

John Stuart Mill and the Politics of the Irish Land Question

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ABSTRACT

The Irish famine in the mid-1840s caused by the failure of the potato crop called John Stuart Mill's attention to the agricultural and economic problems of Ireland. In this paper, I examine Mill's engagement in the Irish land question in the light of contemporary discussion on the Irish national character and the Irish question. In the first section, I examine what early-nineteenth-century intellectuals thought of the Irish question and "Irish national character." In the second section, I present an account of Mill's views on the Irish condition and his proposed solution for the Irish land question, which he approached from both economic and ethological points of view. In other words, his analysis of the Irish land question was underpinned by an interest in the relationship between the formation of national character and the state of the society, and political institutions. He stressed how artificial social systems, including the land system, could contribute to the formation of national character. This section shows that both his diagnosis of the Irish distress and his proposed remedy for it were grounded in the theoretical views of man and society that had been gradually developed in the 1830s and early 1840s.

Keywords: John Stuart Mill, Irish Land Question, National Character

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1 Introduction

This article discusses John Stuart Mill's involvement with the Irish land question at the time of the Great Famine of 1846, which was caused by the failure of the potato crop.¹ The Irish land question was itself an aspect of a larger issue, the "Irish question." On the eve of the Great Famine, Benjamin Disraeli told the House of Commons:

[Y]ou have a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien church, and in addition, the weakest executive in the world. That was the Irish question. ...

¹ "Irish land question" refers loosely to the issue of the structure and relationships of landownership, landholding, and the use of the soil in Ireland—a controversial political issue in early 19th century Britain. See Gray (1999) 1–7.

The connexion with England thus became the cause of the present state of Ireland. If the connexion with England prevented a revolution, and a revolution were the only remedy, England logically was in the odious position of being the cause of all the misery in Ireland. ... That was the Irish question in its integrity.²

The land question was regarded as a central aspect of the political, constitutional, and economic relationship between Britain and Ireland. Accordingly, resolving the Irish land question would be the necessary first step to solving the Irish question as a whole.

Suspending his work on *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill devoted his time and effort exclusively to a series of articles on the problems of the Irish land system, published in a liberal periodical, the *Morning Chronicle*, during the Irish famine of 1846. Mill is said to be one of the first thinkers who “placed the question of Irish agricultural land tenure in a wider context, embodying not only Irish cultural and social factors and English legal assumptions, but also the general principles of political economy as then understood.”³ As the topics Mill discussed dealt with economics—he drew on his knowledge of political economy—his involvement with the Irish land question in the mid-1840s has been examined mainly from an economic perspective.⁴ Nevertheless, since Mill aspired to create a new science of society in the 1830s and 1840s, his *Morning Chronicle* series is better understood from this point of view, wherein political ethology was hugely important.⁵

In section 2, I examine what early-nineteenth-century intellectuals thought of the nature of the Irish question and how they saw the “Irish national character.” In this context, “Irish national character” referred to the traits of the Irish peasantry from a social standpoint, although their being overwhelmingly Roman Catholic complicated the situation. Political economists had a particularly huge interest in the Irish question, and their “scientific” perspective was vital to their analysis of its economic aspects. A remedy that most political economists put forward for the Irish distress was the capitalization of Irish agriculture through the introduction of English capital—a policy proposal that Mill later criticized. Thus, this section depicts the intellectual milieu in which Mill’s argument on Ireland might be reasonably interpreted.

In section 3, I present an account of Mill’s views on the Irish condition and his proposed solution for the Irish land question in the intellectual context shown in the previous section. He examined the question from economic and ethological angles. In other words, he stressed how artificial social systems,

² *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., lxxii, 1016 (February 16, 1844).

³ Bull (1996) 30.

⁴ For example, see Black (1960) and Martin (1981).

⁵ Zastoupil (1983), Carlisle (1991), and Kinzer (2001) emphasize the importance of political ethological concern in examining Mill’s involvement with the Irish land question.

including the land system, could contribute to the formation of national character. This section shows that both his diagnosis of the Irish distress and his proposed remedy for it were firmly grounded on the theoretical views of man and society, which had been gradually developed in the 1830s and early 1840s.⁶

2 The Irish Question and Irish National Character

The experience of colonization and plantation cast a long shadow over modern Irish history. Even though the penal laws against Catholics, enacted between 1667 and 1705, had gradually been abandoned in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Protestant elite continued to enjoy a near-monopoly of landownership and political power. By the terms of the Act of Union of 1800, the British government and parliament took on direct responsibility for the condition of Ireland, but they had little interest in its improvement. Rather, the economic and social divergence between England and Ireland increased after the Union. Britain's misgovernment made Ireland more vulnerable to social disaster. Eventually, however, the state of Ireland became a source of serious concern to the British government as regards political control and military security. Meanwhile, there was growing awareness among British politicians and intellectuals of the deteriorating socioeconomic condition of Ireland, such as agricultural and industrial stagnation and overpopulation, which was leading to social instability.⁷

In discussions of Irish national character, one of the fundamental questions was whether it was due to the history of oppression and demoralization inflicted by England or to heredity. The clash between those who advocated environmentalism and those who advocated biological determinism came to a head on this issue. Early nineteenth century environmentalist arguments on national character originated in the tradition of philosophical history, which flourished in late-eighteenth-century Scotland. The posthumous 3rd edition of John Millar's *An Historical View of the English Government*, published in 1803,⁸ contained a section on "The Government of Ireland," which was characterized by historical environmentalism. Millar argued against the view held by many

⁶This paper concentrates on Mill's *Morning Chronicle* series on Ireland and does not deal with his argument on Ireland that appeared in his *Principles of Political Economy*, in spite of its importance. This is largely because I do not aim to give a comprehensive analysis of his views on the Irish land question nor examine his argument for the formation of peasant properties. Rather, I intend to use his *Morning Chronicle* series as a good example of his ethological concern—an interest in the relationship between the formation of national character and the state of the society, and political institutions.

