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Introduction

The seventeenth-century English writer William Petty has been described by Amartya Sen as ‘a founder of development economics’ (Sen 1988: 10). Indeed, almost any branch of economics, or for that matter of any other social science, can find a good proportion of its aims and methods anticipated in one way or another in Petty’s pioneering works of social and economic analysis. Yet he seldom receives more than a passing mention in the development literature, a particularly disappointing omission in this case since even the most casual acquaintance with his writings is enough to show that it is he who, particularly in his writings on Ireland, first attempted to conceptualize many of the issues which remain central for the development economists of today. He clearly addressed, for example, such questions as the relation between the subsistence and commercial sectors of the economy, the relation of town to country, and of manufacture to agriculture, as well as the obstacles to the consolidation of a wage-earning labour force in an agrarian context, and the influence on economic life of traditional society and culture. Above all, there is one feature of Petty’s writings which, even on its own, would justify according him a prominent status in the intellectual ancestry of development economics in his own right, rather than being relegated, as he customarily is, to the status of a mere ‘precursor of Adam Smith’. This salient feature is the explicitly colonial context in which his economic thought was forged.

For it was once again colonialism which, two-and-a-half centuries after Petty’s death, provided the context in which development economics was first established as an academic sub-discipline. A prime example is the case of Oxford University, where it was introduced around the time of the second world war as an element in the ‘colonial studies’ course for students being trained for service in Britain’s colonial empire (Meier 1984: 8 and 1994b: 183-7). Barely had this new element in the curriculum been established, however, when the requirement for training such officials was overtaken by the policy of training replacements for them from among the nationals of the countries emerging into independence from the 1950s and 1960s onwards. In the course of this reorientation, a further task also assumed increasing importance, which was to contribute to the modification of the attitudes prevailing within the colonial metropolis itself towards its colonies and ex-colonies; for there was now clearly a need to accelerate the process in which ‘areas that had been considered in the eighteenth century as “rude and barbarous”, in the nineteenth century as “backward”, and in the pre-war period as “underdeveloped”, now became the “less developed countries” or “the poor

countries” -- and also the “emergent countries” and “developing economies” (Meier and Rauch 2000: 69).

If indeed development economists have hitherto addressed these two principal aspects of their mission on a theoretical and methodological basis whose intellectual roots stretch back to Petty, then some awkward questions arise as to the adequacy of their approach for the tasks they confront. For in Petty’s writings, the goal of development, to the extent that any anticipation of such an idea can be discerned there, is unequivocally given second place to motives of colonial conquest and repression, international rivalry and predatory warfare. Furthermore, no effort is made to disguise the explicit aim of utterly obliterating the social, cultural and intellectual traditions indigenous to the colonized society, which were assumed to constitute, by their very existence, a challenge to the unquestioned dominance of the colonial power.

In what follows, an attempt will be made to address these uncomfortable issues without the customary equivocation. To this end, the literature, such as it is, on the relevance of Petty’s writings to developmental issues will first be critically reviewed, followed by an account of his biographical background in its historical context. His approach to some central issues in the intellectual ancestry of development economics will then be analysed -- the emergence of a wage-earning labour force in an agrarian context, the ideology of a ‘civilizing mission’, the role of institutions in economic transformation, and the political-economic status of the state in the colony. In each case, it will be shown that his writings provide a valuable historical vantage-point from which to assess the extent to which development economics has, or has not, surmounted the intellectual legacy of colonialist thought and moved forward to the construction of a truly post-colonial perspective on economic development in the world today.

Petty, Smith And Development Economics: A Literature Review

Such few passing references to Petty as may be gleaned from the writings on development economics and its history are predominantly found in writers of the pioneering period, including Colin Clark, Arthur Lewis and Amartya Sen, as well as the work of more recent authors who continue to adhere to the same general approach (for example, Yang 2003). Their comments, however, commonly amount to little more than an antiquarian flourish on more substantial discussion of Adam Smith, whose *Wealth of*

Nations is widely regarded as the true starting-point in tracing the sub-discipline's intellectual ancestry, this work being perceived as 'also an inquiry into the basic issues of development economics' (Sen 1988: 10). According to this view, the fate of the developmental approach to economic issues encapsulated in Smith's concept of the 'natural progress of opulence' was that 'in the neo-classical epoch, it was just put to bed' (Meier (ed.) 1994: 7, citing Hicks), or was to 'almost die out' (Lewis 1988: 36), only to be reawakened, or 'resurrected' (Meier 1994a: 1), by the pioneers of today's development economics almost two centuries later (see also Meier 1984: 3-4).

Those elements of Smith's theoretical system adduced in support of this view are conventionally grouped together in what is categorized collectively as his theory of economic growth, which is in turn sometimes cited as evidence of his orientation towards an ideal of social and economic progress; these elements are, most notably, his celebrated concept of the increase in the division of labour in response to the extension of the market, his discussions of the effects of increase of population and of capital ('stock'), his remarks on technological progress, and his concept of a 'progressive state' of society (see, for example, Meier 1994a, Meier and Rauch 2000: 72-3; Yang 2003: 1).

The assumption that referring to Petty can somehow deepen the historical perspective on this theoretical heritage leads inevitably to a tendency among development economists to overestimate the extent to which his discussions of analogous subjects anticipate the Smithian theoretical system. In this they are by no means alone; for example, historians of economic thought have in general been inclined to exaggerate the extent to which Petty's discussions of division of labour -- significant though these are -- anticipate Smith's highly distinctive and far more elaborate theory (for an example in the development literature, see Yang 2003: 1, 31). With even less justification, Petty has been credited with the origination of the theory of economic growth, on the dubious basis of his contention, described as 'part of one of the earliest discussions of development economics', that 'the French grow too fast' (Sen 1988: 10, discussing PA: 242). A further assertion to be found in the development literature, whose inaccuracy will astonish anyone at all acquainted with Petty's writings, is that, in his time, 'economists are no longer occupied with military power' (Lewis 1988: 28). Clark stands alone in showing that he has actually studied Petty's writings, and in his seminal textbook first published in 1940, he not only makes use of his statistical estimates of world trade but also attributes to him the 'brilliant and entirely correct generalization' -- or 'what must be called, in all fairness, Petty's Law' -- the idea that there is a long term

tendency for the working population to move ‘from agriculture to manufacture, and from manufacture to commerce and services’, or ‘from primary production to secondary and tertiary’ (Clark 1940: 448-9, 176-7, 341, citing PA: 256, 267; see also Clark 1984: 70). One commentator, who prefers the term ‘Petty-Clark Law’, also suggests that wider affinities exist between the methodology of the two authors (Pyatt 1984: 79).

