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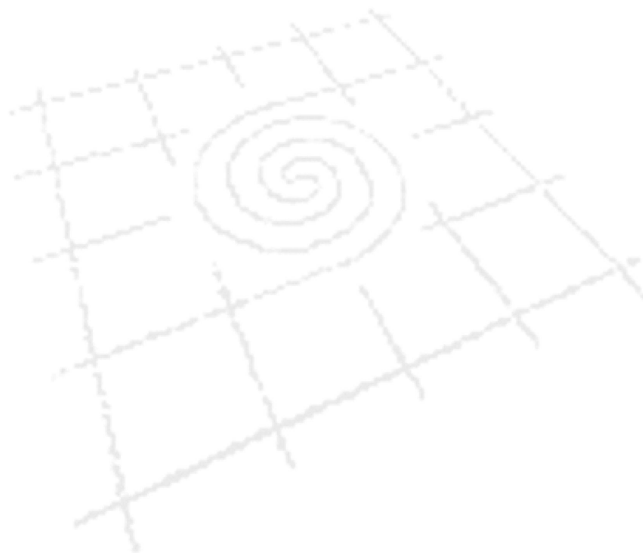


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## Marx on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Ireland: Analyzing Colonialism beyond Dependency Theory

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we explore the possibility that Marx had a far more complex understanding of the colonialization of Ireland than can be accounted for by Dependency theory. This insight is provided by an examination of Marx's 1867 Report of the Irish situation during the height of Fenian activity in Britain. We propose that Marx's crucial conceptualization in this theoretical work is to see colonialism as a regime, which originates at the political level within its various institutions and that the character of this regime changes over time. Accordingly, Marx systematically explores the evolution of the colonizing regime from the Plantations to the middle of the nineteenth century.

However, Marx also explicates how the process of colonialism moves out of the political level and subsequently penetrates into the other levels of social and economic activity that make up Irish civil society. These levels include the legal, the economic, the social and the ecological. Consequently, we attempt to articulate this penetration of the other institutions of the Irish social formation by the colonizing regime as a social process which subverts those institutional structures to the colonizing agenda. And in the concrete situation of Ireland, from the Plantations up to the 1860s this agenda meant buttressing a Feudal landlord caste, whose material conditions involved reproducing a Feudal mode of production. From this perspective, the Capitalist mode of production is neither the cause nor the consequence of the colonialization of Ireland by the British.

# **Marx on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Ireland: Analyzing Colonialism beyond Dependency theory.**

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## **Section 1: Introduction**

The discussion of the relation between Ireland and colonialism has often revolved around the similarities and differences that exist between the Irish situation and other, more iconic, examples of colonised societies. This tendency has been partially encouraged by the prominence of the dependency approach within Marxian scholarship which locates the underdevelopment of colonial societies as due primarily to their integration into the capitalist world economic system. In this analysis all colonised societies share this integration into world capitalism and consequently share a common source of exploitation and disadvantage. This perspective has often located its source in Marx's writings on India and, crucially for our current concern, Ireland. In this article we wish to explore a different perspective on colonialism which we believe can be found in Marx's consideration of the Irish situation.

Our discussion will centre around the *Outline of a Report on the Irish Question to the Communist Educational Association of German Workers in London*.<sup>1</sup> While these are essentially notes, they constituted the basis of a report which took an hour and a half to deliver,<sup>2</sup> enough time to develop a sophisticated argument by today's academic standards.

We will argue that the Report contains a number of provocative and underdiscussed perspectives on the process of colonialism. The first is the evolution of the Irish colonial project through a succession of regimes which differ one from the other. Consequently, it would not be surprising to find colonial regimes differing substantially from one place to another. Secondly, Marx discusses in some detail the effect of colonialism on the character of Irish agriculture in the nineteenth century. Marx does not neglect the impact of deindustrialisation under imperial integration and the Report contains several widely cited observations in this regard. However, Marx goes beyond the identification of the absence of industrial development to discuss the specific local dynamics of what is there, the Irish agricultural economy. Finally, Marx introduces the idea that colonialism has an ecological dimension through the effective export of the Irish soil. Thus colonialism can violate the physical reproducibility of the colonized society as well as its economic, political, and social integrity.

## **Section 2: What Baffles the English:<sup>3</sup>**

In a letter to Engels, dated November 30, 1867, Marx observed a curious English misunderstanding of the colonial situation of Ireland:

‘What the English do not know is that since 1846 the economic content and therefore also the political aim of English domination in Ireland have entered into an entirely new phase’. .... What can be more ridiculous than to confuse the barbarities of Elizabeth and Cromwell, who wanted to supplant the Irish with English colonists (in the Roman sense), with the present system, which wants to supplant them by sheep, pigs and oxen! ....*Clearing the estate of Ireland!* is now the one purpose of English rule in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

It is remarkable that Marx suggests that the English did not know the precise nature of their colonising campaign in Ireland in the post-famine period. It cannot be because the English (we presume the Government) simply did not reside in Ireland. Rather it must have to do with the complex structure of the colonising process itself which hides its presence from empirical observation even by its protagonist. In developing this observation we may find ourselves in a position to be better able to elaborate Marx's understanding of colonialism.

At this stage we can observe from the above quotation that Marx conceptualised the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland as operating not in a static fashion but as passing through 'phases' of development. In addition, the latest one, identified as '*Clearing the estate of Ireland*' dates from 1846. This particular phase is contrasted with an earlier phase of the colonial relationship in the historical periods of Elizabeth and Cromwell. Already we can observe that Marx is conceptualising the colonial relationship of England and Ireland as one which has definite historical roots but which is ongoing at the time of Marx's writing. Despite its ongoing character, however, this colonial process is capable of taking different forms or "phases" in different periods. Indeed these phases may be so distinctive that nothing could be "more ridiculous" than to confuse them.

