

William Petty and colonialism: no room for plurality of perspectives!

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Introduction and overview.

1. Biographical and historical background.
2. Anti-colonialist responses: history, historians, literature.
3. Economics: pluralism under siege.
4. Disciplines neighbouring economics: pluralism to the fore.

Conclusion: No room for plurality of perspectives on colonialism!

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Abstract

The writings of William Petty (1623-87) prefigure much of the analytical apparatus of today's economics and of a number of other social science disciplines besides. At the same time, the undisguised colonialist motivation of his economic and social thought, along with his explicit advocacy of genocide and slavery, can only provoke revulsion in all but the most ideologically insensitive of his readers. Yet not only the economic orthodoxy but the social science disciplines as a whole have hitherto failed to generate an unequivocally anti-colonialist response to this aspect of their intellectual ancestry, a failure, which has, in turn, helped to impede the further exploration and exposure of the colonialist roots of many of the categories of analysis in use by economists today. A review of some of the literature on Petty from within the critical social science literatures suggests that an indiscriminate approbation of pluralism may have contributed to this disappointing outcome, by dissipating the focus of inquiry away from the political economy of colonialism and its ideology, to which Petty made such a substantial contribution.

Introduction and overview.

The principle of 'pluralism' is upheld across a remarkably wide range of the ideological spectrum, from the most hawkish neo-conservatism on the right to the most flamboyantly critical currents within the social science literatures on the left. Thus, on the one hand, pluralism is commonly listed alongside 'free and open markets' as a declared aim of the current interventionist phase of US foreign policy, while also, on the other hand, featuring as a guiding principle of heterodox currents within economics that seek to break the iron grip upon the profession of the markedly non-plural neo-classical orthodoxy.

Such plurality, not to say antagonism, of values and objectives may reasonably be distinguished from methodological pluralism, in that the latter embraces concepts such as interdisciplinarity, which are ideologically neutral in form, whatever the significance of their actual application in any given case. What will here be urged, however, is a note of caution in the advocacy of pluralism as a general principle in the social sciences, for example by calling for a 'plurality of perspectives'. It will be argued that this can all-too-easily allow 'seepage' from pluralism in methodology to a type of pluralism which defeats its own stated objectives by passivity or equivocation in the face of core elements of the non-pluralistic standpoint it sets out to challenge.

Pluralism, like any other intellectual phenomenon, does not exist in universal, abstract form, but has to be analysed in the context of particular social circumstances in any given case, with reference, above all, to who advances it and for what purpose. The roots of pluralism in the sense in which it is advocated by the neoconservative right of today may to a great extent be traced back to the tradition of compromise among different strands among the ruling establishment in England -- a tradition which became a particularly characteristic feature of that establishment following the events of 1688, when the 'moneyed interest' increasingly merged itself into the formerly dominant 'landed interest', and *vice versa*. The call for pluralism from within today's radical social science literature has, of course, a very different social basis and motivation. In the first place, it constitutes a defensive measure in face of the non-pluralistic dominance of the neo-classical mainstream and efforts to extend this dominance into neighbouring disciplines. It can also, however, be associated with an unwillingness or incapacity to take a firm and definite stand on social issues, and it is this aspect which will here be explored, with reference to the central issue facing progressive humanity in our time -- the issue of how to repudiate and surmount the legacy of colonialism.¹

This exploration will take the form of a critical review of responses to aspects of the life and thought of William Petty (1623-87), whose writings, as is now widely recognised, prefigured much of the analytical apparatus not only of economics but of a number of other social science disciplines besides. At the same time, the undisguised colonialist motivation of his economic and social thought, along with his explicit advocacy of genocide and slavery, can only provoke revulsion in all but the most ideologically insensitive of his readers. Yet not only the economic orthodoxy but also heterodox currents and the social science disciplines as a whole have hitherto failed to generate an unequivocally anti-colonialist response on any substantial scale. The following review will address the question of whether an indiscriminate approbation of pluralism within the critical social science literatures may have contributed to this failure.

