

# 'A Nation Perishing of Political Economy'?

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It is difficult to deny the centrality of political economy, the master public discourse of nineteenth-century Britain, in the contemporary debates about the Great Famine, its causes, consequences, and especially the question of the efficiency and equity of the market mechanism in the distribution of famine relief. We would argue that the Famine crucially challenged political economy in Ireland and bore a large responsibility, though not immediately, for fundamental discursive changes in the discipline. The Famine was seen to impugn the very scientificity of political economy and the universality of its laws. It called into question its abstractionism, its methodological deductivism, its homogenising cosmopolitanism, its Anglocentrism. By the end of the 1850s even its most orthodox defenders, such as William Neilson Hancock, were submitting it to a searching moral critique. This process of historicising culminated in the work of two notable Irish practitioners, Cliffe Leslie and John Kells Ingram, who became the leading proponents of the historical school of political economy in the English-speaking world. In this article we will concentrate on the official defence of the discipline in the era of the Great Famine in Ireland.

From the early nineteenth century there was a widespread belief that political economy was a 'science ... unknown in Ireland',<sup>1</sup> and if known was not highly thought of. There were moral critiques after the fashion of Carlyle and Ruskin (as in the work of William Dillon<sup>2</sup> and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett<sup>3</sup>) and a widely-held view that it was inimical to religion, especially Roman Catholicism. John Henry Newman, as rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, had described it as a science 'at once dangerous and leading to occasions of sin'.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, he was attacking Nassau Senior whose version of political economy was influentially disseminated in Ireland by his friend Archbishop Whately of Dublin and by many of the Whately professors at Trinity College Dublin. It was also felt in various quarters that political economy, though allegedly an impartial, unideological science, was unfriendly to the interests of, vari-

1 John Bright in a letter to Gladstone 15 October 1869, British Library, Add. MSS 44112 quoted in R.D.C. Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 58.

2 William Dillon, *The Dismal Science: A Criticism of Modern English Political Economy* (Dublin, 1882).

3 H.M. Posnett, *The Historical Method in Ethics, Jurisprudence, and Political Economy* (London, 1882); *The Ricardian Theory of Rent* (London, 1884).

4 J.H. Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London, 1901), p. 86.

ously, the working class, tenants, and the very Irish nation itself. A conservative critique emanated from the *Nation* and a sharply radical one from such revolutionary organs as the *United Irishman*, *Irish Tribune*, and *Irish Felon*. All versions of nationalism attacked free trade, *laissez-faire*, the doctrine of the sanctity of the market mechanism, and the utilitarian philosophy which underpinned political economy. More radical versions challenged the sacredness of contract and of private property, especially in land. This critique reached its climax during the Famine. The hitherto more-or-less orthodox Isaac Butt became the only academic economist in these islands to defend a version of protectionism. There was widespread clamouring that the 'laws of political economy' (meaning, in effect, *laissez-faire*) should be ignored, or modified in the face of the terrible calamity of the Famine. James Lawson, in a lecture which he delivered in May 1848, 'On Commercial Panics', stated that during the 'distress of the two last years, it was very common to say, "Oh, these are extraordinary times; we cannot apply the rules of Political Economy to them."' At a time when guidance from 'settled principles' was most urgently needed, they were cast aside. If, he added: 'we have any faith in the truth or certainty of science, we must feel fully persuaded that the truths are of universal application; that they cannot be true at one moment and false at the next; that they are not to be taken up in smooth seasons, and laid aside in rough ones.'<sup>5</sup>

Others, like John Mitchel, advocated an *Irish* political economy, an absurd oxymoron in the view of the orthodox. There was none more orthodox than Hancock, and such was his view in an important paper which he delivered to the Statistical Society, 'On the Economic Views of Bishop Berkeley and Mr. Butt, With Respect to the Theory that a Nation May Gain by the Compulsory Use of Native Manufactures'. He said that the *Querist*, published by Berkeley almost a century previously, had been 'recently recommended as a valuable manual of *Irish* political economy, quite as well suited to the year 1847 as it was to 1741'. But 'the idea of having a science of exchanges peculiar to Ireland, under the name of Irish Political Economy, is about as reasonable as proposing to have Irish mechanics, Irish mathematics, or Irish astronomy'.<sup>6</sup> Hancock was referring here to the booklet entitled *Irish Political Economy*, edited by John Mitchel, and published by the Irish Confederation in 1847, which had conscripted Berkeley and Swift as early exemplars of national economics. The essence of Hancock's critique of Butt was that his treatise, avowedly dealing only with a specific situation, was *unscientific* in that it refused to generalize its findings or to relate them to the principles of political economy which were of universal

