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## The political economy of Ireland and its counterfactuals

Review of James Stafford *The Case of Ireland: Commerce, Empire and the European Order, 1750–1848* (CUP, 2022)

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It has been more than sixty years since R. D. Collison Black published his *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, a book which ever since has been widely regarded as a classic in the history of economic thought.<sup>1</sup> Covering the period between the completion of the Union in 1817 (when the Irish exchequer was absorbed by the British) and Gladstone's First Irish Land Act of 1870, Black's authoritative study of the 'Irish Question' analysed the relationship between economic theory and economic policy in the two quarter centuries on either side of the Great Famine. Theoretically, it spanned the period of 'classical economics' between Ricardo's *Principles* (1817) and W. S. Jevons' *Theory of Political Economy* (1871), with J. S. Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) acting as the major mid-century watershed, signalling a long overdue recognition that the Irish question required Irish answers. In narrative terms, Black's study showed how the early classical economists had approached the problem of Irish economic development through the prism of an insular consensus about the superiority of the English agricultural system, a system consisting of a tripart division between the landlord, the tenant farmer and his agricultural labourers. Their policy prescriptions, therefore, were designed to bring about English conditions in the Irish countryside, conditions that were taken for granted in the Ricardian theoretical apparatus of rents, profits and wages. But whereas supplanting the Irish cottier system with large-scale farming was a sound objective in theory, promoted as the only way to stem the growth of population and make the economy deliver a surplus, the radically different Irish realities – widespread absenteeism, sub-letting, subdivision of farms, and tenancies-at-will – made its implementation highly impracticable, conditional on several measures being implemented at once. On the one hand, it required a large subsection of the Irish tenantry to accept the status of agricultural labourers, working for wages on large farms managed by capitalist farmers and owned by largely protestant landlords. On the other hand, the remaining tenants, made redundant by the consolidation of farms, had to be dealt with through a combination of poor relief, organised emigration, and some sort of alternative employment, which in Ireland had to be facilitated since alternatives to agriculture were largely absent, not least due to the long legacy of pre-Union trade restrictions imposed by Westminster and the easy access to British manufactured goods. Although these policy prescriptions had been made in earnest by various political economists, and although they were not without some moderate success, the idea that Irish development had to follow the English model ultimately only prepared the way for the famine. The power of orthodoxy only began to loosen too late. Writing in the pages of the *Morning Chronicle* during the 1840s, John Stuart Mill had been among the first in Britain to address the core problem head on, the problem of security of tenure among the cultivators. As a

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remedy, he advocated the replacement of the cottar system with peasant proprietorships, established through improved security of tenure and the reclamation of waste lands. However, since this solution rubbed up against the property rights of the Protestant Ascendancy, it was met with strong opposition from fellow economists, who vehemently defended the orthodox English view of development in the *Spectator* and the *Edinburgh Review*. In due time, Mill's proposals became increasingly radical and gained several supporters, principally among the coterie of young economists and colonial administrators who gathered around him in the 1860s, but the process of conversion was too slow and too partial. The essential problem, according to Black, was the mindset created by the Union, which made it extremely difficult for English opinion to countenance any special treatment of Ireland's economic problems, let alone any interference with property rights, which was widely seen as collaterally jeopardising the sanctity of property in England. The Union, in other words, created the conditions for its own failure.

Rejecting the idea of drawing up a balance sheet of gains and losses from the Union, Black was instead intrigued by J. S. Mill's suggestion that Ireland might have fared better if it had been governed more like India, that is, with an eye to the things that made Ireland different. In his long essay *England and Ireland* (1868), written as a diatribe against liberal complacency and Tory stupidity in the aftermath of the failed Fenian rising of 1867, Mill had noted that it was precisely those Englishmen who understood India well who also understood Ireland best. The advantage that these people had, according to Mill, was their hard-won experience in 'shaking off insular prejudices, and governing another country according to its own wants, and not according to common English habits and notions'.<sup>2</sup> To Collison Black, this statement did not seem implausible. As he noted in retrospect: 'I was struck by the many comparisons with the Indian case in the literature; J. S. Mill in particular frequently cited parallels between the problems of Ireland and India'.<sup>3</sup> Black was not alone in noticing this. From the vantagepoint of his work on the English utilitarians in India, the historian Eric Stokes had similarly been struck by the fact that it was mainly Indian administrators such as J. S. Mill and George Campbell who had sought to persuade Gladstone and the Liberal party that 'the state might justly lay hands on the sacred institution of private landed property'.<sup>4</sup> For Black, however, it was the Irish economist and politician Isaac Butt who best expressed the view that he wished to explore. Commenting on the relative ease with which land reforms had been implemented in India, Butt had lamented in 1868 that

... this is not done in the case of Ireland, just because we have the fiction of an identity with England. The owner of the soil is a 'landlord' not a '*Zemindar*' – the occupier is a 'tenant', not a '*ryot*'. I believe in my conscience, that if we had Irish or Gaelic names to express the relation, if the owner were a '*corbe*' and the occupier a '*kerne*', an English Parliament would not for one session tolerate the continuance of the wrong. Our misfortune is that English phrases are applied to relations that bear no resemblance to the things which the words describe in English tongue.<sup>5</sup>

In a subsequent article, published in 1968, Black pursued this counterfactual further, comparing the relative success of economic policy in Ireland and India. Famously, James Mill had heaped unmitigated scorn on the 1793 Permanent Settlement of Bengal in his *History of India* (1822), decrying it as the legislative result of aristocratic English prejudice. By conferring absolute property rights on the native class of *Zemindars*, who had been little more than tax collectors under the Mogul Empire, Lord Cornwallis and his administrators had squandered a golden opportunity to set Bengal on a path of economic improvement and foolishly created English-style landlords where there previously was none. Repeating his father's condemnation in his *Principles*, J. S. Mill argued that the early administrators 'flattered themselves that they had created, throughout the Bengal provinces, English landlords, and it proved that they had created only Irish ones'.<sup>6</sup> But the power of English or Whig orthodoxy had been broken early in India, much earlier than in Ireland. In subsequent settlements, beginning with the Madras province in 1822, the aristocratic Bengal model was rejected in favour of the system promoted by Sir Thomas Munro, which in contrast conferred property rights on the cultivating peasants – the *ryotwari*. To the Mills, who imposed their own utilitarian gloss on

these *ryotwari* settlements, this change in practice was of paramount importance, since it allowed the state to deal directly with the cultivators and, most importantly, to extract the land tax without relying on a class of intermediaries, who would otherwise pocket a portion of the unearned value of land for themselves. India, in other words, represented an opportunity to implement the radical idea, implied in the Ricardian theory of rent, of basing the entire state revenue on the value of land, thereby leaving the improvements and profits of the cultivators free and secure, preventing also any tendency towards sub-letting. In the late 1850s, when the East India Company was nationalised and the responsibility of governing India was transferred to Westminster, J. S. Mill defended the results of his administration by pointing out that

the Government only reserves to itself, instead of conceding to the cultivator, the profit of a kind of natural monopoly, leaving to him the same reward of his labour and capital which is obtained by the remainder of the industrious population. Any amount of revenue, therefore, derived from the rent of land cannot be regarded, generally speaking, as a burthen on the tax-paying community.<sup>7</sup>

