Expropriating Ireland:

Land theft, property relations, and Ireland's colonial regime

James Beirne

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

SOCIAL & POLITICAL THOUGHT, YORK UNIVERSITY

Toronto, Ontario

October 2023

Abstract

Colonialism is perhaps the most significant social force in Irish history, but its long duration and the great scope of its impacts make it difficult to address comprehensively. This dissertation makes a step in this direction through a historical materialist framework, incorporating insights from political Marxism, settler colonial studies, and Gramscian historicism. The introduction situates present-day Ireland in the context of its colonisation and stresses the importance of a historical materialist approach unbounded by disciplinary considerations. Two theoretical chapters then introduce two important concepts which help delineate the essential contours of a colonial social totality over the *longue durée*. In the first chapter, colonial property relations are developed from the concept of social property relations advanced by scholars such as Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and George Comninel and by engagement with Maïa Pal's similar 'colonial social property relations'. Ultimately, colonial property relations differ from social property relations in that rather than being part of the internal development of a single society, they are imposed by one society upon another. This theme is further developed in the second chapter, which—through a synthetic criticism of settler colonial property drawing on the work of Robert Nichols, Patrick Wolfe, and Brenna Bhandar—introduces the concept of the colonial regime. Drawing on the work of Esteve Morera and Eamonn Slater and Terrence McDonough's interpretation of Marx's writings on Ireland, which centres an early formulation of the concept of colonial regime, this is presented as a loose extension of Gramsci's 'integral state' that is suited for historicist analysis of a precapitalist society that is not enveloped by a single state, but by a suprastate social structure. Then follows an extensive historical chapter which, beginning with a discussion of the nature of Gaelic class society before the arrival of the English, traces the development of colonial property relations and the colonial regime over the centuries, primarily through engagement with the historical and geographic literature. Following a preliminary discussion of the breakdown of English domination, the conclusion suggests that Ireland's political economy is nevertheless still determined by the colonial system and advances a call for further, radical Irish theory and historiography.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my granda, John Cleary.

Acknowledgements

The largest individual influence on this dissertation came from my co-supervisor, George Comninel, who died suddenly on 18 August 2022 as I was undertaking a major rewrite. George helped to focus my eclectic interests and kept me intellectually honest. His perspectives differed in some ways from mine and I am saddened that I will never receive his riposte. I am also immensely grateful to my other co-supervisor, William Jenkins, for the role he played in helping me reach completion following George's death. As members of my supervisorial committee and as course directors, Pablo Idahosa, and Esteve Morera provided continual guidance over the years which has fundamentally shaped my approach to scholarship. Adrian Kirwan and Jeff Black deserve special thanks for their comments on portions of the draft, and Keith O'Regan's advice was especially useful at a formative stage of the writing process. Thank you to my parents, Eilish and Gerard, for their education, support, and encouragement over the years—to my dad, thanks in particular for teaching me how to write. Ultimately, the theoretical perspectives I draw on have been forged through centuries of historical experience and I owe as much of my own understanding of colonialism and property to the communities and organisations I have engaged with as to academic institutions, including the many Indigenous nations in Canada on whose lands I have lived. I hope that ultimately these words may benefit them in return.

Table of Contents

For the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. From what? Not just from foreigners, but also from a whole other agenda whose purpose and processes are controlled elsewhere.

— Edward Said[1]

Le colon fait l'histoire et sait qu'il la fait.

—Frantz Fanon[2]

The Irish question is therefore not simply a nationality question, but a question of land and existence. Ruin or revolution is the watchword…

— Karl Marx[3]

---

[1] Said in Eagleton, Jameson, & Said, 77.

[2] Fanon, 463; my translation: 'The coloniser makes history and knows that he makes it.'

[3] Marx in Marx & Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 142.

1

Introduction

The problem of colonialism in Ireland

Ireland has been so completely shaped by colonialism that it is easy to overlook. As the monumental *Atlas of the Rural Irish Landscape* makes clear, even the apparently natural landscape has been shaped and reshaped from the ground up by successive epochs of human history.[4] Among the most important of the forces which played this role in the development of the Ireland we know today is colonialism. In political economic terms, colonialism transformed Ireland from an island populated by largely independent polities with kinship-based property systems into a one with a largely centralised, though partitioned, state structure dominated by capitalist property relations and situated within a world economy dominated by the same. This and other transformations occurred in the context of a colonial relationship between Ireland and England that changed form, but which was never finally dissolved. While conventionally speaking, colonialism is said to have ended in the 20th century with Ireland's juridical independence, Adrian Beatty has observed that Ireland even in this period exhibits significant continuity with its colonial past.[5] Moreover, partition itself developed as a direct consequence of colonialism. As such, although Britain is no longer the political overlord of all Ireland, the colonial relation which it established long ago continues to structure Irish society.

At the same time, there are real and obvious differences which characterise colonialism in Ireland during different periods, and these demand explanation. In some cases, these differences seem to affirm the directionality implied by colonial process, while others seem to belie it. There appears to be a large degree of path dependency, but there is also dramatic change. To reconcile these and to understand colonialism in Ireland in its totality, therefore, means understanding it over the *longue durée*—as a structuring social and historical process which began long before England came to dominate Ireland and which did not neatly end with independence. While individual

---

[4] See Aalen, Whelan, & Stout.
[5] Beatty, 55.

moments of Irish history can be fruitfully understood through many lenses which may be cognisant of colonialism to a greater or lesser extent, when looking at the last millennium of Irish history in its totality, the colonisation of Ireland looms large. This fact has deeply shaped the way we understand Ireland; the very concepts of 'Ireland', 'the Irish nation', and 'Irish people' are themselves the products of this long colonial history. Therefore, if colonialism must be understood in the context of Irish history, so too must Irish history be understood in light of colonialism. The object of study, the process which produced the object, and the process of understanding the object are inextricably linked.

Because colonialism is an inherently political process that has structured the very terms we use to understand it, the study of colonialism in Irish history is a political project as well as an academic one. In his contribution to 2017's *Cambridge History of Ireland*, a work whose publication has had great influence on the direction of this dissertation, John Cunningham wrote:

> Four decades have passed since Patrick Corish warned that historians investigating the mid-seventeenth century in Ireland risked disturbing ghosts…. Regardless of the particular approach taken, the ghosts, as Corish recognised, can hardly be avoided. Nor should the violence that birthed them be detached from the political processes explored in this chapter.[6]

We might go further than Cunningham and posit that if ghosts are present, they should be deliberately provoked. The traces of Ireland's history may or may not be cognised on a daily basis by its current inhabitants, but in the long run, they make their presence felt. The present is the record of history, as Gramsci tells us, and insofar as ghosts remain, they reflect the historical processes which produced the present.[7] For this reason, Irish historiography has often had a strong political element.[8] Even if their primary significance is emotive or ideological, ghosts are important aspects of the historical development of Ireland's social consciousness. To ignore or

---

[6] Cunningham in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2, 95.
[7] Morera, *Gramsci's Historicism*, 77.
[8] Thanks to Adrian Kirwan for this point.

suppress them is to ignore or suppress the problems they reflect. To resolve these problems entails, as Frantz Fanon suggested, a revolutionary transformation of the world.[9] This begins with studying society, scholastically and otherwise, to understand how its nature and characteristics have developed in order to contextualise the present.

In short, reckoning with Irish history requires the use of an appropriate theoretical apparatus that can help us to account for long term processes and their effects. The problem of colonialism in Ireland finds expression in many areas of research. While it may be tempting to look at these in isolation—indeed, their complexities often make it hard to do otherwise—understanding the totality which gives rise to particular expressions is paramount. For instance, Beatty's caution notwithstanding, the land reforms that occurred in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century entailed the dissolution of the landlord class and led to *de jure* independence for most of Ireland—obviously a significant turning point.[10] Nevertheless, while some may have wished to see the peace process of the 1990s as a final settlement between colonised and coloniser (though those with such optimism might not have framed it in these terms), much of the underlying social, political, and economic system which resulted from colonialism remains intact and embedded in Ireland's social institutions and landscape—the border being the most obvious example. Indeed, the ongoing fallout of Brexit has clearly shown that partition is still of fundamental importance, including on an economic level, to relationships between Ireland and not only Britain but also Europe, the United States, and the world. While the link between Ireland and Britain is not as determinative as it once was, Ireland has retained in its state and property systems the basic modes of social organisation that Britain instituted. This was by no means inevitable, but is the achievement of a particular politics; against the vision of those who fought to nationalise the land and resources of Ireland, the independent Irish state has acted and continues to act as a prime advocate of capitalist private property. In a very real sense, Ireland has internalised the processes of colonialism so thoroughly that they have continued even in the absence of a specific coloniser.

---

[9] Fanon, 125; see also 87.

[10] Beatty, 55.

The rapid intensification of commodified housing today cannot be understood separately from colonialism anymore than can the land war of the late 19th century.

Perhaps as a consequence of the failure to thoroughly reckon with Ireland's own past, there has also been a disconnect between the experiences of Ireland and other colonised countries, a fact which is reflected in Ireland's relative marginalisation from the scholarship on intercontinental colonialism. On this, Declan Kiberd wrote in 1997 that '[t]he Irish were the first English-speaking people in this century to attempt a programme of decolonization; the first to walk in darkness down what is by now a well-lit road…. [w]ithin a generation, the cultural revival had created a new self-confidence among Irish people'.[11] Reaching a similar conclusion to Beatty, if for different reasons, Kiberd argues that '[t]he victory was only partial', due not only to partition but also to a post-independence fatigue. Consequently, 'Ireland became one of those states which was, in the words of Benedict Anderson, "insufficiently imagined".'[12] Kiberd's largely literary analysis includes the important observation that the newly independent Irish nation was 'lacking in self-confidence and easily bullied by outsiders.'[13] By the 1970s, he suggests, we had betrayed the anticolonial potential of the Irish nation, emulating Albert Camus, who

> had said that, if forced to choose between revolutionary justice and his mother, he would in the end opt to save his mother. 'Not every intellectual has to make the same choice,' commented [Conor Cruise] O'Brien, 'but each must realize how he is a product of the culture of the advanced world, and how much there is that will pull him, among the 'Algerias' of the future, towards Camus' fall'.[14]

Thus Kiberd explains Ireland's experiential isolation:

> Revivalist doctrine had, perhaps predictably, trumpeted the Irish as God's chosen people, 'like no other people on earth', and thus

---

[11] Kiberd, 81.
[12] Kiberd, 81–2.
[13] Kiberd, 86.
[14] Kiberd, 91. This was, ironically, a force to which O'Brien himself also hypocritically succumbed.

destined to be saviours of spiritual values for the modern world; but *the disinclination to make comparisons with the experience of other peoples in the decades that followed*, especially those people emerging from a briefer phase of colonial occupation, would enact a palpable price.[15]

Kiberd does not mention the inverse relationship, but just as Ireland disengaged from the rest of the colonised world, so too did much of the colonised world not learn from the experiences of Ireland. Lenin, for example, was in many ways anticipated or paralleled by James Connolly, for example, but most people outside of Ireland have never heard of Connolly, much less engaged seriously with his mode of thinking. Moving to a different time and place, Fanon—great though his writings are—would likely have benefited from having access to this thinker and the comparative case of Ireland. That is, if it seems productive to study Ireland in terms of the framework he presents in *Les damnés de la terre*, then by corollary the case study of Ireland could also have informed this theorist of the Algerian revolution and the broader anticolonial struggle. Fanon casts this struggle in *inter*-continental terms: that the fact of *intra*-European colonialism left no apparent impression on him is itself significant. Though the disconnection between Ireland and other revolutionary struggles is by no means total, it is significant, leaving us to wonder at the alliances and cross-pollinations that might have been.

Given the last hundred years, such disconnection is unsurprising. The romantic image of Ireland as a hapless victim of colonialism, now free and proud, is a fantasy; it is, as Kiberd writes, 'melodramatized, for only a rudimentary thinker would deny that the Irish experience is at once post-colonial [i.e., the subject of colonialism] and post-imperial [i.e., its agent]. If many Irish suffered the economic and cultural woes of life under the imperial yoke, quite a few others happily took on the white man's burden in Africa and India.'[16] Independent Ireland was not reorganised from the top down in order to produce a more equitable society, as Beatty reminds us, nor did

---

[15] Kiberd, 82.
[16] Kiberd, 97.

Ireland align itself with other colonies for the pursuit of shared goals and a more just world. Instead, it has consistently sided with empire—British and American—and global white supremacy. Ireland has not, further, engaged in the type of psychological introspection which Fanon insists is necessary for any country emerging from colonialism: reconstructing the world also implies reconstructing its constituent polities and peoples. Instead, between Europe and postcolony—to use Kiberd's framing—Ireland opted for Europe. The failure to reckon with colonialism internally and externally are, in essence, the same. '[Requiring] a vast degree of self-repression,' Ireland presents a case of the internalised inferiority that Fanon would famously diagnose.[17]

Thus, far from being a model, an inspiration, or a support for the rake of resurgent independence movements that would follow Fanon's intervention, Ireland by and large ignored the question of colonialism—a political fault which amounts to a tacit acceptance of it, both within Ireland and without. While African states fighting for survival under neocolonialism suffer desertification and land privatisation, struggling to bring commodities to market under favourable terms, Ireland is an enthusiastic member of the European Union and collects hundreds of millions of euros annually in agricultural subsidies. In the face of the discursive resurgence of imperialist rivalry, great power politics, and nuclear war, it is easier to imagine Ireland joining NATO than a revitalised non-aligned movement. Underlying this study is a conviction that understanding Ireland's colonial history is a prerequisite to grappling with its relationship to more apparently contemporary politics, not least because the colonisation of Ireland is but one expression of colonialism in its global aspect. Among other things, reflection of this sort is an important and sobering guard against the romanticism and reaction which tend to characterise popular attempts to relate Ireland's colonisation to contemporary issues. Ireland is therefore a demonstration of the cliché that 'two things can be true at once': by virtue of its successive integration into English, British, and global capitalist systems, Ireland has been both the victim and beneficiary of

---

[17] Kiberd, 94; see Fanon, 66.

colonialism. Regrettably, it has also failed both to integrate the experiences of other colonial countries into its own, and to make its own contributions to general theories of colonialism.

An honest accounting of the history of colonialism in Ireland is required which facilitates the understanding of our present society in terms of processes which began long ago. As mentioned above, and as discussed in subsequent chapters, the human relationship to land in Ireland has transformed dramatically as a result of colonialism and this remains a fundamental component of Irish society at many levels, including very basic ones such as the composition of the soil and the existence of field boundaries. Understanding how these effects continue to play out requires first understanding what happened—it requires understanding what colonialism in Ireland *is*. This dissertation therefore follows the maxim formulated by Patrick Wolfe on the basis of the experience of colonised peoples the world over: 'The colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event.'[18] Or, as expressed by Nicholas Blomley, '[d]ispossession, like settlement, is never complete, but remains dependent on continued enactments.'[19] How does the continued enactment of colonisation structure Irish history?

The problem of colonialism in Irish history has been introduced in the broadest terms. The remainder of this introduction has three components. First, a very brief summary of colonialism in Irish history orients the reader unacquainted with this subject to its general outline in order to provide a minimum of context for the theoretical discussions which are elaborated in chapters 1 and 2, and applied in chapter 3. Second, a short methodological discussion sets out my most basic commitments in order to set the ground and scope of the first two chapters. Third, a summary outline of the dissertation closes the introduction. The issues raised in this introductory section cannot be resolved herein—as suggested, this is a project for contemporary politics—but taken in light of the analysis which follows, they make the case that anticolonial scholarship remains of fundamental importance for Ireland.

---

[18] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', 388.
[19] Blomley, 'The Ties that Blind', 171.

Orientation to Irish history

The brief summary which follows is simplistic and omits much, being included only for the sake of readers with no background in Irish history. It serves as a reference point for the first two chapters, which will introduce the theoretical framework through which I argue Irish history should be understood, while the third chapter provides a more detailed, though still not comprehensive, analysis of that history.

Prior to the arrival of the English in 1169, Ireland had hundreds of independent kings ruling over societies centred around the *túatha*, or kinship group. The *túatha* had collective interest in property, but rights over this property were also privately exercised by the *túatha*'s members. The English did not immediately eliminate this system, but they established a foothold in the region, centred around Dublin and which would eventually become known as the Pale, making a number of legal and administrative advances that provided the basis of future English dominance. Over the next few hundred years, English power waxed and waned, meaning that English and Gaelic societies and modes of life coexisted in Ireland. Control outside the Pale gradually receded and many of the 'Old English' lords in Ireland were partially Gaelicised.

The Tudor period saw the emergence of the Protestant 'New English' as well as the employment of new methods of attaining control over Irish land. Two of these are especially notable: the 'surrender and regrant' method of transforming of converting Gaelic land into English-style property held in fee by its former owner, and the plantation schemes which ultimately aimed at replace Gaelic agricultural methods, social forms, and labourers with English ones. While transformation was not as total as the English might have hoped, changes were dramatic and permanent; it was in this context that the crucial Nine Years (1594–1603), Cromwellian (1649–53), and Williamite (1688–91) wars occurred, smashing the Gaelic and Old English bases of power and transferring massive amounts of property into Protestant English hands. This provided the material foundation for the consolidation of what is known retrospectively as the Protestant Ascendancy, during which Protestant domination over property and the implementation of a restrictive set of 'penal laws' prevented Catholic resistance from seriously challenging the basis of English control

over Ireland. On the contrary, this period saw the continuing transformation of Ireland's property relations to an English-style system and the *de jure* annexation of the country to the United Kingdom.

The famine proved a watershed moment, though it is better understood as the culmination of existing trends than a point of radical departure. Over the next few decades, Ireland's population declined by half, leading to massive cultural and social change such as the consolidation of land, while from 1879 phases of nationally-organised agrarian agitation led to the creation of land-purchase schemes which ultimately saw much of Ireland transferred to Irish owners—now in an easily saleable form. While the decline of the English landlords' interest in Ireland allowed for the emergence of an independent Irish state under the framework of partition, the previous 750 years had completely transformed Ireland and integrated it into the global capitalist economy, thus ensuring that the 'postcolonial' period remained determined by colonialism and capitalist relations.

Scope and method

This dissertation takes colonialism in Ireland as its object of study. Given the breadth of this topic, it cannot feasibly analyse its effects comprehensively, but focuses on colonialism as a process. We might say this has three stages: origin, unfolding, and dissolution. It is important to understand that the dissolution of the process of colonialism and the social structures which embody it are of paramount theoretical importance to understanding colonialism as a totality, as well as being particularly relevant in having shaped the Ireland of the present. Studying dissolution entails an in-depth analysis of Ireland's contemporary national political economic structures and their relationships to global ones, including hegemonic capitalism. Evidently this is a complex task; the historical and theoretical debates over these topics both within Ireland and globally, as well as their historical proximity and thus the acuity of their contemporary relevance, risk overshadowing the basic dynamic I seek to expose, not to mention adding considerably to the theoretical and historical material that must be considered. Consequently, neither the later stages of the process, leading to independence and partition, nor the theoretical problems they pose, such as the transition to capitalism or the relationship of Ireland to global capitalism, are taken up to a

significant degree. As such, the project posed by this dissertation is not completed by it. Given that the historicist framework I use approaches dissolutions in terms of their origins and developments rather than the other way around, I am happy to leave this work to other scholars.

Moreover, although I position dispossession as the root of Ireland's coloniality, this dispossession is a theoretical abstraction of many related phenomena which collectively unfolded over centuries, not an 'original accumulation' that in one moment changed Ireland's property system forever. It might be better to think of origins in the plural than a single origin; the unfolding of dispossessive processes is the theoretical kernel of Ireland's colonial history. Consequently, though the changes which colonialism wrought can be understood only by an initial comparison to the uncolonised Ireland of a thousand years ago, implying a moment of 'origin', in reality the middle stage of unfolding is that which carries the most weight. Similarly, though watersheds like the arrival of Strongbow or the War of Independence have some explanatory value for Irish history, understanding the details of such changes requires a lot of in-depth description which does not necessarily have much bearing on that history's basic contours. It is in this theoretically and temporally restricted, highly abstracted way that the process of colonialism must be first approached.

Focus is, however, necessary. As colonialism is a very broad subject, touching on every aspect of Irish history and society, this dissertation gets at the heart of colonialism as a historical project by focusing on the twin concepts of colonial property relations and the colonial regime. It is therefore also spatially, temporally, and theoretically focused, touching on many possible tangential topics for the sake of illustration, but elucidating them only to the minimum extent necessary to outline the central arguments. Because the object of study is a process with no definitive beginning or end dates, which unfolds within Ireland but also between Ireland and Britain as well as implicating global structures, and encompassing a range of phenomena which require a commensurate range of methods of analysis, this focus should not be understood as a strict delimitation. As such, this study draws on a range of disciplines, but is not systematically bound by any of them. Nessa Cronin has argued for the importance of crossing disciplinary lines

in Irish Studies in order to better reckon with the problem of colonialism.[20] Lewis Gordon has, similarly, made a critique of 'disciplinary decadence' in the context of colonialism, but also cautions that interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches can end up reifying disciplines despite efforts their best intentions, calling instead for a 'teleological suspension of disciplinarity':[21]

> By that, I mean the willingness to go beyond disciplines in the production of knowledge. This 'beyond' is, however, paradoxical. In some instances, it revitalizes an existing discipline. In others, it generates a new one. For example, a teleological suspension of philosophy generates new philosophy in some instances, and in others, it may generate new social thought that may not be philosophical. A teleological suspension of topology, chemistry, and biology could offer much to genetics and other sequencing notions of life.[22]

Thus the methodological constraints I impose on my work are driven by the problem of understanding colonialism in Ireland with the ultimate aim of overcoming it. This study is above all problem-focused. In this regard, as Tithi Bhattacharya argues, Marxist social science investigates phenomena in a very concrete way, but always with an eye to the overall totality:

> Marx suggests that we produce knowledge about reality when we advance from such 'imaginary concrete concepts' (the family, childcare, etc.) to 'increasingly simple concepts' or abstractions (such as, for example, domestic labor). Such abstractions then have to be investigated at an empirical level, keeping in mind their historic conditions of production and thereby their limits. But then a reverse theoretical movement must take place. We must return to the phenomena we started out with, but now they can be understood as

---

[20] Cronin, '"Disciplinary Ghettoes"'.
[21] Gordon, 5–8.
[22] Gordon, 8.

'a totality comprising many determinations and relations.' The concept is now a 'real concrete' because it is 'a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects.'[23]

To understand these processes as well as reasonably possible, political science, sociology, geography, and history are all strongly represented herein, with Marxist social theory employed to ground the analysis and maintain consistency of method. Because of the centrality of dispossession to the analysis, my approach to Ireland draws heavily on theories of settler colonialism in other colonial contexts. These fields and approaches each have their own, not always mutually compatible, ways of approaching colonialism, but by putting my problem first and focusing as much as possible on my two primary theoretical concepts, I hope to shed some light on the historical social processes at work. That is, as Cronin argues, the eclecticism of this approach is a reasoned one, not an arbitrary one; as Gordon argues, the 'rationality' of colonial disciplines does not exhaust reason.[24]

Any colonial relation has two sides: colonised and coloniser. As the colonisation of Ireland was founded on military conquest and the consequent dispossession of land, the colonial relation can be understood in terms of the forcible establishment or transformation of class relations. Thus, the colonised–coloniser relationship is also a class relationship, with the colonised largely comprising Irish peasants or agricultural labourers and the colonised largely comprising English lords extracting rents, backed up by the violence or the threat of violence of the state. This is not a simple equation: in Ireland there were a good many Gaelic lords, especially in the first half of the millennium, and many English or Scottish workers. But these people existed in the context of a colonial relation which was defined, now to a greater and now to a lesser extent, by English control of Ireland, and this fact underlaid their daily realities. This is what gives focus to the study and the development of the theoretical framework appropriate to apprehending it.

Gerry Kearns's formulation is apt: 'The relations between property and state formed the

---

[23] Bhattacharya, 16–17.
[24] Cronin, '"Disciplinary Ghettoes"', 6; Gordon, 6.

colonial political economy of Ireland'.[25] Thus my three chapters focus respectively on property (in terms of social property relations), a contextually specific but theoretically analogous concept to the state (i.e., colonial regime), and on the colonial political economy of Ireland in terms of these two. A full critique of Ireland's colonial political economy would have to be much more comprehensive than this—my aim is rather to lay some of the basic groundwork that would enable it to be conducted. This is not to say that no work has been done in this direction, a fact which will be evident from an examination of my bibliography, but what I attempt to do here is to stitch together numerous strands developed in specific historical, geographical, or theoretical contexts into something that can be put to use in a more comprehensive way. In the Irish context, while much of the work I draw on uses colonialism as a lens to look at some other problem, the nature of colonialism itself has generally not been the subject. For my purposes, some of Marx's work—especially as interpreted by Eamonn Slater & Terrence McDonough—comes closest, though this must be significantly augmented with later analyses of colonialism in general as well as in Ireland to be put to use to look at long term problems in a more-than-speculative way. This consideration has informed the limitations I have drawn on my project.

For example, while I hope that the work I have done can help open up space for an explicitly subaltern critique of colonialism in Ireland with an approach similar to that begun by Gramsci in relation to Italian history—and while subaltern social groups undeniably form a significant part of the colonial regime in the way I posit it—the need to first contend with the kinds of structurally determinative factors that Marx only began to explore means that my emphasis is placed overwhelmingly on English activity in Ireland. While the form and content of this activity changed significantly over time, any attempt to answer many of the most important questions about Ireland from the middle of the 12th century on must confront the fact that England had a domineering and ultimately dominant presence in Ireland. As Eoin Flaherty has said, 'it is clear that existing accounts have drastically overdrawn a dichotomous transition between capitalism and

---

[25] Kearns, '"Up to the Sun…"', 131.

feudalism. Continuity and coevolution, rather than discrete rupture, is the hallmark of the Irish experience.'[26]

A comprehensive and flexible way of accounting for continuity and coevolution over the entire period of colonialism is a lot to ask for, but ultimately that is what will be necessary. This will eventually require a degree of original historical research, but equally important is the application of social and political thought in considering the broader relationships and long term trends that tend to become obscured by more finely detailed study. This is my focus. Rather than adopting a determinate theoretical framework, or attempting to intervene in the many debates that exist within and between them, my preferred approach is to engage with what David Lloyd has termed the 'critical suggestiveness' that comes from placing a number of theoretical traditions in dialogue with each other, and with the findings of expert historians.[27] While Marxist methods are very well suited to studying political economic transitions and changes in property relations, their application to colonial contexts has not always taken proper account of the specificities of those contexts or of the theoretical innovations that anticolonial scholars, sometimes Marxist but sometimes not, have developed in their own societies' contexts. This requires not only assembling a diverse set of theoretical tools, but also ensuring that these tools can operate in tandem without undermining each other. In this regard, the specificity of the historical context imposes both exigencies and constraints which shape the study, but to that end I have drawn on work developed in other situations. It is likely that many of my theoretical conclusions are applicable to other contexts—indeed, many of them are based on theory developed in other contexts in the first place—but the purpose here is not to develop a ready-made theoretical analysis for the study of any and every instance of colonialism. Similarly, while I hope this work marks a small step towards bringing Irish anticolonial thought together with that practiced elsewhere, I believe it is important to understand the Irish context on its own terms first before it can be compared directly with colonial regimes elsewhere. My theoretical arguments should therefore always be understood as

---

[26] Flaherty, 69.
[27] Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 348.

being accompanied by the implicit parenthetical, '(at least in Ireland)'. In brief, therefore, this is a limited theoretical dissertation which examines colonialism in Irish history through the concepts of colonial property relations and the colonial regime in order to demonstrate the fertility of a historicist framework through which future questions about Ireland's relationship to colonialism could be approached.

Dissertation structure

As this introduction has explained, colonialism in Ireland is a complex structuring process that has affected nearly every aspect of Irish history over more than eight hundred years. While the specific forms it has taken have varied, it has been underpinned by a systematic tendency to transform the land of Ireland into colonial forms of property. Consequently, the first chapter looks at colonial property relations, beginning with a discussion of historical materialism in the colonial context. It suggests that colonialism can be fruitfully understood as being socially embedded through labour processes, engaging the political Marxist critique of social property relations to suggest a relationship between political and economic processes. It concludes by extending this critique to colonialism which, because it involves relations of domination between two societies, is subject to specific considerations which do not apply to other contexts. From here, the second chapter focuses on the way that political arrangements enact and mediate the colonial relation through a colonial regime. Colonialism is often characterised by messiness and contradiction, as the designs of colonisers—namely, dispossession—can often not be fully or directly realised but must be incompletely and violently imposed. While this is true in general, in the case of Ireland, colonialism unfolded over an especially long period and the full effects of its developments took centuries to come to fruition. With an emphasis on the role of law, this chapter draws on Gramscian historicism and theories of colonial property to provide a framework for understanding changes in Ireland's colonial regime. The final chapter provides an extensive account of the development of colonial property relations and the colonial regime in the context of Irish history in order to demonstrate the utility of these concepts and to show how they have underpinned colonialism in

Ireland. While the policies of 'surrender and regrant' and plantation are especially visible as vehicles of dispossession, the approach advanced by the first chapter demands that they be situated in the context of a much longer development, beginning long before the English arrived in Ireland. Furthermore, these explicitly dispossessive moments did not end the struggle over land in Ireland. The 19th century saw this process intensify dramatically, while the highest form of alienation—capitalist private property—did not emerge in Ireland until the 20th. In order to demonstrate the fundamental roles of colonial property relations and the colonial regime in shaping Irish history, this chapter therefore draws together these and other moments to expose dispossession as a continuous process. Finally, a reflective conclusion resituates the dissertation back in the historiographical tradition it belongs to, best associated with James Connolly, and identifies a number of questions that have been raised as directions for future research.

1. Colonial property relations

This chapter presents an adaptation of the political Marxist concept of social property relations for the case where they unfold within a colonial dialectic. Beginning with a brief discussion of historical materialist method as understood by the political Marxists, notably Ellen Meiksins Wood and George Comninel, it places labour and class at the heart of anticolonial analysis. Applying their argument to colonial forms of property, it argues that colonialism must be understood as historically specific forms of exploitation. Marxist critiques of colonialism, therefore, must be situated within this understanding; i.e., they must centre on colonial property relations.

Historical materialism and colonialism

If colonialism is constantly changing, then how is it possible to study its essential nature? This section shows the importance of a dialectical and historical materialist analysis in undercutting unhelpful and potentially misleading abstractions, highlighting the importance of careful theoretical and empirical analysis in the development of concepts that can elucidate concrete social phenomena. In doing so it provides a theoretical foundation for the rest of the investigation, enabling us to get at the heart of what colonialism entails in a specific social context. Because colonialism is an inherently spatial relationship, and because one of the major impacts of colonialism in Ireland has been the repeated transformation of the landscape, it ends with a brief discussion of the connection between land, labour, and labour's cultural expressions from a historical materialist position.

By centring the relationships that define complex social phenomena, a dialectical analysis provides a powerful way of describing their continuity not only despite, but in terms of their change. As Morera explains in *Gramsci, Materialism, and Philosophy*,

> The dialectic is to be understood as a particular form of interrelationship between entities that are codependent—that is, they are mutually and actively interrelated, yet they are opposed to one another in some fundamental ways. This opposition leads to

18

antagonism and strife, which in turn produces transformations that
can lead to the emergence of new systems. This unity of opposites
is the core of dialectical relations.[28]

In the case of the colonisation of Ireland, colonialism can therefore be understood as a process that unfolds between Ireland and England, with the latter in a position of domination. Because colonialism is from its very inception imposed by one country on another, this basic opposition provides the vantage point for studying society from an anticolonial perspective. To do so is not to assert that colonialism is the only explanatory factor, but seeks to expose it as a basic and powerful logic that has been operational for a long time. As Marx demonstrates in the three volumes of *Capital*, a dialectical analysis that begins with one social phenomenon, in that case, the commodity, can be iteratively expanded to eventually incorporate virtually any other. The explanatory utility of doing so depends on the strength of the real world relationships between that phenomenon and others. The focus on a particular contradiction, therefore, methodologically delimits an investigation, replacing disciplinarity in order to understand it as a concrete social phenomenon. For Mao, '[t]he sciences are differentiated precisely on the basis of the particular contradictions inherent in their respective objects of study. Thus the contradiction peculiar to a certain field of phenomena constitutes the object of study for a specific branch of science.'[29] Colonialism in Ireland, therefore, is not merely an object of study, but a field of study in terms of which numerous phenomena can be described.

Of course, doing so first requires understanding how the dialectic of colonialism is realised through its social structures. Following Ellen Meiksins Wood, George Comninel argued that this means that a historical materialist analysis must be capable of not only describing phenomena, but also of explaining how and why they came to be.[30] Both authors reject explanations that take a capitalist society as an in inevitable outcome, Comninel arguing that '[i]t has been a staple of

---

[28] Morera, *Materialism*, 64–5.
[29] Mao, 320.
[30] Comninel, 85.

Marxist historiography to "solve" the problem of transition by assuming that capitalism is already present in feudal society, waiting only for an opportunity to burst its fetters asunder.'[31] In a similar vein, this dissertation proceeds from a recognition of the tremendous impact that colonialism has had on the political and economic structure of Irish society, but its approach to that problem is to explain its essential nature by analysing its process of development and describing its constitutive effects, most notably, the appropriation of land. Efforts to understand colonialism that do not begin here put, in some ways, the cart before the horse.

Colonialism underlies all Irish history subsequent to its inception. If the history of a process includes its origin, its progression, and its dissolution, then identifying the first of these is the most important to studying it, if only because it provides the necessary context to understand the latter two. This intuition led Wood, in developing Marx's argument about 'primitive accumulation', to insist that capitalism had a definite historical origin, before which its laws of motion were never in operation and since which they have operated continuously. As she writes, 'Now obviously the long and complex historical processes that ultimately led to this condition of market dependence could be traced back indefinitely. But we can make the question more manageable by identifying the first time and place that a new social dynamic of market dependence is clearly discernible.'[32] While capitalism was a product of, and therefore in a sense in continuity with, preceding circumstances, it nevertheless marked a major break with them. In the case of capitalism, Wood situates its origins precisely in the alienation of English labourers from the means of production (i.e., their land) and in their consequent of market-dependence. According to her argument, the particular state this left them in is in short what gives rise to the particular dynamics of capitalism. Therefore, to describe capitalism as unconditioned or transhistorical, or to suggest that its essence is already present within precapitalist relations—that is, to say that it has no particular historical origin—would be to deny its particular nature, making it an unhelpful mode of analysis.[33] By

---

[31] Comninel, 86.
[32] Wood, *Origin,* 98.
[33] Wood, *Origin,* 4.

corollary, Wood's argument about the origin of capitalism reminds us why the analysis of capitalism is significant in the first place. Though *The Origin of Capitalism* is intended as a historical argument, its more important contribution is theoretical: understanding that capitalism had an origin is a prerequisite to understanding capitalism as a historical social process, and therefore to understanding its effects. In other words, Wood presents a rebuke to those who would take capitalism to be the inevitable product of human nature.

Things are somewhat different in the context of colonialism. Capitalism, as Wood describes it, is a purely internal relation, unfolding within English society. No specific external force intervened to make it operative. Colonialism, which 'is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place', is very different.[34] The cause of colonialism in Ireland is not in doubt: English conquest. Of course, the colonial encounter itself has historical antecedents, and the beginnings of English conquest did not instantiate every process of colonialism. The origin of colonialism is a theoretical abstraction, but it is a relatively definable one for my purposes: when the processes of appropriation began. Thus we can move on to understanding the subsequent development of colonialism, the main subject of this dissertation. The continuities across the watershed of 1169 are many, and the watershed itself is a bit of a fiction, but it nevertheless it marks a real change in real social dynamics—the start of something new between Ireland and England. The form and content of this relationship would change over time, but from this point on, attempts to answer many of the most important questions about Ireland must inescapably confront the fact that England had a domineering and then dominant presence in Ireland. This is one of the defining dynamics of Ireland's history and played a primary role in the shaping of Ireland's society today. Rather than aiming to fix the origin of the colonial relationship, this dissertation proceeds from those origins of colonialism to see how that relationship unfolded. Given that England was trying to exert control over Ireland, by what means and to what effect did it try to accomplish that aim?

In answering this question, it is important to avoid naturalising not only the fact of

---

[34] Said, 77.

colonialism, but also the specific processes which brought it about and realised its effects. If understanding the specificity of colonialism means understanding its origin, following Woods' argument would suggest that it also means understanding its progression. Recognising colonialism as a violent process of deprivation and death which operates by denying the means of life to some for the benefit of others, this dissertation takes a historical materialist approach as summed up in Marx's famous expression: 'By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life…. As individuals express their life, so they are.'[35] In a class society, the production of the means of subsistence and of life by definition occurs on the basis of relationships between those without and those with property. Necessarily, the propertyless and the propertied mutually exist in an intrinsically dependent, yet negatively defined, relationship to the other. If there were no property, there would be no propertyless and propertied. If there were no propertyless and propertied, there would be no property. Property is therefore a dialectical social relationship between the propertyless and the propertied: a unity of opposites.

The form in which this relationship is realised can vary dramatically and is not always easy to uncover, requiring rigorous theoretical and empirical evaluation. While scholarship has shown that the authorship of the 'Feuerbach' chapter of 'The German Ideology' cannot be solely ascribed to Marx and Engels, George Comninel is among many who holds that it remains 'a primary text for many of the themes of their historical and social analysis.'[36] The value lies not in its authorship but in the insights it provides. For example: 'The first premise of all human history is, of course, the history of living individuals.'[37] It follows that the conditions for living individuals' continued existence are also therefore the essential conditions for everything they produce, including their social organisation, their brain activity, and their linguistic or symbolic expressions. Thus labour, Marxists hold, is 'an interaction between the person who works and the natural world such that elements of the latter are consciously altered in a purposive manner.'[38] Labour is a necessary

---

[35] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 31.
[36] Carver, 109; Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution*, 136.
[37] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 31.
[38] Bottomore, 297.

precondition for the continuation of life and, therefore, is the condition of *all* human activity, purposive or otherwise. The nature of this labour will naturally affect the nature of its consequences: 'What [individuals] are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and *how* they produce.'[39] This 'first premise' therefore suggests that historical social science focus on the basic structures of how people's daily activities are organised in order to meet their needs, as the essential precursor to understanding how more complex social phenomena emerge. Colonialism may be many things, but at its root it is a labour relation.

The corollary of this principle is that complex social phenomena should not be taken for granted but ought to be explained in terms of the social relationships which structure them—in other words, we are exhorted not to fetishise conceptual abstractions. Thus another main reason for the continuing relevance of 'The German Ideology' is its materialist critique of ideology: 'men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.'[40] In other words, mental activity, including ideas and their linguistic representations, is also a form of labour, being the product of and the condition for 'the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life.'[41] Ideas, therefore, are ultimately determined by the organisation of the societies which give rise to them: they follow, rather than precede social forms. This, naturally, includes ideas regarding the nature of society itself. This is what underlies the particular approach to abstraction in Marxist thought discussed in the introduction, wherein analytical categories are taken as the starting point of empirical analysis, but are themselves subjected to critique as part of that analysis. Marx and Engels' criticism of the belief that 'conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, [were] the real chains of men' applies broadly.[42]

---

[39] Bottomore, 297.
[40] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 37.
[41] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 36.
[42] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 30.

For example, one manifestation of this tendency is the ideological justification for the colonial transformation of Ireland that the moral character of the Irish had to be improved through the improvement of their agricultural techniques. At first glance this may appear to be a materialist motive in that it attributes social characteristics to the nature of labour. However, in in its presumptions that a) there is such a thing as moral character in the first place, b) such a conception is applicable to Ireland in the second place, and c) it is the responsibility of the English to improve it in the third place, it places that abstraction outside the realm of investigation of its theory, elevating it beyond critique. In doing so, it would naturalise colonialism. On the contrary, it quickly becomes apparent that explaining the supposed necessity of transforming one society's mode of life in terms of a product of consciousness (moral character) of another society makes little sense. The idea of the 'civilising mission' might be greatly satisfying to those it would benefit, but it is not well founded.