Along the way Marx identifies another phase before the 1846 one of '*Clearing the estate of Ireland*' as occurring between 1801 and 1846, this one dominated by the presence of rack-renting and middlemen:

'The system of 1801-1846, with its rack-rents and middlemen, collapsed in 1846. The repeal of the Corn Laws, partly the result of or at any rate hastened by the Irish famine, deprived Ireland of its *monopoly* of English corn supply in normal times. Wool and meat became the slogan, hence the conversion of tillage to pasture. Hence from then onwards systematic

consolidation of farms. The Encumbered Estates Act, which turned a mass of previously enriched middlemen into landlords, hastened the process'.<sup>5</sup>

In this passage Marx moves on to analyse the phase '*Clearing the estate of Ireland*' more concretely as a *systematic* process made up of a number of discrete historical events, parliamentary enactments and long run market trends and agricultural practices. While Marx identifies colonial domination as a primarily political process, in this passage, Marx emphasises the economic elements of the process. Crucially, while this process manifests itself in the aforementioned concrete entities and events, abstractly considered it is essentially a colonising process and one which is not immediately recognisable in its concrete phenomenal forms, especially, according to Marx by the English government. By contrast, it is certainly there for those that have to live in it - the Irish:

*'Clearing of the Estate of Ireland* is now the one purpose of English rule in Ireland. The *stupid* English government in London knows nothing of course itself of this immense change since 1846. But the Irish know it '<sup>6</sup>

### **Section 3: Ireland and 'Underdevelopment' in Marxism:**

It can be noted in the discussion above that Marx has no hesitation in considering the history of Ireland in colonial context. Subsequently, Marxism has been to the forefront in locating Ireland within colonial development literature. This tradition has its origin in the important place that Ireland holds, along with India, in Marx's thinking on colonialism. This subsequent Marxist tradition has generally concentrated on how colonialism can hinder the economic development of the colonised economy. In the Irish case, most have concentrated

on how Ireland was deindustrialised by Britain to create the essential condition for the 'development of underdevelopment'. This relationship of dependent development has become the most influential representation of the colonial relationship between Great Britain and Ireland. Kenzo Mohri has suggested that this colonial relationship is an early example of the 'dependent development'.<sup>7</sup>

Ivan Vujacic, interpreting Marx's view of colonialism, saw Ireland as the classical case of colonial domination having a detrimental effect on its economic development contrasted with the positive effect it had on India:

'In this sense, colonialism plays a progressive role up to the point when it destroys the pre-capitalist mode of production and creates the conditions for overcoming underdevelopment (India), after which it becomes an obstacle to development of these countries (Ireland).'<sup>8</sup>

Anthony Brewer is even more explicit in his interpretation of Marx's analysis of the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland as centering on and primarily involving capitalist penetration:

'Marx argued that Ireland's poverty and misery compared with England's status as the leading capitalist centre, were not caused by any internal difference in the prior mode of production, but by external (English) oppression and exploitation. The expulsion of the peasantry and the creation of capitalist farms...., followed essentially the same course as in England, though it was carried out with even greater brutality.'<sup>9</sup>

In Brewer's account Marx emphasises the capitalist nature of colonialism in creating conditions of underdevelopment and making the Irish economy dependent on the British

economy. This interpretation of Marx on Ireland was one of the crucial sources which influenced the Dependency framework founded by Gunder Frank in the 1970s. This basic interpretation in relation to Ireland is fleshed out in the work of a number of writers in the Marxian tradition. Accounts of Irish history in these terms can be found in Munck<sup>10</sup> and Jacobsen.<sup>11</sup> The most sophisticated and the definitive account of the history of the development of underdevelopment in Ireland's history can be found in Denis O'Hearn's *The Atlantic Economy: Britain, the US and Ireland*.<sup>12</sup>

What is common to the array of differing interpretations of Marx's understanding of Ireland's colonial relationship with Britain is their tendency to emphasise one element of that relationship as the 'prime mover' of colonialism. The problem with this theoretical tendency is that other 'variables' -occurring in concrete situations and over differing historical periods - tend to be either ignored as unconnected or to appear as mere consequences of the determining 'prime mover'. The consequence of this search for a single determining dynamic anchoring Marx's conceptualisation of the Irish situation is that this abstraction of determination within the colonial relationship must necessarily be taken out of context, Context here is used in a double sense of its meaning - both as the changing historical reality of Ireland over the long period of colonialism and as the textual context of Marx's own more theoretical approaches to the Irish Question.

#### **Section 4: The Context of Marx's 1867 Report:**

It has been contended that Marx never engaged in a systematic investigation of the Irish Question.<sup>13</sup> These assertions find evidence in the discrete nature of Marx's published observations on the Irish situation in newspapers, journals, Capital volumes 1 and 3, and in his letters to Engels and others over the years.<sup>14</sup> The scattered nature of these writings has



created the impression that Marx's pronouncements on the Irish Question do not form a substantive theoretical position. However, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1867, Marx gave an hour and half talk to German immigrants in London on the Irish crisis. The report was occasioned by the emergence of Fenian activity on mainland Britain in the 1860s. To give this particular report, Marx had to write a long manuscript which ran to fourteen printed pages.<sup>15</sup> It is exclusively about Ireland and not primarily concerned to illustrate concrete instances of difference from the more capitalistic development of Britain (as for instance Marx uses them in the volumes of *Capital*). Although it was mostly written in note form, Marx, as we hope to demonstrate, was able to construct a theoretical framework which allowed him to provide a systematic analysis of the Irish Question.

Two other short pieces are relevant. Firstly, there is 'Notes from an Undelivered speech on Ireland,'<sup>16</sup> which was to be given on 26 November 1867. but Marx decided against doing so. These Notes clearly form the basis for the later Report. Secondly, there exists an anonymous record of the December Report which summarises Marx's main points.<sup>17</sup> Both of these 'supplementary' pieces help us to get a better insight not only into what Marx gave particular emphasis to in his talk but also a deeper understanding of his theoretical framework. Our paper is an attempt to explicate this framework from the Report itself and its two published 'spin-offs'. We want to suggest that this particular intellectual endeavour on the part of Marx holds the key not only to his understanding of colonialism in the Irish context but also to providing a more complex theoretical framework for understanding colonialism in general.