Mill willingly admitted that mistakes had also been made. The burden of taxation had often been too onerous, leaving too small a surplus for the *ryots*, but these mistakes had mostly been corrected and the Indian agricultural system was on a path of improvement. '[T]he agricultural population either have, or will shortly have, the benefits of tenures and rights perfectly defined and secured', Mill insisted, 'and moderate rents fixed for a sufficient term to afford, in full strength, the natural incentives to improvement'.<sup>8</sup> At this point in time, however, the administrative legacy that Mill was defending was being challenged, not least by the men of the Manchester School, whose strong commitment to *laissez-faire* disposed them to question the interventionist taxation scheme advocated by the Mills. More importantly, the Mutiny of 1857 cast serious doubts on the political stability of the *ryotwari* settlements, and the case for an intermediate class of landlords was gaining new supporters amongst Indian administrators, especially due to the fact that in the North-Western provinces, where the Mutiny had been strongest, and notably in the recently settled province of Oudh, the peasantry had rallied around the native aristocracy and reaffirmed its original social status, contrary to the intentions of the utilitarian administrators. In the eyes of Collison Black, this meant that Mill's claim that he and his fellow administrators had successfully freed themselves of insular English prejudices had to be questioned. Although the Indian peasant arguably occupied his land more securely and thus was moderately better off than his Irish counterpart, the attempt to settle India according to radical utilitarian ideals was no more based on 'governing a country according to its wants' than the English government of Ireland had been. The conclusion that he drew was one of humility on the part of economic theory. Noticing the increased confidence with which economic theory asserted itself in his present day, his lesson was instead to keep in mind 'the relativity of much of economic theory and the value of the historical and comparative approach'.<sup>9</sup>

The question of 'economic relativity' had already been raised by Black in *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*. In fact, hidden in the footnotes of that book one finds the evidence of a submerged polemical intent, aimed at questioning the validity of the kind of doxographical historiography represented by Joseph A. Schumpeter, whose monumental *History of Economic Analysis* had been published posthumously in 1954 – just when Black was in the initial stages of research. Schumpeter had written his study of economic analysis on the explicit assumption that economic theorising was an intellectually autonomous activity that could – and should – be detached from the historical context and isolated from the moral values and political concerns that had animated its contributors. Whatever ends economic analysis had historically been directed towards was deemed irrelevant to the internal progress of the science, the history of which was best told by demonstrating the progressive sophistication of its theoretical apparatus, which he believed had reached its apogee with Leon Walras's general equilibrium model. In a very real sense, the history of economic analysis was for Schumpeter the history of various incomplete attempts to grasp what Walras had been the first to properly understand. Walras' theory of general market equilibrium was 'the only work by an economist that will stand comparison with the achievements of theoretical physics'.<sup>10</sup>

To Black, however, the ‘Irish Question’ demonstrated that such an approach to the history of economic thought was mistaken, because it was precisely the universalistic hubris of classical political economy that had allowed Ireland to stagger into the catastrophe of the famine. Not for nothing, when Black reminded his readers that Ricardo had been interested in ‘logical analysis’ only, and not the ‘comparative study of institutions’, rather than providing a reference to anything written by Ricardo, he suggestively added a reference to Schumpeter’s *History* instead.<sup>11</sup> And with that implied comparison, enough was said.

In the late 1940s, after completing his PhD at Trinity College Dublin, Collison Black had travelled to Princeton on a Rockefeller post-doctoral fellowship to study under Jacob Viner, the distinguished economist and historian, and it was Viner who then encouraged him to continue his research on the relationship between economic theory and policy by studying nineteenth century Ireland.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, while Black was conducting his research on the ‘Irish Question’, which required him to consult a wide range of archival sources not normally studied by economic historians, Viner provided a powerful defence of the kind of contextual historiography that he preferred. In an early, perceptive review of Schumpeter’s *History*, Viner devastatingly pointed out that the ‘picture of economic analysis as a somewhat ethereal intellectual activity, without roots in values, without entanglements with other social discipline ...’ represented merely Schumpeter’s *own* ‘subjective ideal’, an ideal that could never be sustained against the reality of actual human beings, for whom ends and means acted upon each other constantly. ‘To deny any influence to economic analysis’, Viner defiantly stated, ‘is to deny any role to reason in the formation by a sensible man of his system of ends’.<sup>13</sup> When Black’s book appeared in 1960, after more than a decade of plodding through archives, Viner blessed the result with a jubilant foreword:

Dr Black believes that there was too rigid adherence to dogmas and too abject yielding to vested interests for Ireland’s, and I presume, also for England’s, good. I have no doubt he is right. I am struck by the fact that the nineteenth-century history of Ireland seems to offer a striking illustration of the possibility that a greater prevalence of uncalculating compassion and sympathy with suffering may at times be a better instrument of reform than the most carefully reasoned weighing of prudential pros and cons in deciding whether immediately-helpful experiments would in the long run do more good than harm.<sup>14</sup>

While he was still at Princeton, Black encountered another student of Viner’s, the young LSE graduate Donald Winch, who was there to research a PhD thesis on classical political economy and colonialism, a topic that lent itself to a similar kind of contextual treatment as Black’s study of Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting on this fortunate encounter in 2010, Winch described how Black had provided him with ‘a model for everything I would wish to emulate in the complete historian of economic thought’.<sup>16</sup> For Winch, as well as for many other historians of his generation, Black’s *Economic Thought and the Irish Question* became a classic that demonstrated what could be achieved by engaging with a wider array of sources and by examining the interaction between theory and policy. In fact, it is not too far of a stretch to say that Black’s study of the Irish question did for the history of economic thought what Peter Laslett’s studies of Filmer and Locke did for the history of political thought – it redefined what was possible and thereby defined what ought to be done.<sup>17</sup>