The historical materialist approach thus stresses the essential role of social history in the development of apparently natural phenomena, including the apparently supremely natural phenomenon of land. If Wood showed that changes in humans' relationship to land are key to understanding the transition to capitalism, they are even more important in the context of colonialism, where land must be conquered as well as transformed. This lead Fanon to comment, '*Aux colonies, l'infrastructure économique est également une superstructure. La cause est conséquence : on est riche parce que blanc, on est blanc parce que riche.*'[43] This insight is ultimately a consequence of the historical materialist approach. As Marx and Engels wrote, the world is

> …the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed, [a product] in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its

---

[43] Fanon, 455. My translation: 'In the colonies, the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is consequence: one is rich because one is white, one is white because one is rich.'

intercourse, and modifying its social system according to the changed needs. Even the objects of the simplest 'sensuous certainty' are only given [man] through social development, industry and commercial intercourse. The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-tress, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by *commerce* into our zone, and therefore only *by* this action of a definite society in a definite age has it become 'sensuous certainty'…[44]

The crucial insight here is that humans' environment is a product not merely of historical processes but of historical *labour* processes. As humans labour in order to reproduce their existence, some of their labour becomes embodied in the natural environment, providing context and raw material for future labour. This is true of all societies, simply as a consequence of the fact that humans must labour to survive: 'life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things', a condition which must be satisfied daily.[45] In order to reproduce not only one's own self, but 'to propagate their kind', people must also engage with others; hence society is inherently a condition for the reproduction of individuals. People's relationships to nature and to each other therefore go hand in hand. This is readily apparent on the physical level. For example, FHA Aalen describes how Ireland's landscape is in large part the product of thousands of years of agriculture:

New materials and fertilisers have also been applied over long periods…. Notably on the coastal rim of the west of Ireland, many soils are effectively *plaggen* — manufactured soils accumulated through generations of diligent spade labour and continuous applications of sod, seaweed, sand, soot, turf, farm refuse and decayed thatch. Bog clearance and land drainage have long been underway, especially in the east where the intensity of land

---

[44] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 39.
[45] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 41–2.

improvement has reinforced the natural superiority of the soils.[46]

Eamonn Slater further emphasises the replenishment of the Irish soil as a classed relationship, reminding us that violence and alienation structure the ground we stand upon in a very literal sense.[47] But this also happens on a less literal, though no less determinative level: on the Marxist account, human consciousness is also the product of labour, and as human labour is embodied in the physical landscape, culture too becomes physically embodied, or historically objectified, in the environment, thereby also shaping future human activities—here too, there are connections to Fanon.[48] In the Irish context, Aalen describes:

> The physical and biotic world has been so strongly modified by human agency that the resulting landscape is a synthesis of natural and cultural elements....[49]
>
> A deep time perspective is required to comprehend fully the significance of modern landscape features. Landscape is not static but the dynamic product of a complex interaction between human society and its habitat.... Our landscapes therefore are not the product of contemporary activities alone: they have matured over lengthy periods of prehistoric and historic time. While present land uses modify the cultural landscape, it is essentially a legacy from the past.[50]

Present human activity may not be entirely determined by past human activity, but there are no clear divisions between what is social and what is not. The geological processes that have shaped the Irish landscape long preceded humans' arrival on the island, but from that point, humans have been involved with shaping them through their labour by placing the landscape in relation with their bodies, tools, symbols, and other landscape features—this is Marx's

---

[46] Aalen in Aalen, Whelan, & Stout, 17.
[47] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil'.
[48] See, eg, Fanon, 453–4.
[49] Aalen, 6.
[50] Aalen, 6.

'metabolism between [man] and nature'.[51] Insofar as it is socially relevant, landscape is social. In this way, the landscape is no different than other cultural phenomena: as Marx notes, objects like coats and linen may contain a '[material] substratum furnished by nature without human intervention,' but labour is what mediates this natural material, rendering it usable by humans. Linen may be made from flax, but it *is* made. Even labour products which seem to lack a tangible form, such as human language, have their basis in human biology. As Comninel wrote,

> …reality is precisely that which is created by *consciousness* and human intention. A book is composed of natural materials and produced through human labors that, in both muscle and machine, are material processes. Yet the material reality of the book as a human artifact must include its *meaning* as a product of consciousness, a reality which is entirely *natural* in its content, yet which cannot be comprehended in purely 'natural scientific' terms that would exclude the processes of conscious existence.[52]

While human activity and its products may not be irreducibly social, they are nevertheless social in essence. This is true of both physical and mental results of labour processes, but crucially, it is also true of the social relationships which condition those labour processes.

Social property relations

Continuing with their reassessment of historical materialism, this section introduces a major contribution of the political Marxist school, the concept of social property relations, which stresses the importance of history and politics to a Marxist understanding of property. Centring property and emphasising it as a mode of exploitation, this school draws attention to the historical specificity of capitalist relations. In general, Marxist analysis aims to be explanatory rather than only descriptive, proceeding from its recognition of the class nature of a society to explain broader developments in the course of that society's history. By explicitly centring this methodological

---

[51] Marx, *Capital*, 283, 636.
[52] Comninel, 148.

insight, political Marxists have engaged in a collective re-evaluation of Marxist historical method, reaffirmed the importance of materialism and emphasised the particular function of property, especially landed property, in class exploitation. They thereby '[reassert] the role of the political as a firm base to the economic sphere, and hence to the mode of production,' a shift in emphasis which does not mean diminishing the role of production but rather recognising its interrelation with politics in precapitalist societies.[53] Above all, the political Marxist approach calls upon the necessity of centring alienation (or estrangement) in political economic critique. Ashe process of colonisation is even more concerned with land and the human relationships expressed through it than is capitalism, the following section will argue that social property relations are even more important in this context. First, however, it is essential to understand the concept of social property relations in general and how it provides this dissertation with a simple but flexible and insightful approach to comprehending the changes in property which occur in the development of class societies.

As Maïa Pal notes, a defining feature of the political Marxists, including Comninel, Wood, and Robert Brenner, is their special emphasis on social property relations. These can be defined as those relations which exist between producers and their exploiters through the mediation of their access to the means of production.[54] As Comninel reminds us, Marx's materialist method puts property—and thus human relations—at the centre of history. Because the essence of property is the appropriation of alienated labour, the real root of social change is the process by which labour is alienated—and, by corollary, class struggle.[55] Thus while the term 'social property relations' itself may be a retrospective coinage, they were at the base of Marx's mode of analysis from a very early stage. As Pal writes:

> Social property relations refer to Marx's concept of social relations
> of production yet further emphasise the contested imbrication of
> legal, political, and economic actors and institutions that organise

---

[53] Pal, 91.
[54] Pal, 103, see also 92–3.
[55] Comninel, 148, 134–5.

labour, social reproduction, and political representation. They provide a wider handle on the legal dimension of social relations while emphasising their ever-contested yet interrelated condition.[56]

The explanation of social property relations under capitalism can be simplistically reduced to being a kind of interaction between two classes, but it must not be forgotten that they are fundamentally material, historical, and political processes, as Pal explains:

> Social property relations are thus a 'three-way dialectical relationship between the direct producers and nature (raw materials, ecology), the "vertical" exploitative social relation between the direct producer and the appropriator of the producer's surplus, and also the "horizontal" social relation within the main classes' (Dimmock, 2017). The horizontal dimension is crucial as it is not constrained by national or territorial boundaries. Classes can compete and collaborate within or beyond the various political, legal, economic, cultural, and ideological boundaries that may define a mode of production.[57]

Nor are social property relations merely about class struggle—rather, they are concerned with that which gives rise to class struggle, namely exploitation and estrangement. This is the major theoretical intervention of George Comninel's *Rethinking the French Revolution*, in which he criticises Marx for straying from his own methodology: '[T]hough Marx created historical materialism specifically through the *criticism* of liberal social theory, in the form of a critique of political economy, his political purpose of social revolution in capitalist society did not lead him to make a similar criticism of liberal history.'[58] Comninel's book is concerned with correcting this fault, which he argues led Marx to incorrectly adopt a stadial approach to history which theoretically privileges a liberal narrative of progress over the critique of alienation that

---

[56] Pal, 103.

[57] Pal, 92–3.

[58] Comninel, 64.

characterises Marx's most original thought.[59] People using Marxist methods to study history, especially when looking at the *longue durée* where the need for comprehensibility practically demands some retrospective periodisation, must be careful not to lose sight of alienation through over-abstraction. Importantly, for Comninel this is an internal critique: he positions his critique as using Marx's own methods to correct a methodological inconsistency. In this regard, political Marxism can be understood as a mode of self-critique, or at least reflection, which can help keep Marxist analysis on its intended track. This is especially important when engaging in Marxist critique of colonialism, where class struggle takes on forms and can develop along lines not directly comparable to non-colonised societies. Concepts must be adapted accordingly, a task which must be undertaken carefully: Marx, Engels, and other scholars have sometimes been insufficiently critical of their own perspectives on colonialism. This does not mean rejecting scholarship—Marxist or otherwise—where it is otherwise sound, but rather correcting the error through a more sensitive and precise analysis, as Comninel does for Marx. While social property relations are instrumental to an understanding of colonialism, an awareness of the specificities which characterise colonial relations must also be retained.

Comninel reminds us that the theory of class struggle was originally produced by bourgeois historians and that 'Marx would only take credit for proving "that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*"… and tying this class struggle to the creation of *classless* society through proletarian revolution'.[60] That is, Marxist critique is concerned not only with property *per se*, but also with how its forms emerge out of a given complex of historically determined social relations and to how they are eventually superseded. As Comninel writes,

> In general, Marx's work is a critique of the liberal tradition. In
> drawing the conclusion that it is the alienation of labor, or exploitive
> production, that is the basis of property—and not the reverse—Marx

---

[59] Comninel, 72–4, 141–3.
[60] Comninel, 56.

took the essential step by which the critique of political economy also became (if only in overview) a critique of speculative history. Here is the very core of historical materialism, its fundamental difference from liberal materialist history: where the latter takes for granted the social relations of property, which even the economists recognized as leading to great disparities in class, historical materialism instead recognizes property to be the result of specific and historical social violence, the exploitive alienation of productive humanity.[61]

The immediate context of Marx's theoretical intervention was English capitalism, where the dispossession of producers from the means of production can be obscured, or overlooked, in a way that is less possible in the context of colonialism in Ireland, where the fact of dispossession through 'specific and historical social violence' is starkly visible. Thus it is unlikely that anyone would mistake the social relations of property which colonialism instituted in Ireland as being other than exploitative, at least at the moment of dispossession. This is not the case with capitalism, where a muted history makes the landless worker appear to be a natural political economic fact. It might therefore seem unnecessary to point out that colonialism starts with violence, putting the relevance of political Marxism in question. But Comninel stresses that even more important in Marx's intervention is to recognise that the form of property itself is also not separate from its history:

Property, as the organizing principle of 'the economy' (alienated social production) is not a timeless and immutable expression of human nature, nor a general necessity of social relations. Property is a historically specific expression of exploitive class relations, relations which—having gained ascendancy in a distant but real past—have since constituted, in their development, the central

[61] Comninel, 130.

dynamic of class society.[62]

Comninel in effect calls for a thorough re-examination of the foundations of historical materialism as a method in order to identify Marx's most radical contributions.[63] As Comninel explains, Robert Brenner had argued that 'an analysis of history which takes for granted the appearance of a given mode of production *assumes* precisely that which most needs to be explained—the *origin* of those social relations of production by which the mode of production is defined.'[64] To Comninel, much of Marx's early work is 'essentially political' in approach, in contrast with the overall theme of his corpus which is concerned with '*private property* itself, its centrality in all aspects of human alienation, and is *developmental* character as the decisive dynamic of class history…. As a result, Marx's development of historical materialism would remain almost entirely restricted to his study of capitalist society, primarily through the critique of political economy.'[65] Yet the ideas of this young Marx are still important in the works he would write decades later; against the reduction of alienation to a 'merely psychological condition', Comninel asserts that it refers 'above all [to] *exploitation — economic estrangement*'.[66]

This point was central to Marx's analysis in *Capital*, where Marx analysed the transition to that highest form of estrangement which capital represents, but crucially, it can equally inform analysis of property's longer history. In the context of precapitalist property, however, Comninel argues that Marx and Engels' historical analysis of property was flawed.[67] This was also the starting point of that earlier work by Ellen Meiksins Wood, subsequently expanded and republished as *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. While Comninel's theoretical critique is concerned with alienation in a relatively abstracted sense, Wood's takes pains to centre an understanding of specificity. Repudiating the view that capitalism emerged automatically from a mere quantitative expansion of dynamics already present in feudal society, Wood followed Robert

---

[62] Comninel, 131.
[63] Comninel, 80–1.
[64] Comninel, 87.
[65] Comninel, 124.
[66] Comninel, 127.
[67] Comninel, 141.

Brenner in arguing that its inception required 'a complete [qualitative] transformation in the most basic human relations and practices, a rupture in age-old patterns of human interaction with nature.'[68] The transition from feudalism to capitalism, therefore, consists in nothing short of the production of an entirely new, genuinely unprecedented form of social organisation. Wood explains that while for most of written history, peasants have had direct access to the means of production, predominantly land, with their surplus having been appropriated via direct coercion, capitalism has an altogether different method of appropriation which emerges as workers become dependent on the market for access to their most basic means of subsistence—food:[69]

> Only in capitalism is the dominant mode of appropriation based on the complete dispossession of direct producers, who (unlike chattel slaves) are legally free and whose surplus labour is appropriated by purely 'economic' means. Because direct producers in a fully developed capitalism are propertyless, and because their only access to the means of production, to the requirements of their own reproduction, even to the means of their own labour, is the sale of their labour-power in exchange for a wage, capitalists can appropriate the workers' surplus labour without direct coercion.[70]

Stressing the specificity of this new form of relation, she contrasts England and France:

> The divergence between property relations in France and those in England is nicely encapsulated in the contrast between the mind-set of the late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century English land surveyor we encountered before and that of his French counterpart, then and long thereafter. While the English were preoccupied with market valuations and competitive rents, at a time when French peasants were consolidating rights of inheritance and French lords had little benefit from rents, the French surveyor was obsessively

---

[68] Wood, *Origin,* 95.
[69] Wood, *Origin,* 96–7.
[70] Wood, *Origin,* 97.

combing the records for any sign of seigneurial rights and peasant obligations that could be revived—or even invented. So while the English went in search of 'real' market values, the French were using the most up-to-date and scientific methods to chart a revival of feudalism.[71]

Capitalism is therefore not merely an extension of feudalism, but it could not develop in just any feudal society. Rather, it came out of a specific historical context, and marks a specific break in productive relations. Following this, Wood also argues that transformations in ways of organising society gave rise to new philosophical and technical modes of thought, such as the view of improvement attributed above all to John Locke. No automatic process, improvement was itself part of the self-conscious reconstruction of society through the reconstitution of its underlying relations:

> improvement meant more than new or better methods or techniques of farming. Improvement meant, even more fundamentally, new forms and conceptions of property. 'Improved' farming, for the enterprising landlord and his prosperous capitalist tenant, ideally though not necessarily meant enlarged and concentrated landholdings. It certainly meant the elimination of old customs and practices that interfered with the most productive use of land.[72]

Wood likewise clarifies Marx's conception of enclosure: 'Enclosure is often thought of as simply the fencing in of common land, or of the "open fields" that characterized certain parts of the English countryside. But enclosure meant not simply a physical fencing of land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood.'[73] Thus political, economic, and philosophical concerns were united in an acute process of dramatic social transformation:

---

[71] Wood, *Origin,* 104.
[72] Wood, *Origin,* 107.
[73] Wood, *Origin,* 108.

We need to be reminded that the definition of property was in Locke's day not just a philosophical issue but a very immediate practical one. As we have seen, a new, capitalist definition of property was in the process of establishing itself, challenging traditional forms not just in theory but also in practice., the idea of overlapping use rights to the same piece of land was giving way in England to *exclusive* ownership…. Increasingly, the principle of improvement for profitable exchange was taking precedence over other principles and other claims to property, whether those claims were based on custom, or on some fundamental right of subsistence.[74]

Thus Wood historicises improvement, enclosure, the forms of property that they assume and produce, and the processes through which they are implemented—in short, she describes the origin of capitalism. While these concepts have been explained in detail primarily to illustrate the approach she takes to analysing the historical development of specific forms of property, it is also of note that they comprise significant accumulations—to use a concept which will be introduced in the next chapter—which the English would seek to transplant to Ireland.

Colonial property relations

How, then, does colonialism transform social property relations? Continuing the discussion above, this section further illustrates the importance of historical specificity in social analysis with a deeper look at Comninel's internal critique of Marx. Emphasising the special importance of this approach in the colonial context, it positions property relations as unfolding within a colonial dialectic. While the insights of the political Marxists highlighted in the previous section can be applied to any class society, the fact that colonialism brings two separate societies into relation means that the impact of specificities on historical development requires especially close attention.

Comninel points out that Marx's critique, rebutting liberal ideology, has two 'essential

---

[74] Wood, *Origin,* 114.

strategies…. to reveal its *class content*, and to identify the *historical specificity* of its concepts.'[75] It may be hard to deny that colonialism is an exploitative and thus a class relation, but the specificity of the forms that result—as against those that emerge in the absence of colonialism— must also be acknowledged. This is where analysis of social property relations becomes key in the colonial context, although—as previously suggested— understanding how they continue to develop after being introduced is more important than identifying their exact origin. Almost by definition, colonialism consists of the alienation of landed property from the colonised and its appropriation by the coloniser. Colonialism therefore necessarily entails a change in class relations and anticolonial struggle is necessarily class struggle. In the modern context, colonialism is not restricted to the mere substitution of one exploiter with another, leaving the constitutive structure of property relations—and the rest of the society—intact. This would still be a class relation, as Rosa Luxemburg pointed out in her analysis of the Incas' conquest of the Quechuas, which 'graft[ed] onto [their internally unchanged society] a refined system of economic exploitation and political domination.'[76] Yet, if we can make such a distinction, this is a political rather than a social change. Modern colonialism is differentiated in that colonisers seek not only to exploit, but also to transform the nature of such relations and therefore the fundamental character of the societies they invade—hence Fanon's remark that colonialism is at once basal and superstructural.[77] As Marx described, whereas successive conquerors of India had previously only supplanted the ruling class without disrupting the village system on which the society was founded, the English undertook a genuine social revolution with two elements: 'one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.'[78] This, he argued, was similar to what happened in Ireland: 'in a social point of view, Hindustan is not the Italy, but the Ireland of the East.'

    While the transformations brought about by colonisers may or may not attempt to emulate

---

[75] Comninel, 139.

[76] Luxemburg, 77.

[77] Fanon, 455.

[78] Marx in *On Colonialism*, 39–41, 82.

the society of the colonisers, the realisation of colonialism in practice is always messied by the historical attempt to impose them on a society with its own modes of life. Failing to appreciate the importance of such differences can lead Marxists to overgeneralise their theoretical conclusions. For example, while defending in general terms Marx's analysis of colonialism, Kevin Anderson notes that the idea that Indian society was static for millennia until the arrival of the British also reflects a Eurocentrism that considers non-European societies to be perpetually unchanging, as does his description of the 'hereditary stupidity' of China.[79] This is what Johannes Fabian termed the 'denial of coevalness'—the insistence that colonised societies somehow existed outside of historical time, removed from their colonisers, thus enabling anthropologists to study them objectively, and justifying their colonisation.[80] Thus we see that the empirical data of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which remains an important Marxist text, is founded in large part on the accounts of a single colonial anthropologist (a fact which is made clear by the book's original subtitle, '*In the Light of the Researches by Lewis H. Morgan*').

Some of Engels' theoretical conclusions are of relevance today, but they are in other ways limited in their reliance on Morgan's reports. Engels, for example, believes that societies' kinship relations necessarily follow a unidirectional, universal path of gradual evolution towards a familiar European structure, a view that replicates the modernist assumptions implicit in colonial anthropology, which in turn enables the understanding of colonialism as a 'civilising mission'. This former assumption is so taken for granted by Engels that he does not even seem aware that he is making it, nor does he entertain other possible paths of development. Uncritical reliance on this text or its theoretical conclusions could therefore be misleading. The concept of social property relations reminds us to consider the specificities of context, but even this is not enough. It is essential also to recognise that Morgan was studying a colonised society, not one that existed in isolation. He was not studying a society that had developed unimpeded according to its own internal dynamics, but rather one which had been forcibly brought into contact with, and therefore

---

[79] Anderson, 22, 31.
[80] Fabian, 29–35.

had been altered by European society—a process to which Morgan's own studies belonged.

The point is that even if one's theory and method are sound, a failure to be attentive to the specific history of the society in question can lead one to error. Indeed, comprehending property relations in the colonial context means being sensitive not merely to the specificities of one society, nor even of two, but also of the historical relation between those societies. It also requires an additional degree of reflexivity on the part of the knowledge creator, who must determine how their own study of the process may comprise part of the object of study, as well as a methodological commitment to subvert not simply liberal but also colonial ideology. Above all, it requires careful consideration of the actual history in question to determine its dynamics, rather than engaging in theoretical generalisation by excessive inference from other examples.

All this means that even a theoretical analysis of colonial property relations needs a lot of empirical work over and above what would be required in a non-colonial, capitalist context, where we might be justified in taking the findings of a work like *Capital* for granted. Unlike capitalism, which regardless of the forms it takes always exhibits unique built-in dynamics such as the drive to increase the exploitation of surplus value, colonialism is not a mode of production nor an economic system. While it has an intrinsic, specific characteristic, i.e., domination from the outside, that leads predictably to certain outcomes, such as ethnic cleansing and dispossession, it is not universal in the same way that capitalism is. Marx's study of capitalism begins in concrete circumstances, but capitalism's universal nature allows him to generate universal conclusions. Colonialism, by contrast, must always be understood in its specific context and its present day significance is deeply rooted in its history. Conclusions drawn about one colonial society cannot be readily translated to another without proper comparative study. It is the mandatory attentiveness to historical specificity which makes anticolonialism such a powerful analytical lens, but it is also perhaps what leads it to be passed over theoretically in favour of concepts which are (or appear to be) universal, and therefore potentially applicable without as much work. In short, while colonialism may have a general form, every instance of colonialism unfolds in a historically unique way—an insight which gave rise to, and is made clear by, Patrick Wolfe's *Traces of History*. For this reason, while one may dispute the universalist trajectory suggested by James Connolly's belief

that the '[c]ommunal ownership of land would undoubtedly have given way to the privately owned system of capitalist-landlordism, even if Ireland had remained an independent country,' one might still be impressed by his method, which is premised on the idea that understanding the history of colonialism was fundamental to understanding capitalism in Ireland.[81]

This brings us back to social property relations and its role in anticolonial analysis, where the 'how' of alienation is as important as the 'what'. This means that although social property relations remains a useful frame, its general critique of alienation must be understood in the context of a political relation of domination over and above that which already characterises any class society. While capitalism elevates alienation to the extreme, depending on widespread alienation as a precondition and having its extension as a systematic tendency, the alienation of labour and property occurs in all class societies and is of key political economic significance. As Comninel notes, one of Marx's most significant insights is the understanding that property is both the result of alienated labour, and the means of further alienation.[82] While Comninel acknowledges the importance of Marx and Engels' recognition in 'The German Ideology' that the division of labour is related to the emergence of property, he argues that they failed to make the additional recognition that in the absence of exploitation—i.e., appropriation—the division of labour does not result in property.[83] Thus, the social form of property is predicated in the first place upon the existence of exploitation, even as, in later developments of class society, property itself becomes the basis of exploitation. To see the *result* of the process of development as the *essential character* of that process, and therefore present in that process from the very beginning, is to commit the basic methodological error that Marx and Engels defined themselves in opposition to. In seeing exploitation as the inevitable result of the division of labour, Marx and Engels 'incorporated [the] mechanical and "naturalistic" conception of development' proffered by liberal bourgeois historians.[84] In essence, Marx and Engels' error here is to take the fetishized abstract category of

---

[81] James Connolly, vol. 1, 28.
[82] Comninel, 128–9.
[83] Comninel, 143–4.
[84] Comninel, 145.

'class' at face value, rather than to subject it to historical critique.[85] Repeating this mistake prevents one from fully apprehending the possibility of the end of class. To paraphrase Wood, the notion of historicity stands against that of inevitability by suggesting that one moment of history can be superseded by another.[86] That is, without a focus on labour as alienation, there can be no vision of communism. Following her interventions, Comninel therefore argues that there is a distinction between *historical* materialism and materialism *as such*; the latter of which was in Marx's context already established as a liberal intellectual formation.[87] Marx and Engels were not unique in believing that social phenomena had naturalistic explanations: their original contribution was to argue that these explanations ought to be made in terms of human labour. In sum, Comninel writes, 'The central relationship of exploitation thus provides the "class logic" for an entire class-based system of relations of social reproduction'; it is a causal dialectic which internally relates the appropriation of surplus product to the form of the state.[88]

For Comninel, Marx contraposed this '*fully materialist* conception of history, rooted in social fact' with approaches rooted in 'ideological preconception', but his primary aim was not to engage in empirics, not polemics—he sought to explain how this conception of history would be realized in social practice.[89] Along similar lines, based on a passage in Marx's preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Antonio Gramsci would identify in Marx's method 'the two fundamental principles of political science: 1. that no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; 2. that a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated, etc.'[90] However, Comninel argues, to interpret Marxism as implying that history develops in discrete stages, when one set of social conditions springs into

---

[85] Comninel, 146–8.

[86] Wood, *Democracy*, 3.

[87] Comninel, 159.

[88] Comninel, 170, 170–2.

[89] Comninel, 136.

[90] Gramsci, 106; see also Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 29, 263.

being to replace another set which suddenly falls away, is erroneous.[91] He suggests that the error lies in considering the driving force to be production in its bare physical aspect, rather than the social relationships underlying it—that is, property—writing, 'the social forms of *class society* correspond to the development of *class exploitation*, not to production as such.'[92] Reflecting on this distinction also suggests the importance of colonialism as a social phenomenon: even if productive techniques and the exploitation of natural resources do not change, the replacement of a local ruling class by a foreign ruling class constitutes a significant expansion of social relations, a material transformation in the relationship of the exploitation of *labour* by virtue of the installation of a new group of exploiters. That is, colonialism is precisely defined in deviating from the supposed principle that social change is driven by relations internal to a given society. The fact that colonialism also brings with it major changes to the society only heightens its importance.

Examining the social property relations of numerous colonial projects, Maïa Pal coins the term 'colonial social property relations' to describe the specific ways that class relations developed in these contexts. Working in parallel, Pal and I converged upon a similar extension of the concept, our different emphases demonstrating the flexibility and analytical utility of extending this concept to colonialism. In the context of French colonialism, for example, she describes how a varied approach in which France imposed different regimes according to the characteristics of particular locales, led to a complex arrangement of systems under French rule.[93] Meanwhile, contrasting the conditions of the Spanish metropole with its colonies, Pal demonstrates how different cultural understandings of work emerging from different political economic contexts interacted in a specific colonial situation to produce classed, colonial conflict:

> One of the major problems that emerged from the early stages of the
> colonisation was the contrast, and consequently conflict, between
> European and Amerindian ways of living. What seemed to
> Europeans to be the natives' 'idleness' was the natural consequence

---

[91] Comninel, 141.
[92] Comninel, 143.
[93] Pal, 129.

of a life sustained by subsistence farming, hunting and fishing. Compulsory labour, accepted in Europe's agrarian societies, meant forced labour or slavery for Indians, a fact which settlers struggled to understand (Parry, 1990:175). This problem was more largely connected, as Parry shows, to the different conceptions of freedom. The liberty enjoyed by a legally free peasant in Iberia was 'within the context of the whole society to which he belonged, and subject to discharging the appropriate obligations towards that society, as laid down by custom' (1990: 173). In other words, a peasant in Iberia was only free as regards his relationship to the owner of the land on which he lived or for whom he had to pay tribute and services; that legal relationship was personal, and property was conditional, as in any other feudal society. For Indians living on subsistence farming (not all were, as was seen by the discovery of the Aztec and Inca empires), there was no personal and conditional relationship between ruler and ruled, therefore 'instead of laying on Indians a general compulsion to work (which was held to be compatible with liberty) it placed them in permanent personal servitude to individual Spaniards' (Parry, 1990: 176).[94]

Pal thus shows how political struggle, exploitation, and complex and abstract notions like freedom and obligation are connected to social totality through the concept of social property relations. Moreover, she stresses the historical element to their development as well as the specificities that accrue from the existing features already present in the particular colonising and the particular colonised societies—specificities which, as we shall see in the next chapter, Patrick Wolfe terms preaccumulations—writing, 'Hispanic (and to a lesser extent French) settlements led to the reproduction of legal institutions of metropolitan societies and hybrid regimes of social property relations.'[95] In particular, the longer passage above supports Wolfe's argument that

---

[94] Pal, 116–7.
[95] Pal, 115–6.

preaccumulations encompass a cultural element—'a historical endowment of consciousness'—alongside more evident material traces.[96] Like Wolfe and Brenna Bhandar, whose work we will also examine, she emphasises the role of law as a tool of dispossession, although she goes beyond them in explicitly linking the establishment of colonial state systems and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples to the processes of state formation and of primitive accumulation, such as enclosure, which occurred in England.[97] All three authors argue that law's form and class character are contested and evolve along with class conflict and the form of the state, Pal drawing on the work of EP Thompson and emphasising that adopting a static understanding of property 'misses the opportunity to sketch the processes through which legal content oscillated between different conceptions of jurisdiction (i.e. property and ownership), and it especially misses the different processes of dispossession and expropriation they enabled.'[98] In the context of my own argument, Pal's work therefore calls our attention to the close relationship between the specific forms of property and the specific organisation of colonial society. However, my concept of the colonial regime is derived from an explicitly Gramscian notion of the state, whereas Pal takes a legal history approach. Moreover, emphasising the heightened alienation of diremption (see chapter 2), my understanding of colonial property adds an element which is not present in Pal's. For these reasons, I prefer 'colonial property relations' as a way of emphasising the relatively larger distance between my concept and social property relations in general, while acknowledging the debt I owe in terms of conceptual genealogy.

In sum, the notion of colonial property relations indicates that when a colonial relation is established between two societies, that relation's own suprasocial internality supersedes the internality of either society. The distinction between colonised and coloniser is defined by relations of violence and alienation rather than these being the names of two discrete entities brought into contact through colonialism. It is important to avoid fetishising these entities by ascribing

---

[96] Wolfe, 21.
[97] Pal, 132–144.
[98] Pal, 137–8.

properties to them individually which in fact belong to their relation. This is important in the study of any society, but is perhaps more easy to forget in the colonial context. For instance, when Wood describes the origin of capitalism in England, the dynamics she describes unfold within England itself. Because she limits the scope of her analysis in this way, she does not, nor does she need to, engage in the question of what England itself is. But in the context of colonialism in Ireland, we cannot do the same. Ireland itself—whatever that might mean—exists within the colonial relation. As Marx writes in *Capital*, the analysis of society 'begins *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of [that society's] development ready to hand.'[99] It is for this reason that he argued:

> Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. These formulas, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to the political economists' bourgeois consciousness to be as much a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labour itself.[100]

Uncritical abstractions will not do, especially when they are applied to nearly a millennium of history. Therefore when we study some event in Irish history in terms of colonialism, we have to understand it arising from proximate, intermediate, and 'environmental' causes. The critique of colonialism focuses on these latter, pointing out the ways that colonialism continually structures a colonised society, rather than being a one-off moment of violence. We have to ask 'why this content has assumed this particular form'—why the relationship between Ireland and England has unfolded so as to produce a structure in Ireland that permitted, from the highest level of analysis

---

[99] Marx, *Capital*, 168.
[100] Marx, *Capital*, 168.

to the lowest, the events of Irish history to occur. In short, as Bhattacharya reminds us, Marx argues that we need to comprehend how the 'real concrete' of Ireland is 'a synthesis of many definitions'.[101] If the concept of social property relations is founded on a recognition of this point, then colonial property relations are further situated within historically unique contexts of colonialism.

---

[101] Marx, quoted in Bhattacharya, 16–17.

2. The colonial regime

This chapter turns to the way that property relations are mediated. At a higher social level than exploitative property relations themselves is found a political apparatus which enables and sustains them. Conventionally in Marxist theory, this is the role which is ascribed to the state. In the colonial context, however, the destruction and formation of states is part of the process this political apparatus performs. States remain a very important part of the picture, but this necessitates a still-more expansive concept that can help address the expropriative nature of colonialism: that of the colonial regime. With an emphasis on the role of law, this chapter draws on Gramscian historicism, the work of Marx as interpreted by later scholars, and theories of colonial property, especially the work of Robert Nichols, Patrick Wolfe, and Brenna Bhandar, to deepen appreciation of the specificities of colonial property and to provide a framework for understanding changes in Ireland's colonial regime.

Property and politics

As previously suggested, because colonialism occurs between two societies, rather than within a single society, it requires special consideration in terms of a Marxist view of property. In Ireland, perhaps especially, colonial property did not operate on a *tabula rasa*, but was implemented over a very long period of time. This necessitates a political apparatus capable of managing this implementation process and mediating the relationship between the two societies: the colonial regime. This regime played a central role in the creation, transformation, and reproduction of property relations in Ireland, playing a similar role to the English state, though coercively transgressing political boundaries. As we have seen in England, enclosure entailed 'not simply a physical fencing of land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood.'[102] These had emerged over the course of England's long development and were an integral part of that society, which was on the cusp of a social

---

[102] Wood, *Origin,* 108.

revolution the likes of which had never been seen before. As Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*,

> The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'….
>
> Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned…[103]

The passage is evidently hyperbolic, and historians like EP Thompson have shown well that this process was not as smooth as it might seem to suggest.[104] The general view expressed by Marx, and which was taken up by Wood, is that processes like enclosure paved the way for the emergence of a new England, where precapitalist institutions and relations were supplanted, at best persisting in a much reduced role. The origin of capitalism is thus the end, or at least the beginning of the end, of whatever came before (i.e., 'feudalism'). As David Lloyd explains in his 2003 article 'Rethinking National Marxism: James Connolly and "Celtic Communism"', it was just this view which Dipesh Chakrabarty critiqued in 'The Two Histories of Capital': 'Notoriously, theories of modernization, which are generally indissociable from histories of capitalism and of colonialism, assume a trajectory whereby any social formation or element that is recalcitrant to development is necessarily subsumed or annihilated, making way for the subjects and institutions of the modern

---

[103] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6, 486–7.
[104] See, eg., EP Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*.

or capitalist state.'[105] This inspired Lloyd to develop an analysis of Connolly's writings in which he stresses that the colonisation of Ireland played an integral role in the development of capitalist modernity in that country and took the form of an abject social disruption in some ways even greater than that which occurred in England:

> [Displaced Irish] labour was formative and not peripheral to the development of colonial capitalism, and if the Irish experience was not that of the English industrial revolution but rather one of capitalist underdevelopment, it was nonetheless a crucial experience of the dynamics and effects of capitalism modernity. The rationalization of agriculture, the enclosure of land for tillage or grazing, and the displacement of whole populations, turning Ireland into what Marx would come to call a 'sheep-run' for Britain, supplied both the fodder and the labour power for a developing capitalism. In Ireland, perhaps more than anywhere, all that was solid melted into air.[106]

On the other hand—and this is the crucial point—the colonisation of Ireland did not proceed so smoothly as this history might suggest; Ireland's social forms were not so neatly 'swept away':

> the formations of Irish culture may not have lent themselves to the prehistory of capitalism, but they were intricately involved with its emergence, even as its 'other'. As the long history of successive British attempts to impose 'civility' on Ireland suggests, Irish cultural formations continued to be among the many resistances that capitalist colonialism had to overcome in the course of its becoming and, as Connolly seems to have grasped, the coercive force of that overcoming produced as its differential counterpart a persistent if apparently discontinuous set of counter-modern discourses and

---

[105] Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 361.
[106] Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 364.

practices. This is what Connolly means in indicating that the violent rupture of Irish historical development succeeds in preserving rather than destroying the practice of 'cooperation' among the Irish working class. From this perspective, the elements of History 2 must be understood not as the dead ends of truncated developments, sidelined into the eddies of historical change, but as charged repertoires of 'alternative futures', signalling 'an alternative, non-capitalist form of modernity to the rest of the colonized world' (Dobbins 2000: 630, 634).[107]

Thus, Lloyd concludes,

> [Connolly's] versions of 'national Marxism', far from representing a model outmoded by transnationalism, are embedded in the longer history of colonial capitalism and offer the possibility of alternative histories and alternative futures that might sidestep the iron logic of developmental historicism. They offer us a way of thinking the problem of cultural difference without stepping back into the fixity of identity, and an understanding of how, even now, we can draw the possibilities of survival from the continuing toll of damage.[108]

In other words, Connolly's writings attempt to provide a materialist explanation of the apparent paradox that Ireland's history exhibits a strong degree of continuity despite its complete transformation, of the class struggle inherent in the imposition of new forms of domination. If, for the sake of argument, we follow Wood in dating the emergence of capitalism to *c.* 1750, then roughly 70% of the period since 1169 has been characterised by the complete absence of capitalism—not just in Ireland, but anywhere—let alone the period where it existed without being dominant. It is perhaps this long history which makes the difference between capitalism and colonialism especially visible in Ireland. If, as reading Thompson and Wood together would

---

[107] Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 366.
[108] Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 368.

suggest, the establishment of capitalist property relations did not mean the complete erasure of preceding history, then how much more important must history be in the case of Ireland, where property relations were decidedly not capitalist for most of their existence? The nature of those relations and the configuration of social forces that held them in place were subject to repeated transformation; their prevalence waxed and waned. But the establishment of colonial property subjected the societies already existing in Ireland to a new, powerful form of domination which persisted across these many changes and which must be understood on its own terms in order to make sense of Ireland's history.

As the previous chapter suggests, understanding colonialism means seeing it as a kind of property relation. Foregrounding this enables many apparent paradoxes about Irish history to be resolved. For example, when Stephen Howe describes, in *Ireland and Empire*, 'the historians' controversy about medieval and early modern Ireland', he

> divid[es] interpretations of the Irish past between 'colonial' models and 'archipelago' ones. The former thinks in terms of one national entity being conquered and oppressed by another; the latter sees premodern Ireland in a more complex way, as one (or given its internal diversity more than one) of Europe's many 'frontier regions' from the early Middle Ages onwards. And the colonial model may in its turn be subdivided between those who view Ireland within an Atlantic framework, linking its colonial experience with those of the Americas, and those who identify it more in terms of a 'Third World' experience, associating its fate with African and Asian parallels.[109]

Though it is true that there are different explanations, it is a mistake to think that they cannot be reconciled with each other, because they *were* reconciled in Ireland's actual history. Ireland *was* colonised—and for that reason shares features with other colonised countries (the 'Third World'). At the same time, it *is also* situated in an Atlantic archipelago, which has had its

---

[109] Howe, 14.

own implications. As Lloyd argues, 'Historians from Nicholas Canny to Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown' how both realities have been critical to Irish history and, therefore, that dividing them into separate explanations denies their fundamental interdependence.[110] William Smyth similarly argues for the unity of this process.[111]

Tensions like this, which are of no minor import, make clear the value of a dialectical analysis and illustrate why Bhattacharya methodologically centres Marx's 'real concrete' as 'a synthesis of many definitions'.[112] As the volume to which her piece belongs makes clear, any society which conserves its own modes of being will also guarantee the reproduction of the relationships which allow it to exist. In a colonised society, an overwhelming political force, backed up if necessary with military force, intervenes to make sure that the society serves the colonisers' needs, typically the extraction of resources including labour. If it did not, the society would cease to be colonial. This complex of social, political, and military forces bears some similarity to Gramsci's understanding of the 'integral state', as we shall see below, but it is a suprastate formation—both in its geographical extent, i.e., in that it can encompass multiple states (England itself as well as the many Old English, New English, and Gaelic polities which existed contemporaneously in Ireland), and in its historical extent, in that it can encompass changes from small independent polities to large, centralised ones, from England to the United Kingdom, and from Ireland as a British colony to the juridically independent republic and the legally integrated north. For this reason—and not without precedent—I refer to this apparatus not as a colonial state but as a colonial 'regime'. It is this colonial regime which guarantees the persistence of colonial property relations despite anticolonial resistance and other historical forces.

Unlike noncolonial class societies, which must furnish all these physical and social elements on the basis of their own internal dynamics, in a colonised society, the resources of an outside power also underlie the appropriation of resources within. Appropriation may be expressed

---

[110] Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 364.
[111] William Smyth, 14.
[112] Marx, quoted in Bhattacharya, 16–17.

or imposed in many forms: taxation, dispossession, settlement, war, famine, disease, new political institutions, annexation, criminalisation and punishment, cultural or linguistic suppression, and even the transition from one mode of production to another (as in enclosure). Or, perhaps, the conquered people are left to their own devices, their productive relations intact, provided they pay colonial taxes. Violence can be used to counter threats to this structure without wholesale transformation of its underlying relations. This, Marx argued, is why the villages of India were able to remain intact despite being conquered repeatedly by this or that power, but when the British arrived failed to maintain India's agricultural infrastructure, instead preferring their own forms of commerce, the underlying social makeup was disrupted.[113] Something similar eventually occurred in Ireland, as indeed Marx recognises ('in a social point of view, Hindustan is not the Italy, but the Ireland of the East'), when many centuries of reproduction of Gaelic social forms were finally supplanted with England's subjection of Ireland to its own demands.[114] Thereafter, what happened in Ireland was determined by England's needs, not Ireland's. Even where the underlying relations might not have changed immediately, they were enveloped in a new structure of domination which intervened to change them when it becomes feasible and desirable to do so. What Fanon's insight captures is that whereas from the perspective of the coloniser, the colonised society appears as a bare collection of resources, to the colonised, colonialism appears as a brutal campaign of violence and dispossession—the colonial analogue to Wood's enclosure—followed by exploitation.