With the exception of Clark, then, references to Petty by development economists have largely been restricted to cursory and not always fully-informed assertions by those who evidently presume that counting him in as a ‘precursor’ will, in some way, add historical depth to the thesis of the Smithian intellectual ancestry of their sub-discipline. This situation clearly indicates the need for a dedicated literature to clarify the issues involved, yet there is, unfortunately, only one specialist study addressed explicitly to the subject of Petty’s relevance to development economics, namely Roncaglia (1988). This study does indeed provide a salutary corrective to a number of ‘retrospective’ distortions of the kind that currently prevail, taking as a case study the concept of a distinction (or ‘dichotomy’) between manufacture and agriculture.

Roncaglia argues that Petty did not represent these categories in terms of an inter-sectoral input-output system of the kind subsequently formulated by the Physiocrats and further elaborated by Adam Smith;¹ rather, he argues, Petty perceived the relationship as one of ‘vertical integration’, a perception which would, moreover, have accorded with his own first-hand experience in establishing mining and other industrial ventures on his estate in rural Ireland.² Unfortunately, however, this study, while highly sensitive to the emergence of the fundamental categories of early modern political economy, includes only minimal engagement with the development literature it purports to address: all that is offered in this regard is a passing reference to Lewis (1954) in connection with ‘the contrast between “natural” and market-oriented activities’, and a rather pedantic criticism of Clark’s use of the term ‘Petty’s Law’. It is not until the conclusion to his study that Roncaglia eventually raises the question of whether Petty’s writings are relevant to the validity of the concepts used within the development literature today, but this is a question he raises only to leave unanswered.

Despite his useful critique of some retrospective distortions, Roncaglia’s study nevertheless takes subsequent classical political economy as its reference point, and moreover totally ignores the colonial context of Petty’s writings. The result is that the study ultimately has the effect of reducing his status to that of a precursor of Smith, which, of course, in turn has the effect of implicitly endorsing the idea of the Smithian

ancestry of development economics. This idea is, however, not only open to question, but has indeed come under criticism from a number of directions. It has long been pointed out, for example, that Smith's concept of the 'states of society' (progressive, stationary, declining) can by no means be assumed to embody unidirectional economic 'progress', such an optimistic idea being uneasily grafted by Smith onto what remains essentially a pessimistic cyclical theory inherited from ancient times -- a point conspicuously absent from the arguments of those adhering to the 'Smithian origins' standpoint (see, for example, Meier 1994a), though familiar to other writers on the history of economic thought (see, for example, Cowen and Shenton 1995: 30-32, and, for the wider historical background, Perrotta 2003).

A more recent critique, which is also of more direct relevance in the present context, has been advanced by Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton. They argue that to identify Smith as the intellectual forbear of development economics is to mis-construe the motivation of the nineteenth century writers who -- whether under the banner of positivism, utilitarianism, or imperial 'trusteeship' -- began to advance the idea of economic development as it is now understood. They suggest that these nineteenth-century authors, far from being advocates of progress, were, on the contrary, searching for means to 'ameliorate the perceived chaos caused by progress' -- the 'social disorder of rapid urbanization, poverty and unemployment'. They consequently criticize those who, in their attempts to 'legitimize' development economics, ignore this formative period and instead 'rummage through the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment, especially those of Adam Smith', to say nothing of even less historically-minded writers who 'truncate development's historical domain' yet more drastically by confining their attention to the period since 1945. (Cowen and Shenton 1995: 29, 31, a study subsequently elaborated in a 1996 monograph on the same theme.) But while there is much of value in this critique, it is itself founded on another historical truncation, which, as the present study aims to demonstrate, has the consequence of eliding a previous, and even more profoundly relevant, field in which to seek an alternative to the idea of the Smithian roots of development theory.

In turning to Petty's writings on Ireland in this connection, the present study will accordingly be breaking with a number of other approaches to the question of the intellectual roots of development economics. First of all, it will break with the tradition, represented by Roncaglia, of centralizing the fundamental categories of political economy without reference to the colonial context in which they were first forged and

set to work. Secondly, and by the same token, it will break with the centralization of Smithian 'growth theory'; for though Smith frequently makes reference to colonies in this connection (almost exclusively the settler colonies of North America), his purpose is to explore general economic issues such as the effects of labour shortage and the plentiful supply of land, rather than to single out issues which are specifically colonial as such, in the sense of relating to the conquest and administration of subordinate territories. Thirdly, there will also be a break with, or rather a reverse extension of, the critical theory advanced by Cowen and Shenton, whose analysis effectively discounts the relevance of the period prior to the more mature industrial and colonial theory of the nineteenth century.

One further study, though it makes no attempt to address the literature on development economics, nevertheless deserves mention in the present context. This study, Welch (1997), consists primarily of a correlation of aspects of Petty's writings on Ireland with Marx's theory of the role of colonialism in the primitive accumulation of capital. To this end, a selection of citations of relevant texts are discussed under three headings: 'brutality and religious factionalism', 'the supply of labour and the creation of markets', and 'public debt and taxation'. The outcome is that the study directs its focus unequivocally onto the realities of the colonial context in which Petty formulated his economic thought, something which none of the literature reviewed above has done.³ It is to the task of continuing down the path thus opened up that much of the present study will be directed, widening the narrow base of the existing literature on the subject by incorporating insights developed within neighbouring fields of historical, social and literary research.