5 J.A. Lawson, 'On Commercial Panics' in *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, i (1847-9), p. 1.

6 W.N. Hancock, 'On the Economic Views of Bishop Berkeley and Mr. Butt, With Respect to the Theory that a Nation May Gain by the Compulsory Use of Native Manufactures' in *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, i (1847-9), p. 3.

validity. The *Querist* was quite unfit to be a scientific manual at the present day, claimed Hancock, and Butt had 'himself deprived his lectures of any scientific authority, by giving them an avowedly unscientific character', for he stated in his introduction that in 'endeavouring to deal with a particular case, I have rather avoided than sought to lay down general principles, or form any system of general results'. Butt deprecated 'all general discussion of protective duties', and confined himself to the case of Ireland; and from the facts of this case he attempted 'to deduce conclusions at variance with the best established principles of economic science'.<sup>7</sup>

Central to the defence of political economy, which was at once both spirited and systematic, was Archbishop Richard Whately, who formerly professed the subject at Oxford. He founded a chair of political economy at Trinity College Dublin in 1832, shortly after his arrival in Ireland, and as a commissioner of national education he was responsible for having the subject taught to school-children. The Barrington Lectures were set up in 1834 to teach the working class throughout the country the elements of political economy. At the height of the Great Famine, in 1847, the Dublin Statistical Society was established, with Whately's encouragement, by the current and some of the former Whately professors, including Hancock and Lawson, ostensibly as a humanitarian response to the Famine. But, due obsequy having been paid to Schull and Skibbereen, a more important purpose emerged: the defence of the principles of political economy, then under unrelenting attack. The 'principles' were those promulgated by the British classical school. However, their Irish acolytes were selective in reading their masters' texts. Their was general hostility towards David Ricardo and all the early references to Mill were unflattering. Lawson, for instance, used Senior in condemning Ricardo's theory of wages and profits:

that wages fell as profits rose, and profits fell as wages rose, and that any rise of wages was a deduction from profits, and *vice versa*, the effect being to represent the interests of the employer and the labourer diametrically opposed to each other. Mr. Senior made inquiry into the facts, and found, that according to all experience, wages and profits rose and fell together, and that it was quite impossible that every rise of wages could be a deduction from profits.<sup>8</sup>

The young Cliffe Leslie attacked Mill's view of the 'antagonism of the interests of capitalist and labourer,' a view he found 'unscientific as well as mischievous'.<sup>9</sup>

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.

8 J.A. Lawson, 'On the Connexion between Statistics and Political Economy' in *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, i (1847-9), p. 6.

9 T.E.C. Leslie, 'The Self-Dependence of the Working Classes under the Law of Competition', *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, ii (1849-51), p. 4.

Most Irish political economists adopted the Senior-Whately version of classical doctrine, which was hostile to the Smithean cost-of-production theory of value and the Ricardian labour theory of value. It was bitterly opposed to trade unions and it was absolutely committed to free trade in general and especially to free trade in land, totally rejecting any state intervention in the process of distribution. Edward Lysaght was correct when he wrote that all economists of reputation (with the exception of Mill) were agreed 'in attributing the wretched state of agriculture in Ireland to the absence, rather than to the excess of competition'.<sup>10</sup>