⁷See Mokyr (1985) and Gray (1999).

⁸Millar (2006). The first edition of Millar's *Historical View* was published in 1787.

of his contemporaries that the “average” Irish character was inconsistent with the requirements of economic and social development, and that the Irish were inherently “disgraced by a greater portion of barbarity and ferocity, than the rude inhabitants of other countries.”⁹ The manners of the Irish “exhibit that striking resemblance of lines and features, which may be remarked in the inhabitants of every country before the advancement of arts and civilization.”¹⁰ The Irish national character was, to a large extent, a product of the “acts of injustice” that had been perpetrated by successive English governments.¹¹ Significantly, Millar laid little emphasis on the religious factor in discussing the Irish national character.

Many contributors to the *Edinburgh Review* followed Millar in emphasizing the importance of government in shaping national character. For instance, in a review of Millar’s *Historical View*, Francis Jeffrey expounded Millar’s approach to national character; thereafter James Mill adopted Millar’s view on the Irish national character.¹² The reviewers often claimed that the dark side of the Irish national character was, to a great extent, due to oppression by the English. Hence, the backwardness of Ireland was not to be ascribed to an inherited national character. James Mackintosh, for example, stated that English oppression took away “skill and industry, hope and pride” from the Irish Catholics.¹³ Yet, even though the *Edinburgh Reviewers* (e.g., Millar) were aware of the significance of the Catholic question,¹⁴ most of them saw the Irish question as essentially a socioeconomic issue. The repeal of the remaining discriminatory laws against Catholics in 1829 reinforced this trend, though it did little to improve the socioeconomic condition of the Irish. A “scientific” attitude grounded in political economy, as opposed to a religious or fatalist view, helped intellectuals dissect the problem and suggest remedies.

In order to understand Irish economic history, historians have examined a number of causal factors: geographical, political, social, institutional, ethnic, demographic, and so on.¹⁵ One of the most influential explanations for Irish economic backwardness blames the Irish land tenure system. In fact, the land question has been a contentious issue since the early nineteenth century. In this view, Irish economic distress is attributed to the insecurity of the tenants’ tenure, which has resulted in underinvestment and, in turn, low agricultural income. The so-called “land tenure hypothesis” was posited by travelers,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 672.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 672–673.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 673.

¹² Jeffrey (1803); Mill (1813).

¹³ Mackintosh (1812) 352.

¹⁴ For example, see Smith (1820).

¹⁵ Mokyr (1985) 2–5.

administrators, agricultural reformers, and political economists in the first half of the nineteenth century. This hypothesis had a crucial influence on British policies towards Ireland during and after the Great Famine.¹⁶

Early-nineteenth-century British intellectuals, especially political economists, agreed that the miserable state of Ireland was largely caused by its unproductive agriculture, although there were disagreements on the remedies for it. In 1808 and 1809, Thomas Robert Malthus examined Ireland's high population growth.¹⁷ He concluded that it was due to the Irish reliance on potatoes, their food staple, and identified British misrule as the cause. Malthus claimed that the problem would be solved by "the abolition of the Catholic code, and the improvement of government."¹⁸ He regarded overpopulation in Ireland as the reason for the high rents, which burdened the Irish tenantry, and saw the Irish land system as an evil, in that it allowed the number of poor people to multiply to dangerous levels.¹⁹ Nevertheless, he believed that economic development and the subsequent improvement of social conditions could be achieved "through the retention of that system [of landed property], and the adjustment of Irish agriculture to the capitalist type of mixed farming."²⁰ Accordingly, he argued for the consolidation of holdings and subsequent conversion of the cottier into a wage laborer, which would deter improvident marriages and keep population growth in check. Malthus also feared that agriculture would not be able support the current Irish population. He thus espoused the development of the manufacturing industry and the subsequent redeployment of the population. By the mid-1810s, most of Malthus's ideas had been widely accepted by political economists in Britain.²¹

Based on Malthus's principle of population and David Ricardo's arguments on capital accumulation and rent, most British political economists claimed that the widespread subdivision of land was not desirable. John Ramsay McCulloch contributed an essay on the "Cottage System" to the third volume of the *Supplement to the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1819, where he expressed doubt that "the letting of small farms and patches of ground" would encourage the improvement of the condition of the people.²² For him, such use of land contradicted the laws of political economy. The subdivision of land was harmful insofar as it disturbed the accumulation of capital and the division of labor while creating a surplus and an indolent population.

¹⁶ Mokyr (1985) 81–111.

¹⁷ Malthus (1808, 1809).

¹⁸ Malthus (1808) 354.

¹⁹ Ibid., 339–341. Malthus criticized the views of Hume and Smith that rapid population growth in Ireland was caused by "wise institutions" and an "increasing demand for labour" (Ibid., 339).

²⁰ Black (1960) 86.

²¹ See Semmel (1963) 8.

²² McCulloch (1819) 378.

He employed the examples of Ireland and France to support his claim, and referred to political economists such as Arthur Young, Edward Wakefield, and Ricardo as authorities who shared his view.²³

In the 1820s, a modest revival in corn production in Ireland led political economists to hope that agricultural productivity would increase at a faster rate than that of the population. However, they also realized that this improvement would be unsustainable without structural change. Thus, they gave a high priority to capital investment in land. The reorganization of landholding to sweep away the cottier system was vital, since only large-scale capitalist farming was efficient. The notion of anglicizing Irish agriculture through the introduction of English capital was central to the vision of most political economists of the day. The crucial element of anglicization lay in the introduction into Ireland of a tripartite division of labor between landlords, capitalist farmers, and wage laborers.