## **Section 5: Marx's 'Outline of Report on the Irish Question', 1867:**

The report was read before the Communist Educational Association of German workers in London on the 16 December 1867. In organising the presentation of the data for the talk, Marx divided the paper into sections with the following sub-headings:

- a) *The English in Ireland before the Protestant Reformation.***
- b) *Protestant Epoch. Elizabeth. James 1. Charles 1. Cromwell. Colonisation Plan (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries).***
- c) *Restoration of the Stuarts. William 111. Second Irish Revolt, and the Capitulation on Terms.***
- d) *Ireland Defrauded and Humbled to the Dust. 1692- July 4, 1776.***
- e) *1776-1801. Time of Transition.***
- f) *1801-1846. 'The Rack-renting- System'.***
- g) *The Period of the last 20 years (from 1846). Clearing the Estate of Ireland.***

These sub-headings give us an important insight into how Marx developed his thinking. From these headings, Marx obviously uses a chronological approach in identifying watersheds in the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain. However, what is crucial is what Marx is attempting to account for as the relationship moves through these historical watersheds - the colonial regime:

'Here what baffles the English: they find the present *regime* mild compared with England's former oppression of Ireland. So why this most determined and irreconcilable form of opposition now? What I want to show [...] is that the *regime* since 1846, though less barbarian in form, is in effect [as] destructive [...]' (our emphasis)<sup>18</sup>

From this observation near the beginning of the Report, we can see that Marx deepens the concept of colonialism with the idea of the regime. Marx uses this concept of regime as the initial theoretical tool to examine not only the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland but crucially how that relationship changed over time as it passed through its various historical watersheds.

Although the colonial regime is located at the political level, Marx also attempts to understand how this particular political regime impacted on Irish civil society:

‘Hence, I shall give only a few (facts), firstly, to clarify the difference between the present and the past (regimes, ES, TMcD) and, secondly, to bring out a few points about the character of those who are now called the Irish people’.<sup>19</sup>

Marx’s discussion of ‘the character of ...the Irish people’ is very much determined by the particular stage (or phase) in the development of the colonising process. For example, in the initial stage, the original English colonists married into the native Irish population at all levels of society, but especially at the top where the Anglo-Normans married into the Irish noble families to such an extent that in the next wave/phase of colonising with its particular protestant badge of conquest, the ‘Catholic Anglo-Irish fought the English alongside the natives.’<sup>20</sup> In the eighteenth century, the Penal Laws attempted the ‘Anglicanisation’ of proprietary title, though the actual consequence was the opposite of the intended aim - the ‘Catholicisation’ of the Irish people:

‘Experiment to coerce the mass of the Irish nation into the Anglican religion. Catholics deprived of vote for membership of Parliament. This Penal Code intensified the hold of the Catholic Priesthood upon the Irish people.’<sup>21</sup>

Marx pauses to summarise the ‘result of English terrorism’:

‘English incomers absorbed into the Irish people and Catholicised.

The towns founded by the English Irish.

No English colony (except Ulster Scotch) but English landowners.’<sup>22</sup>

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

## **Section 6: Deindustrialisation and Conflict within the Colonising Regime:**

In of our brief review of the historiography of Marx’s ideas on the Irish colonial question, we discovered a trend of reducing the dynamics of the colonial relationship to the working out of an ‘essential’ prime mover. This tendency to abstract a reified essential structure from a complex moving process very much determines the character of the lessons which have been gleaned from Marx’s Report of 1867. This tendency to abstract a single

fundamental dynamic has found inspiration in two dramatic statements concerning deindustrialisation. These are:

‘She (England) struck down the manufactures of Ireland, depopulated her cities and threw the people back upon the land’.<sup>23</sup>

And:

‘Every time Ireland was about to develop industrially, she was crushed and converted into a purely agricultural land.’<sup>24</sup>

On the superficial level and without context these passages are open to the misinterpretation that the relationship is a geographic one between countries or competing regions with England holding the upper hand. However, this spatialised determination can be challenged by putting these quotations back into the original context of the Report. In recontextualising these quotations, we can discover what Marx meant by ‘She (England)’. The first quotation comes from section d of the Report, which Marx entitled: ‘Ireland Defrauded and Humbled to the Dust: 1692 – July 4, 1776’. In this section Marx discussed the effect of British mercantile policies on Ireland:

‘In 1698, *the Anglo-Irish Parliament* (like obedient colonists) passed, on the command of the mother country, *a prohibitory tax on Irish woollen goods export* to foreign countries. In the same year, the English Parliament laid a *heavy tax* on the import of home manufactures in England and Wales and *absolutely prohibited their export to other countries*. She (England

ES, TMcD) struck down the manufactures of Ireland, depopulated her cities and threw the people back upon the land.’<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, the spatialised entity of ‘England’ becomes politically concretised in the institution of the English Parliament and can therefore be theoretically identified as a political part of the colonising regime. However, it should be pointed out that in the same quotation the English Parliament was not the only institution operating in the colonising regime in this particular historical period. Marx also located the presence of the Anglo-Irish Parliament in Dublin as another institution of the colonising regime. In this phase of development, these two distinct institutions formed part of the colonising regime and according to Marx were able to work in unison with each other in dominating the economy of Ireland. However, this consensus of approach became undone when conflict broke out between them, as the following from the same section d testifies:

*‘1698; Molyneaux pamphlet for the independence for the Irish Parliament (i.e. the English Colony in Ireland) against the English. Thus began the struggle of the Anglo-Irish colony and the English nation.’*<sup>26</sup>

Thus factions of the colonising regime can potentially struggle with one another. This insight has an important implication for our understanding of power relationships within the regime and between the regime and civil society. The power of the colonising regime is not absolute. This power is not only shared between the institutions of the regime but also power relationships can be challenged from within - within the regime itself by competing institutional factions. Consequently, the strategies imposed on the Irish civil society were a not necessary result of a consensus approach between the institutions of the regime. In reality,

the relationship between the colonising institutions of the political regime were often conflictual, full of tension and contradictory strategic orientations. Colonialism within this Marxist framework cannot be a unidirectional power relationship played out between a centre (political) dominating a periphery (economic or civil society or both). In actual fact, complex internal power struggles can emerge within the colonising regime itself as well as between the colonising state institutions that make up that regime and the civil society they are attempting to dominate.