In subsequent decades, several new studies of Ireland appeared with an obvious debt to Black’s pioneering work. In 1974, E. D. Steele published *Irish Land and British Politics*, a meticulously detailed study of tenant rights and emergent nationalism in nineteenth century Ireland, focussing especially on the five years leading up to Gladstone’s First Irish Land Act of 1870.<sup>18</sup> Before that, however, Steele had also explored the imperial precedents for Gladstone’s Land Act in a long article that gave particular credit to George Campbell for having bequeathed to Gladstone ‘a deeper understanding of peasant mentality and traditions’ and for confirming ‘his belief that Ireland must be governed, as was India, firmly indeed, yet with generous allowance for her distinctive notions of right’.<sup>19</sup> In 1996, Philip Bull published *Land, Politics and Nationalism*, which provided an intellectual history of Irish nationalism, interpreting it as emerging out of the unresolved structure of land ownership in the Irish countryside. The contradictory assumptions about ownership created a

nexus so strong between land and nationality that the twin issues of effectively merged into one, prefiguring the eventual ‘breakdown of pluralism in modern Ireland’.<sup>20</sup> Explicitly building on Black’s earlier study, Bull’s narrative encompassed the century between the Union and the 1903 Land Act, which effectively marked the end of the ‘land question’ in Ireland by facilitating and funding the buy-out of Anglo-Irish landlords, thereby converting the Irish peasantry into peasant proprietors. With this wider canvas at hand, the book attempted to broaden the focus from the specific failures of policy and economic thought to the more general failure of cultural understanding and communication between two ‘separate but interlocking societies’.<sup>21</sup> In 1999, Peter Gray published *Famine, Land and Politics*, a study of Irish land and British politics, equally as meticulous as Steele’s book but focussing on the crucial years between 1843 and 1850. Appearing two years after Tony Blair had made the controversial decision to issue an official apology for the historic failures of the British government in Ireland, an apology that coincided with the sesquicentenary of the Great Famine, Gray’s book was intended as a scholarly assessment of British responsibility, an assessment that concluded, much in line with Black’s arguments from 1960, that the British government and its members were less to blame for the suffering of the Irish than the general ‘attitude of mind that suffused the British political public, and set the parameters of state activity’.<sup>22</sup> Emphasising the theological aspect of English orthodoxy, the orthodoxy of wishing to introduce capitalist farming to Ireland, Gray identified the core of Britain’s responsibility in the complacency produced by the providential view that the famine contained a developmental silver lining – that it constituted a salutary event that would hasten Ireland’s progress towards civilisation such as the English understood it. In 2001, Bruce L. Kinzer revisited the question of British responsibility in a monograph on J. S. Mill and the Irish question entitled *England’s Disgrace?*, which examined all of Mill’s writings on Ireland and placed Mill’s famous *England and Ireland* (1868) in the context of Mill’s developing thought on a host of issues related to the Union, issues such as Catholic emancipation, the Great Famine and its causes, the ‘Irish University Question’ and, of course, the political economy of development in Ireland. Notably, Kinzer emphasised the importance of Mill’s work as an India House official for his conversion to the benefits of peasant proprietorships, noticing also that Mill’s idea that Ireland ought to have been governed like India dated back to the 1830s. If this had been the case, Mill had then argued, if Ireland had been governed with different and ‘despotically’ imposed laws and in recognition of its lack of development, then the final responsibility of nurturing Ireland towards civilisation and self-government would have been undeniably located within the British Parliament.<sup>23</sup> In one of his many journalistic articles of the 1830s, Mill complained that Britain had lamentably taken a middle course between two modes of government, thus uniting ‘the evils of both extremes with the advantages of neither’:

Either Ireland was sufficiently advanced in civilisation to be fit for the same kind of government for which we were fit, and if so she ought to have been treated exactly like Scotland or Yorkshire; or she was in that stage of advancement at which absolute subjection to a more civilized and a more energetic people, is a state more favourable to improvement than any government which can be framed out of domestic materials; and if so, she ought to have been governed like India, by English functionaries, under responsibility to the English Parliament. She would then have been habituated to government on fixed principles, not by arbitrary will; would at an early period have obtained security to person and property; would have rapidly advanced in all the arts of life; would have known the protection of law, and learned to value it. She would have become civilized, would have acquired all those qualifications for self-government she now has not, and would long ere this have either achieved her independence by a successful contest like the United States, or been admitted to real, not nominal, equality, as an integral part of the kingdom of Great Britain.<sup>24</sup>

Yet Mill also knew that governing Ireland like India was an impossible counterfactual, that it could no longer be done due to the premature development of democratic ideas in Ireland, ideas which had largely, and ironically, been imported from Britain. For the same reason, Mill’s later proposals for a complete overhaul of the Irish land system, Kinzer argued, could not have succeeded in reconciling the Irish to the Union. With the Land Act of 1903, the policy objectives proposed by Mill in 1868 had been broadly achieved, but the passage of legislation came too late to save the Union – so

much too late that even if it had been introduced in 1868, if the Anglo-Irish landlords had been bought out by Gladstone, the result would likely have been to further increase Irish demand for self-government. 'Indeed, it is arguable', Kinzer concluded, 'that giving Irish tenants economic independence would have whetted their appetite for political independence and enhanced their ability to gratify that appetite'.<sup>25</sup>

However, the idea of governing Ireland like India was not the only counterfactual that Mill asked his readers to consider in *England and Ireland*. Long before the famine and shortly before the Union, it had been a real possibility for Ireland to fall within the ambit of the emerging French Empire instead of being absorbed into a consolidated British Empire. In a paragraph that helps to explain the anger and vitriol levied at the author, Mill speculated that if the weather had not prevented the French ships from landing in 1796, then the conditions of the Irish peasantry would likely have been as agreeable as that of the contemporary French peasantry, whose superior well-being Mill of course had the ability to witness himself, being a part-time resident of Avignon:

At a particular moment of the revolutionary war, a French armament, led by the illustrious Hoche, was only prevented by stress of weather from effecting a landing in Ireland. At that moment it was on the cards whether Ireland should not belong to France, or at least be organized as an independent country under French protection. Had this happened, does any one believe that the Irish peasant would not have become even as the French peasant? When the great landowners had fled, as they would have fled, to England, every farm on their estates would have become the property of the occupant, subject to some fixed payment to the State. Ireland would then have been in the condition in which small farming, and tenancy by manual labourers, are consistent with good agriculture and public prosperity. The small holder would have laboured for himself and not for others, and his interest would have coincided with the interest of the country in making every plot of land produce its utmost. What Hoche would have done for the Irish peasant, or its equivalent, has still to be done; and any government which will not do it does not fulfil the rational and moral conditions of a government.<sup>26</sup>

Characteristically, Mill was quick to add that, although the property regime in Ireland urgently needed radical reform, the existing economic interests had to be respected since their property had the sanction of the law. Even though Mill was a radical, he never departed from the idea that pecuniary compensation for expropriated property was the hallmark of any civilised government, a principle he most forcefully upheld in his strong endorsement of the decision to compensate former slave owners after the British abolition of slavery in 1833.<sup>27</sup> However, his willingness to imagine that a French invasion might have positioned Ireland on a better path towards civilisation, even if this had entailed an involuntary exodus of Anglo-Irish landlords comparable to the expulsion of French aristocrats after 1789, speaks not just to the urgency of his rhetoric but also to the degree to which post-Revolutionary France represented an example to be emulated, an alternative model of development that arguably would have proved a better fit for Ireland.