Most British political economists thought that it was the landlords' duty to reform their estates, adopting their traditional paternalist role but modified by capitalist motives. Hence, they criticized the landlords for not acting more decisively to encourage improvement along the lines of a modern, capitalist economy. They were clear on the nature of the problem; they believed that there was a cycle in which an excessive population consumed a disproportionate amount of its produce. As a consequence, wealth could not increase nor could capital accumulate. In turn, new employment opportunities could not be created, thereby further binding the population to the land. To the political economists, therefore, the problem in Ireland was the want of employment, which produced subsequent starvation and discontent. According to an English traveler, Henry David Inglis: "Men who are unable to turn to any business but agriculture will agree to pay any rent, so long as want of employment prevails to so enormous an extent."²⁴ The solution that the political economists put forth was that landlords should take responsibility for turning their own estates into more efficient agricultural units: more compact farms and capital investment in more profitable farming conditions. In their opinion, what was needed to boost Ireland was the will of landlords to improve. The absentee landlord often became the target of their criticism, not because absenteeism was thought to be incompatible with economic efficiency, but because it entailed the abrogation of the paternalist role that political economists expected the landlord to take.²⁵

²³ Although Ricardo had the same opinions as McCulloch regarding small farming, he believed that the Irish misery was mostly the result of oppression and misrule by Irish privileged landlords and the English government. See, for example, David Ricardo to Hutches Trower, July 24, 1823, Ricardo (1951–1973), ix, 314.

²⁴ Inglis (1835) i, 64.

²⁵ See Bull (1996) 5–26.

During his visit to London in 1835, Camillo Cavour, a leading political figure in mid-nineteenth-century Italy, witnessed Nassau Senior, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Gustav de Beaumont discussing landed property:

I found Mr. Senior walking in the garden with M. Tocqueville and M. Beaumont, discussing the great subject of the division of property. An extraordinary thing was that the radical Englishman was in favour of large ownership and the legitimist Frenchman, of small ownership. Mr. Senior thinks that the small proprietor has neither security nor comfort, and that it is much better for him to be in the employ of a large proprietor and have nothing to fear from bad luck or bad seasons. M. Tocqueville refuted his argument very well, on both moral and material grounds.²⁶

In general, Tocqueville emphasized the importance of landed property in the formation of social and political habits. In *Democracy in America*,²⁷ he examined the way in which the distribution of landed property affected society. He thought that the laws of inheritance had an “unbelievable influence on the social state of peoples”; power was diffused where the law required landed property to be divided into equal shares, and the wide distribution of property provided the foundation for democracy.²⁸ In an essay that he contributed to the *London and Westminster Review* at Mill’s request, he wrote that there was “nothing ... more favourable to the reign of democracy than the division of the land into small independent properties.”²⁹

Tocqueville and Beaumont traveled through Ireland in July and August 1835. Beaumont returned in the summer of 1837 to gather material for *Ireland, Social, Political, and Religious*, which he published in 1839;³⁰ it contained an analysis of Irish society on the eve of the Great Famine.³¹ Unlike Beaumont, Tocqueville did not publish any work on Ireland. Even though Beaumont was an Anglophile and attempted to defend British policies in Ireland, he could not help concluding that the misery of Ireland was due largely to the oppression of British governments. He began his book by stating: “The dominion of the English in Ireland from the invasion of that country in 1169 to the close of the last century, has been nothing but a tyranny.”³² In a devastating critique of British policy in Ireland, Beaumont questioned why a government

²⁶ Whyte (1925) 122, quoted in Martin (1981) 16.

²⁷ A. Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, Paris, 1835.

²⁸ Tocqueville (1994) 51–52.

²⁹ Tocqueville (1836) 155. It is worth noting that Mill translated it into English.

³⁰ Gustav Beaumont, *L'Irlande, sociale, politique et religieuse*, Paris, 1839.

³¹ Mill praised the book highly in a letter to Beaumont dated October 18, 1839. (JSM to Gustav de Beaumont, October 18, 1839, CW, xvii, 1990–1992.)

³² Beaumont (2006) 5.

with such enlightened institutions tolerated such oppression, referring to the desperation of the Catholics, the abusive land system, and the misery of famine. He observed that Ireland's English conquerors appropriated lands and bestowed on themselves feudal privileges, which prevented the development of an indigenous aristocracy and middle class by depriving the Irish of any commercial or territorial foundation on which these two classes could rise. The consequence was that an Irish municipal society could not take shape. To his mind, since their earliest history, the Irish had never been able to achieve the circumstances in which commerce, liberty, and community identity could prosper and consolidate into a powerful union. In examining Ireland's sorry history and current miserable condition, Beaumont zeroed in on the country's land system and subsequently suggested the introduction of peasant proprietorship as a means of improving the condition of Irish society and agriculture. He observed that the Irish economy was divided between wealthy landowners who expatriated profits and capital to England on the one hand, and impoverished tenant farmers, most of whom were forced to survive in rueful conditions, on the other. Significantly, Beaumont's interest in the Irish land system was political, not economic. He was concerned about the question of the relationship between landholding and locality, liberty, and identity. He argued that wealth could be derived from small and medium holdings when a free economy was allowed to develop. These holdings would be the domain of a middle class, and it was out of this class that the awareness of freedom and independence would emerge.

Continental authors, including Beaumont, gave Mill a different perspective, both complementary and critical, from that of British authors. Contrary to the mainstream view of British political economists, J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, a Genevan political economist and economic historian, cited the advantages of peasant proprietorship as it existed on the Continent.³³ A Prussian historian, Frederick von Raumer, pointed out the hugely favorable effect of small farming in his country and proposed that the same system be introduced in Ireland.³⁴ Along with Continental thinkers, British travelers who had personally observed the Continental situation and were thus familiar with it added another perspective to the British debate. One such traveler whose work Mill admired was Samuel Laing.³⁵ In his *Notes of a Traveller*, published in 1842, Laing criticized the conventional view held by most British political economists that a wide subdivision of land was not desirable for the development of society. He accused the likes of Arthur Young and McCulloch of having a "narrow local view and

³³ Sismondi (1827, 1837–1838). For Mill's comment on Sismondi, see JSM, "Ireland [30]" (December 11, 1846), CW, xxiv, 988–991.

