manure. If this system of retaining the fertile land for tillage crops worked properly, the cattle must have been grazed mainly outside of the arable area (the infield), in the outfield or commonage. Manure from the animals would have to have been collected, perhaps when cows were housed on straw or other bedding, between evening milking and morning milking. The farmyard manure replaced the mineral nutrients that had been removed from the arable land in crops consumed elsewhere. Otherwise, those rather poor soils would have become poorer still. Crop rotation is often thought of as necessarily including taking land out of tillage for some period in the cycle. This was convenient in larger farms on better land where tillage could be moved around most, or all, of the farm. It was less easy in small farms with only a small proportion of tillable land. But after the spread of potato-growing it became possible to devote portion of tillage land each year to this non-cereal crop. This meant that it was possible to have rotation of crops while keeping all the tillable land in continuous tillage. That practice would have reduced year-to-year carry-over of crop pathogens and improved soil fertility. Potatoes would have responded well to high levels of nutrition, and the way in which they were grown would have facilitated the heavy application of farmyard manure. This, coupled with the fact that the improved soil fertility following potatoes would be expected to improve cereal crops in succeeding years, possibly explains the observation that: 'Rotation of crops is badly attended here. After they raise their crops of barley, they sow after corn, until their land is exhausted before they begin to potato it' (Ordnance Survey Memoirs, 1835, Parish of Donagh, quoted in Slater and Flaherty). Perhaps these farmers were delivering most of their limited supply of farmyard manure at that point in the crop rotation where it gave the best food-crop response.

Despite all this, we are oddly confused about the availability of farmyard manure. On the one hand there is an insistence that grazing animals were not housed in Ireland, because the mild climate did not necessitate housing. But on the other hand there is the belief that every Irish cottage had its dungheap placed indelicately just outside the door.

In a pastoral society, animals may be herded in common but everyone knows how many (s)he owns. In rundale too, animals are private property. Indeed the crops are private property. The only things the community members hold in common is access to, and control of, a block of land. It is hard to see how crop or animal production would necessarily have been much affected had each family taken the land to which it had access at any moment, into its private ownership. It is arguable that the real benefit the communality of rundale gave appeared less in agricultural productivity than in enhanced social support and resistance to external interference, a resistance finally overcome by the landlords who broke the rundale systems up.

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Chandana Mathur

Given Eamonn Slater's always incisive insights on Marx on the subject of Ireland, it is not surprising that the discussion of the rundale system and its eventual demise that he and Eoin Flaherty have developed, in the context of Marx's and Engels's writings on primitive communism, should be quite as impressive as it is. Fracturing the divide between the social and the natural sciences, Slater and Flaherty assemble an analytical framework that defines the essential structure of the rundale system through the complex and changing inter-relationships between property ownership and production and ecological processes, and charts the historical transformations that the system underwent. Noting that 'the socio-ecological metabolism of the mode of production becomes the essential concept of analysis through which we can explore further our societal relationship with nature', they end the essay by designating it as 'Marx's legacy to us of the twenty-first century' (24). It is really they who are to be thanked for having discerned this level of analysis across a staggering breadth of Marx's and Engels's writings – swimming against the tide of the standard presumption that this was classically modernist theory that endorsed the domination of 'nature' by 'man' – and for prising it out and honing it to apply it so powerfully to Irish rural history.

There are, however, specific moments in their discussion of rundale as a form of primitive communism where one wishes that they had pressed further. They clarify that their concern is with the internal dynamics of the rundale system ('the external stresses are about the co-existence of the rundale agrarian commune with other modes of production and that is another story!' (24)), and the external context impinges in this account chiefly through the market imperatives imposed by the colonial system ('In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, all members of Irish society were tied into a monied economy, whether they were from the city of Dublin or Tory Island. The rundale communities of the West were no exception to this trend.' (17)). Nonetheless, Slater and Flaherty would probably agree that the faltering of the rundale system should be seen as part of the massive global renegotiation of the relationships between peoples, labour processes and the natural world that was happening at the same time, and that this wider setting could be explored further in their account. Some of the decades and centuries discussed in this essay were also the era of mercantile adventure, of the birth of plantation agriculture and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Thus, the 'incorporation of the potato within the commune's crop rotations' (16) is not an innocent externally introduced variable, it places the rundale system directly within these force fields of global transformation. Later, although the colonial state appears in their account as the forceful initiator of the market economy within which the rundale system came to be inescapably entangled, it would be interesting to consider the fact that this colonial power was itself undergoing a traumatic transformation from feudalism to industrial capitalism, and to ponder the social, political economic and ecological consequences that might have been belched out into the agrarian sector of 'the first colony'.

One of the most consequential outcomes of the decline of primitive communism noted by Engels in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State was 'the world historical defeat of the female sex'. Slater and Flaherty offer tantalizing glimpses of women in the structures of rundale governance and in its division of

labour, leaving one wishing for follow-up work on the gender dimension of the rundale commune's social relations of production and ecological relationships, and on the gender consequences of the demise of the system.