The second quotation on deindustrialisation comes from section e of the Report, '1776-1801. Time of Transition'. In this historical period, in quite stark contrast to the mercantilist interventionism of the previous period, the demise of Irish industry is due to the introduction of free trade between the two economies. This situation came about with the Act of Union in 1801, which Marx saw as the culmination of the factional struggle between the two parliaments:

*'Anglo-Irish House of Commons voted for the Act of Union passed in 1800. By the Legislature and Customs Union of Britain and Ireland closed the struggle between the Anglo-Irish and the English. The colony itself protested against the illegal Act of Union.'*<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, the specific determining factor, as suggested by Marx, in the deindustrialisation of Ireland in the nineteenth century was not due to economic conditions (either internal or external) but due to a watershed reached within a long running struggle between separate parliamentary institutions within the regime where one institution was able to use its power to close down the other. Therefore, although the consequences of this political struggle were economic, the actual immediate determining factor must be located at the political level. As a consequence, the analytical focus on a 'prime mover' of the industrial self-interest of the

metropolitan economy is not appropriate in understanding the complex changing relationships between the colonising institutions within the political level and their relationships with the Irish economy and civil society in general. The ‘prime mover’ approach must therefore be rejected as a form of inappropriate reductionism.

We must now take a closer look at the obverse side of deindustrialisation, ‘throwing the people back on the land’ and the converting of Ireland ‘into a purely agricultural land’.

### **Section 7: ‘All that the English government succeeded in doing was to plant an aristocracy in Ireland’.**

The analysis of the origins of deindustrialisation in a succession of colonial political regimes is about identifying the source of a crucial absence in the Irish social formation. What was concretely waiting for the native Irish population on the land was a rackrenting landlord caste. Marx articulated this in the following way:

‘Ireland is therefore purely agricultural: ‘Land is Life’ (Justice Blackburne). Land became the great object of pursuit. The people had now before them the choice between the occupation of land, at *any rent*, or *starvation*. System of *rack-renting*.’<sup>28</sup>

In locating the importance of rack-renting in the relationship between the landlord class and their tenants, Marx moved his analysis onto examining the role that landlordism played in the colonising process. The imposition of landlordism on the native Irish and their land through the Plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant that a landlord – tenant relationship mediated the relationship between the colonising elites and the native Irish. And in monopolising the access to the land, the colonising gentry were able to exploit the



native Irish by rack-renting them. Marx continually asserted throughout this material that the only successful aspect of the English colonisation of Ireland was the following: ‘All that the English government succeeded in doing was to plant an aristocracy in Ireland.’<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, landlordism becomes not only the pivotal relationship in the process of British colonisation of Ireland and the one which ‘bathes the rest’<sup>30</sup> of the colonising institutions but it also was a vital institution within the political regime which was unique to Ireland. The uniqueness of their position within the colonising regime was ironically determined by the failure of other strategies to effectively colonise the Irish in the period of the Plantations. The initial strategy that failed was developed during the reign of Elizabeth I:

‘The plan was to exterminate the Irish at least up to the river Shannon, to take their land and settle English colonists in their place.’<sup>31</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, this particular strategy of bringing British farmers into Ireland was dropped:

‘All notions of “*planting*” the country with English and Scotch yeomen or tenant farmers were discarded.’<sup>32</sup>

Consequently with the failure of this particular strategy, coupled with others such as the attempted ‘Anglicanisation’ of the native Irish Catholic population through the Penal Code, the new tenurial structure of rack-renting came about because it was the only strategy which ‘worked’. This imposition of a landowning aristocracy into Ireland allowed them, with the full backing of the military and police apparatus of the new State, to use their monopoly

ownership of the land to exploit the native population in a rack-renting system. Again Marx repeated the only ‘success’ of the colonisation of Ireland in the following way: ‘They succeeded only to plant a landowning aristocracy.’<sup>33</sup>

But the price to be paid by the colonising institutions of the British State for the continuing co-operation of this planted landowning class was that they become a powerful and relatively autonomous part of the colonising regime:

‘With the help of the Protestant Penal Laws, the new aristocrats received freedom of action under Queen Anne. The Irish Parliament was a means of oppression. Those who were Catholic were not allowed to hold an official post, could not be landowners, were not allowed to make wills, could not claim an inheritance,....All these (measures, ES, TMcD) were means for robbing the Irish of their land; ....’<sup>34</sup>

This ‘freedom of action’ meant that the newly established landed gentry took over the other institutions of the State which were operating in Ireland with their own particular colonising agenda.<sup>35</sup> The consequence of this ‘takeover’ manifested itself in the landlords essentially protecting their own economic interests vis-à-vis their Irish tenantry by dominating and controlling the political and legal institutions of the State.

During this period, statute after statute was passed by the Irish Protestant parliament for the benefit of the landlords in dealing with their Irish tenants. For example, ‘the ejectment code’ was enacted to expedite and facilitate the eviction of the tenant, to get rid of every formality and difficulty that protected the British tenant under English common law. Isaac Butt summarises the difference between the ejectment codes in Britain and Ireland:

‘In England it is the duty of judges to administer law so as in every doubtful case to protect the tenant. In Ireland it has been judicially declared to be their duty in every doubtful case to facilitate his eviction.’<sup>36</sup>

This legal form of colonial domination in the ejectment code is reflected throughout all aspects of the landlord/tenant relationship, distress, distrain, agricultural improvements, agricultural fixtures, restraints on leasing, etc. These were legally constituted to buttress the position of the landlords vis-à-vis their tenants.