Political economy in Ireland is best seen in the context of the framework of ideas of the classical school and its diagnosis of Ireland as a case of entrenched underdevelopment. In terms of the Ricardian model Ireland was seen as not having reached the stationary state; rather it was one of arrested development, which could be rectified by appropriate policy measures, which had to be taken in the context of the ideology of free trade, which excluded from debate such issues as protectionism, manipulation of exchange-rates, or major fiscal variation. The classical school was virtually unanimous in their views on Ireland until the later writings of John Elliot Cairnes and John Stuart Mill. Their diagnosis centered on some key concepts in the classical theory of distribution. The pivotal concept was the relation between *population* and *capital* which was crucial to the classical analysis of wages and profits. According to Adam Smith, 'The demand for those who live by wages ... cannot increase but in proportion to the increase of funds which are destined for the payment of wages'.<sup>11</sup> In Ireland, the increase of population had far outstripped the growth of capital, so that the average rate of wages fell to a minimum subsistence level, and combined with the absence of employment opportunities outside of agriculture, created intense competition for land, with resultant subdivision and rack-renting. So a fundamental condition for any economic development was an alteration of the population/capital ratio, either through an increase in capital, a reduction in population, or a combination of the two. To achieve long-term development, agriculture, which employed the vast majority of the population, had to be targeted. Most classical economists believed that a more productive and efficient agriculture could be achieved only through the replacement of Ireland's cottier system with the capitalist leasehold tenancy on the English model. This would involve a large injection of capital and the removal of population to facilitate the consolidation of farms. It was envisaged that most of those dis-

10 Edward Lysaght, 'A Consideration of the Theory, That the Backward State of Agriculture in Ireland is a Consequence of the Excessive Competition for Land' in *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, ii (1849-51), p. 5.

11 Adam Smith, *Wealth of nations*, bk i, ch.viii. For a clear and succinct account of this topic, see R.D. Collison Black, 'The Classical Economists and the Irish Problem' in *Oxford Economic Papers*, v (1953), pp. 26-40.

placed would be re-employed in agriculture as wage-labourers, earning more than they had done as small-holders. The rest would go to non-agricultural employment, in turn generated by either public or private investment, or encouraged to emigrate.

In general, the classical economists were ill-disposed towards state investment in public works, except to the extent necessary to create the basic infrastructure to facilitate private enterprise. To bring about private investment the state would have to provide security of person and of property, at best a long-term objective, at worst a virtual impossibility, given the allegedly disorderly nature of the Irish character. Nassau Senior believed that the insecurity of person and of property in Ireland arose from 'the tendency to violence and resistance to law' which was the 'most prominent, as well as the most mischievous part of the Irish character'.<sup>12</sup> Given pre-Famine rates of population growth, it followed that large-scale emigration became a necessary condition if this model of development were to be effective. Fundamental to this programme was the assumption that English conditions provided the norm towards which Ireland should be moved as rapidly as possible. Mill in England and Cairnes in Ireland were two pivotal figures in the subversion of this conventional wisdom, by advocating peasant proprietorship, which, they argued, could be no less efficient economically than the English model, and would be more socially and politically acceptable given the depth of Irish tenants' belief in their right to the occupation of the soil rather than accepting the status of wage labourers. But all of that was in the future. At the time of the Famine, political economists associated with the Whately chair and the newly-established Dublin Statistical Society, tirelessly propagandized on behalf of free trade in land, free-market solutions, and the unquestioned superiority of the English model.

During and after the Famine, political economy came under unprecedented attack and the official intelligentsia rushed to its defence. Such was Whately's belief in the efficacy of political economy that at a meeting of the Statistical Society on 19 June 1848, his first biographer remarked, 'a moment when all Ireland was drilling, and Dublin seemed like a slumbering volcano, the Archbishop propounded a panacea against the threatened siege'. That panacea was political economy, and Whately urged Young Ireland to study it.<sup>13</sup> At that meeting he spoke of it as the 'only means which existed of rescuing the country from convulsion'.<sup>14</sup> The Famine crisis made it all the more important that the principles of political economy should be applied to Ireland. Any relaxation,

12 N.W. Senior, *Journals, Conversations and Essays Relating to Ireland* (2 vols., London, 1868), i, p. 33.

13 W.J. Fitzpatrick, *Memoirs of Richard Whately, Archbishop of Dublin: With a Glance at his Contemporaries and Times* (2 vols., London, 1864), ii, pp. 63, 67-8.