Petty And Ireland: Historical And Biographical Background⁴

William Petty (1623-1687) is described by the Irish nationalist historian John Mitchel (Mitchel 1873: 53) as 'the most successful land-pirate... and voracious land-shark who ever appeared in Western Europe'. Mitchel's allusion to piracy correctly reflects the fact that the particular colonial administration in which Petty served had been established on the basis of 'a land-based equivalent to a privateering expedition' (Braddick 2000: 213). This was the invasion of Ireland led by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, which restored the colonial rule which that country had succeeded in throwing off during the preceding period of civil wars in England. Far from making any attempt to gloss over the piratical

basis on which they launched this enterprise, the English parliamentary authorities actively promoted the raising of a fund for the invasion by public subscription on the security of prospective shares in land to be expropriated from the Irish! (For an extensive study of these financial arrangements, see Bottigheimer (1971).)

Following this re-conquest, the English authorities initially declared their intention to be mass executions of Irish ‘rebels’ -- defined sufficiently broadly to include the great majority of all adult males in the country -- as well as deportations and enslavements, and the complete removal of the remaining Irish population from three of the country’s four provinces to a kind of reservation in the West -- the notorious policy encapsulated in the expression ‘To Hell or Connaught!’ (Gardiner (1899) remains the definitive study of this policy.) The army of occupation was to receive its arrears of pay in the form of entitlements to land thus expropriated, and would, it was hoped, form the core of a massive colonial immigration that would transform the Irish countryside into a replication of that of England -- a landscape dominated by smallholdings cultivated by a peasant ‘yeomanry’, interspersed with larger manorial estates.⁵

Though neither the planned executions nor the ‘transplantation’ to Connaught were carried out on the mass scale originally envisaged, the expropriation and distribution of land went ahead, and in this process Petty’s role was of pivotal importance, for it was to him that the army assigned the crucial task of surveying the expropriated land for distribution. The opportunities this position offered for bribery and corruption were bounded only by the shores of Ireland itself, and so fully did Petty exploit these opportunities that he soon became one of the foremost landowners in the country, alongside the wealthiest of the incumbent colonialists and other successful Cromwellian newcomers such as himself. These elements proceeded to buy out the bulk of the land entitlements of the rank-and-file soldiery, and, before long, Ireland had fallen into their hands. The outcome was a kind of neo-feudal situation, in which these large landowners were left lording it over the Irish population who remained effectively enserfed on the land they had formerly owned.

Following the collapse of the Cromwellian regime and the restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660, Petty succeeded in retaining most of the land he had seized, and for the rest of his days his lifestyle remained set in a neo-feudal mode. His London residence was described by a contemporary diarist as a ‘splendid palace’, while his fiefdom in county Kerry in south west Ireland was run along the lines of a small principality, as is graphically illustrated in his correspondence with his family and

agents. Much of his energy in the final decades of his life was devoted to fierce litigation to defend his title to these lands, as well as efforts to establish on them an iron foundry and a number of mining, fishery and forestry enterprises.⁶

Intermittently, when these preoccupations allowed, Petty also participated, as he had done from an early age, in the movement for the advancement of science and technology that was fashionable in his time, his own interests ranging widely from medicine (he was himself a qualified physician) to ship-design.⁷ But while his economic writings are undoubtedly influenced in their mode of analysis by this range of interests, it is another aspect of his biography that accounts for their motivation; this is the fact that, following the restoration of the monarchy, he never succeeded in re-launching his official career on the high-flying path it had followed during the Cromwellian period. It was this frustration of his ambitions which drove him to produce those works to which he owes his singular position in the history of economic thought -- an unending series of schemes for fiscal, cadastral, administrative, naval and military initiatives which he vainly hoped would be entrusted to him. It is in the text of these proposals, whose form varies all the way from extensive treatises to brief jottings, that much of the conceptual apparatus of subsequent economic analysis first began to emerge in primitive form, not least his 'political arithmetic', the precursor of all subsequent quantitative methodology in economic analysis.

The culmination of Petty's efforts to apply his new-fangled quantitative methodology was his notorious proposal to transfer the bulk of the population of Ireland to England. This scheme, which he continued to put forward in increasingly elaborate forms from the 1670s till the final weeks of his life in 1687, had a dual aim. On the one hand, it would increase the advantages of compactness of population in England, compactness being, in his view, the key to the advantages enjoyed by Holland, which was, in his time, not only Europe's most densely-populated country, but also its most economically-advanced (see, in particular, PA: chapter 1).⁸ On the other hand, his scheme would put an end to Ireland's national life and its associated anti-colonial traditions, and (in the final version of the scheme) would transform the whole country into a 'kind of factory' for rearing livestock for England, in other words one vast cattle ranch. It would, in short, bring about a 'perpetual settlement' (or in the term used prophetically by his editor in 1899, a 'final solution') that could at last 'cut up the roots of those evils' which 'have made Ireland for the most part a diminution and a burthen, not an advantage, to England'. (TI: 560, 551, 546, 558.)

Such is the biographical and historical background to the life and thought of this intellectually-enterprising land-pirate, whose writings will now be scanned to assess whether he may also, as has been suggested, be accorded the additional epithet of ‘a founder of development economics’.

Petty On Labour In Early Modern Ireland

Mainstream economics is singularly unsuited to the task of analysing the process of transition from one kind of socio-economic formation to another. Development economics, however, is inevitably concerned in the first instance with precisely such a process, and, for this reason, its pioneering practitioners, for all the profound differences between their respective approaches, have commonly been perceived as falling into the one broad category -- very different from that of the mainstream -- of theorists of structural change. (See, for example, Meier 1994c: 182.) Petty’s writings on Ireland provide an opportunity to assess their efforts in this respect against his contemporary observations on an era of momentous significance for world history -- the era when the world stood on the brink of the emergence of the capitalist system and the ‘great divergence’ in fortunes between the rich and poor countries to which that system gave rise.