1. Biographical and historical background.

In 1649, the English parliamentary forces, victorious after seven years of civil war with the monarchy, proceeded, on the one hand, to execute the monarch Charles I, and, on the other, to suppress the egalitarian elements within their own ranks. Having thus consolidated their victory on two fronts, they proceeded forthwith to the preparation and dispatch of an invasion force, led by Oliver Cromwell, to restore Ireland to the colonial rule which it had succeeded in throwing off during the civil war period. After a bloody three-year campaign of reconquest, the English authorities drew up a plan for mass executions of Irish 'rebels' -- defined sufficiently broadly to include the majority of adult males in the country -- as well as deportations and enslavements, and the complete removal of the remaining Irish population from three of the country's four provinces to a kind of reservation in the West -- the notorious policy encapsulated in the expression 'To Hell or Connaught!' The army of occupation was to receive its arrears of pay in the form of entitlements to land thus vacated, and would, it was hoped, form the core of a massive colonial immigration that would forever replace the Irish throughout the great majority of their country.

Neither the planned executions nor the 'transplantation' to Connaught proved practicable on the mass scale originally envisaged. However, one element of the original plan, the expropriation and redistribution of land, did go ahead, and it was here that Petty's role was of pivotal importance, for it was to him that the army of occupation assigned the crucial task

of surveying the expropriated land for redistribution. The opportunities this assignment offered for bribery and corruption were bounded only by the shores of Ireland itself, and so fully did Petty exploit these opportunities that he soon became one of the foremost landowners in the country, alongside the wealthiest of the incumbent colonialists and other Cromwellian *parvenus* such as himself. These elements proceeded to buy out the bulk of the land that had been allotted to the rank-and-file soldiery, and, before long, Ireland had fallen into their hands. The outcome was a kind of neo-feudal situation, in which large landowners like Petty were left lording it over Irish tenants and labourers who remained effectively enserfed on land which they had formerly rented from Irish landowners or themselves owned as smallholdings.

Following the collapse of the Cromwellian regime and the restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660, Petty succeeded in retaining most of the land he had seized, and for the rest of his days his lifestyle remained that of a neo-feudal grandee. His London residence was described by a contemporary diarist as a “splendid palace”, while his fiefdom in county Kerry in south west Ireland was run along the lines of a small principality. But while he was thus accepted into upper-class society under the restored monarchy, he never succeeded in re-launching his official career on the high-flying path it had followed during the Cromwellian period. It was this frustration of his ambitions which drove him to produce those works to which he owes his singular position in the history of economic thought -- an unending series of schemes for fiscal, administrative, military and naval initiatives which he vainly hoped would be entrusted to him. It is in the text of these proposals, whose form varies all the way from extensive treatises to brief jottings, that much of the analytical apparatus of today’s economics first began to emerge in primitive form, not least his ‘political arithmetic’, the principal precursor of the mathematical methodology that has come to prevail in the economics profession as we know it.

The culmination of Petty’s efforts to apply his new-fangled quantitative methodology came in the form of a renewed proposal for the ‘transplantation’ of the bulk of the population of Ireland, whereby they would be transferred not westwards, as in the Cromwellian scheme, but eastwards into England. The aim was to increase the compactness of England’s population, compactness being, in his view, the key to the advantages enjoyed by Holland, which was, in his time, not only Europe’s most densely-populated country, but also its most economically-advanced. As for Ireland, the entire country was to be transformed into a “kind of factory” for rearing livestock for England, in other words one vast cattle ranch. This would, besides, bring about a “perpetual settlement” (or in the term used prophetically by

his editor in 1899, a “final solution”) that could at last “cut up the roots of those evils” which “have made Ireland for the most part a diminution and a burthen, not an advantage, to England”. (For references and discussion, see Goodacre 2005b and 2005c.)

Intermittently, Petty also participated in the movement for the advancement of science and technology that was fashionable in his time, his own interests ranging widely from medicine (he was himself a qualified physician) to ship-design. But while his scientific interests undoubtedly influenced the form and mode in which he advanced his economic and social thought, it is regrettable that writers on the history of economic thought have commonly allowed this aspect of his biography to overshadow consideration of the underlying motivation and character of his writings. This is despite the fact that Petty, far from seeking to conceal or disguise his aims, makes them abundantly clear, setting out in perfectly explicit terms a comprehensive programme for the utter obliteration of the social, cultural and intellectual traditions indigenous to the colonized people, and thus for their extinction as a distinct national entity.

2. Anti-colonialist responses.

Long after the conclusion of its major military engagements, the Cromwellian army of occupation in Ireland continued to face armed resistance, both from remaining detachments of the Irish army and from local guerrilla forces (Gentles 1992: 380). Petty’s land survey was thus carried out in still-hostile territory, and, as his own account makes clear, his surveying teams encountered not only passive resistance and non-cooperation but also the constant danger of attack, so that each team had to be accompanied by “seven soldiers and a corporal”. On one occasion, an entire team was captured, tried and executed by a resistance group led by Donogh O’Derrick, known as ‘Blind Donogh’, who, as one historian memorably observes, “could see well enough for this purpose” (Prendergast 1865 [1870]: 206, 336-7).