14 Richard Whately, 'Report of the Address on the Conclusion of the First Session of the Dublin Statistical Society' in *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, i (1847-9), p. 5.

however nobly motivated, was a 'killing kindness', to use W.E. Hearn's phrase for protectionism.<sup>15</sup> In a pervasive, and conveniently naturalising, metaphor, Ireland was figured as a diseased body, in need of the strong, even harsh medicine of political economy, which was seen as all the more effective for being unpalatable. Emigration, for instance, depending on one's viewpoint, could be either a damaging haemorrhage or a curative phlebotomy of a plethoric body. Lawson saw famines as 'commercial panics', 'diseases to which the body politic is subject – not chronic diseases, but epidemics as regular in their recurrence as influenza itself, though at longer intervals'. He saw the political economist as the 'physician [who] can best meet and cope with disease, who is most intimately acquainted with the structure and functions of the healthy subject'.<sup>16</sup> As John Joseph Murphy wrote much later, in 1866, 'Ireland is, no doubt, a poorer country than Great Britain; but to relax the application of the principles of political economy in the case of a poor country, would be as reasonable as to relax the application of medical science in the case of a patient of weak constitution'.<sup>17</sup> A powerful dose of *laissez-faire* was the universal panacea for Irish ills, in opposition to those who clamoured for more lenient treatment for Ireland either because of her generally perceived 'anomalous' position or because of the exceptional circumstances of the Famine. In 1847, William Neilson Hancock delivered and published his significantly-titled *Three Lectures on the Questions, Should the Principles of Political Economy be Disregarded at the Present Crisis? And If Not, How Can They Be Applied Towards the Discovery of Measures of Relief?* There was an extraordinary proliferation of public lectures on political economy from the late 1840s on. Economic knowledge, theoretical and applied, was produced from the Whately chair at Trinity College Dublin, and from 1849 by the professors of Jurisprudence and Political Economy at the newly-founded Queen's Colleges at Belfast, Cork, and Galway, all of whom (with the exception of Lupton and Donnell at Galway) were graduates of Dublin University. All of these professors were members, usually very active ones, of the newly-founded (1847) Dublin Statistical Society, later to become, and to remain to this day, the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland. The Society was dedicated to the application of economic theory to practical questions and generally to promoting an acceptance of the principles of political economy among the people at large. Its mission was greatly facilitated when it took on the administration of the Barrington Trust in 1849. In 1834 John Barrington had bequeathed a large sum of money for the dissemination of economic knowledge throughout the towns and villages of Ireland, especially to those seen as most in need of it, the lower classes. Professors of the subject, but also of other disciplines, traversed

15 W.E. Hearn, *The Cassell Prize Essay on the Condition of Ireland* (London, 1851), p. 83.

16 Lawson, 'On Commercial Panics', i, pp. 1, 2.

17 J.J. Murphy, 'The Relation of the State to the Railways' in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, iv (1864-8), p. 307.

the length and breadth of Ireland broadcasting what John Mitchel ironically called the 'saving doctrines' of political economy.<sup>18</sup> These lectures were very extensively reported in the national and local press. The view was repeated *ad nauseam* that a knowledge and appreciation of the laws of political economy was crucially important because of the great calamity of the Famine. And the subject had been introduced into the national schools by Whately himself for the edification of the children of the poor.

One of the central tenets of political economy was that of the harmony of interests, the finding, not of discord, but of concord in the operations of competitive society. It was, declared Hancock:

a fundamental principle of economic science that the interests of the various classes in the community are bound up together. The capitalist rarely derives profit without employing labour. The landlord cannot get rent unless both the labourer and capitalist have been engaged in the cultivation of his land.<sup>19</sup>

The interests of the various classes in the community were reciprocal:

The capitalist cannot prosper without increasing the wages of the labourer, and the rent of land. If the labourer is well off, he increases the demand for the various commodities he consumes, and so raises profits and rents. The greater the amount of land rent, the greater the funds out of which those classes can be supported who take care of the highest interests of humanity. Such are the manifest conclusions of economic science, the dissemination of which is calculated to produce happiness, contentment, and peace-teaching, as they do, individuals, classes, and nations that the true interest of each is the true interest of all; that one class can never be sacrificed to another with impunity; that calamities and blessings alike extend their influence, producing, like stones dropped into a lake, the greatest impression where they fall, but extending their influence in circles ever widening, till the effect has reached the entire family of man.<sup>20</sup>

W.E. Hearn, the first Professor of Greek at Queen's College Galway and a political economist of note, claimed in his 'Introductory Lecture' to the Royal

18 John Mitchel, *History of Ireland*, (2 vols., Glasgow & London, n.d.), ii, p. 210. The phrase which we have used for the title of this paper, 'a nation perishing of political economy', is taken from this work, ii, p. 218.