It is hard to see where to begin this task if not from the phenomena which Marx associates with the primitive accumulation of capital, and which were the day-to-day reality reflected in Petty’s life and thought -- violence, social upheaval, expropriation of the cultivators from their land, the centrality of the state as the prime economic agent, and ‘passions the most infamous, the most sordid, the pettiest, the most meanly odious’ (Marx 1970 [1867]: 762). What is far from clear, in contrast, is whether it is possible to identify in Petty’s writings an awareness of the ultimately definitive element of that historical era -- the process through which labour is brought into subjection to capital, so that capitalist accumulation can accordingly be set in train. His writings on Ireland are evidently relevant to this issue, but are riven with inconsistencies, and need to be carefully situated in their biographical and historical context if their significance is to be adequately assessed. In particular, it is necessary to distinguish three successive, though overlapping, phases in his perspective on labour, each of which illustrates an aspect of the preliminary stages through which early modern political economy had to pass in its path towards a formulation of the concept of capitalist accumulation.

The first phase in Petty's perspective on labour in Ireland can readily be associated with the orientation he adopted with respect to the factional struggles within the colonial establishment in the Cromwellian period. These struggles centred around the fact that, by the time he had risen to high office in the mid-1650s, the faction of large landowners into which he integrated had become increasingly opposed to the implementation of the 'transplantation' of the Irish *en masse*. They were naturally more than happy to see the 'rebel' landowners out of the way, but wanted the actual cultivators of the land to be left where they were. For these cultivators constituted the population they aimed to enserf under their neo-feudal domination, and they had no wish to see them swept out from under their feet; least of all did they want them replaced by the soldiery of the Cromwellian army of occupation, who were, from their point of view, factious and uncontrollable 'fanatics' who had performed the task of restoring colonial rule, and were now best sent back to England as soon as possible.

The neo-feudalism of Petty and his fellow land magnates was far from being a mere reversion to 'true' feudalism as it had existed in the middle ages. On the contrary, as the enterprises which Petty subsequently established in his own fiefdom illustrate, a more commercial orientation differentiated such 'new seigneurs' as him from the feudal lords of the former epoch, just as the trade in grain surplus underlay the equivalent 'new feudalism' arising in areas of central and eastern Europe in the same period.⁹

Nevertheless, from a conceptual point of view at least, Petty's standpoint towards labour at this stage shared more in common with feudalism than capitalism, in the sense that he advocated a situation in which labour was to be retained *in situ* as effectively an adjunct to the land.

A second phase in Petty's perspective on labour may be discerned following the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. He now remained in England for a number of years, during which time his attention naturally focused more on English than on Irish affairs. In this phase, a contradiction opened out between his own continuing neo-feudal status and his increasing interest in the advance of the wage system. The idea that labour is, or should be, an adjunct to the land, in feudal style, now gave way in his writings to ideas and concepts that pointed forward to the world of emergent capitalism. Indeed, at the macro level, he ran ahead of the times in his celebrated formulation of a system of national accounts, in that he categorized the income of the entire labouring population purely and simply -- and as yet utterly unrealistically -- as 'wages' (see, for example, VS: chapter 2). At the micro level, he discussed the motivation of labour in

terms of the concept which has subsequently been termed the ‘backward-bending labour supply curve’ -- the idea that an excessive wage level, or, in real terms, ‘over-feeding of the people’, results in ‘indisposing them to their usual labour’ (PA: 275).

Such simplifying assumptions and schematic concepts exemplify the manner in which Petty’s thought prefigures what was eventually to become economics; they also, however, misrepresent the actual situation in England at the time. For while dispossession of the peasantry was indeed far advanced, it by no means follows that the resulting dispossessed population had as yet become a wage-earning labour force, least of all a homogenous one. The reality was that the social dislocation, vagrancy and high mortality suffered by the dispossessed in the sixteenth century had to a large extent been replaced only by the political and national upheaval, civil wars and high mortality of the seventeenth. If such was the case in England, then it was incomparably more so in Ireland, and, when Petty returned to that country in 1666, his writings began to express increasing frustration over the problems involved in establishing a wage-earning labour force at all in the conditions prevailing there. For the Irish socio-economic system, based as it still was on communal as well as individual patterns of land use, remained, even at this time, ‘highly flexible and uniquely suited, in environmental terms,’ to its material circumstances (Morgan 1985: 278), and was fully capable of reabsorbing into itself those who might otherwise have constituted the demographic base for a wage-earning class.

Petty roots his comments on this situation in observation. The Irish, he states,

are able to perform their husbandry with such harness and tackling as each man can make with his own hands, and living in such houses as almost every man can build; and every housewife being a spinner and dyer of wool and yarn, they can live and subsist after their present fashion, without the use of gold or silver money (PA: 273).

Such being the case, the cash economy constitutes, by his estimate, only a fifth of all their ‘expense’, the rest of their consumption being ‘what their own family produceth’ (PAI: 192); the principal exception is tobacco, which was evidently spearheading the introduction of cash transactions for consumption goods into the agrarian economy -- the Coca Cola of its day. He furthermore asserts that the Irish are able to supply themselves with ‘the necessities above-named without labouring two hours per diem’ (PA: 273). He consequently asks:

What need they to work, who can content themselves with potatoes, whereof the labour of one man can feed forty, and with milk, whereof one cow will in summertime give meat and drink enough for three men, when they can everywhere gather cockles, oysters, muscles, crabs, etc., with boats, nets, angles or the art of fishing, [and] can build an house in three days? (PAI: 201.)

Petty's discussions of how the Irish are to be 'kept to their labour' (PAI: 189) thus illustrate the obstacles to the subjection of labour to capital in conditions where they have the alternative of an independent livelihood on the land -- conditions which were to remain characteristic of much of the colonial world in the following centuries (see Marx 1867 [1970]: chapter 33, and, for discussion, Rodriguez Braun 1987, and Welch 1997: 164-5).

From frustration and over-simplification it is only a short step to fantasy, and it was to this mode of thought that Petty turned in what signaled a third and final phase in his changing perception of labour -- his scheme for the wholesale transfer of the Irish population to England -- which he initially put forward 'rather as a dream or reverie than a rational proposition' (PA: 285). The scheme nevertheless took on an increasingly realistic character, until it finally assumed a form whose elaborate statistical apparatus pioneered the entire genre of the economic policy proposal as it has existed ever since. Moreover, it now represented labour in yet another guise. For here Petty took forward his celebrated three-fold division of the macro economy into labour, capital and land -- a division which unmistakably foreshadows the subsequent concept of factors of production -- and assigned to labour the role of what would, in today's spatial-economic analysis, be termed a 'mobile factor of production'.