The degree of subordination of the tenant in this relationship extinguished the possibility of contractual (formal) equality that exists between the capitalist landlord and tenant. Instead an essentially feudal mode of production was established in the Irish countryside through expulsion from and reentry to the land of the native Irish tenantry. Ironically, this took place as feudal relations were fading from the English landscape. The feudal social form of production is a consequence of the complex process of colonialism creating personal discretionary powers for the Irish landlord class in their dealings with the native tenantry. In extracting the surplus product from the Irish direct producers through complex tenurial arrangements, the landlords not only feudalised the Irish legal system but they also used these legal rights as a way of applying extra-economic coercion.<sup>37</sup>

These structural conditions determined by the use of extra-economic coercion caught Irish agriculture in a ‘vice-like grip’ of feudal relations rather than the more dynamic possibilities potentially created by capitalist investment.. As a consequence, the colonisation of Ireland was not determined by the capitalist mode of production, nor did it result in the emergence of the capitalist mode of production in Irish agriculture. What did emerge under the yoke of colonisation was the feudalisation of Irish agriculture - the only

remaining sphere of production within which the vast majority of the Irish population could obtain access to physical subsistence.

This theoretical insight in the Report permeated Marx's discussions on the Irish Question in Capital. For example, in Volume Three, Marx writes with regard to the non-capitalistic nature of Irish agriculture:

'We are not referring here to the conditions in which ground rent, the mode of landed property corresponding to the capitalist mode of production has a formal existence even though the capitalist mode of production itself does not exist, the tenant himself is not an industrial capitalist, and his manner of farming is not a capitalist one. This is how it is in Ireland, for example.'<sup>38</sup>

The normal distribution of income under the capitalist mode of production did not exist in the Irish social formation:

'Here the tenant is generally a small peasant. What he pays the landowner for his lease often absorbs not only a portion of his profit, i.e. his own surplus labour, which he has a right to as owner of his own instruments of labour, but also a portion of the normal wage, which he would receive for the same amount of labour under other conditions.'<sup>39</sup>

The 'normal wage' and 'other conditions' which Marx is referring to in the above passage are those to be found within the capitalist mode of production. The extra-economic coercion at the foundation of the feudal mode of production subverts the possibility of the 'normal' conditions of the capitalist mode of production emerging in the Irish social formation. In the Report, Marx further expands on this tendency to hinder the development of

the capitalist mode of production through the inability of the agricultural economy to re-invest capital back into the production process and the subsequent exportation of this capital to Britain:

‘Middlemen accumulated fortunes that they *would* not invest in the improvement of the land, and *could* not, under the system which prostrated manufactures, invest in machinery, etc. All their accumulations were sent therefore to England for investment.... thus was Ireland forced to contribute cheap labour (through emigration, ES, TMcD) and cheap capital to building up “the great works of Britain.”’<sup>40</sup>

According to Marx, the amount of rent sent to absentee landlords, the amount of interest on mortgages, and the investment of Irish capital in England was many millions of pounds sterling.<sup>41</sup> The crucial aspect of Marx’s point in the above is not the amount actually sent to Britain to build up ‘the great works of Britain’, (an important focus of dependency theory), but rather the reasons why that capital had to be exported. Capital, which was extracted from Irish agriculture through rental returns, was not re-invested in the Irish economy partially because of the legal right of the landlord to appropriate improvements made by the direct producers - the tenants. According to William Neilson Hancock, these legal impediments to re-investment of capital into the Irish economy were a direct consequence of feudal characteristics of the Irish legal system.<sup>42</sup>

Although, this feudalisation began in the reign of Queen Anne, its legal presence was still in existence even after the Act of the Union. This legal presence was one of the concrete links between the political regime of colonisation and its peculiar manifestation in the creation of a feudal landholding class on the ground:

‘State only a tool of the landlords. ... After the Union the system of rack-renting and middlemen, but left the Irish, however ground to the dust, holder of their native soil. Present system, quiet business-like extinction, and government only instrument of the landlords (and usurers).’<sup>43</sup>

Referring to the post-Famine situation and concluding his analysis at the end of his Report, Marx was recorded to make the following summation: ‘The domination over Ireland at present amounts to collecting rent for the English aristocracy.’<sup>44</sup>

With the continuing decline in industrial manufacturing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when free trade came into effect as a consequence of the Act of the Union (1801), the rent relationship became the dominant economic relationship in the Irish economy. This manifested itself in its most explicit forms in the rack-renting and middlemen systems which came to their zenith in the pre-Famine period.

### **Section 8: Marx’s Analysis of Pre-famine Ireland in ‘1801-1846: Rack-renting and Middlemen’:**

‘The occupation of land, *at any rent, or starvation*’ was the dramatic dilemma facing the native Irish population in the early part of the nineteenth century because of the deindustrialisation of the Irish economy and the subsequent rise of the rack-renting system on the land. This life and death dilemma was created by the monopolistic position of the landowners, who since the Plantations, owned the entire surface area of Irish land and used this situation to dictate their own legal and financial terms to their tenantry. The concrete manifestation of these institutional arrangements was to allow the landlords to charge

enormous rents to their tenants, - to rack-rent them. But it also allowed them to create a middleman system between themselves and the actual occupiers of the land:

‘It became a vital necessity to have land; big landowners leased their lands to speculators; land passed through four or five lease stages before it reached the peasant, and made the prices disproportionately high.’<sup>45</sup> (p.141).