19 W.N. Hancock, 'On the Economic Views of Bishop Berkeley and Mr. Butt ...', i, p. 12.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Galway Institution, that 'the interests of the individuals, classes, and nations ultimately coincide, [so] that the true interest of each is the true interest of all'.<sup>21</sup> This theme was centrally addressed in his important lecture to the same body, 'On the Coincidence of Individual and General Interests', and, significantly, as his example he chose the role of the corn dealer in the Famine, arguing that, despite the public odium in which that calling was held, the interests of the corn dealer and those of the people at large coincided.<sup>22</sup> Judging by the political economy papers in the examinations for male national teachers in 1848 and the immediate post-Famine years, the activities of the corn dealers were felt to be in need of justification. In 1848, for example, the following question was asked: 'What is the illustration made use of to show the beneficial action of the corn dealer upon the market of provisions, in times of scarcity?'<sup>23</sup> In another examination in the same year, candidates were asked to show 'in what way the business of the *Corn Dealer* ministers to the public services'.<sup>24</sup> The question was again asked the following year: 'How is it shown that the interest of the Corn Dealer coincides with that of the public?'<sup>25</sup> Hancock defended the activities of provision dealers on the basis of what he described as the 'well-established economic principle, that the interest of consumers and that of producers are really the same', which principle 'is but another form of the doctrine, that both parties gain in every free exchange'.<sup>26</sup> The private self-interest of the corn-dealer was seen, paradoxically, as more productive economically, socially, and morally than the sympathy, altruism, and public spiritedness of state intervention. Whately, although an archbishop, was keenly aware that an excess of benevolence promoted by religion and traditional morality could be dangerous to the body politic unless restrained by political economy.

In his *Three Lectures*, Hancock said that religion and morality were not the province of political economy, which was a science, the domain of intellect, not of feeling. So it was inappropriate, if not indeed immoral, to describe economists, as had been happening with increasing frequency, as 'hard-hearted and cruel'. The hard-headed principles of political economy pointed out that 'the providing food for sale in all districts, and under all circumstances, should be left to the foresight and enterprise of private merchants'. Hancock mentioned the 'common taunt against Political Economy', that it recommended 'the interest of the poor to be sacrificed to the interest of the merchants'. But class-conflict was structurally impossible in this version of political economy: the 'sole reason that Political Economists object to any interference with the provision dealers,

21 W.E. Hearn, 'Introductory Lecture' in *Galway Vindicator*, 6 November 1850.

22 W.E. Hearn, 'On the Coincidence of Individual and General Interests' in *Galway Vindicator*, 6 March 1850.

23 *Fifteenth Report of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland* (1848), p. 305.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 314.

25 *Appendix to Sixteenth Report of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland* (1849), p. 182.

26 W.N. Hancock, 'On the Economic Views of Bishop Berkeley and Mr. Butt ...', i, p. 9.



is that their interests and that of the community are identical'. But the unreflecting then very numerous in Ireland – did not perceive 'the wisdom of the Almighty, in making the security of the most vital interests of the community depend not on any general benevolence or public spirit, but on the strongest and most enduring of human motives – self interest'.<sup>27</sup>

Hancock examined and found wanting Butt's arguments for protectionism, which had found no evidence of the operation of the 'wisdom of the Almighty', nor of its personal representative on earth, the 'hidden hand' of Adam Smith, in the Ireland of the 1840s. These arguments were, according to Hancock:

First – That the consumer must sacrifice his own interest in order to benefit the community. Second – That the poor can gain by government interference with the expenditure of the rich. Third – That wealth has a monopolizing tendency which requires to be controlled.

He rebutted this argument by a familiar appeal to the doctrine of the harmony of interests. To distinguish between the expenditure of the rich and that of other classes in the community, was not merely erroneous but 'most dangerous and objectionable':

To direct the attention of the poor to the wealth of the rich as standing in the way of their comforts, is to make them envious and covetous of that which, if entirely divided amongst them, would produce to each but a trifling sum, insignificant compared with what they would gain in a short time by their own industry from the expenditure of the same wealth by the rich.