Even if we do not begin with property, therefore, the nature of colonialism is still productively understood as being a dialectical relation between colonised and coloniser that comprises an essential part of the material base of the colonised society through the transformation and reproduction of exploitative productive relations. Not everything in a colonised society is reducible to colonial exploitation, but immanent to the activities of a colonised society, this relationship of domination actually occurs. Because of its essential relationship to production, through land and property for example, colonialism governs much of what occurs in such a society.

---

[113] Marx, *On Colonialism*, 37–40.
[114] Marx, *On Colonialism*, 35.

The many weapons in the coloniser's arsenal express, in real ways, either the reproduction or the actualisation of an exploitative and domineering colonial relation. Thus colonialism is not simply a mode of analysis, nor is a colony a definite thing to be identified with a checklist of required features. The internal dynamics of the colonised society itself must be understood. But because colonialism is, by nature, domination from the outside, the internal movement of the colonised society is subsumed into the broader relationship of power between colonised and coloniser, the ultimate expression of colonialism. Where it is not expressly violent, the manifestation of this relationship is eminently political.

Colonialism as land theft: dispossession, alienation and diremption

The previous section suggested that the imposition or transformation of property in the colonial context is undertaken by means of a colonial regime that mediates the relationship between coloniser and colonised. This section outlines the primary function and method of that regime: dispossession. Settler colonialism's drive to accumulate land leads it to eliminate the Indigenous inhabitants of that land—if not by killing them directly, then by dissolving the bonds of their society and replacing them with those desired by the coloniser, thereby transforming them into a more suitable type of inhabitant and separating them from their land. While enclosure also represents a form of dispossession, the fact that it occurs internally to a society, rather than being forcibly imposed by one on another from without, has significant implications for the nature of the struggle.

Explaining the relationship between territory and elimination, Patrick Wolfe observes:

> Whatever settlers may say—and they generally have a lot to say—
> the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity,
> grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is
> settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element.
> The logic of elimination not only refers to the summary liquidation
> of Indigenous people, though it includes that. In common with

genocide as Raphaël Lemkin characterized it, settler colonialism has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base—as I put it, settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event. In its positive aspect, elimination is an organizing principal [sic] of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence. The positive outcomes of the logic of elimination can include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations. All these strategies, including frontier homicide, are characteristic of settler colonialism. Some of them are more controversial in genocide studies than others.

Settler colonialism destroys to replace.[115]

If colonial property relations are what settler colonialism replaces existing social relations with, then the colonial regime is the apparatus through which it does that. While elimination can be effected through the process of military conquest that establishes colonialism in a place, it is generally the established social system itself which accomplishes the bulk of the task. Indeed, physically destroying the labourers, or displacing them *en masse*, can be counterproductive without an adequate labour force to replace them. Transition must often be more gradual than that, as Marx recognised in *Capital* (although he was speaking about settler labour): 'How then can the anti-capitalist cancer of the colonies be healed? If men were willing to turn the whole of the land from public, i.e., to private property at one blow, this would certainly destroy the root of the evil, but it would also destroy—the colony.'[116] As with enclosure, then, the implementation of a new form of property relation through dispossession cannot be accomplished in one fell swoop.

---

[115] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', 388.
[116] Marx, *Capital*, 938.

Scholars of colonialism have developed numerous concepts for analysing this process, many of which can be applied to Ireland. A key intervention is Rob Nichols' *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Political Theory*, which singles out dispossession as one of the most significant features of colonialism—and one which has been undergoing a conceptual 'renaissance' in recent years.[117] More significantly than the term's increased presence in academic and activist discourse, this increase is a reflection of the current state of the ongoing Indigenous struggles in opposition to dispossession. In Nichols' words, 'dispossession is now indelibly written across an intellectual discourse and a political movement.'[118] While dispossession has received attention from Marx and other European theorists, Nichols explains that in the colonial context it takes on an additional level of significance. Dispossession, that is, has a dual genealogy: the specificities of colonial struggles have led Indigenous peoples to articulate in words and practice specific political responses that differ in some ways from those of non-colonised movements.[119] Nichols' major contribution is to identify a crucial feature of the Indigenous understanding of dispossession, which he terms 'recursive dispossession'.

In European political theoretical discourse, 'dispossession' came to signify the unjust appropriation of property by the sovereign; in the 18th and 19th centuries, Europeans were beginning to argue that government itself was founded on dispossession.[120] This gave rise to a range of responses: some argued that since dispossession had yielded civilisation, it was clearly worth defending. Others did not wish to undo dispossession but believed that the dispossessed (generally interpreted as the peasantry) should be compensated retroactively. Finally, some believed that since all government was based on dispossession, that government itself was unjust. This argument reached its zenith in the classical anarchism of such theorists as Kropotkin and Proudhon, the latter of whom is credited with the famous slogan 'Property is theft'.[121] This

---

[117] Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 28.

[118] Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 4.

[119] Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 4, 84.

[120] Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 21–22.

[121] Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 23–5.

expression is an apt summary of the argument and is, obviously, the inspiration for Nichols' title, which inverts the terms (mirroring Marx's own inversion of Proudhon's *The Philosophy of Poverty*). In his interventions, Marx critiqued the anarchists by accusing them of being overly general in their conceptualisation of property, rather than attending to the specificities of capitalism. Moreover, Marx, echoing Max Stirner, pointed out that the phrase 'property is theft' is self-refuting. Stealing requires an object: if property is formed through theft, then what is stolen? Marx sidestepped the issue through an abstracted conception of dispossession rooted in the specificities of the history of capitalism. Describing it in class terms, as the process of separation of direct producers from the means of production, Marx avoided the need to refer to property or theft. Per Nichols, 'Whereas the original anarchist argument presented the rural peasantry as the original "owners" of the land, Marx sought to shear this critique from its normative investment in property.'[122] As a consequence, Marx's conception of dispossession was subsumed under his other, more general, critiques: dispossession was no longer presented as an arena to articulate radical or political demands, but was rather the technical explanation for the origin of capitalist exploitation, which was the true problem.

Separate from this European genealogy, Nichols traces the concept of dispossession as articulated in Indigenous struggles; in this context, dispossession implies very literal land theft.[123] European socialist theorisations of dispossession are therefore insufficient in the context of colonialism. On the one hand, anarchist understandings of dispossession are vulnerable on the grounds that the concept of dispossession implies the pre-existence of property. In this regard, opposing both dispossession and property appears to be a difficult position for Indigenous critics to occupy, as Nichols explains: 'Critics wish to catch Indigenous peoples and their allies on the horns of a dilemma: either one claims prior possession of the land in a recognizable propertied form—thus universalizing and backdating a general possessive logic as the appropriate normative benchmark—or one disavows possession as such, apparently undercutting the force of a

---

[122] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 27.
[123] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 28.

subsequent claim of dispossession.'[124] On the other hand, as also seen above, in sidestepping this issue, the Marxist interpretation of dispossession reduces its normative value to the fact that it enables exploitation. For Indigenous peoples, however, the loss of the land itself is the major point of consideration:

> It would seem very odd indeed to suggest that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands is problematic because it enables their exploitation as labourers, since this is empirically not a very accurate description of the experience of colonization faced by many Indigenous peoples (especially in the Anglo settler world), but more to the point, it seems to distort the underlying logic of these struggles.[125]

In an earlier article, Nichols himself had raised concerns with the language of 'theft of land', which Marx and others have employed, for a few reasons. First, dispossession is a continual social process, not a one-off transfer of property—in other words, it is structural. Second, 'theft of land' suggests an equivalence between land and other forms of property, i.e., it reduces land to a bare object. But land is foundational to human life and labour in a way that other objects are not. Third, and perhaps most significantly, unlike the theft of an object, dispossession does not move the land, but its occupier: 'I don't literally move it from your home to mine. Rather, I move you.'[126] Theoretically, he suggests land is an abstraction which mediates the relationship between humans, who are a part of nature, and that other part of nature which is irreducibly other-than-human:

> So, just as we can affirm the Hegelian-Marxist point that human communities do not interact with nature in a historical vacuum, we must add that neither do they encounter it in a spatial one. Land, then, is best grasped here as an intermediary concept—situated between labour and nature, between activity and object—

---

[124] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 8.
[125] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 28.
[126] Nichols, 'Disaggregating Primitive Accumulation', 22.

designating the spatial and territorial specificity of this mediation. Importantly, while this spatiality can be shaped and reworked by human praxis, it is not reducible to that activity. The land mediates labouring activity through a set of spatial relations which are not themselves the product of human will, but rather a set of worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is why it functions as a mediator; it retains something of the natural world.[127]

This is the problematic that Nichols returns to in *Theft is Property!* He wishes to retain a critique of dispossession which honours the language of theft without obfuscating the complex relationships embedded in land. In part, this is because of the 'high normative stakes' of the debate and, presumably, the fact that his critique comes out of an Indigenous tradition which intentionally employs this language.[128] Another reason he wants to retain this terminology is because in a literal sense, dispossession fits the definition of theft, being an unjust appropriation: 'Most intuitively, a condition of dispossession is characterized by a privation of possession. In this obvious, ordinary, and commonly used sense of the term, dispossession means something like a normatively objectionable loss of possession, essentially a species of *theft*.'[129] But using this language in a coherent way requires a dialectical reconsideration of the concept of dispossession which acknowledges the colonial difference. Whereas European critiques of dispossession are concerned primarily with the negation of possession, many Indigenous critiques consider the issue of possession to be secondary to the fact that land has become something which *can* be possessed at all, emphasising the deracination inherent to the process. However, Nichols argues, the term 'dispossession' is still important to have available as a concept, as 'colonization (especially settler colonization) does involve a unique species of theft for which we do not always have adequate language.'[130]

---

[127] Nichols, 'Disaggregating Primitive Accumulation', 26.
[128] Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 1.
[129] Nichols, *Theft is Property!*, 6.
[130] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 30.

Nichols' solution is premised on a simple recognition: In settler colonial societies, land was figured as property in the first place for the very purpose of dispossessing Indigenous peoples of that property. The question, 'How can you steal that which is not owned?', suggests an interrogation of the concept of theft. What, then, is theft? Theft is property itself. Thus, he argues, dispossession is inherently a recursive act, resolving the apparent paradox: in the colonial context, the creation of proprietary title and the theft of that title are combined into one moment, in which Indigenous people are seen as owners only retrospectively.[131] This is 'recursive dispossession'. In short, 'dispossession is a process in which novel proprietary relations are generated but under structural conditions that demand their simultaneous negation.'[132] 'Theft' is thus understood not as the transfer of property *per se*, but as negation of proprietary right. Because colonialism is a much more total form of alienation than mere capitalist property as such, to shift the focus to exploitation rather than loss of land, as Marx correctly did in Europe, does not adequately respond to the structural problems posed by colonialism.

In the context of settler colonialism, while the dispossessed may well become invested in newly formed relations, the drive towards elimination places these relations in conflict with new structural conditions. 'In effect,' says Nichols, 'the dispossessed may come to "have" something they cannot use, except by alienating it to another'—what Lakota philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. refers to as 'the right only to sell'.[133] Whereas the 'standard' form of property rights is the conjunction of the exclusive rights to acquire, to use, and to alienate, Indigenous people are entitled only to alienate. For them, property exists only as its negation; possession, therefore, is the paradoxical *effect* of dispossession, not its precondition: 'In sum, the recursive movement at work here maybe plotted as one of transformation (making), transference (taking), and retroactive attribution (belated ascribing).... Contrary to Stirner's direct assertion, what belongs to no one can in fact be stolen.'[134]

---

[131] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 8.

[132] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 32.

[133] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 32; Vine Deloria Jr. quoted in Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 33.

[134] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 33–4, 34.

Nichols is careful to emphasise, following such scholars as Patrick Wolfe, Angela Davis, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, that 'dispossession is characterized by synoptic evaluation: we are not concerned here with one particular event or action taken in relative isolation but rather with the overall effect of a macrohistorical process.'[135] Individual acts of dispossession must not be conflated with its structural nature: 'if we object to gentrification as a whole, it does not mean we think each specific event is a moral equivalent—that each micro interaction is necessarily morally objectionable when taken in isolation.'[136] Further, the similarities between different contexts must be considered as well as the differences. Gaelic Ireland, for instance, did have forms of property prior to colonialism and dispossession was a more protracted process. In this case, the double moment of dispossession includes alongside theft not the absolute creation of proprietary title but the transformation of that title from one governed by Gaelic relations and Gaelic law to one governed by colonial property relations modelled after English law. For many hundreds of years, Gaels indeed had rights to their property other than the 'right' to alienation. But, as in Nichols' argument, this was predicated on a structural relationship of colonialism which was *ultimately* aimed at the negation of such right—namely, the colonial regime. Thus, as discussed in the next chapter, the transformation of property in Ireland took place through widespread dispossession in forms similar to those of other colonial contexts, such as the instrument of 'surrender and regrant'. The recognition of title was not always only retrospective, as old nobles could still be entitled to their land, but their ongoing legitimacy was contingent on a repudiation of the old social order and an acceptance of the new. Moreover, the experience of the great mass of Gaelic people, the direct producers, was transformed entirely in the long run. The essential difference Nichols describes therefore still applies in this context, despite the pre-existence of property: unlike in England, where peasants were considered the rightful holders of their land until they were not, in Ireland, any such right was contingent on subsumption into the colonial order, and, hence, surrender.

---

[135] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 87.
[136] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 91.

Drawing on the work of Wolfe, Nichols emphasises that it is significant that the effects of settler colonialism have been largely uniform across different settler states despite often drastic differences in the specific features of those colonial projects.[137] 'Structure', therefore, must not be taken too literally as a term, which runs the risk of obscuring the processual, recursive, and amplificatory—in short, the dialectical—features of dispossession. These processes build on themselves to produce supervenient phenomena, a fact which should emphasise the relation between structure and event, even if individual events cannot always be taken as exactly embodying the features of the structure.[138] This is no small point: in the political thought of colonising societies, structural violence has often been considered as impersonal, acting anonymously and autonomously, independent of human will. Theorists such as John Stuart Mill have described the manner in which individuals come to be dominated by the societies in which they live, but political theorists have too often ignored the fact that some individuals are dominated not only by society as a whole, but by specific members of that society.[139] Thus, Nichols analytically separates the critique of alienation, 'domination of *us by ourselves*', from the critique of what he terms 'diremption', 'domination of *some by others*'.[140] Since at least Marx's time, critiques of capitalism have been concerned with both alienation and diremption, but Marxist critiques of colonialism tend to focus on the fact of enclosure, not on the specificities of the losses caused to Indigenous peoples. Nichols thus insists that a comprehensive critique of dispossession must account not only for the phenomenon of alienation, but also for that of diremption.[141] If Wood shows us how understanding the history of enclosures matters in understanding capitalism's unique mode of operation, then understanding how dispossession occurs is equally fundamental for colonialism.

---

[137] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 90.
[138] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 91–2.
[139] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 93–4.
[140] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 95.
[141] Nichols, *Theft is Property!,* 97–98.

Studying colonial regimes

So far, the discussion of colonial property relations and the colonial regime has been fairly abstract. If we are to understand their concrete realisations in Irish history, it is important to have a historical framework which can relate their evolution to broader changes in the organisation of their society and which is sensitive to differences in forms of law, property, etc. at a given point in history as well as to changes over long periods of time—in short, an approach which unites what are sometimes separated as synchronic and diachronic analysis. As Esteve Morera shows, it is such a framework that Antonio Gramsci provides.[142] This section looks at that framework and considers how, in the colonial context, it can describe the how relationship between property and regime unfolds.

In *Gramsci's Historicism: A Realist Interpretation*, Morera explains the sociological historicist theory which underlies much of Gramsci's writings:

> In Gramsci, history and theory are not two separate disciplines; they are not conceived as a discipline of precise empirical research and a theory of society, a narrative of facts and sociology which formulates some general laws. Gramsci's historicism, to the extent that it is a theory of historiography, is the demand for a history with depth, and hence, a history that understands any situation in terms of the confluence of structures of different durations. Furthermore, it is premised on the possibility of identifying general tendencies, or historical laws, and networks of necessity which allows him to compare different social processes. Comparative history, it was argued earlier, is premised on the conception that history is not simply the narration of unique events.[143]

Gramsci's method thus unites culture, class, and institutions through a historicist approach. Perhaps the best summary of Gramsci's way of thinking about political economy comes from his

---

[142] See Morera, *Historicism*, 139, 83.

[143] Morera, *Historicism*, 148.

own writings, when he declared:

> The historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political (though such forms of unity do have their importance too, and not in a purely formal sense); the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between State or political society and 'civil society'.[144]

The domination of the ruling classes occurs not simply by virtue of their direct suppression of other classes, but also by virtue of the active and passive support they receive from allied classes. As a result, they are able to exercise effective control over subaltern classes, who cannot mount an effective challenge: 'The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States.'[145] For Gramsci, 'state' is an expansive concept. 'In politics,' he writes, 'the error occurs as a result of an inaccurate understanding of what the State (in its integral meaning: dictatorship + hegemony) really is.'[146] Hence the fetishised notion of the nightwatchman state, which in attempting to reduce the state's role to an abstract minimum, misses out that if such a state were ever to exist, its primary functions would simply be exercised directly by the ruling class.[147] Rather, 'it should be remarked that the general notion of State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion).'[148] Gramsci's term for the specific configuration of class unity and domination is 'historical bloc', of which Morera writes:

> In short, Gramsci proposes the concept of a historical bloc as the

---

[144] Gramsci, 52.
[145] Gramsci, 52.
[146] Gramsci, 329.
[147] Gramsci, 261.
[148] Gramsci, 262–3.

necessary unity of several levels. The structure is conceived first as the terrain of the interchange between humanity and nature, an interchange that constitutes the process of production. In this process we can distinguish the technological elements, the labour process, and the classes that result from the organization of this process. For Gramsci, the element of class is the link between the structure and the superstructure, in so far as the latter contains the forms of organization that guarantee the development of the structure in its present form. It is because of this fundamental link that the concept of class plays a fundamental role in Gramsci's theory of history. The superstructure, too, is divided into several levels, notably the private institutions of civil society and the state. There are, moreover, processes of long duration, such as is the case with the cosmopolitan character of Italian intellectuals, which are not linked to the structure of the present historical bloc, though they continue to play an important role in the determination of its character.[149]

The historical bloc is Gramsci's retort to the base-superstructure metaphor, his answer to the rhetorical questions, 'In what sense can one identify politics with history, and hence all of life with politics? How then could the whole system of super-structures be understood as distinctions within politics…?'[150] Clearly, while a major change—such as in the mode of production, but also smaller changes such as a change in class alliances—would on his account imply an effective reconstitution of the state along new lines, states are significant in being able to maintain institutional continuity despite such changes: superstructures which persist beyond their base. This is where Gramsci really shines and his writings and the concepts they develop provide an extremely fertile field for this type of analysis, the great bulk of which we must pass over. But in this sense, his concept of the state positions it as the dialectical mediation of the contradiction

---

[149] Morera, *Historicism*, 141–2.
[150] Gramsci, 137.

between social continuity and social change, as Morera explains:

despite Sassoon's belief that diachronic and synchronic analysis are incompatible, they are both necessary for a full understanding of a historical bloc, for we need to know both the relation that exists between any elements at any point in time as well as their process of transformation during a historical period. Gramsci's analysis of situations is precisely this, namely, the investigation of how temporal processes of different durations intertwine at any given moment in time, so that their long term causal process and their contemporary relations can be clearly understood. Although Gramsci is primarily concerned with the function of political intervention in social change he does not reject the thesis of the primacy of the structure in the last instance.[151]

This framing of the state is extremely useful in understanding how, over time, social and cultural formations accrete or accumulate in a given society, providing a degree of historical determinacy or 'inertia' that can shapes relations between various social groups and the historical bloc, inevitably producing conflict. If this true even within a given state's context, it is doubly true in colonial contexts, which by their nature entail the bringing together of hitherto discrete sets of preaccumulations under the auspices of the historical bloc of the coloniser. While colonialism is a process which unfolds over a long period of time, it is therefore necessarily a rupturing process, breaking continuity—if slowly—in the colonised society. If we can talk about the relationship between state formation in Tudor England and the development of capitalism, 'formation' is perhaps not comprehensive enough to describe the impositions which occurred in Ireland. Gramsci's vocabulary and grammar were, after all, the product of a place and time in which capitalism was dominant. While these can be useful for conceptualising other societies, they need contextually appropriate extension. In the middle of the previous millennium, England may have been ahead of its time in respect of anticipating forms of political and social organisation which

---

[151] Morera, *Materialism*, 139.

would largely be generalised by millennium's end, but it would be a mistake to directly apply Gramsci's concept of a state to Ireland. As Brendan Smith writes,

> If Ireland refuses to sit comfortably in an analysis that identifies state-formation as the key historical development in the late medieval British Isles, within a broader European setting its apparent awkwardness can be seen as anything but untypical. 'When we turn to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries', John Watts observes in his *The Making of Polities: Europe 1300–1500*, published in 2009, 'we enter a period with no meaningful political and constitutional narrative.' In a sentence that could have been written with Ireland in mind, he continues: 'Narratives of state growth … tend to neglect the frequent and dramatic collapse of central authority in this period … to understate the complexity of the world in which institutions operated, and to ignore the less state-like power structures that also held sway across Europe.' Operating in the shadow of the huge and impressive edifice that is the historiography of medieval England, it is all too easy for historians of Ireland to lose sight of the extent to which English developments in this period were unusual within the wider Western European context. Including the Irish experience as fully in interpretations of the later as of the earlier medieval centuries has the potential to both complicate and enrich our understanding of the British and European, as well as the Irish, past.[152]

The degree of 'historical unity' which existed in Italy in 1930, and perhaps in England much earlier, was absent in the Ireland of the 1500s, which had numerous independent polities—Gaelic lordships in direct continuity with pre-English Ireland, Gaelicised Old English lordships, and New English lordships with much closer ties to Britain (all of which was grossly complicated by the Reformation)—which were in relation with each other, and among which the 'New English'

---

[152] Brendan Smith, 'Introduction' in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 7–8.

may have been dominant, but which cannot really be said to belong to the same state. While Gramsci's conception of the state is already expansive, therefore, encompassing both 'state proper' and civil society as unified by a specific configuration of social groups, there is no reason to think that we cannot further expand his method to encompass nearly the totality of social relations insofar as they are dominated by colonial processes of dispossession—that is, to the colonial regime.

Law

If Gramsci argued that the state is not purely juridical, this does not mean that there is no juridical element. Especially when we consider property, law is an important means by which it is constituted and realised by the state and other ruling class institutions. Even where law is not directly utilised in dispossession, or is of lesser importance, the relative clarity of law as compared with other social phenomena makes it well-suited to exposing the dynamics of the political-social-ideological nexus that it often mediates. At least in theory, alienation can occur in a non-colonial context through strictly legal means. From the perspective of the colonised, the same does not apply to diremption, which is premised upon conquest, usurpation, and subjugation which runs counter to the internal logic of the colonised society. At the same time, while colonial dispossession can and often does occur through naked violence, it can also occur through indirect coercion, including via legal apparatuses instituted by colonisers. In practice, it can be difficult to distinguish legal and extra-legal means; moreover, for the colonised, the difference between the two is largely irrelevant as they both amount to diremption. As this section shows, through an examination of the law, a lot can be revealed about the operation of the colonial regime—in general and specifically in Ireland.

This point is clearly illustrated by Patrick Wolfe's *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* and Brenna Bhandar's *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*, each of which analyses the role that law plays in dispossession over time and in different colonial contexts. It is no coincidence, either, that both authors employ the word 'regime' to denote the social structures they discuss; while my use of the term carries specific

theoretical content, the expansiveness of the normal use of the term makes it is well-suited to analysing the relationship between law and property in colonial contexts, which implicate a wide range of social phenomena in the drive to expropriate land. Though Maïa Pal does not use the term 'regime' in her 2020 book, *Jurisdictional Accumulations: An Early Modern History of Law, Empires, and Capital*, which applies a political Marxist framework to a colonial context, she easily could have; it is an entirely suitable word to apply to the relationship between law and society that she describes:

> A historical materialist approach starts from the premise that law needs to be understood as process, not as a thing-in-itself (Marks, 2007: 203). Law is manifested in and as social relations that continuously structure the manifold of human relationships. If this claim is in line with a more general move in mainstream legal theory since the New Haven School (McDougall & Lasswell, 1996), historical materialism in addition implies a holistic, structural, and 'totalising' conception of law.[153]

Law is less explicitly identified in *Traces of History*, but in the more expansive sense Pal uses it, Wolfe's work describes how the racial structures of a number of colonies have been constructed by settler colonialism and have become foundational to the legal structures of property and state. Perhaps chief among the numerous theoretical contributions Wolfe makes in this regard is the concept of preaccumulations. When colonisers arrive, they not only encounter multitudes of unique preconditions produced by generations of Indigenous inhabitants, but they also bring centuries of their own preconditions along with them. As we saw in the previous section, a historicist understanding of society draws attention to the way that its features become accumulated over time. When these become salient in a colonial encounter, they are figured as preaccumulations. Of course, conceiving of the process of colonialism as beginning with a single moment of 'first contact' is clearly a mythic oversimplification, a conceptual convenience in the

---

[153] Pal, 73.

best cases and in others simply not tenable. Contacts between Ireland and Britain, for example, long predated colonialism. Nevertheless, the establishment of a colonial relation does mark a major shift in the relationship between two societies, giving some of their features new salience. The concept of preaccumulations is derived from the more familiar 'primitive accumulation', but differs in that while the latter are part of the internal process of a society, preaccumulations become activated externally, 'coming into play in the presence of a countervailing plenitude. Colonialism did not impress its will on a blank state.'[154]

Wolfe argues that the disparity between the colonised and the colonisers, which conditioned colonisation, was quantitative: as colonialism unfolded, colonised peoples had a shrinking ability to reproduce their society and its relations relative to the colonisers' ability to reproduce and expand theirs. Thus centuries long history of the wealth and violence of capitalism were brought in short order to many colonised societies and Europeans were able to develop relatively free from harassment.[155] Yet the effect of Wolfe's argument is to highlight the importance of qualitative elements. For example, he explains how the preaccumulations of Indigenous societies 'could themselves facilitate colonial expansion…. The land that settlers seize is already value-added. There is no such thing as wilderness, only depopulation.'[156] In North America, settlers saw a land of great abundance, but they ascribed this quality to nature or to God rather than to the inhabitants of those lands: 'In replacing Indigenous agency with that of the cosmos, the concept of nature enabled improvements effected by Natives to figure as serendipity. This is an enduring settler theme.'[157] Ideologically, settlers assimilated not only the product of colonised peoples but also the peoples themselves to nature, 'placing them on the receiving end of Cartesian dualism and, accordingly, as in need of control.'[158] From a colonial perspective, colonialism therefore appears as nothing other than an extension of colonisers' existing

---

[154] Wolfe, 20.
[155] Wolfe, 21–2.
[156] Wolfe, 22–3.
[157] Wolfe, 23.
[158] Wolfe, 23.

interactions with the natural world. This naturalisation of colonialism can persist even after nominal independence, as the features of the colonised society may be taken for granted—rather than being recognised as the products of that very society. While historians and other academics may recognise that precolonial societies had wealth, industry, religion, philosophy, and complex social organisation, the moment of first contact all too readily marks a horizon after which these cease to be historically relevant. To echo another of Lloyd's arguments, this way of thinking, whether explicit or implicit, 'takes colonialism at its word' and reproduces the colonists' own structural relation to the historicity of the peoples they assault. [159] The denial of preaccumulations at all levels, up to dispossession and elimination, is the very premise and mode of operation of the colonial regime. By corollary, recognising them is essential to anticolonialism.

Recognising the need to acknowledge historical specificities, Pal goes further than Wolfe in studying the legal qualitative aspect of colonial relations, putting political Marxism at the centre of her analysis:

> the legal parameters of a society are determined by the conditions for the exploitation and appropriation of land and resources, and the distribution of production between appropriators and producers (i.e. social property relations). The contribution of Political Marxism lies in there also being scope to incorporate, in the concept of social property relations, the occurrence of legal relations as determining conditions for appropriation and production. Political Marxism encapsulates the fact that legal relations can take determining forms in various societies.[160]

Law, she notes, should therefore be understood as a social process that mediates between the apparent distinction between property right and property relation.[161] Law legitimises the operations of the state by

---

[159] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 23.
[160] Pal, 94.
[161] Pal, 95.

a priori annul[ling] or disregard[ing] the power relations that structure the decision-making process. This condition is essential to upholding the state's *raison d'être* as a neutral and transhistorical symbol of law and order. In response, social groups engage in different struggles (legal, political, ideological) so as to tamper, counter, or absorb the effects of the dominant classes' influence filtered through the rule of law.[162]

While a discussion of law might seem to focus on abstractions instead of material political struggles, Pal shows that Marxism operates by exposing the 'real determinants' of law.[163] Law does not enforce itself; the mediation between the abstract goals of law and the concrete goals of a society's members is imperfect. One of the principal tasks of the state, though, is to mediate between these. Other abstractions—political doctrines, intellectual currents, ideology—might be less explicitly formulated than law, but as Gramsci's writings suggest, the 'integral state' is also concerned with mediating these in order to secure a specific realisation of class rule. While my conception of the colonial regime is more expansive than that of the state, the same principles apply—struggles over property relations are, to a large extent, struggles over law.

Even more than Wolfe and Pal, Brenna Bhandar specifically calls our attention to the role that law plays in structuring and mediating the relationships between appropriation, race, and colonial violence:

> Property laws and racial subjectivity developed in relation to one another, an articulation I capture with the concept of racial regimes of ownership.… If the possession of land was (and remains) the ultimate objective of colonial power, then property law is the primary means of realizing this desire.… modern property laws emerged along with and through colonial modes of appropriation.[164]

---

[162] Pal, 97–8.
[163] Pal, 98.
[164] Bhandar, 2–3.

Law cannot be treated as a merely symbolic, synchronic, or instrumental phenomenon, but must be accounted for historically and as a part of the complex social relations attendant in a regime. For Gramsci, law is a key instrument of the ruling class, a negating force which yields positive changes in accordance with that class's demands:

> 'If every State tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilisation and of citizen (and hence of collective life and of individual relations), and to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and to disseminate others, then the Law will be its instrument for this purpose (together with the school system, and other institutions and activities). It must be developed so that it is suitable for such a purpose—so that it is maximally effective and productive of positive results….
>
> The Law is the repressive and negative aspect of the entire positive, civilising activity undertaken by the State.[165]

While Gramsci was writing in the context of capitalist modernity, even the earlier periods of Irish history show law assuming this role in the reconfiguration of property relations, political geography, and the like. Bhandar makes the colonial angle explicit, drawing on an established literature that shows the role that property ownership plays in the constitution of the political subject:

> [t]he English common law of property [ultimately] became the sine qua non of civilized life and society…. The colonial encounter produced a racial regime of ownership that persists into the present, creating a conceptual apparatus in which justifications for private property ownership remain bound to a concept of the human that is thoroughly racial in its makeup…. Being an owner and having the capacity to appropriate have long been considered prerequisites for attaining the status of the proper subject of modern law, a fully

---

[165] Gramsci, 246–7.

individuated citizen-subject.[166]

Consequently, '[c]olonialism took root on the grounds of this juridical formation, twinning the production of racial subjects with an economy of private property ownership that continues to prevail over indigenous and alternate modalities of relating to and using land and its resources.'[167] Against the view that legal forms are merely 'superstructural' and therefore of lesser explanatory importance, Bhandar takes the approach shared by Fanon, Gramsci, political Marxists, and others in considering legal relationships to be part and parcel of the basic property system. As such, changes in property law, are not mere reflections of social change but are a constituent part of that change. Following Cedric Robinson, Bhandar suggests that racial regimes of ownership exhibit the following three aspects: a) they are not inevitable, but neither are they arbitrary; b) consequently, they must be continually renewed; c) as such, 'the constituent parts of the racial regime of ownership' are 'recombinant [in] nature'.[168] This means that the same underlying drive (dispossession and exploitation) can manifest in a myriad of different articulations according to the social and historical circumstances in which it finds itself. Even where a specific system of racial hierarchy is present, its expression can take different forms.[169] Thus the apparent disunity of a colonial regime and its constituent property relations over time is not necessarily reflective of a fundamental break in the logic of the system, so long as the fundamental structure of the relationship (colonisers dispossessing and exploiting the colonised) remains in place. Because the colonial regime takes colonial property relations as its central point of reference, it can explain both unity and disunity.

Being sensitive to dispossession, Bhandar like Nichols rejects the view that the institution of formal land titling programs, which transform land into private property, are beneficial to the poor by allowing them to make 'dead capital' more liquid—i.e., by alienating the land to 'productive' use. She argues that these programs 'are the contemporary manifestation of a legal

---

[166] Bhandar, 4–5.
[167] Bhandar, 7.
[168] Bhandar, 9.
[169] Bhandar 9–17.

device that has had a long and pivotal position in the appropriation and transformation of indigenous lands into individually held property.'[170] In the colonial context, land titling has been used as a tool to replace traditional ways of relating to land with others more suited to capitalist accumulation: 'The imposition of fee simple title was (and perhaps remains) the juridical expression of an economic system and philosophical worldview that posits individual private property ownership as a necessary precondition for individual and national development and progress.'[171] This is an important point to consider in late 19th/early 20th century Ireland, when great numbers of Irish people received title under British land reforms which served as the basis for the independent Irish state—enabling its subsequent alienation and their proletarianization.

Her analysis reveals much about the goals and methods of colonisers. Over time, British colonial administrators developed what became known as the Torrens system, first employed in Western Australia, which was designed to 'render land as fungible as possible'.[172] In the Torrens system, a centralised land registry records the owner of each plot of land, this record in itself constituting proof of ownership. Previously, land sale had to be accompanied by proof that the title was conveyed validly from owner to owner all the way from the original land grant (or theft).[173] It was thus, at least in principle, a historically sensitive approach which could reflect social memory, kinship ties, or other things which pre-existed colonial property relations. Land registration renders these legally irrelevant: 'Perhaps the most radical aspect of a system of title by registration is that it renders all prior ownership claims irrelevant. Title by registration precludes any consideration of what was there before. This is more akin to a logic of elimination, radically negating what was there before, based on the doctrine of terra nullius.'[174] Notably, the Torrens system also sidesteps the historically developed (preaccumulated) English system of property law. However, Bhandar's analysis shows that it would be a mistake to think that this system dispenses with these

---

[170] Bhandar 78.
[171] Bhandar 79–80.
[172] Bhandar, 82.
[173] Bhandar, 86–7.
[174] Bhandar, 84–5, 95.

preaccumulations altogether. The highly abstracted view of landed property which was imposed on Western Australia is itself the product of a long history of colonialism; the legal apparatus which subverts Indigenous and English law came into being only through centuries of interaction between colonised and coloniser in colonial contexts around the world. In this respect, the Torrens system is for the coloniser the logical, rationalised conclusion of colonial property. While it was not imposed in Ireland, the drive to accumulate—and therefore to eliminate—which it perfects is a feature of all colonial property.

Bhandar's book is also notable in its inclusion of a substantial section on Ireland which emphasises the point that earlier colonial histories can provide preaccumulations for later ones, giving modern European colonialism a unity across time and space. Comparative analyses of colonialism often do not include Ireland, perhaps because the geographical and temporal qualities of the colonisation of Ireland fit uneasily into frameworks which have largely been developed on the study of other colonial processes for which the context of Irish colonialism is taken for granted as a constituent of the English state—Lloyd argued that Ireland's geographical proximity and integration with its coloniser gave it a peculiar stance as compared with more remote colonies.[175] Even during periods in Irish history when England did not control the whole island, it was from an early stage a domineering—if not the dominant—force on it. Even without English hegemony, the England-Ireland relation was of utmost importance in Ireland, a fact which was firmly marked in people's consciousnesses by 1480 when, as Christopher Maginn writes, 'the view prevailed in both Ireland and England that a state of war existed between the English and the Irish.'[176] Furthermore, by the mid-17th century, when the colonisation of other parts of the world was still in a relatively early stage, parallel processes in Ireland were in an advanced state. From the vantage point of other colonies, then, there may not be any apparent reason to consider Ireland as much other than an appendage of the British Empire. Aside from her substantive arguments, therefore, the fact that Bhandar pays attention to Ireland by itself makes an important historical and

---

[175] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 33.
[176] Christopher Maginn in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 308.

theoretical point: if processes of colonialism, including their ideological and legal attributes, are considered to be dependent on their preaccumulations and therefore on the historical development of both the colonised and colonising societies, the specific ways in which England's early colonisation of Ireland unfolded are likely to have shaped the ways that later colonialisations occurred—a point also made by, among others, Wood.[177] In effect, this is an acknowledgement that the England which went on to colonise other parts of the world was not only a product of the England-Ireland relation but was also continuously reproduced in accordance with that colonial, social relationship—just as much as Ireland was. Likewise, the last five hundred years or more of Irish history cannot be understood removed from global colonial processes. Ireland's colonial property relations and colonial regime are therefore more significant than might be appreciated at first glance. This substantiates a methodological argument which I have already suggested: namely, that understanding the Irish case on its own terms is an important prerequisite to understanding its relationship to global colonialism.

That conflict was often sited in the domain of law in Ireland is unsurprising but significant. Law occupies a particular intersection between the material organisation of society and its ideological expression. Laws are not always realised in practice, but nor does law exist separately from enforcement. In the colonial context, where law is used simultaneously and seemingly paradoxically as an instrument of theft and as a weapon to secure the wealth of the conquerers, this fact is particularly brute. 'In imitation of practices becoming widespread in England from the late thirteenth century,' Brendan Smith writes, 'settler lords in Ireland made increasing use of legal devices designed to ensure that land was transmitted to male descendants only…. Partitions of estates among female heirs had the potential to weaken the English military position.'[178] As we have seen, Bhandar holds that property law, as expressed in colonialism, is central to the concepts of enlightenment and modernity. In this she follows not only Fanon, who 'wrote incisively of how the ontology of settler and native was produced through a system of property,' but also such

---

[177] Wood, *Origin*, 155.
[178] Brendan Smith, 'Disaster and Opportunity', 266.

theorists as Robinson, Cornel West, and Cheryl Harris.[179] She also sees clear parallels between her work and Wolfe's.[180] As her book's title suggests, the concept of a racial regime of ownership is central to this analysis: "[c]olonialism took root on the grounds of this juridical formation, twinning the production of racial subjects with an economy of private property ownership that continues to prevail over indigenous and alternate modalities of relating to and using land and its resources.[181]" Thus while it is expressed in a myriad of complex ways according to other social factors, and is experienced differently by different people and classes of people according to their characteristics and positions, the colonial relation is essentially singular and a result of the very specific relationships, legal and otherwise, which structure a society.

Studying Ireland's colonial regime

The colonial regime has been suggested as an analytically productive concept to clarify the means by which colonial property relations are implemented, taking account of social totality. However, it has also been emphasised that the concept of the colonial regime must be able to account for historical specificity. Looking at the mediation of totality and specificity is where Wolfe's approach becomes particularly important: his formulation of the 'regime of race' is a progenitor of my understanding of the colonial regime. Further, according to a persuasive interpretation by Eamonn Slater & Terrence McDonough, Marx also implicitly employed the concept of the regime in his analysis of Ireland. Introducing these strands of thought, this section facilitates the move from the foregoing discussion on the abstraction of the colonial regime as such towards a discussion of the specific colonial regime which developed in Ireland.

Wolfe acknowledges a certain unity of global settler colonialism, but the primary emphasis is for him on the specificities of particular colonial contexts. Along with an analysis of the relationship between the racialisation of Jews in Europe and settler colonialism, Wolfe's case

---

[179] Bhandar 6, 7

[180] Bhandar, 22.

[181] Bhandar, 7.

studies are the settler colonies called Australia, the United States, Brazil, and Israel. On Wolfe's analysis, 'Race… is a trace of history' and therefore operates differently in each of these contexts, according to the particular colonial histories that have unfolded there: 'Racialised distinctions such as these bespeak different histories, different forms of expropriation—in one case of labour, in another of land. Moreover, such differences are site-specific.'[182] Whereas, in the United States, race is 'rigorously polarised', in Brazil it exists on more of a continuum; in the US, the 'one-drop rule' excluded people of African ancestry from becoming white; in Brazil, '"racial democracy" has sought to whiten the African Brazilian population'.[183] For such reasons, Wolfe argues, regardless of their similarities in terms of skin tone, the historical experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Australia correspond less closely to those of African Americans in the United States than to those of Indigenous peoples.[184] To substantiate this argument, Wolfe casts race in terms of land and labour:

> A focus on colour (or non-Whiteness) obscures such historically produced differences—in this case, between a history of bodily exploitation and one of territorial dispossession. A relationship premised on the exploitation of enslaved labour requires the continual reproduction of its human providers. By contrast, a relationship premised on the evacuation of Native people's territory requires that the peoples who originally occupied it should never be allowed back….
>
> What matters, then, is not phenotypical endowment. It is not as if social processes come to operate on a naturally present set of bodily attributes that are already given prior to history. Rather, racial identities are constructed in and through the very process of their enactment…. race is colonialism speaking…[185]

---

[182] Wolfe, 2.
[183] Wolfe, 2.
[184] Wolfe, 1.
[185] Wolfe, 3, 5.