Detailing the consequences of restricted land for spatial expansion on the expanded communal reproduction process, Slater and Flaherty observe that 'Clachans, as the most visible indicator of the rundale system therefore, began to "spring up" ... also on so-called compact farms where the original legal tenants were able to undermine the landlord's resistance to land subdivision by allowing a rundale commune to establish itself upon these previously enclosed tenant farms' (20). The rundale commune was thus a site of anti-colonial resistance, and later a potent symbol thereof, as in James Connolly's formulation of 'celtic communism'. David Lloyd has argued that, for Connolly, 'in political terms, then, far from being a backward element in need of radical conscientization, the peasantry can be seen as already possessing, if in inarticulate ways, the counter-cultural consciousness that would be the basis for the syndicalist co-operative commonwealth. It should be stressed that this memory or consciousness is not for Connolly an effect of any ethnic essence or even of some deep, occult continuity in Irish culture ... It is precisely colonization, the violent rupture with a past social organization, that produces the conditions for the politically effective memory of a past formation among the dispossessed ...' (Lloyd 2008: 110). It may be difficult, but still possible, in subsequent work to tease out the forms of conciousness that might have corresponded with the ecological and production relationships and practices of the rundale commune, and their later transition into forms of political memory.

If these further demands are too numerous, it is only because the scholarship contained here is so exciting and generative!

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Nollaig Ó Muraíle

My initial response on reading this article was one of pleasure that this intriguing topic had been tackled – even though I could not really engage with some of what struck me, as a non-specialist in the area, as excessively technical (or Marxian?) jargon. The article's subject-matter also revived memories of sharply differing views on the details of land ownership in Ireland in times past, and especially in Gaelic Ireland prior to the seventeenth-century English conquest – one thinks, for example, of the rather idealized view taken by James Connolly (1910) in relation to the communal ownership of land in early Ireland and, by contrast, the firm rejection by Eóin Mac Néill (1919: 295–7; 1921: 144–51) of the possibility of there having been even an element of embryonic socialism in the system of land tenure obtaining in early Ireland.

An aspect of the article that caught my attention was the manner in which Engels and an author like F. Gibbs (writing as far back as 1870) based some of their observations on the so-called 'Brehon Laws'. Whatever insight they were able to gain into early Irish law would have been based on the notoriously inadequate series of volumes issued by the nineteenth-century Brehon Law Commission under the title Ancient Laws of Ireland. Since that time there has been a revolution in our understanding of the Gaelic law tracts, and any attempt to deal with the roots of the so-called Rundale System of landholding that does not take certain publications of the past forty years or so into account is bound to be seriously deficient. Given constraints of space, all I can do here is mention some of the more relevant works that could be consulted with profit (and which might compel some modifications in certain aspects of the authors' thesis). Significant among these are the works of Fergus Kelly on the early Irish law tracts (see 1988: 100–8) and on early Irish farming (1997: 398–431). Important, too, are the early volumes of the New History of Ireland (Vols I to IV), with special attention to contributions from Donnchadh Ó Corráin (Vol I, 2005: 553–6); Kenneth Nicholls (Vol II, 1987: 430–3); D.B. Quinn and K.W. Nicholls (Vol III, 1976: 34–6), and from Aidan Clarke (ibid.: 170); from Louis Cullen (Vol IV, 1986: 169) and John Andrews (ibid.: 242, 244). Nicholls is also author of other important works, which anyone studying landholding in Ireland cannot afford to ignore (1976; 2003: 64–76).

I would also like to raise the question of the origin and continued usage of the term 'rundale'. It and its variants, rigdale and changedale, are assumed to be in origin English, and this is no doubt correct. But what was the native Irish term for what is often thought of as a quintessentially Irish practice? Patrick Dinneen in his great Irish-English Dictionary (1927: 914) has ronndáil as the Irish for rundale and (ibid.: 1166) talamh ronndála for rundale land, but he gives no indication of the word's antecedents and would seem to have viewed it as a simple borrowing from English. It is interesting that, since the system involved a degree of shared ownership, the Irish word he cites has the appearance of a compound that includes the Irish word dáil, meaning 'a share' – one wonders if this is a calque based on nothing more than coincidence.

My interest in this topic was aroused some time ago by the occurrence of an Irish term in the late-sixteenth-century Connacht text known as Seanchas na mBúrcach. That work includes a detailed survey of the lands on which Mac William Burke claimed rents in Co. Mayo, and in the course of it the word 'ronntáille' appears (although the manuscript reading omits the accent). The entire sentence reads (in normalized spelling): 'Ag so ronntáille tighearnais Mheic Uilliam fá Shliocht Uilleig a Búrc .i. baile Ardaigh agus Baile an Chnuic' (This is the ronntáille of the lordship of Mac William under the progeny of Uilleag a Búrc, i.e. Baile Ardaigh and Baile an Chnuic). The three authors who have hitherto dealt with the text, Hubert T. Knox, Standish Hayes O'Grady and Tomás Ó Raghallaigh (the work of the first was published in 1908, that of the other two in the 1920s), were clearly baffled by the word. Both O'Grady and Ó Raghallaigh rendered it ronnt aille and the former – following Knox (who did not edit the original text) – rather bafflingly translated it as 'extent', while O'Grady (clearly interpreting it as 'roinnt aile') took it to mean 'another portion'. Now it seems more than probable that what we have here is simply a thinly-disguised gaelicization of the word 'rental', but it is so tantalizingly close to the word rundale (and its Irish form, ronndáil, as given by Dinneen) that one wonders if,