Though the action led by Blind Donogh was doubtless typical of very many, such acts of resistance seldom leave a trace in the historical record in this way, and contemporary accounts of the difficulties faced by Petty are largely confined to complaints against him from fellow colonialists whom he had outwitted in the distribution of expropriated Irish

land. Interestingly enough, these complaints are well preserved due to his own habit of meticulously recording the arguments of his adversaries, even at times embellishing their accusations with his own characteristic rhetorical turns of phrase. He evidently felt that by thus representing his accusers as accomplished and eloquent debaters, his own virtuosity in demolishing their arguments would be displayed to best advantage. A mutual conspiracy of silence, however, lies over what was apparently his most lucrative form of corruption -- an approximately 10% underestimation of all the expropriated land he surveyed. This underestimation was, of course, identically equal to over-allocation, for which he was doubtless recompensed by the beneficiaries. (See Andrews 1985: 40).

Complaints about Petty's corruption in the land redistribution process, though plentiful enough, obviously do not carry moral force from an anti-colonialist point of view, the only ones to suffer being his "brethren of the carpet bag" (Mitchel 1873: 55), and it was not until 1729, over four decades after his death, that we find a more wide-ranging expression of moral revulsion regarding his outlook, and even then from within the colonialist establishment. This came in the form of the oft-cited satirical pamphlet by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) entitled *A modest proposal for preventing the children of poor people from becoming a burthen to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick*. This pamphlet takes the form of a gruesome proposal for the breeding of Irish children as livestock. The supposed benefits of this scheme are elaborated in absurd quantitative terms which tellingly parody Petty's 'political arithmetic', detailing the demographic aspects (such as the numbers to be "reserved for breed"), the average weight of each carcass, the costs ("about two shillings per annum, rags included"), potential uses for the hides, the export potential, the implications for the revenue of the church, and so on. (See Goodacre 2005e.)

The acerbity of Swift's satire has ensured that it has been adopted as an element in the heritage of Irish national literature; it is, for example, quoted at length by James Connolly (1868-1916) in his *Labour in Irish History* (Connolly 1910: chapter 3). However, it was only in the final years of the eighteenth century that Irish nationalism began to develop a literature it could truly call its own. Even then, this literature, exemplified in the autobiography of Wolfe Tone (1763-98), was closer in spirit to the cosmopolitan revolutionary democracy of the period of the French revolution than to the resistance of the previous centuries. (See Tone 1826). The heritage of the latter was, however, continued in the rural uprisings of the period, and while the movement these represented inevitably lagged in the consolidation of a literature of its own, it remains to this day commemorated in

tradition and song (Galvin 1955), and, with the rise of the ‘Young Ireland’ national movement from the 1840s onwards, at last found a place in Irish historiography and literature in the work of writers such as the Irish nationalist politician, journalist and historian John Mitchel (1815-75)

By this time, colonialist literature had rediscovered Petty. First came a whimsical account, in the *History of England* by Thomas Macaulay (1800-59), of the “benevolent and enlightened” colonial projects of Petty on his estate in Ireland (Macaulay 1848-62: chapter 12). Subsequently, another prominent Victorian historian, James Froude (1818-94), cited Petty as a “cool-headed” authority whose testimony could be trusted in regard to the alleged wholesale massacre of Protestants in the Irish uprising of 1641, an allegation that has always been central to attempts to justify the Cromwellian invasion. This provided Mitchel with a target to attack head on, and he made the most of the opportunity, the result being the most substantial anti-colonialist response to Petty’s writings in any branch of literature hitherto. Mitchel describes Petty as “the most successful land-pirate... and voracious land-shark who ever appeared in Western Europe”. He ridiculed the idea that Petty’s suggestion that 38,000 Protestants had been massacred could be trusted, parodying Froude’s assertion as being tantamount to the claim that this was “a pretty fair and handsome massacre, a valid and substantial massacre for history to make a turning-point of, and for the Lansdowne estates to derive title from”. (Mitchel 1873: 53, 57, Lansdowne being one of the titles held by Petty’s descendants.)