Wolfe notes that '[a]s John Locke provided, in texts that would profoundly influence Euroamerican colonial ideology, private property accrued from the admixture of labour and land,' (a point which Bhandar developed considerably and with special attention to the role of Ireland in informing this problematic).[186] Thus in the United States, race and the property of whites emerged from the application of enslaved African labour to stolen Indigenous land, 'a primitive accumulation if ever there was one.'[187] The conjunction of these and other historical relationships provided the context for '[t]he expansion and consolidation of US settler society'.[188] Because different preaccumulations contextualised the histories and structures of race which developed in other colonies, Wolfe questions the utility of 'race' as a single, universal framework. While this understanding is contested, his emphasis on historical specificity and the centring of land and labour in his analysis brings him into conversation with the other scholars we have examined and makes him especially useful in looking at the case of Ireland.

Ireland has a particularly contradictory relationship to global structures of colonialism and white supremacy, and was, furthermore, first invaded by England centuries before the emergence of modern structures of race, which on Wolfe's account really occurs in the late 18th century.[189] Along with the political considerations discussed in the introduction, the difficulties of fitting it into rigid conceptual categories is perhaps another reason why Ireland is often not addressed alongside other cases of colonialism. I would like to suggest, however, that this theoretical uneasiness can be as much of an asset as a detriment. Attempting to settle major theoretical questions—such as how and when Irish people started to be considered as white, whether race is reducible to colonialism, or whether Wolfe is correct to emphasise local specificity over global unity—requires an intensive and sustained historical comparative analysis which, while being valuable in its own right, is secondary for the purposes of understanding the colonisation of this specific country. The distance between Ireland and other colonies which exists in the literature

---

[186] Bhandar, ch. 1.
[187] Wolfe, 3.
[188] Wolfe, 4.
[189] Wolfe, 8.

facilitates a critical reformulation of concepts which helps to illuminate Irish history in a way which a more straightforward comparative analysis might miss.

What is clear is that Wolfe's commitment to the aforementioned principle that the terms and theoretical concepts which are used to explain a phenomenon should be derived from the study of that phenomenon is a major strength of his analysis and directly contributes to the utility and flexibility of his conclusions. Perhaps the most significant of these is that race is a major consequence of colonialism. He writes:

> In historical practice, the ideology of race is intrinsically performative, in the sense classically espoused by J. L. Austin and John Searle: rather than simply describing human groups, it brings them into being as inter-relating social categories with behavioural prescriptions to match. Racialisation refers to this active productivity of race, whereby colonialism refashions its human terrain.[190]

Wolfe's structural methodology leads him to search for social structures which give rise to and embody the phenomena that he describes. Race is an complicated phenomenon that dominates all aspects of life, meaning that structures such as the state and the family, though they be extremely extensive in their own right, do not fully encompass it. And while the previous chapter suggests that the economic categories of Marxist political thought are important because they describe the fundamental conditions of human existence, this does not mean that they are conceptually sufficient for all purposes. Yet while Wolfe seeks comprehensiveness, he also seeks particularity. His emphasis is on the differences between colonial projects, rather than on their unity. This is not, however, to deny that they operate in unity: while he does not treat white supremacy as a unifying global *structure*, he still considers white supremacy and whiteness to be the 'overriding goal' and 'common factor' respectively of racial systems globally, for example.[191]

---

[190] Wolfe, 10.
[191] Wolfe, 18.

The concept of a *regime* of race is Wolfe's solution to this problem. Race itself is treated as one dialectically changing process among many which together organise all of society. Wolfe writes that

> racial doctrine is [only] one among a number of resources that a given regime of race coordinates and mobilises, others being economic, political, moral, mythic, legal, institutional, sexual, and aesthetic—the whole gamut of social discourse. I use the term 'regime' to express this comprehensiveness. Conceptually, the idea of a regime is indebted to Marcel Mauss's 'total social fact'. Semantically, however, the unwieldiness of Mauss's term aside, the word 'fact' is too static and too politically neutral for what I want to express, which, apart from being mobile and active (race being high-maintenance), is quintessentially political, race being an instrument of overlordship….
>
> Throughout this book, therefore, regimes of race do not figure as faits accomplis, as transcending history, but as ever-incomplete projects whereby colonisers repetitively seek to impose and maintain White supremacy. There is nothing stable about race, nothing unchallengeable. Even in the heart of the metropolis...[192]

The historical relationship between structures of differentiation in Europe, in Ireland, and in other colonies is complex and much disputed and cannot be addressed without first understanding what happened in Ireland. Thus, while the use of Wolfe's work in this context demands an eventual assessment of racialisation in relation to Ireland, and while we cannot examine the merits of Wolfe's work without understanding what he says about race, for the purposes of my analysis of Ireland, that level of abstraction must be suspended as I begin where Wolfe does, i.e., with the land. Even if, in Ireland, colonialism did not result in something we can equate with modern race, it may exhibit some similarities with other colonies by virtue of having

---

[192] Wolfe, 18–19.

emerged in similar circumstances and through similar processes of conquest and dispossession. Thus, while capital can hide its political character through economic relations, colonialism, like race, is a necessarily political fact.

This fact is reflected in Marx and Engels' original writings on Ireland. As C. Desmond Greaves wrote in his introduction to the collection of these texts, it is well known that Ireland was discussed in *Capital*, '[b]ut a nation seeking national freedom thirsts after politics, not economics.'[193] What the language of regime allows is to do is to unite politics and economics in discussing the way that the process of colonialism acts as an agent in enacting theft, violence, and exploitation in its pursuit of wealth, even while fractions exist within the colonising group and various groups of colonists/philosophies of colonisation compete against each other for dominance. It rejects the apparent trend to move from analysis of class relations to an increasingly fragmentary accounting of colonisation, tending towards individualism, where colonialism is absolved historically because no individual person 'intended' any harm. The concept of the regime emphasises the essential continuities in the social, political, and economic organisation of an imposed mode of social organisation which allowed violence and exploitation to continue, accelerate, and ultimately completely transform the country regardless of what any individual or group may or may not have intended—which, nevertheless, worked out very conveniently for some (hence Nichols' emphasis on the concept of diremption). Greaves thus argues that in their work on Ireland, Marx and Engels therefore 'created an essentially new conception of Irish history based on the analytical method of historical materialism.'[194]

In this light, Ellen Hazelkorn wrote in her unpublished PhD dissertation that Marx and Engels' approach constitutes an alternative to 'the morass of Irish economic historiography left by both classicalist and nationalist opinion alike'—implicitly placing Marxism as a competitor to Irish historiography's 'revisionist' school:

---

[193] Greaves in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 12.
[194] Greaves in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 20.

By placing consideration of Ireland in the chapter dealing with accumulation, Marx has made his greatest contribution to an understanding of the Irish economy. Beating a clear, independent path between classicalist and nationalist historians, he has offered a penetrating analysis of the interdependence of the two islands that has unfortunately gone unobserved. On the one hand, classicalists and modern-day bourgeois historians want to argue that there is a clear delineation between England's intention as regard [sic] Ireland, and its effect. In other words, England did not set out to denude Ireland, it just occurred as a result of English capitalism's internal demands. On the other hand, nationalist historians argue that England, in an almost vindictive manner, sought to undermine the Irish economy and culture because it was a threat to the former's livelihood. Where Marx differs is that he stated, that in a single economy, which Ireland and England were, certain actions were, so-to-speak, capitalistically over-determined; nevertheless, the effect was dramatic and disastrous as far as Ireland was concerned. To some extent, one may argue that Marx's position is a compromise. The key, however, is that it is the law of capitalist accumulation that makes his position so revealing and incisive for one's understanding of nineteenth century Ireland. As asked above, does this then eliminate generally accepted notions of colonialism? No, it does not; rather it seeks to place consideration of colonialism in a context removed entirely from the zone of conspiratorial politics. The pattern for the anglo-Irish link was, as Engels wrote in his <u>History</u>, a direct result of the existence of and/or lack of certain natural factors, which under historical conditions were either enhanced or degraded.[195]

---

[195] Hazelkorn, 126–7.

Although they have some differences of approach, Slater & McDonough likewise demonstrate the importance of Marx and Engels' work on Ireland. For Slater & McDonough, the implied concept of the regime allows Marx to discuss changes in the England-Ireland relationship across the 'watersheds' in Irish history which have so often been central to Irish historiographical approaches. This allows them to address 'superstructural' phenomena, such as 'the character of… the Irish people' as a function of history—an insight which was, for James Connolly, revolutionary.[196] Clarifying their interpretation of Marx's understanding of the regime, Slater & McDonough reject the 'tendency to abstract a reified essential structure from a complex moving process', writing instead that:[197]

> According to Marx, the strategies mentioned above, along with others (to be discussed later), created across the long lifespan of the colonial process in Ireland were developed within the political regime but impacted on all aspects of Irish civil life. Colonialism as a social form penetrated many institutions and structures of everyday life, including political representation, the legal code between the landlord and tenant, the economy, the population structure, emigration, the ecology of agricultural production, and the physical and mental health of the native population. Therefore, although colonialism comes into being at the political level, it permeates all other level of the Irish social formation, and takes on specific forms appropriate to these levels.[198]

Wolfe's historical materialist emphasis on the total social fact becomes vital. While he does not clearly articulate the point in his introduction, his case studies show that he considered politics to be essential to the process. Writing from their explicitly Marxist perspective, Slater & McDonough suggest why this should be the case:

---

[196] See Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism'.
[197] Slater & McDonough, 160.
[198] Slater & McDonough, 160.

The specific determining factor, as suggested by Marx, in the deindustrialisation of Ireland in the nineteenth century was not due to economic conditions (either internal or external) but to a watershed reached within a long-running struggle between separate parliamentary institutions in the regime, where one institution was able to use its power to close down the other. Therefore, although the consequences of this political struggle were economic, the actual immediate determining factor must be located at the political level. As a consequence, the analytical focus on a 'prime mover' of the industrial self-interest of the metropolitan economy is not appropriate in understanding the complex changing relationships between the colonising institutions within the political level and their relationships with the Irish economy and civil society in general. The 'prime mover' approach must therefore be rejected as a form of inappropriate reductionism.[199]

Following Slater & McDonough, Eoin Flaherty summarised the development of Irish land law in a way which, in the context of the foregoing discussion, implicitly draws together the numerous theoretical trends I have engaged:

According to Wylie, modern Irish land law owes its composition to a range of predecessors, including principles of English common law grounded in Norman feudalism, and English statute law enacted both by devolved Irish parliament, and by Westminster subsequent to the implementation of the Act of Union in 1801. Land tenure in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland must therefore be interpreted in context, as a cumulative product of successive waves of colonial influence, the inconsistent eradication of indigenous legal codes governing landholding, transmission and succession,

---

[199] Slater & McDonough, 162.

political conflict, and changing local administrative structures.[200]

What is needed is an outline of this context. Somehow, it came to pass that over the course of approximately seven centuries, the colonial regime which England established in Ireland had the effect of transforming Ireland's existing Gaelic property relations into ones following the English model, dispossessing many and setting the stage for the proletarianisation of the Irish population in the twentieth century. In the process, preaccumulated elements of Gaelic and English society came into contact, evolving as they did so to provide conditions for later developments. This had enormously disruptive effects over a long period of time; one gets the impression that each successive generation in Ireland would find the society of their great grandparents completely unrecognisable. At the same time, the English never lost sight of that which had supposedly been promised by the papal bull *Laudabiliter*: that the land of Ireland was destined to be England's. A sensitive historicist framework, theoretically cognisant of exploitation and expropriation as well as the political means by which they are required, must therefore be brought to bear on the facts of Irish history in order to expose that which gives rise to them. Thus, James Connolly wrote, historical materialism provides the key to Irish history.[201]

---

[200] Flaherty, 67.
[201] James Connolly, vol. 1, 24.

3. Ireland Colonised

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the utility of the of the analytics of colonial property relations and the colonial regime, making the case by corollary that much about Irish history can be explained through the lens of colonial dispossession. Although I engage in a retelling of Irish history in order to do so, this is a theoretical dissertation, not a historiographical one. As the previous two chapters stressed, this is a preliminary work which is confined to analysis of Ireland and which aims to outline long term social processes, with the aim of facilitating future anticolonial work in Ireland and efforts to more fully integrate conceptualisations of the colonisation of Ireland with their counterparts in other places. Thus, at this stage, this work is characterised by an Irish version of what Glen Coulthard termed 'grounded normativity', a 'place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice… that inform[s] and structure[s] our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time.'[202]

In order to make the case for the import of these dynamics, I introduce numerous problematics and argumentative threads which are not here pursued to their conclusions. The narrative I outline is intended to be taken holistically rather than resting on the facts of any given illustrative case. As such, I draw on the work of historians, geographers, and other subject specialists, and—other than a few comments which gesture towards the relationship between colonial social structures and the production of knowledge—I do not aim to critique established scholarship. Rather, I aim to stitch elements of it together in light of the preceding chapters to suggest the contours of a research paradigm. Given the long period under study and the breadth of impact of colonialism, the analysis here cannot be thematically comprehensive, nor have I tried to establish a balance between different historical periods, subjects of inquiry, or the varying

---

[202] Coulthard, 13.

methodologies employed by conventional academic disciplines. The main thread of the chapter is the development of colonial property relations and the colonial regime over time. Pursuing this, I aim to make the case that these concepts fruitfully pose and answer questions about Irish history.

The historiography of Ireland is heavily weighted towards more recent developments. This is understandable, but as I am more concerned with the establishment of processes than their specific effects (other than the general effect of dispossession), my emphasis skews slightly in the other direction. Another thing to note is that it is common to frame writing about Irish history in terms of watersheds, important moments which instantiated significant change. This is not my approach. While there are indeed moments of rapid transformation, I emphasise instead how the ground was laid for these changes over many centuries by gradual changes in the operation of property and in the means of its implementation. Put another way, I stress long term continuities over short-term change. Because I present a historical narrative in multiple sections, there is inevitably a degree of periodisation in my section titles. These should be understood as indicative and overlapping rather than discrete and continuous. The stress is on structures and processes, not 'time periods' or 'phases' as such. Notably, this is somewhat different than the way Marx formulated the concept of the colonial regime, as presented by Slater & McDonough—a difference emerging from our different foci, as Marx was trying to make sense of Ireland's apparently imminent transition to capitalism. Rapid breaks have explanatory value in this context. In order to understand the fuller historical impact of colonialism, however, it is necessary to understand the nature of the society that the English conquered and the ways in which both sets of preaccumulations interacted, developed, and gave rise to new social phenomena over a long period of time. What could appear as breaks are therefore figured as consequences which became embedded in the structure of the colonial regime, many of which in turn functioned akin to preaccumulations for later interactions. Keeping with the metaphor of sedimentation, but with a different temporal emphasis, we can provisionally term this slightly expanded notion of preaccumulations 'accretions'. What this concept asks us to do is to move from the question, 'What was born and what died at this watershed?' to the question, 'What gave rise to this moment and how was it carried forward?' With this consideration in mind, let us examine the development of

Ireland's colonial property relations and Ireland's colonial regime, looking first at the context into which the English arrived.

Gaelic preaccumulations: class society in ancient Ireland

'The Irish landscape', write Matthew Stout and Geraldine Stout, 'is steeped in the cumulative remains of nine millennia of human activity.' During the Bronze Age, the population started to rise in Ireland's lowlands, and the Iron Age, beginning around the 5th century BCE in Ireland, 'witnessed the emergence of kingdoms and the consolidation of territories, defended by hilltop fortifications and linear earthworks.' As Edel Bhreathnach writes in the first chapter of the *Cambridge History of Ireland*, '[t]he Irish lived on an island, mainly a temperate landmass…. The sea and its main rivers offered the key points of access into inland communication networks, and coastal, island and riverine communities were the first to engage with traders, raiders and visitors.'[203] However, Ireland was far from being isolated or disconnected from the wider world.[204] From the 5th century CE, it 'underwent radical change…. Foremost… was the introduction of Christianity early in the fifth century. Its arrival is also indicative of closer contacts with the Roman world, which facilitated the spread of technological advances.[205]' This time period also saw the origination of the surviving texts on Gaelic law, an important source on early Ireland.[206] According to Fergus Kelly, they 'indicate that the basic territorial unit [was] the *túath*, conveniently translated "tribe" or "petty kingdom".'[207] It is estimated that about 150 *túatha* existed at any given time in Ireland, each one possibly having 3000 members. Each was ruled by a *rí* (king) whose powers were, at least in theory, strictly limited by law.[208] While certain people of high status, such as lawyers and poets, were exempt, most people were not permitted to travel outside of their own *túath*. Nevertheless, these people—along with kings, who had the power to entreat with their

---

[203] Bhreathnach in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol 1., 15.
[204] Bhreathnach, 16.
[205] Stout & Stout in Aalen, Whelan, & Stout, 43.
[206] Kelly, 1.
[207] Kelly, 3.
[208] Kelly, 21–5.

peers—maintained strong connections between *túatha*.[209]

However, the most important institution in Gaelic Ireland was the *fine*, or kin-group, which was defined by descent from a common great-grandfather and which 'possesses very considerable legal powers over its members. Each kin-group has its own kin-land (*fintiu*) for which every legally competent adult male in the group has some degree of responsibility.'[210] In a later chapter, Kelly expands on the nature of this property: 'Most farmland [was] *fintiu* 'kin-land'…. Each heir farm[ed] as an individual, but his fellow kinsmen [had] some control over what he [did] with the land.'[211] In addition to holding kin-land, freemen could submit to a *flaith* (lord) who advanced them land in exchange for rent, which they could eventually come to own outright.[212] Success through farming or professional practice could lead to freemen personally owning land, but the *fine* was entitled to a share if they transferred it.[213] Kelly, like many others, thus disputes Engels' contention that Gaelic Ireland had a form of 'primitive communism':

> The 1865-1901 edition of the *Ancient Laws of Ireland* almost always translates *fine* as 'tribe' rather than 'kin-group'. This misled Engels and other modern political thinkers into believing that land was held in common by all members of the *túath* in early Ireland. In fact, early Irish society clearly attached great importance to the principle of the private ownership of property, and even extended it to mines and fishing-rights….
>
> The rights enjoyed by *all* members of a *túath* on private property are extremely limited, and apply only to those who are classed as *recht* 'law-abiding person, one of legal status' (thereby excluding outlaws, slaves, and aliens).[214]

---

[209] Kelly, 4–5; Breathnach, 21.

[210] Kelly, 3–4.

[211] Kelly, 100.

[212] Kelly, 26–9.

[213] Kelly, 100.

[214] Kelly, 106.

Examples of these latter rights were access to resources: 'a quick dip of a fishing net, wood for a meal, collecting hazelnuts'.[215] Kelly also indicates that there were restrictions on hunting and trapping on owned land.[216] The fact that these were restrictions rather than total prohibitions, however, implies that there were cases in which it was permitted. While there were few restrictions placed on unowned land, there is also some evidence that people could have private rights to parts of it, such as the right of appropriation over a given tree and its produce.[217] It is fair to say, however, that the notion that Gaelic Ireland had only common property are not based in fact, nor is Peter Berresford Ellis's claim that in Ireland class was based on 'one's ability and one's service to the community' rather than property or social status.[218]

Ownership *per se*, of course, is not the point of the Marxist conception of class—rather, exploitation is what counts. In 'primitive communism' as in communism, workers are entitled, if not to the entirety of their direct product, to a full share of the social product. In class society, a portion of this share is appropriated by others. We must not forget that many in Gaelic Ireland were excluded from property. As Máire Ní Mhaonaigh reminds us, contemporary ways of thinking which survive to the present day '[express] the mentality of an elite…. the views of kings concerned with control and continuity… and ecclesiastics and scholars…. As the nature of [the *óenach*, a type of common assembly,] continues to elude us, so too does a detailed appreciation of the life of those summoned….'[219] Similarly, we must not forget that, as Alex Woolf describes, Gaelic society made significant use of slavery: 'Slavery was endemic to Ireland: the *cumal*, a slave girl, was one of the standard units of value. It is likely that many, perhaps most, households would have owned a handful of slaves who would have helped with the agrarian and household chores.'[220]

---

[215] Kelly, 106.

[216] Kelly, 108–9.

[217] Kelly, 108.

[218] Ellis, 16.

[219] Ní Mhaonaigh in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 150.

[220] Woolf in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 117.

These slaves would mostly have been captured from other *túatha* in times of war.[221] But even looking only at the free, the requirement to pay rent for access to land alone is enough to demonstrate that Gaelic Ireland was a class society.

For the time being, and for the purposes of understanding the most significant developments of the later period, we can fairly say that in Gaelic Ireland property had obligations attached and these could not be freely disposed of, nor could the property itself: even if property was personally held, the owner's *fine* generally had a sort of residual claim to it, which could be invoked, for example, if it was to be sold.[222] In this regard, despite the inaccuracies in his work, Engels' was right to suggest that Gaelic class relations entailed reciprocal obligations and were therefore not merely appropriative.[223] As such, property was not strictly private in the capitalist sense of being freely alienable and totally at the disposal of the owner. Clearly it was not public either—although in any case, this is probably not the best word to apply to a premodern society in which significant classes of people had few legal rights. It is probably better to say that Gaelic Ireland had a number of different forms of property over which people could exercise certain, often extensive, private rights that were nevertheless limited by being tied to either lordships or kin-groups. Although the specifics might be particular to Ireland, a comparison with precapitalist Europe is not out of place.

Due to the centrality of lordship and kinship in this system, it is no surprise that that collective ancestry 'remained pivotal in certain circumstances and the myth of common descent served as a flexible device.'[224] Individual ancestry was also of great importance: genealogy and oral tradition thus had, among their other functions, an important role in the legitimation of dynastic rule; this led over time to 'an archaeological stratigraphy consisting of layers' of successive histories.[225] This reflected a generally 'strong desire for a sense of connection with the

---

[221] Woolf in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 117.

[222] Kelly, 100.

[223] Engels in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 338, 341.

[224] Ní Mhaonaigh, 148.

[225] Bhreathnach, 23.

deeper past'.[226] It also mirrors the survival of pre-Christian beliefs followed by their subsumption into a Christian religious framework. Existing alongside these traditions, which had laws governing political and kinship relations, was a sophisticated tradition of land law governing everything from beekeeping to waterworks, and an expansive oral history of place known as *dindsenchas*.[227] For the inhabitants of Ireland, the landscape was a fundamental part of their society.

Ireland's interactions with the wider world continued as the centuries passed. For example, the evidence of archaeology and art history demonstrates ongoing cultural and political ties to Britain, probably sustained through intermarriage.[228] Irish monks also travelled to Europe: in earlier periods for vocational purposes, in later periods to seek safety from vikings by exploiting their reputation and training as scholars.[229] Among the many imports of the Norse to Ireland is found, according to a prevailing theory, my own surname.[230] Scandinavians made much more significant contributions to Ireland's history, however, founding important settlements which developed into Dublin, Limerick, and Waterford, among others—towns being a novelty in Ireland.[231] They also for all intents and purposes introduced coinage to Ireland in the 990s, but according to Padraig McGowan, 'in the next two centuries, the acceptance of the use of coinage was relatively slow. The absence of the use of coins in Ireland before this may reflect the existence in Ireland over the previous millennium of a relatively highly developed but localised legal code and counting arrangements that accommodated trading and exchange. [232] However, it should not be thought that the introduction of coin equates to the introduction of trade or of currency, the latter of which, Margaret Murphy points out, had long existed in various forms, 'most notably

---

[226] Carey in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 67.

[227] Bhreathnach, 24–5, 36.

[228] Bhreathnach, 17–18.

[229] Carey, 71–4.

[230] Hanks, Coates, & McClure, 'Beirne'.

[231] Woolf in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1., 113, 124.

[232] McGowan, 46; cf. Woolf, 129.

cattle'.[233] Nevertheless, she explains that an increasingly sophisticated monetary economy did develop in the area around Dublin after the Norse arrived.[234] They were also net importers of precious metals into Ireland, a fact which may have had to do with their introduction of the buying and selling of slaves, which spurred some Gaelic polities to commercialise the kidnapping of humans in a dynamic reminiscent of the later transatlantic slave trade.[235] Of note, this is probably the first time in Ireland that humans' capacity to work was treated as a commodity in a significant way.

Also during this time, agricultural innovations led to population expansion. As Stout & Stout explain, this allowed for the construction of ringforts between the 5th and 10th centuries: 'ringforts enclosed single farmsteads…. Larger, more important ringforts, which accommodated the highest grades of society, act as foci for smaller, low status sites. The pattern represents a "defence in depth" strategy for mutual protection. It may also reflect the inferior status of the occupants of the smaller ringforts….'[236] However, Irish society and industry were much more sophisticated than the simplistic pastoralism these structures can invoke in the popular imagination; the view of the Gaels as simple cattle herds is based more on colonial rhetoric than reality.[237] Iron production went on for around two thousand years in Ireland, only ending when the forests providing the requisite fuel 'receded' under later English rule.[238] Ireland was also renowned for its visual arts and handicraft, particularly in metalworking.[239] Further, while cattle especially were indeed very important to Ireland's economy, so too was tillage, especially after 800.[240] Note this point, as dating from a very early stage, but intensifying in later centuries, land use patterns and social land relations would become critical not only as the means of colonisation, but also as

---

[233] Murphy in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 387.

[234] Murphy, 388.

[235] Woolf, 116–8.

[236] Stout & Stout, 45, 47.

[237] Bhreathnach, 23–4; Murphy, 390.

[238] SJ Connolly, 50.

[239] Hawkes in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 98, 105–6.

[240] Murphy, 387.

part of its rhetorical justification.[241]

As seen in the introduction, FHA Aalen points out that among the most important accretions of this period are Ireland's literal soils, especially *plaggen*. These are not simply a natural resource but are in fact the products of human labour, literally accumulated over centuries, and bound up with other intentional transformations of the landscape, such as reclamation.[242] This demonstrates that far from being mere metaphor, the language of accumulation and accretion captures something real about how the productive labour product of a society is available for future exploitation, benign or maleficent. Marx, too, emphasises this quality of the soil in *Capital*.[243] Eamonn Slater and Ellen Hazelkorn have both drawn attention to this analysis and its implications for Irish history and for Marxist analysis more generally.[244] Slater, for example, writes in his working paper 'Marx on the Colonization of Irish Soil':

> …not only were the Irish direct producers involved in an economic class struggle in the classic Marxist understanding of it but also they and the soil they cultivated were enmeshed in an ecological form of exploitation where the soil tillers were being prevented from 'improving' the soil by their social relations to the rentier classes. And crucially both of these two social forms of conflict were themselves engulfed in a 'life and death' struggle with the British colonial regime. It is within this crushing cauldron of relentless oppression that the material conditions were laid down for the emergence of the Irish Famine, 'which consigned to the grave a million Irishmen, and forced the emigration overseas two million more' (Engels, 1986:181).[245]

We will return to this argument later, but for now the point is that labour from this Gaelic

---

[241] Vincent in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 205–6; Veach in same volume, 164.
[242] Aalen, 17.
[243] Marx, *Capital*, 860.
[244] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', Hazelkorn.
[245] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 4–5.

period was concretised in the land where it would remain available for use in future years and by future generations. English colonialism figured this dead labour as a preaccumulation which could be appropriated for personal and national gain and, ultimately, dispossessed the Irish of it under a colonial regime, a process of great historical significance.[246] The things upon the soil are equally part of what became colonial territory. As mentioned above, the widespread survival of ringforts has assured them a permanent place in Ireland's cultural imagination: over 47000 have been identified, along with 1500 *crannóga* situated on semi-artificial islands.[247] 'Unlike ringforts, a *crannóg* absorbed considerably more labour and material and presumably accommodated high-status or royal individuals.'[248] Their decline probably represents the increasing power of overkings, paralleling the broad European trend of feudalisation, as well as the inutility of these defensive patterns against vikings, who were drawn to the wealth of the increasingly proliferating monasteries that developed out of ecclesiastical centres built in low lying regions.[249] Nevertheless, some *crannóga* remained in use until the 17th century.[250]

The next few centuries saw the construction of round towers and souterrains alongside these monasteries and other churches—of which more than 5500 from this period or earlier are known.[251] These changes followed a broader shift in Irish society, as the development of towns led to growing urban populations, manufacture, intensification of agriculture, increasing wealth, and a partial shift away from clientship relations towards administrative structures.[252] Taxation and military levies became more structured and controlled, while cattle ranching declined in importance. These developments were dominated by the existing aristocracy.[253] It is very likely that class stratification would have also increased concomitantly with the development of these

---

[246] See Nichols, 74–84.

[247] Stout & Stout, 44, 49.

[248] Stout & Stout, 47.

[249] Stout & Stout, 47–50, 54.

[250] Bhreathnach, 32.

[251] Stout & Stout, 49–54.

[252] Ní Mhaonaigh, 150–1.

[253] Ní Mhaonaigh, 152–3.

state-like structures, as the increasing command over labour and resources allowed by such transformations would also permit the increasing appropriation of labour's product.

By 1169, then, Ireland had seen the emergence over millennia of a class society which was highly institutionalised, if highly fragmented, but which also exhibited a long term trend towards increasing centralisation under overkings—although the institution of kinship relations and kin-based property meant that even the most powerful of these early state-like polities had strict limits to their ability to accumulate wealth and power. Politically, Ireland was sharply distinguished from England in lacking a unified or centralised state. Gaelic Ireland also had a rich Christian tradition which was also institutionalised socially and which possessed significant wealth, as well as having an impressive physical presence on the landscape. These institutions of spiritual and temporal power were thoroughly ingrained into Ireland's law, oral tradition, and culture, which were a vibrant and distinctive part of Gaelic society: 'According to one law-text,' Kelly tells us, 'no *túath* can be regarded as a proper *túath* unless it has an ecclesiastical scholar (*ecnae*), a churchman, a poet and a king'—with the foremost among these each having, at least nominally, equal status.[254] Nevertheless, even before the English invasion, the 12th century was also a time of important politico-religious change as both 'secular' and religious forces exercised influence over the church.[255] While Ireland's social, economic, cultural, and political forms were deeply rooted in history and tradition, it was also a dynamic society that, especially in this later period, was undergoing rapid change. Along with the physical landscape of Ireland, these ancient continuities and recent changes alike were among the preaccumulations that made up Ireland on the eve of the arrival of the English.

---

[254] Kelly 4, 9; Carey, 55–6.

[255] Ní Mhaonaigh, 154; Ó Clabaigh in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 356–60.

Thus, the colonisation of Ireland did not proceed from a blank slate. When the English came to Ireland in the late 12th century, they did not arrive in a land without culture—or, indeed, cultivation. Furthermore, they brought their own preaccumulations, including dependence upon English political structures and other elements of their own complex culture (they are for this reason sometimes termed 'Normans' or 'Anglo-Normans' during this period). Nevertheless, since the high point of English domination in Ireland and the most dramatic social changes would not occur until much later, some downplay the importance of these initial centuries—as did Marx: '*1172*. Henry II conquered less than 1/3 of Ireland. It was a nominal conquest…. Mixing of English common colonists with Irish, and of Anglo-Norman nobles with Irish chiefs. Otherwise, the war of conquest was conducted (originally) as against Red Indians. No English reinforcements sent to Ireland until 1565 (Elizabeth).'[256] However, the changes which occurred now were instrumental to those which took place later. The English established a regime centred on Dublin which, though it waxed and waned in power, is the institutional precursor to that which came later. From this very early stage, it became clear that the English were interested in transforming Ireland and that landed property was key to this mission. And in retrospect, factors such as the emergence of the Old English, centuries of war and peace, and an ideological conviction that Ireland rightfully belonged to England were instrumental to Ireland's later history.

In his chapter in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, Colin Veach explains that the English first arrived in Ireland at the request of 'the exiled king of Leinster, Diarmait Mac Murchada [MacMurrough], [when he] approached King Henry II of England for help in regaining his kingdom.'[257] Henry gave Diarmait permission to recruit among his subjects, which he did. Consequently, Veach comments, Diarmait's 'recruitment of the Welsh marcher barons… looks remarkably like invited colonisation.'[258] This interpretation is disputed by another author in the

---

[256] Marx in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 127.
[257] Veach in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 157–8.
[258] Veach, 158–9.

same volume, Nicholas Vincent, who writes that from a very early point in this history, beginning at the latest with Gerald of Wales, this request for military aid has been distortedly interpreted as an act of consent by 'the native Irish': Diarmait requested military assistance, not colonisation.[259] Were Veach correct, this would imply a limited understanding of what modern colonialism comprises: while migration and settlement pervade human history, the historically specific social relations of colonialism involve considerably more than these two, above all dispossession. The conflation between old forms of colonisation, such as that practiced by the Greek city states for example, and new ones, which entail not mere population movement but the exploitation or dispossession of a conquered population leading to widespread social transformation, is commonplace in non-specialist discussions of colonialism, but downplays the historical significance and violence of colonialism.[260] In popular discourse, this gives rise to the justification of settler colonialism on the basis that, throughout history, many states have engaged in colonisation.

In this case, Veach's explanation implies that *had* Diarmait authorised what we would term colonialism, it would thereby be legitimated—an unstated assumption which in turn relies on an uncritical view of class, political authority, and justice in Gaelic Ireland. It reflects a commonplace, contractual understanding of colonialism of the kind which, for instance, considers colonialism to be acceptable as long as it adopts certain legal forms, such as contract or treaty between formally equal parties. To be sure, such forms often exist. Yet they are in turn often imposed by force, as Marx famously noted: 'Between equal rights, force decides.'[261] Because of these ambiguities, readers of Veach's summary could come away with the impression that England's colonisation of Ireland was, at least in its initial stages, unproblematic. Historiographically speaking, it is important to have a clear understanding of what colonialism is to avoid employing concepts which are derived from and therefore reproduce colonial ideology.[262] Emphasising colonial property

---

[259] Vincent, 193.
[260] See Marx in *Ireland*, 54–58.
[261] Marx, *Capital*, 344.
[262] Dorothy Smith, 37–43.

relations—which constitute and effect dispossession—and the colonial regime—which effects and guarantees those relations—helps us to differentiate the mere presence of England in Ireland from English colonialisation of Ireland. Veach and Vincent's divergent understandings indicate that colonial ideology and debates over the justification and legitimacy of colonial rule are still of great significance to Irish historiography, and by corollary, that Irish history is still of great political significance. Returning once again to Wolfe's maxim, colonialism 'is a structure, not an event,' the important question is not whether the arrival of the English was 'legitimate' (for the answer to this question is entirely dependent on what one understands by legitimacy), but rather, how did the English change Ireland once they were there?[263]

 'First contact' is a troubled concept. While England may have had some pretentions to controlling the entire island of Ireland during this period and established some institutions which would eventually develop into the colonial regime proper, the transfer of property and transformation of property relations which occurred in this period was minor in scale. To the extent that colonialism began in this period, it did so in a basic way. Veach suggests that England's forays into Ireland were of a type with other ventures occurring throughout Europe: 'The central Middle Ages was a period of large-scale population movement in Europe…. The conquest and colonisation of Ireland was a small part of this Europe-wide phenomenon.'[264] Likewise, the crucial marriage alliance between Diarmait and Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare, or Strongbow, must be understood in the context of the 'international' marriage alliances that were a normal part of Gaelic politics of the time period. There appears to be a strong element of contingency about this relationship in that its long term implications would not have been visible at the time; to contemporaries, it would have seemed much like any other royal alliance. In this case, however, Strongbow became Diarmait's heir; when Diarmait died in 1171, Strongbow inherited an ascendant polity with the potential of developing into a high kingship.[265]

---

[263] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', 388.
[264] Veach, 157.
[265] Veach, 159.

It was Henry Plantagenet's response to this rising threat which laid the foundation for England's future interest in Ireland, incorporating it into the broader Angevin empire.[266] Henry reduced Leinster to a fiefdom and appropriated the port cities of Dublin, Wexford, and Waterford. 'Importantly,' notes Veach, 'Henry received the submission of most of Ireland's native rulers.'[267] Of equal importance, he devolved control to his military aristocracy. These and other decisions had 'a lasting impact' on Ireland.[268] This stresses the importance of paying attention to historical specificity. Because the groundwork of later developments had its inception in what might have seemed to contemporaries as a relatively normal arrangement, it might be thought that later stages of English colonialism ended up happening by accident—that is, that they were causally unrelated. Conversely, it might be thought that from this early period, the horrors of colonialism were an inevitable natural development. Both reducing the causality of later periods of colonialism to earlier ones and denying a causal connection commit the same error of overlooking colonialism's historical specificity. While the initial activities of Diarmait may have belonged to the normal course of politics, they in fact gave rise to new types of processes which in turn transformed the social geographical structure of Irish politics and, consequently, its nature, into a colonial one. A degree of nuance is required which allows us to see that the events of this period were in some ways precedented and in other ways new, and that while they set the stage for later colonial developments, they did not guarantee them historically. Understanding this requires seeing colonialism as a process which unfolds in shifting contexts. While it is structural, events can nevertheless be consequential.

'Having taken steps to secure their lordships,' Veach writes, 'the English conquerors needed to make them economically viable.'[269] Thus in a historical echo of the Scandinavians' activities in Ireland, though with more lasting import, the English, Murphy writes, introduced 'a commercial mind-set to agriculture' on the basis of European experience, which 'stimulated a

---

[266] Veach, 159–160, 166–7.

[267] Veach, 160.

[268] Veach, 160.

[269] Veach, 163.

hunger for new lands, encouraged the production of surpluses for the market and underlay processes of colonisation and settlement.'[270] England was already organised on the basis of manorial production and this model was replicated in Ireland: tillage was expanded, yielding by the early 14th century 'an impressive surplus for exchange'.[271] This was driven by high grain prices and rising demand, externally—as England desired more grain, including for its armies— and internally—as the urban population rose due to shifting land-use patterns.[272] Even if the extent was limited at this early stage, as the regime expanded, it started to transform Ireland's political economy in qualitative terms.

Veach draws attention to the labour force required for this project: 'In Germany and Central Europe,' he writes, 'evidence exists for an entire system of recruitment, transportation and colonisation, established to support the migration of thousands of settlers to new eastern conquests.'[273] Incidentally, it was this system of statebuilding foreign labour and the consequent ideological exaggeration of 'regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones' that Cedric Robinson cited when he argued that 'racialism' emerged within Europe prior to the development of capitalism and not, as Wolfe and many others have suggested, as a consequence of colonialism.[274] In the case of Ireland (which Veach here terms 'the western British Isles') Veach concludes that while the evidence is not definitive, the historiographical trend is to 'revis[e] upwards estimates of English immigration' but also to recognise the necessity of 'a degree of accommodation with the Irish'—by which he means Gaelic lords rather than the labouring majority—and with the control of the Church.[275] In particular, 'John de Courcy relied heavily on the Church to consolidate his hold on the new lordship of Ulster,' importing monastic communities, promoting saints' cults and conveniently discovering the bodies of the most

---

[270] Murphy, 390.

[271] Murphy, 390–2, 392.

[272] Murphy, 393–5.

[273] Veach, 163–4.

[274] Robinson, 26, 21–26, 8.

[275] Veach, 164–5.

celebrated Irish saints.[276] As a result, 'secular and religious authority were made to radiate from the same location[s].'[277]

As Brendan Smith notes, the chronicles of the church, the charters and accounts of lords and their manors, the deeds of towns' liberties, etc., would contribute to the impressive 'quantity and range of documentary sources' available to scholars researching 14th and 15th century Ireland.[278] Thus to a great degree it is the actions of the English and of the Gaelic elite that produced not only the content but also the form of the records which survive to us. That is, the incipient colonial regime and its Gaelic relata structured the production of their own historical records. It is important to be aware not only of the *fact* that records are unrepresentative, but also to understand the *processes* that make them so. Otherwise, the methods which we use to reflect the past will tend to reproduce, rather than to expose, the faults of societies both past and present. In this regard Morera reminds us of Gramsci's insight that our present society itself 'offers a principle of selection, a document of the meaning or significance of the past. Surely, many aspects of the past will be discovered, but one must avoid "the dangers of sentimental antiquarianism", as Christopher Hill puts it; the selection of sources, as well as our understanding of their significance must be directed by the present as document.'[279]

This suggests something about the significance of the colonial regime, even at this early point in time, because as Smith also points out, what is true of records is also true of the institutions that produce them.[280] The impacts of colonialism are everywhere felt throughout Irish history, but they do not exhaust the past. Though this dissertation is concerned with social structure, and hence with dominant social groups, it must not be forgotten that the impacts of colonialism are worst felt by those who leave the least trace. It must also not be forgotten that if Gaelic lordships were in many cases inferior or subordinate to the English regime in Ireland, they were far from being

---

[276] Veach, 165.