In *The Case of Ireland – Commerce, Empire and the European Order, 1750-1848*, James Stafford invites us to see Mill's 'remarkable counterfactual' in exactly this light, that is, as evidence of the 'manner in which the complex, triangular relationship between Ireland, Britain and France structured eighteenth – and nineteenth-century debates over the vicissitudes of empire in Ireland'.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, Stafford deliberately shifts the focus away from the specifics of policy and legislation within Britain and Ireland and instead sees Ireland as part of a larger European discussion about the politics of commercial society, a discussion in which rival visions of commerce, empire and political economy were applied to Ireland and its problems in what he calls – following C. A. Bayly among others – the 'age of crisis', a period spanning the half centuries on either side of the Union. 'In contemporary European thought', Stafford argues, 'Ireland offered a space of projection for radically differing ideas about what the politics of commercial society should look like'.<sup>29</sup> Rather than a book about Ireland, Irish land or Irish nationalism, Stafford's book is thus about the 'case of Ireland' as seen from both inside and outside Britain and Ireland, positioning Ireland's story within the wider ideological battle between French and British versions of modernity especially, a battle inflected by both the American and French Revolutions as well as the eventual rise of British

hegemony in the middle of the nineteenth century. In other words, Ireland is studied less for its own sake than for the illuminating vantagepoint that it provides (as ‘one among many’ we are reassured) for understanding the ‘intersection of commerce and empire as central problems of European political thought’.<sup>30</sup> As such, Stafford’s book can profitably be read in conjunction with – and, indeed, in extension of – John Shovlin’s recent study of British and French commercial rivalry entitled *Trading with the Enemy – Britain, France, and the 18th-Century Quest for a Peaceful World Order* (YUP, 2021). In fact, both books share a considerable debt to the late István Hont (1947–2013), who arguably is the historian most responsible for directing historiographical attention towards the intersection of commerce and empire and the ways in which the emergence of international trade gave rise to rival political discourses on commercial society in the long eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> One of the limitations of Hont’s work, however, was his reluctance to venture too far into the nineteenth century and too far away from the Scottish Enlightenment. This limitation (if indeed it is a limitation at all) was not for lack of trying though. In the 1980s, Hont was engaged in several projects in Cambridge that sought to expand the avenue of research into the nineteenth century, capitalising on the gains made in contextualising the political economy of eighteenth century Scotland and bringing the Cambridge School method to bear on Malthus, McCulloch and Mill (and many in between) in order to connect the two centuries in a coherent and historically accurate way. At the time, however, this proved to be a more difficult task than anticipated, and the two planned volumes of essays, co-edited by Hont under the provisional titles *After Adam Smith* and *Trade, Politics and Letters*, were ultimately abandoned.<sup>32</sup> Instead, Hont turned his attention to late seventeenth century England and the Neo-Machiavellian political economy of figures such as Charles Davenant and Henry Martyn, focussing on the intellectual origins of what he had previously termed ‘the rich country-poor country debate’.<sup>33</sup> Two decades later, Hont revisited his original 1983 article on this debate and expanded his argument to include both an Irish prehistory and a French reception story to what he had hitherto presented as an exclusively Scottish debate. As Hont now saw it, it was ‘in Ireland that the rich country-poor country issue was given its first articulation, in the hugely defensive response of English theorists and politicians to the commercial challenge presented to them after the Glorious Revolution by the Protestant colonists of Ireland’.<sup>34</sup> The core of the debate was the question whether international free trade would benefit rich and poor countries alike, or whether the former held a disproportionate advantage in its superior wealth and industry or the latter in its lower wage costs. Hont now located the proximate origin of this debate in the controversy over the Irish woollen trade that had emerged in the late seventeenth century, a controversy that reached its high point with the publication of William Molyneux’s *The Case of Ireland* (1698), which argued for Irish independence in all matters of trade on the grounds that Ireland had never been conquered and thus could not be legislated for by Westminster. Molyneux’s argument was widely rejected in the Irish Parliament and received a hostile response in England, where Charles Davenant and John Cary were defending the reason-of-state view that Ireland, because it was a poor competitor, had to be denied the ability to ruin English woollen exports, especially during a time of war with France when resources were needed to fund the defence of the state. With the passing of the ‘Declaratory Act’ in 1720, Westminster formally asserted its superiority over Dublin in all matters of legislation by right of conquest. According to Hont, it was David Hume who first cut through much of the noise of this debate by advancing an argument against all kinds of jealousy of trade, an argument that in Hont’s mind anticipated the ‘basic logic’ of the Ricardian theory of comparative advantage.<sup>35</sup> Hume did so by contending that, despite the fact that both rich and poor countries had certain advantages in trade, this did not mean that free trade was not mutually beneficial insofar as one took a larger and longer view of the issue. In due time, rich countries would develop alternatives to the ones lost to poor competitors, and poor countries, who indeed benefitted from their lower wage costs, would gradually develop economically and thus eventually come to substitute the advantages of a richer country for those of a poor one. In other words, the migration of low wage manufactures was an inevitable part of the commercial development of any country and, as such, constituted a condition that required adaptation rather



than protectionism on the part of rich countries. For many contemporaries, however, Hume's argument in favour of free trade seemed paradoxical, and most – if not all – of his interlocutors failed to understand him properly. In order to do so, Hont argued, it was paramount that one understood Hume as a Scottish thinker, that is, as a citizen of a poor country that had recently been incorporated into a larger and much wealthier polity (Great Britain). Hume's ability to see both sides of the coin in the rich country-poor country debate was to a large degree a result of the special vantage-point on commercial society that post-Union Scotland provided – as a backwards country in a rich (united) kingdom.

By taking Ireland as his vantagepoint, however, James Stafford is able to move beyond Hont in several interesting ways, enabling him to take his narrative further into the nineteenth century. First, Stafford notes that eighteenth-century Ireland was characterised by not one but *two* forms of exclusion. Aside from Ireland's exclusion from certain international and imperial markets, in particular the trade in raw and processed wool, the government of Ireland was also founded on the exclusion of Catholics from almost every sphere of public life, not least those of holding state office and landed property. Passed into law between 1695 and 1728 as legal means to secure the property order established in the seventeenth century, these so-called 'Penal Laws', the result of a series of negotiated bargains between the Protestant Ascendancy and British government, would cast a long shadow well into the post-Union period. Secondly, instead of viewing Ireland through the lens of the 'Hume Paradox', Stafford looks at the Enlightenment critique of empire in Ireland through the lens of what one might call the 'Molyneux Paradox' or, to name it after its most famous expositor, the 'Montesquieu Paradox'. In Stafford's telling, the constitutional subjection of Ireland became a paradigmatic European case illustrating the truth of the notion that empires established by 'free states' tended to subject its peripheral territories to harsher forms of oppression and exclusion than empires established by monarchies. This 'paradox' had first been observed by Molyneux in the decade following the Glorious Revolution, but it was subsequently picked up by Montesquieu, Hume and Smith as yet another argument in favour of the view that modern civilised monarchies were fully capable, and arguably even more capable, of guaranteeing the civil liberties of the people over whom it ruled. For Montesquieu in particular, Britain's treatment of Ireland was evidence of the fragile and factious nature of British politics, which in turn was a result of the unchecked power that the legislature had come to hold after the republican experiment of the seventeenth century.