The Irish legal system, under the control of the landlords, established their right to sublet their estates to other landlords and create them as subtenants. In this type of subletting (between landlords), the rent charged to the actual occupier (the direct producer of the rent) must cover all the rents of the various intermediate landlords (middlemen) as well as the head landlord. Consequently, within the middleman system, there was a tendency for each subletting to double the amount of rent charged to the next subtenant as the intermediate landlords attempted to replicate the same life-style of the head landlord.<sup>46</sup> This non-market determination of the financial cost of subletting within the middleman system coupled with the tenant’s legal insecurity in the rackrenting system reflected the particular social form of production in Irish agriculture, which can only be identified as feudal in character. Given the centrality of the implantation of the landlord class to the political domination of Ireland in this period, the process of colonisation takes on an economic form, in which extra-economic coercion dominates the economic relationships of Irish society.<sup>47</sup>

In drawing a distinction between the pre-famine and post-famine regime Marx opens the possibility of finding a dynamic of change and transformation within the feudal mode of production itself. This dynamic can be found in the contrast between the strategies for the extraction of feudal rent in the two periods. The period before the famine was dominated by the extraction of absolute rent. The period after the famine was characterised by a relative

rental strategy. While Marx does not explicitly analyse the differences in this way, the distinction can be found elsewhere in his work. An absolute strategy of increasing rent involves increasing the amount of surplus labour extracted within existing production techniques and levels of productivity. A relative rental strategy pursues the expansion of rental income through the increase in productivity on the land.

The rackrenting and middleman system is an example of the absolute strategy. Rackrenting simply increases rental income by raising the rent forcing the tenant to devote more labour to the production of rent and less labour to the production of his own standard of living. The middleman system accomplishes the same thing more indirectly. The proliferation of subletting under the middleman system forces the final tenant onto smaller and smaller plots of land without corresponding reductions in rent. Indeed the multiplication of intermediate landlords and the need to support them tended to increase the rent. In this way absolutely more labour was devoted to supporting the landlord system.<sup>48</sup>

Marx describes the end of this system in Volume 1 of *Capital*:

‘The depopulation of Ireland has thrown much of the land out of cultivation, greatly diminished the produce of the soil, and in spite of the greater area devoted to cattle breeding, brought about decline in some of its branches, and in others an advance scarcely worth mentioning, and constantly interrupted by retrogressions. Nevertheless, the rents of the land and the profits of the farmers increased along with the fall in population, though not so steadily as the latter. The reason for this will easily be understood. On the one hand, with the throwing together of the smallholdings, and the change from arable to pasture, a part of the total product was transformed into a surplus product. The surplus product increased although there was a decrease in the total product of which the surplus product formed only a fraction.



On the other hand, the monetary value of this surplus product increased still more rapidly than its actual quantity, owing to the rise in the price of meat, wool, etc., on the English market.<sup>49</sup>

### **Section 9: The Famine and ‘*Clearing the Estate of Ireland 1846-1867*’:**

Marx begins this section by suggesting that the ‘new period’ was ushered in by the potato blight (1846-47), resulting in starvation and the consequent exodus. ‘Over one million people die, partly from hunger, partly from disease, (caused by hunger). In the nine years, 1847-55, 1,656,044 left the country.’<sup>50</sup> The consequence was a revolution in agriculture:

‘The revolution of the old agricultural system was but a natural result of the barren fields. People fled. [...] Hence, of course, the pooling of small leaseholds and substitution of pasturage for crop farming.’<sup>51</sup>

The revolution Marx is discussing is the transition from an absolute rental strategy to a relative one.<sup>52</sup> The pooling of small leaseholds is about raising agricultural productivity through the creation of an optimal farm size allowing for the application of new techniques, mostly associated with plough husbandry. This increase in productivity in turn would allow for an increase in rental income. It is interesting to observe how Marx in the Notes has conceptualised the initial phase of the agricultural revolution following on from the famine. The ‘revolution’ in the agricultural sphere of production seems to have occurred on two levels. Firstly, a process of consolidation began, especially on those farms of under one to under 15 acres.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, there was simultaneously a switch from crop production to livestock production, especially to the pasturing of cattle. But what is crucial to our analysis is

what Marx observed next: ‘However, soon circumstances arose whereby this became a *conscious and deliberate system* (our emphasis)’.<sup>54</sup>

This ‘system’, associated with the new rental strategy, is according to Marx made up of a number of elements, some of which originate in the decision-making of the political state. Accordingly, the revolution in Irish agriculture was now being determined by a new phase in the process of colonialism of Ireland. Mostly, these factors involved Parliamentary enactments which either created institutions which encouraged the landlords to consolidate their estates, e.g. Poor Law and Encumbered Estates Court, or abolished the monopoly position held by Ireland in supplying corn to Britain through the repeal of the Corn Laws. These concrete factors of the colonising process also included individual actions by the landlord class in reforming their landed estates, through various concrete processes such as eviction, paid emigration, ‘improving’ agricultural techniques and preventing land subdivision among their tenantry. These political and landed estate strategies of the colonising regime merged into one overriding aim: ‘*Clearing the Estate of Ireland!* is now the sole purpose of English rule in Ireland’.<sup>55</sup>

## **Section 10: The Ecological Consequence of *Clearing the Estate*; the Colonialisation of Irish Soil:**

According to Marx, between 1861 and 1866, there was dramatic decrease in cultivated land, - cereal crops declined by 470,917 acres while green crops by 128,061 acres. However, even more interesting to Marx with regard to agricultural statistics was the decrease of yield per acre of every crop between 1847 and 1865. Oats decreased by 16.8%, flax by 47.9%, turnips by 36.1% and incredibly the potato crop by 50 %. In 1851, the estimated average

potato yield per statute acre was 5.1 tons, which dropped to 2.9 tons in 1866.<sup>56</sup> Marx proposed that these statistics indicated that Irish soil was gradually losing its fertility:

‘Since the exodus, the land has been underfed and overworked....So result,...gradual deterioration and exhaustion of the source of national life, the soil.’<sup>57</sup>

This tendency highlighted by Marx in the above is an example of what Marx identified as a metabolic rift. John Bellamy Foster has recently rediscovered the ‘green’ Marx, which he has argued is centred around Marx’s concept of the metabolic rift, which he borrowed from the German agricultural chemist, Justus Von Liebig.<sup>58</sup> Following on from the work of Liebig, Marx suggested that a metabolic rift occurs when nutrients from the soil are naturally transferred to agricultural products in the process of growth, and as nutrients embodied in the commodity form, they are then transported from their local eco-systems through trade to urban centres of consumption. When these embodied nutrients get consumed in the urban centres they are subsequently excreted into the local urban waterways in many cases polluting these waterways. As a consequence of this spatial movement of the nutrients to these urban centres they are lost to the local agricultural eco-systems because they are never ‘traded’ back to their original source. This causes a metabolic rift to occur in the rural ecosystem as the nutrients continue to leach out of their native environment into the physical structures of agricultural products and if they are not replaced there will be deterioration (gradual) in the fertility of the soil.