³⁴ Raumer (1836). For Mill's awareness of Raumer, see JSM to Sarah Austin, January 9, 1836, CW, xii, 292. Sarah Austin was the English translator of Raumer's *England im Jahre 1835*.

³⁵ See JSM to Sarah Austin, February 26, 1844, CW, xiii, 622.

prejudice.”³⁶ Based on his own observations in various Continental countries, Laing concluded that the subdivision of land and peasant proprietorship could check overpopulation, as the peasant tended to delay marriage until he had inherited or purchased sufficient land to support his family. In addition, he insisted that small farmers were so industrious that their holdings were in a garden-like state of cultivation.³⁷ He stated that France was improving the condition of her people under “this very system of subdivision of property,” while the condition of the English labor class was worsening with the progress of capitalization.³⁸

The works illustrating the advantages of peasant proprietorship, which attracted Mill’s interest, included Henry David Inglis’s *Switzerland, the South of France and the Pyrenees* (1831), William Howitt’s *Rural and Domestic Life of Germany* (1842), and George Poulett Scrope’s *How is Ireland to be Governed?* (1st edition in 1834; 2nd edition in 1846). Scrope proposed the reclamation of wasteland, which Mill would also support in his *Morning Chronicle* series.³⁹ Moreover, in the mid-1840s, William Thomas Thornton, Mill’s colleague at East India House, published two works: *Over-Population and its Remedy*, in 1845, and *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors, with the Outlines of a Plan for their Establishment in Ireland*, in 1848. In these works, which were similar in substance, Thornton argued strongly for the subdivision of land and proposed the reclamation of wasteland by Irish peasants, severely criticizing the views of McCulloch regarding the effect of a wider distribution of landed property on the increase of population.

As regards Thornton’s works, Alexander Bain stated in his biography of Mill, “I believe that it was his friend W.J. [*sic*] Thornton that first awakened him to the question of Peasant Properties. Thornton’s ‘Plea’ was published before *Political Economy* came out, and Mill read the proof sheets as it went through the press.”⁴⁰ In one of his *Morning Chronicle* articles, Mill acknowledged that he had been influenced by Thornton’s work.⁴¹ Bruce Kinzer, who has recently examined in detail whether and how Thornton influenced Mill on the land question, points out that what Mill had in mind as far as the *Morning Chronicle* series was concerned was not *A Plea*, but *Over-Population*.⁴² Thornton’s *Plea*

³⁶ Laing (1842) 36.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁹ Nevertheless, Scrope was one of the targets of Mill’s criticism. See, for example, JSM, “Poulett Scrope on the Poor Laws,” which appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* on October 31, 1846, where Mill attacked Scrope’s proposed Poor Law Bill (JSM, “Poulett Scrope on the Poor Laws” [October 31, 1846], CW, xxiv, 923–926).

⁴⁰ Bain (1882) 86.

⁴¹ JSM, “Ireland [10]” (October 23, 1846), CW, xxiv, 911.

⁴² Kinzer (2001) 55–56.

had not yet been written when Mill was doing the *Morning Chronicle* articles, but Thornton had already finished writing *Over-Population* by December 1845 and presented Mill with a copy of it early in 1846. This does not mean, however, that Thornton's *Over-Population* played a crucial role in Mill's conversion to the advocacy of peasant proprietorship. Rather, it reinforced Mill's conviction. Mill's receptiveness to peasant proprietorship had been shaped by his close examination of the works on Continental systems of land tenure by both Continental and British thinkers. All the works mentioned above helped Mill recognize the advantages of peasant proprietorship.⁴³

3 J.S. Mill and the Irish Land Question

J.S. Mill's involvement with the Irish question spanned more than 40 years and embraced a variety of issues.⁴⁴ His involvement with the Irish land question at the time of the Great Famine in the mid-1840s was of particular importance. In 1845, he began writing *Principles of Political Economy*, but temporarily shelved the project in the autumn of 1846 in order to contribute to the emerging debate on the Irish land question. In the Great Famine of 1846, Mill found a propitious, albeit urgent, opportunity to present a program based on the principles that he had been developing. He published a series of 43 articles entitled "The Condition of Ireland" in the *Morning Chronicle* from October 5, 1846 to January 7, 1847.⁴⁵ The onset of the potato blight in Ireland had been reported in early September 1845. To some degree, the rest of Europe had

⁴³ In examining the crucial impact of Mill's experience in Indian revenue administration at the East India Company on the development of his political thought, Lynn Zastoupil states: "Mill's response to the Irish famine was conditioned by his knowledge of revenue affairs in India" (Zastoupil [1994] 184. See also *ibid.*, 131–132, 170). In the *Principles*, Mill examined the Indian land system within the chapter discussing the Irish land system, arguing that "the comparison of the two" might be "a source of some instruction" (JSM, *PPE*, CW, ii, 319–320). When discussing the Indian land system, he referred to the work of James Mill, whom he called "the philosophical historian of India" (*ibid.*, 321). For James Mill on the Indian land system, see Stokes (1959) 81–139.

⁴⁴ "Ireland," his first article on the country, discussed the Catholic Question; it was published in February 1826 (JSM, "Ireland," CW, vi, 59–98). His last involvement in the Irish Question was his parliamentary speech on John Francis Maguire's motion on the state of Ireland on March 12, 1868 (JSM, "The State of Ireland," CW, xxviii, 247–261), following the publication of his *England and Ireland* in February 1868 (JSM, *England and Ireland*, CW, vi, 505–532). For a comprehensive analysis of Mill's involvement with the Irish question, see Kinzer (2001).