While the Enlightenment critique of Ireland's dual exclusions progressed in parallel throughout the eighteenth century, Stafford shows that they converged on the question of improvement. For both Charles O'Connor and Edmund Burke, for instance, the penal laws were considered as obstructions to the material improvement of Ireland and, as such, were criticised as detrimental to Britain's imperial interest. Not only did they encourage wealthy Catholics to quit the country and thereby augment the recourses of Britain's enemies; they also frustrated the majority's ability to contribute to the growth and population of the Empire. The law enacted in 1704 as the 'Act to Prevent the Further Growth of Popery' was singled out as particularly harmful since it rendered all Catholic estates a precarious possession by mandating partible inheritance and by empowering any son of a Catholic family to disinherit both his father and his siblings insofar as he converted. To both Burke and O'Conner, the idea of uprooting an established religion in this way was inimical to improvement and undermined the foundation of both civil society and political authority, which required a more inclusive and less factious social order, one that could only be ensured, as Safford writes, 'via a significantly wider distribution of landed property among the Kingdom's Catholic majority'.<sup>36</sup>

While the Enlightenment critique of Ireland's subjection to British trade restrictions thus converged with the critique of the penal laws on the question of improvement, the criticism of the two forms of exclusion were eventually combined in the political economy of Adam Smith. In the final pages of the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith laid out a bold plan for the political and fiscal consolidation of the British Empire, presented as a way to finance the mounting public debt that Britain had

incurred, especially during the Seven Years' War. By entering a union with Britain, Ireland would contribute to financing this debt burden, but the cost of this would be overshadowed, Smith suggested, by the benefits that the Irish majority could expect to derive from the Union, which would act as a solvent to both forms of exclusion. Based on the Scottish experience, Smith believed that a union, aside from eliminating British jealousy of trade, would bring about a complete transformation of Irish society by both neutralising the factious nature of its politics and undermining the ability of its aristocracy to oppress the people. Reflecting on the positive effects that the Union of 1707 had had for Scotland, Smith predicted that

By an union with Great Britain the greater part of the people of all ranks in Ireland would gain an equally compleat deliverance from a much more oppressive aristocracy; an aristocracy not founded, like that of Scotland, in the natural and respectable distinctions of birth and fortune; but in the most odious of all distinctions, those of religious and political prejudices.<sup>37</sup>

Stafford notes that Smith's confidence in these salutary effects of a potential union was based on the pacifying effect that the Union of 1707 had had on Scottish factionalism as well as on the larger social and political transformation that had occurred throughout Europe as a result of increased trade and luxury consumption. As Smith showed in Book III of the *Wealth of Nations*, the introduction of luxury goods had gradually undermined the power of the feudal aristocracy, creating the conditions for a central government and a regular administration of justice to emerge. But the very reason why a union would be an even greater benefit for Ireland than it had been for Scotland, i.e. its religious sectarianism and pronounced 'spirit of party', also begs the question whether it was realistic for Smith to expect that a union with Ireland would produce Scottish results, merely through the silent operation of commerce. At the very least, Smith's optimism was also based on an implicit faith in the ability and willingness of a British government, reconstituted with minority Irish representation, to secure the peace and administer justice in Ireland in a way that would be tolerable to both the disproportionately landed (and thus enfranchised) Anglican aristocracy and the much poorer Catholic majority. Unfortunately, Smith only gave minimal attention to the specific problems of Ireland, and perhaps for this reason, Stafford does not discuss the degree to which Smith's Scottish experience might not be replicable to the case of Ireland. However, what he does suggest is that, although Smith knew that Ireland posed a greater challenge, he nonetheless believed that the natural sources of social deference, those based on 'natural and respectable distinctions', would be strong enough to supplant those based on sectarian allegiance – insofar as Dublin was deprived of its parliament and politics thus became a more distant affair, emotionally as well as geographically.

What Smith of course could not have foreseen in 1776, however, was the vicarious enthusiasm for independence that the 'present disturbances' in America would awaken in Ireland. As Stafford moves on to show, the American Revolution breathed life into an Irish, and heavily Ulster Presbyterian, Volunteer movement, which 'represented a potent politicisation of the Irish culture of "improvement" ... alongside a rejection of its focus on Irish agrarian reform'.<sup>38</sup> In consequence, Molyneux's *The Case of Ireland* re-emerged as a manifesto for Irish autonomy. Moreover, the French and Spanish support for the American cause provided yet another demonstration of the notion that monarchies were no less likely to support civil liberty than free states. Suddenly, the prospect of an invasion from the continent, which had hitherto evoked deep fears in the protestant elite, seemed less dangerous to the established property order, especially in a world where confessional differences increasingly took a backseat to the pursuit of markets. However, while there was widespread agreement in the Irish parliament over the demand for legislative autonomy on trade relations, there was less agreement on the maxims that should govern an independent Ireland's trade with Britain. With the prospect of a Union so forcefully ruled out, the question that defined the late 1770s and the 1780s was how to reconcile Irish demands for legislative independence with Britain's ultimate sovereignty over its imperial trade. On the Irish side, such a reconciliation was sought after since, as Stafford argues, one of the main goals of the Irish free trade