Hancock condemned Butt, clearly no believer in economic harmonies, for subversively speaking of the 'monopolizing power of wealth', and for 'freely and unreservedly' advocating 'the right of the artisan to protection against the grinding influence of riches'.<sup>28</sup>

The harmony of self-interest and social interest was held to come about through the operation of competition, unfettered by unnatural state intrusion. In general, political economists agreed that Ireland's distress was due, not to insufficient state activity in the economy, but to too much 'interference' in the market, especially in the market for land, and they argued that the relief effort was hampered by government intrusion in the food market. In a paper on

27 W.N. Hancock, *Three Lectures on the Questions, Should the Principles of Political Economy be Disregarded at the Present Crisis? And if not, How can They be Applied Towards the Discovery of Measures of Relief?* (Dublin, 1847), pp. 12, 19, 51, 61.

28 W.N. Hancock, 'On the Economic Views of Bishop Berkeley and Mr. Butt ...', i, pp. 9, 12.

*laissez-faire* which he read to the Statistical Society, in December 1847, when the Famine was at its most intense, Hancock stated that the contrast between 'a destitute peasantry and prolific resources' suggested an investigation into the social arrangements of the country where such an 'anomaly' prevailed. But, he added, that natural resources however lavishly bestowed, were 'valueless as instruments for the production of wealth, unless the arrangements respecting their use' were based on 'sound economic principles'. The result of this investigation had been 'to vindicate the character of our common nature from the charge of general indolence', by showing that such anomalies arose from the 'social arrangements transmitted from less enlightened ages, being at variance with the teachings of science'. The problem had been caused, he believed, by 'past neglect of economic science', specifically by 'a want of reliance on private enterprise' as the 'most prolific source of unsound arrangements', and not on the supposed shortcomings of the Celtic race. According to Hancock, there was no country in the world which afforded a stronger proof of the disastrous consequences of neglecting the doctrine of *laissez-faire* than Ireland. Its economic history, he wrote, displayed 'an extent of interference with private enterprise, quite as remarkable as the misery and distress which the potato failure has so painfully disclosed'. The evils, as Hancock believed them to be, of this pervasive interference, were not confined to its direct economic effects – it had 'perverted the minds of the people on economic questions'. This resulted in a proliferation of theories to account for Irish distress, most of them involving remedial action which included a further extension of government interference. The 'principle of *laissez faire* was not tried in the West of Ireland, where the deaths from starvation took place', he claimed; 'the people of Ireland died from want of *money*, and not from want of *food*'. The extreme destitution of the people in the absence of an extensive poor-law, exposed the aged and infirm, who:

could not take advantage of the relief by public works, to the want of the means wherewith to buy food. But the interference with the trade in food undertaken by the commissariat arrangements, instead of benefitting those unfortunate people, since the lowering of the price, supposing it to be effected, is of no benefit to a man who has no money, increased their danger, by turning away the attention of the public from the only mode of saving their lives by supplying them with the means of buying food.<sup>29</sup>

A constant theme with Hancock was the deleterious effects on economic activity, especially in the market for land, of ideas and practices inherited from feudal or other kinds of pre-capitalist social formations. He, and others, argued

29 W.N. Hancock, 'On the Use of the Doctrine of *Laissez Faire*, in Investigating the economic Resources of Ireland' in *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, i (1847-9), pp. 3, 4, 7-8.

strenuously against what they saw as the feudal encumbrances which made the alienation of land, and agricultural improvement generally, extremely difficult. They argued for the removal of all legal restraints on dealing in land and for treating it as a commodity, just like commercial property. *Laissez-faire* and free-trade in land were their watchwords. In short, they demanded the replacement of feudal with capitalist economic and social relations. The old restrictions on trade in food, forestalling, regrating, and engrossing, were, Hancock pointed out, abolished as misdemeanours only in 1844. For instance, the causes of subletting were, in his view:

the legislative enactments which afford less than the ordinary security to the tenant who holds his land and lays out capital in its cultivation, and give him at the same time all the extraordinary powers of a landlord for recovering rent from his cottier tenant.

The real remedies for subletting were 'to give the tenant security for improving his farm, and to give no more power for recovering his rent when he sublets than an ordinary creditor has for recovering his debt'. The law of distress, which enabled the farmer to take the law into his own hands against his cottier tenant, was 'one of those feudal institutions which have survived the policy on which they were founded'. Subdivision, he argued, was injurious only where 'unwise restrictions' impeded the accumulation of land. The theory that Irish 'ruin' was due to middlemen was but another form of the old-fashioned prejudice against intermediate dealers, such as in the case of forestallers. There was nothing in the nature of the case

to make middle parties in transactions necessarily injurious to the community; on the contrary, whenever they arise in the ordinary course of trade, without any special interference of government, as certainly as they gain profit themselves so certainly do they benefit the community. The evils traced to middlemen in Ireland arise not from the parties being middlemen, but from the legal restrictions which render it *unprofitable* for them either to transfer or to improve the land, whilst they are induced to sublet by the ample means for levying exorbitant rents, in the power of distress, and priority of recovering rent which they exercise as landlords.