⁴⁵ In addition to "The Condition of Ireland" series, Mill also published in the *Morning Chronicle* several other essays on Ireland, which were closely connected to the series, though not part of it: "Poulett Scrope on the Poor Laws" (October 31, 1846), CW, xxiv, 923–926; four articles under the title "The Quarterly Review on French Agriculture" (January 9–16, 1847), *ibid.*, 1035–1058; "The Irish Debates in the House of Commons" (February 5, 1847), *ibid.*, 1058–1062; two articles on "The Proposed Irish Poor Law" (March 17 and 19, 1847), *ibid.*, 1066–1072; and "Emigration from Ireland" (April 7, 1847), *ibid.*, 1075–1078.

also suffered from potato blight, but the effects were more severe in Ireland due to the country's heavy reliance on the potato as a staple food. The Great Famine revealed that the current system in Ireland was no longer sustainable and opened up a new range of possibilities for reform. In other words, radical reform, which had long been desired by the critics of the existing system, now seemed practicable, given the urgency of the situation. Mill recalled in his *Autobiography*:

[T]he stern necessities of the time seemed to afford a chance of gaining attention for what appeared to me the only mode of combining relief to immediate destitution with permanent improvement of the social and economic condition of the Irish people.⁴⁶

He was convinced that the most important institutional cause that had exacerbated the famine was the so-called “cottier-tenant system” or “cottier system” of land tenure, which had been widely diffused in Ireland. According to Mill, “A cottier system may be defined, that in which the produce of the land is divided between two sharers—a landlord on one side, and labourers on the other; the competition of the labourers being the regulating principle of the division.”⁴⁷ This system did not inevitably lead to the impoverishment of the agricultural class, but it nevertheless produced calamitous results in overpopulated Ireland. Being the subjects of English landlords, cottier tenants were in a very vulnerable position. In mid-nineteenth-century Ireland, overpopulation resulted in the further segmentation of land and soaring rent; farmers, growing potato as their own staple food, were forced to export corn to England even during the Great Famine.

Mill saw the cottier-tenant system as “the grand economical, as well as moral, evil of Ireland.”⁴⁸ Tolerated by a reckless and improvident landlord class,

In this paper, I do not discuss Mill's argument on Ireland, which appeared in his *Principles of Political Economy*, in spite of its importance. The reason is that this paper aims to examine his ethological concern, which his *Morning Chronicle* series depicts more vividly than his *Principles of Political Economy* does.

⁴⁶ JSM, *Autobiography*, CW, i, 243. In the same paragraph, Mill stated that the *Morning Chronicle* “unexpectedly entered warmly into my purpose.” However, the newspaper's acceptance of Mill's offer seems less surprising than he suggested, given that it had occasionally printed his articles on various topics and had been interested in Irish problems. For this point, see Kinzer (2001) 51–52.

⁴⁷ JSM, “Ireland [3]” (October 10, 1846), CW, xxiv, 889. See also his definition in the *Principles*: “By the general appellation of cottier tenure I shall designate all cases without exception in which the labourer makes his contract for land without the intervention of a capitalist farmer, and in which the conditions of the contract, especially the amount of rent, are determined not by custom but by competition. The principal European example of this tenure is Ireland” (JSM, *PPE*, CW, ii, 313).

⁴⁸ JSM, “Ireland [3]” (October 10, 1846), CW, xxiv, 889.

this system induced overpopulation and savage competition for subsistence. Furthermore, it produced a habitual disaffection from the law and destroyed all motivation for industry and enterprise. Mill's proposed solution, as I shall describe below, was to replace this system with peasant proprietorship, an alternative land system that he thought would contribute to the improvement of the moral and economic condition of the Irish.

Significantly, Mill was firmly convinced that his proposal, as he put forward in the *Morning Chronicle* series, was by no means utopian. Policies to improve the Irish condition had been discussed by many of his contemporaries, but some of them were obviously impracticable. One of the most popular views, endorsed by political economists in particular, was that Ireland could prosper through the introduction of large-scale farming carried out by capitalist tenants, and the simultaneous conversion of the cottier population into hired laborers. Mill thought otherwise, as this policy would not succeed unless accompanied by such measures as clearances, organized emigration, and the creation of alternative employment. He believed that in contrast, his plan was both theoretically well-grounded and feasible, although apparently radical, in the context of mid-1840s Ireland.

In the *Morning Chronicle* series, Mill proposed "the formation of peasant properties on the waste lands of Ireland" as a potential remedy for the Irish distress.⁴⁹ In advocating the reclamation of wasteland, he developed an argument against alternative proposed remedies, such as the enactment of the new Poor Law, the capitalization of Irish agriculture through the introduction of English capital, fixity of tenancy, and the emigration of Irish people to the United States, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere.

The Irish Poor Law, enacted in 1838, had introduced a provision for the unhealthy poor in the workhouse and the employment of able-bodied poor in public works. At the time of the Great Famine, a "poor law, with extensive out-door relief to the able-bodied" was being widely suggested.⁵⁰ While *The Times*, among others, argued in favor of the provision,⁵¹ Mill criticized it in his *Morning Chronicle* series. There were several grounds to his opposition to out-door relief. First, he thought that it would disturb the development of private industries, for the poor flocked to outdoor relief, which provided easy money and work. Second, as the poor realized that they could get money whether or not they worked, they would be disinclined to work. Third, outdoor relief would demoralize the peasant. It had harmful moral effects in that it would "break down all the salutary barriers which the law erects to prevent the people from making what ought to be an extreme resource an habitual one."⁵²

⁴⁹ JSM, *Autobiography*, CW, i, 243.

⁵⁰ JSM, "Ireland [1]" (October 5, 1846), CW, xxiv, 881.

⁵¹ For *The Times*'s position, see Gray (1999) 103–105.

⁵² JSM, "Ireland [2]" (October 7, 1846), *ibid.*, 886. See also Zastoupil (1983) 709.