However, to indulge in such retrospective analogies only highlights the limited extent to which Petty actually anticipates the 'factors of production' approach of subsequent economic theory, predicated as this is upon the endorsement of capitalist competition in the market, an institution which he dismisses as a game of dice won 'rather by hit than wit' (TTC: 52-3; see also Aspromourgos 1996: 50-51, and Roncaglia 1988: 165-7). Rather, he turned spontaneously to the state as the sole force capable of imposing a solution to the problems of consolidating a wage-earning labour force in general, let alone implementing his own scheme.

Such was the long and complex process through which Petty's perspective on labour evolved from the neo-feudal standpoint of his Cromwellian years, to the empirical and observational approach of the subsequent period, and finally to a more abstract

approach which began to foreshadow -- though only dimly and partially -- that of the mature classical political economy of the following century, and, beyond it, the economics that was to follow.

Petty, The Cromwellian Invasion Of Ireland, And The ‘Civilizing Mission’

The tone of Petty’s writings on Ireland, however harsh it may sound to modern ears, is restrained and dispassionate by comparison with the fulminations against all things Irish or Catholic which characterized much of the English political literature of the civil war period of the 1640s (Coughlan 1990: 216-7). This contrast might appear to accord with the complacent assumption still commonly found in the writings of English historians that Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland coincided with a passing moment when fanatical forces temporarily seized control of affairs of state in England; the ferocity of the accompanying anti-Irish hysteria was thus, according to this view, an aberration of English history, and was moreover soon rectified by more moderate counsels emanating from within the mainstream of the ruling establishment in England, in co-ordination with the supposedly paternalist neo-feudal land magnates in Ireland. This interpretation, has, however, been challenged by the historian Norah Carlin, on the basis of her analysis of a body of propaganda material commissioned by the parliamentary authorities in support of the invasion. She points out that this propaganda explicitly de-links the invasion issue from matters of religion, and to a certain extent also from the crudest forms of anti-Irish hysteria; rather, what marks it out as distinctive is its centralization and systematization of the argument that English colonial rule in Ireland could be justified by reference to ‘Irish barbarism and the idea of an English civilizing mission’ (Carlin 1993: 210). In other words, the ideology used to justify the invasion was not a manifestation of a passing wave of fanaticism, but a systematic exposition of England’s long-term colonial objectives, and was formulated, not from within a political fringe, but from within the mainstream of the ruling establishment of the time.

Petty shares with much of this literature a relatively dispassionate tone, and surpasses it all in his relentless efforts at theoretical systematization; his writings on Ireland are in this sense a continuation and further elaboration of the new wave of propaganda which originated in attempts to justify the Cromwellian invasion. Though he does not display direct acquaintance with the particular texts analysed by Carlin, he would undoubtedly

have been aware of the substance of their argumentation, with which, as will now be shown, there is frequently resonance in his writings of the following decades.

For example, Petty castigates the Catholic priesthood for propagating rebellious aspirations among the Irish people, and for effectively constituting an ‘internal and mystical government’ which allows Ireland to be ‘governed indirectly by foreign power’ (PAI: 199, 164). His comments are thus directed overwhelmingly towards political issues, and, while he is prepared to criticize certain aspects of Catholic religious practice which he considers ‘peculiar to those Irish’ (PAI: 198), he makes it clear that he is in general not concerned to extend such discussion into issues relating to Catholic doctrine as such.

Besides de-linking Irish political issues from the sphere of religion in this way, Petty also attempts to provide materialistic explanations for a range of other economic and social issues relating to Ireland and the Irish. For example, it has already been seen that he associates the supposed laziness of the Irish with their ready access to means of subsistence requiring only ‘two hours per diem’ for their production. He was also prepared to consider the possibility that the problem might lie in their physical make-up, though he concluded that this was not an adequate explanation: ‘For their shape, stature, colour, and complexion, I see nothing in them inferior to any other people, nor any enormous predominance of any humour’ (PAI: 201). It was not that he lacked crude notions in the field of physical anthropology, which he did not hesitate to apply to the ‘several species of man’ inhabiting other continents (Hodgen 1964: 419-422). Rather, his observation of Irish society was sufficiently close for him to prefer less fanciful explanations: ‘Their lazing seems to me to proceed rather from want of employment and encouragement to work than from the natural abundance of phlegm in their bowels and blood’ (PAI: 201).

But while the intractability of Irish labour to subjection to capital could thus not be attributed to their physical characteristics, it was, he suggested, nonetheless deeply rooted in consequence of ‘their ancient customs, which affect as well their consciences as their nature’; for, he asks,

why should they desire to fare better, though with more labour, when they are taught that this way of living is more like the patriarchs of old and the saints of later times, by whose prayers and merits they are to be relieved, and whose examples they are therefore to follow? (PAI: 201-2)

Petty's secular explanatory framework, combined with reference to fashionable intellectual fads in what is retrospectively perceived as 'early modern science', accords broadly with much of the propaganda justifying the 1649 invasion. A further range of correlations can also be identified with arguments commonly used in the period to justify rule by conquest (Carlin 1993: 219-20). Such arguments accorded with Petty's view that it was only by conquest that the Irish could be made to realize that "'tis their interest to join with them and follow their example who have brought arts, civility and freedom into their country' (PAI: 203).

In connection with the 'arts', a category which then included technology, Petty claims that there were 'not ten iron furnaces' in the whole of Ireland (PAI: 209). That which he established on his own estate was manned primarily, if not exclusively, by colonists from England, and his experience in this and his other enterprises doubtless strengthened his prejudice that only colonialism could introduce technological progress into Ireland. An associated argument was that, left to themselves, the Irish would fail to develop the natural resources of their country. This argument was used to justify colonial rule in Ireland in a 1652 work by Gerard Boate, a writer who had frequented the same intellectual circles as Petty during the 1640s, and whose work would surely have been known to him (quoted by Carlin (1993: 217); see also Coughlan (1990: 212-3)). The same argument remained a familiar feature of colonialist writings throughout the subsequent era, and was indeed one of the prime contexts in which the term 'economic development' first came into currency two centuries later (Arndt 1981: 460-62).