He agreed that absenteeism produced some economic evils, but these he attributed to the feudal law of distress, whose operation was even more baneful when in the hands of agents.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 12, 13, 14-15.

In an important series of articles, 'On the Economic Causes of the Present State of Agriculture in Ireland', Hancock stated that the main causes to which he ascribed the state of agriculture in Ireland were, 'the legal impediments to the free transfer and sale of land, whether waste or improved; and the legal impediments to the application of capital to agricultural operations'. These included encumbrances of various kinds, such as entails, the high cost of transfer, and other restraints on the power of alienation. He quoted Adam Smith approvingly on the 'disorderly times which gave birth to the barbarous institutions of primogeniture and entails'. The chief object of entails, Hancock stated, was 'to maintain a wealthy and hereditary aristocracy', and it was 'upon its wealth much more than its connection with land that the aristocracy must in future rest its power'. Hancock spoke of the 'old feudal principle that the ownership of improvements follows the ownership of land', which constituted a legal impediment to tenants expending capital in improvement. He quoted a report which spoke of early notions concerning property in land and the relation between landlord and tenant, which had an important social as well as a merely economic dimension. This customary social relationship between a landed aristocracy and its tenantry was radically unequal, whereas the bourgeois-capitalist system advocated by Hancock claimed that its regime of contract was posited in equality:

Above all, the landlord and tenant were not looked on simply as parties to a contract concerning property, in which the rent on the one hand and the usufruct of the land on the other formed the only terms. They had personal relations which placed the landlord in the condition of a superior, the tenant in that of a dependant, and prevented the notion of a contract (which is found on equality) from being fully developed.<sup>31</sup>

During and after the Famine, the scientificity of political economy was frequently appealed to but because of what were seen as its cold and ruthless prescriptions, it was often augmented by having recourse to an officially superannuated but affectively powerful pre-scientific moral discourse. For reasons of expediency this gift-horse was not looked in the mouth and the lesson of Troy went unheeded. The scientific citadel of political economy was breached by the Trojan horse of morality. Ironically, it was Hancock, the most doughty defender of the discipline, who first relented, submitting its 'laws' to a vigorous and sustained *moral* critique. The new historicisation of political economy demonstrated that its laws, far from being universal in their derivation and application, were, usually, based on 'English experience and ideas', to quote the words

31 W.N. Hancock, 'On the Economic Causes of the Present State of Agriculture in Ireland', pt i, p.7; pt ii, p.9; pt iii, pp. 3, 4, 5.

of John Elliot Cairnes.<sup>32</sup> It was later argued that a political economy suitable for Irish circumstances and ideas was, for example, more hospitable to state intervention and small-scale agriculture, and tended to be opposed to the commodification of land, to contract, and to the sacrosanctity of the market. This new version of political economy was propagated, in different ways, by Cairnes and the pioneers of the historical school, Cliffe Leslie and John Kells Ingram. The most famous confrontation between the new and the old political economy occurred in the House of Commons in 1868, significantly in a debate about Irish land. Robert Lowe argued that political economy 'belongs to no nation; it is of no country'. John Stuart Mill replied:

my Right Hon. Friend thinks that a maxim of political economy if good in England must be good in Ireland ... I am sure that no one is at all capable of determining what is the right political economy for any country until he knows the circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

Tom Kettle, a methodological follower of Leslie and Ingram, saw this historicising project as a 'revolt of the small nations against the Czardom, scientific and political, of the great'.<sup>34</sup> But it should not be forgotten that those who fell in the struggle for survival in the Great Irish Famine played a crucial, if unintended, part in demonstrating that political economy, too, had a nation.

<sup>32</sup> J.E. C[airnes], 'Ireland in Transition' in *The Economist*, 14 October 1865, p. 1238.

<sup>33</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. cxc, col. 1525 (16 March 1868).

<sup>34</sup> T.M. Kettle, *The Day's Burden* (Dublin, 1937), p. 138.