In relation to the Poor Law scheme, Mill held an unfavorable opinion of outdoor relief and public works under the existing system. In November 1845, faced with an unprecedented food shortage among the Irish peasantry, the government of British Prime Minister Robert Peel purchased £100,000 worth of corn from the United States and sold it at a low price. Peel also launched public works and repealed the Corn Laws.⁵³ The measures seemed sufficient—until the potato blight struck Ireland in the summer of 1846. Lord John Russell's government, which had come to power on July 30, 1846, failed to respond adequately. Influenced by a *laissez-faire* belief that the market would provide the food needed, Russell's administration halted government food supply and public works other than relief in the form of wages from public employment.⁵⁴ To Mill, public works were of little use in improving the condition of the Irish peasant. He said, "The best which will have been done with any part of this money [i.e., public money] is to drain and otherwise improve land for the benefit of the landlords; the worst, to squander it in jobs, or in useless or superfluous 'public works.'" Even at best, "it appears more probable that drainage by public money will be confined to lands already under culture, and will not increase the quantity, but only the productiveness, of the available soil; so that the competition for land remaining in unabated intensity, no one will gain but the landlord."⁵⁵

In Mill's view, some intellectuals and politicians in both England and Ireland were correct to recognize that the evils were, to a large extent, caused by the cottier-tenant system, but wrong to claim that the solution was the transformation of Irish agriculture into large-scale farming through the introduction of English capital. He found this proposal so counterproductive and inhumane that it would aggravate the situation. It would require the massive expropriation of land, and subsequently, the peasantry would be cleared off it, with no alternative employment available. It would not, therefore, contribute to the improvement of the condition of the Irish peasantry.⁵⁶ To Mill:

The introduction of English farming is another word for the clearing system. It must begin by ejecting the peasantry of a tract of country from the land they occupy, and handing it over *en bloc* to a capitalist-farmer. The number of those whom he would require to retain as labourers would be far short of the number he displaced.⁵⁷

Mill argued: "Improvement in the English sense, improvement by the more powerful instruments and processes of capitalist-farmers, though it raises a far

⁵³ See Gray (1999) 11–35; Bew (2007) 177, 182.

⁵⁴ See Bew (2007) 186, 188–189.

⁵⁵ JSM, "Ireland [15]" (November 5, 1846), CW, xxiv, 932–933.

⁵⁶ JSM, "Ireland [4]" (October 13, 1846), *ibid.*, 893 ff.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 894.

greater net produce than the Irish system, yet from its very nature employs fewer hands.” This was not appropriate for Ireland, where the pressure of overpopulation was acute.⁵⁸

Mill was sympathetic towards the Irish demand for tenant-right as a means of mitigating the cottier system and thus accepted the merits of fixity of tenure, which had been proposed by the Repeal Association founded in 1840. He believed that such a measure would be “a real and a thorough remedy,” that it would be able to convert “an indolent and reckless into a laborious, provident, and careful people.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, he did not give his full support to it, for he thought that it would involve “a violent disturbance of legal rights, amounting almost to a social revolution.”⁶⁰ To make such a radical change politically feasible, it would need a prior change in the British public mind. In addition, Mill did not believe that it would contribute to easing the pressure of overpopulation. Instead, he hoped for milder and more efficient measures that would make such a revolutionary step unnecessary.

As to emigration, even though he appreciated the merits of colonization in general, Mill opposed the proposal of the mass emigration of Irish people to North America and Australia because it would be too costly, it would be of a compulsory nature, and it ignored the fact that the Irish were not yet fit to be “missionaries of civilization.”⁶¹ Furthermore, he thought that those advocating mass emigration looked away from the real root of the evil—the system of cottier tenancy. As long as this system existed, there was no guarantee that the remaining Irish would not be as miserable as ever. Mill felt that advocates of mass emigration as a remedy for the Irish distress ignored the nature of the problem.⁶² In other words, they failed to understand that “the people are there, and the problem is not how to improve the country, but how it can be improved by and for its present inhabitants.”⁶³

Having rejected the other proposed remedies, Mill presented his own plan to improve the condition of the Irish peasants: the so-called plan of “waste land

⁵⁸ Ibid. It should be noted that Mill did not completely reject the introduction of capital into Irish agriculture. In the *Principles*, he proposed the simultaneous creation of a peasant proprietorship on reclaimed wasteland and the introduction of English capital.

⁵⁹ JSM, “Ireland [5]” (October 14, 1846), *ibid.*, 896–897.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 897.

⁶¹ JSM, “Ireland [11]” (October 26, 1846), *ibid.*, 915.

⁶² Ibid., 913–916.

⁶³ JSM, *PPE*, CW, iii, 991. See also Mill’s statement in the *Principles*, wherein he was severely critical of the British government: “To the owners of the rent it may be very convenient that the bulk of the inhabitants, despairing of justice in the country where they and their ancestors have lived and suffered, should seek on another continent that property in land which is denied to them at home. But the legislature of the empire ought to regard with other eyes the forced expatriation of millions of people. When the inhabitants of a country quit the country *en masse* because its Government will not make it a place fit for them to live in, the Government is judged and condemned.” (*Ibid.*, ii, 326.)

reclamation.” He was convinced that it could achieve relief and reconstruction at the same time. The government would buy up wasteland in Ireland and reclaim it through a public works project. The land would then be distributed to Irish peasants through either outright grants-in-deed or permanent tenures under quit-rent. Mill believed that “Neither the economical nor the moral evils admit of any considerable alleviation while that baneful system [i.e., cottier tenancy] continues.”⁶⁴

As I have shown above, in the early nineteenth century, many British political economists, including such experts as Malthus, McCulloch, and Young, tended to see peasant proprietorship in a negative light. It was thought not to benefit from economies of scale and the division of labor.⁶⁵ In addition, it had been argued that in peasant society, property, including land, was usually divided equally among heirs on the death of the holder. This encouraged early marriage and abundant procreation, which then exacerbated population pressure. The young Mill had accepted these views, but by the mid-1840s, he had revised his understanding of peasant proprietorship and became its ardent advocate, thanks largely to the wide-ranging study of land systems in a variety of nations.⁶⁶ A number of works that argued in favor of peasant proprietorship, with supporting examples, persuaded Mill to believe that it could be economically successful in that it could achieve a significant degree of agricultural efficiency and at the same time guard against overpopulation.⁶⁷ Mill referred to France as an example of small farming that was widely diffused:

Every authentic statistical account of the condition of her industry and of her people has shown, and continues to show, that within that period [i.e., the last few decades] the state of her rural population, who are four-fifths of the whole, has improved in every particular; that they are better housed, better clothed, better and more abundantly fed; that their agriculture has improved in quality; that all the productions of the soil have multiplied beyond precedent; that the wealth of the country has advanced, and advances with increasing rapidity, and the population with increasing slowness.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ JSM, “Ireland [3]” (October 10, 1846), CW, xxiv, 889. See also JSM to Aubrey de Vere, February 3, 1848, CW, xiii, 730.