[277] Veach, 166.

[278] Brendan Smith, 'Disaster and Opportunity: 1320–1450' in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 244.

[279] Morera, *Historicism*, 78.

[280] Brendan Smith, 'Disaster and Opportunity', 244.

completely dominated by it. Certainly, it would be a mistake to interpret England's activities as merely supervening on or existing alongside an autonomously existing political apparatus; the political structure itself was shaped by English activity, especially as the centuries went on. Among the factors which influenced Ireland, mediated via England, were the Angevin loss of France, the creation of the earldom of Ulster, the centralisation of control, and maybe most importantly, the proclamation of English law in Ireland.[281] But especially in these earliest years, the generally intact Gaelic social relations and customs also provided a great deal of structure to the politics of the 'conquest'.

Thus, for example, turning to what we might call high politics, Veach details the relationship of Ireland to the Angevin court, especially as embodied in the overlordship of Henry's son, the often caricatured Prince John:

> John also sought to promote the in-built trend towards factionalism on the frontier. As in other European borderlands, the political topography of Ireland comprised overlapping and constantly shifting orbits of power. Just as Irish royal hegemonies often extended well beyond a particular power base, so too did English lordship. King-making and tribute-taking were as much a part of English conquest in Ireland as colonial settlement and administration. When hegemonies collided, the result was often warfare that took no notice of ethnicity. Alliances could be manifold, as could enmities. If the king could influence the pattern of conflict, he could perhaps direct it to his own ends.[282]

There is not always alignment between short and long term trends; after John 'limped back to England, uncrowned and penniless, less than eight months after his arrival,' it is unlikely that many in Ireland would foresee that the English landlord class would still be dominant 700 years later; rebellions during the following few decades, even centuries, were a consequence of

---

[281] Veach, 171–3.
[282] Veach, 168.

England's still limited control over Ireland, permitting something approximating politics as usual despite the accumulation of 'molecular' changes.[283] But it is in the long term shift in the governance of daily life from the social relations of the original inhabitants to those of the conquerors that colonialism is found.

As discussed above, the colonial myth of 'first contact' is reductive and inappropriate to the Irish example, where contact had been ongoing for many years. Nevertheless, contact provides an important frame for understanding the colonial relation. Applying the concept of the 'contact zone' to an earlier time period than is usual, John Morrissey has emphasised colonial contact as heterogeneous and spatially diffuse, with clear distinctions between groups not always easy to identify. In particular, he criticises frontier maps of Ireland which reflect an elite view of territory and do not directly express the everyday experiences of the masses. The overlap between these territories was constitutive of the colonial regime.[284] Ireland and England each had their own complex sets of preaccumulations and it is in the specificities of the interactions between these— now contingent, now structured—that the particular history of Ireland emerged.

Veach refers, for example, to the reaching of an 'equilibrium' in 'internal Irish politics' as John and his successor made compromises with Gaelic 'rebels' (note the way this terminology already suggests Ireland as a locus of English sovereignty, as well as a view of politics as a practice of reaching compromise between contending factions).[285] When England had relatively little control over Ireland—when, to extend the Marxist language, most of Ireland had not even been formally much less really subsumed into the still developing colonial regime—Gaelic preaccumulations would have been predominant. As time went on, these accumulations would no longer have been merely 'pre', as interaction itself modified both societies. The expanded conception of accretions emphasises those features of colonial society that emerge or continue to develop after contact and which influence later stages of colonialism in much the same way as

---

[283] Veach, 167.

[284] Morrissey, 552–7; 561–2.

[285] Veach, 174.

preaccumulations influence early stages. Indeed, past a certain stage it is no longer really possible to fully differentiate 'English' from 'Gaelic' accretions, as they emerge in interaction with each other. But it is possible to distinguish colonial power. The regime and its features, including the English states both in Britain and in Ireland, transforming Irish polities, the structure and notion of market economics, etc, while perhaps not yet in the fullness of their development, not only persisted down to modern times from this early period but came to have overwhelming influence over the course of Irish history.

Even by the mid-13th century, Veach writes, '[Irish kings] could not afford to openly defy the English king'.[286] Of course, categories such as 'English' and 'Irish' are at best abstractions that stand in for very complex systems of social relations between many groups; an interesting passage in Beth Hartland's contribution to *The Cambridge History of Ireland* provides numerous examples—the de Burgh/Geraldine rivalry, Irish dynastic conflicts with settler involvement, deliberately stoked rivalries between colonial magnates, and the like.[287] The Old English, the partly Gaelicised Catholic lords who held power in this period, would similarly complicate affairs in later centuries. Colonialism, then, is a relationship between these systems of relations that is characterised by a historical, material domination of one by the other through a state-like structure, namely, the regime. In that process of domination not only do the two poles of power evolve, but so too does the relation between them. Thus, the balance of power and the extent of domination can vary within the given regime structure. This was true even at this early phase of the conquest:

> Determined that Ireland should not become another Welsh March,
> and schooled in the household of Ranulf de Glanville at the height
> of the twelfth-century renaissance, King John created an incipient
> colony expressly tied to English law and custom. There was to be
> no legal accommodation with the Irish, no hybrid marcher law. The
> English king was to be the fount of all authority, and those in Ireland
> were either under his protection or outside the law. Ireland came to

---

[286] Veach, 180.

[287] Hartland in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 235–6.

be ruled by an intrusive royal government with a bureaucrat's black and white view of the world, but it was a land which demanded local lordship exercised with subtlety and adaptability. The contradictions at the heart of the conquest would drive Irish history for years to come.[288]

These are the concluding words of Veach's chapter, and considering that the 'years' of history they refer to are really 'centuries', they represent something about the finality of what had occurred, even if contemporaries could not have seen the fulness of what was to come. Picking up the historical thread, Vincent tells us that by 1272,

a visitor to Ireland would have observed a wholesale transformation in Irish culture and economy, certainly in the south and east, less tangibly in Ulster and the remoter parts of the west. Over the course of a century, there was extensive building and resettlement…. Even in the un-urbanised interior, foreign lords established castles, markets and more than 100 small boroughs…. Intended to encourage the settlement of immigrants attracted not only by land hunger… but by an Irish economy newly monetised and manorialised.[289]

To analyse the changes in Ireland objectively, Vincent tells us, we must 'begin with some fundamentals: with title, economy and law,'—or, we might say, with property.[290] We must also understand the ideology by which Henry Plantagenet was impelled to conquer Ireland. Thus, Vincent emphasises that the '"invasion" of 1171 was a reaction to circumstances rather than a spontaneous bid for empire' as both Strongbow's ascendency and the fallout from the murder of Thomas Beckett threatened Henry's reign.[291] Along these lines, Vincent reminds us that 12th and 13th century Ireland was not an isolated society. The very notions of kingship and imperium were

---

[288] Veach, 181.

[289] Vincent, 188–9.

[290] Vincent, 189.

[291] Vincent, 191.

of continental import.[292] Our focus here is the colonial regime and its attendant property relations, not the construct of kingship *per se*, but the processes of accretion of the monarchies in Britain, Europe, and Ireland are significant and understanding them more deeply would likely shed light on the colonial interactions of this and later periods. Vincent details some of the important symbols used to legitimate England's rule in Ireland and their roots in larger relations. He also describes how Henry's decision to retain a foothold of power, contrary 'contrary to previous royal policy in Wales or Scotland', left the king in conflict with his barons 'over land and prerogative wardship.'[293] Further, he emphasises the role of John in transforming Ireland 'into a distinctively royal affair under the direct authority of the king,' with the establishment of certain royal apparatuses (despite his short stay).[294] Thus while Henry's involvement in Ireland may have begun from his point of view as a matter of structural necessity, the specific policies he and his successors chose to enact were themselves instrumental in altering that very structure.

That is, the development of the colonial regime in Ireland was driven internally as much as it was by 'English' policy. As CLR James noted, if '[g]reat men make history,' they make 'only such history as it is possible for them to make.'[295] As we have seen, historical materialism asserts that such possibilities are determined by social structure, which is shaped by class, which is, ultimately, relations of exploitation. And indeed, England's presence in Ireland was from an early stage a matter of exploitation, both of labour and of 'natural' resources such as soil through agricultural production and appropriation. Vincent, citing JF Lyndon, puts Irish revenues at about 10% of England's, but suggests that this level might have been sufficient to cause the 'expansion of the colony [to jutter] so rapidly to a halt', presumably as the English rested on their laurels, and for Ireland to experience 'those periods of want that, from 1270, seem to have contributed to the colony's instability.'[296] He also tells us that '[a]s in England after 1066, what there was to plunder,

---

[292] Vincent, 193.
[293] Vincent, 191.
[294] Vincent, 196.
[295] James, x.
[296] Vincent, 215.

the invaders seized. As with England, this included treasures…. [and] the use of Irish oak, after 1200, in the rebuilding of Exeter, Salisbury and Winchester cathedrals.'[297] But this conquest was also a matter of social transformation—or as Vincent terms it, 'consolidation'.[298] This transformation, encompassing changes in the form and owners of property and in political structures, and eventually over the centuries encompassing all conceivable spheres of life, is what makes the conquest of Ireland colonial—diremption rather than mere dispossession.

Unlike in England, where as Wood describes, nascent capitalists could exploit the existing political infrastructure to their advantage, conquerors found a much more fragmented political landscape and had to create their own regime. While England did see transformation in the forces of production as well as social relations, the scale of this in Ireland was on another level:

> Most significantly, perhaps, where in England the wealth of the
> defeated aristocracy could be easily plundered, Ireland, although in
> many ways a rich land, offered fewer easy pickings. Any conqueror
> wishing to prosper here would need to invest heavily before wards
> could be reaped. Labour had to be imported from England, Wales or
> Galloway. Land had to be brought under cultivation. Castles, barns
> and mills had to be constructed, roads improved, timber felled, fields
> drained, ships built to export the resulting produce. And all of this
> against a backdrop of ongoing hostilities, with a native population
> never entirely pacified.[299]

The term colonialism emphasises difference. This reflects real English praxis: 'From the beginning, Ireland's conquerors were aware of difference.'[300] In short, in order to achieve their aims, the English self-consciously colonised Ireland, forcefully but not entirely successfully imposing new ways of living on a population which, at least to a notable degree, actively resisted

---

[297] Vincent, 203.
[298] Vincent, 205.
[299] Vincent, 205.
[300] Vincent, 205.

them. It is this fact which led Marx to analogise this phase with the later colonisation of North America.[301] Such comparisons are risky, especially since the scale of death and destruction wrought in North America vastly outstrips that in Ireland and it took qualitatively different forms. As Wolfe notes, there are important semantic distinctions to be drawn between such terms as 'elimination', 'settler colonialism' and 'genocide'.[302] In this context it is also worth considering the impact of the words that historians such as Veach and Vincent choose to employ on our overall understanding of this period. Such euphemisms as 'easy pickings', 'invest', 'imported [labour]', 'land… brought under cultivation', 'ongoing hostilities', 'native population', and 'pacified', whether intentionally or not, suggest interpretations of Irish history which are sympathetic to the colonisers' motives.

In any case, unlike in England, where a 'territorial and cultural revolution' immediately followed William's conquest, leading to the creation of thousands of aristocrats, a structure consisting of very small number of men with extensive liberties was superimposed in Ireland, becoming a 'close-knit and closely intermarried elite' which 'took on many of the attributes of native Irish lordship.'[303] These included 'the traditions of their Irish forebears for whom raiding and pillage were both endemic and prestigious.'[304] In another one of the somewhat arbitrary but fateful accretions with lasting consequences for the country, this led to the creation of those who would by the early 1600s be known as the Old English.[305] This group of lords' struggles against the very power that created them would be of great consequence in later centuries. As Slater & McDonough point out, Marx made note of the cultural integration of this group as a consequence of intermarriage.[306] Another significant accretion, as Ciaran Brady describes, was 'shiring', the division of Ireland into shires (or counties). This concept 'can be traced [in England] back to the

---

[301] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 8.

[302] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', 401–3.

[303] Vincent, 206–7.

[304] Vincent, 218.

[305] Canny, *Formation*, 2.

[306] Slater & McDonough, 108.

reign of Alfred the Great [and] was adopted and expanded by the conquering Normans,' who in turn began to impose it in Ireland.[307]

> But all of this was halted and reversed from the mid-thirteenth century on, when the decline in royal power and the Gaelic revival accelerated the disappearance or internal decay of the shire until there was little surviving of the original system except the four shires of the English pale…. there emerged a new mode of geopolitical demarcation: lordships defined by power relations rather than property rights.[308]

The 'little surviving' was not, however, inconsequential; the remainder of Brady's chapter describes how these early moves would in centuries to come create headaches for the Elizabethans, serve as the basis for later renewal of the system, and help to actually 'effect a real form of conquest [with a]n irreversible redistribution of land and wealth, and of political, legal and administrative office'.[309] In the interim, the incompleteness of the conquest differentiated it from that which had taken place in England, leaving as it did a largely subordinated but still broadly powerful and 'far larger indigenous majority' having 'ever-present tension' with 'an outnumbered settler population'.[310] The tools which were wielded to subdue this population were many. Religion in particular was a key force in the politics and economics of the regime. It is notable that 'between St Laurence (d. 1180, canonised 1225) and Oliver Plunkett (martyred 1681, beatified in 1920, canonised in 1975), Ireland produced not a single canonised, native saint. Sanctity was too powerful a force to be attributed to the Irish (or for that matter the Welsh) under English rule.'[311] For his part, William Smyth argues that 'the greatest geographical contribution that the Normans made [to Ireland] was linking the ecclesiastical territory of the parish with the economic union of

---

[307] Ciaran Brady in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2, 27
[308] Brady, 28.
[309] Brady, 25.
[310] Vincent, 208.
[311] Vincent, 214.

production—the manor.'[312]

Meanwhile, the promulgation of English law in Ireland instituted an 'apartheid between settlers and natives' leading to 'stigma and resentment' and, at least in retrospect, serving 'as precursor to the 17th-century penal laws: a cruel imposition upon a subject people'.[313] Centring property—being mindful of both exploitation and expropriation—makes it difficult to ignore the clear divides between groups of people. While Gaelic lords extracted surplus from the population, they did not dispossess them. Meanwhile, dispossession could directly affect the common working Gael, or their exploitation could be mediated through the dispossession of their Gaelic overlords. Dispossession was a real, significant, and fundamentally colonial relationship. Gerry Kearns emphasises the expressly territorial (and, in this context, therefore expressly propertied) nature of the legal separatism which prevailed in this period, 'a condition that deserves to be called feudal colonialism':[314]

> There really was one law for the Irish and another for the English.
> In fact, there were three sets of law: an English common law for the
> English, a different set of English laws for the Irish, and the self-
> regulation of the Irish according to their own Brehon law
> (significantly about compensation rather than deterrent pain).[315]

He also relates changes in Ireland to those happening in England:

> Elton (1953) called this a Tudor revolution in government, and
> Hoskins (1988) has described the new forms of statecraft that were
> developed in England, preparing the way for the mercantilist state
> of the eighteenth century. But the colonies were central to this new
> science of the state, with its novel statistics. It was no longer useful
> to follow the feudal practice of treating the colonial periphery as a
> place under weak control to be plundered or farmed by adventurous

---

[312] William Smyth, 252.

[313] Vincent, 211.

[314] Kearns, 'Territory of Colonialism', 231.

[315] Kearns, 'Territory of Colonialism', 231.

sons, earls, or barons who might otherwise cause trouble at home. Instead, the Irish possessions were expected to yield more for the English crown: more timber for ships, more corn for the English towns, and more soldiers for the English army.[316]

A renewed interest in shiring and the subjugation of Irish law to English thus followed; Irish forms of property and inheritance were officially repudiated.[317] Predictably, '[t]he Irish resisted this colonialism and the religious conversion that went with it. In response, the British waged successive wars of reconquest and entrenched still deeper the distinction between Irish native and British settler.'[318] For Kearns, this highlights the unique nature of colonial sovereignty as 'essentially virtual', resulting from the gap between real and imagined power, thereby justifying colonial violence. While practices varied across space and time, from the late 15th century, Gaelic resistance became figured as treachery, justifying dispossession in principle. Writing on a later period, Aiden Clarke indicates how the framing of resistance as 'rebellion' implies a concession to the legitimacy of colonial rule.[319]

There was, in spite of the many complexities, a real colonial binary which was institutionalised in the colonial regime—'in a word, oppressor and oppressed'—and contemporaries knew it.[320] Hartland describes 'both the impressive extent of English interests in Ireland in the late thirteenth century, and the island-wide nature of the pressure being applied by the native Irish on colonial settlements at the time' as well as both English and understandings of difference: 'While alliances across the native-settler divide might pertain at local level, by the late thirteenth century the official English view was that the Irish were enemies because they did not have access to English law.'[321] Conversely, '[t]he Irish may have refused to accept the derogatory views of their law and customs that prevailed among the English, but they also resented being

---

[316] Kearns, 'Territory of Colonialism', 232.

[317] Kearns, 'Territory of Colonialism', 232.

[318] Kearns, 'Territory of Colonialism', 232.

[319] A. Clarke in Peter Roebuck, ed., *Plantation to Partition: Essays in Honour of J.L. McCracken*, 29.

[320] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6, 511.

[321] Hartland, 236.

excluded from the privileges and protections offered by the common law to settlers.'[322] This regime was the initial legacy of the English conquest of Ireland. Despite all of this, Vincent stresses 'the general indifference of English chroniclers to Irish affairs…. Indeed, Matthew [Paris] deliberately omits Ireland from all four of his maps of Britain.'[323] This ideologically cultivated ignorance is an intriguing and persistent motif in Britain-Ireland relations down to the present day and is part and parcel of the colonial regime.

The process of colonialism in Ireland was not unidirectional, although once established, the regime never went away. '[F]rom the 1340s onwards,' Smith writes, 'routine government contact with [Connacht and Ulster] virtually ceased. The common law system no longer operated as a matter of course in such areas….'[324] Nevertheless, 'Ireland was not separating from England.'[325] Such interactions produced interesting emergent phenomena. For example, Katharine Simms writes that '[t]he "ebbing tide" of English government… allowed the Gaelic Irish to enjoy an uneven recovery of influence.'[326] As we have seen, 'greater integration took place between the ruling classes of Gaelic and Anglo-Norman descent,' producing a sense of optimism and ultimately 'a heady ideology extolling nobility and of blood, warrior virtues, the duty to restore a lost high-kingship of Tara and, of course, generous patronage of the learned classes.'[327] In terms of law, Smith writes that '[i]n imitation of practices becoming widespread in England from the late thirteenth century, settler lords in Ireland made increasing use of legal devices designed to ensure that land was transmitted to male descendants only…. Partitions of estates among female heirs had the potential to weaken the English military position.'[328] Thus property relations began to shift in this domain as well.

---

[322] Hartland, 234.

[323] Vincent, 215.

[324] Brendan Smith, 'Disaster and Opportunity', 261.

[325] Brendan Smith, 'Disaster and Opportunity', 271.

[326] Simms in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 272.

[327] Simms, 273.

[328] Brendan Smith, 266.

This period saw the establishment of a relatively weak colonial regime that receded over time, yet whose structures remained intact and became relevant again later. The development of the partially Gaelicised, but still loyal Old English was a significant development of this period with fateful consequences for later history. Some transformations occurred in the means of production in terms of the forces of production as market forces began to change land use patterns; in colonial property relations in those areas under direct English control (i.e., the Pale) where English labour replaced Gaelic labour, extinguishing existing rights and relations in the process; in colonial extraction as English lords began to exist alongside, even if they did not replace, Gaelic lords; and in property law. Property relations are always of central importance, but the particularities which were inscribed on Irish society at this earlier stage came to be fundamental during later periods of time. If later phases of colonialism tend to be oversimplified, even in this earlier period the conquering of Ireland by England was not a straightforward matter of replacing one overlord with another or of superimposing a new level of hierarchy onto an existing society, as in Marx's view of pre-English India—in this case, had the English departed, Gaelic Ireland would have been left fundamentally unchanged. But some fundamentals were changed. For one thing, as against complicated Gaelic systems like of kinship and bondage, the English had largely reduced political power to a matter of bare control over land.[329]

To say that the arrival of the English changed Irish society is not to say either that this change was total nor that it was the sole cause of it. It is notable that many of the changes which came to Ireland during this period would likely have had lasting impact even had the English kings and aristocracy lost their interest in Ireland entirely. That is, these changes restructured Irish society in ways which could not be undone. While the changes of this period were modest with respect to those which came later, they were nevertheless significant, qualifying as colonialism rather than simply conquest. Crucially, it is precisely these modest changes which laid the groundwork for the totally transformative ones of later periods. In this sense, history invests these

[329] See Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 84.

changes with a retrospective significance they lacked at the time in which they occurred. It is hard to read Christopher Maginn's remark that around 1480 'the view prevailed in both Ireland and England that a state of war existed between the English and the Irish' without wondering what might have been if the English had lost that war, as might indeed have occurred.[330] Around the turn of the 16th century, continued English dominance may not have been a given despite some changes, but *given* English dominance, by the mid-18th those changes were decisive in elevating mere dominance to something more akin to hegemony. This multi-phase historical process refutes any simplistic narrative that Ireland saw 800 years of continually progressive conquest, but it does not undermine the notion of a directioned continuity over those 800 years. If the English had totally lost their grip over Ireland, any centralisation of power and other benefits of the changes they brought to Ireland would probably have accrued to Irish lords. But the fundamental relationship— the exercise of power by one island over another—remained in place. Even if weakened or reduced in significance, it was not dissolved. Thus, *given* a sufficient exercise of English power, and suitable reorganisation of Irish society on the basis of that power, the colonial regime in Ireland was later able to move from being merely embedded in social institutions to being the process which governed social institutions. For the English had no interest in disappearing from Ireland.

Reconquest

For the English, the mid-16th to mid-17th century was one of remaking. 'Three years after completing the maps for the Down Survey,' Nessa Cronin writes, '[William] Petty wrote of how religious reform in Ireland could be made possible with the advent of "the new Geography"' which he envisioned.[331] Petty's vision operated in a mode of inevitability resulting from abstraction: he did not appear to envision the possibility that resistance might disrupt his designs, although he did have the awareness to know that his changes would have to be founded upon the '"destruction of

---

[330] Christopher Maginn in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, 308.
[331] Cronin, 'Writing the "New Geography"', 61.

the people [...] by the Sword, Plague and Famine'.[332] Petty, advancing a new technology which would be foundational to later political economy, considered that Ireland offered a better case study than England because conquest would render it a new, simple state unencumbered by history—in a process which was presumably unthinkable to inflict on Englishmen. In his treatment of Ireland as a prospective *tabula rasa*, Petty reflected a contemporary English theme—which perhaps goes a long way to explaining the gap between colonial vision and policy in the early part of this period.[333]

> However much Petty could project into the future the notion of an
> Ireland emptied of its Gaelic Irish populations and of its social and
> cultural systems of land, law and religious practices, the 'when' of
> this speculative statement was a problem that would remain largely
> unresolved. The issue was not that Ireland would be entirely
> 'emptied of the majority of its inhabitants as Petty had advocated,'
> but the recognition that while there may be a new geography there
> was still a very old history, with the additional question of labor
> being required to work the land to extract resources from it. The real
> problem, as T.C. Barnard points out, was that 'Ireland was not a
> *tabula rasa*. There were old institutions; there was a native
> population, both Protestant and Catholic, whose support was
> necessary to any regime's permanence.'[334]

In her own study of Ireland, Bhandar suggests that the mediation of the gap between reality and prospects is ultimately what gave rise to the labour theory of value exemplified by the writings of John Locke:

> The logics of quantification and measurement that subtend the
> ideology of improvement [and thus colonial dispossession] required
> new mechanisms for creating and attributing value to people and the

---

332 Cronin, 'Writing the "New Geography"', 62.
333 Cronin, 'Writing the "New Geography"', 62.
334 Cronin, 'Writing the "New Geography"', 62.

land to which they were connected....[335]

The fusing together of the value of land with the value of people emerges in the context of colonial Ireland, where early attempts to measure land with the use of a cadastral survey coincided with the desire to measure the value of the population on the basis of their consumption and productive labour.[336]

Bhandar argues that it was Locke and William Blackstone who successively spatialised Petty's thought (a point which situates Ireland in her argument about colonial property's global history) but following Stuart Elden, Cronin suggests that the foundational assumption of territory as the stage of history was already taken for granted by Petty.[337] The concept of territorialisation was by now familiar enough that the English could remain unaware that, even as they conquered territory, they were at the same time constructing it. Thus, the problem of expanding England's colonial regime—and thereby the geographical extent of colonial property relations—through the incorporation of new territory was to some extent the problem of remaking the territory into what it was already assumed to be.

The Kingdom of Ireland was established in the 1540s as part of Henry VIII's effort to exert greater influence over the island, though Christopher Maginn suggests that initially, it was kingdom in name only. While dynastic stability, political centralisation, and the strengthening of London's power over Ireland would no doubt have been encouraging to the colonisers,

royal authority in Ireland was barely felt outside of Leinster where life carried on much as it had in 1470 (and before); the Church of Ireland had yet to put down firm roots; several of the 'surrender and regrant' settlements were breaking down; and the constitutional status of Irishmen as subjects of the crown remained ambiguous—nearly twenty Irishmen are known to have received grants of English

---

[335] Bhandar, 35.
[336] Bhandar, 37.
[337] Bhandar, 37–8; Cronin, 'Writing the "New Geography"', 66.

liberty in 1550 alone.[338]

Maginn takes care to emphasise the continuity between the changes of the Tudor–Cromwell period and those of years gone by.[339] This point is underlined by Ohlmeyer in her description of the reasons for England's woes:

> This general disorder stemmed in large part from the fact that a small number of powerful Old English and native Irish overlords not only controlled their own territories but also collected tribute (in the form of military service, food, lodgings, and agricultural labour) and demanded submission from previously independent regions, thereby extending their political control and enhancing their standing within their own lordship. Since military might and robust baronial networks determined dynamic lordship, maintaining and sustaining an effective army became a priority for any sixteenth-century Irish lord. It also underpinned the social order, for a lord's followers were not only obliged to feed and house soldiers but to offer military service themselves in return for his protection. This elaborate system of extortion, intimidation and protection was known to the Old English as 'coign and livery' and enabled individual lords to field substantial private forces.[340]

William Smyth describes the 'revolutionary transformation in the nature of Irish societies and landscapes from the mid-sixteenth century onwards,' during which Ireland was 'forged' into a new landscape, a process which wrought 'devastation', and of which 'the eventual outcome was the emergence of a single monolithic social system we now call landlordism.'[341] While Marx picked up on this point, his claim that the English 'succeeded *only* to plant a landowning

---

[338] Maginn in Cambridge History of Ireland, vol. 1, 327.

[339] Maginn, 327.

[340] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 29–30.

[341] William Smyth, xxiii, 4–5.

aristocracy' (emphasis added) was mistaken.[342] While the impact of the plantations, surrender and regrant agreements, and the like were not as extensive in this period as those which occurred after the famine, this later dispossession was rooted in the violently imposed changes of this time. As Smyth argues, the Cromwellian conquest 'was "the war that finished Ireland", that is, Catholic Ireland…. [the conquest was] bent on creating an absolute *tabula rasa*—a totally English world of tenants and landowners east of the Shannon'.[343] And it *was* a conquest, 'an integral part of the imperial expansion of the English state.'[344] It is important to bear in mind Ohlmeyer's caution that this was neither linear nor predestined, and her note that 'what is striking is the haphazard, messy and clumsy nature of the processes surrounding state formation and the very real limitations on central power.'[345] But the goal of domination did not waver.

Smyth also draws attention to the role that new technologies of statecraft played in this regard, as Petty stepped in to complement the military conquest with a cartographic one, solving not only the problem of mapping Ireland but also of allocating to those to whom it had been promised.[346] Given the revolutionary situation in Ireland and the recurrent tensions between English factions, this was obviously of relevance to English politics, but it also played a geographical function in actually assigning responsibility for land to specific colonial administrators, thereby making the transformation of property relations possible. Petty's work, in other words, consisted in mediating the relationship between the desired and the possible: 'The phenomenal transformation of the economic, cultural and political geography was thus planned….'; '…the Down Survey came to be Ireland's Domesday Book.'[347] Because of the change in the balance of power that the conquest represented, the realisation of a project like that envisioned by Petty was now a possibility. For such reasons, Smyth puts great emphasis on this

---

[342] Marx in *Ireland*, 127.
[343] William Smyth, 161–3.
[344] William Smyth, 153.
[345] Ohlmeyer, 'Introduction' in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2, 9.
[346] William Smyth, 165–7.
[347] William Smyth, 167, 174.

short span of time, writing that '[i]t could be argued that Cromwell's regime achieved in a decade (1649–59) what previous administrations had sought to achieve for more than a century…. Ireland is still—in part at least—the inheritor of what happened in the 1640s and 1650s.'[348]

Nevertheless, while the conquest and the legal settlement which accompanied it made widespread dispossession possible, if not inevitable, it was as much a continuity as a change. As Ted McCormick argues, '[s]ettlement…. had long been part of the logic of plantation…' and 'its greatest significance was that from this point, the losers would remain losers.'[349] In relation to the first, unsuccessful attempt at plantation in 1550, Brady argues along similar lines, writing that 'it is… in their failure, their inconsequentiality and their apparently blatant contradictions, [that such developments] not only defy the easy categories through which the later sixteenth century has been comprehended, but also emblematise the indeterminate character of so many events in the years that were to follow.'[350] From among these many changes, as we have seen, Brady emphasises the resurgence of shiring, which emblematised the ambiguous yet tendential process of English colonialism in Ireland. Seeking to avoid the dual errors of 'ideological' and 'structural-functional analyses' in his interpretation of this issue, Brady centres on the men who conceived and executed the shiring policy.

This analysis is flawed in some ways: his claim that these men were 'prime movers of historical change' elevates them beyond the realm of normal causality and hence critique, suggesting that their volitions were somehow independent of history. This is a consequence of his anti-structuralism and is, ironically, ideological in the way it ringfences the questions one can ask about the origins of those policies. By definition, a prime mover is not subject to external causation and its activities are self-generated. The elevation of English bureaucrats to the level of Providence is thus tantamount to eliminating their mental and physical activities as objects of inquiry. This approach to history therefore precludes any interpretations which might seek to investigate how

---

[348] William Smyth, 103.
[349] McCormick, in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2, 99, 104.
[350] Brady, 23.

ideology or social structure play a role in the production of individual consciousness and activity. In other words, it is, according to the understanding of ideology developed by Dorothy Smith and Himani Bannerji, the ideological move *par excellence*, as it takes individuals and their activities, which are the products and expressions of society, to be self-existing, at least as far as explanation is concerned.[351] Even though Brady's rhetoric is clearly hyperbolic, the degree of hyperbole is unclear, and the fact that an Aristotelean conception of God has been selected as the metaphor by which we can best approach an understanding of colonialism is significant. Leaving the metaphor aside, the salient point is that individualist assumptions underpinning Brady's approach by necessity also close off investigating how colonial officials undergo formation.

Despite this flaw, which is worth highlighting because it shows how basic questions of emphasis can yield very different kinds of explanation, Brady's analysis is on its own terms rigorous and highlights fundamental tensions of colonial policy, as well as being sensitive to the ebbs and flows of historical development over the *longue durée*. The upshot is, as we saw in the previous section, that shiring is one of the most significant ways in which English power has reshaped the Irish landscape. Brady defines the term as 'the establishment of sovereignty over a territory through its division into sub-regions of clearly demarcated geographical boundaries with identical internal subdivisions and uniform legal, administrative and fiscal structures.'[352] In the 16th century, the earl of Sussex, being 'especially sensitive to variables of space and time' (not normally considered among the properties of a prime mover), moved English policy towards a more variegated approach.[353] Significantly for later developments, this included a degree of tolerance towards 'practices, such as retaining, the use of Brehon law and the collection of bonaght, which were fundamentally opposed to the principles of English law.'[354] They thus represented strategic concessions to Gaelic power. Brady concedes that '[s]hiring occurred mostly on paper,'

---

[351] See Dorothy Smith; Bannerji.
[352] Brady, 27
[353] Brady, 28, 29.
[354] Brady, 30–1.

and that 'rule was actually accomplished [by] dispossession, plantation, [and] by coercive military officers; in short all the instruments of conquest', but he argues that shiring determined these strategies.[355]

From a perspective which extrapolates from individual decision makers to the colonial regime, shiring itself can be understood as an incomplete and imperfect expression of these underlying processes. In short, even the most assertive colonial administrative geography reproduced rather than suppressed the contradictions of colonialism. The relationship between landscape and colonial rule is a widespread theme in the literature, as when Smyth describes control of the landscape as key to colonial policy in this era. Referring to economic infrastructure, mostly in the form of buildings, he writes that '[t]he landscape becomes a key vehicle for the manifestation of such visible symbols of colonial rule,' and he argues that clearing woodlands was an essential means of controlling the Gaels.[356] Bhandar, similarly, points out Petty's argument 'that economic growth in Ireland depended on the settling and anglicizing of the Irish population'.[357] Control over space, mediation of the means of subsistence through property, conquest, and cultural transformation were thus all bound together in a massive colonial project.

While we have seen something of the nature of old Gaelic conceptions of property, Nicholas Blomley describes changes in the spatialisation and conceptualisation of property in England during the early colonial period:

> The objectification of property relations encouraged a more recognizably modern conception whereby land itself became thought of as the property. At the same moment, the land itself was "spatialized", conceived of as an abstract, calculable and extensible surface (Elden, 2005). As such, manorial property relations were seen as an impediment: reformers celebrated the disentanglement

---

[355] Brady, 26, 27.

[356] William Smyth, 11, 27.

[357] Bhandar, 43.

that strategies such as enclosure would provide.[358]

Elsewhere, he argues along similar lines:

> Crucially, land itself also became an object of property. As noted, in
> mediaeval England, it was goods and animals, not land, that came
> closest to some conception of absolute property. From the sixteenth
> century onwards, lawyers began to extend their model of ownership
> of goods and animals to landholding such that it was conceptually
> possible to imagine 'property in land' and 'owners of land'. Given
> the sharpening distinction between 'absolute' and 'special' property
> interests, noted above, land began to be conceived of as a thing from
> which others were to be presumptively excluded: 'As land became
> more "property-like", the newly named "owner" acquired more
> freedom to alienate, to extract value in new ways, and to exclude
> others, while the long-recognized rights of other persons over the
> same land was diminished' (Seipp, 1994, 89). The effect was to
> reconceptualize the relationality at issue in property disputes:
> 'Conflicts were no longer between holders of rights of common and
> "the lord of the manor" or "he who has the freehold". Now the
> protagonists were the commoner and the "owner of the soil" or
> "owner of the land"' (Seipp, 1994, 85).'[359]

In essence, putting land to good (i.e., private) use 'required a spatial reconceptualization of property. Property was imagined not just as a thing ("this is mine"), but also as a territory from which others are to be excluded.'[360] We have already seen how important such changes were for Wood in accounting for the emergence of capitalism as a mode of production. In the context of Ireland, such analysis belies simplistic notions of 'English property' as a static preaccumulation which was imported as part of a colonial project, but accumulation is still a valuable metaphor for

---

[358] Blomley, 'The Territory of Property', 559.
[359] Blomley, 'The Territorialization of Property in Land', 238.
[360] Blomley, 'The Territorialization of Property in Land', 241.

the way it calls attention to the process of mediation between colony and metropole. If English property developed historically, then all the more must we consider English property in Ireland through a historicist frame, because to this it adds another level of political and cultural subjugation.[361]

In this connection, another significant process, conceptually similar in some ways to Wood's enclosure, is 'surrender and regrant', agreements whereby Gaelic lords surrendered their title to the Crown and were immediately granted it back, but now as English title and under English law. While the term is often used to designate the especially numerous agreements of 1541–1543, when the policy was most vigorously enacted, Ohlmeyer draws attention also to the similar and 'increasingly sophisticated' agreements of reform that were pursued over subsequent decades with a view to enhancing the power of the English state in Ireland.[362] Thus 'surrender and regrant' can be considered as a historically specific expression of a more peaceful mode of colonial dispossession which unfolded through the apparatuses of law. Given that it is a retrospective term to begin with, it makes conceptual sense to refer to this species of policy collectively as 'surrender and regrant', understanding that specifics varied across time, space, and from agreement to agreement.

For the English, this approach would on one level simply have been a correction of Kearns's 'virtual sovereignty'.[363] English law was finally being reasserted as fact in places where it already held *de jure*. For the Gaels, however, this was a colonial transformation of property: along with a transformation from one legal regime to another came the extinguishing of old rights and the establishment of new property relations. As with most of the changes discussed in this dissertation, the quality and magnitude of these transformations varied across space and time and were rarely complete; in many cases, the changes may have seemed insignificant on the local scale. It is in their cumulative effect over the very long term that these transformations, unfolding under

---

[361] Blomley, 'The Territorialization of Property in Land', 241.

[362] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 32–3.

[363] Kearns, 'Territory of Colonialism', 233–4.

the auspices of a constant colonial regime, lay the ground for or themselves add up to colonial dispossession. As shown by the scholars cited in previous chapters, among many others, piecemeal policies and their heterogenous implementation are a common feature of colonialism down to the present day.[364] In this case, Maginn wrote in his 2007 review of the surrender and regrant literature that:

> At once a device for lasting political, social, and constitutional change, [surrender and regrant] contained the necessary elements for the eventual incorporation of Ireland's English and Gaelic populations into an expanding English state together with the inherent ambiguities and flaws that would bedevil and threaten this process of integration for the next century. The changes introduced into Irish society at this time outlived the initiative of which they were manifestations, surviving even the Tudor monarchy and its policy makers who together had engineered such radical change.[365]

Although a specific and especially consequential moment of it—Ohlmeyer notes that the 1541–1563 period is largely responsible for the mid-16th century's 'considerable expansion' of the Irish peerage—it comprises just one moment in a long history of dispossession.[366] This is perhaps among the reasons it has been overlooked in the literature, especially alongside the 'more coercive' measures that were to follow.[367] Maginn muses:

> Surrender and regrant has thus come to occupy a curious place in Irish historiography. The seemingly limitless interest by professional historians in most aspects of early modern Ireland has created a situation where surrender and regrant is frequently (indeed almost invariably) acknowledged as a seminal episode in Anglo-Irish relations, but one that is rarely questioned or critically

---

[364] See, e.g., Nir & Shushan.
[365] Maginn, '"Surrender and Regrant"', 955.
[366] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 32.
[367] Maginn, '"Surrender and Regrant"', 956.

126

assessed.[368]

A central issue is that much of the literature on English colonialism in Ireland is concerned with assessing things like surrender and regrant or plantation (which we shall come to shortly) either as though they were unified policies or, as a critique of that presumption, as little more than *post hoc* pattern recognition. Rarely do they centre the role they played in generating their intended effect of dispossession, which requires an expansive historical view. Maginn is not insensitive to the broader political significance of the policy, however, citing Nicholas Canny's 1987 critique that '[w]hen ... mention is made of surrender being made to the crown in 1540 and 1541 what is meant is the surrender by the lords to the crown of their right of ruling over particular septs (or the resident septs in designated areas or lands), and the acceptance by the lords that they and, by implication, the people over whom they ruled were subjects of the crown,' although he stresses that sensitivity to region, overall context, and temporal extent are important problems to be addressed.[369]

In this regard, Eve Campbell's interesting study of surrender and regrant in Pobul Uí Cheallacháin makes use of English documentation of Gaelic lordships which, she notes, enable scholars to reconstruct the use of space and its changes through such transitions.[370] In this case, the polity of Pobul Uí Cheallacháin had competing factions who relied on either Gaelic or English succession customs to assert their right to inheritance. Ultimately, one of the parties' opportunistic agreement to surrender and regrant in 1594 led to a mapping of the lordship. Campbell notes the high degree of continuity in property boundaries from this period to the 19th century; while, as she indicates, this partially reflects the topographical nature of the boundaries, the foregoing analysis of shiring demonstrates the importance of legal arrangements in embedding political economic geographies into the institutional framework of the colonial regime—potentially including English

---

[368] Maginn, '"Surrender and Regrant"', 963.

[369] Nicholas Canny, *From Reformation to Restoration: Ireland, 1534–1660*, Dublin: Helicon, 1987, 43, quoted in Maginn '"Surrender and Regrant"', 964; Maginn, '"Surrender and Regrant"', 964.

[370] Eve Campbell, 19.