A further common feature of this ideology of conquest is the denial that the colonized people had a history at all prior to the arrival of the invader. Petty enthusiastically embraced this idea:

There is at this day no monument or real argument that, when the Irish were first invaded, they had any stone housing at all, any money, any foreign trade, nor any learning but the legends of the Saints, Psalters, Missals, Rituals, etc., viz. nor geometry, astronomy, anatomy, architecture, enginery, painting, carving, nor any mind of manufacture, nor the least use of navigation or the art military (PAI: 154-5).

The ultimate insult in this connection was the assertion that the Irish were intruders in their own country, a common suggestion being that they were of 'Scythian' origin, an idea which supposedly explained the apparently 'nomadic' (in fact transhumant) aspect

of Irish pastoral society.¹⁰ Petty's own 'conjecture' was in fact less exotic, though perhaps intended to be no less wounding, suggesting as he did that Ireland's first inhabitants were likely to have come from Scotland, rather than being 'Phoenicians, Scythians, Biscayers, etc.' (PAI: 204).

The generally positive estimation that Petty receives from development economists for his contribution to their theoretical heritage is thus in contradiction with the assumption, which presumably most of them would share, that much of the impulse to the formative work of their pioneering representatives came from the perceived need to supersede the colonialist ideology of the 'civilizing mission' and provide a post-colonial alternative to it. Once it is taken into account, therefore, that Petty was in fact deeply engaged in an early, but crucial, stage of the formulation of this ideology, questions inevitably arise as to the level of self-awareness prevailing in the sub-discipline regarding the intellectual roots of the conceptual apparatus on which its practitioners continue to rely.

Petty On Institutions And Their Transformation

There is some remarkably close resonance with aspects of the development economics literature in Petty's comments on what would now be termed 'institutions', or, more specifically, the commercial and financial infrastructure, the legal institutions relating to the security of property rights, and the conditions for a culture of enterprise.

Regarding commercial institutions, Petty poses the question: 'Why should they [i.e. the Irish] raise more commodities, since there are not merchants sufficiently stocked to take them of them, nor provided with other more pleasing foreign commodities to give in exchange for them?' (PAI: 201). Moreover, commercial transactions are impeded by corresponding deficiencies in the financial institutions, in the form of 'difference, confusion and badness of coins, [and] exorbitant exchange and interest of money' (PAI: 196).

As for what are now termed property rights, Petty asks the question: 'Why should men endeavour to get estates, where the legislative power is not agreed upon, and where tricks and words destroy natural right and property?' (PAI: 202). This issue of secure land tenure was, of course, one with which he was deeply concerned throughout his career, first as both surveyor of Ireland and beneficiary of the Cromwellian confiscations, and subsequently in ongoing legal battles to retain possession of the lands

he had seized. It is consequently no surprise that he repeatedly returns to this theme, calling for 'clear conditions' upon leases (PAI: 203), and, in the political sphere, 'certainty' over where ultimate legislative authority lies (PAI: 159-60). At the same time, he cautions that laws might not be readily transferable between countries, since if 'first made and first fitted to thick-peopled countries', they might overload the more summary legal apparatus available in 'thin-peopled countries such as Ireland' (PAI: 202).

Against the background of such weak commercial, financial and legal institutions, it is no surprise that a culture of enterprise was failing to take root. Reflecting on the 'indisposition' of the Irish to take to maritime trade, he complains that 'the Irish had rather eat potatoes and milk on dry land than contest with the wind and waves with better food' (PAI: 208).

This entire range of discussion, based as it is on his own lifelong practical preoccupations and frustrations, gives Petty's writings on institutional matters a more concrete and immediate aspect than the rather unspecific and general observations on equivalent subjects that had been propagated at the time of the 1649 invasion. He also strikes a more modern note than is subsequently to be found in Smith's discussions of colonialism, which, based as they are on second-hand information, are Olympian, academic and unrealistic by comparison.

This realism endows Petty's final proposal with a grimly practical character. For its virtue, in his eyes, was that it incorporated all the different means he had at various times considered for wiping out Ireland's national traditions -- economic, social and cultural -- which had proved so resilient to transformation in accordance with the requirements of colonialism and emergent capitalism. The English had never been able to muster sufficient colonists to swamp these traditions *in situ*; his scheme was, he argued, a more realistic means to achieving the same aim. It would, for example, facilitate the eradication of the Irish language, along with the replacement of 'those uncertain and unintelligible' Irish place names (PAI: 208). It would provide ample scope for cross marriages, in particular between Irish men and English women, so that the offspring would be reared in the language and culture of their mothers (PAI: 202-3). In short, 'the manners, habits, language and customs of the Irish... would all be transmuted into English' (TI: 573).

History is full of ironies, and by dismissing the market in favour of the blunter instrument of state action, Petty was in fact turning his back on precisely those forces

that were ultimately to achieve what, for him, had been only a ‘dream or reverie’. For as the geographer Yann Morvran Goblet, writing in 1930, tellingly observed, Petty’s scheme was grimly prophetic of what was actually to transpire in the two centuries that followed, when Ireland was indeed emptied of the majority of its inhabitants, many of them transported abroad as he had advocated, its language and traditional way of life fighting for survival, and much of the country’s territory converted into one vast cattle ranch. This prompted Goblet to ask: ‘What politician has ever put forward a plan, be it never so formal and official, which has been realized so comprehensively, point by point, as the “reverie” of Sir William Petty?’ (Goblet 1930: 2, 305.)