⁶⁵ Dewey (1974) 17–19; Kinzer (2001) 53. See also JSM, “Ireland” (February 1826), CW, vi, 59–98.

⁶⁶ Bruce Kinzer lists the works to which Mill referred in the *Morning Chronicle* series and the *Principles* as far as land system was concerned. See Kinzer (2001) 56.

⁶⁷ JSM, “Ireland [26]” (December 3, 1846), CW, xxiv, 977. Prior to the *Morning Chronicle* series, Mill published “The Claims of Labour” in the *Edinburgh Review* of April 1845, where he stated that peasant proprietorship would contribute to the curbing of population growth. (JSM, “The Claims of Labour,” CW, iv, 389).

⁶⁸ JSM, “Ireland [19]” (November 16, 1846), CW, xxiv, 950. For Mill, the underdeveloped condition of French agriculture was not due to peasant proprietorship, but to “the exclusive taste of

He contrasted the distressed state of Ireland, in which cottier tenancy was widespread, with various Continental nations where peasant proprietorship had produced good moral effects in improving the condition of people.

Mill attached the highest priority to a scheme of wasteland reclamation: "After the people are saved from present starvation, which must be presupposed in all plans, the formation of a peasant proprietary should, in our opinion, be the first object; all other things are of secondary importance."⁶⁹ To his mind, "[a]ll other schemes for the improvement of Ireland are schemes for getting rid of the people."⁷⁰ Mill stressed that the government should take the land that had remained unused and pay only what it was worth. He was convinced that it would not be unjust to landlords if they were compelled to sell to the government the unused land at its present value, not at a speculative price that is "grounded on the improvements which are only to be effected by means of the purchase."⁷¹ In a *Morning Chronicle* article, he criticized the landed aristocracy for their "defence of an imaginary idol called Rights of Property."⁷² He was at his most radical when rebutting the claims of the landed interest; he had been hostile towards the landed aristocracy since the 1820s. In the mid-1830s, for example, he stated that the landed interest had successfully made others bear their burden by enacting laws to force people to buy their produce at high prices and by exempting their land from taxation.⁷³

Mill argued that launching land improvement schemes based on the expenditure of public money should be on condition that the "tenants of the land so improved" would be given "a *permanent proprietary interest* in the soil."⁷⁴ He recognized the good economic effect of having property in land: "Property in the soil has a sort of magic power of engendering industry, perseverance, forethought in an agricultural people."⁷⁵ Moreover, he said that "the feeling of proprietorship" was a "never-failing source of local attachments."⁷⁶ Mill believed that such a viewpoint on the improvement of economic efficiency was well grounded in human experience but was not sufficient justification for land

the wealthy and middle classes for town life and town pursuits, combined with the general want of enterprise of the French nation with respect to industrial improvements" (JSM, "The Quarterly Review on French Agriculture [3]" [January 13, 1847], *ibid.*, 1050).

⁶⁹ JSM, "Ireland [10]" (October 23, 1846), *ibid.*, 912.

⁷⁰ JSM, "Ireland [5]" (October 14, 1846), *ibid.*, 898.

⁷¹ JSM, "Ireland [9]" (October 22, 1846), *ibid.*, 910. See also JSM, "Ireland [12]" (October 29, 1846), *ibid.*, 919–923.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 920.

⁷³ See Martin (1981) 10. See also JSM, "Notes on the Newspapers [2–3]" (April 1834), CW, vi, 168–218 and JSM, "Ireland [2]" (October 7, 1846), CW, xxiv, 885.

⁷⁴ JSM, "Ireland [16]" (November 6, 1846), *ibid.*, 934–935.

⁷⁵ JSM, "Ireland [5]" (October 14, 1846), *ibid.*, 898.

⁷⁶ JSM, "Ireland [10]" (October 23, 1846), *ibid.*, 913.

reform, and that further ethological justification was needed. He reiterated that for the reform of the economic system to be efficient, it should also contribute to the moral improvement of people; otherwise, it would end in failure. He declared, “Without a change in the people, the most beneficent change in their mere outward circumstances would not last a generation. ... You will never change the people but by changing the external motives which act on them, and shape their way of life from the cradle to the grave.”⁷⁷

As John Robson states, Mill thought that property was “[e]ssential to achieving and maintaining civilization.”⁷⁸ Peasant proprietorship, which secured tenure, would make the Irish “not just better *farmers* but better *people*.”⁷⁹ Mill emphasized “how high a rank among civilizing agents belongs to the wide diffusion of property in land.”⁸⁰ From an ethological viewpoint, he found good moral effects in peasant proprietorship. In other words, he was convinced that the conversion of the Irish land system into peasant proprietorship would improve the Irish national character. This was the most important reason he argued for peasant proprietorship. In advocating the introduction of peasant proprietorship into Ireland, his ultimate aim was the improvement of the moral state of the Irish. Peasant proprietorship was, to his mind, “a measure of social reform and moral regeneration, a means of abolishing the worst of all forms of landed tenure and raising up a class of peasantry to be an example and a guiding influence to the rest.”⁸¹

Mill’s proposals belonged to the environmentalist tradition of interpretation in relation to the formation of the Irish national character. He admitted that the current Irish national character was far from desirable: “The grand fundamental defects in the character and habits of the Irish peasants are want of industry and want of providence.”⁸² However, as he claimed, “The faults of the Irish peasantry are the result of circumstances,”⁸³ not due to heredity, so that the Irish national character could be improved.⁸⁴ Once peasant proprietorship was introduced, the Irish farmers would acquire such virtues as industry, conscience, and independence. Peasant proprietorship would, therefore, “be not

⁷⁷ JSM, “Ireland [20]” (November 19, 1846), *ibid.*, 955.