agitation of 1778-9, despite its rhetoric of independence, was to secure full access to the trade networks of the British Empire, something which Lord North, the British Prime Minister, perceived as a gift rather than a right. Another complication was the impact that the free trade arguments of Hume, Tucker and (in particular) Adam Smith had had in persuading Irish opinion that their industry was no threat to England's superior wealth and skill. In consequence, when the Irish parliament succeeded in achieving legislative independence in 1782, the question of protective duties quickly gained prominence in Ireland, which at the time, like Britain, was suffering from a post-war recession. As Stafford notes, this was rather paradoxical (a more apt term might be 'ironic'), since arguments that were intended to persuade English opinion of the relative harmlessness of free trade with Ireland, something which they largely failed to do, were now used in Ireland to buttress the case for protectionism. On the British side, the most contentious issue turned out to be the perceived ability of Ireland, due to its Western location, to act as an entrepôt for re-exporting British colonial goods to its continental rivals, thus undermining the purpose of the Navigation Acts, and for damaging Britain's colonial trade by importing cheap goods from Spanish or French colonies in the Caribbean, goods that could then be easily smuggled into Britain. In short, Ireland's closer proximity to the Atlantic colonies of Europe meant that Irish autonomy in matters of trade, if improperly managed from the metropole, had the potential to damage the imperial and mercantile interests of Britain. And more than the fear of Ireland's lower wage costs, it was this issue that proved decisive in Westminster, leading to the rejection of William Pitt's attempt to settle the British-Irish trade relationship with his 'Commercial Propositions' of 1785. In Ireland, however, Pitt's Propositions, which were drawn up as an effort to keep Ireland within Britain's commercial empire, were ultimately rejected precisely because they were perceived as inimical to its pursuit of legislative independence. To Josiah Tucker, one of the leading English critics of Britain's commercial empire, this outcome seemed auspicious, given that it opened up the possibility for Ireland to disrupt the whole mercantile system by demonstrating the superiority of free trade over monopoly, the redundancy of the Navigation Acts, and the superior productivity of free labour over slavery in the Caribbean. This was not to be the case either, however. After the failure of Pitt's Propositions, Westminster kept an uneasy stability by exploiting its power of patronage to influence Irish politics, a policy of procrastination that, as Stafford notes, could only endure in an atmosphere of popular and international peace, which of course would not last the decade.

The outbreak of the French Revolution naturally had a profound effect on Irish politics. With the fall of the *Ancien Régime*, the remaining geopolitical justification for Protestant rule in Ireland swiftly disappeared. Longstanding Protestant fears of either a Bourbon universal monarchy or a French assisted Jacobite coup were now thoroughly discredited. Furthermore, among the members of the Society of United Irishmen, founded in Belfast in 1791, the new republican regime in France inspired hopes of not only an Ireland untethered from the British Empire but also of a Europe remade in the image of cross-confessional allegiance to republican principles. Stafford focuses especially on the way in which the massive redistribution of property and the reform of the French laws of inheritance provided inspiration for a radical reform of the Irish interior. Whereas the American Revolution thus primarily generated enthusiasm for autonomy in international trade, the French Revolution revitalised interest in agrarian reform and politicised the distribution of landed property in a way that went far beyond the former critique of the penal laws. And whereas the Volunteers had sought independence within a British Empire, checked by the European balance of power, the United Irishmen, led by the charismatic figure of Wolf Tone, instead saw France as the handmaiden of Irish independence and agrarian reform. As Stafford writes about Wolf Tone: 'By following the moral example of French reform, unencumbered by fears of French intentions, Ireland could mobilise the popular forces necessary to secure autonomy from Britain'.<sup>39</sup> Due to the British support for the counter-revolutionary peasants in *La Vendée*, the prospect of French interference in Ireland became imminent, receiving active support and encouragement from the now persecuted movement of United Irishmen. However, French plans to turn Ireland into a British *Vendée* were rejected by Wolf Tone, who travelled from his exile in America to Paris in 1796 in

order to negotiate a proper French landing with the Directory. For Tone, the key to a successful revolution was to win the support of the Irish peasantry by converting, as Stafford writes, ‘Irish economic grievance into political support for the invasion ...’, while simultaneously avoiding the bloody civil war that had occurred in France. For this purpose, Tone composed two ‘Addresses’, one to the Irish peasantry and another to the Irish people, both of which intended to garner popular support for the planned landing of fifteen thousand French soldiers. The addresses never reached their intended audience, however, due to the failure of the French landing at Bantry Bay, but as Stafford shows, they reveal the degree to which Tone’s imagined revolution was in conformity with the moderate desire of the French Directory to put an end to the revolution. Aside from celebrating the French republican regime, Tone extolled the Directory for having produced, despite the violence of the Terror, a system of landownership in which almost all lands were placed in the hands of those who cultivated them. The message was clear: Ireland’s immiserated peasantry could expect the same results from a French invasion, but as Stafford notes, Tone’s address was ‘strikingly devoid of political agency’ as well as selectively silent about the events that had largely forced the Directory to ‘render a *de facto* situation *de jure*’.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Tone’s promises to the Irish peasantry were somewhat contradicted by his reluctance to accept that a French-style redistribution of Irish land required a similar level of confiscations from the landed aristocracy. As Stafford notes, Tone’s appeal to the ‘men of no property’ was not grounded in ‘any substantive account of the claims of labour’, nor did it situate Ireland within a ‘broader analysis of the progress of “commercial society”’.<sup>41</sup> However, this was not the case with Tone’s fellow United Irishman, Arthur O’Connor, the aristocratic radical and relative latecomer to the cause, who emerges in Stafford’s interpretation as a ‘singular intellectual force within the movement’.<sup>42</sup> With Thomas Paine as a likely intermediary, O’Connor’s analysis was a radicalised version of Smith’s political economy, in particular Smith’s arguments against the nefarious political and economic effects of primogeniture and entails. Much like Wolf Tone and, indeed, Tom Paine, O’Connor’s portrayal of the French Revolution conformed to the Directory’s objective of ending the revolution and avoiding further bloodshed. Adopting Smith’s view of the superiority of small-scale agriculture, O’Connor was furthermore persuaded that the French state now rested on a much firmer foundation than that of Britain, given that the revolution had effectively ensured that its economy would follow what Smith had termed the ‘natural progress of opulence’. In consequence, he had little doubt that the new Republic would win the war. In *The State of Ireland*, which constituted O’Connor’s passionate manifesto for the Irish rebellion of 1798, he argued that Ireland should ‘emulate’, as Stafford formulates it, the French legal reforms. If the distribution of land were no longer encumbered by laws maintaining aristocratic monopoly and dominance, then the economy would flourish and generate economic independence among the peasantry, a condition which he believed was prerequisite for widening the franchise, as a guarantee of political independence. However, as Stafford correctly remarks, the French Revolution had not simply abolished the feudal inheritance laws but had in fact rendered primogeniture illegal. The *Code Civil* of 1794 (as well as the later *Code Napoléon* of 1804) mandated partible inheritance of all estates and thus heavily infringed on the freedom of testamentary disposition, much like the penal laws had done regarding Catholic estates. In contrast, O’Connor’s only ‘substantive prescription’ for an Irish ‘Constituent Body’ was the mere abolition of primogeniture and entails, which would not only leave testamentary freedom intact, but actually expand it by abolishing the practice of entailment along with the whole legal apparatus of life-tenants and remainders in tail. However, by eliding the difference between prescribed and permitted partible inheritance, O’Connor’s comparison to France can hardly be seen as anything other than a specious one. Although Stafford does not address this directly, he does provide some explanation for why O’Connor expected this less interventionist reform to produce French results. Aside from his belief in the superior productivity of subdivided landownership, O’Connor’s reading of Smith had convinced him that aristocracy was progressively being undermined throughout Europe by the combined forces of commerce and vanity, a process which increased the amount of moveable wealth and thus lessened the power and influence of land.