The idea that the Cromwellian occupation had been a fatal watershed in Irish history was widely popularised in Irish nationalist circles by a book, published in 1865, which was written by a barrister named John Prendergast. Paradoxically, this author was not a nationalist at all, and was indeed somewhat alarmed by the enthusiastic reception of his book by the growing nationalist readership of the time; he accordingly attempted to dull its effect by adding a sequel aiming to demonstrate that the wrongs suffered by the Irish had largely been righted in the subsequent period. The sequel, however, has remained unread, leaving him, far from his own intentions, a substantial contributor to the growing heritage of Irish nationalist historiography on the Cromwellian settlement in general, and on Petty’s role in it in particular. (See Barnard 1993, discussing Prendergast 1865 [1870].)

No such equivocation is found in the work of Karl Marx (1818-83), who notes that Petty was “quite unscrupulous and just as apt to plunder in Ireland under the aegis of Cromwell as to fawn upon Charles II”. Marx also, of course, provided much of the pioneering analysis of Petty’s place in the emergence of early classical political economy. In this connection, he

lamented the absence of readily-available editions of his works. He comments that his might sound surprising in view of the fact that Petty's ancestors remained so prominent in ruling circles, but offered the following explanation:

The Lansdowne family could hardly prepare a complete edition of Petty's works without prefacing it with his biography, and what is true with regard to the origin of most of the big Whig families, applies also in this case -- the less said of it the better. (Marx (1859) [1970 tr.]: 52-4.)

However, as British imperialism gained confidence in subsequent decades, the English aristocracy demonstrated a capacity to find solutions to their ideological and moral dilemmas which could not have been anticipated by Marx in the more stormy conditions of the 1850s. As it turned out, Petty's descendants, far from keeping quiet about the disreputable sources of their prosperity, adopted a note of cheerful cynicism towards the subject and proceeded to write some remarkably frank and well-researched works of scholarship, namely a biography, published in 1895, by Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, and valuable editions of selected items from his papers by the Marquis of Lansdowne between 1927 and 1931.

The above-quoted polemical article by John Mitchel, much of whose work was written while in exile among the Irish diaspora in the United States, is only one example of how anti-colonialist responses to Petty have very largely arisen from within intellectual currents far-removed from mainstream English historiography. A further example is the continued existence of a current in French writings on Ireland which effectively sustains the anti-colonial traditions of the French military expeditions in support of the Irish national movement in the 1790s, and which accordingly remains conscious that the wrongs inflicted by Petty and his generation have still to be righted. As the French geographer Yann-Morvran Goblet tellingly observed in a major monograph study written in 1930, Petty's final scheme was grimly prophetic of what was actually to transpire in the two centuries that followed, when Ireland was indeed emptied of the majority of its inhabitants as he had advocated, its language and traditional way of life fighting for survival, and much of its territory (at any rate in the southern, 26-county, state) serving, as it largely did in Goblet's time, as one vast cattle ranch; in the words of a reviewer of Goblet's work, Petty's proposals "would be ludicrous if the next two centuries had not proved them to be in many ways prophetic" (Lynam 1932: 418, in a review of Goblet 1930).

While it is thus necessary to leave Britain to find an explicitly anti-colonialist response to Petty's writings, the work of mainstream English historians nevertheless includes much that

is impressive and enduring in its scholarship. For example, anti-colonialists could ask for no better analysis of the demographic implications of the ‘Hell or Connaught!’ programme than that provided over a century ago by the historian Samuel Gardiner, whose grisly calculations continue to this day to be taken as authoritative by historians of the period (Gardiner 1899).

The response of progressive historians outside the Irish nationalist tradition has been, though sometimes heartfelt, disappointing, and so far largely confined to passing remarks. For example, it has been suggested that the goal of the Cromwellian invasion was “something like an instant transition from feudalism to capitalism” (Wood 2002: 153f), a remark which ignores the complex interplay of capitalist and feudal, or, at any rate, neo-feudal, interests. (On the concept of neo-feudalism in this context, see Goodacre 2005b, discussing Morgan 1985 and the work of Brenner.) Colonialism in Ireland has also been described as an experience which “presaged the future form of capitalist imperialism”, that it was consciously adopted by England as a “model of empire” (Wood 2002: 156), and even that it was specifically Petty who first “began to define colonial populations by looking at Ireland” (Chaplin 2001: 318-320). All these are highly suggestive comments, which only go to highlight the limited extent to which they have actually been taken up for substantial discussion.

