.

what — but not in a way which made John's net converge with Mary's. For in John's generation, one cousin was a nurse and three others — two males and one female — had obtained a trade. In contrast, the vast majority of Mary's cousins were farmers or farmers' wives, just as their parents had been. These differing occupations in the two nets were related to a fourth difference — how these networks had been produced over several generations. John's local network had been 'cognatically' created: his cousins in his own generation were descendants of both men and women — brothers and sisters of his parents and grandparents. John's network of locally resident kin was the result of those kin, in each generation, who had remained behind — whether male or female. For example, his father's mother had eight siblings. Five emigrated (three women, two men) and three married locally. One of these (a

brother) had no children; the remaining two sisters had a dozen children between them; but all emigrated. John therefore, had no cousins from his paternal grandmother's siblings. Similarly, the five marriages of his local kin in his parents' generation (see diagram) produced 20 children — (ten males, ten females). Only seven remained in county Kilkenny — four men and three women.

In contrast, Mary's dispersed network had been 'matrilaterally' produced. Of her 13 local cousins, only two were descended through men and only one of these was descended in the male line for more than one generation. Thus, one cousin in her own DED was on a farm which his father had fallen into; however, this was because his father's mother's sister, married to a nearby farmer, had had no children. A second male cousin was in the home place from which Mary's paternal grandmother had come; he had inherited the place from his father and father's father. All of Mary's other Kilkenny cousins in her own generation were related to her through females. Her mother, an only child, was the daughter of an engineer without immovable property. Her father had had seven sisters and three brothers. One brother fell into the farm mentioned above; two were elsewhere in Ireland. Five of the seven sisters (those on the diagram) married Kilkenny farmers; another emigrated and one married a Tipperary farmer. In her father's father's generation, five brothers emigrated to the United States; two sisters married the sons of local farmers but emigrated soon after, in one case after selling the farm. Of her father's mother's two sisters, one emigrated and one married into the farm which Mary's paternal uncle had inherited.

Both nets, therefore, had been heavily structured through emigration — although in this there was variation as Mary's kin went to America in her grandfather's generation and to other parts of Ireland in her parents' generation. In contrast, John's kin went mainly to Britain in all generations. Both local networks reflected this movement away — John's more so than Mary's in numerical terms. However, they varied according to whether it was the males or the females who stayed behind to produce subsequent generations and thus to produce Mary's and John's local cousins. In Mary's case, as already shown, it was mainly the women; in John's net, it was both men and women. This difference comes out clearly by examining an unusual portion of Mary's network. This segment (surrounded by a dotted line on Mary's genealogy) was the result of what local people clearly remember as a misalliance and was so regarded by both sets of kin. What happened was that one of her father's sisters married a local labourer. That marriage has produced a segment within Mary's network which has characteristics more typical of John's net than of her own. In that segment, Mary has four cousins living in the county — three of them are women of whom one is married to an artisan, one to a clerk and one to a lorry driver. Of these three, one was living in Mary's own DED, in a council house. Mary's male cousin was also an artisan; he lived in Mary's second order field. Clearly, this 'labouring' segment of Mary's network was more localised, more cognatic and more occupationally differentiated than the remainder of her network. The segment did not contain farmers; and not only

flow endlessly outwards. To describe 'Thomastown' is not to describe a place: it is, rather, to describe the criteria and patterns through which differing meanings and networks intersect and organise social life.

was it structured similarly to John's net, but it also brought together one of Mary's cousins — the driver — and John into the same trade union. This was the only place, as far as we can tell, where the two very different networks intersected — although people recognised that John was the son of a labourer while Mary's trade union cousin was 'connected to farming people.' It is doubtful, therefore, if any other people in one net had any other connections with individuals in the other net. At the most, they put each other in the category of people whom one might 'know to see.'

At its most general, the differences between the two networks reflect the role of property in structuring social relations. On the one hand, a farm is not merely a place of residence but a highly valued occupation, life-style and means of livelihood. With impartible inheritance, those who do not inherit must leave. Their 'fortune' allows them to move far, to obtain a profession, or if a woman, to marry a farmer. On the other hand, a labourer may own a cottage and perhaps an acre of land; and inheritance of that property may become a matter of serious conflict amongst kin.⁹ Nevertheless, success or failure to inherit, though not unimportant to those involved, does not affect employment chances, local residence or life-style. Occupation is not tied to residence and the non-inheriting are 'freer' to remain or leave, as they choose. The nature of the two networks — in terms of locality, class, kin and gender — reflects this different relation to property. These features ultimately affect how lives are lived — where, with whom and how.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have described the main criteria by which local life is organised whilst demonstrating briefly, and with a few illustrations, that such life is neither bounded nor 'community-based' within a place called 'Thomastown.' Because of a clustering of houses, a convergence of roads and a concentration of shops, pubs, leisure facilities, etc., there tends to be a relative intensity of overlapping networks of social relations, interaction and information in a seemingly localised place. This is, however, only a general tendency. Not everyone is linked to everyone else in significant ways; nor does everyone know, or know about, everyone else. Those linked together by residential locality or by class or kinship or gender are also, simultaneously, separated from others by the same criteria. Finally, there is no physical or social beginning or end to this seemingly localised place. Instead, all people are linked in various ways to others who live 'elsewhere,' in a series of endlessly overlapping spatial fields.

Equally important as these disjunctions and extensions in networks and interactions is flexibility in meaning. 'Thomastown,' like other local, geographical categories, means different things depending on who is using the term, on the context and on who is being excluded. In neither meaning nor interaction does 'Thomastown' end where another place begins. Instead, there are co-existing and different meanings and interactions which simultaneously

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