This metabolic rift is what Marx in *Capital*, vol.1 suggested was occurring to Irish soil and was further caused by the process of colonialism:

‘[I]t must not be forgotten that for a century and a half, England has indirectly exported the soil of Ireland, without even allowing its cultivators the means of replacing the constituents of the exhausted soil.’<sup>59</sup>

But as we have discovered in our analysis, it is necessary to critically evaluate what is the social form Marx is referring to in the spatial entity, - ‘England’. In the Report, Marx locates the determination of the metabolic rift at the economic level in its concrete forms of consolidation of landholding and the continuing presence of conacre:

‘Since the exodus, the land has been underfed and overworked, partly from the injudicious consolidation of farms, partly because under the corn-acre system, the farmer in a great measure trusted to his labourers to manure the land for him.’<sup>60</sup> (p.136)’.

The consolidation of farms and the previous conacre were themselves in Marx’s view mediated by the social form of the feudal mode of production. In consolidating landholdings the landlord was able to appropriate more of the surplus product and in doing so, appropriated more nutrients, which had to be traded (mostly to Britain) so that the surplus product could be realized in its concrete financial form - monetized rent. This consolidation eliminated the conacre system which was the final subletting in which labourers received a plot of land in exchange for a combination of labour and rent. Thus through consolidation the labour force responsible for recuperating the land was lost.

However, there is another aspect of the increase in the surplus product which impacts on the exportation ‘of Irish soil’ which Marx is drawing attention to and that is, with the increasing decline in the population through emigration, there is less of the soil being given over to the physical subsistence of the population, a metabolic transfer of nutrients which is more likely to keep those nutrients not only in the country but also in the local ecosystems.

Therefore, the social process of colonisation, which manifests itself in the concrete forms of farm consolidation and the physical loss of nutrients from the Irish soil, are conceptually linked in the following way by Marx: ‘So result: gradual expulsion of the natives, gradual deterioration and exhaustion of the source of national life, the soil.’<sup>61</sup>

There is one more level which Marx investigates - the mental and physical health of the remaining native Irish population. Noting that ‘whilst the population had decreased enormously’ there was ‘at the same time *not only a relative*, but an *absolute increase* in the number of deaf-mutes, blind, insane, idiotic, and decrepit inhabitants.’<sup>62</sup> Provocatively Marx was reported to have attributed this decline in the Irish population’s health directly to the metabolic rift in the colonised soil of Ireland:

‘With the exhaustion of the soil, the population has deteriorated physically. There has been an absolute increase in the number of lame, blind, deaf and dumb, and insane in the decreasing population’.<sup>63</sup>

This final point links environmental factors with health issues and in doing so projects Marx not only as an historical analyst of colonialism but also perhaps as a theorist of environmental modernity.

## **. Section 11: Conclusion – Colonialism as a Complex Social Process.**

Marx concludes his Report with a considered defense of the Fenian movement. He asserts that the Irish question is not simply a nationality question. Rather it is a question of ‘land and existence.’<sup>64</sup> Marx is contending that the attempted decolonising campaigns by the Fenians and other political movements of civil society were essentially about deconstructing

the various concrete forms in which colonialism existed at various levels in the Irish social formation. As we have discovered in Marx's framework, the abstract social process of colonialism moves through many concrete forms located on differing levels, such as the political, legal, economic, social and even ecological. The political is usually dominant because colonialism is inherently about the exercise of force within the political regime in order to attempt to subvert the 'natural' tendencies and laws of motion within the economy/civil society so as to continually reproduce particular colonising elites. Resistance to colonialism can operate at any of these levels, from the economic (tenant right movements) to the cultural (language and sport), but the pivotal level is the political, where institutional arrangements are put in place which determine the specific concrete structures of the colonising process. Hence for the Fenian movement according to Marx, it is essential that "Ruin or revolution is the watchword..."<sup>65</sup>

Marx's account of Irish history in the Report indicates that there cannot be a general theory of colonialism, with a single 'prime mover', because colonialism depends on the conjunction of the forces operating in the political regime in conjunction with those in the local economy and civil society. Therefore, Marx provides only a theoretical guide to conceptualising it as a social process. This conception creates the ability to trace the particular colonial tendencies operating within the specific colonised society. Accordingly, those theorists and historians who have exclusively conflated the determinations of colonialism with capitalistic expansion eliminate the possibility of discovering the subtle and often hidden ways in which colonialism impacts on local political institutions and those in civil society. What Marx provided in the Report was a theoretical framework which allows us to go beyond the relatively narrow economic analysis of Marxian dependency theory, one which instead sees colonialism as a complex social process operating at differing levels within the social formation as these levels interact with each other in complex ways. This

framework has the potential to lead to more fruitful work on specific colonialisms in the Marxian tradition.