At a more general level, a current within historiography has, under the banner of the ‘reappraisal of Irish history’, criticised the assumption that “austerely clinical terms” are an essential prerequisite for an “academic” approach to Irish history, arguing that such an approach has resulted in the elision of that history’s “catastrophic dimension”, “thereby desensitising the trauma” of the country’s colonial experience (Bradshaw 1989 [1994]: 201-4). It is unfortunate that progressive historians writing on Petty have not further developed this theme, for which the ‘clinical terms’ both of Petty himself and of many commentators on his economic writings provide ample opportunity.

There has been a more substantial response to this aspect of Petty’s writings from within the literary sphere, from Swift’s pamphlet onwards. In particular, attention has been drawn to the fact that Petty regarded colonialism in Ireland as an ideal opportunity for the application of ‘political anatomy’, just as, to use his own words, “students in medicine practice their inquiry upon cheap and common animals” (see, in particular, Coughlan 1990: 213-20). From the point of view of such experimentation, everything that constitutes an advance from the English point of view necessarily entails measures to suppress Ireland’s cultural, political and religious life and annihilate its national identity: “the development of ‘Englishness’

depended on the negation of ‘Irishness’” (Hadfield and Maley 1993: 7). Petty’s writings address both aspects of this process with equally unabashed frankness.

A further aspect of the colonialist character of Petty’s writings has attracted attention from within the history of the social sciences. This is that he pioneered the application of crude notions in the field of physical anthropology. As it happens, he concludes that these cannot explain the ‘lazing’ and other supposed deficiencies in the Irish national character: “For their shape, stature, colour, and complexion, I see nothing in them inferior to any other people, nor any enormous predominance of any humour”, nor a “natural abundance of phlegm in their bowels and blood”. It was otherwise when it came to the “several species of man” inhabiting other continents, where he freely applied such notions (Hodgen 1964: 419-422).

Perhaps the most revealing light of all is cast upon the ideological significance of Petty’s writings by comparing them with a body of propaganda material commissioned and propagated by the parliamentary authorities in support of Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland. This material, it has convincingly been argued, constitutes the first carefully considered exposition of England’s colonialist ideology, expressed in terms of “Irish barbarism and the idea of an English civilizing mission” (Carlin 1993: 210). A comparison with Petty’s writings shows that he not only takes up the principal themes addressed in this material but surpasses it in his relentless efforts at theoretical systematization (see Goodacre 2005b); his writings on Ireland are in this sense a continuation and further elaboration of a new wave of state-sponsored propaganda, not an isolated curiosity. The idiosyncratic and often eccentric character of his writings should consequently not be allowed to obscure their significance as a substantial contribution to the emergence of the colonialist, and even racist, ideology of subsequent centuries, not only in the specific form of Irish Unionism, of which he was a direct precursor, but in relation to the colonial order in general.

3. Economics: pluralism under siege.

Since the ‘marginalist revolution’ of the 1870s, the conceptual and analytical apparatus of the economics ‘mainstream’ has been progressively stripped of all specific historical or contextual reference. This process has proceeded in successive waves, culminating in the present situation where, to be accepted as ‘respectable’ by the dominant orthodoxy, an economic proposition must be formulated in entirely abstract, preferably mathematical,

form. (For discussion, see Goodacre 2006b.) From the point of view of an approach with such an epistemological basis, with no ground for history as understood by historians, let alone for explicit moral or ethical values, the very idea of an anti-colonialist standpoint, or indeed any other ideological orientation, is perceived as meaningless.

Even the history of the process by which this positivistic orthodoxy came into being is commonly regarded with little interest, except in cases where it serves to illustrate the 'advance' towards the present mathematical, or scientific, stage. This is not to say that reference to Petty is absent from the work of economists of neo-classical orientation; on the contrary, "economists whom no other topic could unite... have... joined forces in extolling him" (Schumpeter 1955: 210). However, instead of attempting to explain Petty's theoretical and methodological achievements with reference to their context and motivation, it is customary just to proffer the ludicrously inadequate explanation that he had a 'fertile brain', an assertion sometimes accompanied by elements of a standard biographical narrative based on his own self-adulatory account (see Goodacre 2006a).² To find more considered responses to Petty's economic thought, we accordingly have to turn, on the one hand, to the pre-marginal literature of classical political economy, and, on the other, to heterodox currents, notably Marxism and neo-Ricardianism.