In consequence, the abolition of primogeniture and entails would not so much cause the downfall of the landed aristocracy but rather precipitate a transition that was already underway. However, there seems to be something more to be said about this. Like Smith, O'Connor also placed great emphasis on the power of parental affection and saw partible inheritance as the natural result of this, describing it, as Stafford indeed mentions, as the 'policy of nature'.<sup>43</sup> Commenting on the various ways in which a family settlement ensured provisions for the younger children, O'Connor insisted that these feudal laws of inheritance were in fact laws of *disinheritance* and, as such, violated the paternal affection that a father naturally had for all his children.

If it is pretended that these laws of monopoly oblige parents to provide for their children, I answer, that they are laws of disinheritance; and though they were not so, I will appeal to you, who have felt what it is to have children, whether the strength of paternal affection is not a sufficient and best guarantee for the performance of this paramount duty; and if any one should be found vile enough to deny it, he would only bear testimony to the depravity of his own heart, but not against the validity of paternal affection.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the failure of the French invasion and the bloody suppression of the rebellion of 1798, the United Irishmen had nonetheless succeeded in defining the terms of the debate that was to dominate European discussions about Ireland for the next half a century. In particular, they had presented France as the 'representative of a different and superior kind of commercial modernity to that embodied by the British Empire and the "English" constitution'.<sup>45</sup> Within Britain, however, the immediate result of the events of the 1790s was to hasten the movement towards political and fiscal unification, not least due to Britain's mounting debt and intense imperial anxiety.

Stafford conventionally presents the Union as a 'geopolitical imperative', as a response by William Pitt's government to Britain's perilous imperial crisis. In ideological terms, however, Stafford understands it as the expression of a 'counter-revolutionary interpretation of Scottish moral philosophy', advanced by an influential Scottish contingent within Pitt's cabinet led by Pitt's Secretary of War, Henry Dundas, who drew heavily on Adam Smith in his advocacy for the Union. Aside from suppressing sectarianism within Ireland, the Union was intended to bring about prosperity and agricultural improvement, thereby removing the underlying cause of Irish unrest. As Stafford notes, the interest that British politicians now professed in the social condition of the Irish peasantry was unprecedented, signalling an increased distrust in the ability and willingness of the Anglo-Irish landowners to deliver improvement. It also signalled a growing need for Ireland to become a 'breadbasket' for Britain, capable of increasing the supply of grain at a time when Britain no longer produced enough to feed itself. For this reason, Stafford suggests that the debate about the Union was fundamentally about 'who was ultimately responsible for the condition of the Irish interior – the Anglo-Irish landholding class, or the imperial parliament at Westminster'.<sup>46</sup> Within this debate, there were two contrasting visions of economic reform, one that relied on the local knowledge and leadership of Irish landlords and another that saw union as an agent of commerce and civilisation. Stafford sees this clash epitomised in the debate between John Foster, the speaker of the Irish parliament, and the Anglican clergyman Thomas Brook Clarke. While Foster made his case against Union by warning that it would lead to widespread absenteeism and reduce Ireland to a mere supplier of primary goods, Clarke drew on the authority of David Hume and argued for the economic benefits of union, emphasising the advantage that Ireland's lower wage cost provided in drawing in British investment. Clarke's larger optimistic view of the prospect of unification was rooted in, as Stafford writes, 'a straightforward application of Adam Smith's history of commerce to Ireland's distinctive circumstances'.<sup>47</sup> Substituting the Irish landlords for Smith's feudal barons, Clarke argued that it was through commerce exclusively that Ireland could subdue the 'barbarous spirit of feudal power'. And commerce was what the Union brought with it, along with stability, civility and progress.<sup>48</sup> On the continent, the Prussian diplomat (and translator of Edmund Burke) Friedrich Gentz saw the Union of 1801 as evidence of Britain's continuing capability for reform. Britain embodied a revitalised model for an enlightened reason of state that ought to be emulated by Europe's monarchies. By consolidating its empire and thus

avoiding revolution, Britain had proved itself a superior alternative to the excesses and corruption of its French Republican rival.

The loss of its parliament, combined with the shock of the Irish Rebellion, generated a renewed interest among the Anglo-Irish elite to comprehend the Irish interior and its population. As evidence of this, Stafford provides an interesting and thought-provoking analysis of the Country Cork politician Thomas Newenham's voluminous writings on Irish demography and agriculture, which not only captured the attention of T. R. Malthus and the *Edinburgh Review* but also influenced a wider European debate about the prospect of Ireland during the Napoleonic war. Newenham observed that Irish agriculture had undergone a significant transition from grazing to tillage farming, which had led to an increase in population. This development was sustainable and positive, he believed, since Ireland's agriculture was more labour intensive than that of Britain. Crucially, the introduction of the potato crop as a staple food for the Irish peasantry was seen as providing Ireland with a double advantage. Aside from ensuring an easily grown and nutritious food supply, it allowed most of its grain to be exported as a manufacture, thus enabling the Irish economy to grow in both wealth and population as part of an extended division of labour with British industry. As Stafford writes, 'Newenham envisioned Union as the stable coexistence of two differing political economies, founded on contrasting diets, occupations and territorial distributions of the labouring poor'.<sup>49</sup> In consequence, he was optimistic about Ireland's abundant potential as a granary for Britain and argued for a government sponsored programme of public investment to realise this potential. To the Genevan writer Francis d'Ivernois, moreover, Ireland's apparent improvement through the Union provided evidence of the prosperous future that was in store for Europe's continental states if they only came to accept Britain's legitimate status as a commercial hegemon. The continental blockade had not succeeded in bringing Britain's superior industry to a halt, but had only caused her to find alternative markets, and the main beneficiary of this was Ireland. Within the remaining circle of Irish radicals, however, the agrarian path of post-Union Ireland was seen as a betrayal of the promise of the union. Stafford brings this opposition to light through an analysis of the *Irish Magazine*, which he argues 'played a crucial role in the remodelling of Irish radicalism during the later years of the war'.<sup>50</sup> Published by Walter Cox, a veteran of 1798 and an advocate of Catholic Emancipation, the *Irish Magazine* lamented the dependency generated by Ireland's undiversified economy, and for a brief period, during the War of 1812, even advocated for an American invasion and a federal union between Ireland and the United States. Somewhat surprisingly, this radical rejection of Irish agrarianism was echoed by T. R. Malthus, who formulated a pessimistic view of the post-Union economic boom and its reliance on the potato, a pessimistic view that corresponded to a heightened sense of crisis that had taken hold among the editors of the *Edinburgh Review* due to Napoleon's continued grip on European politics. In two long review articles, published in 1808-9, Malthus countered Newenham's optimism by rejecting the idea that Ireland could develop through agriculture alone. What Newenham had seen as a double advantage, Malthus saw instead as a recipe for disaster. The fundamental problem was the potato and the low subsistence floor that it made possible for the peasantry. By supporting an increase in population without any increase in living standards, the potato rendered civilisation impossible and further immiseration likely, since without developing more refined modes of subsistence, the population could never come to practice the same 'moral restraint' (i.e. procreation control) that the wage-labourers of England had learned. What Ireland needed was both a diversified economy and a diversified diet, which for Malthus required more dignified forms of consumption as well as Catholic Emancipation, something which would facilitate moral development and, as Stafford emphasises, reinforce more 'masculine and civilised political virtues'.<sup>51</sup>