Petty And The State: Metropolitan And Colonial

As has now been shown, what the tone of Petty’s discussions lacks in fanatical invective is amply compensated by a clinical note which is, arguably, even more chilling. This reaches its extreme in his use of anatomical imagery to justify his methodological approach to socio-economic analysis, and, in particular, his argument that Ireland presents an ideal opportunity for such ‘political anatomy’, just as ‘students in medicine practice their inquiry upon cheap and common animals’ (PAI: 129; for discussion, see Coughlan 1990: 213-20). The English state’s experiments in this ‘laboratory’ of Ireland aimed at realizing a programme of social, political and religious transformation, encompassing ‘governmental modernization, colonial expansion, religious reformation and identity formation all in process simultaneously’ (Morgan 1999: 9). In the case of each of these processes, everything that constituted an advance from the English point of view necessarily entailed measures to suppress Ireland’s cultural, political and religious life and annihilate its national identity: ‘the development of “Englishness” depended on the negation of “Irishness”’ (Hadfield and Maley 1993: 7). Petty’s writings disingenuously reveal both sides of this equation with a frankness and clarity which contrasts with the distorted perspective -- all-too-common among historians of economic, social and political thought -- which one-sidedly focuses on those aspects of his writings which are susceptible of being represented in a positive light, or even as socially progressive.¹¹

The history of England’s colonial policy in Ireland provides ample illustration of the paradoxical fact that the fundamental institutions of what is now perceived as capitalist private enterprise, such as the joint stock company and even corporate enterprise in

general, first emerged in inseparable combination with state -- usually military -- activity (Bottigheimer 1971: 44, Morgan 1985: 262-7). It was in such a context, for which he elsewhere coined the term 'privato-public' (TTC: 65), that Petty made his fortune; in this, he exemplified the rise of neo-feudal upstarts of all kinds in the Europe of his time, a rise which, for all its local variation, had in common the fact that it was predicated on the strength of the state rather than, as in the 'true' feudalism of the medieval period, its weakness. It is therefore no surprise that Petty's economic writings are concerned above all with the tasks involved in furthering the development of what is now termed the 'fiscal-military state'. This term was originally coined with respect to the period following the 1688 revolution in England, but it is now widely acknowledged that it was the statesmen and writers of the preceding generation, not least Petty himself, who laid much of the ideological and intellectual groundwork for the subsequent reconstruction of the state along fiscal-military lines. Thus, the maximization of England's taxation revenue from Ireland dominated much of his writing on the latter country, and though he at times criticized the English authorities for imposing restraints on aspects of the Irish economy -- particularly by restricting its cattle exports (see PAI: 160-1, with editorial note, and PA: 299) -- this was unashamedly motivated by defence of the profits reaped by colonial landowners such as himself, rather than being an expression of sympathy with the idea of an independent economic life for Ireland, let alone an independent Irish nation-state.

The idea of economic planning by the state was in Petty's time strongly linked with Utopian currents in social thought, not least in connection with colonial policy, Thomas More's *Utopia* having itself been described as marking 'a watershed in the development of colonial theory' (Morgan 1985: 269). One topical pamphlet in this genre emanated from the intellectual circles in which Petty had moved prior to his arrival in Ireland. It described a mythical kingdom named 'Macaria', whose 'excellent government' included a number of 'councils' handling the different aspects of state policy, one of these being a 'council for new plantations [i.e. colonies]' (Webster 1979: 67-8). Petty greatly elaborated such ideas in his later writings, and in his final scheme for the transformation of Ireland into a 'kind of factory', he outlined the tasks of a proposed 'council of fitting persons' in terms which vividly portray the transition from utopian speculation to the practicalities of administering a planned economy:

pitching the number of each species of cattle, for every sort of land within the whole territory of Ireland; the same may pitch the number of cow-herds,

shepherds, dairy-women, slaughter men and others, which are fit and sufficient to manage the trade of exported cattle, dead or alive, of hides, tallow, butter and cheese, wool and sea-fish, etc.; to appoint the foreign markets and ports where each commodity is to be shipped and sold, to provide shipping, and to keep account of the exportation above mentioned, and of the imported salt, tobacco, with a few other necessaries (TI: 575).

The demography of the population remaining in Ireland is also to be placed under the control of this Council, which may 'adjust' it in such a way as to

pitch how many of them shall be English, or such as can speak English, and how many Irish, how many Catholics and how many others, without any other respect, than the management of this trade, for the common good of all the owners of these lands, and its stock indifferently (TI: 575).

This power of the Council extends to 'managing the multiplication' of the population (TI: 605): since the entire population is to be 'all aged between 16 and 60 years' (TI: 563), the Council will also be obliged to 'carry away children and superannuated persons'.

Despite the normally positive connotations which the term 'utopia' enjoys today, there has, from Plato's *Republic* onwards, traditionally been, explicitly or implicitly, an associated 'dystopia' for those excluded from its highest privileges, and it is in this sense that Goblet describes Petty's proposal as a system of 'twin utopias' (Goblet 1930: 2, 280-306). The polarity between the two comes across vividly in Petty's writings as a whole: on the one hand, the variety and luxury of the glittering colonial metropolis of London, on the other, the dour homogeneity of Petty's scheme for a 'new model Ireland' (TI: 567) -- housing that reaches a standard of basic habitability (TI: 577), clothes that are 'uniform' (TI: 569), and a humble country diet of potatoes and dairy products, enlivened only by foraging (PAI: 201, as quoted above).

In view of this sharp distinction between the metropolitan and colonial worlds as they are depicted in Petty's writings, it is disappointing to note the lack of attention hitherto paid to the fact that he accords the state a completely different political-economic status on either side of the divide; indeed, one otherwise-perceptive study of his writings on government and administration totally omits any mention of colonies whatsoever (Mykkänen 1994), while Roncaglia (1988) is arguably even more remiss in succumbing to the same shortcoming in a study dedicated explicitly to Petty's relation to development economics. It is evidently necessary, therefore, to underline the fact that,

in Petty's writings, there is no assumption of political, administrative or political-economic equivalence between the role of the state in the colonies and in the metropolis; in political economy, such a concept was only to emerge a century later in the more universalistic theoretical system of Adam Smith, and then only in relation to the North American colonies (see, in particular, Smith 1976 [1776]: 624-6). Petty's writings and practical involvements in state affairs thus usefully draw out the fact that his approach -- especially as it concerns the issues now addressed by development economics -- was based on the presumption of a dominant and subordinate status in all spheres of government, administration and political economy.