The term 'classical political economy' was coined by Marx, who categorised Petty, Cantillon (1680s-1734?) and Boisguilbert (1646-1714) as representatives of its early, or embryonic, stage. Even before this stage was over, Cantillon had already set the tone for responses to Petty which has prevailed ever since, by identifying him as an originator of economic ideas considered in abstraction, not, as in the comments of Petty's own generation, or indeed Swift's parody, in connection with the facts of his biography. Adam Smith (1723-90), to the limited extent that he engaged with Petty's thought at all, followed the same practice,³ as did such pioneers of the history of economic thought as Ramsay McCulloch and Wilhelm Roscher (1817-94), by whom Petty was viewed principally as the originator of the concept of a social surplus, a concept which was subsequently to occupy such a central place in the classical tradition in political economy.

Only in the work of Marx do we find a balanced approach, which both draws attention to the original, even 'brilliant' aspects of Petty's writings, while at the same time unreservedly denouncing his unscrupulous participation in colonialist plunder. It is a sad reflection on the failure of Western academic Marxism to generate a substantial anti-colonialist tradition that such a two-sided approach is rare indeed from that quarter, where the topic of Petty's conceptual originality all-too-often overwhelms any other consideration, to the extent that

his colonialist motivation is commonly as blandly ignored as it is within the literature of the orthodoxy. There are, however, some honourable exceptions to this generally disappointing record, in particular, a study by Patrick Welch, which usefully correlates aspects of Petty's writings on Ireland with Marx's theory of the role of colonialism in the primitive accumulation of capital (Welch 1997). Others of Marxist orientation have drawn attention to the directly military, and more particularly naval, motivation of much of Petty's work, and have contributed substantial analysis of his contributions to class analysis and the methodology of the social sciences (see, for example, Perelman 2000: 125-9, 186-9, and Poovey 1994: 20-32 and 1998: chapter 3).⁴ In general, however, Marxist comment on Petty has displayed little substantial engagement with the wider world of anti-colonialism, let alone the literature of Irish nationalism

A further current within economics, distinguished alike from the neo-classical orthodoxy, classical political economy, and Marxism, is the 'neo-Ricardian' tradition associated with the work of Piero Sraffa (1898-1983). Writers of this school of thought assign great importance to Petty, since, following Marx, they identify him as the originator of the 'surplus approach' to which they adhere, as explained in unpublished papers by Sraffa himself, and, more extensively, in the work of Alessandro Roncaglia (see Goodacre 2005f). However, as might be expected if even academic Marxism has failed to generate an anti-colonialist response to Petty on any scale, the Sraffian tradition is similarly deficient in this respect.

There is, however, one significant special case which needs to be considered in more detail in this connection. This is the work of Tony Aspromourgos, the leading current specialist writer on Petty's economic thought, who is a representative of the 'surplus', or Sraffian, tradition, while also being exceptional in drawing attention to the ethical issues that arise for the history of economic thought when confronted with the facts of Petty's biography (Aspromourgos 2005). However, this orientation fails to inform the overall approach adopted in his research, none of which has so far directly confronted the full implications of the colonial background and motivation of Petty's writings. In general, Aspromourgos discusses Petty's contributions to economic thought against the background of what is identified as the 'progressive', and in particular scientific, thought of his day, and the colonial context is not taken into consideration even when directly discussing Petty's colonial enterprises themselves (Aspromourgos 2000: 58-60).

This issue has come to a head in a recent important article in which Aspromourgos addresses the question of how Petty arrived at his formulation of the surplus concept. This article

suggests that his involvement with the movement for scientific reform in the late 1640s and early 1650s, and in particular for technological advance in agriculture, provided a basis from which he was able to formulate a concept of the ‘own-rate of reproduction’. The article goes on to acknowledge that this leaves unexplained the question of how, some ten or more years later, in the early 1660s, he made the further “conceptual jump” to the eventual formulation of his ‘social surplus’ concept. It is strange indeed that the article does not inquire into the influence of the intervening period; indeed, it makes no reference at all to the fact that this was precisely the period of Petty’s service in the Cromwellian military-colonial administration! Yet surely, from the point of view of the article itself no less than of the present inquiry, it is the influence of this period which offers the most crucially important avenue for further research and analysis.

Apart, then, from a few exceptions of varying degrees of enthusiasm and determination, the colonialist context and motivation of Petty’s economic thought has been met with a silence in economic literature which is all-too-often as complete in the case of heterodox currents as in the case of the orthodoxy, whose overwhelming dominance within the discipline has effortlessly prevented the topic from assuming any substantial profile in the profession as a whole.