127

changes but also accumulated boundaries from the period of Gaelic dominance.[371] Helpfully for scholars like Campbell, the English documented property relationships which were foreign to their law:

> The Mallow Inquisition details a series of parcels of land allocated to the kinsmen of O'Callaghan: 'every kinsman of O'Callaghan is to have a certain parcel of land to live upon'. This comprised the land of the ruling sept. It did not pass by primogeniture but was allocated by the O'Callaghan lord who had the prerogative to remove its occupants to other lands 'according to the custom' (Nicholls 1976, 18, 26). Four kinsmen and their allotted parcels of land are named in the Mallow Inquisition, including the brother of the O'Callaghan. While the other freeholders owed rents and duties out of their lands, it would appear that the kinsmen of the O'Callaghan, co-members of the *derbfine*, did not (see Hayes-McCoy 1958, 52).[372]

The use of English legal tools by the claimant who eventually prevailed led to the 'unpinning and remaking of the bonds that held the lordship together. The result was the disenfranchisement of certain kinsmen of the O'Callaghan sept and their relegation to mere tenants.'[373] Under the new property regime, kinship relations were extinguished, and over the next 50 years a great concentration of kin-land ensued (although freeholders seemed unaffected):[374]

> In 1594, the O'Callaghan held a demesne by virtue of his office, and oversaw the distribution of parcels of land among four kinsmen, but by 1641 Donogh O'Callaghan 'chief of his name' stood alone as the dominant landowner, with claim to 79% of the sept land, followed by Dermot O'Callaghan with 15%; six individuals held the

---

[371] Eve Campbell, 23–27.
[372] Eve Campbell, 31–2.
[373] Eve Campbell, 33.
[374] Eve Campbell, 33–4.

remaining 6% (NLI n.d., BSDCork 160–76).[375]

In her discussion of a slightly later case, Ohlmeyer notes that despite their deep and lasting impacts, these were not once and done processes, but, if I may be allowed the metaphor, produced seeds and sprouts which would reach their ultimate fruition later when circumstances allowed:

> Clanricarde's earldom triggered the onset of a long process of anglicization, lasting at least five generations, which was interrupted by bouts of resistance. As in the cases of Thomond and Fitzpatrick, the true impact of anglicization only became really apparent after 1603 once Ireland had been militarily subdued and the Crown finally had the resources to enforce Tudor reforms.[376]

This anglicisation was not only cultural but, ultimately, also entailed the complete political reconstitution of the peerage.[377] Nevertheless, the cultural element was significant, perhaps especially for the labouring masses, and it provided an ideological link for the English in connecting the later to the earlier conquest. As John Montaño argues in *The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland*, the English revived classical views of the relationship between land and civilisation in ways that allowed them to cast the pastoral Gaels as savage: 'At its core, the theory has two inseparable beliefs: first of all, that walls, cities, and cultivated fields are the essential marker of civilization: likewise, by way of antithesis, mobile, nomadic, or pastoral life is, therefore, a sign of savage barbarity.'[378] Montaño considers the changes that the English had instituted to have been reversed over the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, to the horror of their inheritors.[379] While simplistic, this puts contemporary views in context. Certainly, a renewed centralisation of power among Gaelic lords meant an increasing ability to resist and assert ways of life incompatible with an equally renewed and centralising English order.[380] By the restoration, he

---

[375] Eve Campbell, 33.

[376] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 32.

[377] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 64.

[378] Montaño, 3–4, 6.

[379] Montaño, 13, 25.

[380] Montaño, 14–15.

suggests, they had remade the environment as they desired and while ideas about cultivation and improvement had (merely) reached the 'fringes' of government by the end of Henry VIII's reign, '[b]y the early sixteenth century, English officials tasked with restoring order in Ireland established a definite link between reforming the people and transforming the land.'[381] It is in this context that the work of William Petty, both in terms of its intellectual content and in providing a cartography for colonialism, emerged.

While rurality, a noncommercial economy, and pastorality had been intensified by a Gaelic revival, areas of English settlement had been devoted to grain cultivation, '[s]o, while the size and shape of the Pale continued to shift as the defences were neglected or extended, an intangible cultural border was increasingly apparent.'[382] Poynings made this tangible with the establishment of ditches, a reminder of the way that social relations can be materially embedded in territory.[383] Despite the apparent insularity of English ambition that the engraving of fortifications into the earth suggests, the Gaelic lords' power was too great to ignore and the prospect of seizing it appealed to the English lords—so Gaelic power had to go.[384] We have already seen the argument that the seizing of land entailed a remaking of it: 'the land had to be suited to the laws before Ireland could be brought to civility.'[385] Hence the prospect of an expanded colonisation developed, as did—again as we have seen—colonial technologies such as maps and surveys: '[O]fficials assumed that secure laws of inheritance would quickly produce the civilized culture of fences, hedges, walls, gates and houses. They soon learned that there was a whole array of barbarous customs that would need to be eliminated before reform could advance.'[386] Blomley draws attention to similar dynamics in relation to property when he discusses hedgerows; while he takes the case of English enclosure, his argument can also be considered in relation to Ireland, showing

---

[381] Montaño, 25, 59, 64.
[382] Montaño 64, 67.
[383] Montaño, 68.
[384] Montaño, 74.
[385] Montaño, 78.
[386] Montaño, 100, 189.

how bordering logic operates within and between territories in both colonial and noncolonial contexts:

> [I]t is clear that the hedge, more so than the map, was at the centre of a fierce political struggle over enclosure and privatisation. This conflict, however, was often very practical. While enclosers planted hedges, commoners tore them down. As both a barrier and a sign, the hedge was a powerful machine of enclosure. However, its very materiality made it vulnerable to those who opposed privatisation….[387]
>
> [T]he hedge did more than signal private property. It also aimed to enforce it (Sack, 1986). It was not only a sign, and to the extent that it was, it signified ownership in more complicated ways. The hedge did important practical work. Most immediately, it made it difficult for human and nonhuman bodies to move as they had done in the past.[388]

Like Brady, Montaño therefore draws our attention to shires, describing their creation (or redevelopment) as 'a key indicator of civility' for the English, as erecting legal borders and establishing property rights in a similar way as the introduction of cultivated land would, as establishing places and institutions of colonial authority including in county towns, and as a precursor to 'creat[ing] the facts on the ground that demonstrated their determination to order, to civilize, to cultivate, and to possess the land.'[389] William Smyth elaborates on this point:

> First, units of local government and administration were now firmly bounded and focused on a specific central place—the county town…. But there was a further crucial difference in administrative terms. 'Lordship' largely pivoted around strong individual personalities and shifting kin and family

---

[387] Blomley, 'Making Private Property', 5.
[388] Blomley, 'Making Private Property', 8.
[389] Montaño 189, 190–2, 194.

alliances. County administration was now in the hands of a regular, uniform group of state officials, bureaucrats who answered to Dublin and ultimately to London. The county towns became the centres of the garrison, assize courts and local administration generally…'[390]

Such a geography embedded ideological content, Montaño stresses, as wildness as a moral position was conflated with a physical one; 'hedges, ditches, fences, walls, houses, and cities [helped] clarify the division' between the wild and the civilised.[391] The extension of English law was seen as essential, but it needed to be founded on cultivated land.[392] Surrender and regrant served this twin purpose, entailing

an indenture in which the future patentee agreed to a standard set of revealing conditions: he was to renounce his Gaelic title (instead using only his patronymic or a title granted by the king), to accept the sovereignty of the king, do military service and meet certain financial obligations (in lieu of Irish exactions to be renounced), to pay rent, and to adopt certain aspects of civil culture…. grantees were to encourage tillage and to build houses for the husbandsmen. These last two elements are an indication of St. Leger's belief that stability and order were rooted in a social, economic, and cultural structure—a structure built upon the use of lands modelled along English lines.[393]

As he observes, however, if the Irish did not want to renounce their customs, they would have to be compelled to: the more the Gaels resisted the English, the more Gaelic culture itself seemed to be the problem.[394]

Surrender and regrant was soon displaced by a much more direct form of colonial violence:

---

[390] William Smyth, 352–3.
[391] Montaño, 215.
[392] Montaño, 210.
[393] Montaño, 235.
[394] Montaño, 283–6, 386.

plantation. David Heffernan positions plantation as being more of a continuity than a break with surrender and regrant, at least in Leinster. Initially, surrender and regrant was seen as a pragmatic alternative to conquest, although he reports that a lobby in favour of renewing conquest had emerged in the 1530s. With changing context, most notably the accession of Henry VIII, conquest again looked viable, and eventually supplanted surrender and regrant as the primary strategy of extending the regime.[395] Expressing a more common, more dichotomous view of the policies, Nicholas Canny writes that plantation became imperative 'in 1565 when it became the avowed purpose of the government to bring all of Ireland under English control.'[396] To the English, they were reclaiming title they had won through right of conquest and never forfeited, but new views of savagery influenced by Spanish colonial precedent provided new justification for the English's 'own harsh treatment of the native Irish', which were then transferred back to other colonial contexts by the English.[397] The older understanding that the Gaelic masses should, once liberated from their barbaric overlords, be accepted as English subjects gave way to one justifying slaughter, including of non-combatants.[398] This was justified in part by declaring them pagan and hence uncivilised; transhumance was similarly taken as proof of nomadism, and hence barbarity.[399]

A view of English cultural superiority thus developed which held that the Gaels were not ready for freedom and hence had to be under the custody of the English.[400] As Canny writes, '[o]ther Europeans, notably the Renaissance theorists of Italy and France, had advanced the notion of social superiority, but it was only those who came into contact with "barbaric" peoples who drew practical conclusions from the idea in order to provide moral respectability for colonization.'[401] While other geographic contexts are not directly relevant to this study, Canny reminds us that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that England's colonisation of Ireland

---

[395] Heffernan, 3, 15–21.

[396] Canny, *Ideology*, 576.

[397] Canny, *Ideology*, 579, 593–595.

[398] Canny, *Ideology*, 579–83.

[399] Canny, *Ideology*, 584–7.

[400] Canny, *Ideology*, 588–92.

[401] Canny, *Ideology*, 598.

did not occur in a vacuum but is part of a global history, as '[a]ttempts to reassert English authority over Ireland produced under Elizabeth I a pattern of conquest, bolstered by attempts at colonization, which was contemporaneous with and parallel to the first effective contacts of Englishmen with North America, to plans for conquest and settlement there, and to the earliest encounters with its Indian inhabitants. The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland should therefore be viewed in the wider context of European expansion.'[402] This is a point also stressed by Smyth, who reminds us that the early modern period was European, if not global, in its extent, and that England was 'discovering' itself at the same time as it was waging war in Ireland, though he underlines the specificity of Irish developments as 'Ireland became the first European country to be entirely mapped by a systematic, almost island-wide, *field* survey.'[403] Moreover, global developments had unique significance for Ireland as, for example, Mercator's expansion of the map to include the 'new world' redefined Ireland's place in it 'as part of the British Isles'.[404] This not only situated the colonisation of Ireland within global colonialism, but Ireland's colonisation played a direct facilitative role. For instance, already in 1623, in *A Short discourse of the New-found-land : contaynig diverse reasons and inducements, for the planting of that countrey*, Thomas Cary positioned Ireland as a staging ground for the plantation of Newfoundland.[405]

Elsewhere, Canny also considers the politics of the Pale to be of importance in the policy transition to plantation, with relations within the Pale, between the Pale and the rest of Ireland, but especially between the Pale and England each playing a role at a time of shifting allegiances. As he writes, 'during the 1560s and seventies, the policy pursued by the English government in Ireland persuaded the dominant element in the Pale to reconsider their role in society, to reassess their opposition in relation to the government, and to redirect their political endeavours.'[406] The Pale was still largely rural, though economically and politically heterogeneous, and was more

---

[402] Canny, *Ideology*, 575.
[403] William Smyth, 14, 24.
[404] William Smyth, 27.
[405] Cary, B.
[406] Canny, *Formation*, 2.

differentiated from England than was realised by some of Canny's peers.[407] During that period, surrender and regrant was seen by its advocates in the Pale as a means of reform and enlightenment, expressing a 'growing enthusiasm for formal education' and a view that landowners should be intermediaries between peasants and government. Canny writes, 'Equally important was the fact that their awareness of developments outside Ireland convinced the Palesmen that the policy of surrender and regrant was an example of applied humanism aimed at uplifting the Gaelic Irish from their previous state of barbarism.'[408] While they were committed to this policy, as things changed in England, they began to look outmoded and relations with England became more fractious.[409] Economic problems heightened the divide.[410] By 1577 it was clear that they would not only not prevail upon the English in advancing new policy, but that they stood to lose what they already had, leading them to look more towards Europe, strengthening their Catholicism and their internal bonds—a development with obvious consequences for the wars of the next century.[411]

While these discussions show how interrelating factional politics, unstable ideologies, cultural and physical geography, and continental and global influences conditioned the manner in which colonial policy developed, what did not change was their ultimate aim of alienating Gaelic workers from the land and subordinating them to English control—that is, instituting and extending colonial property relations. Thus while the more aggressive and ambitious policy of plantation was in some ways a break, more important was this continuity of purpose and process. The English never lost sight of their goal of appropriating Ireland for themselves.

The Tudors launched the first and ultimately unsuccessful attempt at the plantation of Ireland in 1550, wherein masses of settlers from Britain were imported in planned towns built on seized lands in order to supplant Gaelic property relations and ways of living with English ones.

---

[407] Canny, *Formation*, 3.
[408] Canny, *Formation*, 13–14, 14.
[409] Canny, *Formation*, 15–7.
[410] Canny, *Formation*, 21–2.
[411] Canny, *Formation*, 23–4, 28–31.

Plantation was an alluring prospect to the English, promising to be helpful for resolving problems at home (an excess of Scots) and in Ireland, lucrative, geopolitically important, and 'essentially good for the Irish'.[412] Before long, plantation would soon come to be one of the most influential processes of colonial dispossession, in the Americas as well as in Ireland, although these earliest attempts were not successful in their ultimate aims.

Plantation was a self-consciously political process, as Ohlmeyer explains:

> Demands for more formal colonial enterprise and expropriation of native lords dated from the later Middle Ages. However, only after the Desmond rebellion of the 1570s did wholesale plantation win widespread acceptance. These windfalls, much like the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s and 1540s, provided the Crown with an opportunity to hand out vast swathes of Irish land to its favourites or to reward with acres those who supported its wider civilizing agenda.[413]

David Edwards writes that by 1603, 'Tudor forces had succeeded in breaking the resistance of autonomous Irish warlords opposed to the encroachment of central government; the country was conquered. James would waste little time capitalising on this. During his reign (1603-1625) and that of his son Charles I (1625-1649), Ireland would experience a series of sweeping changes….' with 'revolutionary' effect.[414] This provides the context and confidence which explains James VI and I's determination to, in the words of Ohlmeyer, '"civilize"' Ireland. This involved imposing English legal, political, administrative and tenurial structures, along with an English honour system, the English language, Protestantism, English dress, customs, codes of behaviour and lowland economic and agricultural practices.'[415] Most significantly for our purposes, it also led lord deputy Arthur Chichester to mark the new king's ascension by

---

[412] Brady, 36–37, 37, 26.

[413] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 100.

[414] David Edwards in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2, 48.

[415] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 27.

proclaiming that everyone in Ireland was James's subject, rather than the subject of any Gaelic lord.[416] According to Eoin Flaherty, '[c]rucially, this proclamation outlawed the indigenous Irish system of partible inheritance, known as gavelkind under Gaelic law, through a declaration by judges of the King's Bench in Dublin that neither should be recognized or enforced in the king's court.'[417] Tanistry was abolished, private property rights were introduced, '[t]he sovereignty enjoyed by the lord time out of mind was gone,' the *túatha* was undermined, and the seigneurial right of taxation was abolished. It was in this context, Brady reminds us, that the Flight of the Earls occurred.[418] These changes established a political and legal situation in which dispossession could be widely extended:

> In addition to formal policies of plantation, the Crown sought to
> tame 'those rude parts'—while at the same time enriching itself—
> by interfering in land titles. In 1606 James VI and I established the
> Commission for the Remedy of Defective Titles which, on pain of
> fine or forfeiture, required all Irish landowners to prove their title to
> their land. Many failed and this resulted in the redistribution of land
> in Counties Wexford, Leitrim, Longford and parts of the Midlands
> between 1610 and 1620. This contributed to the outbreak of civil
> war in Ireland almost a decade later…[419]

Where 400 years of English policy had failed, plantation finally succeeded. Despite the change in approach, many of the foremost thinkers on English policy under previous monarchs remained prominent during these years. Perhaps supporting Heffernan's interpretation, policy had a significant degree of continuity in its aim: 'broad Anglicisation of Ireland through a mixture of legal and administrative innovation in central and regional government, colonisation schemes and crude military compulsion…. a concerted effort to eliminate the aristocratic independence of the

---

[416] Brady, 26.

[417] Flaherty, 67.

[418] Brady, 26, 28.

[419] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 101.

Gaelic and Gaelicized lordships, to be undertaken as part of England's historic "civilising" mission in the country.'[420] Edwards suggests the suppression of Gaelic lords was done in pursuit of the desire to anglicise, rather than the other way around, as a class-centric approach might ultimately suggest. Like Brady, Edwards does not interrogate the formation of the functionaries who were responsible for implementing colonial policy—the possibility that political structures which produced a given set of imperatives would also tend to have the effect of producing the functionaries capable of conceptualising and pursuing these imperatives. That is, even if individuals believed their actions were about anglicisation, they could ultimately be determined by a structured mission of dispossession. In this regard, Gerard Farrell more keenly situates plantation policy in its context of the connected desires to anglicise the Gaels and to control their land:

> The attorney-general Sir John Davies, another of the plantation's chief architects, hoped to transform [the Gaelic lords of Ulster] from tribute-receiving warlords into rent-receiving landlords by converting their landholding status to English legal norms. Indeed, Davies had high hopes that bringing the Irish population within the compass of the Common Law for the first time would act as an effective means of anglicisation which he regarded as one of the chief purposes of the plantation.[421]

When he writes that the plantation was intended 'to turn Ulster into a loyal and revenue-generating part of the realm', we can understand these as two sides of the same coin.[422] Raymond Gillespie, meanwhile, presents us with an unusual document by Richard Spert from 1608, being one of only a few known tracts from this period directly advocating royal intervention in Ireland. It deals with issues similar to those discussed by colonial idealogues like Petty: the moral uplifting of the Irish through the transformation of agriculture and, therefore, property. As Gillespie

---

[420] Edwards, 49.

[421] Farrell, 170.

[422] Farrell, 173.

observes, it reflects a wider concern with planting crops like hemp and flax (which could be commercialised) and a view of the Irish as idle, though he cautions that the tract is rather aspirational when compared to the messiness of actual plantations. Spert's tract is almost quaint in its specificity, prescribing a rate of exploitation, with tenants to retain 1/3 of their crop (forfeiting their estates if 'he or they in any sort deceive your Majesty of any part of your corn'); it also reflects a contemporary preoccupation with the new colonial technology of surveying as a means to value land appraise 'what quantity of waste and woods will amount unto and… what your revenues will amount unto'.[423] As have numerous of the scholars cited above, Kearns emphasises the importance of this type of management in the Irish colonial context.[424]

Although he is concerned with private profit, Spert stresses the importance of public duty and morality as essential in this regard: Spert has a 'view of projects created as part of plantation schemes to employ natives and integrate them into the commercial economy… [with] the effect of removing the distinction between private profit and public duty. Each became inextricably linked to the other.'[425] In this respect, Spert indeed reflects the real situation, wherein the Crown put 'private enterprise… to work for the purposes of state.'[426] Brady notes, as do many scholars, the contradictions that emerged here between public and private.[427] The designs of colonial officials being frustrated by self-interested private interests is an emergent theme in the literature; Farrell, for instance, notes that the planters were less interested in the transformation of people or of the economy than in their own bottom lines.[428] Initially, economic transformation appears to have been slow and may even have worked in the favour of many Gaels as, following the Flight of the Earls, they appropriated cattle they had previously been leasing. This left them paying only for grazing rights, albeit rights which became more precious as plantation continued. Farrell suggests that in

---

[423] Gillespie, 67, 70.
[424] Kearns, 'Territory of Colonialism', 324.
[425] Gillespie, 62–5, 64.
[426] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 100.
[427] Brady, 37.
[428] Farrell, 178.

many respects, Gaels would have seen substantial continuity between the previous and old systems.[429] Over time, though, rising costs left them increasingly displaced and they were largely excluded from commercial activity.[430] These novel possibilities are themselves indicators of deeper change, as is another English innovation, this time in the realm of mortgages. Farrell writes:

> Decline in land ownership over this period is, of course, only one indicator of material decline among the native grantees in plantation Ulster. This poor economic performance is often attributed to a lack of experience in the commercial management of estates. Widespread mortgaging of land to colonists and reckless borrowing characterised the years leading up to the rising. Unfamiliarity with English-style mortgages, for example, in which the mortgagor might retain occupancy of the land but lose it permanently if the loan was defaulted on likely played a part in this, accustomed as the Irish were to the Gaelic mortgage or *geall*, in which the mortgagee immediately assumed occupancy but the prospect of recovering the land was always held out to the mortgagor if means could be summoned to repay the loan.[431]

Compounding such pressures, many Gaelic lords were compelled to maintain themselves according to both the English and Gaelic manners, adding to their costs, while they were largely precluded from imposing new obligations, as did their English counterparts.[432] In an increasingly competitive space, higher costs and lower revenues suggest a clear endgame.

In other words, Gaelic 'decline' during this period is a structural effect of colonial political economy. By this time, many of the forces at play were well established and entrenched in society, and, therefore, were mutually reinforcing and self-reproducing. 'Unlike before, however, [this time] the implementation of policy progressed much further, affected all areas and did so

---

[429] Farrell, 183–4.
[430] Farrell, 187.
[431] Farrell, 197.
[432] Farrell, 198.

remarkably quickly…. due partly to the fact that native resistance to English rule was crushed.'[433] Edwards observes that '[a]fter years of war, the country was devastated, with famine widespread.'[434] It is worth noting here another asymmetry of colonialism: because, by its nature, the brutality of colonial conflict is almost totally confined to the colonised country (there is no reciprocal reverse colonisation), the coloniser can continue to depend on the means of production, social institutions, and other preaccumulations of the metropole which it depends upon to reproduce itself, even while the colonised country is continually weakened. Recall Wolfe's summary of global colonial history: European colonialism had a near unlimited ability to reproduce itself; Indigenous societies did not.[435]

The plantation of Ulster was an effect of the military victory, being conceived to fill the power gap which now existed in that former stronghold of resistance.[436] It did not succeed completely, but its failures and successes alike permanently transformed the region:

> Suffice it to say, while the plantation enabled the seizure from the native population of over 3.6 million statute acres in Ulster, and the creation of a major new colony of English and Scottish settlers who were granted most of the best land, nevertheless it fell short of achieving its primary object—full 'British' control of the province. For the plantation to succeed as its planners had intended, it required four things: tight military security; growing Anglo-Scottish cooperation; the emergence of a permanent new colonial aristocracy committed to the plantation project; and a steady flow of large numbers of Protestant settlers from England, Scotland and Wales to develop a population large enough to occupy all the land that had been seized on its behalf. It failed to realise fully any of these

---

[433] Edwards, 49–50.

[434] Edwards, 50

[435] Wolfe, 20.

[436] Edwards, 59–60.

requirements.[437]

As Slater notes, this was also recognised by Marx, who argued that the only enduring effect of the plantation was the concentration of existing preaccumulations in social relations and in soil under a small number of mostly English owners:

> However, in this particular class structure the dominant and exploiting class was a 'small class of land monopolists' (Marx, 1971:59/60). This 'rapacious caste' of landlords owed their privileged existence to the colonial plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The exploitation of these cultivators involved a complex matrix of enfolding social processes with material and organic processes, which were metabolizing with each other within the labour process of agricultural cultivation.[438]

Nevertheless, these policies were significant. Their successes transformed the nature of resistance but did not end it. '[A]n evolving series of rebellions' followed the policies of this period; 'unrest was almost continuous.'[439] Ireland was permanently transformed. Until the present day, of course, the Ulster plantations have had particularly poignant reverberations, both acute and chronic. These effects were not felt equally; '[b]y a distance the main losers in these plantations were the smaller Gaelic landowners, who lost practically everything, while the senior landowners lost between a quarter and a third of their holdings.'[440] These transformations cannot be reduced to individual events, but were structural, consisting of the production of conditions and the institutionalisation of processes in the colonial regime. In this regard, for example, we may consider Ohlmeyer's observation that '[a]s the seventeenth century progressed, the state enjoyed authority over these "tyrannous Irish lords" and exercised a monopoly over the use of violence…. Irish lords no longer operated as "petty sovereigns" but "now embraced and [were] environed by

---

[437] Edwards, 60.

[438] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 4.

[439] Edwards, 71; Brady, 39.

[440] Brady, 29.

[royal] authority".'[441] On a level perhaps more sensible to the everyday person, she notes that the peers' 'pre-eminent position as landowners accorded them privileges which represented an important source of revenue. They enjoyed a monopoly over access to and exploitation of natural resources, especially timber, together with hunting and fishing rights, and they could compel their tenants to use their mill or local court'.[442]

Such processes of enclosure, argue David Nally and Gerry Kearns, 'prepared the ground, quite literally, for the potato.'[443] This new food product's high productivity on marginal land had a contradictory effect similar to that Wood ascribes to market-mediated food in England, as it enabled people to survive despite exploitation and dispossession, thereby also enabling their exploitation and dispossession.[444] While the economy of this society was not capitalist, and dispossession was not total as under capitalism, 'subsistence' under this alienation is analogous to the 'double freedom' of the proletarian labour in the way it induces dependence on colonial domination.[445] Parallels can also be drawn to Marx's assessment of Italy where

> the dissolution of serfdom also took place earlier than elsewhere.
> There the serf was emancipated before he had acquired any
> prescriptive right to the soil. His emancipation at once transformed
> him into a 'free' proletarian, without any legal rights, and he found
> a master ready and waiting for him in the towns, which had been for
> the most part handed down from Roman times. When the revolution
> which took place in the world market at about the end of the fifteenth
> century had annihilated northern Italy's commercial supremacy, a
> movement in the reverse direction set in. The urban workers were
> driven *en masse* into the countryside, and gave a previously
> unheard-of impulse to small-scale cultivation, carried on in the form

---

[441] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 34.

[442] Ohlmeyer, 'Reconstitution', 71.

[443] Nally & Kearns, 1377.

[444] Nally & Kearns, 1378, 1381; see Wood, 57–61.

[445] See Marx, *Capital*, 272.

of market gardening.[446]

If not total, dispossession was widespread: confiscations would reduce Catholic ownership to 14% by the 18th century.[447] During the nine years war and the Cromwellian expedition, systematic destruction of agriculture was undertaken; in the decade or so following the 1641 rising, Irish property had been depreciated in value by a fifth; confiscations were imposed on over 10 000 Catholic landowners; and many people were deported.[448] Faced with the 'dominant assumption… that the rising is sufficiently explained as an inexorable consequence of the plantation which it sought to overthrow,' Aiden Clarke equivocates, emphasising '[t]he need to strike a satisfactory balance between' the existence of preconditions and the specific short-term context of the rising.[449] Nevertheless, removing it from a narrative that would position it as just one of a number of national liberation revolts, he suggests that in its immediacy, it was 'the preliminary to, and perhaps even the necessary condition of, the second phase of the conquest of Ireland.'[450] Further, it 'led to a rearrangement of the elements of Irish society.'[451] Whether we ascribe causality to events or processes, other parts of Ireland were not so radically changed as Ulster—at least not on such a rapid timescale—but they suffered generalised dispossession as well. In response to the rising, John Cunningham writes that the Adventurers Act of 1642 'offered 2,500,000 acres of Irish Catholic land for sale to investors, with the resulting monies being earmarked to finance the suppression of the rebellion. The Adventurers' Act was a telling statement of intent, as the English parliament intruded further into Irish affairs and committed itself firmly to an aggressive policy of mass confiscation.'[452] It is remarkable the speed at which a war which—for the English—could have been about merely protecting the status quo was instead reimagined into an unprecedented colonial offensive. It is also remarkable how significant this war ended up being within England,

---

[446] Marx, *Capital*, 876f.
[447] Nally & Kearns, 1379.
[448] Nally & Kearns, 1379–80.
[449] A. Clarke, 32.
[450] A. Clarke, 42.
[451] A. Clarke, 45.
[452] Cunningham, 75.

being—as Cunningham's account makes clear—intimately bound up with the English revolution. Colonialism in Ireland was therefore perhaps as significant for England as it was for Ireland—albeit in a different way, reflecting the basic asymmetry of the colonial relation.

In any event, as the regime's dominance became more assured, its politics likewise matured. Ted McCormick argues that

> the Restoration witnessed the gradual consolidation of a certain kind of social and political revolution. This revolution centred on the Protestant expropriation of Catholic-owned land, and the concomitant transmutation of the social and political *élite…* [and also] initiated, accelerated, or completed a further series of transformations—in political interests and identities and in the mechanisms, modes and spaces of political a participation—that can be seen as marking the beginnings of a distinctly modern Irish political culture.[453]

He characterises the concept of 'settlement'—in the political sense, not the movement of peoples—as an important, if simplifying, theme in the historiography of the decades following the Confederate uprising (1641–52). This was the last major war waged by Catholic lords in Ireland, who were defeated in what has become known as the Cromwellian conquest, which led to widespread dispossession, authorised by the 1642 Adventurers' Act. As Cunningham explains, '[t]his legislation offered 2,500,000 acres of Irish Catholic land for sale to investors, with the resulting monies being earmarked to finance the suppression of the rebellion. The Adventurers' Act was a telling statement of intent, as the English parliament intruded further into Irish affairs and committed itself firmly to an aggressive policy of mass confiscation.'[454] Policies such as establishment and tolerance aimed at preventing social disparities from threatening the political order, but the reality was not as neat as elites might have liked: 'Settlement… implied the territorial and therefore political supremacy of one confessional group…. Yet in practice the territorial

---

[453] McCormick, 97.
[454] Cunningham, 75.

question cut across politico-religious divisions.'[455] Previous centuries had given Ireland a complex demographic landscape: while the relation between English and Irish had always been central to it, the new religious bifurcation did not neatly map onto this inheritance. At the same time, Robert Armstrong tells us how Protestantism's now dominant status enabled law to be used as a tool in the 'rationalisation of parishes' and the suppression of Catholicism through the implementation of a 'legalised geography'.[456] The creation of parochial administrative units, which as accretions would, in centuries to come, become one of the most important vectors of public and private policy in Ireland, echoes the process of shiring on a finer, overlapping manner. McCormick notes however that the religious complexities of this period 'doomed the search for a universally acceptable settlement to failure absent another, more decisive conquest.'[457] The strategies pursued were sometimes planned (as in the case of the Plantation), but sometimes they emerged unintentionally from evolving circumstances, 'alter[ing] Irish political structures from within and impos[ing] new constraints from without'.[458] The vagaries and tensions of politics, for example, led to the undoing of 1662's Act of Settlement's Court of Claims system, as judges 'were often divided, either by factional loyalties, corruption or genuine differences of opinion', satisfying no one and producing an alarmist reaction which led to political crisis and two rebellious plots.[459]

Quoting Wood, Nally & Kearns sum up the overall effect of these developments: 'The usurpation and enclosure of Gaelic land was the prelude to the imposition of an entirely new political, social and economic order, what one scholar calls "the world's first structural adjustment programme" (Wood 2017:155)…. The power of the newly established "Protestant Ascendancy" rested on plunder and legislative fiat (Nally 2011b).'[460] The political economy established here was foundational to the Ireland that was to come. While the early centuries of England's colonial

[455] McCormick, 97, 98.

[456] Armstrong in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol 2, 232.

[457] McCormick, 97–8.

[458] McCormick, 98

[459] McCormick, 101–3.

[460] Nally & Kearns, 1380–81.

regime were essential in laying the groundwork for later developments—conditions of possibility as well as structural imperatives—they did not themselves necessitate or constitute those developments. Much scholarly attention has focused on the importance of events following this period, probably due to the extent of English domination, but many important qualitative changes had already occurred by its end. Nevertheless, while many processes—surrender and regrant, the military defeat of the Gaelic lordships after the Nine Years' War and the attendant devastation of Ireland, the Cromwellian settlement and plantation—produce events which do constitute watersheds of sorts, Wolfe emphasises that watersheds exist in a context of accumulation in its temporal aspect, as continuous (which is not to say unilinear).[461]

More important than any individual event or policy was the cumulative process of dispossession through the implementation and extension of colonial property relations. This was permitted by the expansion in power and space of the colonial regime, which was itself closely linked to ongoing military processes: once opposition had been smashed, the institution of a smaller, aggressive, colonial occupation garrison was sufficient to maintain order—effectively, a police force, and a historically important example of one at that.[462] As Edwards writes, 'the "order" it imposed was in many places entirely new'.[463] This is significant: the geographical extension of English power inherently entailed the imposition of new 'order'—i.e., the transformation of social relations—including, as Marx notes, a shift in which the Irish were considered not as intrinsic outlaws or enemies of the regime but as subjects.[464] One major effect of this was the swift 'demilitarisation of the native lordships',[465] a long desired but only newly possible level of English dominance. More consequentially for the shape of the colonial regime, sweeping reform to property relations also occurred. The right to impose taxation was usurped.[466] Tanistry, as well as

---

[461] Wolfe, 209.
[462] Edwards, 51–54.
[463] Edwards, 52.
[464] Marx in *Ireland*, 127–8.
[465] Edwards, 55.
[466] Edwards, 57.

the Gaelic, kin-based form of property it belonged to, was abolished in favour of primogeniture and English-style private property.[467] '[T]he very notion of the *túatha*, as a polity shared by people of ancient noble stock, was itself gravely diluted.'[468] Although the idea of a penal 'code' may be misleading, the cumulative effect of anti-Catholic legislation was significant, while '[i]n the economic sphere, a series of parliamentary acts—most importantly the Navigation, Cattle and Woollen Acts—ensured that Ireland's economic activity was carefully synchronised to ensure England's domestic growth and commercial expansion (Nally 2012).'[469] Along with, driven by, and exacerbating these transformations was a dramatic growth in population, which from 1550 to 1730 'doubled (from roughly one million), which was the highest rate in contemporary Europe.'[470]

These changes were monumental in Irish history, restructuring Irish society on lines more conducive to English-style private property, laying the groundwork for later processes such as ongoing land transfers, subdivision of tenancies and the famine, agitation over the right to alienate property through exchange, and ultimately the transition to capitalism. The overall effect was to make it no longer possible to reproduce Gaelic society. The intention was to lead to the production of an English society. However, colonisers never operate on a blank slate: because of the sheer depth of Gaelic preaccumulations and the unique features which had emerged over the long period of contact, many specifically Irish social phenomena persisted as accretions and would continue to interfere in these designs. Nevertheless, although many possibilities remained open, from this point on, an independent Gaelic future was foreclosed. As William Smyth writes, 'Ireland… had experienced a colonial conquest that in truth was never more than a half-conquest. It experienced the attempted destruction of an old civilization that almost succeeded, yet saw the creation of a number of new regional societies…. What Ireland would have been like without this conquest can never be known.'[471] And from this point on, in Ohlmeyer's words, '[e]conomic imperialism

---

[467] Edwards, 56.

[468] Edwards, 57.

[469] McGrath in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2; Nally & Kearns, 1381.

[470] Ohlmeyer, 'Introduction' in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol 2, 7.

[471] William Smyth, 451.

reinforced political dominance,' as Ireland was firmly enmeshed in 'a political economy of dependency centred on London'.[472]

Ascendancy

By 1730, Charles McGrath tells us, Ireland had seen 'the complete and conclusive collapse of Roman Catholic political and economic power; the establishment of a Protestant hegemony in the governance of the country'.[473] However, DW Hayton argues that this process 'simply confirmed the work already accomplished by the Cromwellian conquest and confiscations.'[474] The Protestant ascendancy was 'reinforced' by these changes; Jacobite confidence, as well as the cause itself, faded.[475] At the same time, fears of Catholic revival, insecurity, and 'a broader appreciation of the European situation', were widespread and highly motivating components of Protestant ideology.[476] While there were many political developments in this new environment, a sort of status quo could be established: dispossession still continued and Ireland's property relations were still subject to ongoing change, but major exercises of force were no longer required and the colonial regime could be consolidated around the state which England had created in Ireland. In retrospect, it is easy to identify tension rising in the system, even if it was not always directly manifest—for example, the confluence of potato and property structure shaped 'a new Ireland', facilitating the agricultural transition to the potato as a means of survival under duress.[477]

Illustrating McGrath's argument that political dominance led Parliament to become 'the main vehicle through which [Protestant elite] power was exercised', Hayton describes how one of its main objectives was to further cement that power by curtailing Catholic revival.[478] Among other things this meant exercising legal power over land, as Thomas O'Connor describes: 'Because the

---

[472] Ohlmeyer, 'Introduction' in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol 2, 9.

[473] McGrath in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2., 120.

[474] Hayton in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 2, 144.

[475] Hayton, 144–5.

[476] Hayton, 148.

[477] Nally & Kearns, 1380.

[478] McGrath, 124; Hayton, 145–6.

Irish Protestant interest was based on the possession of confiscated landed wealth, safeguarding the Cromwellian and Williamite land settlements was [a] key legislative priority.'[479] Cumulative confiscations, including a new round in the aftermath of the defeat of the Jacobites, reduced Catholics to holding 14% of the land by 1703. Land reforms were instituted in order to ensure that Catholic power continued to decline: the implementation of gavelkind inheritance, for instance, led to the increasing subdivision of estates.[480] At the same time, enlisting Protestant converts as well as amenable Catholics to the service of the regime played a role in maintaining the stability of this period.[481]

The 'apartheid' referred to by Vincent was another feature of this period.[482] Hayton writes that while revisionist historians have pointed out the so-called penal code was in origin more ad hoc and contingent than its common name might suggest, there was still a 'formidable range of restrictions on the religious, social, economic, professional and political lives of Irish Catholics.'[483] Recognising the way that social change can accrete as a series of small changes, the concept of a penal code is therefore not without coherence—even if they did not comprise one, Hayton writes that the laws had 'the appearance of a systematic code'.[484] It is a rare social institution that comes into existence all at once and in a perfectly premeditated way. Hayton's analyses supports the argument that despite a degree of effective tolerance, the widespread dispossessions, the colonial regime, and especially the legal expression of their relationship was what ensured that Catholics were generally marginalised at all levels of society.[485] This, he makes clear, was a direct result of the property system and its connection to citizenship:

> The fact that so few Catholics in Ireland retained freehold property,
> in a society in which the possession of real estate was understood as

---

[479] Thomas O'Connor in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 3, 261.
[480] Hayton, 123, 134.
[481] See O'Connor, 262, 278.
[482] Vincent, 211.
[483] Hayton, 146, 147.
[484] Hatyon, 152.
[485] Hayton, 152–4.

the essential qualification for full and active citizenship, meant that Catholics occupied a secondary role not merely in the political system but in public life in general. The extent to which Ireland in the first half of the eighteenth century was a Protestant-dominated society cannot be over-emphasised, and justifies the use of the term 'Protestant Ascendancy', despite its being an anachronism. The institutions of state power were monopolised by Protestants, as were parliament, the law courts and eventually the legal profession.[486]

Having wrested control of Ireland from Catholic lords, the English now sought to lessen the potential threat posed by this newly subaltern social group by the formation of a new historical bloc that included, to some degree, the Catholic elite. This would have fractured Catholics' political subjectivities, as O'Connor suggests: '[t]he Penal Laws may have placed all Irish Catholics in one legal category but this did not encourage political *esprit de corps*.'[487] The security of this new social order was confirmed by reducing conflict between the established church and its dissenters: Andrew Holmes tells us that '[b]y the 1880s, intra-Protestant difference had been eased by the influence of evangelicalism, but perhaps more significant was the concern about the minority Protestant interest in Ireland and the threat posed by Catholic democracy and the spectre of "Rome Rule".'[488]

At the same time, Slater & McDonough, following Marx, argue that once it had been consolidated, the colonial regime was relatively conservative, at least by comparison with the transition to capitalism then beginning in England. They write:

> What can be concluded from this examination of Marx's report of 1867 is that colonialism begat a feudal economy that lasted into the nineteenth century. The Cromwellian conquest introduced a British feudalism in Ireland at precisely the moment the English feudal aristocracy was losing its sway over British society. The motivation

---

[486] Hayton, 153.

[487] O'Connor, 278.