What we can conclude from our examination of Marx's Report of 1867 is that colonialism 'begat' a feudal economy which lasted into the nineteenth century. The Cromwellian conquest introduced a British feudalism in Ireland at precisely the time when the English aristocracy was losing its sway over British society. The motivation for this settlement was more political than economic, aimed at securing Ireland against rivals. Subsequently, strategic necessity forged a strong bond between Irish landed and British imperial interests. The absence of traditional ties left the peasantry without customary protections. The religious disability of the peasantry reinforced inequity in tenurial relations. While retaining power over a subordinated peasantry, the fitful character of industrialisation under various colonial regimes shielded the landlord class from challenges which would have emanated from a dynamic capitalist class. Thus the colonial character of Irish agricultural relations advantaged the landlords in conflict with both the native peasantry and alternative elites. These advantages pushed feudalism in Ireland into the nineteenth century.

Finally, Marx raised the possibility that the dynamic of colonial relations could push up against the limits of the physical environment. Colonial exploitation had the possibility of disrupting the reproductive processes involved in the recuperation of the soil through the recycling of essential nutrients. This underlines the necessity of a concrete analysis of colonial situations at multiple levels. This awareness of the colonisation of the ecosystem of Irish agriculture perhaps lends an extra layer of meaning to the end of the section 'Clearing of the Estate of Ireland'. Marx concludes 'In sum, it is a question of life and death.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, 'Outline of a Report on the Irish Question to the Communist Educational Association of German Workers in London, December 16, 1867' in idem and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, (Moscow, 1978), pp 136-49.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 555, n 110.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, 'Marx to Engels, November 30, 1867' in idem and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, (Moscow, 1978), pp 156-8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 157-8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Kenzo Mohri, 'Progressive and Negative Perspectives of Capitalism and Imperialism' in Ronald Chilcote (ed), *Imperialism: Theoretical Directions* (Amherst, New York, 2000) p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Vujacic, 'Marx and Engels on development and underdevelopment: the restoration of a certain coherence' in *History of Political Economy*, vol.20, no.3 (1988) p. 483

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Brewer; *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (London, 1990), p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ronnie Munck, *The Irish Economy, Results and Prospects* (London, 1993), pp 1-23.

<sup>11</sup> John Kurt Jacobsen, *Chasing progress in the Irish Republic* (Cambridge, 1994), pp 45-50.

<sup>12</sup> Denis O'Hearn, *The Atlantic Economy* (Manchester, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> See for instance , Steven Howe, Ireland and Empire, Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture (Oxford, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, (Moscow, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Marx, Outline, pp 136-49.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, 'Notes for an Undelivered Speech on Ireland' in idem and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, (Moscow, 1978), pp 130-5.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, 'Record of a Speech on the Irish Question Delivered by Karl Marx to the German Workers' Educational Association in London on December 16, 1867' in idem and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, (Moscow, 1978), pp 150-3.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, Outline, pp 136.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp 137.



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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, Record, p. 151.

<sup>30</sup> After a description by Marx: 'It is as though light of a particular hue were cast upon everything, tingeing all other colours and modifying their specific features as if a special ether determined the specific gravity of everything found in it' Karl Marx *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb (Moscow, 1977), p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, Record, p. 150.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance, Virginia Crossman, 'Colonial Perspectives on Local Government in Nineteenth-Century Ireland' in Terrence McDonough (ed), *Was Ireland a Colony? Economics, Politics and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), pp 102-16.

<sup>36</sup> Isaac Butt, *The Irish People and the Irish Land, A Letter to Lord Lifford* (Dublin, 1867), pp 188-9.

<sup>37</sup> This argument is developed in more detail in Eamonn Slater and Terrence McDonough. 'Bulwark of Landlordism and Capitalism: The Dynamics of Feudalism in Nineteenth Century Ireland' in *Research in Political Economy*, Vol. 14 (1994), pp 63-118.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1981) p. 763.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 143.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> William Neilson Hancock, *Impediments to the Prosperity of Ireland* (London, 1850)

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<sup>43</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 133-4.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, Record, p. 152.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>46</sup> Kevin O'Neill in his study of Co.Cavan suggests that the ratio between the rent paid by the subtenant and the head-tenant is 2:1 in his *Family and Farm in Pre-Famine Ireland* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1984) p. 60.

<sup>47</sup> Extra-economic coercion in the extraction of surplus labour is identified as the essential characteristic of feudalism in Ernesto Laclau 'Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America' in *New Left Review*, 67, May/June (1971), pp 19-38 and in Marx, Capital, pp 926-7.

<sup>48</sup> Slater and McDonough, Bulwark.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 1 (London, 1976), p. 860.

<sup>50</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 144.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> This argument is developed in more detail in Eamonn Slater and Terrence McDonough. 'Bulwark of Landlordism and Capitalism: The Dynamics of Feudalism in Nineteenth Century Ireland' in *Research in Political Economy*, Vol. 14 (1994), pp 63-118.

<sup>53</sup> Marx, Notes, p. 133.

<sup>54</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 144.

<sup>55</sup> Marx, Marx to Engels, p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, Outline, pp 145-6. The decline in productivity which Marx observed in the contemporary statistics has been confirmed in more recent historical work. The less intense cultivation which was involved in the switch from spade to plough husbandry after the famine consequent on the consolidation of farms would have contributed to the fall off in productivity. The fall in the amount of labour applied to the land was especially important. (Michael Turner, *After the Famine, Irish Agriculture, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1996) p. 29.) The statistics would be impacted, however, by the fact that 1859 to 1864 was a period of agricultural depression brought on by poor weather conditions which damaged output. (Ibid. pp 30-2) The point here is not the empirical accuracy of the argument but the way in which Marx integrates a number of levels of analysis in his treatment of the Irish colonial situation.

<sup>57</sup> Marx, Notes, pp 132-3.

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<sup>58</sup> Foster's best articulation of this perspective is his article: John Bellamy Foster, 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology', in *American Journal of Sociology*, vol.105, no.2 September (1999) pp. 366-405.

<sup>59</sup> Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, p. 860.

<sup>60</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 146.

<sup>61</sup> Marx, Notes, p. 133.

<sup>62</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 148.

<sup>63</sup> Marx, Record, pp 151-2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 152.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Marx, Outline, p. 149.