Conclusions

The conceptual resonance of Petty's mode of economic analysis with the economics of today never ceases to attract comment from historians of economic thought, and yet, as has now been shown, the explicitly colonialist intent which motivates that analysis has been almost entirely ignored. This is despite the fact that only a few decades after his death, one of the world's most celebrated satirists, Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, drew attention to the appalling reality behind the clinical terms of Petty's 'political arithmetic' in a manner which would surely have been sufficiently forceful to impress the message indelibly on the minds of any less insensitive sector of the reading public. In his parody of Petty, Swift (1729) puts forward, in terms which imitate Petty's mode of expression with icy accuracy, a gruesome proposal for the breeding of Irish children as livestock, commenting that they would make 'excellent nutritious meat' -- 'whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled' -- for sale to 'persons of quality and fortune'. This 'modest proposal for the public benefit' is advanced complete with Petty's characteristic panoply of statistical justification, covering the demographic aspects, the average weight of each carcass, the costs ('about two shillings per annum, rags included'), potential uses for the hides ('gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen'), the export potential, the implications for the revenue of the church, the numbers to be 'reserved for breed', and so on.

Both the unconcealed predatory intent and the reality of colonialist devastation that lie behind Petty's economic thought have, then, been clear as day to writers as diverse as the Irish nationalist Mitchel, the French geographer Goblet, and the satirist Swift. It is consequently mortifying to find that even adherents of the most critical perspectives

within the social sciences today habitually fail to take account of this phase of the intellectual ancestry of their respective disciplines. Such a failure must be reckoned particularly reprehensible in the case of development economics, since this is the branch of economic thought most directly concerned with addressing the colonial experience and its aftermath.

In short, the search for the roots of the theoretical and methodological apparatus of today's development economics does not lead back, as is widely and complacently assumed, to the universalistic or progressive orientation commonly associated with the Enlightenment movement in eighteenth-century philosophy. Rather, the search for such roots leads back to Petty, who, applying his pioneering quantitative method, coldly calculated the advantages to the colonial power of the annihilation of the national life of the colonized people, their effective extinction as a demographic unit, and the imposition upon their territory of an intentionally dependent, single-export economy. The urgent, difficult and self-searching task of confronting and surmounting an intellectual heritage with roots in such an unbridled phase of colonialism must surely be prioritized by development economists if they are convincingly to demonstrate that the conceptual apparatus prevailing in their sub-discipline is adequate for the progressive analytical tasks it claims to be capable of performing.

Notes.

¹ Kurz and Salvadori (2000: 156), in contrast, describe Petty as 'an important author in the genealogy of input-output analysis'.

² The force of Roncaglia's argument is weakened by his failure, all too characteristic of economists, to take account of conspicuously relevant branches of literature in neighbouring fields, including research on the 'drift' of manufactures to the countryside, as well as the entire debate over the concept of 'proto-industrialization', and, for that matter, also the substantial body of research by Barnard and others on Petty's own enterprises in Ireland (on which see further below).

³ The logical structure of Welch's argumentation can be obscure, and his application of Marxist terms and concepts is imprecise and sometimes questionable; this does not alter the fact, of course, that his study constitutes the main precedent for the present one. Moreover, it certainly compares favourably with the analogous, but less focused, discussion in Perelman 2000: 125-129,

⁴ It is over half a century since the publication of the last biographical monograph on Petty (Strauss 1954), but the following summary account reflects the fact that many aspects of his eventful life story have continued to be explored within a variety of specialist historical fields.

⁵ The case of Ireland thus breaches the neat distinction, which is current in some of the literature on the geography of development, between the ‘new Englands’ or ‘neo-Europes’ of colonial policy in the temperate zones, and the more oppressive ‘extractive states’ established in the tropics (see Goodacre 2004).

⁶ These enterprises have been the subject of a number of detailed studies by the historian Toby Barnard (for references, see Barnard 2003: 431). Even in his notes on his estate affairs, Petty persisted in his relentless theorizing, as discussed by Aspromourgos (2000: 58-60).

⁷ Despite the customary assumption that Petty was in the vanguard of scientific and technical progress, his supposed achievements in this regard have in fact received specialist assessment in only one field, that of surveying and cartography, where it has been shown that he lagged significantly behind the advanced practice of his time. See Andrews (1985: 65-6) and other studies by the same author.

⁸ Petty’s advocacy of the advantages of compactness has gone largely unnoticed in development economics, though Clark (1957 [1940]: 492-3) comments that it contrasts with the subsequent prevalence of ‘Malthusian propaganda’ (see also Pyatt 1984: 81). There is an oblique reference to the topic in Yang (2003: 1), where it is termed ‘Petty’s theory of urbanization’.

⁹ It is disappointing that the debate among historians on the ‘new feudalism’ of the period has focused almost entirely on central and eastern Europe (see, for example, Brenner 1976: 50-60), despite the evident relevance of the situation in Ireland (as demonstrated by Morgan 1985: 274-8).

¹⁰ This idea was given wide currency by the English poet Spenser (see Coughlan 1990: 207). See also Morgan (1985: 268). Carlin (1993: 221-2), compares this ‘last twist of the knife’ with ‘white South African claims that the black majority are late arrivals in the area’.

¹¹ Once again, Colin Clark stands alone among development economists who have commented on Petty in at least alluding to the need for ‘deploring his mercantile

morality’, as displayed in his inclusion, ‘without a blush’, of the proceeds of piracy and slavery in his estimate of England’s import-export statistics (Clark 1940: 448-9, discussing PA: 296).

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Writings of William Petty, with abbreviations

All page numbers for works of Petty refer to those in the following edition:

EW Hull, Charles H. (ed.) (1899). *The economic writings of Sir William Petty*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The individual works of Petty, in the order in which they were written, are:

TTC *A treatise of taxes and contributions*. Published 1662. In EW: 1-97.

VS *Verbum sapienti*. Written 1665. First published 1691. In: EW: 99-120.

PAI *The political anatomy of Ireland*. Written ca. 1671. First published 1691. In EW: 121-231.

PA *Political arithmetic*. Written ca. 1671-2 and amended in subsequent years. First authorised edition published 1690. In EW: 233-313.

TI *A treatise of Ireland*. Written 1687. First published 1899. In EW: 545-621.

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