[488] Andrew R. Holmes in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 3, 332.

for this settlement was more political than economic, its aim being to secure Ireland against rivals. Subsequently, strategic necessity forged a strong bond between Irish landed and British imperial interests. The absence of traditional ties left the peasantry without customary protections. The religious disability of the peasantry reinforced inequity in tenurial relations. While retaining power over a subordinated peasantry, the fitful character of industrialisation under various colonial regimes shielded the landlord class from challenges that would have emanated from a dynamic capitalist class. Thus, the colonial character of Irish agricultural relations advantaged the landlords in conflict with both the native peasantry and alternative elites. These institutional advantages maintained feudalism in Ireland into the nineteenth century.[489]

As this passage suggests, while property relations were not expressly capitalist, they still responded to capitalist imperatives. The colonial regime therefore acted as an intermediary between capitalist and non-capitalist relations. Before long, for example, the discourse of the 'improvement' of Ireland, long the English mission on the island, became 'increasingly focused on the modernisation of farming techniques and the introduction of new industries such as linen manufacture', which expanded dramatically in the early 18th century.[490] That is, there was emphasis on increasing surplus value production through the reorganisation of labour both within existing industries and through the reallocation of labour to new industries. Wood argued that a 'new kind of commercial system' uniquely developed in England in 'dependence on intensive as distinct from extensive expansion, on the extraction of surplus value created in production as distinct from profit in the sphere of circulation, on economic growth based on increasing productivity and competition within a single market—in other words, on capitalism.'[491] Now began attempts to introduce it in Ireland to further English profit. Though Ireland had long had

---

[489] Slater & McDonough, 171–2.

[490] Hayton, 164; Ohlmeyer in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, 7.

[491] Tadgh Ó hAnnracháin in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, 174–5.

market-driven economic activity, Wood shows that capitalist market dynamics have unique imperatives, including the systemic need to further alienation of the workforce. Colonial property was historically unique.

Further evidence that the apparent status quo actually expressed a heightening of colonial contradictions is seen in the development of Irish civil society. Martyn Powell tells us, for example, that '[i]n Ireland one can identify a close relationship between the growth of civil society and sectarianism' and draws our attention to moderate class divisions as well as 'political cleavages, the differences between rural and urban environments, and the role played by groups committed to the maintenance of the connection to the British state.'[492] In a similar way, economy and economic ideology was related to civil society: 'Improvement was a leitmotif of Irish club culture in the eighteenth century… there was a strong relationship between Irish clubs and improvement.'[493] Even being a member of a club required spending money, meaning that '[e]conomic and political credit was bound together in the associational world.'[494] Thus, we can see reflected in Irish clubs the emergence of a proto-capitalist sociality in a context where non-capitalist, personal, and patronage relationships were still important. There were, moreover, clubs concerned with asserting agrarian interests and the interests of tenants; as time went on, clubs became more open to Catholic membership, but 'a hardening occurred that resulted in more defined class stratification and intensified sectarianism in the nineteenth century.'[495] This mirrors the development of party politics in Ireland and Britain during the same period. In an environment where there was no longer an extant political power which could provide a real alternative to the colonial regime, it is no surprise that in combination with the rising population, land struggles would be at the forefront of Irish politics until partition.

Union and famine

---

[492] Martyn J. Powell in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 3, 466.
[493] Powell, 469.
[494] Powell, 478.
[495] Powell, 466.

Robert Scally's *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, & Emigration* demonstrates how much the country had changed by the mid-19th century. The first chapter, 'The Townland', is devoted to explaining the lifeworld of the book's subjects through the social institution of the townland, or *baile*. As he explains, *bailia* 'were not villages as most Europeans of the age would think of them, not units that could be easily counted and taxed, not always entities that had standing in law, often not even possessing the geometrical silhouettes that Europeans had long associated with civilization;' nonetheless, they were loci of history, kinship, and collective force.[496] The townland was not only 'a division of the land but the human communities dwelling within it…. [a] marriage of meanings, one material and the other mental….'[497] Moreover, there was a fundamental divide between the way that the colonial government and the labouring population conceived of the land: 'Like so much else in prefamine Ireland, the official ordering of the land in its surveys and divisions no longer coincided with the perceptions and consciousness of the population.'[498] Today's conception of the townland thus more closely aligns with that of the colonial administrators than with the ancient Irish ways of living.

Nevertheless, Scally argues that the ruling elite could hardly be considered foreign any longer; the colonial status of the country consisted more in the classed landlord/tenant divide than any other factor, such as ethnic origin *per se,* the union, or other legislation. These, along with such developments as the import of British capital and the modernization 'disfigured by colonialism', reflected cumulative changes in the nature of Irish society, conditioned fundamentally by its history of subordination to the neighbouring island polity.[499]. One result of this complex situation was to allow the development of contradictory political phenomena which would collide with dramatic effect. In the townland of Ballykilcline, the inhabitants were to discover suddenly that they were not, as they had believed, tenants of a local landlord, but had been for some time the tenants of the Crown—with the 'landlord' acting rather as the Crown's

---

[496] Scally, 10.
[497] Scally, 12.
[498] Scally, 13.
[499] Scally 20–1.

agent, collecting and transmitting rent. In the course of the events described in *The End of Hidden Ireland*, '[t]his fact and the layer of upon layer of the superstructure above was revealed to them only by degrees…. The peasants' place in relation to that outside world and the possibility that they might soon have to travel in it was also unveiled to them in the same process, one layer at a time.'[500] Of course, Ballykilcline was just one small community with its own peculiarities, but its history exemplifies the many centuries of accumulated tensions that had been building up in Ireland.

By the 19th century 'the educated and polished middle classes reigned supreme, having finally wrested control of philanthropy, charity and education, and in the process usurped the asset-rich and landed as the natural governors of society.'[501] Union had significant economic impacts: by 1826, Ireland and Britain 'constituted a unified monetary and trading zone.'[502] Most households were supported by a mix of wage and peasant labour. However, even among Irish workers, fortunes varied widely: 400,000 families occupied 70% of land; cottiers and labourers together held 13%: 'This starkly reveals the highly uneven income distribution of the pre-Famine economy, which left much of the bottom third of the population highly vulnerable to harvest fluctuations and limited recourse to the market. Yet at this stage about two-thirds of agricultural output was sold for cash.'[503] Along with its increasing commercial power, the ruling class had strengthening political power. Increasingly able to exercise both material and ideological control over society, the colonial regime had consolidated into something approaching a modern state with a Gramscian historical bloc. As Virginia Crossman explains, 'by the middle of the nineteenth century Ireland possessed a range of institutions and services that had no parallel in other parts of the United Kingdom; these included a national system of elementary education, a national police force and, according to MacDonagh, a health system.'[504] That Ireland was the locus of such advancements is less

---

[500] Scally, 22.
[501] Ciaran O'Neill in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 3, 518.
[502] Andy Bielenberg in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 3, 179.
[503] Bielenberg, 182.
[504] Virginia Crossman in *Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 3, 542.

surprising than it seems as unlike in Britain and Europe, where the state had to mediate between elite factions, in Ireland it was a tool of the colonial establishment and did not need to make many concessions, significant exceptions being emancipation and the land reforms of the late 19th century. Moreover, the ancient institutions present in Ireland had already been effectively dispensed with as conquest rendered many Gaelic preaccumulations irrelevant; in Britain and Europe, analogues had to be contended with throughout the period of state centralisation and the transition to capitalism.

Though violence had indeed provided the foundation for substantial transformations, Petty's *tabula rasa* had still not come to pass. Elimination was far from total and while there was no coherent rival power bloc in Ireland, the fear that English Protestant rule could be challenged persisted. Indeed, Jim Smyth points out that the very term 'Protestant Ascendancy' is a largely retrospective one, having been coined in 1786 and taking off after 1792 as a 'defensive concept' in response to a renewed Catholic threat—although the regime exhibited a certain security, this was something that had to be actively maintained. The Marxist/Gramscian affirmation that 'society does not pose for itself tasks the conditions for whose resolution do not already exist' is worth contemplation in this context as one analyses the factional and class politics of this period of high colonialism.[505] While they may have been relatively weak, Smyth argues that working classes nevertheless played a central role in the politics of this period, but that unlike in England, they did not cohere through the development of a unified working-class consciousness and instead '[found] expression through opposition to the ascendancy, religion and an as yet inchoate nationalism.'[506] Smyth makes an argument for the importance of subaltern political consciousness in the assessment of this period, noting that '[t]he recurrence of words like "natural", "rooted" and "hereditary disaffection" [in contemporary accounts] imply the existence of a popular *mentalité* inherent in the structures or history of Irish society,' and suggesting, in rather Gramscian terms, that 'Ireland was divided along religious, "racial", cultural and linguistic lines, and these divisions,

---

[505] Gramsci, 409–410.
[506] Jim Smyth, 2, 8.

entrenched in folk memory and perpetuated by the country's legal, political and institutional structures, effectively prevented the evolution of a more integrated, deferential and stable society.'[507]

In this context, O'Neill describes how Adam Smith, whose influence on political economy during this century need hardly be mentioned, desired a union of Ireland and Britain to enable the bourgeoisie in Ireland to become a buffer between rich and poor, enabling capitalist development. That this did not take full root in Ireland is largely a consequence of the land system and the resistance of the Irish to losing what little they retained, not for a lack of trying on the part of Britain and British landlords in Ireland. It would be a mistake to assume that the interests of the colonial elite and the interests of the British state were totally aligned, but they both had a vested interest in maintaining the basic system of property and regime that were now ascendant.

The new situation funnelled resistance into new avenues as by the 1790s, growing political consciousness and the language of rights made the Catholic question 'an unavoidable item on the British political agenda.'[508] Crossman also writes of a new state politics:

> It is generally assumed in a nineteenth-century context that 'the state' can only mean the British state, since Ireland did not possess a parliament, an army or control over foreign policy…. Yet, as Thomas Bartlett has argued, it is possible to detect a nascent Irish state in the eighteenth century, one moreover that grew stronger over time, and that demonstrated an ability to attract the loyalty of its citizens. Indeed, it was the growing strength of the Irish state, he argues, and the threat it 'appeared to pose to imperial unity, that prompted British ministers to urge its absorption….'[509]
> The nineteenth century saw the emergence of new kinds of government and administration throughout the United Kingdom, and a new kind of state, one that intervened more directly in the lives

---

[507] Jim Smyth, 38, 39.
[508] O'Connor, 279.
[509] Crossman, 543.

of its citizens. In Britain this process was driven largely by the demands of industrialisation. This was not the case in Ireland, where government focused more on addressing the consequences of centuries of political upheaval and the fractured nature of Irish society.[510]

This reciprocally shaped the development of the Irish state, as Crossman illustrates with the example of policing: 'Centralisation was initially introduced as a means of giving the force popular legitimacy. That legitimacy was bound up with the legitimacy of central government. As central government came more into conflict with the mass of the population, so the police came to be aligned once again with the forces of reaction and repression.'[511] Thus, the very fact that the British and Irish states had to be unified under one political order despite their differences may well have been what ultimately drove them apart. While some contend that the legal arrangement of union rendered this situation non-colonial, from the fundamentals of agriculture to political conflicts at the highest level, colonial contradictions continued to structure both Ireland and its relationship to Britain.

The Acts of Union ended the era of the Irish parliament and set the terms of constitutional struggle during the 19th century. Desmond McCourt notes that among other things, union meant the gradual breakup of rundale in Ulster over the late 18th century, dramatically changing the appearance of the landscape.[512] Jim Smyth writes,

> By mid-century the profitability of converting tillage to pasture prompted enclosures, a process which… disrupted the 'moral economy' of the countryside, displacing smaller tenants and encroaching upon customary access to common land. In this instance modernisation had a socially destabilising effect: it eroded settled relationships and undermined traditional rural practices.[513]

---

[510] Crossman, 566.
[511] Crossman, 565.
[512] D. McCourt in Roebuck, 119.
[513] Jim Smyth, 25.

McCourt emphasises the relation between the spatial and the temporal dimensions of this process: the relationship between infield and outfield, practices such as transhumance and wintering stock, and varying tillage as necessary both within and between years, kept 'the various components of rundale… in equilibrium.'[514] Its flexibility also allowed it to adapt, and therefore persist, in changing socioeconomic circumstances.[515] The growing population led to subdivision and shifts in the grazing–tillage balance, both of which put increasing pressure on the rundale system.[516] For a time, the practices of those who opposed rundale exhibited a degree of similarity with it, before moving towards a new strategy of consolidation and improvement after 1815.[517] Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence to suggest that 'agrarian communism' survived institutionally in Ireland. For example, Flaherty writes that 'the practice of periodic rotation in certain districts, as observed by Young in the late eighteenth century, is suggestive not of an institutionalized system of private holding, but rather of a co-existing mode of collective holding and share entitlement or usufruct, which Friedrich Engels argued was a feature of Celtic survival.'[518]

Marx and Engels considered deindustrialisation to be a major development of this time, a departure from the caricature that they favoured industrialisation at all costs. As Slater & McDonough suggest, Marx's conclusions resulted from the particularities of the contemporary political situation and his understanding of the structural requirements of the colonial regime:

> Therefore, the specific determining factor, as suggested by Marx, in the deindustrialisation of Ireland in the nineteenth century was not due to economic conditions (either internal or external) but to a watershed reached within a long-running struggle between separate parliamentary institutions in the regime, where one institution was able to use its power to close down the other. Therefore, although

---

[514] D. McCourt, 120.
[515] D. McCourt, 120.
[516] D. McCourt, 127–8.
[517] D. McCourt, 131, 134.
[518] Flaherty, 68.

the consequences of this political struggle were economic, the actual immediate determining factor must be located at the political level. As a consequence, the analytical focus on a 'prime mover' of the industrial self-interest of the metropolitan economy is not appropriate in understanding the complex changing relationships between the colonising institutions within the political level and their relationships with the Irish economy and civil society in general. The 'prime mover' approach must therefore be rejected as a form of inappropriate reductionism.[519]

Like in England—if we accept Wood's argument—transformations in property relations were mediated politically. Unlike in England, where the accumulative logic of domestic property relations produced a clear trend of concentration and centralisation, and therefore of 'improvement' and industrialisation, the relationship between Ireland and England allowed for more flexibility. Despite union, the colonial regime was not dismantled; indeed it could not be, as it was the means of asserting control over a foreign population and was therefore constitutional to union. Instead, it was partially incorporated. Ireland was thus enabled to remain partially outside the general framework of capitalist relations, even as they became dominant in England. The significance of this relationship was primarily qualtiative. While the extraction of surplus was a consistent feature, not being interrupted even during the famine, it was the property and state relations constituting the colonial regime, rather than the worker-employee relationship of capitalist enterprises, which governed this flow. Within these auspices came, as Marx argued, numerous phases of qualitatively different forms of exploitation. Indeed, to Engels, England's ability and willingness to alter the forces and relations of production in Ireland was perhaps the defining characteristic of Ireland's colonisation, as the following excerpt from his proposed *History of Ireland* shows:

It can be seen that even the facts of nature become points of national

---

[519] Slater & McDonough, 162.

controversy between England and Ireland. It can also be seen, however, how the public opinion of the ruling class in England—and it is only this that is generally known on the Continent—changes with the fashion and in its own interests. Today England needs grain quickly and dependably—Ireland is just perfect for wheat-growing. Tomorrow England needs meat—Ireland is only fit for cattle pastures. The existence of five million Irish is itself a smack in the eye to all the laws of political economy, they have to get out but whereto is their worry![520]

Though union significantly altered the political and economic situation in Ireland, especially in legal terms, it did not alter the basic structural constitution of the England-Ireland colonial relation. As the final words of Engels' excerpt suggest, however, the accretions of this period were a powerful latent force that would have profound consequences for Irish history once catalysed.

Slater & McDonough argue that for Marx, the defining feature of the pre-famine period was the rackrenting and middleman system which emerged as a consequence of the failures of plantation and anglicisation, in large part dependent on the establishment of the concentrated landlord class through the Cromwellian conquest.[521] Union, of course, had a major influence in this sphere as well. Hazelkorn writes: 'Any hint that the two islands operated as single economies was exploded politically by the Act of Union but moreso by the economic ramifications of the Great Famine. Hence, what was occurring was a process of uneven development within the British context.'[522] As this suggests, the unity of the two economies was mediated by transformations in the economic configuration of Ireland. While the rackrenting system was concerned with the extraction of maximum absolute surplus to individual landlords, it was the Corn Laws which institutionalised this economic arrangement in a definite legal framework.[523] Slater &

---

[520] Engels in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 190–1.
[521] Slater & McDonough, 155, 163, 8.
[522] Hazelkorn, 317–8.
[523] Slater & McDonough, 14.

McDonough, noting the extra-economic coercion underlying this exploitation, term the mode of production 'essentially feudal', since accepting rackrents was the only alternative most had to starvation.[524] Developing an argument of Marx's, they argue that this system also precluded the development of capitalism in Ireland:

> The extra economic coercion at the foundation of the feudal mode of production subverts the possibility of the 'normal' conditions of the capitalist mode of production emerging in the Irish social formation. In his report, Marx further expands on this tendency to hinder the development of the capitalist mode of production through the inability of the agricultural economy to reinvest capital back into the production process, and the subsequent exportation of this capital to Britain:
>
>> Middlemen accumulated fortunes that they would not invest in the improvement of the land, and could not, under the system which prostrated manufactures, invest in machinery, etc. All their accumulations were sent therefore to England for investment... thus was Ireland forced to contribute cheap labour [through emigration] and cheap capital to building up 'the great works of Britain'.
>
> According to Marx, the amount of rent sent to absentee landlords, the amount of interest on mortgages, and the investment of Irish capital in England was many millions of pounds sterling. The crucial aspect of Marx's point in the above is not the amount actually sent to Britain to build up 'the great works of Britain' (an important focus of dependency theory), but, rather, the reasons why that capital had to be exported. Capital, which was extracted from Irish agriculture through rental returns, was not reinvested in the Irish economy

---

[524] Slater & McDonough, 62–6.

partially because of the legal right of the landlord to appropriate improvements made by the direct producers—the tenants. According to William Neilson Hancock, these legal impediments to reinvestment of capital into the Irish economy were a direct consequence of feudal characteristics of the Irish legal system.

The surplus labour product of Ireland, therefore, was exported to England—where it could become capital. Ireland was thus integral to England's capitalist economy, but the colonial regime and its property arrangements intervened between Ireland and England to ensure this unfolded through absolute value extraction mediated through export. As Christine Kinealy explained (to a popular audience):

> It is generally accepted that by the 1840s, Ireland had become the granary of Britain, supplying the grain-hungry British market sufficient to feed two million people annually. Grain was not the only major food export to Britain: the data suggests that at the time of the Famine the population of Britain depended heavily on Ireland for a wide range of foodstuffs, and not just grain.[525]

In addition to food exports, a large amount of money was also sent over to England in the form of mortgage interest, investment funds, and rent returns.[526] Rental payments, of course, were derived from the sale of agricultural product in the first place, and thus represent the total alienation of the labourer—and the Irish as a colonised people—from the land and labour which was exploited to produce it. In an important ecological Marxist analysis, Slater argued that this represents another non-capitalistic feature of the system, since rent in Ireland was therefore a bare deduction from 'wages'.[527] Tenants and labourers were incentivised to do the minimum labour required for their subsistence, since anything additional would be extracted; moreover, Marx points out, if land were made more productive, rent was bound to increase—a circumstance which

---

[525] Kinealy, 34.
[526] Slater & McDonough, 17.
[527] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 15.

would amount to the labourer paying interest on their own capital![528] Slater argues that this situation gave cotters an essential role in maintaining and restoring the fertility of the soil.[529]

By the eve of the famine, '[t]wo centuries of confiscation and plantation had turned a nation of owners into a nation of tenant-paupers' largely dependent on the potato.[530] Where Ireland's ancient kinship ties persisted, they were increasingly mediated through property: as Samuel Clark suggests in *Social Origins of the Irish Land War,* the decline of the rundale system meant that by the early 1800s the only way to fulfil traditional kinship obligations, other than the provision of dowries, was by subdividing land between sons—which was, of course, precisely the point.[531] On top of this, Ireland continued to see significant demographic change in the first half of the 19th century. While Cormac Ó Gráda notes the rate of growth came closer to the European norm the age of marriage rose, growth remained high.[532] These factors did not prevent the population rising to eight million by the famine, which meant that land was increasingly scarce, but also that there was a large amount of new labour. Consequently, agricultural land use shifted away from livestock grazing, which requires relatively much land and little labour, to tillage—especially for potatoes. Along with rising food prices, Ireland's population became highly dependent on this now well-established crop.[533]

In 1845, just prior to the famine, the Devon Commission concluded that while Ireland's tenancy law was not fatal to the Irish economy, it was the most significant thing 'impeding' it. This view, disputed today, was widely accepted throughout the 19th century, guaranteeing that land law would be at the centre of political struggle. While some legislation was introduced to rectify the situation, such as by promoting capital movement, ultimately this was to little effect.[534] Nevertheless, Ireland's reliance on the potato was structural and could not have been solved merely

---

[528] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 18–19; Marx in *Ireland*, 59–60.
[529] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 17–26.
[530] Nally & Kearns, 1379.
[531] Samuel Clark, 26, 45–6.
[532] Ó Gráda, 69–72.
[533] Ó Gráda, 14–16.
[534] Solow, 2–3.

by legal changes.[535] Numerous features of potatoes, including their ability to grow in marginal land, and the fact that they could be eaten with no processing beyond boiling, gave them a high yield which was valuable in these circumstances.[536] Significantly, as the population grew, the shift in land-use became locked in, as only the potato was capable of sustaining this new demographic situation.[537] This made for an interesting political economic situation, as Nally & Kearns describe:

> A new managerial class of landowners served leases that promoted a switch from tillage to pasturage. Graziers, dairy farmers, speculators and middlemen took advantage, scattering the poorest to make way for consolidated sheep-runs and cattle ranches. Where arable farming persisted, rural toilers, restricted by penal laws and proto-industrial collapse, were compelled to accept small plots with the rent to be worked out in labour. Given the immense competition for land—and the necessity of securing subsistence—workers often agreed to the highest possible rents and the lowest possible value on their labour (Rogers 1847a). The self-same pressures that pushed the poor on to ever smaller slips of land encouraged a deepening reliance on a very narrow range of varieties of potato. Indeed, on the eve of the Famine just one variety, the prodigious but blight-prone 'Lumper', was the mainstay of the poorest class of farmers (Bourke 1993). For the vast majority of Irish people everyday life had become a virtual "speculation in subsistence" (Miller 1985:53).[538]

Ó Gráda complicates this last claim. Although the growing population meant lower wages, higher rents, the reclamation of poorer ground, and the beginnings of large-scale emigration, Ó Gráda suggests that people were healthy with good life expectancies.[539] Yields may have been low as compared with England, but they were high by comparison with France; agriculture may

---

[535] Solow, 11–14.
[536] Nally & Kearns, 1382.
[537] Solow, 11–12.
[538] Nally & Kearns, 1381.
[539] Solow, 2; Samuel Clark, 37; Ó Gráda, 18–22.

have been laborious, but there was plenty of labour.[540] The economy, that is, seems to have had the ability to provide an increasing benefit for an increasing number of people—leaving the attendant dispossession, discrimination, and cultural change to the side—satisfying people's use values in a manner which was, until the blight, apparently sustainable. This, Ó Gráda argues, means a famine was not as inevitable as is sometimes supposed.[541] These gains were not equally spread, however, as the standard of living for the bottom third fell, nor were they incompatible with the rising rents and farming profits of the period.[542] Clark reminds us as well that not all tenants were equal and that the divisions between cultivators could be as large as those between tenants and landlords. Furthermore, the entrenched middleman system meant that most landlords were not landowners: 'The system was so complex that it was not unknown for two people to be both landlord and tenant to one another. The result was obviously that many persons found it difficult to think of themselves either as landlords or as tenants, because they were both.'[543] This undermines the interpretation of class as definite sociological categories, a point Clark also emphasises: 'Realistically, we should think of the agrarian class structure as formed by a gradation in levels of power and wealth, from the landless laborer to the very large farmer, with infinite distinctions in between.'[544] Rather, class appeared relationally as part of the now-substantially-reworked property system which had replaced kinship, tradition, and mutual responsibility with transactional contracts.

By comparison with the industrialised intensification of exploitation in England, though, the situation in Ireland seemed like a wasted opportunity: it was a far cry from Petty's imagined, rationalistic society built from the ground up on a state wiped clean of its accumulations. In the 1800s, landlords in Ireland had considerably less power than their English counterparts; generally,

---

[540] Ó Gráda, 25–27.

[541] Ó Gráda, 23.

[542] Ó Gráda 81, 84–5, 28–9.

[543] Samuel Clark, 34–6, 36.

[544] Samuel Clark, 38.

tenants decided how to put the country's land to use.[545] With an abstraction that obfuscates the real human relationships involved, political economists of the period (as well as some economists of the present day) framed the shift to tillage primarily as representing a fall in the productivity of labour.[546] The potato could not be effectively transformed into capital, leading to suspicion of it and the strengthening of a political economic preference for grain.[547] Rather than seeing the increasing provision of use values as a benefit, the ruling classes lamented their inability to capture more of that increase for themselves. Where it does not wish to take credit for them, colonialism has an impressive ability to turn human benefits into proof of their victims' backwardness. The circumstances in Ireland meant that the British model of improvement, which depended on combining smaller plots of land together so as to build large-scale infrastructure such as irrigation ditches and benefit from economies of scale, was not feasible there. Ó Gráda concludes: 'All in all, landlords achieved little for Irish agriculture in the pre-Famine era,' spending little on improvement; most of what they did spend was not on farms.[548]

As Clark shows, the power of tenants to resist eviction was the primary barrier to land consolidation and remained a key political advantage for tenants throughout the 19th century, even when the famine decreased the number of tenants and increased the sizes of plots, attenuating the effect.[549] It is interesting to consider this in light of Ó Gráda's argument regarding the relatively good health of the Irish population: disregarding other structural factors, the presence of a large number of healthy workers would likely have a significant effect on labour dynamics by itself. Considering that tenants had no long term security in law, and that landlords had the backing of the state as well as significant incentive to eject them, it is impressive that they were able to hold out as much as they were.[550] Further, in the pre-famine period, tenants had some security in that

---

[545] Solow, 82.
[546] Solow, 11–12.
[547] Nally & Kearns, 1384–5.
[548] Ó Gráda, 129, 123.
[549] See Samuel Clark.
[550] Samuel Clark, 22–33.

they were able to provide for themselves somewhat independently of market dynamics.[551] At the same time, the high importance of even the smallest bits of land in this economy counterbalanced matters by affording land ownership great importance, thereby strengthening the power of landlords over tenants.[552]

The changes wrought on Ireland by the famine, especially in cultural terms, cannot be comprehensively addressed here. I will merely summarise a few of their most relevant effects. What is most important to understand is that the famine acted as the trigger for an unprecedented sociocultural transformation that had been desired for many centuries and as the culmination of a series of facilitative changes effected over an equally long period. In other words, what the famine represents is the penultimate success of the colonial project—all that remained to be done afterwards was the consolidation of holdings and the proletarianisation of the population—that is, the actual dispossession of the peasantry and the transition to capitalism, eliminating the production of Irish use values beyond the minimum necessary to facilitate the extraction of wealth. The policy decisions taken by the state in response to the famine made survival contingent on giving up plots, entering workhouses, dissolving family ties, or emigrating—in other words, on surrendering to the colonial property order and accepting diremption.[553] However, the medium-term political economic effects of the famine identified by Marx in chapter 25 of *Capital*, vol. 1, 'The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation', where considerable attention is devoted to the subject, were perhaps overstated. Cormac Ó Gráda suggests Marx extrapolated from a few bad years.[554] In retrospect, the explosive transition to capitalism which Marx appears to think he was witnessing did not occur at this time. Nevertheless, Marx is not without basis in painting a picture of growing immiseration, at least in the short- to medium-term: mass evictions, falling wages, seasonal unemployment, precarious work, and the loss of an ancient way of life, while the rate of

---

[551] Nally & Kearns, 1384.
[552] Nally & Kearns, 1378, 1383.
[553] Kearns, 'Historical Geographies of Ireland', 22–3.
[554] See Ó Gráda, 205.

exploitation rose dramatically.[555]

Further, while Marx draws our attention to the consolidation of land holdings following the famine, the reality is that throughout the 19th century the vast majority of plots were still small, single-family holdings.[556] By and large, landlords failed to consolidate their estates.[557] The famine, in other words, did not lead to proletarianisation (at least within Ireland—the connection between the emigration of Ireland's poor and the relative tameness of its radicalism has often been observed). In this regard, although Vaughan tells us that 'in 1861, [labourers] were more numerous than farmers: there were 890,520 farm servants, labourers, herds, and ploughmen compared with 440,697 farmers,' this category of farmers excludes the family members of landholders as well as other unwaged workers, many of whom would have been permanently engaged in this form of agricultural work. Labourers, on the other hand, seemed to occupy their class only temporarily: most were young men, 'suggesting that labouring was a prelude either to emigration or to inheriting a farm.'[558] In other words, even after the clearances, those that remained were by and large not alienated from the land in the capitalist sense. As Clark comments, 'in the Irish context, the term "landless" can be somewhat misleading, as even the landless often held land in conacre and those who did not were usually related to, and could thus often depend on, small landholders.[559] This was possibly due to an extraordinary resilience exhibited by the Irish smallholding tenantry, which without any organisation to speak of, managed to resist evictions and kept rents below competitive levels. As Barbara Solow observes, this was a source of great and prolonged frustration to Irish landlords and the British elites, not to mention to Solow herself, and ultimately, over a period of more than half a century, generated a political process which led to the end of the landlord system through a tenant land purchase scheme.[560]

---

[555] Marx, *Capital*, 854–870.

[556] Marx, *Capital*, 854.

[557] See Vaughan, 42; Solow, 222.

[558] Vaughan, 7–8.

[559] Samuel Clark, 40.

[560] Solow, 184–194.

Even if most Irish people did not work for wages, after the famine, agriculture became increasingly mediated by the market. Ó Gráda indicates that the acreage used for potato and pig rearing—i.e., subsistence—was 'dramatically reduced by the famine'.[561] Agricultural output per worker increased while output per acre decreased; even after the crop recovered, potato yields permanently fell to about half of their prefamine levels and by the 1870s even small farmers purchased roughly half their food.[562] Excepting wheat, the prices of all foodstuffs rose faster than the general price level; the price of livestock rose especially fast. Livestock production regained its traditional place as the dominant agricultural activity of the island. The dependence of labourers on wages and markets to survive in these circumstances would have intensified. Furthermore, their numbers shrank as the poorest were hardest hit, a point suggested by Clark when he notes that '[c]losely related to [the] fall in population was an increase in the average size of landholdings. Median size of holdings over one acre increased from 10.8 acres in 1844 to 16.5 acres in 1851 and 18.5 acres in 1876.'[563] There was a decline in subtenancy and a proportional increase in the number of farmers.[564]

This led to shifting social allegiances. Prior to the famine, small farmers shared many common interests with wage labourers: both were poor, typically subtenants of larger farmers, and tended to prefer tillage to pasture farming. After the famine, small farmers were more likely to be direct tenants of landlords and to favour pasture farming, bringing their interests more in line with relatively wealthy large farmers than with poor labourers. Further, small farmers and labourers had few kinship or other social ties after the famine that might have moderated these effects.[565] Unlike in England, urban and rural residents were not at odds and 'the land war was not a rural assault on urban power and interests, but rather a rural-urban coalition against a landed elite. One major reason for this is that after the famine, the Irish were not only purchasing roughly half their food

---

[561] Ó Gráda, 112.

[562] Solow, 107, 112–3; Samuel Clark, 126.

[563] Samuel Clark, 107.

[564] Samuel Clark, 107–113.

[565] Clark, 116–20.

on the market—a drastic shift—but in doing so were heavily reliant on shopkeepers' willingness and ability to extend them lines of credit. This affected even the smallest farmers and would have given the groups a mutual dependence.[566] However, some economic metrics, including tenants' incomes, recovered relatively quickly. Unlike in Britain, increased market dependence was not associated with a decline in standard of living, as per capita income rose and most farmers experienced rising incomes, though many remained very poor.[567] Strengthening this effect, the industrial decline in Ireland which had begun following union meant that all but the largest cities 'lost whatever status they had formerly enjoyed as viable economic entities in their own right. They became appendages to the farming population; and their main function was now to serve its needs.'[568] Nevertheless, as the famine had all but destroyed what still remained of the ancient settlement pattern of small villages and hamlets, towns were among the primary loci of social organisation and the proportion of the population living in towns larger than 2000 people grew from a seventh to a third.[569]

By the time of the land war, then, Ireland had developed a social structure that paralleled Britain in some respects but diverged in significant ways. Though Ireland did see the increasing polarisation of society into commercial farmers and waged labourers, the 'middle peasant' class of market-dependent, unwaged farmer remained numerically dominant into the 20th century. They were, however, 'still exceedingly poor and continued to rely on subsistence tillage for a major part of their livelihood.'[570] Crucially, though essentially autonomous, they remained tenants, preventing them from becoming 'wholly free entrepreneurs…. Moreover, it was their dependent status as tenants, more than any other single factor, that united the members of this social group and gave them a common interest.'[571] This class structure was combined with changing social

---

[566] Samuel Clark, 263, 135–9, 126.
[567] Clark, 110–12; Ó Gráda, 213; Solow, 91–4, 101.
[568] Samuel Clark, 135.
[569] Samuel Clark, 135–6; Ó Gráda, 213.
[570] Samuel Clark, 151.
[571] Samuel Clark, 152.

relations, as Ireland became increasingly national integrated through a new network of towns. Ireland was a far cry from the society it had been eight hundred years before, where private ownership was subordinated to familial obligations, where small polities allowed for human-scale forms of sociology as against mass-scale war and biopower, where an ancient Gaelic Catholic culture flourished in confidence, and where, if class existed, it was nothing like the systematic, island-wide exploitation which now prevailed. Legally and institutionally, in terms of property and politics, the stage was now set for the massive transfer of capitalistic private property to the tenantry—the essential precursor to their final expropriation. Nevertheless, the Ireland of old had still not been rendered *tabula rasa*, as old social structures—townlands, kinship, and parish 'now coexisted with stronger national and urban structures,' albeit in transformed and much reduced form.[572]

Towards capitalism: colonial political economy

The transition to capitalism, and its relationship to colonialism, is subject to great theoretical and empirical debate. Application of this question to the Irish context requires a significant theoretical synthesis far beyond what I, being concerned almost exclusively with precapitalist relations, have engaged in thus far. Furthermore, it requires engagement with a much more substantial body of literature relating to the last 150 years of Ireland's history, sociology, economics, etc. This cannot be addressed here in any comprehensive way. At the same time, the position I have developed suggests certain considerations. To close this chapter, therefore, I will offer a few remarks concerning the downfall of landlordism, the process of independence, and the emerging context which led to the transition to capitalism. Along with the dissertation's formal conclusion, this subsection should be taken in the first place as an indication for future work.

Despite union, the separate institutions of the states in Ireland and Britain gave them in some respects a dual-state character. Ireland's colonial regime was never subsumed fully into the British state. This meant that when the time came for Ireland to become an independent state, it

---

[572] Samuel Clark, 151.

was largely able to carry on as it were. This is not to deny that there were substantial changes, but rather to call into question their overall political economic significance (in this regard, the Russian Revolution and the foundation of the USSR might offer an illustrative contrast). Thus while for many, 'revolution' is an appropriate label for the events of the 1910s and 20s, Aidan Beatty more aptly analyses it using Gramsci's concept of 'revolution without a revolution'.[573] He writes:

> As Immanuel Wallerstein points out, revolution is a term that connotes 'sudden, dramatic, and extensive change. It emphasizes discontinuity.' Yet, when many scholars come to study 'revolutions,' what they often end up studying are the much slower, long term social changes that feed into an ostensibly sudden rupture with the past. Wallerstein even goes so far as to query the analytic utility of such a slippery and contradictory term (Wallerstein 2011b). At the very least, the study of a revolution should not be divorced from the formative events of preceding decades.[574]

Or, indeed, preceding centuries. For while it is true that the land system changed significantly in the decades prior to independence, these were changes which came on the back of the famine, which in turn was predicated on centuries of imposed change. This is not merely a retrospective critique, but finds precedent in the political activities of land struggles throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as in the thought of people like James Fintan Lalor.[575] And while the land reforms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries meant the English propertied class no longer directly controlled Irish affairs, the politics of the colonial regime they left behind continued to unfold. By 1908, roughly the end of the third phase of agrarian agitation, 46% of holdings in Ireland were owned by their occupant, compared to just 3% in 1870.[576] This tremendous change in property ownership did not challenge the fundamentals of the economic

---

[573] Beatty, 58.
[574] Beatty, 56.
[575] See Kearns, '"Up to the Sun…"'; and James Connolly, 'Labour and Irish History'.
[576] Solow, 190–3.

order, but Solow argues that it greatly advanced the cause for home rule: without the landlord 'garrison', the British state's interest in Ireland diminished greatly.[577] Yet if the downfall in the landlord system led to a decline of British interest in Ireland—though to the present, never its elimination—Ireland was nevertheless primed for a transition to capitalism in continuity with its colonial trajectory:

> The Irish revolution, such as it was, was also trapped with certain delineated codes and operated along pre-existing paths…. What was gestating in the decades before 1912 or 1916 were market-driven economics, private property, an Irish variant of a privatised sense of selfhood; in other words, capitalist modernity. And already, well before 1916, Ireland and Irish identity were markedly affected by the country's status as a supplier of agricultural raw materials for British markets. The dominant currents of early twentieth-century Irish nationalism were products of this capitalist modernity on the periphery of the British economy, and never broke from its strictures.[578]
>
> …the social order was not drastically altered, agrarian and labor agitation were undercut and ultimately suppressed, and the country's status in the world-economy remained largely the same. It was a (political) revolution without a (social) revolution…. Talk of 'revolution' helps us to get at the popular mood in Ireland, but also blinds us to the deeper structures of Irish society and of Ireland's global status, which were not only unchanged by the 'revolution,' but were not seriously threatened.[579]

This echoes the familiar critique of bourgeois nationalism in the colonial context, but Beatty's point (as was Fanon's), was not merely that the national bourgeoisie would betray the

---

[577] Solow, 202.
[578] Beatty, 56–7.
[579] Beatty, 59.

colonised working classes in pursuit of its own interest, but that it was structurally compelled to follow 'a certain kind of capitalist path-dependency.'[580] That the history of Ireland in the 20th century seems a break with that of the colonial period has more to do with nationalist myth than with anticolonial praxis. A more comprehensive and longer-term perspective on the national question centres the question of property as something which is developed historically and enacted continually. In that regard, though the colonial regime no longer functions to hold all of Ireland subservient to England, it continues to hold the dispossessed Irish subservient to their dispossessors—and it must not be forgotten that along with the colonially-formed but juridically independent Irish republic, within the regime, there still exists alongside it the formally-annexed Northern Irish 'statelet'.

Understanding the continuity between this regime and Ireland's past means understanding what was *not* changed by the famine: namely, the fundamentally colonial nature of Ireland's relationship with Britain. As Engels argued, we have seen, no matter what the circumstances, the point of Ireland was to service England's needs. Ireland was both before and after the famine an important political and economic part of Britain's capitalist state complex; in this regard, Ireland was an auxiliary to British capital. While his political comments in this regard have perhaps attracted more notice, Marx notes that for the English, '[Ireland's] depopulation must go still further, in order that she may fulfil her true destiny, to be an English sheep-walk and cattle pasture.'[581] Marx argues, as have many others, that England treated Ireland as a breadbasket. As the industrial revolution was kicking into high gear and British workers increasingly left the countryside for the cities, Ireland supplied sufficient grain to feed over a tenth of the population, and other types of food on top. Consider the dynamics of this food supply. Ireland had an almost feudal economy wherein peasants produced primarily for their own consumption but had to provide some of their surplus as rent. Vaughan estimates that amounted to roughly a third of the country's output, of which a bit less than a third (for a total of 10%) was landlords' net income,

---

[580] Beatty, 62.

[581] Marx, *Capital*, 869.

which, since improvement was not viable, was mostly spent as luxury.[582] To meet these expenditures, landlords would have had to realise most of this value on the market—which generally meant exporting, primarily to England. Even where food was not exported directly to England, where the realised value was spent on English goods, it became available to be spent on food for England.

Another interesting consideration is the role of Irish surplus in the development of English industrial capitalism. Even during the famine years, this food supply was largely uninterrupted. What would have happened otherwise? In an acute case, workers might have starved, capitalists might have taken losses, or the state might have stepped in to purchase or forcibly appropriate food. A short interruption in the food supply would likely have been of minor significance, but a prolonged one could have instituted permanent changes to the structure of the British economy as the loss of millions of workers worth of sustenance would have had to be replaced through a reallocation of labour or the workers would have starved or emigrated, as occurred in Ireland. In the most extreme case, the industrial reserve army could have been eliminated almost entirely as the unemployed, presumably, would be the first to starve. As Ernest Mandel points out, the loss of 1.2 million workers from 1881–1911 'destroy[ed] Britain's dominant position on the world market.'[583] The loss of 4 million would have sent English capitalism into an existential crisis. This counterfactual was part of a very real systemic logic: all else being equal, the colonisation of Ireland allowed Britain to feed millions of extra workers throughout the better part of the 19th century, a crucial moment in global capitalist history. We can hypothesise that the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain could have been a major contributing factor to the rapid rise of Britain as a global superpower; with sufficient data, corroboration of this through a Marxist value analysis is in principle possible.