Increasingly, Malthus also became convinced that an improved system of agriculture was needed, a system which mirrored that which existed in England. By 1820, when Malthus published his *Principles of Political Economy*, the insular English orthodoxy regarding its own agricultural superiority was firmly establishing itself among political economists such as Malthus and J. R. McCulloch, building on ideas first expressed by agricultural writers such as Arthur Young

and Edward Wakefield. As Stafford notes, Britain's victory in the Napoleonic Wars was seen as evidence of the superiority of England's capital-intensive system of farming, and the British reform effort in Ireland henceforth became committed to substituting English-style farming for Ireland's small-scale cottier system. In this way, it was the 'fraught conditions' of the Napoleonic Wars that produced the orthodoxy that formed the starting point of R. D. Collison Black's book. It was thus an orthodoxy that had little to do with Adam Smith, whose political economy was more often evoked by supporters of the French alternative based on owner-occupancy and *petite culture*. As Stafford writes,

Instead of being a programmatic extension of Smith's political economy, the nineteenth-century British reform agenda reflected its refraction and recombination through broader frameworks of agronomic and demographic thought. Arthur Young, not Adam Smith, was the most pugnacious advocate of large-scale, capital-intensive farming as the indispensable engine of England's wealth and the leading inspiration for nineteenth-century efforts to remodel Irish agriculture.<sup>52</sup>

In the final chapter, we see this ideological battle between rival visions of commercial society played out. Adopting the terminology of the French historian Joseph Droz, Stafford shows how the *systeme anglaise* came under increasing attack by various proponents of the *systeme française*, proponents comprising a disparate array of economists, historians and philosophers such as Sismondi de Sismondi, Benjamin Constant, Jean-Baptiste Say and, somewhat surprisingly, G.W.F. Hegel. Special attention is given by Stafford to Gustave de Beaumont and his book *Irlande* (1839), which advocated for the transformation of Irish society on the model of the French Revolution, that is, through a reform of the aristocratic laws of inheritance. But aside from being a critique of Britain, it also functioned as a surreptitious intervention into French and, indeed, European discussions about the legacy of the Revolution, especially in relation to the new 'national' division of property and the equality of conditions that it heralded. In Beaumont's book, Ireland was cast as the ideal European vantagepoint from which to witness the clash between rival versions of commercial modernity, a clash that Beaumont redescribed as a struggle between democracy and aristocracy.<sup>53</sup>

Within Ireland, Beaumont's ideas were taken up by the 'Young Ireland' circle of writers, who proceeded to tie the idea of democratic landownership to the cause of Irish nationalism. Thomas Davis is singled out as the main person responsible for importing French political economy and historiography into Daniel O'Connell's repeal movement, a political economy that saw partible inheritance as part of a natural order of property and progress and, as such, was indirectly indebted, through Sismondi and Say, to Adam Smith. In this way, the *systeme française* – which Stafford notes was equally associated with America, Prussia and Norway at this point – came to inform both Irish nationalism as well as the radical suggestions for saving the union expressed by British liberals such as J. S. Mill and his followers. For this reason, Stafford suggests that the central issues of Irish politics in the nineteenth century – the issues of property and nationalism – ought to be seen as one of the 'complex legacies of the French Revolution's transformation of European political economy'.<sup>54</sup> In line with this view, Stafford insists that we should see authors such as Davis less as romantic critics of the 'dismal science' than as political economists with a constructive agenda, based on their belief in the economic viability or superiority of a society dominated by small-scale agriculture. Echoing Collison Black's call for historicist humility, Stafford concludes his book with a lesson that Sismondi and Davis did not have to be taught, namely that there is 'no set of political or institutional arrangements (...) that constitute the definitive form of "modernity", towards which all development must inevitably end'.<sup>55</sup> We might add that this was also J. S. Mill's view, as exemplified in the distinction he drew in his *Principles* between the unalterable laws of production and the negotiable laws of distribution, a distinction which Stafford's book helps to place in its proper European context.

In general, there is much to recommend in Stafford's book, which succeeds admirably in its aim of situating 'the case of Ireland' amid the rival visions of commercial society that emerged in the 'age of crisis'. In doing so, Stafford's book also provides a valuable template for how to bridge the gap between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and producing a comprehensive history that is

both coherent and properly contextual. Moreover, the book will be of particular value to anyone interested in the legacy of Adam Smith's political economy, which Stafford shows to have had an extraordinary and multifaceted impact in both Ireland, Britain and in France, both directly through his students and more indirectly through the likes of Thomas Paine and Sismondi. Although the *système française* owed its existence to the French Revolution and its mandatory law of partible inheritance (both of which means which Smith would have abhorred), Smith was read – and remained relevant far into the nineteenth century – as an exponent of the vision of commercial society that emerged in post-revolutionary France. In this regard, a point of criticism might be in order. Smith's continued relevance to proponents of *petite culture* was perhaps also sustained by the fact that his political economy, unlike that of Ricardo, Malthus and McCulloch, came without a law of diminishing returns. As Donald Winch pointed out in his *Wealth and Life* (2009), this theoretical innovation, itself a 'product' of the Napoleonic Wars and the pressures it placed on British agriculture, largely explained Smith's appeal to Richard Cobden, but the argument can be easily extended to anyone who argued for the superior productivity of peasant proprietors.<sup>56</sup> In other words, what is lacking from Stafford's account is a more direct assessment of the impact that the post-Smithian 'discovery' of the law of diminishing returns had on the development of the English orthodoxy in favour of large-scale capitalist farming. Aside from providing James and John Stuart Mill with a law of rent that justified the taxation of the 'unearned' value of land, the law of diminishing returns could also be – and indeed was – employed in defence of the consolidation, rationalisation and specialisation that England's large farms enabled.

Nonetheless, while some of the economic reasons behind the rival visions of commercial society are overlooked, Stafford's book provides an impressive overview of both the politics of commercial society and the 'case of Ireland' in the age of crisis. As such, it deserves to be read widely and studied carefully.

## Notes

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23. Bruce Kinzer, *England's Disgrace? – J. S. Mill and the Irish Question* (Toronto University Press, 2001), 34.
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## Disclosure statement

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