4. Disciplines neighbouring economics: pluralism to the fore.

The disciplines surrounding economics have traditionally contrasted sharply with economics in the unstinting hospitality they have provided to radical currents of thought. Moreover, in many respects they share with economics a common forebear in Petty’s social and economic thought. It might therefore be hoped that they would present a more positive aspect than economics from the point of view of the present inquiry. However, here also there has been a failure to consolidate an anti-colonialist response on any scale. This time, moreover, the failure cannot be attributed to the stifling influence of a non-pluralist orthodoxy, since it is precisely the critical social science literatures which themselves most fervently uphold a pluralist approach.

Both the characteristics of this pluralist approach and the relationship between these critical literatures and neo-classical economics are conveniently illustrated by the case of economy geography. Nowhere is pluralism in methodology upheld with such fervour, in the form of

the application of “a wealth of situated methodologies”, “post-positive and interpretative epistemologies” of a “philosophically diverse” character, a “multiplicity” or “variety of epistemological and methodological perspectives”, an “unprecedented diversity of approaches”, and so on (for references, see Goodacre 2005a). But while it is understandable that critics of neo-classical economics should feel the need for a vigorous response to its oppressively restrictive monism, this enthusiasm for pluralism led, during the 1980s and 1990s, to such a proliferation of approaches, commonly grouped together under the umbrella-term of ‘post-modernism’, that a situation of theoretical and methodological chaos prevailed. Faced with this situation, many geographers themselves began to complain that their discipline was becoming characterised by “trendy and fast-moving jargon that constantly evades any rigorous evaluation”, with a lack of “overall conceptual coherence”, and an acceptance of the principle that “anything goes”. The response has been a retreat from the heady extremes of the post-modern heyday, a retreat which has now been under way in the critical social science literatures for a decade or more, resulting in the prevalence of a more restrained intellectual atmosphere, characterised most notably by the call for a return to material realities, and in particular to the principles of political economy.

An example of this more restrained standpoint, which at the same time reveals its limitations, is provided by the editors of a recent compilation on economic geography, who state in their introduction that “as an approach, political economy is pervasive: it is how economic geography is now done”. What is disappointing in the present context, however, is that they provide only the vaguest idea of what the essential characteristics of political economy are, singling out nothing more specific than its “insistence that the political and the economic are irrevocably bound”, and noting that the issues involved are matters of debate between a wide variety of different schools of thought (Sheppard and Barnes 2000: 5-6). Such a fragmented and eclectic conception of political economy allows the categories of analysis forged by its classical pioneers to be wrenched from their original context and subjected to a theoretical depletion and methodological dismemberment little less debilitating than that which they suffer at the hands of the neo-classical orthodoxy.

What is particularly disappointing in the present context is that the political economy of colonialism has been a victim of this process of theoretical depletion, even the very concept of colonialism itself being reduced in some cases to a metaphor for ‘masculinism’, or as a focus for the critique of “dominant notions of gender and work in order to include social categories such as race and ethnicity”. The acceptance of such diffuse conceptions of colonialism cannot fail to undermine the critique of the neo-classical approach to the

international economy. This is particularly clear in the case of neo-classical forays into spheres of inquiry previously considered beyond the reach of its methodology, a case in point being the ‘new economic geography’ of Paul Krugman, who unceremoniously dismisses the very idea of international political economy, asserting there is no “inherent importance in drawing a line on the ground and calling the land on either side two different countries” (Krugman 1991: 71f-2). It may also be noted in this connection that such neo-classical incursions into neighbouring disciplines have commonly displayed a lack of basic propriety in their willing acceptance of tasteless metaphors drawn from the world of colonialism. For example, a pioneer of this approach, Gary Becker, has commented that the term ‘economics imperialism’ is “probably a good description of what I do” (quoted in Fine 2002: 205). Indeed, even the language of Krugman, who is in other respects such a courageous radical, abounds in arrogance towards the incumbent practitioners of geography that inescapably recalls colonialist attitudes towards the peoples of colonised territories.

Though this digression on the critical economic geography literature has led us away from our review of responses to the writings of William Petty, there is no reason in principle why this should have been so. Petty is the most geographical-minded of the early political economists, as has long been noted (Hull 1899: lxxv); indeed, the most substantial of all studies of his writings is the massive two-volume monograph by the geographer Goblet. It is consequently disappointing that the pluralist tradition within geography should have failed to respond to this aspect of his thought.