This serves as a reminder of the role of the colonial regime in structuring Irish society. The extraction of this surplus was a fundamentally political question. It is a mistake to see this sort of

---

[582] Vaughan, 118.

[583] Mandel, 'Appendix—Introduction' in Marx, *Capital*, 947.

accumulation as resulting merely from the conjuration of private property where previously there was none. Rather, it should be seen as part of the long term process of the assertion of political control over a space that this chapter has described. Without the transformation of Ireland into a site of surplus extraction, English capitalism could not have developed as it did. This extraction is not merely primitive accumulation, which 'is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.'[584] The domination of Ireland by England—diremption—is quite a bit more than mere dispossession. Nevertheless, alienation from the means of production is its essential element, for no matter the cost to itself, the Irish peasantry was forced to forfeit a third of their product to the British—a third which would more important to capitalism than some acts of primitive accumulation, such as minor enclosures.

While the changes we have seen have been diverse and many, they were all mediated by the colonial apparatus, including colonial political economy. That is, none of them were 'natural' but were the consequence of a very slow but often deliberate process of comprehensive social construction. To use a phrase employed by David Harvey in a more recent context, this colonialism was, among other things, fundamentally a project of class power.[585] Losing sight of this insight has consequences—not only in that it can affect the political content of one's scholarship, but also in that it can lead to a misdiagnosis of the phenomena at play. Relatively superficial phenomena can be taken as definitive, while more profound, though less visible phenomena can be missed entirely. Thus on the downfall of the landlord system, Ó Gráda remarked in 1994, '[w]hat is striking nearly a century later is how easily the system imposed by the sword in the seventeenth century was eliminated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how few traces it left.'[586] This was indeed a fairly rapid transformation, as before the famine, peasant proprietorship was not a foreseeable political possibility.[587] But while the *owners* of property may have changed, the *form* of the property was, in essence, that imposed by hook and crook in the early modern

---

584 Ibid. 875.
585 Harvey, 31–6.
586 Ó Gráda, 257.
587 Ó Gráda, 121–2.

period—namely, single-proprietorship, unencumbered by kinship obligations, and with right (or, in some cases, inevitability) of sale—and it was now integrated into a global capitalist economy, where the wealthy of one country have the right to alienate the poor of another, and to oblige them to work (and to relocate) for a pittance. On a deeper level, this change also is in strong continuity with pre-famine Ireland—and pre-famine Ireland thereby did, indeed, leave many traces.

In the context of liberal political ideology, Lloyd suggests that during the famine, the failure of the Irish to adhere to the model of peasant proprietorship was seen as the cause of their misfortunate backwardness, mirroring arguments we have seen in other contexts.[588] Nally makes much the same point:

> In short, one finds that theories [advanced in response to the famine] tagged as 'ameliorative' were later wielded as tools to radically restructure Irish society. Thus, a colonial biopolitical model powerfully shaped the course of the Irish Famine as the state was willing to exploit catastrophe to further the aims of population reform and socioeconomic advancement. Under the veil of humanitarian intervention, a 'sovereign remedy' was applied to putative Irish backwardness.[589]

Thus, situating the famine in relation to the literature on other colonial famines, Nally reminds us that economic 'liberalism' is often a form of social intervention, a point also stressed by Slater.[590] To that end, the famine provided a tremendous opportunity to finally effect some of the changes long anticipated by the colonisers: 'in Ireland, the difficulties of superintending a colonial population during an ecological crisis became a powerful reason to expand the pastoral role of the state…. This was a staggering experiment in political economy.'[591] Nally draws on Engels' insight on the repeated restructuring of Ireland's economy (seen above—'Today England

---

[588] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 22.
[589] Nally, '"That Coming Storm"', 730–1.
[590] Nally, '"That Coming Storm"', 715, 718; Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 27.
[591] Nally, '"That Coming Storm"', 718.

needs grain…. Tomorrow England needs meat…') and Naomi Klein's formulation of 'disaster capitalism' to argue that the regime's interventions in the famine were aimed at dispossession and the disciplining of labour, and thus the transformation of property, in service of 'the ideological view that the Irish could be improved out of existence and, moreover, that relief strategies could be used as a radical tool for regeneration'.[592] Perhaps because it finally saw the opportunity to address the so-called 'land question', replicating to the greatest degree yet the enclosures of England and thereby vindicating supposedly universal and natural political economic laws, Slater & McDonough stress in this context Marx's observation that the English considered the regime of this period to be the mildest in history; at the same time, it was met with the fiercest opposition because it, 'though less barbarian in form, is in effect [as] destructive'.[593] Among other things, the Encumbered Estates Act of 1853 allowed for the sale of land and the extinguishing of claims upon it.[594] In this respect, it anticipated the reforms of the Torrens system, introduced in areas of colonial Australia just a few years later, which as we have seen, Bhandar argued reflected an even higher form of abstracted and commoditised conception of land that was independent of concrete forms of labour or of historically-determined rights—and which thus more perfectly expresses the logic of elimination.[595] This created an environment in which new, speculating landlords, seeing an unprecedented opportunity to invest their capital in Ireland, purchasing land and further intensifying the process of clearance.[596] There was, therefore, a kind of snowball effect: whereas previously, consolidation was impeded by the fact that combining two plots of land required not only the eviction of at least one and possibly both tenants along with their families but also, therefore, the replacement of their labour, Marx wrote in this period that '[t]he more a landlord injures one tenant, the easier he will find it to oppress another,'[597] a fact which perhaps reflects a

---

[592] Nally, '"That Coming Storm"', 733; Engels in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 190–1.

[593] Karl Marx in *Ireland*, 126, quoted in Slater & McDonough 159; see also 155–6.

[594] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 30.

[595] Bhandar, 95–8.

[596] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 31.

[597] Marx in *On Colonialism*, 57.

post-famine breakdown in the previously strong ties of solidarity between tenants which had long enabled them to resist their exploiters.

Seen in this context, for example, the repeal of the corn laws was—whatever else—the affirmation of the idea that markets were the appropriate response to starvation even if they might make things worse for the people involved.[598] The repeal deprived Ireland of its monopoly over Irish corn—hence facilitating the conversion to pasture and consolidation which the famine and subsequent depopulation allowed.[599] This had direct advantages to the landowning class, allowing an increased proportion of the land area to be dedicated to production for exchange while also increasing productivity. As Marx wrote, 'The fact is that, as the Irish population diminishes, the Irish rent-rolls swell; that depopulation benefits the landlords, thus also benefits the soil and therefore the people, that mere accessory of the soil,' (although the benefits of this were short-lived).[600]

In short, Nally argues, '[t]he desire to break the pattern of small, subsistence-based landholdings and cultivate a tripartite division of labor among landlords, capitalist tenant farmers, and a landless pool of wage labor was well expressed and theorized prior to the Great Famine. Dispossession was the end game of this logic…'[601] As, indeed, it had always been. Lloyd thus emphasises that 'Irish conditions were at once the object and the test of political economic theory;' that 'the famine was a godsend not only to the administrator but to the theorists'.[602] As does Ó Gráda, Lloyd points out that although there was indeed misery in Ireland prior to the famine, the prevalence of this image as universal is largely retrospective and has as much to do with the theory of political economy as with reality. That is, the ability of the Irish to subsist despite having a rising population was a living refutation of Malthus.[603] Unlike in other colonial contexts, where

---

[598] Nally, '"That Coming Storm"', 728–9.

[599] Slater & McDonough, 155–6.

[600] Marx, *Capital*, 868.

[601] Nally, '"That Coming Storm"', 731.

[602] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 21, 25.

[603] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 31.

geographical separation made it possible to maintain the illusion of scientific universality despite their economies' objective failure to operate according to laws formulated by colonial political economists, the proximity of Ireland to England and the consequent degree of interconnection between the two societies made the 'coevalness' of Ireland and England impossible to deny.[604] Elsewhere, Nally cites Foucault's critique of biopower in pointing out that 'laissez-faire' economics do not actually leave things be but systematically and intentionally undermine customary food entitlements:[605]

> The imposition of free markets will require the active collusion of state forces: 'anti-scarcity systems' will have to be dismantled; legislative assistance will be needed to place grain markets in private hands; the repressive powers of the police may be called upon to quell revolt, and so on. In other words, free markets emerge from the intimate connections forged between the state and capital. The assumption that markets are 'natural systems' operating outside of power and politics is itself an invention of the 19th century that takes for granted the violent manner in which the state must eliminate all behaviour that is now deemed aberrant or undesirable.[606]

In other words, because market provision of subsistence (and thus dispossession) becomes superior to self-subsistence (and thus property-holding), 'letting die' becomes a legitimate strategy.[607] While the demographic situation of pre-famine Ireland obtained, Ireland's very existence posed a serious problem for an England which was in the early stages of a world-historic industrialisation. And so it was changed. Thus, Ellen Hazelkorn writes, Marx used the case of Ireland as evidence for his putative capitalist law of population, namely that it demands an absolute fall in the agricultural population[608]—underlining that while the colonial regime may have been a

---

[604] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 33; see Fabian.
[605] Nally, 'The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning', 39–40.
[606] Nally, 'The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning', 40.
[607] Nally, 'The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning', 40–1.
[608] Hazelkorn, 110–113.

'non-capitalist' instrument of domination by England of Ireland, it was also a core constituent of the England integral state and its economic foundations. Of more specific significance is the implication that the depopulation and deindustrialisation of Ireland of this period freed up capital for export back to England.[609] This is a quantitative exacerbation of a trend we have already seen, but it is one underlaid by a qualitative change in the forces of production which led to widescale transformations in the Irish economy. This is therefore the period for Marx in which the absolute surplus extraction which had always characterised exploitation in Ireland was finally challenged by relative surplus extraction, the result of an agricultural revolution following depopulation, consolidation, and transformation to pasturage which enabled an increase in productivity and therefore exploitation as mediated by rental income.[610] Thus, as Hazelkorn notes, while a declining population led to a decline in absolute product, it lead at the same time to an increase in surplus product.[611] As Nally remarked, '[t]he regulation of scarcity, therefore, does not signal the end of hunger so much as its displacement in space and time.'[612] That is, it is not simply that Ireland starved while England ate, it's that Ireland starved *so that* England could eat.

Slater & McDonough also situate Marx's argument on Ireland's agriculture system in context of what is now termed 'metabolic rift', an argument which was much extended by Slater in 'Marx on the colonization of Irish soil'.[613] The main thrust of Slater's argument is that under the previous phase of colonialism, the bulk of the labour of maintaining the quality and nutrition of Ireland's soil—the reproduction of the preaccumulated wealth—fell to the cottier class, which was transformed into pure wage labour after the famine, consequently ceasing to maintain and replenish the soil.[614] This, combined with the increase in productivity attendant upon the consolidation and intensification of agriculture meant that fewer nutrients went into the

---

[609] Hazelkorn, 119.
[610] Slater & McDonough, 166–7
[611] Hazelkorn, 151.
[612] Nally, 'The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning', 49.
[613] Slater & McDonough, 169; Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil'.
[614] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 26.

maintenance of the population (and thus, eventually, returning to the soil) and more were exported out of the country where they went to fuel British industry. Thus Ireland's very soil—which in Marx's terms was stored up use-value and concretised dead labour—was transformed into English commodity capital whose value went in part to the maintenance of British workers (i.e., variable capital) and in part was realised as money through sale. The result, as Marx discussed in *Capital*, was a drastic decline in the quality of the Irish soil, even as English agriculture was being revolutionized through permanent improvements.[615] Slater & McDonough emphasise Marx's connection of this fact to an increase in physical and mental health issues in post-famine Ireland,[616] but it is clear that he and Engels saw it as an important element of a larger social crisis, Marx writing in 1859 that 'There must be something rotten in the very core of a social system which increases its wealth without diminishing its misery, and increases in crimes even more rapidly than in numbers…. Law itself may not only punish crime, but improvise it, and the law of professional lawyers is very apt to work in this direction.'[617] Quoting Engels, Slater writes:

> However, soil depletion was only one consequence of this stunted form of agricultural revolution, there was also a social revolution embedded in the transformation of tillage to pasture which had potential disastrous consequences for Ireland as Engels suggests in the following: 'And yet the social revolution inherent in this transformation from tillage to cattle- rearing would be far greater in Ireland than in England. In England, where large-scale agriculture prevails and where agricultural labourers have been replaced by machinery to a large extent, it would mean the transplantation of at most one million; in Ireland, where small and even cottage-farming prevails, it would mean the transportation of four million: the extermination of the Irish people' (Engels,1971:190).[618]

---

[615] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 32.
[616] Slater & McDonough, 170.
[617] Marx in *Ireland*, 92–3.
[618] Slater, 'Colonization of Irish Soil', 32.

Thus Marx and Engels clearly identified that the transformation in social property relations, embodied in land, and realised through the structure of the colonial regime, amounted to social catastrophe and the end of Ireland as they knew it—not through complete depopulation, for the Irish were still required for their labour, but through what Patrick Wolfe termed elimination, which includes modes of annihilating a people without necessarily getting rid of its constituent persons.[619] At the same time, depopulation was an important component of this process. As mentioned above, Marx saw Ireland as an important proof of his view of the law of population under capitalism—which, it should be noted, he used as a main example to argue for the historical specificity of historical laws in *Capital* and of especial importance to capitalism, writing, for example, that the existence of a surplus population 'becomes… the lever of capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production.'[620] Elsewhere, and explicitly in the context of Ireland, Marx contrasted emigration '[i]n the ancient States', with capitalist emigration:

> But with modern compulsory emigration the case stands quite opposite. Here it is not the want of productive power which creates a surplus population; it is the increase of productive power which demands a diminution of population, and drives away the surplus by famine or emigration. It is not population that presses on productive power; it is productive power that presses on population.[621]

The clearances were the primary means by which this reserve army of labour was created. With this in mind, Hazelkorn is among the many scholars who have noted the increasing importance that Marx and Engels afforded Ireland in the English revolutionary struggle in the late 1860s. The rise of the Fenians was instrumental in causing them to re-evaluate this political position;[622] Engels wrote that, uniquely among Ireland's long history of anticolonial resistance,

---

[619] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism'.
[620] Marx, *Capital*, 784.
[621] Marx, *Ireland*, 57.
[622] Hazelkorn, 38–41.

Fenianism was characterised by being rooted in the lower classes.[623] Whereas previously Marx and Engels thought that the locus of the English class struggle must lie in England (Marx favouring a federative relationship for Ireland), they came to believe that '[a]s long as Ireland remained a safe-haven and breeding ground for the English aristocracy, the latter would continue to be able to influence and direct British politics. While it fattened upon Irish land it prolonged its unnatural and ahistoric life, and hence clouded the ultimate class struggle, that of bourgeoisie and proletariat.'[624] Far from simply being a 'black box' upon which the English could rely to provide a steady source of food and revenue, Ireland's colonial regime was a core constituent of the British class structure and state complex. For Marx, Hazelkorn writes, '[a]bove-all, the Irish question was a "specific English question."'[625]

Hazelkorn differs from Slater and McDonough in understanding Marx and Engels' view of this process. She argues that they observed a 'very tight distinction between what was and was not, of the Irish condition, accountable to English rule' and suggests therefore that they missed the totalising character of colonialism for Ireland.[626] Yet, as she also shows, immanent to their view is an understanding of the colonial regime as mediating both continuity and rupture in Ireland:

> On the one hand, Ireland had been transformed from a colonial (territorial) acquisition into a food-producing region of England. On the other, its status had not changed. Ireland continued to be an essential component of accumulation; under merchant capital, it had been a haven for rewarding soldiers and newly-created nobles with territory and a good income from rent. As primitive accumulation gave way to capitalist accumulation, Ireland shipped out not only money but also labour and foodstuffs, thereby aiding industrial expansion.[627]

---

[623] Engels, *Ireland*, 126.
[624] Hazelkorn, 40.
[625] Hazelkorn, 45.
[626] Hazelkorn, 107–8.
[627] Hazelkorn, 41.

Hazelkorn further acknowledges Marx and Engels' recognition of the new and central role of socialism in Irish politics attendant upon the new economic configuration, writing that they saw that '[t]he rub came in that as long as [the economic integration of Ireland and England] continued, the flood of Irish into the ranks of the English proletariat would stymie the drive towards socialism. In Ireland, the aristocracy had proven itself to be adaptable.'

This 'adaptability' extended to the land reforms by which Parliament eventually provided for the transfer of Ireland's land back to its peasantry—but now as capitalistic private property, in totally alienable form. Hence the transformations in the colonial regime, the brutality of the famine and the clearances, the death knell of Gaelic Ireland and the emergence of the Fenians—all these transformations in Ireland's colonial regime were the very means by which the regime itself was maintained. After more than seven hundred years, through the eliminative dispossession of settler colonialism, England had finally turned Ireland from an autonomous, self-sufficient, richly cultured society of hundreds of interconnected political units into a single, subjugated polity ready to be devoured by capitalism.

Conclusion

The question of the colonial regime has high political stakes, even for the present day. This is for at least two reasons, which have already been indicated. First, a quick glance at Ireland's political institutions and property system indicate that the colonial regime was not dissolved in 1921, or subsequently. It now contains not a hundred minor kingships nor a single British-administered state, but two hegemonic political entities: one juridically independent, one a 'statelet' still belonging to the United Kingdom. While some would no doubt object to considering these to be 'colonial', the fact is, as Beatty suggests, today's regime is in direct continuity with the colonial regime which existed in Ireland for the best part of a millennium.[628] Among other things, this would make Ireland an example of what Joshua Moufawad-Paul has termed 'sublimated colonialism', a situation which emerges in the context of capitalist hegemony and which therefore implies a large degree of ideological 'consent' by the dominated to their domination:

> The colonial contexts that remain contemporary, however, do not possess a specific geographical mother country…. Thus a theory that defines colonialism within the historical relationship of colony-motherland is in need of updating when it comes to actually existing colonialism. These remaining colonialisms are what I will call *sublimated colonialism*: colonial hegemony has been pushed under the surface of the ideological apparati of the colonial countries. The essential characteristics of colonialism discussed in the previous section are still preserved, but the form of colonialism has mutated…. [A] large number of colonial states were able to escape the decolonization movements that swept through Africa and Asia during the time of Fanon and Memmi.[629]

Second, the historicist framework I have been using is premised upon the insight, framed by Morera, that '[t]he present… offers a principle of selection, a document of the meaning or

---

[628] See Beatty, 55.

[629] Moufawad-Paul, 84.

significance of the past.'[630] As such,

> [a]n historical phenomenon is not fully known until its effects can
> be described…. understanding the present is important for
> understanding the past. In Gramsci's words, the present is 'in a sense
> the best document of the past', because 'every real historical phase
> leaves traces of itself in the successive phases'. The present, hence,
> contains the past, but not all the past; only those aspects that were
> essential, or viable, survive.[631]

The question of viability is paramount, whether we refer to aspects of the past themselves
or mere memories of them. In Chapter Three, I foregrounded the way that preaccumulations and
'accretions' like accumulated soil, social strata like the Old English, and social property relations
like the rundale system could remain, or once again become, of great relevance centuries or even
millennia later. But a Marxist framework suggests that ideas, too, can be considered in the same
way. In Chapter One, I quoted Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, explaining:

> another main reason for the continuing relevance of 'The German
> Ideology' is its materialist critique of ideology: 'men, developing
> their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along
> with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of
> their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life
> that determines consciousness.'[632] In other words, mental activity,
> including ideas and their linguistic representations, is also a form of
> labour, being the product of and the condition for 'the material
> activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real
> life.'[633] Ideas, therefore, are ultimately determined by the
> organisation of the societies which give rise to them: they follow,
> rather than precede social forms. This, naturally, includes ideas

---

[630] Morera, *Historicism*, 78.

[631] Morera, *Historicism*, 77.

[632] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 37.

[633] Marx in *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, 36.

regarding the nature of society itself.

This area is, of course, one in which Antonio Gramsci made significant theoretical contributions, but in this he was preceded by other Marxists, including James Connolly and, before him, Engels. As I alluded to in Chapter Three, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels wrote that old Celtic laws indicated the historical importance of the gens, arguing that 'In Ireland it is still alive, at least instinctively, in the popular mind to this day, after the English forcibly blew it up…. Property that has only rights, but no duties, is absolutely beyond the ken of the Irishman.'[634] Engels was writing in the immediate aftermath of the late 19th century 'land wars', a period in which widespread resentment over landlords' refusal to grant relief in hard times, as the Irish believed to be their obligation, led to a national rent strike ultimately culminating in the downfall of the landlord system.[635] His suspicion that a through-line runs between these two points is merely speculative, but his insight that the sentiments of the Irish populace might be historically rooted in property relations is a powerful insight with very real political implications—it was a primary factor underlying Connolly's *Labour in Irish History* and, it may be inferred, his political activities and those of his movement.[636]

In this sense, even if Engels' is mistaken and there is no causal continuity between these centuries-apart sensibilities, Connolly's work makes it retrospectively significant, as Connolly himself would have agreed. On the facticity of the myth of Saint Patrick, he wrote that 'sentiment is often greater than facts, because it is an idealised expression of fact—a mind picture of truth as it is seen by the soul, unhampered by the grosser dirt of the world and the flesh…. it is nevertheless as much a great historical reality as if it were embodied in a statute book, or had a material existence vouched for by all the pages of history.'[637] Importantly, this kind of myth-making is not merely retrospective, but is related to, and dependent on, the transmission of a real, living history

---

[634] Engels in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, 338, 341.

[635] Clark 69.

[636] See Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 352.

[637] James Connolly, vol. 2, 166–7.

accreted over time. Being able to differentiate between myth and fact is, of course, important. Implicit in the premise of this dissertation is the need to provide a critical anticolonialism that is sympathetic to, but does not reproduce, nationalist mythmaking. In that regard, understanding the realities of Gaelic property is fundamental. But it is essential to appreciate that we are doing so in order to understand the historical mediation between Ireland's past and present, in which myth may play as important a role as fact.

Popular consciousness is therefore critical. David Lloyd wrote in 'Rethinking National Marxism' that while Connolly's 'own historical work is understood as an intervention designed to rewrite a history of which the Irish people have become ignorant', he also 'claim[s] that a memory of an alternative system of property persists in the Irish consciousness, particularly among the peasantry…. far from being a backward element in need of radical conscientization, the peasantry can be seen as already possessing, if in inarticulate ways, the counter-cultural consciousness that would be the basis for the syndicalist cooperative commonwealth.'[638] The Irish tradition of hospitality, for example, deserves a proper genealogy—is it, as is sometimes surmised, a vestige of an older system of obligation and collective provision? This anticipates Gramsci's understanding of the role of the Communist Party in providing direction to select elements of popular consciousness that accurately understand their working class condition and lead to practical activity to overcome it. As explained by Stephen Gencarella:

> 'Gramsci aimed to promote a Marxist conception of the world that would initially ratify progressive elements in both folklore *and* official [i.e., ruling class] ideology, then ultimately replace both…. While Gramsci (1985) often stands critical of folklore (and vernacular culture) itself, he makes clear its high stakes: the constitution of a folk through folkloric practice, no matter how seemingly innocuous, always relates to the constitution of the state as its reflection or its counterpoint.'[639]

---

[638] Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 353.
[639] Gencarella, 185.

Gramsci himself wrote:

> This unity between 'spontaneity' and 'conscious leadership' or 'discipline' is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes.... can modern theory be in opposition to the 'spontaneous' feelings of the masses? ('Spontaneous' in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by 'common sense', i.e. by the traditional popular conception of the world-what is unimaginatively called 'instinct', although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition.) It cannot be in opposition to them.[640]

In *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000*, Lloyd argued that while it was a relatively literate country, Ireland remained dominated by an oral cultural space, associated there with the settlement form of the *clachan,* for far longer than most of Europe, subverting both colonial rule and colonial assumptions about orality:[641] 'From the perspective of that historical consciousness, the oral signifies the pre-modern, the primordial, and is associated with myth and folklore, forms of consciousness that lack historical sense and imply the absence of a notion of change over time if not, indeed, an inveterate resistance to progress and development.'[642] Against this, '[t]he space of orality not only embodied a set of material relations, but also contained a distinct set of social and cultural possibilities'.[643] While the famine put an end to this space, Lloyd argues that, in fragmentary form, '[o]ral practices live on athwart the institutional spaces of a modernizing Ireland… and their survival is inseparable from [them]…. not only the contents, but even the structures of oral space find ways to live on'.[644] As the other chapters of his book shows, for Lloyd, this oral space (or its successor, a literary space with embedded oral fragments) runs the

---

[640] Gramsci, 198–9.

[641] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 4–6.

[642] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 5.

[643] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 9.

[644] Lloyd, *Irish Culture*, 9.

full gamut of cultural practices, from political economy to wakes and the prison culture of republicans, who subverted the literal architecture of incarceration through oral forms which, for Lloyd, envision 'the utopian possibility of another life in common.'[645] Oral space is, therefore, nothing less than an interpretive abstraction of the social totality.

There is here the beginnings of a research programme which suggests the larger import of questions of Ireland's property relations and political regime. This requires thorough genealogical research. From a Marxist perspective, the first thing to understand is the development of property and regime: when Marx wrote that '[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,' he explicitly linked political authority to property; Lenin famously contended in *The State and Revolution*, a largely exegetical work, that one of Marx and Engels' main theoretical contributions was on the question of political power:

> [T]he transition from capitalist society—which is developing towards communism—to communist society is impossible without a 'political transition period', and the state in this period can only be the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.
> What, then, is the relation of this dictatorship to democracy?
> We have seen that the Communist Manifesto simply places side by side the two concepts: 'to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class' and 'to win the battle of democracy'.[646]

This was the political theoretical tradition in which Gramsci made his formulations. As I indicated in my discussion in Chapter Two, where I discussed expanding from Gramsci's conception of the state to a conception of the regime, theories of the capitalist state, i.e., the dictatorship of the bourgeoise, cannot be directly applied to precapitalist society. Even colonial capitalist states trouble the concept of 'the' bourgeoisie which takes on, as Lenin, Mao, Fanon, and many others have recognised, national characteristics. That is, Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, and other Marxists have formulated their theories of the state in a particular context. Recalling once again

---

[645] Lloyd, 197.
[646] Lenin, 464–5.

the imperative to attend to historical specificity, and recognising the historical uniqueness of colonialism in Ireland, a comprehensive, empirical assessment of political economic power in Irish history is called for. Chapter Three suggests in the broadest and most simplistic terms a demonstration of the kind of work that can be done, focusing on two important but nebulous conceptual thematics. Lloyd's 'Rethinking National Marxism' in essence aims to resurrect the intellectual project of James Connolly: a new, communist historiography of Ireland that is fundamentally wedded to political praxis, connecting the past to the present to envision and enact a radical futurity. As Assata Shakur poignantly wrote, 'the true history of any oppressed people is impossible to find in history books.' They must write it themselves.[647]

In this regard, my work does little more than synthesise a theoretical and historiographical tradition which is already out there, in largely unrecognised form, and including the work of numerous scholars who would probably be surprised to find themselves considered among it. More than any fixed theoretical claims about colonial property relations or colonial regime, which are after all merely abstractions arising from an ever-shifting context, or the attempt to shoehorn the impossible multiplicities of Irish history into a grand narrative, I aim in the foregoing chapters to convince through a demonstrative analysis the inescapability of a few fundamental points for future research:

1. Irish history is best understood through configurations of political economic power.
2. Colonialism has been the most significant of these, completely reshaping Ireland over hundreds of years.
3. Colonial property was thus a major driving force of class struggle in Ireland, determining (though not monocausally) changes in the mode of production.
4. Colonialism is notable because it mediates between two societies, and because the processes of domination and dispossession it employs are systematically imposed by

---

[647] Shakur, 199.

force.

5. Connolly's assertion that capitalism in Ireland is colonial in origin is therefore fundamentally correct and has profound consequences for theoretical, historical, and political projects relating to the transition to and from capitalism in Ireland.

Along the way, I have tried to indicate as many potential avenues for such research as possible: the importance in Irish history of questions of land, earth, property and territory—the latter two of which suggest a peculiar link between the work of political Marxists, especially Maïa Pal, and Frantz Fanon; the beyond-metaphorical link between the Gramscian sedimentation of ideological forms and the physical landscape in Ireland, relating to Slater's work on soil and to the broader research on the 'metabolic rift'; the impact of Gaelic culture, including Christianity, on the later development of Irish subaltern consciousness; the way in which colonial ideologies and technologies were determined by structural imperatives (what Glen Coulthard calls 'discursive facets' of the 'settler-colonial relationship') and led to the reshaping of property and regime accordingly; and the contradiction between the apparently unassailable stability of a regime approaching hegemony—the Protestant Ascendancy—and the heightening tensions which erupted most visibly with the famine and which led to independence; and the role of Irish surplus in the development of English capitalism, especially in the industrial revolution.[648] Developing any one of these is a demanding task, requiring significant historical and theoretical work.

Notably absent from this dissertation is any discussion of Mincéirí, an internally colonised people whose colonial subjection has only continued and intensified in the independent state. In the 21st century, they are subject to blatant everyday discrimination and dehumanising slurs, the suppression of traditional ways of life, deliberate underallocation of state resources, and extreme violence including arson, part of the arsenal of settler colonialism globally. If there is any proof that Ireland is still a settler colonial society, it lies in its treatment of Mincéirí. Nevertheless, this

---

[648] Coulthard, 7–8.

dissertation could not engage with this topic: the deliberate suppression and erasure of Mincéir history has meant it is largely ignored by the academy. The Irish state did not even recognise Mincéirí as a people state until March 2017. That same year saw the release of the *Cambridge History of Ireland*, which, as an ambitious overview of Irish history that is sensitive to political, social, cultural, and economic history, has been instrumental to my research. Yet its four volumes do not mention Mincéirí once. Overcoming the intentional degradation of knowledge of and by Mincéirí is part and parcel of overcoming colonialism in Ireland. This entails, as Fanon suggested, a complete restructuring of the world. More immediate practical steps include redressing inequities and redirecting resources towards Mincéirí and the celebration of Mincéir knowledge and ways of life.

If there is one original contribution I have made it is this: to show above all that the *entire* period of the colonial regime's existence has been first and foremost about property relations, about continually re-enacting a settler-colonial relationship, 'a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.'[649] As I put it in Chapter Three:

> While these discussions show how interrelating factional politics, unstable ideologies, cultural and physical geography, and continental and global influences conditioned the manner in which colonial policy developed, what did not change was their ultimate aim of alienating Gaelic workers from the land and subordinating them to English control—that is, instituting and extending colonial property relations…. The English never lost sight of their goal of appropriating Ireland for themselves.

In this regard, Lloyd's emphasis on Connolly's historiographic insight that colonialism bridges the gap between capitalist and precapitalist Ireland is critical.[650] Ireland's ghosts continue to haunt it. Colonial dispossession has not ended: the alienation of the Irish proletariat, even in the

---

[649] Coulthard, 8.
[650] See Lloyd, 'Rethinking National Marxism', 362.

independent state, is a direct consequence of the sublimated regime and property relations introduced and repeatedly transformed by English colonisers; the 'original expropriation' of the English, enacted over centuries, has been subsumed into the general dispossession of global capitalism.[651] Among others, Irish, American, and English capitalists have replaced English feudal landlords as the claimants to Irish property. The study of this process, and the present nature of Ireland's sublimated coloniality, is perhaps the most important, and most challenging task raised by this dissertation, but it is imperative. As capitalist crises reach a new peak, the people of Ireland are, like everyone else, in an increasingly desperate situation, and it is more pressing than ever to realise Connolly's vision that '[e]very man, woman, and child of the nation must be considered as an heir of all the property of the nation, and the entire resources of the nation should stand behind all individuals guaranteeing them against want, and multiplying their individual powers with all the powers of the organised nation.'[652] Fortunately, Ireland is not alone—though its history is unique in many respects, so too are the histories of every colonised country. Just as it must dispense with the ideological conceit that its past is nothing more than the prehistory of capitalism, Ireland must learn from and act with the theory, history, and politics of anticolonial struggles around the world if it has any hope of knowing, let alone saving, itself.

---

[651] See Angus.
[652] James Connolly, vol. 2, 367.

Bibliography

Aalen, F.H.A., Kevin Whelan, & Matthew Stout, eds., *Atlas of the Rural Irish Landscape*, 2nd ed. Cork: Cork University Press, 2011.

Anderson, Kevin. *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Angus, Ian. 'The Meaning of "So-called Primitive Accumulation"', *Climate and Capitalism*. Retrieved 24 June 2023. 2022. https://climateandcapitalism.com/2022/09/05/so-called-primitive-accumulation/

Beatty, Adrian. 'An Irish Revolution without a Revolution', *Journal of World Systems Research* 22, no. 1 (2016): 54–76.

Bannerji, Himani. 'Ideology' in *Marxism & Feminism*, Shahrzad Mojab, ed. London: Zed Books, 2015. 102–121.

Bartlett, Thomas, ed. *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, 4 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Bhandar, Brenna. *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Bhattacharya, Tithi. 'Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory', in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.). London: Pluto Press, 2017. 1–20.

Blomley, Nicholas. 'Making Private Property: Enclosure, Common Right and the Work of Hedges', *Rural History* 18, 1 (2007): 1–21.

Blomley, Nicholas. 'The Territorialization of Property in Land: Space, Power and Practice', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, 2 (2019): 233–249.

Blomley, Nicholas. 'The Territory of Property', *Progress in Human Geography* 40, 5 (2016): 593–609.

Blomley, Nicholas. 'The Ties that Blind: Making Fee Simple in the British Columbia Treaty

Process', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40, 2 (2015): 168–179.

Bottomore, Thomas. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 2nd ed. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1991.

Canny, Nicholas. *The Formation of the Old English Elite in Ireland*. Dublin: National University of Ireland, Dublin, 1975.

Canny, Nicholas. 'The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to North America', offprint from *The William and Mary Quarterly* 30, 4 (1973): 575–598.

Cary, Thomas. *A Short discourse of the New-found-land : contaynig diverse reasons and inducements, for the planting of that countrey*. Dublin: Societie of Stationers, 1623. https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.90071

Carver, Terrell. '*The German Ideology* Never Took Place', *History of Political Thought* 31, 4 (2020): 107–127.

Campbell, Ian. *Renaissance Humanism and Ethnicity Before Race: The Irish and the English in the Seventeenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

Clark, Samuel. *Social Origins of the Irish Land War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Comninel, George. *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge*. London: Verso, 1987.

Connolly, James. *Collected Works*, 2 vols. Dublin: New Books Publications, 1987.

Connolly, SJ. *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Cronin, Nessa. '"Disciplinary Ghettoes": Irish Studies and Interdisciplinary Navigation', *Nordic Irish Studies* 6 (2007): 1–15.

Cronin, Nessa. 'Writing the "New Geography": Cartographic Discourse and Colonial Governmentality in William Petty's *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* (1672)'. *Historical Geography* 42 (2014): 58–71.

Eagleton, Terry, Frederic Jameson, & Edward W. Said. Introduction by Seamus Deane. *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

Fabian, Johannes. 'Time and the Emerging Other', in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Fanon, Frantz. *Œuvres*. Paris: La Découverte, 2011.

Farrell, Gerard. 'The Irish and the Economy of Plantation Ulster,' *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 122, 1 (2022): 169–202.

Flaherty, Eoin. 'Geographies of Communality, Colonialism, and Capitalism: Ecology and the World-System', *Historical Geography* 41 (2013): 59–79.

Gencarella, Stephen. 'Constituting Folklore: A Case for Critical Folklore Studies', *The Journal of American Folklore* 122, 484 (2009): 172–196.

Gordon, Lewis. R. 'Fanon on Decolonizing Knowledge' in *Fanon and the Decolonization of Philosophy*, Elizabeth A. Hoppe & Tracey Nicholls (eds.). Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.). New York: International Publishers, 1971.

Hanks, Patrick, Richard Coates, & Peter McClure. 'Beirne', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199677764.001.0001

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hazelkorn, Ellen. 'Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: The Irish Dimension.' PhD dissertation. Canterbury: University of Kent, 1980.

Heffernan, David. 'The reduction of Leinster and the origins of the Tudor conquest of Ireland,

c. 1534–46', *Irish Historical Studies* 40, 157 (2016): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/ihs.2016.5

Howe, Stephen. *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

James, CLR. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1963.

Kearns, Gerry. 'Historical Geographies of Ireland: Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Legacies' (introduction to special issue), *Historical Geography* 41 (2013): 22–34.

Kearns, Gerry. 'The Territory of Colonialism', *Territory, Politics, Government* 5, 2 (2017): 222–238. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2016.1266961

Kearns, Gerry. '"Up to the Sun and Down to the Centre": The Utopian Moment in Anticolonial Nationalism', *Historical Geography* 42 (2014): 130–151.

Keegan, Kevin. 'The Linguistic Geography of the Contact Zone: The Complementarity of Orality and Literacy in Colonial Ireland', *Historical Geography* 41 (2013): 80–93.

Kelly, Fergus. *A Guide to Early Irish Law*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988.

Kiberd, Declan. 'Modern Ireland: Postcolonial or European?' in *Not on Any Map: Essays on Postcoloniality and Cultural Nationalism*, Stuart Murray, ed. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997.

Kinealy, Christine. 'Food Exports from Ireland 1846-47', *History Ireland* 5, 1 (1997): 32–6.

Lenin, Vladimir. *Collected Works*, vol. 25. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964.

Lloyd, David. *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Lloyd, David. 'Rethinking National Marxism: James Connolly and "Celtic Communism"', *Interventions* 5, no. 3 (2003): 345–370, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801032000135611.

Maginn, Christopher. '"Surrender and Regrant" in the Historiography of Sixteenth-Century Ireland'. *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 38, 4 (2007): 955–974. https://doi.org/10.2307/20478623

Mao Zedong. *Selected Works*, vol. 1. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.

Martin, Amy E. 'Victorian Ireland: Race and the Category of the Human', *Victorian Review* 40, 1 (2014): 52–57.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1976.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *Ireland and the Irish Question*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, 50 vols. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *On Colonialism.* Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001.

McGowan, Padraig. 'Money and Banking in Ireland: Origins Development and Future'. Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland 26, 1 (1988–1993): 45–132, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/money-banking-ireland-origins-development-future/docview/911978683/se-2.

Montaño, John Patrick. *The Roots of English Colonialism in Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Morera, Esteve. *Gramsci's Historicism: A Realist Interpretation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1990.

Morera, Esteve. *Gramsci, Materialism, and Philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

Morrissey, John. 'Cultural Geographies of the Contact Zone: Gaels, Galls and Overlapping Territories in Late Medieval Ireland'. *Social & Cultural Geography* 6, 4 (2005): 551–566.

Moufawad-Paul, Joshua. 'A Living Colonialism: Reconceptualizing Anti-colonial Philosophy'. PhD dissertation. Toronto: York University, 2010.

Nally, David. '"That Coming Storm": The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, 3 (2008): 714–741.

Nally, David & Gerry Kearns. 'Vegetative States: Potatoes, Affordances, and Survival Ecologies'. *Antipode* 52, 5 (2020): 1373–1392.

Nichols, Robert. *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Nir, Ori & Debra Shushan. 'From Creeping to Leaping: Annexation in the Trump-Netanyahu Era'. *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 23, 4 (2018), 49–61.

Ohlmeyer, Jane. 'The Reconstitution of Ireland's Aristocracy, 1590s–1670s' in *Making Ireland English: The Irish Aristocracy in the Seventeenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 25–207.

Pal, Maïa. *Jurisdictional Accumulation: An Early Modern History of Law, Empires and Capital*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Roebuck, Peter, ed., *Plantation to Partition: Essays in Honour of J.L. McCracken*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1981.

Scally, Robert James. *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, & Emigration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001.

Slater, Eamonn. 'Marx on the Colonization of Irish Soil.' MUSSI Working Paper No. 3. Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute. 2018. https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9342/

Slater, Eamonn & Terrence McDonough. 'Marx on 19th Century Colonial Ireland: Analyzing Colonialism beyond Dependency Theory.' NIRSA Working Paper No. 36. National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis. 2008. https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/1151/

Smith, Dorothy. 'The Ideological Practice of Sociology' in *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990. 31–57.

Smyth, Jim. *The Men of No Property: Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1998.

Smyth, William. *Map-making, Landscapes and Memory: A Geography of Colonial and Early Modern Ireland, c. 1530–1750*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2006.

Solow, Barbara Lewis. *The Land Question and the Irish Economy, 1870-1903*. Cambridge:

Harvard University Press, 1971.

Thompson, EP. *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*. New York: The New Press, 1993.

Wolfe, Patrick. *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*. London: Verso, 2016.

Wolfe, Patrick. 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.' *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, 4 (2006): 387–409.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London: Verso, 2002.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. London: Verso, 1995.

Vaughan, W. E. *Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.