⁷⁸ Robson (1998) 357.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁸⁰ JSM, “Ireland [32]” (December 15, 1846), *CW*, xxiv, 997. See also JSM, “Ireland [25]” (December 2, 1846), *ibid.*, 974.

⁸¹ JSM, “Ireland [32]” (December 15, 1846), *ibid.*, 996.

⁸² JSM, “Ireland [20]” (November 19, 1846), *ibid.*, 955–956.

⁸³ JSM, “Ireland [34]” (December 17, 1846), *ibid.*, 1004.

⁸⁴ Mill stated: “The curse of this system [i.e., cottier-tenant system] is, that it destroys, more utterly than any other system of nominally free labour, all motive either to industry or to prudence. ... A cottier-tenant system is essentially an anarchical system. Habitual disaffection to the law is almost inherent in it.” (JSM, “Ireland [3]” [October 10, 1846], *ibid.*, 891.)

merely a sovereign remedy for Irish listlessness and indolence, but would do much to correct the still deeper seated and more intractable malady of Irish improvidence.”⁸⁵

It is difficult to assess the actual effect of Mill’s articles on the British politics of the day,⁸⁶ but it is possible to understand the significance of his political ethology from his involvement in Irish affairs in the mid-1840s. His diagnosis of the state of the Irish in the mid-1840s was that even though they did not yet possess the qualities necessary for self-rule, they had been sufficiently cultivated to the point where their consent to be governed by others was not only desirable, but necessary as well. In the ladder of civilization, according to Mill, Ireland was distinct, not only from advanced nations such as Britain and America, but also from lower nations such as India. In the lower stage of civilization, where the people were not capable of understanding their true interest, their consent to be governed was not necessary; therefore, despotism was justified. Unlike India, Ireland was not fit for despotism, which was legitimate only for governing people of low development and slaves.⁸⁷ Hence, what Ireland needed were circumstances in which its people would attain such a suitable character that they would be capable of fulfilling the duties required by self-government, a government which would lead to further improvement of their character.

Mill believed that economic reform would create the conditions by which Irish farmers would lift themselves to a position of moral independence, akin to the process that he envisaged for the working class in England, where commerce and industry had been sufficiently developed. He thought that the remedies he proposed were superior not because they contributed to the improvement of Irish agriculture, but mainly because “they would surround the peasant with a new moral atmosphere; they would bring a set of motives to operate upon him which he has never before experienced, tending in the strongest manner to correct everything in his national character which needs correction.”⁸⁸ As I have shown, Mill held an environmentalist view that the Irish national character was a reflection of the backward social condition of Ireland, which, in turn, was due to English misgovernment. This view implied that the Irish national character could be changed through institutional reform. For Mill, the ultimate purpose of land reform was not “the improvement of Irish agriculture” but “of the condition of the Irish people.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ JSM, “Ireland [26]” (December 3, 1846), *ibid.*, 977.

⁸⁶ For the impact of his articles on public debate, see Kinzer (2001) 71 ff.

⁸⁷ See Zastoupil (1983) 712. See JSM, *CRG*, CW, xix, 395 and 562–577. According to Zastoupil, Mill had advocated despotism in Ireland in the 1830s. (Zastoupil [1983] 714.) For this point, see JSM to John Pringle Nichol, December 21, 1837, CW, xii, 365.

⁸⁸ JSM, “Ireland [20]” (November 19, 1846), CW, xxiv, 955.

⁸⁹ JSM, *PPE*, CW, ii, 326.

4 Concluding Note

As time passed, the Irish distress deepened. By the beginning of December 1846, around 300,000 able-bodied people in Ireland were receiving relief in the form of wages from public employment.⁹⁰ The British government, however, was forced to recognize the failure of the public works policy.⁹¹ The worst consequence of this relief was the demoralization of the Irish, who would work only for government wages, which were higher than any other.

Mill's *Morning Chronicle* series was intended to build up public support for his scheme. Its target was "the spirit of routine," which was "an obstacle to good, almost as strong and far more universal than selfishness."⁹² He criticized the views of what he regarded as obsolete English political economists and the public's acceptance of them. In spite of Mill's great efforts, however, his proposed measures were not implemented by the British government. Nevertheless, he contended that to some degree, his objective had been met by late December. In a letter to Alexander Bain dated December 28, 1846, he said:

I continue to carry on the *Pol. Econ.* [i.e., *Principles of Political Economy*] as well as I can with the articles in the *Chronicle*. These last I may a little slacken now, having in a great measure, as far as may be judged by appearances, carried my point, viz., to have the waste lands reclaimed and parcelled out in small properties among the best of the peasantry.⁹³

The final article of Mill's *Morning Chronicle* series was published on January 7, 1847, by which time he had resumed his work on *Principles of Political Economy*.

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⁹⁰ See Martin (1981) 25.

⁹¹ See Bew (2007) 187, 189.

⁹² JSM, "Ireland [19]" (November 16, 1846), CW, xxiv, 949–950.

⁹³ JSM to Alexander Bain, December 28, 1846, CW, xiii, 705. See also JMS to Alexander Bain, mid-November 1846, *ibid.*, in which he stated that his *Morning Chronicle* articles "have excited a good deal of notice, and have quite snatched the initiative out of the *Times*."

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Abbreviations

- CW: *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 33 vols., ed. F.E.L. Priestley and J.M. Robson (Toronto and London, 1963–1991). [followed by volume and pages.]
- "Ireland [1–43]": John Stuart Mill, "The Condition of Ireland [1–43]" (1846–1847), reproduced in CW, xxiv, 879–1035.
- JSM: John Stuart Mill.
- PPE: John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy: With Some of their Applications to Social Philosophy* (1848), reproduced in CW, ii and iii.