Turning to the field of development economics as such, Petty’s writings provide a valuable historical vantage-point from which to assess the extent to which this sub-discipline has surmounted the intellectual legacy of colonialist thought and moved forward to the construction of a truly post-colonial perspective on economic development in the world today. For the theoretical and methodological apparatus deployed within today’s development economics is unmistakably prefigured in Petty’s writings on Ireland (Goodacre 2005b), showing that the sub-discipline cannot, as has been widely and complacently assumed, lay claim to an ancestry in the universalistic or progressive outlook commonly ascribed to Adam Smith. There has, however, hitherto been only one dedicated study of Petty’s role as a precursor of development economics, a 1988 article by Alessandro Roncaglia. This article, however, actually has very limited reference to the literature of that sub-discipline, and, moreover, is silent on the colonial context of Petty’s writings, an omission particularly remiss in view of the fact that development economics is precisely the

branch of social science most directly concerned with addressing the colonial experience and its aftermath.

Besides geography and development studies, a further discipline neighbouring economics which has displayed interest in Petty's writings is that of political science, notably in two articles which have applied Foucaultian concepts. The first of these situates Petty's writings in the context of the dissolution of the pre-modern, or, 'assimilationist', outlook, defined as "a unified discourse predicated upon universal correspondence" (Raylor 1992). The second study, an article on Petty's administrative thought, sees in it the beginnings of a concept of 'governmentality', defined as "a manner of directing a group of individuals which was more and more typified by the exercise of sovereign power" (Mykkänen 1994). It is disappointing that these two studies, which both represent post-modern scholarship at its beguiling best, at the same time display its failure to confront the colonial context of the ideas analysed, a context which, in fact, neither of them even mention.

This survey of some responses to Petty's economic and social thought from within disciplines neighbouring economics has of necessity been highly selective. It could readily have been extended into other disciplines and sub-disciplines. For example, in the field of the history of science, Petty's contribution has drawn considerable attention, not least in respect of the development of scientific activity in Ireland; however, the studies in question stand outside the radical traditions of the social science literatures which explicitly uphold the principle of pluralism, so they have been discounted in favour of a narrower focus on those fields of inquiry where pluralism has been a declared methodological and theoretical principle.

Conclusion: No room for plurality of perspectives on colonialism!

The mortifying conclusion which emerges from this survey is that the critical social science literatures upholding the principle of pluralism have been no more successful than heterodox currents within economics in generating a substantial anti-colonialist response to Petty's economic and social thought. Some idea of why this is the case is suggested by comments by economic geographers who have pointed out that the analytical concepts which have hitherto been central to their sub-discipline, such as 'flexible specialisation', 'new industrial districts', and so on, apply "only in relatively developed countries", and that, more broadly,

many fields of concern among economic geographers reflect the limitations of a “privileged Western interest”, as well as a lack of attention to perspectives developed from within the peripheral countries themselves (for references, see Goodacre 2005a and 2005d). It is to be hoped that this realisation, and equivalent trends within other social science disciplines, may in the future result in the call for pluralism to be qualified by careful consideration of the need for a sharper focus on the political economy of colonialism, as an essential element in the further exploration and exposure of colonialist elements in the intellectual ancestry not only of economics but of much of Western social science as well, an ancestry represented so blatantly by the writings of William Petty.

Notes.

¹ As Bernstein 2000: 242 points out, the term ‘colonialism’ was originally applied only in cases of “significant movements of population from the country of the colonising state”, but this situation is now more commonly indicated by use of the narrower term ‘settler state’, since colonialism has come to be used for any form of domination over a subject territory. In the present study, it will be used in the latter, broad sense, embracing settler states, colonialist commercial and military outposts, the imperialism of the British and other empires, neo-colonialism as defined by Nkrumah (1965), and the colonialist revanchism of current US and British foreign policy.

² Ekelund and Hébert 1975 add the breathtakingly ignorant statement that he was a ‘true born son of Ireland’, which remains uncorrected twenty-two years later in the fourth edition of 1997.

³ Though it might be argued that Smith’s disparaging comments on political arithmetic reflect a distaste for the undisguisedly fiscal-military orientation of writers such as Petty.

⁴ There have, of course, been many others who, though not within any particular radical tradition, have departed from the norm in the history of economic thought by considering the influence on Petty’s economic thought of his activities in Ireland. See, for example, Hull 1899: lxxii and McNally 1988: 36, 46-8.

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